GETTING TO GRIPS WITH
THE NATIONAL TRAINING
REFORM AGENDA
GETTING TO GRIPS WITH THE NATIONAL TRAINING REFORM AGENDA

William Hall
The 'Getting to Grips With . . .' series has been written for the general reader who wants to understand important trends in vocational education and training.

Each booklet is in two parts. The first part comprises a description of the subject matter in a manner which is intended to be clear to any interested layperson. The second part gives an annotated list of publications for those who want to read further.

Other titles in the series include: Getting to grips with competency-based training and assessment, Getting to grips with skills audits, Getting to grips with industry restructuring, Getting to grips with key technologies, Getting to grips with on-the-job training, Getting to grips with on-the-job competencies, Getting to grips with quality, Getting to grips with assessment, Getting to grips with implementing CBT and Getting to grips with developing competency standards.

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INTRODUCTION

The national training reform agenda must succeed. We have no choice. This does not mean that everybody thinks it is perfect (because there are imperfections), or that some of the methods that are being used to achieve reform should not be changed (because some should). What it does mean is that if Australia is to achieve the mission stated by the Prime Minister in July 1992, then training reform is essential.

The Prime Minister's mission statement:

Australia's vocational education and training system aims to:

- provide an educated, skilled and flexible workforce to enable Australian industry to be competitive in domestic and international markets.

- improve the knowledge, skills and quality of life for Australians, having regard to the particular needs of disadvantaged groups.

For something so important, there seems to be a lot of confusion about what is meant by training reform. People say it is complex, or that the 'target' is changing. I would agree with the first comment, but not with the second. This 'Getting to grips with...' publication discusses the national training reform agenda, explains why training reform is essential, and looks at the reform processes. It is hoped it will help to clear some of the confusion.
Throughout this book are extracts from the publication *National Goals for Vocational Education and Training in Australia*, which is the official statement on the reform. These extracts are boxed and shaded.

More workplace training is part of the agenda (photo CALS)

**TRAINING REFORM**

'Training reform agenda' immediately assumes that training needs to be reformed. It also assumes that there needs to be a systematic way of going about it. In this section, let's look at some of the main reasons why training needs to be reformed. The next section will then discuss the areas for reform, followed by the processes of reform.
The need for reform

Barry Jones in his book *Sleepers, wake! The technology and the future of work* was one of the first Australians to show the urgent need for reform. He explained that in 1982 Australian education was still mostly designed for the élite, urban middle class.

Even over ten years later, a large number of Australians are inadequately educated and the training received by many is for past employment needs, not even for the present, let alone for the future.

Training, even in the recent past, was usually narrowly skills-based, with little opportunity for further educational development. Let me give one consequence of this. I can remember only a few years ago visiting a large factory which had recently installed German machines. Whenever a fault developed (except of a very minor nature), the machines had to be shut down and technicians had to be flown from Germany to carry out the necessary maintenance. This meant that a whole production line would be closed down for up to a week.

I asked the person showing me around if he would like to deal with problems. He said he was keen to do it but had never been trained for the new machines.

The national training reform agenda is intended to deal with problems such as this.
The national goals for vocational education and training include the statement:

The new [vocational education and training] system is designed to deliver quality training and increase the capacity of Australian employers and employees to be creative, innovative and productive as well as being more responsive to the needs and priorities of industry across the nation. With a skilled and capable workforce, able to respond creatively to new ideas and technology, Australia will increase its competitive edge in the world marketplace.

First reason

So, the first reason for training reform is to ensure that Australia may compete successfully in the world marketplace. Training reform, of itself, could not achieve this and so other changes were also introduced. The most important of these was to reduce tariffs on imports, thereby forcing Australian industry to become more competitive.

It is important to recognise that training reform was (and still is) part of a large, national strategy to change the country in fundamental ways. For some, those changes have been painful. For all, they are essential.

Second reason

The second reason for training reform was to develop consistency of outcomes across the country and portability of qualifications.
Education and training are the responsibilities of States and Territories. This has led to some important differences of length, type and content of training in one State as compared to another.

For example, certain jobs in some States do not require formal licensing, whereas in other States they do. Even when licensing is required in all States, the lengths of time to become licensed may vary from State to State.

Also, people are increasingly moving between States and so portability of skills recognition was seen to be necessary. Many employers operate across Australia and they were frustrated at the lack of national consistency.
One way to achieve national consistency was to switch to competency-based training. This meant that the emphasis was now on outcomes, rather than on how long a course should be. Skills competencies have frequently been narrowly interpreted, but there are indications that a broader approach is now being adopted.

