

## Debating Competencies

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A perennial topic of educational debate concerns how what is learned at school relates to the employment opportunities of individual students and to the overall performance of the economy. In periods of economic stress the attention of politicians and other policy actors tends to focus sharply on the educational process, its perceived failings and need for reform.

The Hawke Labor government which assumed federal power in Australia in 1983 initially followed an orthodox social democratic policy path in education, emphasising social justice through programs such as Participation and Equity in Education. In 1986, however, the nation faced a dramatic balance of payments and currency crisis which fundamentally altered the government's outlook and led to a commitment to deep-seated economic reform.<sup>1</sup> A major focus was education, initially higher and vocational education, but soon encompassing schools and their interfaces with other educational sectors and with workplaces.

### Changing values

Even before the financial crisis, the government had become uneasy about the lack of visible learning or economic outcomes from its considerably expanded investments in education. It had asked Professor Peter Karmel to review the evidence for educational improvements resulting from his celebrated report of 1973. This Quality of Education Review Committee (QERC) found that almost all additional funds had gone into employing extra people: while enrolments had grown by 5 per cent in the previous decade, teacher numbers had grown by a third. Unfortunately, the committee concluded, there was:

no incontrovertible evidence from either government or non-government schools that cognitive outcomes for students have become either better or worse...perspectives of inadequacies are strongly held by employers and industry groups but the evidence is largely anecdotal.<sup>2</sup>

Disappointed by a decade of liberal educational policies, governments began to listen to those who advocated instrumental objectives in education and the use of market forces to achieve them. While the vocational education sector was the first target, senior secondary schooling soon became entangled in the same net. The vehicle to drive change in both was an emphasis on employment-relevant competencies. While this idea had a long if not always happy pedigree in various areas of education,<sup>3</sup> it arrived in Australian practice from the national industrial relations agenda – the introduction of award restructuring, utilising skill levels as the basis for employee remuneration, meant that equivalences had to be sought for qualitatively different work skills and the levels of the vocational education system had been adopted as the appropriate metric.

Governments planning policy reforms which entail significant value changes seek to mobilise public opinion in support of the change; in Australia the formal public inquiry

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<sup>1</sup> Edwards, 1996, 287

<sup>2</sup> QERC, 1985, 187–188

<sup>3</sup> Collins, 1993, 1; Harris and Hodge, 2009

is a favoured method.<sup>4</sup> Once the policy prism had moved by 1991 from the post-school sectors to a focus on an age group – 15 to 19 year olds, many of whom would still be at school – several review committees were established in quick succession to legitimise and promote the new competency agenda. The most important of these were the Finn and Mayer inquiries, with a further review by the Employment Skills Formation Commission named for its Chair (Carmichael).<sup>5</sup> Clearly, this was an area of policy innovation of considerable concern to the Australian College of Educators and its membership.

### **The Finn Committee 1991**

The Finn Review, chaired by Brian Finn, CEO of IBM Australia, began work in February 1991, contacting the College and other interested parties seeking submissions in response to an Issues Paper. Barely a month was allowed for the preparation of submissions and the short timeline limited the capacity of the College to engage with the questions raised.<sup>6</sup> The Issues paper provided background, especially on the sharp fall in education participation between the ages of 15 and 19 and the extent both of unemployment and absence from either the workforce or education of many of the age group, and sought advice on a range of issues. However, the wording of the document implied that most directions for the eventual report had been predetermined. For example, it did not ask whether the idea of a national participation target was supported, but rather its 'appropriate form and level', and also a basis for measurement, strategies and timetable. On the key issue of curriculum, it assumed that there should be 'national curriculum principles... to develop key competencies' and sought advice only on implementation procedures.

Advice was also invited on:

- the appropriate roles of the three education sectors
- barriers to participation by the disadvantaged
- careers education, and
- resource implications.

