# Identifying nationally recognised emergency management skill sets: godsend or poisoned chalice?

*Andy Smith provides an overview of the skills that will grow capabilities and performance within Australia's Emergency management sector.*

## Abstract

The Public Safety Training Package was first published in July 2000 by the then Public Safety Industry Training Advisory Board (PS ITAB) and provided the first nationally recognized qualification in emergency management being an Advanced Diploma in Public Safety (Emergency Management). In this paper, Smith provides an overview of nationally recognised skill sets and opportunities for the emergency management sector to identify skill sets that may strategically enhance capability and performance within the sector. He draws upon the experience of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, the State/Territory Emergency Services sector in addition to researchers within the vocational education and training (VET) sector. Since inception, the emergency management sector has clustered competency standards to meet industry and employer needs, rather than as a strategic decision informed by the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF).

## Introduction

Emergency management has become a key feature for industries outside of the 'traditional' emergency services. The drivers of this change range from legislative amendments that have increased the emergency management-related roles and responsibilities of some organizations (such as local government) in addition to capability enhancements initiated in part as a response to significant events (such as business continuity within the critical infrastructure sector). The training sector has not always kept pace with the drivers of change within industry, and this has often resulted in tension between the industry (especially employers) and the training sector (specifically training providers).

This paper provides an overview of skill sets within the vocational education and training sector that arose following a Higher Level Review of Training Packages in 2006 that informed a directive by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) to the National Quality Council (NQC) to explore the development and identification of skill sets or "those single units [of competency] or combinations of units which link to a licence or regulatory requirement or defined industry need." (in tpatwork, April 2007)

The High Level Review of Training Packages identified that *"Increasingly, individuals are finding that it is a job requirement to possess specific sets of skills to meet industry standards or regulatory and legislative requirements. The national training system now has processes in place to identify specific skill sets within training packages and allow formal recognition of those skills.*

*In 2006 the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) acknowledged that this was a problem which was inhibiting economic grow and productivity. It made the recognition of skills, including skill sets, a priority for the national training system."* (tpatwork, April 2007)

The Public Safety Training Package (PUA00) contains the single, emergency management specific qualification for the sector, namely the Advanced Diploma in Public Safety (Emergency Management). The PUA00 was first endorsed in 2000 with the qualification that was heavily weighted towards emergency risk management. A review of the PUA00 in 2003/04 resulted in changes to the structure of the qualification to reflect changes within the sector, especially the organizations identified as participants in the various emergency management arrangements.

The major review of the PUA00 is being undertaken by Government Skills Australia (GSA) — the industry skills council for the government and community safety industries, in consultation with the Emergency Management Sector Working Group (EMSWG) — the representative body for emergency management within the vocational education and training sector. (GSA/DEST, 2007) The EMSWG noted that the "identification and initial recommendations for

improvement have been proposed through extensive consultation, research and analysis that have been approved by the industry." (EMSWG, 2007) The identification of skill sets are among the proposed improvements to the qualification.

Emergency management is one of the 'industry-wide (or cross-industry) sectors' within the PUA00, while Defence, Police, State/Territory Emergency Services (SES) and Fire are sectors within their own right. Skill sets have attracted the interest of other sectors, including those who represent public safety volunteers. Within the context of the PUA00 review project, it has been noted that "there is an opportunity for SES personnel to train to role and maintain current competency in key skill areas as they choose or local demand requires, rather than be driven by a qualifications-only outcome." (GSA/NETC, 2007)

## Skill sets

Skill sets will not be unique to the emergency management or public safety sector, rather they will "appear in all industries and across all levels of work" (tpatwork, April 2007) implying that they will be equally relevant to entry level (Certificate II) training to higher level training such as that which is available to the emergency management sector. Many industries that 'train to role' have been delivering and assessing training using skill sets 'by proxy', since the inception of the nationally recognized training system in the mid-1990s.

