Management Development as Public Policy: Australia's Frontline Management Initiative (FMI) 1995–2002

Anne Rozario* and Ian Hampson**

Abstract

This is one of few empirical studies of the implementation of the Frontline Management Initiative. It is based on qualitative research in six Australian organizations. Arising from a 1990s policy view, represented by the Karpin Report, that Australia's competitive weakness was partly an outcome of poor management capabilities, the FMI was introduced in order to train first-line supervisors, who were seen as key in changing work practices. The FMI, however, suffered from the weaknesses in competence-based training (CBT), exacerbated by problems in the Australian National Training Framework. Lack of uniformity in curricula and standards, coupled with a fuzziness in defining frontline management, undermined this exercise in management development as public policy. Narrowly-specified outcomes did not deliver the claimed ease of assessment but undermined content. More fundamentally, 'unitarist' assumptions such as those underpinning the FMI are based on an inadequate understanding of workplace learning. Even the highly structured CBT approach cannot prevent learners from exploring their own interests and affirming their own counter- identity, in ways that may run counter to enterprise productivity.

Introduction

In Australia, in the 1990s, the skills of management were problematised by the poor performance and unethical behaviour of certain Australian businesses. Thus the Karpin report in 1995 recommended (among other things) competence-based training (CBT) for Australia's 'frontline' managers (formerly known as supervisors) (Karpin 1995a, 1995b, 1995c). The resulting training program was known as the 'Frontline Management Initiative', or FMI. Despite the ex-

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* Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, Canberra.
** The University of New South Wales.

tensive debates about CBT, there have been few critical empirical examinations of its application, especially to management development, at least in Australia. This article reports the results of PhD research covering the period 1996-2002 (Rozario 2004). The research examined the implementation of the FMI in six Australian organizations, using qualitative research methodology, in particular in-depth structured and semi-structured interviews. It also examined the effects of the much-criticised public training institutions on the implementation of the FMI. We argue that the weaknesses in CBT were exacerbated by problems in the Australian National Training Framework, and this undermined management development as public policy.

Section one briefly canvasses the critique of CBT, and thus questions the decision of Australian policy makers to opt for CBT as the central training technology of the new system. The inherent difficulties of conceptualizing the 'frontline' management process and therefore applying CBT to it only add to these concerns. Section two locates the origins of the FMI in the 'politics of reform' in the early 1990s. It sketches the failures of training reform, in particular widespread and well founded concerns over exploitation of trainees and compromised assessment practices. Section three shows how the implementation of frontline management training was corrupted by flawed training institutions. Section four turns in more detail to the implementation of the FMI in the specific organizations under study. Key problems specified in the previous sections are followed through to the case study organizations, where they mesh with some familiar issues of organizational politics. Despite a generally unfavourable picture emerging from 'inside the frontline', the Government and key stakeholders paint a rosy picture of outcomes.

Competence-Based Training and Management Skill

This section argues that the attempt to apply competence-based training and assessment to management development is inherently very difficult for two reasons: first, the contested and problematic nature of CBT itself, and second, the contested nature of management work and the skills needed to perform it. Taken together, these two factors made it very difficult to achieve the stated public policy goals of the FMI: to draw up and apply lists of competencies that are at once generic and enterprise specific, and to spur management learning in organizations with the aim of improving organizational effectiveness and, of course, national competitiveness.

CBT is primarily:

> a form of assessment that is derived from the specification of a set of outcomes that so clearly states both the outcomes — general and specific — that assessors, students and interested third parties can all make reasonably objective judgements with respect to student achievement or non-achievement of these outcomes Wolf (1995: 1).

The claimed advantages of this *behavioural* approach are attractive: unproblematic, 'tick the box' assessment, by generically skilled assessors. But critics argue that the precision with which competencies are specified is misleading.

The behaviours that sum to a competent performance are far too complex to be captured in this way, even for lower-order tasks (Wolf 1995: 24, 109, 115, passim; Ashworth and Saxton 1990). And while there may be different ways to perform any given work task, the form taken by competency standards often seems to assume that there is only one single model of competent performance (Wolf 1995: 17). These points apply with particular force to more highly skilled work, in particular management work. Crucially, much of the educationist literature critical of CBT suggests that the process of specifying training outcomes in the form of behavioural learning objectives, which advocates present as an ultimate virtue of CBT (e.g. Tovey 1997), is *educationally* unsound. While the attention of trainers and students is undoubtedly focussed on the outcomes to be achieved, this can distract from broader, conceptual and 'incidental' learning, for instance about the principles underlying a particular 'competency' (Wolf 1995: 85–86). As later critics would point out, CBT was chosen for Australia more for its claimed industrial properties, as a skill recognition and assessment technology, than for its pedagogical appropriateness (Ewer and Ablett 1996). In any case, educationist expertise was explicitly excluded from the commanding heights of the training reform institutions (Cornford 2000; SEWRS-BERC 2000).

