

Competency standards and the professions

Anne Hazell and Jennefer Nicholson

The impetus for the development of competency standards for the professions has been different from that at the industry level. For professions it was primarily to establish standards for entry to the profession, whether from overseas or across States, and had particular relevance to professions with different State registration requirements for practice. For industries the impetus was primarily to establish standards for the assessment of vocational skills, education and training needs within the workplace and to incorporate award restructuring developments.

NOOSR and the Australian Standards Framework

In 1989 the National Office of Overseas Skills Recognition (NOOSR) was established within the Department of Employment, Education and Training to provide advice and assistance to those professions with a workforce of over 2000, where education and training is predominantly delivered by higher education institutions. The aim was to develop a competency-based approach to the assessment and recognition of professional skills, in place of making judgement about the parity of qualifications between States, and overseas qualifications with those gained in Australia. NOOSR became a funding body for professions to develop competency standards and assessment methods. Some professions, such as the nursing profession, were already well under way. Standards developed so far are predominantly for entry-level competency requirements for the profession as a whole. Many of those funded by NOOSR have chosen to retain the competency standards for their own purposes and not have them endorsed by the National Training Board (NTB). NOOSR does not endorse standards.

The health professions, includ-

ing nursing, pharmacy, physiotherapy, podiatry, are well-represented among the professions which have developed competency standards with assistance from NOOSR. The development of competency standards for nursing in particular has been well documented.

In terms of the national benchmark eight-level Australian Standards Framework, competency standards developed through NOOSR sponsorship generally begin at Levels 6 or 7. Industry-based competency standards endorsed by the NTB have covered Levels 1-6, although there is evidence that they are extending coverage to Level 7, as in the case of the library sector.

Although it is almost impossible from a professional association viewpoint to separate entry-level professional practice from the professional education which precedes it, it is widely accepted that competency standards are not curriculum documents—they are about outcomes and leave open how those outcomes are achieved. The NTB clearly states in its *Policy and Guidelines* (2nd Ed) that 'Endorsement of competency standards where delivery is by self-accrediting higher education institutions does not have the same effect on accreditation and delivery as in the vocational education and training sector'. (p.54)

The great debate

There is extensive debate in higher education about competencies. The NTB model is seen as 'behaviourist', emphasising observable behaviour against units of competence, with underlying knowledge often inferred. Criticism of this model is that it does not adequately incorporate the application of attributes to performance, nor the relationship of competence in one area to another. In general the professions, and higher education commentators believe that a cognitive or 'holistic' model is

more appropriate. This model, or approach, allows for a wider perspective than individual observable behaviour. It acknowledges the interrelationship of attitudes, such as organisation culture, ethics, and attributes such as knowledge to competent performance. Reflection on this knowledge and attitudes is essential for the professional to apply judgement which is a fundamental aspect of professional practice. In this context, there is no intention that competency standards will cover every aspect of professional practice, but that they should provide a good coverage of what is considered important in that profession.

Further issues of debate, as yet unresolved but of great interest to the Association, are: whether industry competency standards should influence curricula in

Australia wide library supplies a speciality

Cassettes, Compact Discs

Classical, pop, jazz, country and western easy listening, ethnic, ambient, children's and spoken word on CD and cassette. Over 35 000 titles (classical and non-classical) available on compact disc.

We provide your library with a complete service. We discuss your requirements and provide free detailed submissions. Alternatively we can supply goods from your listing. Naturally all sound recordings are sales tax exempt and we give you a discount, as well.

Whether you are planning to buy now, or later, we welcome your enquiry. References from other libraries readily given.

Printed Music

Tarantella also supplies classical and non-classical sheet music, vocal scores and pocket scores.

TARANTELLA

PO Box 44, Gordon, NSW 2072
Telephone (02) 498 3711
(Frank Morrison or Don Frew)

*...competency standards
are not curriculum
documents—they are
about outcomes...*

higher education—higher education in itself brings a whole range of education competency standards; the role of practical experience in formal education, with a view to providing a better linkage between theory and professional practice; and the alignment of formal education with industry competency standards.

ALIA's involvement

ALIA's original discussions in relation to the development of competency standards took place in 1990-1991 with NOOSR. The reasons for ALIA shifting its involvement from NOOSR to Arts Training Australia and hence NTB-endorsed competency standards are complex. The library and information services industry, including ALIA, wished to develop standards which covered all work-

ers in the industry. In the case of ALIA this is a reflection of our membership coverage of librarians and technicians with formal qualifications, and unqualified workers within the industry. This is in contrast with many other professional associations. Where a Competency Standards Body (CSB) exists for an industry with a career path going through to professional levels, NOOSR requires profession to consult with that CSB. The DEET-preferred approach was for one competency standards project, to be done through a CSB and including professional level. In 1992, Arts Training Australia (ATA) was successful in obtaining DEET funding for the development of competency standards for the library and information services industry. That ALIA would also receive government funding

for the development of standards seemed highly unlikely. Nor would standards developed outside the ATA/NTB context have had any status, partly because the powerful industrial lobby is committed to NTB endorsed standards. With some reluctance, ALIA abandoned negotiations with NOOSR, and, at the end of 1992, agreed to be a member of the ATA project.

Simon Marginson from the Centre for the Study of Higher Education at the University of Melbourne notes two interesting aspects about competency standards and the professions: the most prestigious professions, law and medicine, have not felt obliged to develop competency standards, and, the higher the status of the profession, the more the professional association becomes the key decision-making group. ■



Information - here and beyond!

Discover *VISTA* - an exciting new way to deliver information through your Dynix system. Use any Dynix workstation and terminal to access *VISTA* databases and investigate a spectrum of subjects.

VISTA brings you:

- Single, centralised information centre.
- Topics can span education, business, health, general interest and more.
- Powerful Dynix searching for easy retrieval.
- Ready access via Internet.
- No database storage or maintenance requirements.
- Fixed costs for budgeting purposes.
- Direct document delivery via printer or fax.

Take advantage of the one month free trial access!

Dynix Australia Pty Ltd
A.C.N. 008 122 950
175 Fullarton Road
Dulwich South Australia 5065
Ph (08) 366 4000 Fax (08) 366 4098

Dynix New Zealand Inc.
Level 3, 15 Day Street
CPO Box 1978
Auckland, New Zealand
Ph (09) 302 5215 Fax (09) 302 5235

Dynix Asia Region
175 Fullarton Road
Dulwich SA 5065
Ph (08) 366 4000 Fax (08) 366 4098