

FIRST NATIONAL CONFERENCE  
ON  
COMPETENCIES IN NURSING

"The Relevance of the National Training Board (NTB)  
and its Policy Framework for Nurses

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## INTRODUCTION

Thank you very much for the invitation to address your first National Conference on Competencies in Nursing. This conference is timely not only in raising the issues of further development and implementation of competencies in your profession but because it enables discussion of the wider issues involved in the development of competency based education and training for the professions generally and their relationship with industry related education - a theme which other speakers have also picked up on.

Today, I've been asked to talk to you specifically on the topic of the National Training Board (NTB) and the relevance of its policy framework to nursing competencies. Given some of the comments this morning I'm beginning to feel I was "set up" in being asked to address this Conference. On the other hand I feel it is essential to try and defuse some of the myths about the NTB which obviously exist.

My topic reflects the theme of this Conference - "Competency Challenge - Pathways and Choices for Nursing."

The National Training Board is a pathway open to the nursing profession in the development of its competencies. And it is a

pathway worthy of proper consideration. The issues I want to raise with you today will, I hope, assist in that consideration. However, in the final analysis the choice of which pathway or pathways you follow will be up to you, the people who must practice in the nursing profession.

#### Defining the Issues

Underlying the topic of whether the NTB is relevant or not are a myriad of issues which need to be put on the table and debated. At one level the core issue is the relationship between "industries" and "professionals" At another level it is about who has control over decisions on educational requirements. At another its about competency based education and its appropriateness or whether differing concepts of competency are valid for differing areas of employment. These are all matters which previous speakers this morning have raised.

In respect of whether the competency approach is one you want to adopt, I can only assume that this debate is more or less finalised, given your decision to develop competencies through the ANRAC process in 1986 and the continuing development of those competencies since that time, including these proceedings.

With respect to the other issues I am sure there are many differing views. The issue of what is competency and how it is defined was expertly portrayed by Andrew Gonzi. His integrated model is one which I believe sits comfortably with the NTB's Policy Framework. As one member of the audience this morning suggested, there is a tendency to criticise the NTB's model as simplistic and narrow - whereas I would suggest a proper reading of the Board's Policy would demonstrate the opposite. Not only does the model incorporate a definition which extends well beyond task skills to incorporate generic competencies, it is designed to achieve the integrated approach which Andrew Gonzi outlined.

The difficulty, I believe, as Andrew also stated is the interpretation of that model in practice - yes the NTB has endorsed some very narrow task based models but it has also endorsed standards which I believe embrace the dynamic, broad integrated approach. As the NTB moves beyond this initial phase of standards endorsement, a priority will become the review process which aims to achieve the Competency Standards model. As Andrew also said, there are no perfect standards and all parties in this process are on a learning curve.

Turning to the area of relationships between the professions and industry - this has been described as a minefield. It is not only a question of who represents who but also the role of professional bodies in relation to both employers and unions as well as each other. This is certainly the case in describing the nursing profession and its relationship with the health and community services industry.

In her opening address, Marilyn Beaumont referred to the complex issues before this Conference and the need to ensure careful consideration of each perspective.

I too believe the issues before us are extremely complex

#### Role of the NTB

Before turning to these broader issues in more detail I thought it useful to quickly go over the role of the NTB and its place in the National Training Reform Agenda.

The NTB was established by Ministers of Vocational Education and Training in 1989 as a major plank in the reform process in the vocational education and training sector related to the introduction of competency based training.

Competency based training was seen as a vehicle for the delivery and recognition of the objective training requirements of industry. Its potential benefits include consistent national recognition and accreditation, an open and equitable assessment process measured against national competency standards, recognition of prior learning, and articulated training and progression within industries.

National Industry Competency Standards form the benchmark of the CBT system. These are endorsed by the NTB as part of a quality control process to maximise national consistency, portability and transferability of competency within and across industries.

The Board carries out its role in the context of a specific policy framework designed to maximise these objectives. Key aspects of the framework include recognition of competency standards bodies (CSBs) which are the bodies authorised to develop national standards; processes and guidelines for the consistent development of competency standards; delineation of standards into 3 categories of endorsement (industry, cross industry and enterprise); and alignment of standards against the Australian Standards Framework (ASF), which is a set of eight broad competency levels enabling the work based competencies to be linked together across industries and

enterprises in a consistent way and which provides a benchmark for competency related qualifications.