An alternative concept of 'competence' defines the latter as consisting of *attributes*, that cause superior job performance (e.g. Spencer and Spencer 1993). The existence of these attributes is *inferred* from performance and/or through psychometric testing, rather than (allegedly) directly observed in behaviour (Hagar and Gonzi 1993: 38). This is, of course, a rather more difficult process, which loses the claimed advantages of behavioural assessment — transparency and simplicity. Further, as Hagar (1995: 143) argued, assessing attributes apart from work practice bears little relation to actual work performance, when expertise is context-dependent and domain-specific. Thus Hagar advocated an 'integrated' concept of competence, in which both performance and 'complex combinations of attributes (knowledge, skills, attitudes) underpin occupational performance' (1995: 143). According to Cornford, the problem with this is that the introduction of cognitive and affective elements has meant a loosening up of what were, conceptually, very tightly defined criteria of performance under the old, behavioural approach. It makes assessment difficult, without changing the linguistic format that makes unproblematic assessment a legitimate expectation (Cornford 1997: 54). It conflicts with the requirement that competency standards 'define performance outcomes required by the industrial parties … [and] … *be assessable in practice*' (NTB 1991: 10 emphasis added).

Although ease of assessment is a claimed advantage of CBT, it remains an ongoing problem. Objectivity of assessment, crucial for perceptions of transferability and equity, depends on the competence of assessors themselves in two senses: that assessors are competent in the process of assessment *itself, and* that they are competent in what they are assessing (Mann 1993; Loan-Clarke 1996, c.f. Rozario 2004: 31). Those who depend on the assessments need to have confidence in both, if assessments are to be seen as credible. Making as-

sessments *consistent*, within and across organizations, is also inherently difficult (Proctor and Powney, 1991) requiring immersion in a social milieu — assessors need to talk to each other. Thus assessment is a *social* process, and the impression of individual assessors rating individual trainees against objective 'criterion referenced' standards is misleading (Wolf 1995: 96-99; Ashworth and Saxton 1990: 6; Norris 1991: 331–2, also cf. Lave and Wenger 1991).

We turn now from assessment to that which is assessed — the nature of management skill. The classical approach to management — the view that there exists a set of general management principles, knowledge and skills — has considerable resonance with the competency-based approach to management development. Both draw up allegedly 'universal', or at least very widely applicable, lists that purport to capture the 'essence' of management like planning, organizing, commanding, coordinating, and controlling (Fayol 1949). Against this, as Stewart (1983: 96–97) states:

> The picture that emerges from studies of what managers do is of someone who lives in a whirl of activity, in which attention must be switched from one subject, problem and person to another, of an uncertain world … and a picture of managers who, increasingly as they ascend the managerial ladder, live in a political world where they must learn how to influence people … how to manoeuvre … In short, it is a much more human activity than commonly suggested in management textbooks.

This view of management work is now dominant (e.g. see Mintzberg 1973: 28–53; Mintzberg 1975; Kotter 1982: 59–60; Luthans *et al.* 1988). It is implausible that management work so conceived would be able to be encoded into behavioural competency standards. The attribute model may have a better chance of capturing the underlying personal characteristics of successful managers, but once again at the cost of assessment difficulties.

Kotter (1982: 85) argues that managers do engage in 'universal' processes, like planning and organizing, but that these universal processes manifest themselves in different ways in different contexts. But Whitley (1989) questions the very notion of skills that are transferable between different management contexts. It is not our task to resolve this difficult question here. The point here is that this unresolved tension worked its way into the FMI. The conception of transferable competencies underpinned the idea of applying competency-based training to management development. But on the other hand, the Karpin report also argued that the competencies should be directly applicable to the enterprise (see below). We will now examine the genesis of the FMI.