Skill sets are "a new look nationally portable Statement of Attainment [SOA] setting out consistently and clearly for employers the competencies and skills a person has achieved" (Cleary, 2007) yet "are not a new qualification within the national training framework, but they are a way of publicly identifying on a Statement of Attainment, logical groupings of units of competency which meet an identified need or industry outcome." (NQF, 2007)

The authority to research, identify and validate skill sets within nationally endorsed training packages for all industries commenced with the High Level Review of Training Packages that "identified that there are many individuals and enterprises looking not for full qualifications, but rather for flexible skill sets made up of individual units of competency." (tpatwork, April 2007) The Review further noted that "Before 2007, individuals received no formal recognition when completing a particular combination of units within a qualification to meet a required industry or job need. They received either a statement of attainment or a full qualification. In most cases the statement of attainment made reference to a partial completion of a qualification rather than acknowledging that the completed units constituted a skill set." (tpatwork, April 2007)

The latter was certainly correct within the public safety sector, including emergency management, where the delivery and assessment of the Advanced Diploma qualification by registered training organizations (RTOs) occurred by default to meet the diverse industry need, rather than a strategic decision within the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF). The emergency management industry strives to remain responsive to a number of drivers that influence its capability requirements, including recommendations arising from significant events and exercises/simulations to shifts in government policy and legislation. Skill sets, as defined in this paper, formalise an approach that has been acceptable to the emergency management industry since the endorsement of the first version of the Public Safety Training Package.

Before exploring the skill set concept in further detail, the purpose of units of competency or competency standards must also be defined. In addition to the various working definition used by the VET sector, Phil Rutherford, a former member of the National Training Board (1993-1996) states that competency "standards provide a clear understanding of what each person or group must do in order to achieve business and strategic objectives at all levels of an organization – be it private or public sector." (Rutherford, 2006)

Further to Rutherford's broad definition of competency standards, he asserts that "competency standards are not, and never have been, written for the purpose of training. They describe the standards of work required in the workplace and if people can be fully or partially trained to this level then all well and good, but training is not their primary purpose." (Rutherford, 2006) This view has formed the underpinning philosophy adopted by EMSWG as part of the review of the emergency management qualification and competency standards. The implications for the emergency management sector include ensuring that the broad range of emergency management related roles, functions and tasks are captured during the review. These must then be validated and informed by the emergency management industry, that is an industry which has grown exponentially since 2000 to include organisations not previously seen as 'players' in the emergency management arrangements.

During the first round of national consultations undertaken by GSA partnership with EMSWG members, the list of organisations participating and/or contributing to a jurisdiction's emergency management capability appeared endless. The lists were consolidated at the conclusion of the consultative workshops and demonstrated that there is increased participation within the following sectors:

• Australian (Federal) Government agencies and departments

- Local government

- Essential services and critical infrastructure

- Recovery and welfare service organisations

- Large industries with significant emergency risks to workers and surrounding communities

(This is a summary of the groups of organisations identified by stakeholders and should not be construed as complete).

The key driver for the development of Skill Sets within endorsed training packages has been driven by industry. Geof Hawke, Senior Research Fellow with the Centre of Research in Learning and Change at the University of Sydney observed that in 2006 "governments agreed to employer demands to introduce 'skill sets' into the VET system. These will not be qualifications but "a way of publicly identifying … logical groupings of units of competency which meet an identified need or industry outcome." (Hawke, 2007) Such demands have come from a cross section of industries including those driven by the "resources boom", in addition to some not readily considered including the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC).

Jenny Ferber, Head of ABC Learning with the ABC stated that support for the Skill Sets approach was based upon "an increasing impatience with what is seen as the bureaucratic nature of the training system and an increasing urgency to acquire skills as the need emerges." (Ferber, 2007) The ABC draws upon the national training system for four key reasons, including "quality assurance through the Australian Qualifications Training Framework (AQTF); the establishment of agreed standards; the practical, hands-on skills; and the quality of trainers and assessors." (Ferber, 2007) These reasons are consistent with those of most public safety organizations and employers.