Part of the task when developing consistency is to acknowledge States' rights, whilst developing an inclusive training system. This national/State 'tension' is already one of Australia's political strengths although frequently not recognised as such! The solution is to develop nationally agreed frameworks and policies which are amenable to the States' and Territories' ways of doing things.

The national goals for vocational education and training state:

'As a blueprint for the future, the Commonwealth, State and Territory Ministers responsible for vocational education, employment and training have developed a set of National Goals and Objectives for vocational education and training in Australia.

The National Goals and Objectives encompass the essential elements needed for a best practice training system: one which is nationally consistent and which allows for the skills and competencies relevant to the workplace to be recognised across Australia.'
The National Framework for the Recognition of Training (NFROT) was established on 1 April 1992, to provide a means of obtaining national consistency, mechanisms for providing recognition of training, mechanisms for the assessment of individual's competencies and recognition of prior learning.

It is generally believed that NFROT has not been successful, although the achievement of its aims are still important to the success of training reform. For example, the Allen Consulting Group, in its report to ANTA on the national training reform agenda, identified nine perceived weaknesses of NFROT, including the fact that there is 'no national mechanism for the ongoing implementation, monitoring and development of NFROT'.

**Third reason**

The third reason for training reform was because the country, as a whole, was grossly underqualified in terms of general education, vocational education and training. Only in higher education could we be satisfied with participation rates.

The realisation that Australia had to change brought a flurry of overseas trips to look at countries such as Japan, Sweden, Germany, England and Scotland. Whilst it is important that we should learn from other countries, it is equally important that we should develop an Australian way.
Australian approach

One concern must be that, so far, we have not fully developed an Australian approach which builds on traditional characteristics such as:
- egalitarianism (everyone’s on an equal footing)
- making things work using minimal resources
- mateship
- a ‘fair go’ so that anyone can be successful
- being inventive.

The academic jargon would be
- flat management structures
- problem solving at every level
- team work
- equity
- entrepreneurship.

Now let’s take a look at the details of the reform.
TRAINING REFORM—WHAT IT IS

The National Goals Statement listed six goals. They covered:
- A national training system
- Quality
- Opportunities and outcomes for individuals
- Needs of industry
- Equity
- Training as an investment.

Let's consider each of these in turn.

A national training system

A NATIONAL TRAINING SYSTEM

‘Develop a national vocational education and training system in which publicly funded, private and industry providers can operate effectively, efficiently and collaboratively and which meets the needs of industry and individuals.’

There are six ways proposed for achieving a national training system.

First way

First, there is a national framework for the recognition of skills, accreditation and credit transfer. Such a framework enables ‘articulation’ to occur. Articulation may be the movement from one course to another course so that credit
is given in the second course for skills successfully attained in the first one. Articulation may also be within the same institution or between different institutions.

Articulation may involve the recognition by a TAFE college of skills attained in the workplace.

The recognition of acquired skills, accreditation and credit transfer is just common sense. Unfortunately, there is insufficient of that common sense around and so much still needs to be done to achieve the training efficiencies which articulation will bring.

**Second way**

The second way of achieving a national training system is to develop and implement national competency standards. The National Training Board (NTB) is the vehicle for achieving these.

There has been much heated debate about the usefulness of competency standards. There are those people who insist that all tasks should be broken down into detailed and observable skill competency statements. There are others who claim that vocational education is much broader than this, that the 'whole' is much bigger than the sum of the separate 'parts'.

Certainly, extravagant claims have been made by some of those in favour of skill competencies. Equally certainly, vague statements about trainee attainment which are based
on length of time served are no longer acceptable. It is hoped a sensible middle course will eventually be found. There are signs that this is starting to occur.

**Third way**

The third way of achieving a national training system is by means of the Australian Standards Framework (ASF). The framework allows for eight levels of achievement which cover every sector of education and training. So all accredited courses will fit within the framework. This should make articulation easier.

The lower levels of the framework have been criticised by some as being too basic. On the other hand, those concerned with the training of the disabled have said that the lower levels are of too high a standard. Further criticisms have included the perceived rigidity that the ASF imposes. Nevertheless, the ASF does offer a common benchmark and can be made to work.

**Fourth way**

The fourth way of achieving a national training system is by means of an accessible and unified structured entry level training system. New South Wales is doing this with its ‘Pathways’ approach which is summarised overleaf.

