

## 4. 'KEY COMPETENCIES' IN SCHOOLS -

### FOR WORK OR FOR LIFE?

4.1 Many witnesses were agitated by effects they feared from introducing the 'Mayer Key Competencies' into schools.

#### The 'Mayer Key Competencies' described

4.2 In December 1990 the Australian Education Council (the council of Commonwealth and State Education Ministers) established the Finn Committee to inquire into (among other things) '...the appropriate roles and responsibilities of schools, Technical and Further Education (TAFE) and higher education in the provision of post-compulsory education and training.' The inquiry was prompted by major changes in the previous decade, including the increasing Year 12 retention rate among students not destined for university, and the trend to convergence of senior secondary and TAFE courses. The Committee was also to consider '...appropriate national curriculum principles designed to enable all young people, including those with special needs, to develop key competencies...'<sup>1</sup>

4.3 The Finn report (July 1991) saw three components to education:

- 'general education' (that is, general *only*: 'there are some few elements of general education which do not have any clear vocational character...')
- 'vocational education' (that is, vocational *only*: 'there are elements of vocational education which are so specific to an individual task or occupation that they have no wider application...')
- a large overlapping middle ground ('general/vocational') which is likely to be of ever increasing importance in future ('Literacy is at once both a general and a vocational competence. An understanding of computers and information technology may once have been seen as strictly vocational but is increasingly a general requirement...')<sup>2</sup>

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1 Young People's Participation in Post-Compulsory Education and Training - Report of the Australian Education Council Review Committee [Finn report], July 1991, p1-2.

2 *ibid.* p8-9. This may be a type of conceptual scheme which, though unobjectionable in principle, conceals a lot of possible doubt at the detailed level about which things belong in which category. The Committee notes with interest that the Schools Council of the National Board of Employment, Education and Training regards 'the majority of subjects in university professional schools' as 'general/vocational'. Schools Council [of National Board of Employment, Education and Training], *The Role of Schools in the Vocational Preparation of Australia's Senior Secondary Students: Final Report*, 1994, p7.

4.4 The Finn report concentrated on the transition from education to employment. Its focus was on ‘...employability, understood in the broadest possible sense.’<sup>3</sup> It produced a list of 25 desired areas of competence ‘related to a young person’s initial and lifelong employability’, grouped under the six headings: Language and Communication; Mathematics; Scientific and Technological Understanding; Cultural Understanding; Problem solving; Personal and Interpersonal.<sup>4</sup>

4.5 In late 1991 the Australian Education Council appointed the Mayer Committee to do further work on the ‘competencies’ part of the Finn report.<sup>5</sup> The Mayer committee simplified Finn’s categories, producing seven Key Competencies, said to be things ‘that all young people need to enable them to participate effectively in the emerging forms of work and work organisation.’<sup>6</sup> These were ‘validated’ by reference to the submissions of industry and by organised studies of a number of industry groups: Building and Construction; Travel and Tourism; Metals and Engineering; Office/Clerical; Wholesale/Retail (‘Collectively, these industry sectors cover a very significant proportion of employment of 15-19 year olds and 20-24 year olds and include a wide range of occupational classifications.’)<sup>7</sup>

4.6 The seven ‘Key Competencies’ of the Mayer report are -

- collecting, analysing and organising information
- communicating ideas and information
- planning and organising activities
- working with others and in teams
- using mathematical ideas and techniques
- solving problems
- using technology.

4.7 They are reproduced with their accompanying glosses from the Mayer report in Figure 14.

4.8 For each competency the report describes three ‘performance levels’ and gives some examples of performance at each level. For example: *Using Technology* level 1: ‘entering and retrieving data from a computer software package...’; level 2: ‘assembling a kit-form fitness machine to full operating condition...’; level 3:

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3 Young People’s Participation in Post-Compulsory Education and Training - Report of the Australian Education Council Review Committee [Finn report], July 1991, p12.

4 *ibid.* pp62,66.

5 A useful brief commentary on the Finn/Mayer competency work (among other things) to 1992 (not including the final Mayer report) is in Dr G. Speedy/ National Board of Employment, Education and Training, *Curriculum Initiatives*, Canberra, 1992.

6 Mayer, E., Putting General Education to Work - the Key Competencies Report, no date [1992], p2.

7 *ibid.* p46.

‘preparing clothing design options for the technical and management staff of a city restaurant...’<sup>8</sup>

4.9 The performance levels were ‘developed through extensive discussion and debate among people with relevant experience and expertise in schools, TAFE and industry.’ The report acknowledges that they are debatable; for example: ‘some argue that performance level 3 is generally too high; others argue that it should be higher.’<sup>9</sup>

4.10 Competencies to do with ‘values and attitudes’ (some of which were included in Finn’s ‘personal and interpersonal’ category) were explicitly excluded from the Mayer report as being things that could not be ‘developed by education and training’ and are not ‘amenable to credible assessment’.<sup>10</sup> However the Mayer report did recommend further work on ‘cultural understanding’ as a competency. In 1993 the Education Ministers (now MCEETYA - Ministerial Council on Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs) accepted this in principle as an eighth key competency; the Queensland Department of Education was funded to develop the documentation; this has not yet been finalised.<sup>11</sup>

4.11 Pilot projects are now under way to ‘integrate the Key Competencies into schools -

‘In 1993 the Commonwealth committed \$20 million over three financial years to support the development and piloting of the key competencies. In 1993-94 agreements were reached with State and Territory Governments on the nature of their participation in the Key Competencies Program. Pilot projects commenced in all States and Territories in the first half of 1994. These pilot projects will inform the further integration of the key competencies into school and training systems and will address complex issues such as the assessment of the key competencies. To coincide with the commencement of these pilot projects, a national information campaign was conducted to promote the key competencies to teachers, business, parents and teachers. A sophisticated professional development package on the key competencies is being developed and will be available to teachers and trainers in all States and Territories in 1995-96.’ (Department of Employment, Education and Training, *Annual Report 1993-94*, p65)

4.12 The problems of assessing students’ performance in the key competencies are being addressed in the pilot phase. It is expected that the key competencies will feature on all students’ exit certificates in a few years time.<sup>12</sup>

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8 *ibid.* p29.