Given the brief period allowed to prepare a response, the responsibility fell to the then President, Professor Phillip Hughes, although the Chair of the NSW Chapter, Professor A G Shannon, offered the Committee a brief submission on the topic of mathematics education.<sup>7</sup>

Hughes had recently written more generally on somewhat the same subject matter<sup>8</sup> and prepared a substantial response in a short time, sensibly advising the committee to note existing research. His principal comments concerned:

- youth labour markets, noting the existence of multiple exit and entry points in the school to work transition, gender differentiation, and practices which erected barriers to equitable outcomes
- income support, both for students generally and for the economically disadvantaged
- curriculum research, referring to existing research on retention rates

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<sup>4</sup> Ryan, 1999

<sup>5</sup> Finn, 1991; Mayer, 1992; Carmichael, 1992

<sup>6</sup> ACEOA 015-09; subsequent references to the College's involvement with Finn are to this file

<sup>7</sup> Shannon to Phillips, 12 March 1991, ACEOA 015-09

<sup>8</sup> Hughes, 1991, ACEOA 015-09

- pedagogy, arguing that how young adults learn is as important an issue as what they should be taught.

Hughes' covering letter agreed with the thrust of the committee's Issues Paper, but added that the College would caution the review Committee against defining the educational needs of young people too narrowly in terms of labour market competencies alone.<sup>9</sup>

Apart from a standard acknowledgement, there is no indication that the Finn Committee developed any further contact with the College or that the College reacted directly to its eventual report. This was not of direct relevance to the issue of competence, however, as one of the key findings of Finn was the need for further work to elucidate what was meant by the key competencies which went beyond vocational skills but which in a more general sense underpinned an individual's capacity to be an effective employee and citizen. Defining these key competencies was a task entrusted to the Mayer Committee.

### **The Mayer Committee 1992**

The Mayer Committee, chaired by Eric Mayer, formerly CEO of National Mutual was made up of a wide range of business, union and education executives, and supported by three expert sub-committees. It commenced work even before its final membership was approved in December 1991 and began by issuing a short discussion document, somewhat expanding on its terms of reference.<sup>10</sup> The document posed a range of questions:

- How is competence to be defined?
- What does employment-related competence involve?
- What aspects are generic to all areas of employment?
- Is the Finn committee's sixfold structure appropriate?
- Should competencies include creativity and household management?
- What are the components of a competency profile?
- How should profiles be developed?
- What are the Implications for school and training curricula?
- What are the purposes of reporting on competencies?
- What are the consequences for assessment?
- Can reporting competencies facilitate school-training transition?

After initial consultations, the Committee in May 1992 issued a proposal for employment-related key competencies as a basis for final consultations,<sup>11</sup> with the intention of reporting to federal, state and territory ministers in July. The proposal asserted that its definition of competence was widely supported in initial consultations. Noting that it had rejected narrow task-performance approaches the Committee said it had adopted:

...a broad definition of competence which recognises that performance is underpinned not only by skill but also by knowledge and understanding and that competence involves both the ability to perform in a given context and the capacity to transfer knowledge and skills to new tasks and situations.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Hughes to Phillips, 13 March 1991, ACEOA 015-09

<sup>10</sup> ACEOA 015-06

<sup>11</sup> Mayer, E (Chair), 1991, in ACEOA 015-06

<sup>12</sup> Mayer, E (Chair), 1992, 4

The proposal developed a range of what it described as Key Competency Strands, which it claimed to have derived from the Finn Report's key areas of competence. Each of its strands was said to be measurable at three performance levels. These were designated for each area of competence, with performance criteria which pertained sometimes to all levels, at other times showing a progression through levels. What everyone had been waiting for was the specification of key areas of competence, which became known in effect as the key competencies. The Finn Report had detailed six areas of competence:

- Language and communication
- Using mathematics
- Scientific and technological understanding
- Cultural understanding
- Problem solving
- Personal and interpersonal.