Of course, this is not the only way. But it is one example of how a major State is dealing with the challenge.
Major post-Year 10 education and training pathways

From NSW Government Directions

The Australian Vocational Training System (AVTS) will also assist unified, structured entry level training. The system will incorporate apprenticeships and traineeships. It will be available to trainees in schools, vocational education colleges, private training establishments and industry, or any combination of these providers. It is one of this country’s most important educational developments.

Fifth way

National curriculum projects have been a feature of Australian training for many years. They are now
administered by the Australian Committee for Training Curriculum (ACTRAC). The continuing development of national curricula is the fifth approach to developing a national training system.

The quantity of national curricula which has been produced is impressive. However, there has been little evaluation of its usefulness and strong links have not been developed between ACTRAC and the NTB, although this will now change. It is intended that ACTRAC, the NTB and the National Staff Development Committee should integrate their activities. This should mean that curricula and staff training should develop alongside skills standards.

**Sixth way**

A final key objective to achieving a national training system is to 'develop an efficient, effective, responsive and integrated training market'. This objective is much less precise than the others. In any case, it assumes a single 'training market' when, in actual fact, there are many markets.

The task of developing a national training system has been given to the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA), which started operating at the beginning of 1994. It will be evaluated in 1995.

The formation of ANTA was an extremely important decision, not least of all because it introduced a new level of 'government' to Australia—one which was positioned between the Commonwealth and the States/Territories.
ANTA's role is two-fold. Firstly, to allocate money for training purposes; secondly, to develop a national training system. In line with the government's belief that the client should be in control, the ANTA Board membership is drawn entirely from industry interests.

QUALITY

'Improve the quality of the outcomes of vocational education and training.'
The training reform agenda focuses on quality and deals with:
- those involved in training
- training outcomes—both quantitative and qualitative.

Not surprisingly all trainers (TAFE staff, private providers, teachers and industry trainers) have key roles to play in improving training outcomes. Time and money need to be spent on staff development to achieve this and research has been done to show what TAFE teacher preparation and development needs are.

A major research project which reviewed TAFE teacher preparation and development was published in 1991 by NCVER. The skill phases are shown below. They are described in the full report.
The vocational training process within colleges used to be fairly straightforward. Courses were of a *fixed* length, in a *fixed* place, using *fixed* training methods and *fixed* assessments. You can see that there was little, if any, flexibility, so far as the client was concerned.

That is now starting to change, especially with the widespread move towards 'open learning'. The main distinctions between 'open' and 'closed' learning are shown below.

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<th>CLOSED</th>
<th>OPEN</th>
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<td>Fixed attendance pattern; fixed student classes at pre-determined times.</td>
<td>Attendance negotiable at student's own convenience.</td>
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<td>No attendance required at college; student working whenever it is convenient.</td>
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Reference has already been made to NFROT. It has an important role to play in quality assurance, including appropriate recognition of training providers, recognition of prior learning and the assessment of an individual's competencies.

Another previously mentioned body with important quality assurance responsibilities is the National Training Board (NTB) whose main aims are:
'in consultation with industry and key interest groups, to ratify skill standards developed by industry for occupations and industry classifications linked to industrial awards. The Board will also provide advice and assistance to industry on the development of standards'.

EMPHASISING THE INDIVIDUAL

Political statements, administrative structures consisting of boxes joined with lines, high sounding aims and training quota are all of little use unless we remember that we are dealing with individuals. Therefore this third goal is extremely important.

OPPORTUNITIES AND OUTCOMES FOR INDIVIDUALS

'Improve vocational education and training opportunities and outcomes for individuals.'

A key objective of the training reform agenda is to increase participation rates in vocational education and training.

Compared to similar industrialised countries, and based on statistical comparisons, Australia does not have a high participation rate for vocational education and training. Our participation rate for higher education, however, is good.
The statistical comparisons may be debated. For example, in this country Year 12 English and Mathematics were considered suitable training for entry into the public service, although these were never regarded as 'vocational'.

**Provider links**

The links between education and training providers are summarised below:

The links between some of the providers are not as good as they should be. For example, success at school is still frequently judged by university entry rather than entry to TAFE. The movement between TAFE and university (in both directions) does not always allow for the full recognition of prior learning (articulation).
School curricula are still mostly driven by measurement of entry to university. This must change if parental and student attitudes towards vocational education and training are to change.

