

A vocational stream for social care workers: A case study

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This article is a case study of an attempt by a team of VET teachers, researchers and users of social services to develop a more effective, knowledge rich, vocational stream qualification in the Health Care and Social Assistance industry. Health Care and Social Assistance is one of the fastest growing industries in Australia, adding entry-level jobs at a time when other industries are shedding them. Entry to this industry requires a Certificate 3 qualification from the relevant national Training Package.

Training Packages have been designed to facilitate flexible points of entry to an industry for early school leavers and other disadvantaged groups, and then pathways to further study and careers. However, a growing body of research has pointed to the weaknesses of the training package model and competency based training more generally, to achieve these aspirations. Vocational streams and enhanced attention to knowledge in VET have been suggested as alternative ways forward. This case study draws on this research, and on the voices of service users, to build a more effective program for entry-level learners, while still working within the Training Package system. It highlights the limitations of Training Package Qualifications to provide accessible points of engagement for disadvantaged learners and provide them

with the skills and knowledge required to pursue further education and build meaningful careers.

Keywords: *Competency based training, VET, training packages, case study research*

Introduction

This article is a case study based in a dual sector Australian University. Dual sector Universities offer substantial amounts of vocational education and training alongside the full suite of University activities, namely higher education courses, research and the awarding of research doctorates (Moodie, 2009). A team comprised of researchers, people with lived experience of accessing social care services, and vocational education teachers attempted to replace a number of entry level Vocational Education and Training (VET) qualifications for different types of social care workers (disability support workers, aged carers, home and community carers) with a broader program and qualification based on a social care vocational stream. The program was informed by research into vocational streams as a way to address many of the shortcomings of Australian training package qualifications (Yu, Bretherton, & Buchanan, 2013; Buchanan et al., 2009), research about knowledge in VET (Wheelahan, 2015; Pardy & Seddon, 2011; Hodge, Atkins, & Simons, 2016) and also research about the weak link between qualifications and quality of work in the social care workforce (Charlesworth & Smith, 2018; Pocock et al., 2011).

There were two stages to the process. In 2017, the University trialled the delivery of Certificate 3 in Individual Support using the standard Training Package qualification but with three specialisations (Ageing, Home and Community Care and Disability) instead of the usual one. The program was offered for free, via scholarship, to groups currently under represented in the social care workforce, namely young people, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and people from CALD communities (Department of Social Services, 2019). The program was then externally evaluated to see if it met the needs of the learners undertaking the program, and more specifically, whether it could provide a more appealing option to encourage underrepresented groups to enter the growing social care industries.

In 2018, funding was awarded by the Victorian State Government to the university for a project to develop a blended learning curriculum and learning resources to improve the program, but still within the constraints of the current Australian Training Package system. The 2018 curriculum project was designed to overcome some of the barriers identified in the formal evaluation of the 2017 delivery trial, namely, the narrowness and atomization of the Training Package units of competency, their repetitiveness, lack of important knowledge content and the need for better input from people with lived experience of using social services (Stevens, 2018). This case study explores the second stage in detail and, by doing so, it points to the limitations of training packages to provide high quality, engaging programs and qualifications that could appeal to entry level learners, and provide them with the knowledge and skills they need to pursue meaningful careers and further education.

The aim of the project under study was to create a broader qualification that covered a 'vocational stream' rather than a course aimed at one specific, narrowly defined entry-level job. Drawing on research, the goal was for an improved program and qualification that would be more appealing to groups currently ignoring the opportunity for careers in the growing social services industries, more able to facilitate labour mobility, further study and career pathways, and, most importantly, able to facilitate better outcomes for vulnerable people accessing social care services. The aim of this case study is to identify the extent to which a knowledge rich vocational stream qualification was achievable within the current Australian Training Package system. While this is one case study based on building one qualification in one Training Package, as the qualification that provides entry level work in the fastest growing occupation within the fastest growing industry in Australia, it is a significant test case for the effectiveness of Training Packages to respond to industry, individual and community need. Additional research into Training Package use in different industries and among different cohorts, such as trainees or workers 'on the job', may have different results.