The NTB is the driving force for facilitating competency standards development for industries. Both it and the National Training Reform Agenda have been developed subsequent to your initial voyage down the competency road. Linked to this agenda new and specific training reforms related to your industry have been established. An Industry Training Advisory Body (ITAB) has been created which has coverage for the whole industry. It is representative of unions, employers, governments and non government peak organisations. This ITAB has been granted CSB status by the NTB.

This changing context raises some fundamental questions.

**Should the nursing profession recognise the broader context of competency development which is occurring around them including the NTB and ITAB processes?**

My answer would be yes. Why? Because nurses are professionals but they are also part of a wider industry represented by the ITAB and because most are also employees within that industry.

Within this context professional competencies need to be linked into the industry framework.

As employees, nurses interact with and are an integral part of the overall health system. To isolate professional competencies and remove them from the industry context is to deny this relationship

In my view such an approach has serious and negative implications including:

- a reduced capacity to provide continuity of care and a whole system whole approach to care;
- the blocking of career paths in industry;
- reducing the capacity for introduction of articulation and credit transfer;
- the blocking of identification of common competencies

If you accept the view that industry wide and professional competency initiatives need to be interrelated the next question becomes:-

**In what circumstances should industry bodies (ITABs/CSBs) and Professions consult and involve each other in relation to competency standards?**

A very restrictive approach would be to say when they are covered by the same industrial award or agreement

A broader approach would include such factors as: -

- movement or potential for movement from 'below' into the profession;
- common/functions/competencies between the profession and other areas of the industry; and
- the potential for some commonality of training

**What approach to this relationship has the NTB adopted?**

The approach adopted by the NTB to the relationship between standards for professions and for enterprises and industries, and the consequences for providers of education and training, is set out in both its Policy and Guidelines, Second Edition, and its agreement on Operational Mechanisms between the NTB and NOOSR.

The approach distinguishes between professions and industry sorting out between themselves the roles and relationships they would have

in each specific case in developing competency standards, and what requirements would be made if professions approached NOOSR for assistance, or either group approached the NTB seeking endorsement of standards.

One policy issue the NTB will have to contend with is how it relates professions as occupations to its policy framework. Current NTB Policy is not occupationally based because this would be seen as leading to a narrow approach whereas the aim is to improve and extend the skill base. Any occupational link at the professional level will need to be looked at carefully.

The NTB has made it quite explicit that where standards are developed for professions, and for professional recognition, it will be for the professions concerned and the higher education institutions providing education for the professions to discuss and establish the relationship between these standards and education provided by these institutions. This reinforces the fact that NTB endorsement of competency standards, where the 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.

**What is the NTB's relationship with NOOSR?**

As you are all well aware NOOSR has provided assistance and funding through DEET for professional competencies including nursing. The principal role of NOOSR is to provide this assistance for the purposes of assessing overseas educated professionals for the right to practice in Australia and to assist with mutual recognition. NOOSR does not endorse competencies. Only the NTB has that role. Nonetheless, NOOSR as I'm sure the following speaker will indicate, has played a considerable role in the competency development process for professionals.

In order to establish an understanding between the NTB and NOOSR an agreed operational mechanism was developed which provided that:

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- industry is free to develop competency standards for whatever it chooses, including all levels of the ASF. This is to be encouraged as part of improving national competitiveness and achieving the objectives of the National Training Reform Agenda;
- professions are free to choose if they wish to develop competency standards for professional recognition purposes.

This is to be encouraged, particularly where professions are regulated, for both overseas skills recognition and mutual recognition purposes;

- consultation is required between professions and industry where there is a relationship between their standards;
- normal requirements for consultation and involvement of stakeholders will apply where endorsement of standards is sought;
- The NTB and NOOSR will not act as arbiters of disputes between professions and industries or enterprises to force particular patterns of outcomes. Rather they should facilitate resolution and, if appropriate, refer parties to relevant Ministerial Councils;
- implementation issues in terms of accreditation, delivery and certification are for the parties to resolve with relevant parties in the educational sector of their choice, and no particular route should be forced on them by the NTB or NOOSR.

As part of this Operational Mechanism NOOSR requires projects its funds to consult with the relevant industry Competency Standards Body if there is a career path going through the industry into professions.

**Can professions bring standards to the NTB for endorsement?**

The NTB in the 2nd Policy and Guidelines clarified this issue in the following terms.