Although the link between private schools and universities is a strong one, the link between private schools and TAFE is not.

A key objective of the training reform agenda is to improve articulation between educational and training sectors. Of course, articulation only makes sense if students have good career guidance. Good career guidance is also important to ensure that a person is employed after undertaking training.

Individual needs are also being met by making training more 'open'. (This has already been described.) The Australian Standards Framework allows for broad-based training and multi-skilling, whilst permitting qualifications to fit within a national framework.

**National Qualifications Framework**

Another important development has been the National Qualifications Framework. What this does is encourage consistency of qualifications, regardless of which approved body issues formal certification.

The framework has three key elements:
- the six levels of vocational education and training qualifications
- the names given to the qualifications
- the descriptions of qualifications.

The six levels are:
- advanced diploma
- diploma
- certificate IV
- certificate III
- certificate II
- certificate I

Certificate III is roughly equivalent to the old trade qualification.

**NEEDS OF INDUSTRY**

One of the biggest changes in vocational education has been to focus on clients' needs. No longer is industry the passive recipient of what professional trainers decide they should offer. Industry is now increasingly making it clear what it expects.

There is one snag to this: 'industry' is actually a heterogeneous group with widely different aims. The needs of small business are not necessarily the needs of a major manufacturer. This makes the task of offering appropriate training even more challenging.
Small businesses, especially, offer a major challenge to the national training reform agenda. It seems clear that their needs are presently not being satisfactorily met.

**NEEDS OF INDUSTRY**

'Improve the ability of the vocational education and training system to respond to the current and future needs of industry.'

The Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) has a responsibility to advise Ministers on ways in which vocational education and training should satisfy industry's training needs. The 'Working Nation' policies and programs statement by the Prime Minister on 4 May, 1994, made clear statements about training reform and industry's role in this, including industry's role in decision-making.

An important decision was taken by the National Training Board to approve enterprise standards. The first to be approved were those submitted by McDonald's and OTIS. In addition, the Business Council of Australia is developing an Enterprise Stream within the Australian Vocational Training System to cater for the training needs of larger enterprises. Enterprises will then be able to develop and accredit their own training programs and issue their own training qualifications.
The training reform agenda seeks to give industry a much greater role in the development and provision of training. The ANTA Board has five members, all of whom would claim to represent 'industry'. And industrial representatives sit on national, State and local training committees.

Five main problems remain:
- a better integration of on-the-job with off-the-job training;
- the structuring of much on-the-job training so that it fits into a total training framework, thereby allowing it to have 'currency':
- improving the quantity and quality of training in some industries;
- developing a quicker response to dealing with skills shortages;
- satisfying the needs of small business.

**EQUITY**

At a recent lunch with a group of senior business managers, I was astounded to hear one of them state that 'he had no time for all of that equity rubbish'. I was even more astounded when the rest of the group of ten, apart from me and one other, strongly agreed with that person.

That left just two of us to point out why we believe in equity provisions. Clearly, there still remains a great deal to be done to change attitudes. That is why the equity goal of the training reform agenda is so important and must not be neglected.
One difficulty in achieving such a goal is that the disadvantaged are not a homogeneous group. Not surprisingly, many women object to being classified as ‘disadvantaged’.

Although about one-half of all vocational education students are women, they are grouped within a small number of courses, such as business studies and hairdressing. The sad fact is that prejudices continue to be widespread. Some jobs are regarded as ‘male’ and some as ‘female’.

The list of ‘disadvantaged’ in the training reform agenda includes:
- women
- people without social and functional skills in English language, literacy and numeracy
- those with disabilities
- Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders
- the unemployed
- people in rural areas.

Consider the last of these. The total number of non-metropolitan Australians is about the same as the population of Sydney. Many of these people do not have ready access to training.
Link three of the disadvantaged: women who are non-English-speaking migrants and who live in rural areas. The NCVER conducted research into the needs of this group and found that they had to overcome huge disadvantages. These disadvantages could be partly overcome by developing networks of women who work together and help each other. One isolated West Australian woman said:

'Although we have come a long way in 200 years, women in the country are still very disadvantaged in health, education and social activities. Let us strive for equal opportunities for women wherever they are . . . As we are only a small nation . . . we cannot afford the luxury of ignoring the potential of all of our women, throughout the country'.

Although said a few years ago, there is every indication we still have a long way to go. Curricula, course delivery, counselling services and assessment procedures must all take careful account of the needs of the disadvantaged.
'Increase public recognition of the value of vocational education and training as an investment for both industry and individuals.'