Background

Certificate 3 in Individual Support (CHC3313) is a pre-service national training package qualification, aimed at learners who want to enter the growing social support workforce. The qualification is designed in a way

that allows for common units across Ageing, Disability, and Home and Community Care (HACC) recognising the commonality of skills required across these sectors. A small group of specialist units is then added to create a specialisation. By providing multiple specialisations, the qualification has been identified as having the potential to train learners across a vocational stream (Misko & Korbel 2016), defined as ‘a set of linked occupations within a broad field of practice, where the focus is on the attributes, knowledge and skills a person requires to work within a broadly defined vocation that combines educational and occupational progression’ (Buchanan et al., 2009).

The aim of providing a vocational stream, rather than a qualification focused on one entry-level job, was to provide students with a fuller learning experience and a broader array of future career and education options. In addition to gaining immediate employment in entry level Aged Care, Home and Community Care or Disability Support Work, it was hoped that students would have an understanding of the broader social services industries, and the foundation skills and knowledge to follow employment and further education pathways, vertically within the Aged Care, Home and Community Care and Disability sectors but also horizontally between these sectors and diagonally into other social services work at an advanced level. While it is technically possible to offer a broader, knowledge rich, entry-level qualification within the current Training Package, there are many barriers to it in practice that were explored in this case study.

The evaluation of the 2017 trial of the program (Stevens, 2018) indicated some success towards these aims. It found that the students experienced the aged care, HACC and disability components of the course as complementary. Further, students were able to articulate a meta-knowledge of the industry including the theoretical, political and historical factors that have informed current practices. Some students, for example, identified a stronger focus on empowerment, independence and social models of support in disability work than in aged care services and observed that services in aged care mirrored historical practices in disability support (Stevens, 2018, p. 12). This meta-knowledge allowed them to make choices about future career paths, with some indicating strong preferences for one sector over another, others changing their desired career path after experiencing the course and others following pathways on to further study with an enhanced knowledge of the various career options available to them (Stevens, 2018, p. 18).

The evaluation also revealed deficiencies and limitations to providing a program that met Buchanan et al. (2009) definition of a vocational stream through the existing training package. It was identified that the program didn't effectively combine aged and disability care concepts but rather added disability content to an existing aged care curriculum as disability and aged care teachers had no time allocation to work collaboratively to cluster or combine the content in a way that would meet the regulatory Standards for Registered Training Organisations (National Skills Standards Council, 2012). Underpinning knowledge was repeated again and again across units because teachers felt compelled to make each unit independently compliant, even though the content had been adequately covered elsewhere in the course. In one student's words;

Everything was repetitive and the content of modules overlapped, it wasn't engaging to be covering the same material for the 3rd or 4th time. Topics that were learnt originally in aged care were exactly the same at the start of disability except 'aged care' was replaced with 'disability' (Stevens, 2018, p. 10).

Alongside repetition, students complained of a lack of content depth, wanting to know more about different types of disability, mental health, work in the home and about the National Disability Insurance Scheme (Stevens, 2018, p. 22). They also expressed a desire to spend more time analysing and reflecting on the emotionally challenging components of the course such as palliative care, elder abuse and dealing with people in pain (Stevens, 2018, p. 14). The twin complaints of repetition and lack of content depth suggested that if the curriculum was built more effectively, richer content could be covered that would allow students to feel better prepared for the transition into work or further study.

VET and the Social Care Workforce

Certificate 3 qualifications play an important role in the Australian education and training system and are arguably worthy of greater scrutiny. Certificate 3 is considered the minimum qualification for entry into a range of different industries and forms the basis for apprenticeships in most traditional trades. VET qualifications are derived from National Training Packages, which are based on competency based training (CBT). CBT uses templates to represent and modularise work tasks and has conceptual roots in behavioural

objectives theory and task analysis theory (Hodge, Atkins, & Simons, 2016). 958 000 students were enrolled in the government-funded VET system in the nine months to 30 September 2018, and of these, 42% were enrolled in Certificate 3 programs (NCVER, 2019).