Genesis and Context: The Failure of Training Reform

In 1991, a number of government reports argued that sections of Australian management were performing below international standards, in part due to low levels of training and education (EPAC 1991; Callus *et al.* 1991: 99, also see ACTU/TDC 1987). Thus was formed, in 1992 the Industry Task Force on Leadership and Management Skills (the Karpin committee) to inquire into measures 'to strengthen management development and business leadership within

Australian enterprises' (Karpin 1995a: vii). The inquiry was stacked with senior business people, consultants and business school academics, with minimal union representation, and the perspective it took was therefore predictable. The chair, David Karpin, famously asserted that 'we need to create a culture in which we revere and foster our business and industry leaders in the same way we do our sporting heroes' (Karpin 1995d: 10; 1995b: 202).

The Karpin report implicitly deflected responsibility for economic performance away from senior management and government policy, and onto 'frontline managers'. *Education*[2] was seen as more appropriate for the former, *training* for the latter (Karpin 1995a: 33). Accordingly the report recommended an immediate introduction of a National Certificate of Workplace Leadership to be undertaken by some 80,000 supervisors over the next five years. The resulting training program was to be known as the 'Frontline Management Initiative', or FMI. It would be delivered through a reformed Technical and Further Education (TAFE) sector and a greatly expanded role for private training providers. The National Certificate in Workplace Leadership would be integrated into the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) to ensure articulation with other programs (Karpin 1995a: 285–6, 370), and would employ competence-based training — the centrepiece of training reform. The training would be funded by the Commonwealth Government, under the principles of 'User Choice' (see below). In short, the FMI would be integrated with the reformed national training system.

Serious conflict over industrial relations institutions and practices (mis-) shaped training reform. Labour-oriented reformers sought to implement a system in which robust skill recognition procedures would underpin transferable qualifications, and to which employers would contribute financially. The desired system would recognize hitherto unrewarded skill, and enhance labour mobility and hence bargaining power with employers (e.g. see Ewer *et al.* 1991). This required a strong regulatory regime, and employer cooperation, neither of which was forthcoming in the industrial politics of the 1980s and 1990s. The Government was also keen on training and industrial relations reform, but was influenced more by an employer agenda. Big business successfully resisted the intrusion of 'third parties' — be they unions or public training institutions — into what they saw as an area of management prerogative. In 1993, big business secured the right to develop, train and assess firm-specific 'enterprise standards' within the emerging *national* system. In addition, the industrial relations reform agenda converged on 'enterprise bargaining'. Thus the centralization necessary for a truly national system of training to operate, to ensure uniformity of curricula and qualifications, was opposed — effectively — by big business (Hampson 2002, 2004; Ewer *et al.* 1991).

This 'first phase' of training reform was widely acknowledged to have failed by 1993, including by the relevant federal minister, who put in place a review process. The review conducted by the Allen Consulting Group (1994) was scathing of the bureaucratic nature of the reformed training institutions, which had prevented business 'having ownership' of the reforms. It thus recommended deregulation and marketisation. In the proposed new system, employers and

employees would jointly decide on the purchase of recognised, off the job training in a training market (p. iv) (a mechanism known as 'User Choice'). The review also affirmed support for the goal of accredited training, portable 'to the maximum extent possible' (pp. iii–iv, 35–37). But this raised profound problems of recognition:

> No one is clear about how far a national course can be varied in content to meet the specific needs of an enterprise, while retaining integrity as a course leading to a qualification (p. 25).

Under the Liberal/National Coalition, training marketisation proceeded and the institutional machinery necessary to ensure the integrity of assessment and training quality was further degraded. Liberal party election materials promised to 'ensure that industry plays a central role in driving the national training agenda and that training more closely reflects industry needs [and to] replace the existing arrangements with an industry and enterprise driven training system.' (Liberal Party of Australia 1996: 11–16; also see Kemp 1996: 9). The new arrangements were known collectively as the 'National Training Framework' (NTF).

The main elements of the new system were training packages, national assessment arrangements, and the Australian Recognition Framework (ARF). Training packages contain competency standards (developed in ITABs and endorsed by the Standards and Curriculum Council), and guidelines as to how the competency standards can be assessed and combined into qualifications, whilst adhering to the structures of the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF). But training packages contain no curricula. Importantly, qualifications could be issued irrespective of how they were attained, i.e. irrespective of the type of training, indeed they also come with suggested Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) procedures. The FMI was arguably one of the first training packages to be developed. One interviewee portrayed the FMI as something new and radical, that was not a training program as such, but a 'broad deregulated framework of competencies, of assessment protocols and with the quality assurance being provided through the qualifications structures of the FMI' (Rosario 2004).

