How convincing are the arguments against competency standards?

Paul Hager

Introduction

Currently in Australia a debate is occurring about the place, if any, of competency standards in the higher education system. This debate took some time to get started before being fuelled by the Finn Report (1991) and the subsequent Mayer Committee discussion paper (1992) with their emphasis on key competencies and the recommendation that these should be built into all levels of the Australian education and training system. This debate has now been fuelled further by the Higher Education Council (1992) discussion papers, The Quality of Higher Education. Major contributors to this debate have been the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee (AVCC) which has repeatedly expressed the view that competency standards constitute a type of centralised control that is incompatible with the essential autonomy of university curricula.

The National Training Board (NTB) has been seen by many as the focus of this alleged centralised control of curricula.

The main aim of this paper is to examine the arguments proposed by various writers about competency standards, dating back to the flurry of writing on this topic in the 1970's in the USA. These arguments will be related to the current situation in Australia. However before that, there are several general aspects of the competency debate as it has unfolded in Australia that deserve notice.

One remarkable feature of the discussions about the place, if any, of competency standards in the higher education system is that a person's political allegiances seem to be no guide to their position on competency standards. Leonie Kramer thinks that they represent the end for the humanities, whereas Lauchlan Chipman sees them injecting a welcome much-needed clarity into the way the humanities are taught and examined. Laurie Carmichael and others of the left see competency standards as the vehicle for achieving a range of desirable ends including workplace reform, overdue adequate recognition of women's skills, etc. while others see Carmichael and company as joining the new right. In recent weeks in The Australian's Higher Education section, a group from one of Australia's more venerable universities has blamed Althusserian Marxism for the rise of competency standards, whilst a group from a different university traced it to economic rationalism and corporate managerialism. All of this suggests that the debate, in order to advance, needs to go beyond assigning labels and to take a much closer look at what competency standards have become — whatever their origins might be. After all, there is such a thing as the genetic fallacy, i.e. the fallacy of arguing that because something had certain characteristics at an earlier time, it must have those characteristics now.

It is here that we run into a second remarkable feature of the current debate about competency standards, viz. the reluctance of most people in the higher education sector to
take a dispassionate look at competency standards. There is no doubt a variety of reasons for this, but clearly a major one is that the influence of the vocational/general dichotomy runs deep. That is, the thinking of many people in the higher education sector is dominated by the traditional dichotomy between vocational education and ‘genuine’ education and all that this entails, viz. body vs. mind, hand vs. head, manual vs. mental, skills vs. knowledge, applied vs. pure, knowing how vs. knowing that, practice vs. theory, particular vs. general, and training vs. education. For those who think in terms of this series of contrasts, it is self-evident that competency standards are essentially concerned with the performance of particular and discrete vocational tasks which, however skilled they may be, involve a minimum of thought. As such, competency standards are clearly the proper concern of training, but have nothing to say to education. The seeming self-evidence of this line of thinking is presumably the reason why typical higher education opponents of competency standards show no sign of understanding what is actually in the competency standards developed so far by various professions in Australia.

That higher education opponents of competency standards in Australia do think in terms of the above dichotomies is clear from their writings, in particular in the contrasts that they draw between the higher level generic attributes, e.g. critical thinking, problem solving, etc., that are fostered by universities, and the ‘narrow’ (this is the favourite epithet) outcomes that are seen as the concern of competency standards. (The contrast that results from thinking in terms of these dichotomies is shown in columns 1 and 2 of the appendix, which was compiled largely from claims made in the writings of a variety of higher education opponents of competency standards).