9 *ibid.* p40.

10 *ibid.* p9.

11 On 26 May 1995 a meeting of the Ministerial Council on Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) resolved to do more work on documenting ‘Cultural Understandings’ as a competency.

12 Department of Employment, Education and Training, *Key Competencies Backgrounder - Next Steps*, promotional brochure, no date [1994?].

## Some general issues to do with the Key Competencies

4.13 The Committee, recognising the particular work-related focus of the Key Competencies project - developing a better trained workforce and providing more useful outcomes for the growing number of Year 11-12 students who do not continue to university - supports that aim. We note that the Key Competencies are still at a developmental stage, and we acknowledge the careful thought that the Department of Employment, Education and Training and state education authorities are giving to the problems of implementing them in schools. Concerns raised in the submissions to this inquiry, which the Committee shares, are mostly to do with the problems of implementing them in an imperfect world, and fears of unintended side-effects detrimental to 'general education'.

4.14 To set the scene for the complaints of arts educators we point out some general problems and issues to do with the Key Competencies:

*How important does a competency have to be?*

4.15 The Committee considers that there may have been an element of subjectivity in deciding which competencies were important enough to make the list, and that this is insufficiently acknowledged.

4.16 This becomes clearer if we consider exactly what is meant by 'essential for preparation for employment' - which the Key Competencies are said to be.<sup>13</sup> It is unclear whether this means -

1. they are all essential for everyone in all jobs
2. they are all essential for everyone at some stage in every career path
3. they are essential for every new entrant in order to be widely competitive in the job market (although they may not all be essential in the particular job or career path that a person ends up with)
4. they are essential for the workforce as a whole, on average, to be most adaptable to future changes in work...

4.17 The intention seems to be 3. and 4. ('[young people ] need to be multi-skilled, flexible and adaptable'<sup>14</sup>). Obviously, despite the claims made for them, the Key Competencies are *not* all essential for everyone in all jobs - a lighthouse keeper doesn't need to work in teams; a sandwich hand doesn't need to know mathematics. Whether they will all be necessary from time to time in a typical career path in the lighthouse industry or the sandwich industry is less clear, mainly because it is unclear what this career path would typically be: it raises big questions, not discussed in the Mayer report, about people's likelihood of promotion or transfer to a different field during a career.

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13 Mayer, E., Putting General Education to Work - the Key Competencies Report, no date [1992], p8

14 *ibid.* p2.

4.18 Probably the most exact statement possible about the Key Competencies is that they are things *most* of which *most* people will need at least *some* of the time during a working life.

4.19 This raises the question of how many other competencies there are which were excluded on the ground of not being essential for *all* occupations - a ground which appears to be spurious (foreign language skills were explicitly excluded as 'proficiency in a second language is not yet, and is not likely to be in the next few years, generic to all industries and occupations'<sup>15</sup>). Arts educators argued for 'using aesthetic awareness'; perhaps, beside 'using technology', there should have been a competency about 'getting on with people' - essential in the growing service sector (and something more, we suggest, than merely 'working in teams'); and so on.

4.20 So are the chosen seven (soon to be eight) *the* definitive key competencies or simply the more important ones? Behind the authors' choices must lie, firstly, objective research findings that *most* jobs require working in teams, but *few* jobs require foreign language skills (and so on); secondly, subjective judgments about what degree of *mostness* warranted inclusion as a 'key' competency (influenced by the desire, which the Mayer Committee admitted frankly<sup>16</sup>, to keep the list short). We suspect that the concept of 'generic to *all* industries and occupations' has been added as a *post hoc* attempt, whether conscious or sub-conscious, to buttress the authors' judgments by presenting them as objective yes-no questions.<sup>17</sup>

4.21 In fairness, it must be said that - in the small print - the Key Competencies are not claimed to be a *complete* list of anything -

'No 'set' can ever be considered definitive. The set of key competencies is to be responsive to new ideas and circumstances and open to discussion and change. For example, the Queensland Department of Education is currently trialling the additional competency "Cultural Understandings"' (Department of Employment Education and Training, *Key Competencies - Schools Kit Questions and Answers*, promotional brochure, no date [1994?])

4.22 In other words, where the Mayer report says '...there are seven Key Competencies that all young people need...' <sup>18</sup> we must mentally add '...and there may be others.' The problem with this is that it *is* the small print. The general tenor of the documentation is all the other way. Every sentence that starts 'The Key Competencies

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15 *ibid.* p9.

16 *ibid.* p8.