Under the new system, Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) were the main agencies responsible for delivery and assessment. State Training Authorities (STAs) registered these organisations. After registration, they were audited only infrequently, and were entrusted with the responsibility to 'self assess'. Employers and RTOs would decide what training and assessment procedures were best suited to their particular needs, within a financial framework characterised by wage subsidies, starting and completion payments determined by the Federal Government. Employers would not be limited to the public sphere (i.e. TAFEs) as to their choice of training provider, but a plethora of private providers would spring up into the market, fertilized by government subsidies and incentive payments. Further flexibility would be provided by the ability to customize the training packages, and minimising employers' obligations to pay for training at the workplace.

Institutionalised conflicts of interest plagued the system. New Apprenticeship Centres (NACs) were established in 1998 to provide employers with 'one stop' integrated support services (ANTA 1998f). They would administer the Commonwealth's incentive program, help define training arrangements that best suit employers' and trainees' needs, and assist with developing and registering a training agreement. State Governments regulated the training agreements and the provision of training, while the Federal Government provided incentives to the employer and funded the NACs. The NACs are paid a fee for each placement, and are profit driven, as are the RTOs. NACs provide referrals to RTOs, some of which have financial linkages to the referring NAC which some might see as improper. Indeed, some NACs and even some employers have attained status as RTOs, who both deliver and assess training (Rozario 2004: 141).

From 1998 the quality of training began to emerge as a political issue. The Labor opposition attacked the Government, quoting anecdotal stories of taxpayer-funded 'trainees' in some cases not setting eyes on a trainer or assessor, yet being issued with qualifications. Inquiries in some State jurisdictions (Queensland, Victoria, NSW) and a Senate inquiry made similar findings. The reports found that the 'obvious' conflicts of interests that RTOs, performing the two functions of training and assessing in a competitive marketised situation find themselves, naturally gave rise to unethical practices, including issuing faulty qualifications, and even fraud (SEWRSBERC 2000: xxvi; Schofield, 1999a, 1999b, 2000).

Apart from the incentives built into the institutions themselves, the competence of trainers and assessors also affected quality. There are two interrelated issues here. The first is whether trainers and assessors are themselves proficient in the arts of training and assessment. The NTF required that training must be delivered by a person who has all the competencies to a Certificate IV level from the Training Package for Assessment and Workplace Training, or who is under the supervision of someone with those competencies. But in practice, some training providers used non-specialist training staff, with little formal training in training and little understanding of national competency standards, for internal training purposes (Smith *et al.* 2002: 61; Rozario 2004: 153), although the extent of this practice has not been thoroughly researched and while cheaper, it is probably illegal (ANTA 2001: 17). Importantly, and this is the second point, according to NTF documentation, a person delivering and assessing training should be able to demonstrate vocational competencies at least to the level of those being trained. This is a common sense point, if often ignored — if you are showing someone how to do something, you should know how to do it yourself first, especially if you are going to assess their proficiency. The Schofield report found that it was a major problem that 'generically trained assessors … make judgements about the workplace application of specific skills without an appreciation of context.' (Schofield 1999b: 6). Problems are bound to arise when assessors have little understanding of the work process which they are training or assessing beyond that conveyed in competency standards (Robertson and Harford 2000).[3]

The FMI as Public Policy: The Politics of Implementation

Previous sections have noted academic debates over the existence or otherwise of generic managerial skill. The Karpin inquiry reproduced both sides of the controversy, thus giving rise to an impossible implementation task, arguing that 'there be a definition, development, maintenance and promotion of flexible management competencies *for use in all industries*, … by managers operating at *all* levels.' (Karpin 1995a: 38, emphasis added). Yet the Report also questioned the very *existence* of generic management skills. '*If* there are generic competencies in the practice of management these *may* lie in the soft skills area, but many other skills that an effective manager needs are industry and company specific … [thus] any intervention that the state considers for improving management skills must recognise the *contingent nature* of these skills' (Karpin 1995b: 29, emphasis added). The definition of competencies "is not a role for government, but should be driven by the enterprises themselves" (Karpin 1995a: 32, cf. BCA 1990). Karpin stated:

> the Task Force does not think it would be appropriate to be more prescriptive as to what form these competencies might take in specific industries and enterprises, nor to suggest what priorities might be placed across the various areas by any particular enterprise (Karpin 1995b: 137–138).

The initial FMI documentation, therefore, is deeply confused as to whether generic management skills exist, and whether, if they exist, they can be codified by external agencies into competency standards and whether, if they exist and can be codified, enterprises should take notice of them anyway. This is a difficult brief for an agency charged with implementing a national training program in management skills.