Now there are several comments that I wish to make about the dominant influence in this debate of the vocational/general and related dichotomies. Firstly, there are several ironies in this situation. For a start, the theory/practice dichotomy and all the other dichotomies that it underpins support a particular kind of educational elitism that some of the higher education opponents of competency standards have elsewhere disowned in their writings. Likewise some of the higher education opponents of competency standards are people who have at other times attacked the theory/practice division as a false and misleading way of thinking. A further irony is that several of those who have been most trenchant in their rejection of the idea that vocational education might have any place in a University preside over institutions with many faculties that are clearly vocational in intent. In medical faculties, for instance, there has been a clear trend in the last decade for assessment in the final years to centre on assessment of clinical competence.

Secondly, as I have argued in detail elsewhere, (Hager 1990), there are a number of general reasons for maintaining that the vocational/general and related dichotomies are false ones. This is not the place to repeat the details of these arguments. However, briefly, there are economic, technological and educational reasons why the vocational/general and related dichotomies are false ones. From the economist’s point of view the vocational/general dichotomy is a false one, not only because graduates of supposedly general higher education courses end up in relatively well paid jobs. As well, the same result is found in all countries where schooling offers alternatives of general education or vocational education. In addition, underdeveloped countries which set out to achieve economic growth and development by deliberately making their education system specifically vocational have fared less well than those whose education system focussed on basic general education. So in both cases the economist is left with the paradox that general education is more vocational than vocational education.

The technological argument is that the major impact of microelectronic technology on work has been to create a demand for the broad skills that are the product of general
education. The educational argument is complex, but it is essentially Whitehead's one for the view that 'the antithesis between a technical and a liberal education is fallacious.' (1950, p. 74) Whitehead's basic challenge is:

Pedants sneer at an education which is useful. But if education is not useful, what is it? (1950, p. 3)

Overall, then, there are cogent reasons of various kinds for rejecting the vocational/general dichotomy.

Thirdly, and most importantly, there are also serious epistemological reasons why the vocational/general and related dichotomies are false ones. For one thing, knowledge and competence are not as disparate as some commentators assume. Wolf (1989, p. 39) argues for the position '...that there is no bifurcation between competence and education.' She takes this to mean that competency-based education '...is perfectly compatible with the learning of higher-level skills, the acquisition of generalizable knowledge (and understanding), and with broad-based courses.' Wolf's reasons for supporting this position include:

- Competence is a construct, and not something that we can observe directly' (p. 40), but so too is knowledge.
- What we know of the structure of mind shows the importance of a variety of cognitive abilities. Knowledge recall is only the start.
- Not just that something is done, but why it is done is crucial, i.e. "knowing" something involves knowing when to access it, and being able to do so when appropriate - even if it is only in an examination room.

(Wolf 1989, p. 40, 42)

As well, there are other aspects of the epistemological argument against the vocational/general dichotomy. For instance, the vice chancellor of the University of Leeds (Wilson 1992) has argued that by shunning the vocational, universities risk inhibiting the growth of knowledge. His argument, briefly, is that knowledge is a social product and so are the ways that we package it. He discusses various sorts of boxes in which it might be packaged. He suggests an initial four-fold division. 1. Enabling disciplines (philosophy, mathematics, computing, etc.); 2. Disciplines concerned with the natural world (physics, chemistry, biology, etc.); 3. Disciplines concerned with the human world (the arts, the social sciences); and 4. Disciplines concerned with practice in the human world (engineering, medicine, law, education, etc.). Wilson argues that all categories of the disciplines make valuable contributions to knowledge advance. Increasingly, he suggests, significant advances require inter- and multidisciplinary input. He further suggests that disciplines concerned with practice in the human world offer unique skills, e.g. design, diagnosis, pattern recognition, etc. and should not be neglected in favour of the first three categories. Eraut (1985) is another to claim that significant knowledge exists within professions that is typically not recognised by academics.