These were now to be replaced with seven key strands (or more simply, key competencies):

- Collecting, analysing and organising ideas and information
- Expressing ideas and information
- Planning and organising activities
- Working with others and in teams
- Using mathematical ideas and techniques
- Solving problems
- Using technology

Performance levels were linked flexibly (if not entirely comprehensibly) to the Australian Standards Framework (ASF), which had been constructed originally for comparability across industrial awards. Assessment methodologies were suggested and stress placed on national reporting and data collection.

While earlier dabbling with the concepts of creativity and family and household management had disappeared without trace, there was some concern at the disappearance of cultural understanding and interpersonal and personal skills – for example, in the submissions from the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) and from the Victorian Chapter of the College.<sup>13</sup>

With more time available for comment, the College and its constituent elements were able to delve more deeply into the Mayer than the Finn recommendations. Moreover, the College was able to exchange thoughts with like-minded bodies. For example, a staff group at ACER provided a range of comments focusing specially on their expertise in assessment and reporting, sounding a warning on the practicality and resource needs of the proposal and asking how useful would the suggested national data collection be.<sup>14</sup> The National Council of Independent School Associations (NCISA) suggested that the generic competencies did not differ qualitatively from existing general education and sought both a holistic approach to curriculum, assessment and reporting recommendations and an evolutionary approach to implementation.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> ACE Victorian Chapter, Response to the Mayer Report, ACEOA 015-06

<sup>14</sup> ACER, 1992, Response to the Mayer Committee Proposal, ACEOA 302-11

<sup>15</sup> NCISA, 1992, NCISA Response to the Mayer Committee's Second Discussion Paper, ACEOA 015-06

From within the College came comments from a significant number of sources: formal submissions from the Victorian, South Australian and Queensland Chapters and the Barwon-Western Victoria Regional Group, and responses from groups of College members at the University of Western Sydney, Murdoch University in Perth and the Macarthur region in NSW<sup>16</sup>. A final College response was drafted by Professor Philip Hughes at the University of Tasmania.

Such a variety of comment is not easy to summarise briefly. Overall, comment congratulated the committee on what was described as a 'sincere effort' or 'genuine attempt', which implied a need for more effort to come. Mostly the competency approach was broadly endorsed although how it was to be operationalised and how it related to existing curricula were felt to be open questions. Some questioned whether industry was really engaged with the process and the Queensland group noted a lack of evidence that the intended benefits would actually flow. Only the Murdoch University group questioned the basic concept of competencies, noting that a British model had been adopted although it had not worked well in the UK.

There were doubts, too, about the resource and practical issues of implementation, including the need for staging, a feeling that educators and teachers were being left out of the loop, and concerns about the confidentiality of assessment data. The question of knowledge transferability was raised, along with doubts about alignment to the ASF and, several times, regret about the loss of cultural understanding and personal and interpersonal competencies.

On 28 July the College president provided a Council-endorsed response to Mayer.<sup>17</sup> The response is lengthy but some core elements were:

- support for the committee's general approach and especially for the way it had broadened and given a theoretical backing to the idea of generic competencies: the College stressed the value of incorporating knowledge as well as skills in the concept, perhaps with some concern that the debate tended to keep slipping back to narrower and less educationally supportive definition
- in particular, the College warned against a return to the behaviourist theories of the 1960s and, in this context, regretted the disappearance of the cultural understanding and personal and interpersonal competencies and the swallowing of critical and creative thinking competencies by a broad skill of problem solving
- comment on confidentiality of assessment, minimal attention to the needs of the disadvantaged and recognition of prior learning
- concern at the cost and practicalities of implementation – a staged approach was suggested.

In its covering letter, the college made two further points:<sup>18</sup>

- That the competencies approach posed a risk of further marginalisation of important curriculum areas like creative and performing arts, health and physical education and languages other than English
- A whole strand of generic competencies concerned with caring remained missing from the frameworks.