The new Conservative government inherited the implementation process of the FMI. The previous Labor government had set up a National Reference Group, operating under the auspices of ANTA, to implement the management development strategy proposed by the Karpin Committee (Quirk 1997; ANTA 1998a: 7; Rozario 2004: 112–3). This reference group identified 11 generic frontline management competencies, which were endorsed in 1996. The competencies were designed to fit into the existing qualification structure, and FMI qualifications were available at levels 3, 4 and 5, the latter a Diploma in Frontline Management. ANTA specified 5 core units (essential for any organization), and 6 that could be taken optionally (see Rozario 2004: 113, and 381–2). Different levels of qualification contained the same competencies that could be assessed at an appropriate level (more rigorously for higher qualifications), thus raising the difficulty of differentiating levels. Importantly, it was up to the training provider to decide whether the requirements of the FMI have been met in order to award a qualification (Rozario 2004: 115). But as argued above, combining the roles of assessment and delivery within the one organisation in a competitive market, contains a natural tendency to erode training quality. The training packages did not specify curricula, teaching strategies, or assessment procedures. This would give enterprises considerable scope to shape training practice to the 'needs of the enterprise', potentially at the expense of portability and transferability.

As mentioned above, ANTA was the body charged with the implementation of the FMI, and the official line claims success. However, behind the scenes and contradicting official rhetoric, officials involved in the implementation group were expressing grave doubts about the process, which was marked by controversy and conflict over key aspects. Importantly, there was major disagreement over the appropriateness of CBT for Australian managers, over the origins of the frontline management competencies (that is, the mechanisms by which they were evolved), the rationale behind the designation of some competencies as core and electives, and the reactions to the competencies of various stakeholders, especially employers.

As described above, the formation of the FMI was taking place just when the newly elected Coalition Government was foreshadowing and proposing major changes to the training system, in particular an acceleration of marketisation. Central to these changes was the formation of 'training packages', which bore a remarkable resemblance to the FMI — but for one thing. The competency standards that were the backbone of the FMI were not developed by an ITAB, but by ANTA itself, through numerous workshops and so on. Thus, *business was not involved directly in the development of the competencies.* One official expressed concern that ANTA had taken upon itself to decide what competencies were central to an organization, and which were peripheral (Rozario 2004: 120). This gave a perfect reason for business to be uncooperative, or selectively cooperative. Also, as one official explained:

> I think what happened to the FMI was it built up a head of steam, and then it just died and this is a public policy failure … they (ANTA) stuffed around how they were going to put it into the public domain, they put out a kit which was inadequate, hopeless … they had those pilots running. It all ran on far too long, then by the time Prentice Hall got it they took six months to negotiate a contract, and then another seven or eight months to actually publish the materials .. it's not moving fast in the market as they expected because the impetus was lost (Senior Manager, TAFE, in Rozario 2004: 119).

Some ANTA officials claim that the task of developing the FMI competencies naturally fell to ANTA, because it was a body without a vested interest in the outcome, unlike various components of the huge Australian management training and development industry. However, others claim that, quietly, ANTA was setting the scene to divest itself of the FMI, because the FMI was obviously going to fail. In 1998, ANTA washed its hands of the FMI, transferring it to Business Services Training Australia (BSTA — the Business Services ITAB). Officials there, although seemingly happy to have taken the program over, expressed hints of reticence. In the words of one official, '… it's probably not how we would have designed it…' (Rozario 2004: 119). Thus, if the FMI is seen to have failed, both parties are well placed to point the finger at each other, thus accountability falls to neither — from one point of view, a desirable outcome of inter-institutional politics.

The impossible task of FMI implementation was to prescribe generic frontline management competencies, to support the transferability of skill and qual-

ifications, but at the same time to make the program sufficiently relevant to individual enterprises so they will be attracted to it. As one senior manager remarked, the prescriptive nature of the competencies, and the way they are embedded in the national training reforms, was highly undesirable.

> … there's just too much bureaucracy attached to it [FMI] … the whole system is very confusing. An organization that has no experience with the bureaucracy and the whole system would just be confounded by it, and I think at the end of the day they would just walk away from it, because it just doesn't suit their requirements … This is where the reform agenda has missed the point … the thing about national standards and that sort of stuff … because to be quite honest our corporation doesn't really give a damn about national standards. We've dabbled with national standards because it's been convenient … To be quite honest we've got a certain set of needs, some of them coincide with national interests but a lot of them don't and so why would we spend money getting our guys nationally accredited in things we really don't need to be nationally accredited in? (Senior Manager, Public Sector, in Rozario 2004: 121).