So far, then, I have suggested some reasons why the debate in Australia about competency standards and their relation to higher education has taken the course that it has. In particular, I have suggested that the debate has been clouded by dubious assumptions about the nature of vocational education. I will now move on to take a closer look at arguments about the nature of competence.
Arguments about the nature of competence

As noted already, higher education opponents of competency standards in Australia have virtually all agreed that narrow conceptions of competence are undesirable. In this view, competency standards are synonymous with lists of particular, discrete vocational tasks. Not surprisingly, the philosophers of education have been trenchant in their rejection of such conceptions of competence. A focus of their criticisms was competency- (or performance) based teacher education (CBTE or PBTE) which had a brief flowering in the 1970’s particularly in the USA. (See Houston 1974 for a comprehensive discussion). CBTE represented the attempt to apply theories of behaviourist psychology to the analysis of teaching. It was based on a very narrow conception of competence and was intended to dramatically revamp teacher education courses. According to Broudy the CBTE approach defines:

‘competence in terms of prespecified performances stated as segments of overt behaviour; it argues that practicing the performance directly is more efficient than achieving it indirectly through the conventional courses..........competence training....contrasts an overt performance with the conventional program’s promise of performance.’

(Broudy 1984, p.3)

Broudy and others (e.g. Kaminsky 1975 and Johnson 1975) had no difficulty in demolishing the theoretical foundations of this narrow approach to competence. Although their writings were focused on CBTE/ PBTE, their criticisms are sufficiently general to apply to the conceptualisation of any occupation in these terms. Some ramifications of this approach to competence are outlined in the first column of the appendix.

Academic critics of competency standards rightly reject such an approach, preferring instead to focus attention on generic attributes as the best indicators of future successful performance. Some ramifications of this second approach to competence are outlined in the middle column of the appendix. The difficulty with this second approach is that the link between a generic attribute, such as analysis, and actual professional performance is doubly vague. Firstly because the claim that graduates develop a capacity for analysis is typically not subjected to detailed scrutiny (see, for example, Chipman 1992), and secondly because what analysis typically means in the day-to-day practice of the profession is not considered. The integrated approach which I will be recommending addresses both of these issues.

However the above alternatives are not the only way of conceptualising competence, although this does not appear to be a welcome message in many quarters. The same people who want to reject all narrow conceptions of competence typically don’t look closely to see what the alternatives might be. The preferred alternative has been the middle column of the appendix, (but not called an approach to competency as such, thereby preserving the vocational/general dichotomy) As I have indicated, there are some significant problems for this view.

To lead us on to a third model of competence, let us take a look at what some of the early critics of the first model suggested in the way of alternatives. In an important paper, Noddings (1984) applied linguistic analysis to the problems of defining competence and of clarifying the relation between competence and human action. Her first main conclusion was that competence must be differentiated from performance. She arrived at this conclusion via a critique of Rylean behaviourism as an inadequate account of competence. The key argument here is that if competence consists of a series of observable behaviours,
then the same series of observable behaviours will be displayed by anyone competent in a
given field. But it is evident that not everyone competent in a given field will display the
same series of observable behaviours (think of competent teachers), hence competence is
not the same thing as performance. Rather it is something that underlies performance. In
addition, Noddings points out, the occurrence of observable behaviours associated with
competence in a given field may be explicable by causes other than competence (think of
actors playing the roles of, say, surgeons). So, she concluded:

'...if competence as capacity, is to be retained as groundwork for performance, then
the problem of identifying reliable indicators of competence arises and this, it seems
to me, is a tough problem demanding sophisticated methods and extensive
investigation.'

(Noddings, 1984, pp. 18-19)

She goes on to recommend an empirically based, comprehensive, naturalistic study of
actual professionals indisputably held to be competent as the main source of a description
of competence. From this, in relation to teaching, she suggests that it should be:

'...possible to construct theories that have some degree of the desired
systematisation... capable of producing categories that will aid us in describing
competence and in evaluating it.'

(Noddings, 1984, pp. 21)

Noddings states that she knows of no program of CBTE or PBTE that meets the
considerations outlined in her paper. However she commends earlier work by Kerr and
Soltis as a promising extension of her ideas.