17 This procedure also explains the curiously uneven level of detail of the Key Competencies. 'Using technology' or 'using mathematics' are surely more specialised activities than 'collecting information' or 'planning activities'. Presumably the inclusion of some more specialised skills and not others is a bias arising from the typical characteristics of work in a technological society. The Key Competencies of a gatherer-hunter society would be more likely to include 'good hand-eye co-ordination' than 'using mathematics'.

18 Mayer, E., Putting General Education to Work - the Key Competencies Report, no date [1992], p2.

are...' will entrench in the mind of a hasty reader the idea that this *is* an objective and definitive list.

*What about values and attitudes?*

4.23 Values and attitudes are supposedly excluded;<sup>19</sup> but arguably, having values and attitudes (apart from their other virtues!) is an inseparable part of competent execution of many tasks. For example, 'solving problems' about workplace relationships involves making ethical judgements about whose problems should have priority. Many tasks involve ethical judgments about what degree of excellence one should aim for. 'Self-esteem' (one of Finn's 'personal and inter-personal' competencies) is arguably fundamental to effective performance in paid employment as well as in life generally.

4.24 The Mayer report acknowledges values and attitudes, without including them in the Key Competencies, with these words:

'There is, however, an ethical dimension to the Key Competencies and, given the way in which they are embedded in context, *their development is likely to support the development of the attitudes seen as desirable.* [emphasis added] While work ethics such as 'a fair day's work for a fair day's pay' are not identified among the Key Competencies, other dimensions of personal and work ethics are evident. Working with Others and in Teams, for example, includes contributing to the good of the group or organisation and being ethical in one's dealings with others. In short, while attitudes are not competencies *per se* they are a function of particular work place settings which will be reflected in the development and application of Key Competencies.' (Mayer, E., *Putting General Education to Work - the Key Competencies Report*, no date [1992], p9)

4.25 This Committee is not so confident. One can 'work in teams' co-operatively and considerately, or manipulatively and autocratically; both may be profitable. The goons of a military dictatorship would do well to be skilled in the Key Competencies, and their efficiency would be increased thereby; but nothing in the Key Competencies would make them doubt the rightness of their actions. To foster ethical behaviour one must explicitly value ethical behaviour *and reflect that value appropriately in the structure of the rule-book so it will be carried through to detailed actions.* It is not enough simply to hope that ethical behaviour will grow out of policies whose main purpose is focused elsewhere.

4.26 It might be argued that to deal with values and attitudes in the Key Competencies would take them beyond their scope. But this statement itself depends on value judgments about what the proper scope is. A different type of society might unhesitatingly place 'ethical behaviour' at the top of its list of work-related

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19 That is, they are excluded *from the list of competencies*. The *authors'* values and attitudes - the element of subjectivity which must have informed their judgments, discussed from paragraph 4.15 - are a different matter.

competencies; this, within its own frame of reference, would be just as objective as any of the competencies actually chosen.

4.27 The most important thing about the Key Competencies is the list itself. The list itself is an artefact that is intended to influence educational practice; in order for it to do so teachers must memorise it and internalise it.<sup>20</sup> It gives extra importance to the things that are on it - that is its purpose - so inevitably it will detract, relatively speaking, from the perceived importance of things that are not on it. By treating ethics as a sort of ghost that haunts all the competencies, denying it a concrete place in the head list, the Mayer report inevitably creates the impression - unintended, no doubt - that matters of ethics and morality are less important than matters of 'efficient' performance.<sup>21</sup>

4.28 The same issue arises in the case of 'creativity', which is placed not as a separate competency but rather as a 'significant factor in distinguishing between performance levels'.<sup>22</sup> This choice is a matter of priority and emphasis, not of logic. *Any* competency could be regarded as a factor distinguishing performance levels in *all* the other competencies.<sup>23</sup>

#### *For work or for life?*

'Schooling at all levels is concerned with more than just the acquisition of work-related skills. Schooling is concerned also with the moral, ethical, physical and cultural development of the student... The curriculum, therefore, needs to provide for activities which will enable all students not only to develop skills and competencies necessary for employment but also to foster such things as an understanding and appreciation of art, music and literature, an awareness of our world and the need to preserve it, the ability to relate to people and the skills to participate actively in a democratic society. An emphasis on the task of preparation for the workforce should not be at the cost of other equally important purposes of schooling.' (Schools Council [of National Board of Employment, Education and Training], *Five to Fifteen - Reviewing the Compulsory Years of Schooling*, Canberra, 1993, p18)

4.29 Is the purpose of the Key Competencies *limited* to vocational training? Or is it part of 'generation education' (whatever that means)? If so, what does 'part of' mean *exactly*, and what are the implications for the *other* parts of general education? There appears to be some confusion over these questions. The Committee suspects that they have not been thought through fully.

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20 The Mayer Committee clearly recognised this, with its frequent references to the need to keep the list clear and simple.

21 Of course, defining 'efficient' itself involves value judgments.

22 Mayer, E., Putting General Education to Work - the Key Competencies Report, no date [1992], p9.

23 For example, imagine - 'Collecting information' Level 1: by yourself; Level 2: in a team. 'Working in teams': Level 1: using readily available information; Level 2: using less readily available information... See Figure 14.

4.30 The Finn report and the general tenor of the Mayer report are firmly focused on vocational training, as will be obvious from the description of their development from paragraph 4.2 above ('employment-related key competencies' - 'new opportunities for creating clearer linkages between education, training and the world of work...' <sup>24</sup>). But the Mayer report also makes a few brief references to the effect that 'key Competencies must... equip individuals to participate effectively in a wide range of social settings *and adult life more generally*'. <sup>25</sup> Publicity brochures by the Department of Employment, Education and Training are entitled *Key Competencies - for Work, Education and Life*.