Implementation of the FMI in the Case Study Organisations

To examine the impact of the NTF arrangements on the design, delivery and implementation of the FMI, the study adopted a multiple case design using a combination of interviews and questionnaires in six organisations over the period 1998–2003. For confidentiality these are referred to as Health Service A, Health Service B, Regulatory Department, Government Operations, Area Hospital and Policy Department[4]. In total, 138 FMI participants were surveyed, of which 66 individuals and 9 senior managers were interviewed. Sixty-three interviews were also conducted with individuals, mainly policy makers, from institutions such as ANTA, Business Services Training Australia[5] and Technical and Further Education (TAFE) colleges, with the aim of delving into reasons for various policy decisions.

Although the six organisations differed in their rationale for introducing the FMI program, organisational needs, rather than those of trainees, were foremost in their consideration. Implementation was similar, with all organisations (apart from Policy Department) customising the FMI to their needs, and without *direct* links to strategic HR practice such as performance appraisals and promotions, although being chosen for FMI training was itself a promotion pathway. Participants in all the organisations had some access to study leave and time for the work-based assignments during normal working times, including all costs for resourcing and accrediting the program. However, the time available was usually too little, and the gathering of information for RPL procedures inevitably spilled over into employees' private lives. Finally, in some case study organisations (Health Service A, Health Service B and Government Operations) employees from different occupational levels ranging from non-managers, frontline to middle managers, underwent FMI training.

As mentioned above, the Karpin Committee's pronouncements were saturated with managerialist and unitarist rhetoric, in particular a sense that the interests of senior and middle/lower management, employees and the broader community were 'really' the same. Building the 'competencies' of frontline managers was crucial to the competitiveness of the country and the enterprise. It would also contribute to individual development, mobility and employability, by recognising graduates as motivated, enterprising individuals. But the interests of organizational members may diverge markedly, and organizational reality may be beset by conflicting interests, power plays, and petty human foibles — not to mention the broader structural lineaments of power.

One important manifestation of unitarism was the emphasis on 'workplace learning', a.k.a. 'organisational learning', 'self-directed learning' and so on (ANTA 1998a, 1998b, 1998c), which was seen as a 'paradigm shift' (e.g. Varpins 1996: 162; Ellerington 1998: 180). Such rhetoric promises learners control over the pace, timing and indeed the content of learning. However, the plausibility of the workplace learning ideology, like all forms of enterprise training, depends on concrete management support in the form of resources, without which it tends to become one more task added to, what is likely to be in Australia *post-'reform'*, a workplace with little 'idle' time. In addition, the 'unitarist' take on workplace learning fails to register the ways in which 'learning' may *dis*advantage the firm, by enabling employees to advance their own interests in various ways at the expense of enterprise productivity, for example, by withholding information, taking breaks when they know they will be undetected, and so on. Importantly, learning often resolves into a contest over *identity* (Lave and Wenger 1991). Individual organizational members might counterpose their own notions of identity to those of the 'enterprising self' promoted in the FMI.

Perceptual Dissonance and Uncertainty

Dissonance between the perceptions of senior management and the FMI participants was a constant theme of the research findings. The majority of participants felt compelled to do the program, having been 'nominated' or instructed to do it. Being '*told*' to do the FMI was often taken to mean that individuals were 'not performing' well in their jobs. Interestingly, senior managers were more likely to believe that nominating an individual to the FMI sent a clear signal that the particular employee had potential to move upwards within the organisation. Contradicting unitarist 'workplace learning' rhetoric, in all organisations senior managers kept a tight rein on who would undergo FMI training at each level, and the choice of competency units. The Head of Government Operations stated:

> We ask them [employees] to choose the units they want to do, but we have also asked them to choose wisely and asked them to justify why they have chosen them. It's up to them. But we still scrutinise that and say — look, hang on a minute, maybe you might be better off doing this one [competency unit] in the job that you are doing. But in the first instance they get to choose what units they do (Rozario 2004: 209).

