What's in a training package?

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In his world best-seller, Dr Peter Roget classified the entire vocabulary of the English language into six broad categories, one of which is for words relating to the communication of ideas. ‘Discourse’, ‘interlocution’, ‘debate’ and ‘war of words’, all fall within this category.

Anyone involved in an area as significant and far-reaching as vocational education and training would have to agree that at least some of these activities are integral to sound policy development. In the first half of this year, many ideas were being communicated on the subject of Training Packages particularly their key role in continuously improving and opening up new opportunities for New Apprenticeship pathways. This airing of views was in part generated by media coverage of the Senate’s Employment Workplace Relations and Small Business and Education References Committee Inquiry into the Quality of Vocational Education and Training in Australia.

This communication of ideas varied from a positive contribution—discourse—to its less helpful form—the war of words. The constructive exchange of information is essential and to be encouraged and ANTA has been, and continues to be, an interested observer and participant in this activity. In this, our regular contribution to Australian Training Review, ANTA seeks to reiterate the points we feel need to be made in the interests of ongoing, well-informed discussion.

The training initiatives of the past decade, including Training Packages and the expansion of flexible learning pathways they support, represent the first time any federated nation has introduced such massive change to the nature of vocational education and training. Australia has tackled this to achieve a world class vocational education and training system that both serves the needs of industry and of the nation and gives everyone the opportunity to acquire skills throughout their life. Understandably, these changes have brought challenges. Our ongoing discourse with clients and stakeholders has made us aware of a number of the issues that found their way into the public debate and which need addressing if Training Packages are to provide a foundation for high quality learning and skill development.

Initially, let’s consider how and why the concept of a Training Package was developed and what it is meant to be.

A Training Package is a tool designed to close the loop between industry skill demands and the outcomes of training. This involves linking competency standards directly with AQF qualifications and defining minimum requirements for how learners should be assessed against the competencies. Packages were never intended to be a complete training resource or curriculum substitute—they are part of an industry-driven system where curriculum is a teacher’s tool and not the driving force of vocational training. An analogy might be that a Training Package is like a building plan for a house. Such a plan is always comprehensive and designed to lead to a finished product that is sound, meets building regulations and satisfies the eventual owner. It is also able to be customised in certain ways and within prescribed limits to meet individual needs while still retaining the overall integrity of the design and construction principles. The plan does, however, require interpretation by experienced people and organisations to turn it into a finished product that suits the client—just as a teacher or trainer interprets a Training Package to suit learners from different pathways and points of entry and with different learning capabilities, all of whom seek to reach the same level of skill.

So what has been the progress to date?

Currently, there are 52 industry and three enterprise Training Packages endorsed and published. ANTA estimates a maximum of 70 industry Packages will be completed by the end of 2001. Potential exists for up to another dozen enterprise Training Packages.
The existing endorsed Packages define 993 national qualifications that can be gained through combinations of the 7794 unique units of competency they contain. Compared with the 17017 accredited courses still on the National Training Information Service this represents a significant streamlining and simplification of training specification to help learners, providers and enterprises.

We also recognise—as does any organisation with a market and a product—that there must be continuous improvement and input from the users. Even the manufacturers of Coke changed the recipe in response to demand!

Continuous improvement of Training Packages happens on two levels. Individual Packages are reviewed 18 months before the end of their initial endorsement period and at the moment, the first 13 Training Packages are under review. This process specifically includes working with the State and Territory training authorities to gain feedback from public and private RTO users in every jurisdiction and input is welcome at any time from Training Package users, either to ANTA or to the national developers identified in each Training Package.

On another level, ANTA is taking a broad, long-term view of the future role of Training Packages and the contribution they can make to the nation’s learning and skill development needs. Our current focus is on:

- Expanding the opportunities for New Apprenticeships as a vibrant, accessible and highly valued learning pathway.
- More clearly identifying skills which apply to work generally (sometimes called ‘generic’ or ‘soft’ skills) in Training Packages.
- Ensuring that the knowledge that underpins what is done on the job is made more explicit in Training Packages.
- Making sure Training Packages meet the needs of students who are not yet in relevant employment.
- Feeding ‘leading-edge’ industry advice into the development of Packages and keeping in touch with the emerging needs of industry.
- Drawing on the expertise of educators in determining how training can best be delivered, and how that might impact on how the outcomes are defined in Training Packages.
- Providing practical, flexible resources and professional development opportunities to help teachers and trainers to make the transition to Training Packages and maximise the potential to exercise their professional skills.

So, where to in the future?

Our crystal ball is no more reliable than anyone else’s. However, the Training Package concept will remain an important part of defining industry and individual needs for workforce skills into the future. The Training Packages we have now are the starting point for a better and more focussed approach to defining vocational skills. Like any tool, they will evolve and improve and informed criticism is integral to their transformation over time into the mainstay of Australian training.

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