4.31 It appears that this shift has been made somewhere between the draft Mayer report <sup>26</sup> (like Finn, firmly focused on vocational training) and the final Mayer report. It may be that the architects of the Key Competencies (perhaps in response to 'general education' critics?) may be trying to have their cake and eat it - to create a more employment-related focus in senior high school, and yet to do this under the virtuous banner of 'general education'. The opportunity to do this arises because of the existence of the large middle ground, which Finn referred to, of education that may be regarded as having both general and vocational purposes. How or why this shift has occurred is less important than the fact of its occurrence, for it serves to redefine the purpose of education as equipping children for paid employment.

4.32 This shift in emphasis has continued apace in the documentation prepared by Queensland for 'cultural understandings' as the eighth Key Competency. This speaks of things like 'the need for individuals and groups to value and understand the interrelated cultures that make up Australian society... the historical, economic and political knowledge and skills which should be familiar to all students in order to ensure that they can make a productive contribution to the nation... sensitivity, empathy and tolerance for others....' <sup>27</sup> Such statements are surely straying far from the Mayer report.

4.33 The Committee has concerns with this trend. The sentiments just quoted have a place, of course; the issues are the appropriateness of trying to press them into the Key Competency mould, or to press this mould too far as an adequate descriptor of general education. A phrase like *to ensure that they can make a productive contribution to the nation* illustrates the problem perfectly. It is obviously so expressed, using the language of economic production, as a gesture towards consistency with the employment-related focus of the Mayer report; but this subtly biases the whole

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24 Mayer, E., Putting General Education to Work - the Key Competencies Report, no date [1992], p2.

25 *ibid.* p8 (emphasis added).

26 Mayer Committee, Employment Related Key Competencies: A Proposal for Consultation, no date [1992].

27 Queensland Department of Education and others, *Cultural Understandings as the Eighth Key Competency - Final Report...*, no date [1994], p3. Note that this documentation is not final. On 26 May 1995 the Ministerial Council on Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs referred the matter for further work.



discourse. Why not *to ensure that they are good citizens and participate in community life*? This would be quite consistent with values expressed elsewhere in the ‘cultural understandings’ documentation just quoted. What other unconscious biases are there? The shades of meaning do matter, because they create the general tenor of the documentation which, more than anything, will influence the understandings and attitudes of the teachers who will have to implement it hourly.

4.34 As well as the likelihood of bias, there are the omissions. If the Key Competencies are ‘for life’, not just ‘for work’, then the omission of ‘competencies’ about values and attitudes, creativity and aesthetic awareness, environmental responsibility, good citizenship, tolerance in all its forms (no doubt this list could be extended) becomes much more contentious.<sup>28</sup> It will affect teachers’ attitudes about the relative importance of what’s in and what’s out; it may affect schools’ decisions or system-wide decisions about the design or distribution of curriculum support or inservice professional development.

4.35 This issue is a confusing one largely because the Key Competencies are such motherhood statements. Most of them *are* obviously relevant in some way to life in general. But this, *from the point of view of the vocational purpose of the Mayer report*, is incidental. This being so, it does not necessarily mean that the scheme of Key Competencies, as now put, is suitable to be a guiding force in the whole school curriculum - which it risks becoming if applied uncritically. The issue is about appropriate design for a given purpose. To teach the Key Competencies, as now put, under the banner ‘for life’ - that is, to teach ‘for life’ using the Key Competencies as a framework - is like trying to use a truck as your suburban run-about. It *can* be done, more or less - the truck is adaptable, to a degree; but before long the extra expense and discomfort, the extra things you want that the truck annoyingly omits, might persuade you that the truck should be left for the tasks it was designed for.

4.36 Purposes must inform and influence detailed actions. It is the vocational purpose that dictates the details of the Key Competencies - what’s in, what’s out, the emphases, the shades of meaning, the attitudes conveyed. If the *main* purpose of the Key Competencies project is to do with vocational training, and if school curricula are subtly reorganised around *that* purpose, this will influence a thousand teachers’ choices, accumulating day by day to serve *that* purpose: valuing ‘communicating information’ more than solitary thought; valuing ‘working in teams’ more than individual creativity; valuing ‘solving problems’ more than seeing problems; valuing efficiency more than morality. These attitudes and emphases - part of the ‘hidden

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28 This type of listing immediately raises the deep debate about what the proper functions of school are, and what life skills we should expect children to learn elsewhere. Of course children learn a lot about these things at home; but they can and do also learn about them at school.

curriculum' - if they are followed uncritically, risk being detrimental to a broad education of the whole person.<sup>29</sup>

4.37 The issue becomes more urgent in proportion as the Key Competencies are adopted *below* Years 11-12. At the moment New South Wales is examining the possibility of introducing them in Years 9-10, and South Australia is considering how they might be incorporated from Reception/Kindergarten to Year 10.<sup>30</sup> The Committee trusts that these deliberations are considering fundamentals as well as logistics. There is no reason to assume in advance that the present list of Key Competencies - designed to prepare Year 11-12's for the workforce - is a suitable template for the *primary* school curriculum.<sup>31</sup>

4.38 The Mayer report acknowledges that 'key competencies are essential elements of a general education but do not displace the broader purposes of general education in developing young people as individuals and members of Australian society.'<sup>32</sup> The Committee respects the intention behind this, but has concerns that the relationship between the two in practice - in the classroom - has not been fully thought through. Probably the suspicions of the critics about what they see as school education being co-opted for the needs of industry arise not least from the way in which the Key Competencies seem to be subtly extending their reach without a clear understanding of this relationship. It was put to the Committee<sup>33</sup> that probably a lot of resentment would dissipate once a clear relationship is defined, so teachers can be confident the Key Competencies will not be imposed inappropriately.