There was a high level of uncertainty and confusion regarding the nature of the FMI program among participants, even though the FMI had been implemented in all the case study organisations for more than a year. Participants expressed doubts regarding the purpose of frontline management competencies and how these related to their work. The general FMI program, including CBT and the language of the FMI was very difficult for a majority of participants (67 per cent) to understand. Sixty two per cent perceived the 'descriptions of some competencies to be vague'. Also the general process of CBT itself, its application, relevance to their jobs, the nature of evidence to be collected to demonstrate competence, the fact that some participants were not managers and some frontline managers did not manage other staff, and unclear assessment procedures (which we examine below) – were opaque to many, and took time (Rozario 2004: 205). Middle managers from Health Service A were especially critical stating:

> The nature of the course is bizarre and requires a high degree of involvement from above and below. Takes time and is questionable in its value. The jargon '*it's only what you are already doing*' is an oxymoron! If this is what we are doing i.e. collecting and collating evidence for hours, how do we get anything at all achieved at the end of each month/year? (emphasis added) (Rozario 2004: 205)

Other managers in Health Service B seemed to agree with the view, 'you will hear CBT, PDPs, FMI — these acronyms bandied about, but no one is really clear about what they stand for.' (Frontline manager, Health Service B) (Rozario 2004: 206). Training providers too voiced some reservations relating to the actual 'language' of the frontline management standards:

> I think rewording — it really needs to be [written in] plain English. I can't understand why a program that's aimed at people between secondary and higher tertiary level is so difficult to understand. I think I'm of reasonable intelligence and I find it hard. I found it with all of the VET stuff. I have to sit and read things half a dozen times to work out what they are trying to do and I keep thinking, 'well I know I'm not stupid', but how can I expect staff who don't have my level of education to be picking these packages up and trying to work out what they want, they are just terrible. The whole thing … seems to be designed to confuse. (Learning and Development Manager and In-House Trainer, Health Service A) (Rozario 2004: 206).

Training Mechanisms

The choice of training mechanisms was another area where the gulf between unitarist rhetoric, which stressed flexible delivery of training catering to the needs of all employees and the reality of practice was marked. The case study organisations implemented the FMI through traditional training and development activities such as 'on-the-job training' (82 per cent) and 'seminars/workshops' (79 per cent). The number of participants from different sections of the organisation, made it unlikely that training could be tailored to every participant. A generic CBT program was more cost-effective, because of the ease of

access and the added advantage that learning and training was situated in workplaces (implicitly under the control of senior managers). Individual differences in learning styles, their expectations and consequent responses were generally not considered when designing the delivery of the FMI. In addition, the heavy reliance on RPL mechanisms was time consuming, and conflicted with other time demands at work, often leading to 'spillover' to the employees' own time.

Mentoring and coaching, supposedly effective developmental training strategies (see ANTA, 1998a, 1998c, 1998e) were the least used in organisations. Some respondents from Health Service B and Regulatory Department believed that '… having a good mentor would have been more effective than the FMI program.' (Rozario 2004: 211). This was because working with an 'effective' manager on a day-to-day basis would provide more 'regular contact' and opportunities to gain feedback on their performance. While senior management believed that "it would be excellent if all middle and senior managers got involved in the mentoring process" (senior HR manager, Regulatory Department) — it was also recognised that most managers would not make good, or desirable, mentors. Health Service A considered mentoring and coaching to be somewhat ineffective activities mainly because the managers considered suitable were either not interested or lacked the time; while the managers who wanted to be mentors were not perceived by the organisation as being 'suitable' role models (Rozario 2004: 212).

Quality Assurance and the Delivery of Training

Quality assurance was a persistent problem with FMI implementation, reflecting the failures of institutional design described in previous sections. There were three issues here: trainee access to trainers, knowledge and competence of trainers and assessors in the material they were training and assessing, and, relatedly, the quality of assessment procedures themselves. As to access, trainer interaction with FMI participants was kept to a minimum. In Area Hospital and Health Services A and B, the trainer had face-to face-contact with participants only once every two months. Workshops on specific subjects were conducted if there was a perceived need. All the participants in the case study organisations were expected to telephone the trainer in case of problems in assignments. Not surprisingly, many participants admitted to bypassing the trainer and trying to "figure out the difficulty" themselves by enlisting the aid of friends and work supervisors (Rozario 2004: 214).

As to trainer knowledge and competence, trainers and/or managers acting as work-based assessors need to have a good understanding of the organisational context in order to be seen as 'credible' in the eyes of FMI participants. Of the 60 per cent of participants who were critical of assessments, 53 per cent queried the 'ability' of trainers to correctly judge and assess their competencies, in part because trainers were seen to lack an in-depth knowledge of an organisation's functions, its operational needs, its infrastructure and particularly the detailed roles of management . Part of the problem was that trainers

were seen as lacking understanding and knowledge of *public* sector organisations (in this study, of the six organisations investigated five were in the public sector, with only Area Hospital being a private organisation) (Rozario 2004: 218). The FMI was perceived to be oriented towards private organisations and this raises questions of how well a program developed on commercial principles can be adopted successfully for public sector use (Stewart and Ranson 1988; Pollitt 1990; Cunningham 1994 and Boyett and Currie 2001). A frontline manager from Regulatory Department stated:

> A public sector organisation works along quite different lines to a private sector company. For one we are a service — public service organisation — we are not necessarily profit motivated. We are geared more towards the community, but the trainer did not seem to consider this (Rozario 2004: 219).