Kerr and Soltis (1974, p. 3) attempted to provide 'a theoretical description of teaching,
which is at least adequate to the task of identifying teacher competencies.' I will not
consider in any detail those aspects of their paper that were specifically concerned with
the nature of teaching (these ideas generated a significant debate, e.g. Noddings 1974a
and 1974b, Johnson, 1975). Rather, I will outline some of their general points about
competence which are crucial to the third approach to competence which, I will be
arguing, is much to be preferred to the two other approaches discussed so far in this
paper.

Kerr and Soltis (1974, p. 4) set out to develop 'a theoretical model of teaching that
possesses descriptive adequacy.' Following Green (1964), they propose an action
description rather than a behaviour description, because

'...one applies the adverb 'competently' only to those movements which a person
intends as a particular type of activity... Thus, while it is possible to describe teaching,
or any other human activity, as either action, which necessarily involves intended
activity and appeals to a person's reasons and goals to explain the activity, or as
behaviour, which can be specified directly in terms of observable movement and
appeals to causes for explanation, our interest in competency advises an action
description.'

(Kerr and Soltis 1974, pp. 4-5)

Kerr and Soltis end up recommending that professional competence be conceived in terms
of a set of action categories that are necessary to carrying out the profession, with further
elaboration and development reflecting the 'logic' of this set of action categories. It is interesting that though the Kerr-Soltis proposal was published and debated from 1974 onwards, Noddings in 1984 reported that to her knowledge nobody had attempted to apply it to the problem of teacher competence. Walker's proposals on how to conceive of teacher competence (Walker 1992a) are perhaps the next development of these ideas.

If Noddings and Kerr and Soltis provide a model of what linguistic analysis can contribute in this field, Price, I believe, provides a model of what it cannot do. According to Price (1974), his paper is the Presidential Address to the 1974 Philosophy of Education Society meeting) there are four senses of the word 'performance'. The first applies to any action of a thing, e.g. the performance of a rock is its falling under gravity. The second applies to the action of any thing that accords with the design followed in that thing's production, and that leads to a specified concrete result, e.g. the action of a drill. The third applies to any action of a person that has parts s/he makes answer to the parts of the work performed and connects in ways that correspond to relations of the parts of the work, e.g. performance of a Beethoven sonata. The fourth applies to any action of a person that s/he makes accord with a moral rule.

After delineating and discussing each of these four senses, Price says:

'I can find no other senses of the word 'performance'; I conclude that it is wrong, without the invention of some new sense, to describe teaching as a performance at all....'

(Price 1974, p.326)

But Price's four senses are clearly not exhaustive. Can we not legitimately ask about Price's performance as President of PES? What about job performance appraisal in general, e.g. David Hill's performance as General Manager of the ABC? It is clear, I think, that Price is arbitrarily ruling out an important sense of 'performance'.

The basic ideas on how professional competence might best be conceived, and which I have identified in the work of Noddings and Kerr and Soltis, provide a good starting point for understanding the way that professional competency standards have been developed in Australia. While I will not here describe the processes, (see Gonczi, Hager and Oliver 1990; Ash, Gonczi and Hager 1992; and Heywood, Gonczi and Hager 1992 for details), the focus is on applying a suitable combination of applied social science research methods to arrive at a logically structured set of action categories of the kind described by Kerr and Soltis. This approach to conceptualising professional competence has been called the 'integrated approach', because it brings together the 'tasks' (or, more accurately, 'key intentional actions') of the first approach and the attributes of the second approach.

According to the integrated conception, competence is conceptualised in terms of knowledge, abilities, skills and attitudes displayed in the context of a carefully chosen set of realistic professional tasks ('intentional actions') which are of an appropriate level of generality. A feature of this integrated approach is that it avoids the problem of a myriad of tasks by selecting key tasks ('intentional actions') that are central to the practice of the profession. The main attributes that are required for the competent performance of these key tasks ('intentional actions') are then identified. Experience has shown that when both of these are integrated to produce competency standards, the results do capture the holistic richness of professional practice.