Within the Community Services Training Package, the Certificate 3 in Individual Support provides a direct employment outcome in disability work, aged care work or home and community care work, as well as a pathway to Certificate 4 programs for community services jobs such as Alcohol and other Drugs Worker, Youth Worker and Mental Health Outreach Worker. It also provides an alternative non-school entry point into the Diploma of Nursing. The Australian government predicts that demand for Aged and Disabled Carers in the Australian job market will rise faster than any other single occupation over the five years to 2023 (ABS, 2018). The broader Health Care and Social Assistance industry is projected to produce 2 in every 7 new jobs in Australia over the same period from an already high employment base, as the industry adjusts to full implementation of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), the ongoing ageing of the population and increasing demand for childcare and home based care services (Department of Jobs and Small Business, 2019). While other industries are requiring fewer entry-level jobs due to automation and digitisation, Health Care and Social Assistance will continue to be a strong source of entry-level employment. There is, arguably, a higher likelihood of an employment outcome following pre-service vocational training in Aged Care and Disability Support than in any other area of study (Department of Jobs and Small Business, 2018).

There is an ethical imperative to ensure that training in social care provides participants with a foundation of skills and knowledge that allow for labour mobility, access to further education and the ability to advocate for the industry and the vulnerable people who access its services. Despite the growing demand for workers in the industry, Aged and Disabled Carers remain among some of the lowest paid and precariously employed workers in Australia (Charlesworth & Smith, 2018). Disability support work, in particular, appears to be following a long term trend towards higher levels of casualisation, underemployment and high staff turnover; a process hastened by the rollout of the NDIS (National Disability Services, 2018). The Health and Social Care workforce is 79% female, a higher level than any

other Australian industry and gender segregation has intensified over the last 20 years (ABS, 2018). The low pay of the sector reflects the continued undervaluation of feminised work and skills and the historical mechanisms for setting pay in feminised industries (Charlesworth & Smith, 2018).

Despite the established educational pathways identified above, and a strong 'vocational narrative' centred around care that characterises the Health and Social Care workforce, labour mobility remains low (Yu, Bretherton, & Schutz, 2012). Research suggests that while technically possible, few support workers make the transition into nursing, despite jobs growth, career structure and higher pay in nursing (Yu, Bretherton, & Buchanan, 2013).

While the public rhetoric around VET suggests a neat correlation between skill development and private benefits, in their three year study of the low paid workforce, Pocock et al. (2011) identified that for low paid workers, including in the social care sector, positive rates of financial return on VET were often limited or non-existent. Further, that training often made life harder for low paid workers by consuming time and money while raising unrealised expectations, particularly if that training 'merely "ticks the box"; is not associated with genuine learning; is of poor quality; is not integrated into work processes; and creates new money and time strains, without generating rewards, in terms of new skills or better pay or prospects' (Pocock et al, 2011, p. 7). For VET training to avoid leaving low paid workers with what Pocock et al. (2011) call 'shallow occupational ladders', particular pedagogical features were identified. These include 'flexible delivery (in time and place); appropriate use of E-learning and/or distance learning (taking account of literacy and numeracy skills, where necessary, and providing support); learning that includes provision of computing resources, where appropriate; training that is integrated into workplaces; and training that does not impose upon time at home' (p. 42). In particular, the study identified a strong correlation between low literacy, low wages and shallow occupational ladders (Pocock et al., 2011, p. 15).

Vocational Streams as an alternative

Training packages are made up of Units of Competency, which are grouped together to form qualifications according to the 'packaging

rules' that accompany each training package. Qualifications are commonly made up of 'core units'; that is, compulsory units, and a defined number of elective units chosen from an expansive list. The Community Services Training Package offers 62 possible electives. The qualifications are designed to be customisable to different delivery environments by assembling combinations of the elective units, but the final combination 'must contribute to a valid, industry-supported vocational outcome' (Skills IQ, 2015). Each Unit of Competency is made up of a set of demonstrable skills (elements and performance criteria), the conditions under which the skills can be fairly and rigorously assessed (range of assessment conditions), and the knowledge required to perform those skills (knowledge evidence).