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29 'The hidden curriculum, contained in the ways schools treat their pupils, is as powerful an educational force as the official curriculum.' R.W. Connell, *Schools and Social Justice*, Pluto Press, Leichhardt, 1993, p15.

30 Schools Council [of National Board of Employment, Education and Training], *The Role of Schools in the Vocational Preparation of Australia's Senior Secondary students: Final Report*, December 1994, p24.

31 'The requirement that the key competencies be reported at Year 10 raises the issue of 'backwash' (that is, the effects of the competencies on the curriculum in the lower grades of the high school). While the Finn report is careful to point out that the key competencies are only part of the education program in the school, the importance that is likely to be accorded to them, and the need for assessment and reporting at Year 10, is bound to affect the whole of curriculum and assessment in the high school.' Dr G. Speedy/ National Board of Employment, Education and Training, *Curriculum Initiatives*, Canberra, 1992, p45.

32 Mayer, E., *Putting General Education to Work - the Key Competencies Report*, no date [1992], p7.

33 at a private briefing for the Committee, 29 May 1995.

If anyone asks, as so many are asking, ‘What is the use of my son learning all about Ancient Athens and remote China and medieval guilds and monasteries, and all sorts of dead or distant things, when he is going to be a plumber in Pimlico?’ the answer is obvious enough. The use of it is that he may have some power of comparison, which will not only prevent him from supposing that Pimlico covers the whole planet, but will also enable him, while doing full credit to the beauties and virtues of Pimlico, to point out that, here and there, as revealed by alternative experiments, even Pimlico may conceal somewhere a defect.

G.K. Chesterton

### *A single organising concept?*

4.39 Overarching the issues raised above is scepticism expressed in some submissions about the wisdom of relying on the competencies as a ‘single organising concept’ in education:

‘Perhaps it is time for criticism of the competency concept as an appropriate tool for education reform. Reid, Porter et al. (1992) in a recent paper argued: “The idea that there is one ‘single best answer’ to what are extremely complex teaching and learning, as well as education and work issues, is neither realistic nor practicable. Hanging all reform on a single organising concept through which all education and training in Australia is to transform itself into worker productivity and career advancement, as well as national economic development, is a rationalist’s dream which is unlikely to come true.... Perhaps it is time to recognise the educational agenda in terms of its cultural and social, as well as its economic orientation.”’ (Australian Society for the Arts in Education, submission 70 p741)

4.40 The Key Competency project has an important purpose in working for more useful educational outcomes for the growing number of Year 12 students who do not continue to university. It would be a pity to throw out the baby with the bathwater. But if a scheme can only work by being simple, and yet being simple cannot avoid being too simplistic, perhaps this calls into question its whole design.

### *A new balance of power*

4.41 The Key Competencies, though *relevant* to other things, are *focused* on one aspect of life - paid employment. They give extra importance to things that are on the list and so, *relatively*, detract from things that are not on the list. These are fundamental and unavoidable features of the Key Competencies project. They create a new balance of power which, with the best intentions, risks being detrimental to the other aims of education if it is applied uncritically.

4.42 There is a need to reassess the right balance - to clarify the other aims of education with the same care and attention as has been given to the Key Competencies, so as to send the right message to teachers and the community that the other things are also important. It is possible to visualise a 'Key Competencies for Life' project quite comparable to the present Key Competencies project - perhaps, instead of asking employers what skills they want their workers to have, it would ask parents and the community what life skills they want their children to have for the two thirds of their waking hours that they will spend not in paid employment. This would doubtless be a much more contentious project than the present Key Competencies project; but it is necessary. As noted above, the new balance of power is now a situation in which efficiency is implicitly more important than morality. The Committee regards this as unacceptable.

4.43 In short, the key issue is this: given that it is necessary to put more vocational training into schools (because of increasing Year 12 retention among students not destined for university), it is equally necessary to ensure that the education of the whole person (not only in Years 11-12, but throughout school life) is not relatively neglected. The Committee considers that the Commonwealth, having taken a leading role in the first matter, should also take a leading role in the second.

#### **Recommendations 13, 14, 15**

**13. In increasing the profile of vocational training in schools, the Education Ministers should pay particular attention to the need to ensure that a broad general education is not marginalised. Monitoring the implementation of Key Competencies projects must address this question. Commonwealth special purpose funding of Key Competencies related projects should be conditional on this.**

**14. Professional development programs for teachers (including the National Professional Development Program) should address the relationship between the Key Competencies and broader educational aims, so the Key Competencies are not misused outside their proper sphere.**

**15. The Education Ministers should initiate a project of comparable status and focus to the present Key Competencies project to clarify the broad purposes of school education and re-assert their importance beside the employment-related purposes which are the focus of the Mayer report.**

#### **Arts educators' concerns about the Key Competencies**

4.44 We turn to the specific concerns of arts educators with the Key Competencies movement. A few submissions saw possible benefits:

'An education in drama provides essential learning for many areas of employment. A set of Key Competencies has been nationally endorsed as

essential for effective participation in work, further education and adult life in general. Drama education develops these Key Competencies particularly well.’ (National Association for Drama in Education, submission 73 p772)

4.45 This support seems rather opportunistic; the same could probably be said for a lot of other things. A cautiously supportive statement of principle was -

‘In the general move towards competencies following the Mayer and Finn reports, there was a healthy concomitant move away from the traditional model of schools as being simply for the transmission of knowledge, standardised by external written examinations at the conclusion of secondary school. Practical and creative arts did not fit easily into this model and a shift to competencies seemed at first glance to accommodate more easily dance, musical performance, the crafts and drama - the ‘embodied’ knowledge which seemed to exist outside or beyond written knowledge....’ (Dr Felicity Haynes, submission 91 p1066)

4.46 But most witnesses had concerns, including that just quoted, who continued -

‘...The competencies movement depends on student exemplars to provide evidence of understanding.... However, it is not clear what standards of quality are used to measure these exemplars.... [knowledge is reduced] to a product-based commodity, its measurement being reduced to comparison of exemplars with the standard product.’ (Dr Felicity Haynes, submission 91 p1066)

#### *Creative processes versus measurable outcomes*

4.47 This expresses the first major concern: that the creative processes of the arts fit ill with the emphasis on measurable outcomes implicit in the competency approach.<sup>34</sup>

‘The trend towards competency based course structures in vocational education and training does not fit the ethos of the creative arts. National competency standards appear to be on a quest for ‘benchmarks’. To me as a practicing artist this quest is a totally ridiculous situation, as the ‘Holy Grail’ of the creative arts is individuality not standardisation. If we continue this headlong rush towards competency based training and assessment within the Fine Arts we will undoubtedly construct an atmosphere of creative stagnation. None of the papers that I have researched on competency assessment come close to addressing the divergent thinking that is required by an artist.... If competency based structures are put into place we will construct a very real danger of the illusion of validity, that is, we will place great emphasis on assessing minor points of progress rather than artistic achievement.’ (Mr Martin Gash, submission 3a p62)

4.48 A number of submissions stressed the important distinction between *process* and *product* in arts learning -

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34 Similar concerns were expressed in relation to the National Curriculum - see paragraph 3.81.

‘...prospective teachers perceive visual arts and music in terms of adult forms of performance/exhibitions and resultant technical *products*; whereas visual arts/music for young children should focus on drawing/painting activities and singing/music making as *process-oriented learning*... When arts are taught [in primary school] the learning experiences tend to be product-oriented and trite...’ (Dr Diana Kendall, submission 30a p366-7)

‘Many educators and a large number of parents have a problem with the assessment of Visual Arts. [While] many subjects may be assessed by their outcomes or their products, the value of Visual Arts lies primarily in the development and processes explored by the student.’ (Mr Robert Waters, submission 26 p314)

4.49 The Mayer report, on the other hand, strongly emphasises the notion that ‘competence is the capacity to ‘do’ something rather than just ‘know’ something.’<sup>35</sup> This explicitly values ‘know how to’ knowledge more highly than ‘know that’ knowledge. The Mayer report acknowledges the importance of knowledge and understanding (‘performance is underpinned not only by skill but also by knowledge and understanding...’<sup>36</sup>), but the general tenor of it (particularly in its use of performance levels and examples) is obviously the other way. This is not a matter of undervaluing knowledge as such (since knowledge is obviously a prerequisite for measurable performance), but rather of undervaluing understandings that may not be immediately expressed in measurable performance (or indeed, understandings that may not ever be expressed through predictable behaviour that can be put under observation in school).

4.50 The implications of this, if implemented uncritically, are a fair cause of concern for the arts educators (and, we suspect, many other educators) who say that in education the process of coming to understanding is as important as the product. A comment made in relation to the National Curriculum is equally relevant to the Key Competencies:

‘Art and music teachers know that the difference between the playing of a simple melody in music, or the making of a gestural mark in visual arts at a high level, and those of performances at a low level is usually expressed in students by the exercise of hidden understandings.’ (Dr Neil Brown, submission 15 p178)

4.51 The evidence was that because of the creative and unpredictable elements of arts learning this problem applies more to arts than to some other subjects where outcomes and understandings are more easily measurable.

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35 Mayer, E., Putting General Education to Work - the Key Competencies Report, no date [1992], p8.

36 *ibid.* p4.

## Recommendations 16, 17

**16. Projects to integrate the Key Competencies into the school curriculum should monitor the effects on the various disciplines, paying particular regard to the creative and unpredictable element of arts learning which cannot easily be accommodated in a framework of measurable behavioural outcomes.**

**Commonwealth special purpose funding of Key Competencies related projects should be conditional on this.**

**17. In light of this the Commonwealth and the States should monitor the integration of the Key Competencies into the school curriculum to assess whether they have effects that are relatively disadvantaging the arts, and should devise pre-emptive or remedial strategies.**

### 4.52 *Key Competencies versus subjects*

4.53 The second main concern raised in submissions is that competencies are meaningless unless applied to some subject content:

‘How does one critically think without reference to an understanding of the entities one is thinking about?’ (Dr Neil Brown, submission 15 p179)

4.54 In principle the Committee does not see this as a great concern. It is obvious; the Mayer Committee acknowledged it;<sup>37</sup> most importantly (by contrast with the other concerns raised here about the risks in *implementing* Key Competencies), any misconceptions are likely to be self-correcting: a teacher who tries to ‘teach’ pure competencies without subject content (‘collecting information’ without information?) will surely find it impossible.