Recently it has become evident that there is still a lot of misunderstanding of the professional competency standards that have been developed in Australia under the aegis of NOOSR (e.g. Dall'Alba and Sandberg 1992), so it is worth pointing to some of their...
distinctive features. One of the most overused terms in the debate about competency standards has been 'atomistic'. Authors seem to assume that if an approach to conceptualising competence is labelled, usually by themselves, as 'atomistic' then it can be rejected without further argument. In chemistry, where atoms are discrete and independent units, they nevertheless combine to form molecules which have quite different properties to those of their constituent atoms. So here atoms are a highly useful unit of analysis and are consistent with subsequent powerful synthesis. In reference to competency standards, 'atomistic' has no such clearcut meaning, nor does 'holistic'. Both are relative terms when applied to competency standards and their application needs to be justified by further argument. The fragmenting of a profession into a myriad of tasks, as the first approach to competence does, is overly 'atomistic', precisely because actual practice is much richer than sequences of these isolated tasks and the overall approach fails to provide any synthesis of the tasks. In that case we are justified in concluding that the distinctive character of the profession has been destroyed by the analysis. However the opposite mistake is adherence to a rigid, self-defeating, monistic holism that rules out all analysis. In practice, some degree of atomism in approaches to competence will be acceptable, provided that it is accompanied by a suitable degree of holism. The above professional competency standards produced by the integrated approach are holistic in several important senses.

1. They are holistic in that competence is a construct that is inferred (as suggested by Noddings) from performance of relatively complex and demanding intentional actions (as suggested by Kerr and Soltis). The relative complexity of the actions can be gauged from the fact that a typical profession involves no more than 30-40 such key intentional actions.

2. The holistic character of such competency standards is due also to the fact that the tasks (or intentional actions) are not discrete and independent. For example, actual professional practice will often simultaneously involve several of these intentional actions.

3. A further sense in which these kinds of competency standards are holistic is that the intentional actions involve what Walker (1992b) calls 'situational understanding', i.e. the competency standards include the idea that the professional performer takes account of the varying contexts in which they are operating. A more general cognitive perspective is called on to frame a skilled intentional action appropriate to the context.

4. Yet another sense in which these kinds of competency standards are holistic is that by integrating key tasks and attributes, i.e. integrating intentional actions with characteristics or qualities of individuals, competence is constituted by a relation between the professional and their work. (Contrary to Dall’Alba and Sandberg 1992, this means that Sandberg’s (1991) findings actually provide strong support for the integrated approach to professional competency standards that has been used in Australia).

By being holistic in the above senses, these competency standards are the opposite of any significantly atomistic approach, whether the atoms be tasks or attributes (once again, contra Dall’Alba and Sandberg 1992, p. 2). In this way these professional competency standards strike a balance between the misguided extremes of fragmenting the profession to such a degree that its character is destroyed by the analysis or adhering to a rigid, monistic holism that rules out all analysis. That this balance is a reasonable one is indicated by the fact that these professional competency standards allow for professional
discretion, i.e. they do not prescribe that all professionals will necessarily act in the same way in a given situation; nor do they require that all professionals will have identical overall conceptions of their work, i.e. these professional competency standards are quite consistent with one practitioner having, say, a strong commitment to social justice, while another is just as strongly committed to excellence of practice.

The nature of these competency standards will obviously determine how they should best be assessed. Since they are based on the idea that competence is a construct that is not directly observable, but rather is inferred from successful performance, it is clear that performance will be vital for assessment. Equally vital will be the requirement that sufficient evidence be gathered to justify the inference. While evidence from performance will be central to assessment, it may be supplemented by other kinds of evidence. This follows from the integrated nature of these competency standards in which attributes underpin performance. This means that the attributes often figure in the performance criteria. Thus in some instances evidence about possession of attributes, such as certain kinds of knowledge, might usefully supplement evidence of performance. (For a detailed treatment of these points see Gonczi, Hager and Athanasou).