Until fairly recently, it was a common belief that training was something you did before starting full-time work; and that the training was to last for the whole of a person's life. This was a bit like getting vaccinated: it wasn't very pleasant, you had to do it, but you soon forgot all about it. Also, it mostly had a limited life, just like most vaccinations!

This vaccination theory of training is no longer widespread. We are realising that training must be a continual process because of changes to technology. Also, we realise that people change jobs. No longer will they be doing the same thing for the whole of their working lives.

Workforce restructuring in Australia has been nothing short of revolutionary—but peaceful revolution without blood! The rigid structuring of jobs into narrow bands of skills, strict job demarcation, autocratic and hierarchical management structures, and obsolete equipment have become redundant.

However, increased skills are only possible with a strong commitment to training as an investment. That investment
spills over into how we conduct our home and leisure living, not just how we do our paid work.

For this to happen we must broaden our view of what comprises ‘training’. The very best preparation for work and for vocational education and training is a good, general education. This has been recognised by the World Bank in their funding of secondary education.

Literacy, numeracy, scientific and technological understanding, and a non-English language are all fundamental to a good general education for Australians. So is a range of interpersonal skills.

The training of managers is crucial to the success of the national training reform agenda. Many have merely learned (badly) on-the-job and are repeating the deficiencies of those they are copying.

HOW’S THE REFORM PROGRESSING?

The national training reform agenda has its critics. Professor Judith Sloan, Director of the National Institute of Labour Studies, says the reform can only be understood if two assumptions are made:
• that Australia is one big engineering workshop;
• that the labour market is an eight-storey, concrete car park.
She is implying that training reform has been developed for big industry only, with the Australian Standards Framework in mind.

She goes on to question whether the market would be demanding such arrangements if there were no national training reform agenda.

Such critics do not support government involvement in training (which is what the training reform agenda is all about). However, government involvement is essential if such important changes are to occur. Nevertheless, as I have already acknowledged, critics do have a point in implying that much small business is directly untouched by the changes.

Whilst welcoming the much increased interest in training we must guard against the danger of believing that training has all of the solutions to our employment problems. Training alone is seen by some to be the way to shorter dole queues, to update industry and to improve working conditions.

However, training is only one of the important variables. Others which contribute to the problem of unemployment include bad management, the emphasis on short-term profits instead of investment, the making of redundant products, or products of low quality, and poor marketing.

By now you will appreciate that the training reform agenda is highly complex. And so it should be. Those who are wanting a simple slogan miss the point. The complexity is a
direct consequence of the complexity of training. The old way of doing things hasn’t worked: that is why we must change.

One immediate change should be to stop referring to the training reform ‘agenda’. Instead of ‘agenda’ we should follow the Commonwealth Minister’s suggestion and refer to ‘implementation’.

As I stated at the beginning of this booklet: the national training reform agenda must succeed: we have no choice!

FURTHER READING

Clark, Terry 1990, Getting to grips with skills audits, National Centre for Vocational Education Research, Adelaide.

Explaining for the general reader the basics of how to conduct skills audits and why they are needed.

Clark, Terry 1991, Getting to grips with on-the-job training, National Centre for Vocational Education Research, Adelaide.

A straight-forward approach to on-the-job training.

Foyster, John 1990, Getting to grips with competency-based training and assessment, National Centre for Vocational Education Research, Adelaide.

Explaining for the general reader the basics of competency-based training and assessment.

Explaining for the general reader the basics of applying competencies in the workplace.


Explaining for the general reader the most important aspects of quality, such as effectiveness, presentation, reliability and cost—and how to encourage their application.


Explaining for the general reader the basics of training assessment.


Explaining for the general reader the basic steps for applying competency-based training.


Explaining for the general reader the basics of the important trends in vocational education and training.

The book’s blurb (accurately) states ‘*Sleepers, wake!* urges all of us to become aware of the implications of life in a ‘post-service’ era, and Barry Jones confronts this vital issue without equivocation’.

**VEETAC Secretariat, National goals for vocational education and training in Australia,** published in 1992 by the VEETAC Secretariat, Canberra.

This is where it all began; and it belies the criticism of some that ‘no one knows what the training reform agenda is about’. They should read this booklet!

Other publications on particular aspects of training reform are available from the NCVER whose catalogue should be consulted. Also, the quarterly magazine *Australian Training Review* includes relevant articles.