Margaret Kling, an Accredited Practitioner of the Australian Institute of Training Development, identified an added benefit for trainees are that "skill sets still constitute a pathway to a full qualification, as with any of SOA, if that is subsequently required." (Kling, 2007) This fact is important for the emergency management sector, with a single qualification accessed by a variety of pathways from a range of industries.

The development of Skill Sets within endorsed training packages has sparked passionate discussions regarding the role and place of qualifications. Skill Sets will not replace qualifications; rather provide pathways to them while supporting the immediate skills needs of industry. It is as this point that there may be a divided view of Skill Sets across all industries including those in the public safety sector. There are those industries and organisations that view qualifications as integral to not only strengthening workforce capability and succession planning, but also provide a balanced objective measure

to inform career advancement and performance management. There are other organisations that do not see the importance of qualifications in the same way, and remain focussed on ensuring that workers, paid and volunteer, can perform the requirements of their job to an agreed set of national standards.

On the subject of the importance of qualifications generally, Hawke notes that key reasons that support the belief that the level of qualifications in society is important include:

- "People with qualifications are more likely to be able to gain and keep a job.

- People with qualifications earn more over their lifetime than those who haven't.

- Having a qualification makes it easier for a person to move from employer to employer, especially in difficult economic times.

- People with qualifications are held in better regard and feel better about themselves.

- Gaining a qualification is an important way of encouraging people to continue to improve their knowledge and skills. It sets them on an upward path.

- Australia has fairly low skills base in contrast to its major competitors. We need to increase our level of skills in order to compete effectively.

He concludes by noting that based on his own research, and that of his colleagues, "only the first two of these beliefs are clearly supported by evidence. All of the rest are assertions that are not, in general, true. (Hawke, 2007)

Skill Sets will be developed and identified in endorsed training packages "where there is industry demand, national training qualifications will include identified skills clusters" (Cleary, 2007) from 2008 onwards. Initial reaction to the inclusion of Skill Sets by industry and the VET sector has been positive, as "the new skill sets are seen to provide an accepted and respected statement of attainment (SOA) which will be compete in its provision of skills related to the trainer's role and thereby remedy the precise issue many organizations have experienced." (Kling, 2007)

Many organizations, including those within the public safety sector, have openly supported the Skill Sets recommendation as a strategy to address the key skills shortages within industry. A unique example cited within the ABC case study cites specifically the areas of broadcast technology and in television production, where the ABC has "designed entry-level training programs to develop the precise skills we need." (Ferber, 2007) Within the public sector, the "SES sector has demonstrated a need for clusters of units that support particular job roles within volunteer ranks." (GSA/NETC, 2007)

Support for Skill Sets has been largely driven by the appearance of them being a logical approach to workforce capability development, the ABC case study indicates that "the backdrop for this whole issue is an increased emphasis in the ABC, as in other corporations, on general workforce capabilities and culture, rather than purely on technical and professional skills." (Ferber, 2007) Further, to make Skill Sets attractive to trainees and employees, "[the skills] have been mapped against qualifications from training packages and over time they will deliver graduates with complete qualifications. But the issue is not the qualification, it is the urgent need for skills." (Ferber, 2007)

The skills shortage issue is not as significant for the public safety industries as it is for the resources sector and that of the ABC as argued above, however volunteer public safety groups including the SES "have emphasized the changing nature of the SES sector and, in particular, the specific needs of volunteers while recognizing the importance to provide training that targets key skill areas based on job roles, rather than qualifications." (GSA/NETC, 2007) An outcome of the review of the PUA00 for the SES will be an agreed set of national Skill Sets that will provide a training pathway for new and existing volunteers to be trained and assessed to perform key roles more efficiently, thus training for role.

It is the sense of urgency for appropriate skilled emergency management personnel rather than the single qualification that will be among the key concepts for further consultation as part of the review of the PUA00. To avoid the development of Skill Sets on a 'whim' or to address short term need, the NQC have agreed to principles and protocols for the inclusion of Skill Sets in endorsed training packages.

## Principles and protocols

The following Principles and Protocols were developed in widespread consultation with stakeholders and provide guidance to Training Package developers in defining and developing skill sets in Training Packages.