Wheelahan, Buchanan, and Yu (2015) suggest that qualifications have several purposes, only one of which is an industry supported vocational outcome. The other two factors include progress to higher-level studies within the education system and social inclusion and mobility (p. 15). They identify vocational streams as a means of meeting all three of those qualification purposes, because vocational streams link learners to a broader range of potential occupations and they focus on the 'knowledge and skills underpinning tasks and roles' rather than simply performance of the tasks and roles (p. 20). These underpinning knowledge and skills, defined as 'productive capabilities' can allow the person to be adaptable and to make complex judgements at work, but also lay a foundation for further education and to navigate the labour market and society more broadly (p. 20). A broader range of knowledge and skills could arguably play an enhanced social inclusion role in social care work, beyond the social inclusion and mobility of workers, because social care involves making complex judgements directly impacting the wellbeing of vulnerable cohorts, namely, frail aged people and people with a disability.

Yu, Bretherton, and Buchanan (2013) identified two preconditions to the development of a vocational stream as the basis for workforce development. These were 1) links in terms of underpinning skills and knowledge, or 'commonalities in capability' and 2) the potential for commitment and cooperation across stakeholders, or social partners, on resolving issues such as skills shortages, defined as 'social partner readiness' (p. 7). In their assessment of the potential for vocational streams in a range of industries, Health and Social Care sat in an interesting space, with very high levels of commonalities in capability

and very low levels of social partner readiness (p. 8). The lack of social partner readiness was, in part, driven by the push by some stakeholders such as major health and social care employers (and resistance by bodies such as health care unions) to expand the scope of lower paid roles into work traditionally done by higher qualified workers in the face of the growing costs of health and social care (p. 15).

There was some evidence to suggest that the low level of 'social partner readiness' identified by Yu, Bretherton, and Buchanan (2013) might not apply to this program. Firstly, this case study focused on building a vocational stream across industries (disability, aged care, home and community care) that had similar industrial outcomes avoiding being caught up in some of the industrial arguments about deskilling and degrading of roles occurring across Health and Social Care (p. 15). Further, since 2013, the move towards so called 'person centred care' and the accompanying marketised models of delivery driven by the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) and the Commonwealth My Aged Care reforms have led to new ways of grouping work in the form of 'services' supplied to the newly created Aged Care and Disability 'market places'. These factors have reconfigured the industries, to some extent, around common skills and capabilities, allowing for VET that traverses a broader vocational stream than would have been hitherto possible.

The place of knowledge in VET

An important distinction between knowledge in VET and knowledge in the other sectors of education such as higher education and schools is that knowledge is subordinated to the performance and demonstration of skill in VET and is not graded. The national standards for training packages specifies that knowledge evidence must 'relate (s) directly to the performance criteria and/or range of conditions' (National Skills Standards Council 2012). The National Standards for Registered Training Organisations, which are used by the regulatory authority, the Australian Skills and Qualifications Authority (ASQA), to regulate assessment in VET specifies that to be compliant, 'assessment of knowledge and skills is integrated with their practical application' (ASQA, 2017).

The privileging of practice within VET has been identified as one of the things that makes it attractive to excluded learners, particularly those for

whom school based education was unsuccessful or not available (Pardy & Seddon, 2011). Pardy and Seddon (2011) articulate it thus; ‘VET as a space of orientation affirms the value of being practically useful’ (p. 62). Within the trial program, this view was apparent when students were asked to assist people with a disability attending an advocacy conference as part of a practical learning exercise. After the conference, one of their teachers observed that a particular group of young, immigrant, early school leavers, who were poor attenders in class and struggled with written assignments, excelled at the opportunity to display skills largely developed through extended family care-work. Teachers reported that they came early, worked through their lunch break, proactively offered assistance to attendees with a disability and stayed behind to reflect on the challenges and their achievements at the end of the day. Pardy and Seddon (2011) emphasise that entering or changing occupations is not easy for marginalised cohorts, something that is spoken of, at length, by the participants in the Stevens (2018) evaluation. They observe, ‘That VET learning privileges practice is a strength for those who are ‘excluded’; who must recognise themselves as learners first before they can imagine themselves into futures that rest on and value learning’ (Pardy & Seddon, 2011, p. 63).

While the knowledge embedded in the practical acts of providing individual support to a person with a disability, is significant, and certainly, vastly underestimated in the public estimation, it is doubtful that it would be sufficient to allow workers to navigate, advocate for themselves and progress in the increasingly complex and challenging social care work environments. Hodge, Atkins, and Simons (2016, p. 238) refer to this additional knowledge requirement as the ‘why of performance’ that is, knowledge, which, by its nature, must sit outside competency based assessment to allow learners to make use of their performance of competency. Referring specifically to Indigenous students, Dreise (2014) uses the phrase ‘learning, earning, yearning’ to describe the need for practical skills acquisition to sit within a knowledge framework based on ‘developing entrepreneurial mindsets, supporting personal agency and fostering creativity’ in order for learners to be ‘not simply consumers of learning, but producers of it’.