4.55 A more specific fear is that a demand to teach subjects *with a view to fostering the Key Competencies as primary outcomes* will subtly push teaching of the subject in unsound directions:

‘As a test of one’s cynicism, on the same page [of the draft Mayer Report: *Employment-Related Key Competencies - A Proposal for Consultation*, 1992] - ‘The Key Competency Strands describe outcomes of learning. They do not prescribe the ways by which these outcomes will be achieved. They do not and are not intended to be a curriculum.’ As if anyone would be naive enough to accept that a description of outcomes of learning was in some way unconnected with the ways that they would be achieved, especially when it is transparently clear that it is outcomes which are to provide the measure of value for both student and teacher success. In other

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37 ‘The Key Competency Strands assume a basis of knowledge, skills and understanding to be integrated and applied. They do not describe the development of these foundations...’ Mayer Committee, *Employment Related Key Competencies: A Proposal for Consultation*, no date [1992], p11.

words subjects and disciplines are being co-opted into the service of providing the Competencies with token meaning.’ (Dr Neil Brown, submission 15 p185)

4.56 Some fear that a focus on measurable outcomes will push arts teachers further towards the ‘product-oriented and trite’. As well, we suspect that there is a concern similar to that expressed in submissions on the National Curriculum (see paragraph 3.78), that the Key Competencies threaten teachers’ independence and authority as subject specialists.

4.57 Some witnesses, who fear that grouping the various artforms as one Key Learning Area in the National Curriculum will encourage school administrators to neglect the important differences between them (see paragraph 3.83 and following), also fear that the ‘generic’ nature of the competencies will encourage this tendency:

‘Competencies, profiles and outcomes are subtended by the assumption that achievement can be measured by removing the specialist content of a field of practice from accomplished performance, which becomes reduced to generic competencies. Generic competencies are assisted by the assumed homogeneity of an ‘arts’ model which easily adapts to a generic competencies approach. This approach is replete with pedagogical limitations, failing to take account of advances in the knowledge of a field and distancing the values of school subjects from contemporary society.’ (Art Education Society of New South Wales, submission 84 p992)

4.58 Some feared that the difference between a ‘skilled subject’ approach and a ‘fostering Key Competencies’ approach will come to be seen as the difference between quality and mediocrity, and will encourage divergence between arts education for the élite and the many. They feared -

‘...a tendency to confine the teaching of traditional subjects to the socially and academically privileged students attending selective and private schools. Students at level 5 in selective schools, whose careers are directed toward the professions will not be fooling around with music as a means of learning how to ‘work with others and in groups’. Such students will be approaching the subject in a substantive way. The intellectual autonomy which is provided by a deep understanding of individual subjects, and access to subject-based ‘competency’ which represent the traditional pathway to the professions, may be denied to underprivileged students for whom education provides one the few means of social mobility. The emphasis on subjects, as opposed to competencies in a school, is already being accepted by the public as an indication of the class of students it is the school’s intention to produce.’ (Dr Neil Brown, submission 15 p184)

#### *A Key Competency for ‘aesthetic awareness’?*

4.59 The next major concern about the Key Competencies is that they should include a competency relating to ‘aesthetic awareness’; that the absence of this will send a signal to schools that the arts are not important.



‘During the several rounds of consultation [in the preparation of the Mayer report] many arts and non-arts organisations argued strongly for other competencies to be included. These were • cultural understanding; • applying aesthetic awareness. In 1993/94 the competency of cultural understanding was accepted and written. There still remains growing concern that the area of aesthetics is being overlooked.... The inability of the Mayer Committee to comprehend the realm of aesthetics is to deny the value and importance of design, presentation, appearance, ability to respond, criticism, ability to relate to environments and ideas. These concepts are relevant to all employment situations.’ (Australian Dance Council - Ausdance Inc., submission 79 p857)

4.60 Proponents of this argued strongly that ‘applying aesthetic awareness’ is an *employment-related* competency no less than the chosen seven:

‘To become employable at the entry level, the ability to demonstrate aesthetic judgements is paramount (in the way people present themselves, present information and ideas, present products, respond to other ideas, relate to environments) and is relevant to all employment situations. Bricklayers, plumbers, hairdressers, chefs, typists all make aesthetic judgements in the way they present their “products” and this is a matter of more than just “technical accuracy”.’ (Australian Society for the Arts in Education, submission 70 p752)

4.61 Quite apart from the broader relevance claimed for aesthetic awareness, witnesses pointed out how *design* was neglected:

‘Design is one industry-linked outcome of applying aesthetic judgements but it is by no means the only one. It is important to note here that the design aspect has not been extensively incorporated into the current competency strands (even in ‘Using Technology’), let alone other aesthetic elements.’ (Australian Society for the Arts in Education, submission 70 p752)

4.62 The Mayer report does not say why ‘aesthetic awareness’ was rejected. Possibly, like foreign language skills, it was felt to be not important *enough*, given the over-riding desire to keep the list short (as noted at paragraph 4.20), the dubious concept of ‘generic to *all* industries and occupations’ has the effect of hiding this type of judgment).