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<sup>16</sup> ACEOA 015-06 and 302-11

<sup>17</sup> Australian College of Education, Response to the Mayer Committee, ACEOA 015-06

<sup>18</sup> Pope to Borthwick, 28 July, 1992, ACEOA 015-06

## Beyond Mayer

In many ways the Mayer Report could be seen as the educationalists' participation in the competencies debate – industry representation on the Mayer Committee was dwarfed by that of education officials and teacher union representatives; moreover, of the 540 submissions received by the Committee, only six were from industry employers.<sup>19</sup> Perhaps for this reason it made less of a policy impression than the Finn Report, or the Carmichael Review which now followed.<sup>20</sup> While Carmichael was partly aimed at repatriating the debate to the vocational education sector where it had originated, it also showed a greater enthusiasm than Finn or Mayer for expanding vocational education in schools, even suggesting that the TAFE sector should vacate entry level training.<sup>21</sup>

Essentially, the major outcome for schooling of these initiatives of the early 1990s was the expansion of vocational subjects in the school curriculum, so that now about half of all students undertake some such study; the program's success is a more qualified question.<sup>22</sup> Over that time, the fundamental conflict between a knowledge-based curriculum and a competency-based one has continued to pose a conundrum for curriculum developers and assessors.

Many of these continuing issues were spelt out in the College's major contribution to the competency debate. This came in 1993 and, while records are incomplete, seems to have been an initiative undertaken by the College's Publications Committee, rather than arising from the deliberations of Council or its Policy Issues Group. The Chair of the Publications Committee, Professor Cherry Collins of Murdoch University, had been considerably less satisfied than other internal contributors with the College's generally supportive stand on Mayer. As she wrote to the College Office in July 1992

I think that the draft response of the College is much too complimentary over the whole operationalisation of Competence...the Mayer Committee needs to be pushed firmly to consult with people who know about cognitive structures and the development of cognitive processes.<sup>23</sup>

Collins pointed out the whole approach was copied from the UK where, she argued, it was yet to prove a success. The Publications Committee therefore took the initiative of developing a book of readings covering all dimensions of the competency debate.<sup>24</sup> Collins, as editor, outlined three purposes:

- to provide basic information on the what and the why of initiatives in competency-based education
- to look at initiatives as experienced on the ground at state level or at the teaching–learning interface
- to set out some of the issues which educators and the community needed to debate before pressing too far with competency schemes.

Eleven chapters covered the basics of competency-based education at policy, state, institution and teaching profession levels; three provided a critique of concept and practice. In the first, the underlying psychology of cognition and learning processes,

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<sup>19</sup> Ryan, 1994, 9

<sup>20</sup> Carmichael, 1992

<sup>21</sup> Ryan, 2002

<sup>22</sup> Anlezark et al, 2006

<sup>23</sup> Collins to Pope and Glyde, 27 July 1992. ACEOA 015-06

<sup>24</sup> Collins, C (ed.), 1993

almost entirely overlooked in the public debate, were examined. The second looked at the competency push in terms of ideology and social relations. A final critique examined the nature of knowledge and how approaches to epistemology fitted varying world views and preferred social outcomes.

### **Conclusion: the College and a crucial national debate**

The three major reports considered here were not the only ingredients in a decade of public policy development in education, but they were the foundation for many of the government decisions which followed throughout the 1990s and which continue to resonate in contemporary policy. The central fulcrum, especially in relation to Australian schooling, was the report of the Mayer Committee. Here the College was a noteworthy participant in debate and effective collaborator with other professional bodies in education.

The College's capacity to respond so effectively derived from its ability to draw on the expertise and interest of a wide range of individuals and entities within its structure, many of whom in turn were able to reach out effectively to like-minded individuals and organisations. A possible downside of the College's present more centralised structure might be that too great a burden of expectation falls on its central office staff: it remains an open question whether the College retains the same degree of flexibility and room for internal initiative as it displayed in the 1990s.

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