Some observers have identified that the subordination of knowledge to skills in VET in Australia and other Anglophone countries reproduces inequality rather than reducing it (Wheelahlan, 2009; 2015; Wheelahan,

Moodie, & Buchanan, 2012; Young, 2007; Young & Muller, 2014) Drawing on Durkheim and Bernstein, Wheelahan (2015) defines the theoretical knowledge that exists in each field of practice as 'collective representations', which provide the means through which society reflects upon itself and considers alternative futures (p. 752). Within each occupation, collective representations form the basis and boundaries of debate. Without access to this knowledge, it is argued, workers struggle to exercise agency within an occupation, and in society more broadly (p. 752).

Hodge, Atkins, and Simons (2016) have suggested the identification and incorporation of 'threshold concepts' into VET. 'Threshold concepts', can be described as 'unique ways of seeing' within occupations that provide a 'threshold' to understanding a broader set of concepts (Meyer & Land, 2003; Meyer, 2016). There are epistemological priorities, it is argued, within all occupations, that are unlikely to exist as prior knowledge, and amongst these, some form a foundation and entry point to a broader range of concepts (Hodge, Atkins, & Simons, 2016).

Approaches to the case study

The objective of this case study is to document the process and identify the challenges associated with the implementation of a knowledge rich vocational stream, in order to review, affirm and strengthen thinking around vocational streams and the foregrounding of knowledge within the Australian vocational education and training system, particularly at the entry level and for disadvantaged cohorts.

Formal data collection for this case study took place between April and June 2019. Reviewed data includes the following records: steering group meetings, commissioned research papers, records of industry consultation, email correspondence between participants, notes from planning sessions, course evaluation reports, the program implementation guide and the course materials themselves. The approach to analysis was to logically link the data to a series of propositions, as outlined above and interpret the subsequent information (Miles, 1994).

As a participant in the co-design process and a member of the project team, the researcher's observations of the process also provide an insider perspective on the case study. While there are a variety of definitions of

insider-researchers, generally they can be described as those who choose to study a group to which they belong (Breen, 2007). Insider perspectives in exploratory case studies provide advantages and disadvantages in terms of access, familiarity and rapport. The primary advantage of insider perspectives in case study research is that insider researchers approach the case study with a body of knowledge, that would take an outsider a long time to acquire, including the informal, often invisible, institutional norms that guide practice (Unluer, 2012; Smyth & Holian, 2008). This research has an inductive and interpretive orientation used to arrive at a general understanding of the challenges of vocational education and training in an Australian context in 2019.

This case study approaches the data through the lens of recent research on knowledge in Australian VET and on vocational streams. A number of researchers, vocational education practitioners, industry experts and people with lived experience of disability and aged care took part in the project and each brought bodies of knowledge that informed the process and the final products. This research does not attempt to explore all these perspectives. For example, ideas about co-design and co-production by system users featured heavily in documentation around the project (Dorst, 2011; Sanders & Stappers, 2014). Future research into how the project met the aspiration to include people with lived experience as co-designers of complex systems would yield insights that are unable to be covered in this case study. Similarly, the role of teachers in Australian VET curriculum development is touched on in this study, but worthy of greater attention.

Towards a knowledge rich foundation qualification

The formal curriculum development project at the heart of this case study began in January 2018 and concluded in April 2019. The curriculum team were committed to developing a program that provided participants with a strong foundation of skills and knowledge from which to build a career in social services including following linear pathways within their chosen industries, and diagonal pathways into adjacent fields such as family services or community development. It was hoped that these additional skills and knowledge would allow graduates to work across fields in locations with thin markets, manage life transitions and interruptions and to advocate for themselves, the vulnerable people they work with, and the industry more broadly. They

were acutely aware of the traps awaiting learners from marginalised cohorts from training leading to low paid, precarious work with limited labour mobility. This is partly outlined in the introductory section of the Program Implementation Guide for the completed curriculum:

The goal of the program is to prepare learners for a broad range of potential careers and pathways within social services including aged care, family support and disability support, with the aim of building the NDIS workforce specifically, and the sector more generally (Program Implementation Guide, p. 5).