### The three (3) principles for the development of Skill Sets include:

Principle 1: Skill sets should be considered by Training Package developers in the same way that units of competency and qualifications are. That means consideration must be given to logical clusters that meet the needs of an industry, or sector or specific part of the industry and have value in the workplace.

Principle 2: Target groups for all qualifications and skill sets should be clearly defined in the Training Package.

Principle 3: The identification and development of skill sets within Training Packages should increase, rather than decrease, available skill development options for individuals and enterprises. (Cleary, 2007)

### The five (5) protocols for the development of Skill Sets include:

Protocol 1: Consultation and validation must be undertaken to establish the extent of industry need for the skill set, just as it is required to establish demand for units of competency and qualifications.

Protocol 2: Consideration must be given to identifying clear relationships between skill sets or between skill sets and qualifications where this may be appropriate.

Protocol 3: The Training Package customisation and packaging guidelines must be designed to encourage the use of proposed unit combination(s).

Protocol 4: Identified skill sets should be noted within the Qualifications section of the Training Package. The relationship that identified skill sets may have with any of the qualifications in the Training Package should also be made clear.

Protocol 5: Where a Training Package developer considers a skill set should be constructed consisting of units across Training Packages consideration should be given to whether units should be imported or advice provided to Registered Training Organisations. (Cleary, 2007)

The key question challenging those involved in developing the direction and possible outcomes of the major review project is 'will the emergency management industry accept or discard formalised skill sets?' As outlined earlier in this paper, the sector has been wedded to skill sets by default since the initial endorsement of nationally endorsed training packages. Therefore, the key challenge is actually agreeing on a profile of nationally endorsed skill sets as an industry and informed not led by RTOs.

The approach agreed by the EMSWG at a combined workshop with representatives of the National Project Steering Committee (for the PUA00 review), was to seek feedback from the diverse emergency management industry for the purpose of identifying skill sets that reflect the work currently being undertaken within the sector. At the time of preparing this paper, the skill sets that had been identified at the first four national consultation workshops indicated overwhelming support for skill sets that articulate towards a qualification, that will remain as an 'end point' for the sector, while not being the only focus. The skill sets that were identified by industry in October 2007 will be validated and enhanced during the second round of national consultation workshops scheduled for April 2008.

If support from the emergency management industry for the skill set concept remains supportive, then the EMSWG is aware that the greatest challenge will always

be implementation by RTOs. Kling (2007) notes that "training organizations delivering the skill sets must have a clear understanding of how each skill set will transfer into the full qualification under the packaging rules. If this information is cumbersome, many (RTOs) will opt to stay with the full qualification and this will perhaps deepen the division of opinion even further (notwithstanding that organizations are making decisions based on their individual business needs)." This aspect is relatively simple for the emergency management sector, that has a single qualification within the PUA00 rather than a suite of qualifications spread across all AQF levels.

Skill sets are not an entirely new approach to training and assessment within the VET sector. The NQC (2007) noted that "some Training Packages have developed skill sets in the past, particularly by showing combinations of units which link to licence or regulatory requirements." For the emergency management sector, the COAG decision which identified "that by 31 December 2008 national training qualifications will include identified skills clusters where there is industry demand" provides an opportunity to review the structure of the qualification to ensure that the units of competency that make up the core and elective choices, articulate with the nationally agreed skill sets for the sector.

The EMSWG (2007) agreed at the combined July workshop that "it is important for the emergency management sector to develop accurate competency standards that may assist with workforce planning, recruitment and performance management processes within the industry as well as providing outcome statements for the development of learning and assessment strategies." (EMSWG, 2007) Discussion at this meeting also reflected "an increased emphasis on informal, just-in-time learning, individual exploration and sharing, both virtual and personal, over and above structured skills acquisition" that was the experience of many other industries. (Ferber, 2007)