4.63 Possibly, underlying this decision, is the problem of different understandings of ‘aesthetic’. To many people it probably seems bizarre to say ‘bricklayers, plumbers, hairdressers, chefs, typists all make aesthetic judgements in the way they present their products.’ We live in a technological urbanised society in which labour is specialised, beauty sometimes seems rare, and mass consumption is more important than individual creativity. This encourages us to believe that ‘aesthetic’ is the province of poets, and that ‘creativity’ belongs in a box labelled ‘the arts’, to which only a few special people have the key. Whereas, in fact, anyone who chooses a new car, plans a flowerbed, or hangs a picture - in other words, everyone - shows their aesthetic sense. The bricklayer shows it in striking off the mortar, the plumber in positioning the taps, the typist in sizing the

margins. As one witness said, ‘Everything in this room has been designed or created by an artistic person at some stage. Someone has put the colours together...’<sup>38</sup> It is in these humble ways - seemingly far removed from ‘the arts’ - that aesthetic awareness is an employment related competency.

*The most important thing is the list itself*

4.64 In reply to the claims for ‘aesthetic awareness’ as a Key Competency it was also said (we paraphrase): ‘The arts is all about communicating ideas, solving problems, working in teams - think of the school play - in fact the arts probably relates to *more* of the competencies than most subjects - so what’s your problem?’<sup>39</sup>

4.65 This shows a fundamental misunderstanding about the nature of the competencies and the nature of the complaint. ‘Doing the arts’ is not a competency (that is, an aptitude or ability): it is a particular activity. *Any* particular activity probably involves several of the competencies; *any* activity can be justified with reference to the competencies; so the statement has no meaning specific to arts. If the competencies had omitted mathematics, and maths teachers objected, you could say, in exactly the same way, ‘Maths is all about problem-solving and organising information - so what’s your problem?’ You could probably omit *any* of the competencies and make a similar sentence about it with reference to the remaining ones.

4.66 The nature of the competencies is that they are a list of seven things, distilled from all possible candidates within scope, chosen according to the authors’ evaluation of what the most important things are relating to paid employment. The most important thing is the list itself. The list itself is an artefact that is intended to be influential in education; it is intended to give importance in people’s minds to things that are on it, and inevitably it will correspondingly detract from things that are not on it. The complaint is that ‘using aesthetic awareness’ is a competency, it is employment related, it is important, and accordingly it should be on the list. The obvious fact that the arts can still be taught without it (just as maths could still be taught without a specific mathematical competency) is not to the point.

4.67 As one witness put it: ‘Arts teachers can see themselves in the competencies, but they can’t see the distinctive part of themselves.’<sup>40</sup>

4.68 The Committee agrees that ‘using aesthetic awareness’ in the sense discussed above (quite apart from its virtues in life in general) is a widely applied employment-related competency, comparable in its scope to some of the more specialised competencies actually listed, such as ‘using mathematics’ or ‘using technology’. Its importance is likely to increase in the light of the growth of the service sector. It is important to industrial design, a crucial element in Australia’s ‘clever country’

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38 Ms K McKay, evidence p1118.

39 For example, Department of Employment, Education & Training, evidence p800.

40 at a private briefing for the Committee, 29 May 1995.

ambitions to grow in value-added manufactures. We have heard no good reason why it should not be included in the list of Key Competencies. If the reason was the perceived need to keep the list of Key Competencies short, we do not think this is a good enough reason. The need to keep the list short, if it results in unacceptable biases and omissions, would call into question the whole design of the Key Competency project.

### **Recommendation 18**

**18. A competency relating to aesthetic awareness should be added to the head list of Key Competencies.**

### **Conclusions on the Mayer Key Competencies**

4.69 The most important thing is the list itself. In order to integrate the Key competencies into the school curriculum teachers must memorise and internalise it. It is intended to give importance in people's minds to things that are on it, and so inevitably it will detract, relatively, from things that are not on it.

4.70 The main purpose of the Key Competencies as now put is employment-related. This purpose has controlled the choice of items on the list, and it will inform and influence detailed actions. Shades of meaning do matter, because they inform the attitudes and understandings of the teachers who will have to implement the Key Competencies hourly.

4.71 Therefore, claims to extend the scope of the competencies to 'general education', without adapting or enlarging them to reflect that, are a matter of great concern, which the Committee does not think has been sufficiently thought through.

4.72 The Committee respects the purpose of the Key Competencies relating to improved vocational training, and the good intentions of the Department of Employment, Education and Training in piloting them carefully. The concerns put to us are mainly fears about how the list might be uncritically interpreted and applied.

4.73 Our witnesses, whatever their views in principle about the need to bring more vocational training in schools, fear that *in practice* - at the coalface - the Key Competencies movement will encourage teachers to coach observable behaviour, to the detriment of deeper understanding; that it will encourage teachers to value more easily measurable things above equally important but less easily measurable things; that it will encourage an unintelligent mechanistic box-ticking approach to assessment, as a response of desperation to the difficulties of assessing such broadly defined behaviours across the variety of subjects; that these tendencies will be disproportionately detrimental to the arts, because of the difficulties of measuring creative processes; that schools will be encouraged to undervalue the arts generally, because the Mayer report did not regard creativity or aesthetic awareness as important enough to be included in the head list of Key Competencies.

4.74 It is too early to make judgments about the Key Competencies in practice, as they are still at the trialling stage. However, the Committee does have a fair degree of sympathy with these fears. It is the duty of the architects of the Key Competencies to ensure that when they reach the classroom - a long way from committees and reports - they are used in their proper sphere, for appropriate purposes and not for inappropriate purposes, so that their good purposes are obtained and their feared side-effects avoided.