The project had a number of distinct phases. In order to ensure that knowledge was foregrounded, it began with the development of 5 knowledge reviews covering 5 key areas that underpin high quality social support work. The knowledge reviews were supplemented by co-design planning sessions with users of Aged Care and Disability Support Services, employers and Alumni from the 2017 course. Only then, was the curriculum mapped back to the training package qualification and the gaps filled with additional learning and assessment activities.

The resulting curriculum followed a blended learning model that included some key features. First, industry engagement and inclusion of service users began from the first weeks and work placement in a variety of workplace types was spread throughout the program so that the transition into the industry was scaffolded and students experienced the widest possible array of jobs. An online learning component was built around 24 short videos featuring workers and people with lived experience of aged care or disability support services. The videos were the primary introduction to the core knowledge areas, allowing students to engage with complex ideas without having to have high levels of print literacy. The third component was classroom based activities that included revising the knowledge content, debriefing students on their workplace based experiences, hearing from system users and engaging in practical learning activities. The online learning components were designed to be supported in class for the first six weeks of the program to ensure that students have adequate digital literacy to succeed before being expected to undertake this online learning at home, the workplace or the library, taking into account the competing challenges identified by Pocock et al. (2011) for flexibility around work and family as well as general literacy and digital literacy support.

The five knowledge areas were settled upon through consultation with social studies academic experts and vocational education teachers. Three of the knowledge areas, 1) Human Rights Led Practice, 2) Power and Abuse and 3) Working with Diverse people, appeared in some form in the Knowledge Evidence of Units of Competency. In the course, however, teachers reported that the emphasis by regulatory auditors on the practical application of skills, the crowded list of Knowledge Evidence topics with limited explanation, and the lack of time for teachers to develop assessment tasks and resources meant that the Knowledge Evidence was often dealt with in a perfunctory, or 'tick a box' way. For example, Human Rights related content appears amongst a list of up to 20 major items in 7 of the 15 units of competency that make up the qualification. It is not that knowledge of human rights is absent from the training package, rather, teachers reported that a crowded, atomised training package meant that teaching tended to 'skim over the top', focusing on the instruments of human rights rather than extrapolating how these instruments inform laws, policies and frameworks which then impact practice. Most importantly, teachers reported that they lacked the time to construct classroom activities to explore how a worker can engage in constant reflective practice about human rights when dealing with vulnerable people.

A fourth knowledge area, Enabling Technology, was almost entirely absent from the training package qualification. Disability experts identified that the NDIS has a strong focus on using technology to eliminate barriers to participation for people with a range of disabilities, which is changing practice in the sector. Indeed, it was identified that advances in technology are challenging the very notions of ability and disability (Ladner, 2011). Being able to support a client's technology use has a profound impact on their quality of life, yet it is possible to exit the current Certificate 3 program with little knowledge of the range of assistive technologies opening up new possibilities to people with a disability. The complete absence of this powerful and empowering knowledge speaks to one of the major criticisms of Training Packages; that is, that they are reactive; starting from the employer's perspective of a job in the present, then taking years for the state training apparatus to turn that point in time into a training package, a process, at odds with the rapidly changing nature of work (Wheelahen & Carter, 2001).

The fifth, and arguably, the most complex knowledge area was Ethics of Care, a normative ethical theory that emphasises mutuality and

solidarity in providing care across the lifespan and across societies (Barnes, 2012; Held, 2006; Noddings, 2013) Wheelahan (2015) observes:

Each occupation has its own (big and small) challenges about the nature of practice, ethical issues and dilemmas, and different perspectives about how practice and their field should be developed in future. If students are to participate in these debates, they need to have access to, and be able to use, the specialized knowledge that underpins practice in their occupational field (Wheelahan, 2015, p. 752).