At the conclusion of the first round of national consultation workshops (October 2007), the EMSWG were informed that "[some stakeholders] have expressed the need for clearer linkages between emergency management job roles and functions, the performance requirements involved for each and career pathways from one to another." (GSA/EMSWG, 2007) From this, it was further noted by the project team that "it may be possible to include some relevant information in the revised [Public Safety] Training Package in terms of the alignment of emergency management [related] skill sets and qualifications with job roles and functions." (GSA/EMSWG, 2007)

It appears that determining the structure and possible application of skills for the sector is straight forward if the EMSWG and stakeholders adhere to the agreed Principles and Protocols. The ultimate challenge will be the

implementation in partnership between industry and the RTOs. EMA is an example of an industry based RTO that has developed a learning and assessment pathway model that may facilitate the introduction of nationally agreed skill sets. Previous published research noted that "the fundamental rationale used by Emergency Management Australia (EMA) conforms to the main practices of experiential learning theory (ELT), where relatively abstract ideas, such as the need to plan for risk, are transformed into concrete experiences, experimentation and skills, which the participant can then understand even more fully upon subsequent reflection." (Kolb and Boyatziz, 2000 in March and Henry, 2007)

If the skill sets are packaged correctly to reflect job roles, and a logical grouping of units of competency, there is potential for all RTOs within the public safety sector to deliver and assess training that not only leads to a qualification, but provides industry with an individual who has the right skills for the job. The successful outcome must require an effective and acceptable learning and assessment model such as ELT to support the acquisition and application of these new skills. The EMA approach discussed above asserts that "participants leave the course having practised new and enhanced skills in a "safe" environment, as well has having challenged, and been challenged by, different ideas, points of view, and methodologies." (March and Henry, 2007) Such a model may just provide an insight for other RTOs to explore and possibly contextualise for their own client base.

The identification and validation of skill sets must be supported and informed by industry in partnership with subject matter experts and those involved in the delivery and assessment of the skill sets. Failure to do so at any stage of the major review project may result in a concept seen to date by many as a Godsend turning into a poisoned chalice.

## Conclusion

The emergency management sector is unique when compared to other sectors, in that it has very few defined, full time employees. While there has been a slight increase in the number of identifiable emergency management roles (particularly within local and State/Territory governments), they are generally aligned to other parts of an organizations business. Even this slight increase is a change that the EMSWG have identified as a driver for a new qualification structure supported by endorsed competency standards for the sector.

Other drivers that will inform the final recommendations (due in October 2008) have been supported by research and consultation completed within other sectors, that are not dissimilar to the emergency management sector when it comes to the actual implementation of vocational education and training at the enterprise or

industry level. An example of another driver that will inform the final recommendations of the EMSWG to the National Project Steering Committee include that "for the next decade or so, qualifications will not be quite the driving force for government policy that we have seen in the last 20 years." (Hawke, 2007)

While in terms of skill sets, that "will allow for several new and existing units to be combined in a "set" which will provide the relevant skills for certain types of trainer roles and allow many organizations access to better aligned, less costly (both in time and funds) and more relevant courses." (Kling, 2007)

When developing the consultation approach to review the individual units of competency, the EMSWG will need to remain aware that "[Employees, their managers, and workplace assessors] are key players in the recognition, quality and application of any standards of workplace competence but too often [Rutherford has been] told that they are neither consulted during the development of such standards not conferred with to ensure they are both understandable and useable." (Rutherford, 2006) A number of feedback mechanisms have already been identified and analysed to inform possible changes to the units of competency that will comprise the skill sets and ultimate the qualification.

The emergency management sector has, and always will, pride itself on having a well practiced approach to continuous improvement across the development of policies, plans, exercises/simulations and training. These elements of emergency management capability for jurisdictions and organizations have received an increase in their profile as a result of significant events and increases in government funding and interest. Australia's emergency management capability is well placed to be further strengthened by the incorporation of nationally agreed skill sets that will underpin the structure of its vocational qualification. It is time to return to the core principles of the vocational education and training system by focusing on training for role rather than for qualification, and to draw upon the experiences of other industries that may assist in the shaping of the next version of the Public Safety Training Package.

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