VET tail should stop wagging federalism dog

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On 30 December last year, in the sleepy news-week between Christmas and New Year, *The Australian*’s front-page lead story by Elizabeth Coleman reported that the Commonwealth and State and Territory governments had agreed to implement national licences for the trades. Coleman referred to this as “the biggest restructure of trades accreditation since federation…”

This straightforward and welcome reform provides Australia with an unprecedented opportunity to break with the current reductive and overly prescriptive system of qualifications in all of VET, and not just the trades. However, to do so governments need to see the potential inherent in their national licensing proposal. Unfortunately, this is unlikely.

There are three possible levels of regulating occupations, each of which may be determined nationally or by each state and territory: occupational standards, occupational licensing and educational qualifications leading to occupational licensing.

Under current arrangements there is no national specification of occupational standards and no national licensing for many trades and other occupations for which VET prepares, such as state enrolled or division 2 nurses. Each of the eight states and territories has its own occupational standards and licensing arrangements and it is sometimes difficult for those with a trade to get registered in another state. They often experience delays and have to navigate bureaucracy and pay fees, despite already being qualified and licensed to practice in their own state.

This is the rail gauge problem that bedevils federalism in Australia. Just as we don’t have a national rail gauge, we don’t have national regulations and occupational standards in many other areas of the economy or social infrastructure. This can make building a single, national economy somewhat difficult.

Governments addressed this problem in the early 1990s not by seeking to establish national occupational standards or national licensing, but by establishing a national system of VET qualifications. We needed a national VET system and the fact that we now have one is an enduring achievement of the last 20 years, but this has been at some cost because it shifts the focus of VET from processes of learning to defining national occupational standards.
The push to establish a national VET system was based on the notion that if everyone did the same kind of training and achieved the same outcomes state differences would be overcome by imposing *de facto* national occupational standards. Consequently, national VET qualifications needed to specify the outcomes required for particular jobs. This is why national portability of qualifications is the holy grail of VET. This has been achieved through national training packages that specify the units of competency related to a particular occupation, rules about how those units of competency must be combined to make a nationally recognised qualification, and the assessment guidelines that must be used.

National portability is sought be governments because it benefits the economy and employers and is sought by unions because it benefits their members. Thus some unions have been the most strident defenders of training packages because they see any attack on training packages as an attack on national portability.

However, those of us who attack training packages are not attacking national portability, we are attacking training packages. This is because they have the balance between learning and regulation all wrong, lead to the over-specification of outcomes, are based on simplistic behaviourist theories of learning, and are overly prescriptive.

We need to divorce occupational standards from education and training. This occurs in many of the professions. The professional bodies specify the occupational standards needed for a particular occupation and accredit university programs that prepare people for these occupations. While the occupational standards are specified nationally, each institution is free to satisfy those standards in their own way provided they meet the accreditation requirements. This allows occupational bodies to concentrate on the requirements for competent practice which includes educational preparation but often in addition include periods of supervised practice and being of good character. At the same time educational institutions can focus on processes of learning and the holistic development of students for the professions, rather than an audit of units of competency and associated performance criteria.

The national specification of occupational standards does not require national licensing. Thus, the Australian Medical Council accredits Australian and New Zealand medical schools and medical programs, but registration and licensing of medical practitioners is the responsibility of each state and territory’s medical board. National occupational standards for lawyers are specified by a national committee chaired by Mr Justice Priestley but the accreditation of law programs and the admission of practitioners is the responsibility of each jurisdiction’s supreme court and its board of examiners.
Rather than using VET to overcome the deficiencies of federalism, Australia should be trying to achieve genuine national regulatory and occupational frameworks for licensed occupations beyond the professions. If this were achieved Australia would have genuine nationally portable qualifications while national prescription of VET qualifications would need to be of only broad learning outcomes. Detailed learning outcomes and curriculum could be developed at the local level to meet the particular needs of local and regional employers in ways that are more responsive than currently. We need this in the trades and in other VET qualifications. The VET tail should not be used to wag the federalism dog.