Educational implications of the integrated approach

Finally in this paper, I consider what integrated professional competency standards mean for higher education. I believe that the same points are applicable to other providers of vocational education, e.g. TAFE. This discussion will be structured around the points in the third column of the appendix. (The previous section dealt with the first two points, viz. competence is inferred from performance and the holistic nature of the competency standards. So this discussion will start at the third point).

Competency standards make no claim to exhaust all facets of a profession, just as traditional entry procedures for professionals don’t claim to be totally comprehensive. What a good set of competency standards does is to provide a clear statement of what is considered to be important in competent performance in that profession. This is something which has been a long felt need of registering authorities and the like, thereby pointing to weaknesses in the present arrangements. After all, it would be rather strange if people who are in the business of registering or educating professionals insisted that it was too hard to specify what it is that distinguishes a professional from non-professional performance. This is essentially what competency standards do. To point out that professional work is complex is simply to require that valid standards will need to take account of this complexity. It is already evident in the professional competency standards that have been developed so far in Australia that it is possible to capture the complexity of professional work.

Moving to the fourth point, some people worry that competency standards will demand a uniformity in the way professionals practise which is totally inappropriate. It is pointed out that there is more than one correct way to perform most professional tasks. The problem here is that ‘standards’ are taken to imply ‘standardisation’ of procedure. In fact the standards are typically about outcomes, and how the outcomes are achieved is left open. The professional competency standards that have been developed so far in Australia do allow for the diversity that is proper to the practice of a profession.

Another worry, which brings us to the fifth point, is that as a result of establishing competency standards, the corresponding courses that prepare people for the profession will adopt competency-based training (see, e.g. Ashworth and Saxton 1990, pp. 18-19). Academics are, of course, correct in their rejection of professional courses becoming a
series of practical modules, as the roles and tasks approach to analysing professional competence suggests.

However when competence is conceptualised via the integrated approach in terms of knowledge, abilities, skills and attitudes displayed in the context of realistic professional tasks (or intentional actions), these consequences no longer follow. Rather than recommending the adoption of competency-based training, the integrated approach, by also emphasising requisite knowledge, abilities, skills and attitudes, offers powerful guidance for improvement of traditional courses in respect of content, teaching strategies and assessment procedures. So, for example, testing graduates against the competency-based standards would effectively identify strengths and weaknesses of the course. Hence, though I uphold the integrated approach to conceptualising professional competence, I do not recommend the adoption of competency-based training for professional courses.

Competency standards also offer educational and assessment benefits. The competency standards themselves are a powerful guide to providers of professional education. However, it needs to be emphasised that they are not a curriculum document. So, for example, entry-level competency standards specify what new graduates should be able to do, but say nothing about how this state is to be achieved. Hence for providers there is as much flexibility as ever to decide what to teach, how to teach it and how to assess it. However, assuming that there is room for improvement in most existing courses, a good set of competency standards will provide invaluable guidance on content changes as well as new methods of delivery and assessment. As always, there is more than one way to teach effectively.

Beyond entry level, competency standards offer considerable guidance for the longer term development of the profession. Continuing professional education (CPE) has been criticised frequently for lack of direction and/or rationale. The clear specification of what a competent professional needs to be able to do will provide a much sharper focus for CPE. (See Hager and Gonczi 1991) Similar considerations apply to refresher courses for people returning to the profession after an absence, or those whose training is out of date. The value of competency standards for efficient and equitable recognition of overseas qualifications is also important.