Within social care, the major challenges to the nature of practice are arguably being driven by British and American feminist writing on Ethics of Care (Held, 2006; Barnes, 2012; Noddings, 2013). Rather than there being one right answer or approach, as Competency Based Training would suggest, Ethics of Care theorists present a challenge to the dominant Human Rights approach in social care, critiquing it as deriving from individualistic and masculine world views (Noddings, 2013). While the broader debate is complex, having access to the most basic principles of Ethics of Care, such as the gendered nature of care work, the devaluing of care in neo-liberal societies and the idea that 'care' can be both oppressive and supportive, gives entry level workers a framework to think about and advocate for their work, and the people for whom they provide support. It also provides them with a basis for making ethical decisions in the great many situations in care work, in which one client's human rights intersect with another's (Barnes, 2012).

Discussion

Supporters of training packages often make a distinction between the training package components and the 'curriculum', suggesting that how they structure the learning that leads to the outcomes in a training package is entirely up to teachers and coordinators and eminently adaptable. However, this case study suggests that while technically possible, the regulatory, cost and practical barriers involved make this unrealistic.

The time and expertise required to cluster underpinning knowledge and performance criteria across units to avoid the repetition and narrowness identified in the Stevens evaluation was significant. Once completed, the assessment tasks were checked by a VET compliance expert and a

consultant who also works as a compliance auditor to assuage teacher and administrator concerns that future auditors, used to the unit by unit 'tick a box' approach common in VET practice would not recognise the resulting assessment tasks as compliant. The first cluster of the curriculum included an Assessment Mapping spreadsheet with 11 columns and 92 lines of references, a process repeated four times for the entire curriculum. Assessment Guides read like legal documents with lists of coded references under each task such as KE -CCS3 referring to the Knowledge Evidence from the unit, CHCCCS021 – Respond to suspected abuse. At one of the steering group meetings, one project participant, a teacher and administrator with decades of VET experience observed; 'Ten years ago if you had asked me to write an assessment task, I could bring out a piece of paper and do it. Now I would struggle to write one that would pass audit'.

Funding barriers also impeded the production of a vocational stream. In the state of Victoria, where this case study is based, the funding provided by the Victorian state government for vocational qualifications only covers one of the Ageing or Disability specialisations in the Certificate 3 in Individual Support. This is consistent with the approach of some state governments who aim to incentivise learners to move up a qualification ladder rather than funding them to expand and broaden their skills at the same qualification level. In practice this means either students are charged fee for service rates for additional streams or the provider is expected to absorb these additional costs of delivery. As a result, few learners exit with a qualification with multiple specialisations that allows them to work across social support, despite the training package being structured in a way that allows this (NCVER, 2019). In this instance, in order to trial the concept, the University absorbed the costs of the additional streams and offered scholarships to target groups to make the whole program completely fee free and cover materials and incidentals, a practice that is unlikely to survive beyond the trial period in the current financially constrained VET funding environment.

The limitations on knowledge in the training package became obvious when the learning activities related to the five knowledge areas were developed, particularly the two areas, Ethics of Care and Enabling Technology that had the least connection to the training package. For Enabling Technology, instructional designers could have neatly mapped the unit to an additional elective unit imported from the Business

Services training package; a practice allowable under the training package rules. However, this unit would be in excess of that funded by the state, meaning that providers would only be able to offer it as an add-on fee for service component, something low paid entry level workers would be unlikely to afford. The alternative was to map the content against the Knowledge Evidence of a great number of Units of Competency and record this mapping; a complex and time consuming exercise outside the scope of most teachers' work.

A disconnect between the supposed flexibility of the training package and the practicalities of making use of this flexibility was again highlighted by the Power and Abuse knowledge area. The content of this knowledge area mapped neatly to one unit of the training package, CHCCCSO21 Respond to Suspected Abuse, (albeit, it went deeper than the unit requirements to 'recognise', 'respond' and 'report' abuse, to look at the underlying drivers of abuse such as ableism, ageism and social isolation). However, despite the importance of this content to care work, this unit is one of the 62 electives rather than a core unit. Again, this meant that the unit would sit outside the funding provided by the Victorian government, and its inclusion would require entry level workers to pay fee for service to access it or providers would have to absorb the costs. Also, to be compliant with National Standards around training and assessment, individual providers would have to show evidence that they had industry endorsement that the qualification with this additional unit would 'contribute to a valid, industry-supported vocational outcome' (Skills IQ, 2015), and enrol learners in it separately to the rest of the qualification, both cumbersome administrative processes. The team felt so strongly that this unit had to be included intact and not obscured through a complex mapping process, that they built its inclusion into the curriculum and added the following caveat to the Program Implementation Guide:

RTOs needs to be aware this program includes 15 units and if your organisation chooses to deliver the entire clusters, as developed in this program, they will need to make enquiries regarding funding process because these clusters include two additional units (beyond those required by the training package) (p 2).