*"where competency standards for a profession covered by an industrial award or agreement are included in industry competency standards, these may be submitted by the relevant CSB for endorsement by the Board"*

**Should nursing competencies be brought to the NTB for endorsement?**

Certainly, the capacity to bring forward the standards exists so long as the relevant CSB is used as the conduit. In this instance, the CSB is the national ITAB on which the ANF, as a major organisation representing the professional interests of nurses, is represented.

appropriate standards). No requirement to respond to competency standards of any sort has ever been placed on the universities, and the responsible Minister in 1992, The Hon Peter Baldwin, made it clear the Commonwealth's position was that it would not seek to impose requirements in relation to competency standards (whether developed by professions or endorsed by the NTB) or universities.

Where standards are endorsed for levels which extend into the domain of higher education as part of a career path they will be put on the NTB Register of standards. Any courses relating to these standards would be placed on the Register of Courses.

**Should Professions have a veto over professional competencies?**

This question raises the issue of whether a profession has the right to ownership or complete control over competency standards for the profession. At one level the answer should be yes if the competencies are the direct responsibility of the profession or body representing that profession. In this respect, I refer to the ANF Policy statement on Competencies and Nursing discussed to by Marilyn Beaumont this morning. This view was also clearly outlined by Professor Peter

Johnson, this morning, where he referred to competencies as the 'property' of the profession.

However there are circumstances where this ownership can extend to what would amount to a veto over the use of any competencies that are common between a profession and other occupations.

In this context I have much trouble with the "ownership" view being enunciated. Professor Denise Brady, in her address, also outlined the role such ownership has played in the past for both skilled trades levels and professionals - almost exclusively in the male domain.

However, I would content that for the male dominated trades, at least, award restructuring and competency related training is breaking down this skill segregation. If you take the Metals model it has taken the fragmented skill definitions of 300 occupations and pulled them together into 14 broad categories which articulate. The concept of skill and knowledge in these areas is being reconstructed to create a more open and flexible labour market premised on multi-skilling and opening up the 'closed' trades.

By contrast, the approach put by Professor Johnson this morning held to the very strong view that the professions and their competencies must remain closed and limited - with control exerted by those who are themselves the beneficiaries of this closed market.

As an aside, I might ask the question why the professions should be exempt from the process of restructuring and labour market reform. Their role and responsibility is surely to the wider community not just themselves and they, too should be subject to the reform process which the rest of the community has shouldered.

Another related issue in the context of control is the use of ASF Levels to differentiate "professions" from others. Such a delineation which presumes Levels 7 & 8 of the ASF as professional is flawed, and sets artificial barriers between both 'professions' and the providers of education and training.

This leads me to the last question I wanted to raise and that is the role of universities in the context of competency related education.

As I'm sure you are all aware, the universities have been luke warm to cold blooded about competency based education. This has considerable implications for implementation of nursing competencies.

You may have determined and controlled the process of developing the competencies but your level of control over what happens to them in the context of university curriculum is limited.

I would just like to read you a statement putting the views of the AVCC on this question.

*"The AVCC position is that competency based standards for university-level education can neither be developed independently of the universities nor imposed on the higher education system. University qualifications are, therefore, based on curricula which develop the capabilities of students to meet academic, professional and employment requirements. The imposition of externally developed competency-based standards could significantly degrade the quality and standing of education at this level."*

Policy Statement by AVCC "Competency Based Education and Training the AVCC Position." P 2

and further

*"Where a profession or occupation decides that entry to is dependent on the attainment of academic qualifications because the qualifications encompasses the capabilities required, they override the application of any externally developed competency-based standards."*

and

*"an order to safeguard the broad educational role of higher education this responsibility must remain ultimately under the authority of the universities."*

The nursing profession has taken nursing education out of the industry and into the universities. This has meant increased professional recognition but on the above statements a loss of control over the substance of that education. It has also meant a less holistic approach to education involving theory and practice which the competency approach seeks to resolve.

The profession in this context provide an advisory role only. By contrast, in the vocational arena, the N.T.R.A has meant a substantial shift of control back to the industry.

This issue of control and direction is obviously a critical one for nurses to resolve but perhaps is a little beyond the subject matter of this paper.

In conclusion, I hope I have raised some issues which are relevant to this conference. I have tried to bring together a number of perspectives including your relationship with the industry you work in, your relationship to the workforce as a whole and your own professional needs.

I think the contributions to your conference have been outstanding and I've been heartened, in the main, by the discussion so far. In many ways I think we are showing a maturation in our deliberations - a maturation which all parties can legitimately contribute to creating, including the NTB.

In the final analysis the issues involved have no black and white answers - only shades of grey.

**Good luck in your endeavours.**