A further worry, represented by point six, holds that competency standards are developed and controlled by government bureaucrats, e.g. the National Training Board. In fact, the philosophy behind the development of competency standards in Australia is that the profession or industry owns and develops the standards. In many cases, university staff are active members of the professional body, hence they have strong representation on the body that owns and develops the competency standards. In all cases, the professional body is a major stakeholder that is entitled to significant input into courses for their profession. Competency standards present a unique opportunity for professions in Australia to raise their community image by increasing their level of professionalism. For one thing, the competency standards are an explicit public statement of what the profession does, something that has not previously been available publicly in most cases. One aspect of professions increasing their professionalism would be a mature and productive relationship between the professional body and the providers of the courses.

The above considerations give the lie to a related misconception about competency standards, that everything that takes place in a course is dictated centrally by faceless bureaucrats. In fact, given that the profession will own the competency standards, there will be no greater central control than at present in, for example, accounting and engineering, where the professional bodies accredit the courses. (The Higher Education
Council 1992, p. 6, notes and rejects the claim that a focus on outcomes will result in standardised or common courses.

Since the competency standards are a powerful guide to providers of professional education without being a curriculum document, they provide common ground for discussion between providers and the profession that doesn’t exist now. The lack of such common ground in the past has seen some providers fragment into a series of specialist departments that compete with one another for funds, staff, etc. and thereby lose sight of the totality of professional practice. The competency standards will enable the relative roles of the providers and profession to become clearer in a mutually cooperative environment.

Still a further worry, point seven, holds that assessment of competence involves ticking off a checklist of observable behaviours. Given the complexity of professional work, this is seen as a futile attempt to achieve objectivity at the cost of sacrificing validity (see, e.g. Ashworth and Saxton 1990, p. 22-23). I accept this as a criticism of the behaviourist task approach to competency standards. However when the integrated approach to competency standards is adopted, competence is not something that is directly observed. Rather, as pointed out above, competence is inferred from performance. This has the effect of placing assessment of competence in the same boat as other kinds of assessment in academic institutions, in that procedures are available to maximise its validity and reliability. (Gonczi, Hager and Oliver 1990, Section 5 and Masters and McCurry 1990). If these procedures are followed then assessment of competence is as ‘objective’ as any of the alternatives. Similar points apply to claims that competency standards are too vague for assessment purposes (see, for example, Ashworth and Saxton 1990, p. 21-22). A properly planned and executed competency analysis will yield standards as specific as the case requires. (See, for example, Ash, Gonczi and Hager 1992).

Finally, point eight presents a criticism that is commonly put forward in relation to entry-level competency standards. It holds that because they prescribe minimum standards, they therefore discourage excellence by reducing everything to the lowest common denominator. A variant on this is that they promote deskilling. (The Higher Education Council 1992, p. 6, notes and rejects the ‘Lowest Common Denominator Myth’).

These charges are no more logical than making the same claims about traditional examinations on the ground that there is a minimum mark for gaining a pass. More specifically, this myth is based on a complete misunderstanding of the nature of the standards. For the charges to have any substance, the standards would have to relate to tasks that admit no degrees of performance, i.e. you can either do it or you can’t. However in professional work, (and in most other kinds of work), such tasks are rare. Typically, the standards relate to tasks that admit many degrees of performance, as does the task of taking a traditional examination. In both cases the existence of a minimum satisfactory level of performance is consistent with a full range of performances from excellent through to fail. (For a discussion of the kinds of standards, called ‘described standards’, that are appropriate for professional tasks see Gonczi, Hager and Oliver 1990 and Masters and McCurry 1990).

In addition, as already discussed, entry-level competency standards are not a curriculum document. Of course the expectation is that most graduates of professional courses will greatly exceed the performance levels specified by the entry-level competency standards, just as most entrants to the professional courses greatly exceed the entry requirements. (For further discussion see Heywood, Gonczi and Hager 1992, Section 2.4).
Conclusion

A series of arguments about competency standards by various writers has been considered. It has been found that a way of developing competency standards that conform to the general requirements and principles proposed by these arguments is possible. This way of developing competency standards appears to meet all the theoretical objections that have been raised against competency standards. Those developed so far in Australia for professions according to these principles also seem to be satisfactory. How well they work out in the long term remains to be seen.