A further difficulty arose with the assessment of the knowledge areas. The review by the first compliance consultant identified that the

curriculum was breaching the Standards for RTO's rules around over assessment because the curriculum was assessing knowledge not explicitly contained in the Unit of Competency. Again, instructional designers undertook a technically complex process of creating a mapping document that split the online assessment, labelling half of the assessment formative the other half summative, so that the additional assessment content could be disguised as scaffolding the endorsed knowledge in the training package. The non-endorsed formative component also had to be made 'optional' to be compliant. A short micro-credential was offered to learners who undertook this additional assessment. Again, a technically complex process, outside the expertise of most teachers, and only possible because the curriculum build was externally funded.

VET reform since the early 90s has privileged situated learning in the workplace as the ideal. As a result, the range and conditions of units of competency in training packages increasingly specify that assessment must occur 'on the job'. The amount of time required for each assessment event and the practical challenges of assessing each individual student in situ leaves limited time and resources to apply to the practice of skills in preparation for workforce placement and reflection on practice afterwards, aside from the challenges of finding enough employers willing to host learners on extensive placements. This situation has been made more challenging by NDIS and My Aged Care driven imperatives to fund individualised services rather than block-fund large community services organisations. In the post NDIS and My Aged Care worlds, the 'employer' is likely to be an individual and the 'workplace' a home or the community. Placing students for lengthy periods of time within these work environments presents an ongoing challenge. Within the case study, the disconnect between the aspirations of the training package for on the job learning and assessment and the practicalities of providing so many practical placement hours created tensions between instructional designers who worked to the rules of the training package and the teachers and coordinators who had to implement the program. The issue of how training packages have led to deskilling and alienation of teachers, identified in the literature (Hodge, 2016; Wheelahan & Carter, 2001), was evident throughout this case study and is worthy of further research.

Conclusion

This case study suggests that the Australian VET system based around national training package qualifications is ill equipped to offer students the knowledge required to navigate increasingly complex work in emerging labour markets. While teaching and learning within Australian VET might, in theory, address other material drawn from the professional experiences of teachers, threshold concepts identified through research, or the lived experiences of service users, the rigidity and complexity of training packages and the regulatory regimes that surround them tend to restrict teaching and assessment to narrow, atomised, repetitive components of the relevant training package. Making a meaningful, knowledge-rich vocational stream program within the training package system was found to be enormously complex and unsustainable outside a generously funded one-off pilot program.

The case study also highlights the illusion of choice and flexibility of training package qualifications. Training packages present as vast menus from which providers can maintain national consistency while meeting the specific needs of diverse industries and applying their own specialist expertise. This case study suggests that choices are limited by available funding, an administratively burdensome regulatory approach and by the complexity of the packages themselves. National data suggests that a great many training package qualifications have zero or minimal enrolments (Misko & Korbek, 2016). This research would suggest that within these qualifications, training organisations and teachers are steered towards standard unit choices and that a great many of the elective units are unlikely to be ever elected.

While this case study is confined to one qualification level in one industry, the projected job growth in this industry and the fact that it continues to add entry level jobs requiring a Certificate 3 qualification, at a time when other industries are shedding them, makes it an ideal test case for whether Australian VET can live up to its aspiration to provide an entry point to the labour market for excluded groups, and pathways into productive and meaningful careers. If VET courses and qualifications don't facilitate labour mobility and career paths in Australia's fastest growing industry, if they provide limited or no return on investment and 'shallow occupational ladders' for low wage workers, if they are boring and repetitive and if they leave vulnerable frail aged and disabled members of the community to be supported by narrowly skilled

workers with few other options, then these are significant failings that should prompt renewed thought on the fit for purpose of Australian VET.

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