

What is ...competent?

Peter Murdoch, South Australian Library Technicians Section

At 7pm on 11 July, 50 library technicians and technicians-in-training gathered at the Adelaide Institute of TAFE auditorium for an information session on competency standards for the Library and Information Services industry.

Heather Linnett, President of the South Australian Library Technicians (SALT) Section which organised the event, opened the session by discussing recent work of the SALT Committee including the revision and printing of a *Consider a career as a library technician* brochure, the status of a request to the Commissioner for Public Employment for the inclusion of an eligibility clause in library technician job descriptions consistent with that used for librarian positions, and the Committee's role in having an advertised vacancy withdrawn and subsequently reclassified at an appropriate library technician level.

Peter Murdoch began the evening with a video clip of a news report in which the reporter inferred that library technicians were poorly skilled or unskilled workers. He pointed to this poor perception of library technicians and suggested that competency standards being developed should provide a framework to more clearly describe our skills and help to change this perception.

The union perspective

Hugh Callaway, Industrial Officer with the Public Service Association of SA, was then invited to present the 'Union' perspective on competency standards and their potential influence on employment agreements and training. He outlined the push by the federal government for a fundamental shift in emphasis from a produce-based to an intellectual-based economy which would make Australia more competitive in the international marketplace. As a vital part of the National Training Reform Agenda (begun in 1989) this shift will allow for greater flexibility in training both off and on-the-job, clearer career path options, and improved mobility between jobs at both local and national levels. With the competency standards being developed nationally by Arts Training Australia (our ITAB or Industry Training Advisory Body), employer and union representatives, and with ALIA's involvement, it will mean a more consistent expectation amongst employers as to what skills and knowledge their employees should possess at various levels of responsibility.

Because of the rapidly changing nature of the working environment, a basic principle underlying the competency-based approach is that assessment of competence will not simply be a matter of holding particular qualifications or showing proficiency in certain skills and knowledge. Instead competency will include the demonstrated ability to transfer ones skills and understanding, and hence performance, to new and developing situations. In line with this, a new, more flexible approach to training is required which recognises skills and knowledge acquired through on-the-job training

and non-formal courses as well as through current formally accredited courses.

Hugh concluded by highlighting some of the implications for enterprise bargaining that competency-based employment agreements would bring. These included employers being more able to design positions that suited their current and future needs; greater accountability of the changing nature of family situations and the need for more flexible working patterns; and employees being rewarded for skills and knowledge gained through non-formal means which enhanced their capability to undertake a more varied range of duties.

Competencies and the reform agenda

Anne Hazell spoke of her involvement with the development of competency standards for our industry. Despite ALIA's unsuccessful submission to develop competency standards for the library and information services sector, ALIA was still keen that they represent the profession nationally, and as a direct result from her role as Chair of the ALIA Board of Education, Anne was asked to join the national taskforce as ALIA representative.

She described where competencies fit into the reform agenda, citing a diagram reproduced in the ALIA brochure *What competency standards for the library and information services industry means to you* (November 1993). The foundation upon which this process of reform is based is provided by the development of generic- and industry-level competency standards. The generic-level competencies (core competencies) are those that all employees should have by the time they reach the workforce. Industry-level competencies are those which define in broad terms the skills and knowledge that could be expected of employees at various levels in the library and services industry, subject to refinement.

Once competencies have been defined (the phase we are currently in at the moment) the whole process of training reform will gain momentum. Having identified what employees need to know and be capable of will lead to clarification of the training and development requirements to meet these needs and whether they can be met through formal education systems, worksite training or alternate methods. Structures and procedures will need to be established which embody equity in the assessment and recognition of such competency training and lead to employees gaining acknowledgment for their increased capabilities through formal certification or through enterprise bargaining agreements.

It is believed that a workforce based on a training structure such as this will, as it gains in skills and understanding, develop improved work practices which will lead to increased productivity and consequently improve, as Hugh Callaway initially mentioned, Australia's competitiveness in the international marketplace. Anne pointed out that this process, even though

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more easily seen in product-based industries such as the metal trades, was just as significant a development for the many service-based industries in Australia.

The process

Having outlined the rationale behind the push for competency standards Anne focussed on the development of the national standards for our industry. Over fifty participants were selected from around Australia reflecting the range of positions, and cultural and special interest groups represented in libraries. Participants were asked what were the duties undertaken or skills used and how much of their job they comprised.

This information was then collated by Arts Training Australia Project Officer, Margaret Thurstans, and a preliminary ranking of tasks was made against the Australian Standards Framework (ASF) levels. This was developed into a first draft of competencies, which the national taskforce, at its June 1994 meeting, sent back for extensive development as it was felt that the draft did not adequately reflect the complexity of the industry.

Anne returned to the ASF levels, clarifying their role as national benchmarks developed in order to describe in broad terms the work levels at which employees would be operating and, by making comparisons to current classification and qualification structures, how positions may be translated across to those levels identified appropriate for our industry. She also expressed concern that the differing nature of para-professional and professional responsibilities be recognised, where library technicians with greater experience and more specialised skills, for instance, or those with management responsibilities, should expect to find themselves placed at a level higher than that at which a beginning librarian may be placed. The whole issue of translation to the national benchmarks is one that will undoubtedly generate enormous discussion during the competencies verification phase and leading up to any implementation of those competencies.

We were given a glimpse of what Anne expected the draft competencies to look like with two examples: one

based on library promotion and the other on providing children's services. To illustrate the first example for instance, let's say, in the 'unit' library promotion, one 'element of competency' is defined as: *Raise client awareness of library services through regular displays.* For this competency the 'performance criteria' might read: *at level 2 you may assist in the setting up of displays; at level 3 you may gather the items for displays and make the signs for them as well; at level 4 you may plan and organise the implementation of displays; at level 5 you may devise displays that meet or enhance your program objectives and evaluate the outcomes; at level 6 you may be responsible for assessing community needs and attitudes, and how you can promote the library's services and collections which are available to meet those needs.*

As can be seen from this example it is clear that as competence increases (through training and/or experience) so does the capability to undertake positions of greater operational responsibility.

During question time, Hugh Callaway said that we need to see learning as an ongoing working-life process and that the changing nature of training would, for many occupations, mean a shift in emphasis to increased assessment in the workplace. Anne reiterated her view on the importance of a clear understanding of the content and structure of the competencies for a satisfactory translation into ASF levels, and stressed the need for all sectors of the industry to have input during the verification phase.

As a result of this information session, a Library Technician Competency Standards Verification Working Group (SA) has been established: Peter Murdoch (Convenor), Adele Green and Ros Emms representing public service employees, Joy O'Brien and Elizabeth Collins representing higher education, Alison Potts and Ronis Hicks representing local government, John Matthews and Eva Dimasi representing public and independent schools respectively, and Robyn Matthews, library technician educator, for representation on training and assessment issues.

We eagerly await the release of the draft competencies! ■

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