This suggests that it is crucial that we be clear about our conception of competence and consider alternatives. The 'natural' way of conceiving competence, i.e. as a series of tasks, has fatal defects. Likewise, the alternative of conceiving competence as consisting in attributes or generic skills also has marked limitations. This paper has argued that a third conception of competence, which integrates tasks and attributes, offers many advantages while avoiding the major limitations of the other two conceptions. This integrated approach suggests some challenges for the implementation of the Finn/Mayer recommendations. If the schools and higher education institutions restrict themselves to merely teaching generic competencies, there will remain a problem about how these translate into life and occupational competencies. On the other hand, facing up to the challenge of integrating the generic and the specific, promises a range of exciting possibilities for the teaching and assessment of key competencies.

At the beginning of this paper it was pointed out that critics have labelled competency standards with all kinds of (often incompatible) -isms. Here is another one. Elliott has suggested that the

'widespread emergence of fundamentalism in the late 20th century is not confined to religious traditions. It is evidenced in most of the 'reforms' now sweeping our social institutions.....The competency-based education and training movement is one example.'

(Elliott 1991, p.119)

Elliott further points out that fundamentalist movements generally possess four characteristics:

'First, they attempt to reduce social practices to a small number of essential elements, against which the practices as a whole can be judged. Their view of competence is an atomistic one. Competence is specified as a number of discrete, atomised abilities which are held to represent its essential elements. Second, the essentials are derived from what is held to be an indubitable foundation of knowledge, such as the Bible, or, in the case of the competency movement, a science of management concerned with the prediction and control of human behaviour... Third, the essential elements of the fundamentalist's credo must refer to concrete tangible and measurable phenomena. Christ's resurrection and virgin birth are considered by Christian fundamentalists to be concrete events in time and place...Similarly 'competencies' were viewed...as concrete, tangible and measurable... Fourth, the essential elements are viewed as unchanging rather than culturally and socially relative.'

(Elliott 1991, p. 119-120)

All of these features applied to the failed conception of competence that flourished in the 1970's. This paper has argued that none of these limiting features need apply to the richer conception of competence which is currently being used in Australia.
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## APPENDIX

### THREE DIFFERENT CONCEPTIONS OF COMPETENCE AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS

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<th>BEHAVIOURIST OR SPECIFIC TASKS APPROACH</th>
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<th>INTEGRATED OR TASK + ATTRIBUTE APPROACH</th>
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<td>General attributes as predictors of future performance</td>
<td>Competence inferred from performance</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Atomistic, reductive, trivial, mechanistic, standardised, routine, discrete tasks or skills</td>
<td>Abstract, remote from actual practice, problem of transfer. Overall rationale often lacking</td>
<td>Holistic, richness of practice captured</td>
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<td>3. Large number of specific competencies - list lengthens with complexity of work e.g. professions</td>
<td>Small number of generic competencies</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Uniformity (1 right way)</td>
<td>Diversity (&gt; 1 right way)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. 'Doing' curriculum. Practical modules. Jettison current curriculum</td>
<td>Conventional curriculum. Fragmented into subjects</td>
<td>Powerful device for improving content, delivery and assessment of current curriculum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Central control of curriculum</td>
<td>Provide autonomy in curriculum</td>
<td>Profession/provider, joint control of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Checklist for ticking - invalid assessment</td>
<td>Traditional assessment - has its limitations</td>
<td>Competence demonstrated over time portfolios, etc. Assessment needs careful planning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Minimum competence 'Lowest common denominator discourages excellence'. 'Deskilling'</td>
<td>Encourages excellence that is remote from professional practice</td>
<td>Richness of quality professional performance is captured</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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How convincing are the arguments against competency standards? 87
What future for technical and vocational education in training?