Some training providers, perhaps understandably, only instructed in topics with which they had an affinity. Managers in Health Service B, Regulatory Department and Policy Department made several references to trainers who disregarded topics that they considered unimportant for the participants (even though there were part of the course). As a result of perceptions of poor quality training, one client (Policy Department) withdrew its custom, leading to the whole FMI program being scrapped. The training delivered by the RTO was considered to be mediocre and 'several trainees had complained about the relevance of the training.' (Manager, Policy Department) (Rozario 2004: 216).

As to the quality of assessment, this is shaped by the institutional environment in which assessment is conducted. At the national level, as described earlier, the NTF expects RTOs to monitor their own training activities (and to 'self assess'), whilst giving them significant incentives to behave unethically. Trainers train, assess and issue qualifications with few external controls and this has left the system open to abuse, contributing to lowering of standards and the quality of training (Schofield 1999a, 199b, 2000; SEWRSBERC 2000). The FMI Assessor's Guide (ANTA 1998d: 18) lays down strong assessment requirements for the award of 'competence'. This includes: relevance (whether the evidence of skills and knowledge relate to the competency being assessed), currency (the competency can still be performed to the required standards), authenticity (participant has actually completed the learning that is being claimed), quality (learning has reached the required AQF outcome), precision (evidence closely meets the competency identified) and rigour (underpinning knowledge, skills and understanding have the required depth). However, the extent to which practice conforms to these high ideals is questionable.

A particular assessment challenge derives from inadequate differentiation between the AQF levels of competence. All the management competencies at the differing FMI AQF levels have identical terminology, and this presents practical problems not only in ' differentiating managers between the levels.' (Learning and Development Manager, Health Service A) in terms of their roles and responsibilities, but also in accurately assessing the complexity of tasks performed at each level. Trainers in Health Service B, Area Hospital, Regulatory Department and Government Operations did not follow some of the guide-

lines of the FMI, as they allowed participants to progress from a lower AQF level to higher levels without testing competencies separately at the higher level as required. In order to gain an AQF 4 certificate, according to the documentation, *all* the competencies (acquired at level 3) should be reassessed at the higher level. In all the case study organisations, with the exception of Health Service A where all the participants are undertaking the FMI at the highest AQF level 5, participants could gain a higher level qualification and only be assessed in the *new* units of competency at that higher level, escaping the need for reassessment on the others. In fact 10 per cent of participants in this study had already progressed from AQF 3 to AQF 4 in this fashion. Such practices cast further doubt on whether FMI qualifications really reflect the learning, knowledge, skills, understanding and competency that they claim (Rozario 2004: 215–220, ch. 7, passim).

Perhaps unsurprisingly it was found that a majority of FMI participants (60 per cent) criticised the *quality of assessments*, in particular for a 'lack of rigour' of FMI-related assignments and project work. Individuals from Health Service B and Regulatory Hospital were particularly forthcoming in their negativity. According to them. '… every assignment received high marks', even when they 'felt' they didn't deserve such marks. The outstanding comments participants received for their assignments were not seen to be a reflection of their ability and competence in certain areas but appeared to be rather a reflection of an *'intellectually undemanding'* program and an '*easy marking*' trainer. A frontline manager (Regulatory Department) perceptively argued:

> You were told you were competent in assignments, but you never knew what you did to make you competent in the assignment (Rozario 2004: 217, ch. 7).

Skills Acquisition and Instrumentalism

It was acknowledged that the FMI may well facilitate participants' careers *within* the organisation, albeit not because they had acquired new skills. Frontline managers from Health Service B, Area Hospital and Regulatory Department made explicit references to the benefits of the FMI to their careers even though they do not necessarily believe in its intrinsic value. A frontline manager from Regulatory Department observed:

> I can use the FMI to gain leverage in promotions. I have sat on some promotion panels and HR people were quizzing these hopefuls on management competencies. Well, if this is going to be the focus of promotion panels, I can definitely use the FMI to my advantage (Rozario 2004: 191).

Another frontline manager from Area Hospital commented, 'To be truthful I didn't think it added anything of specific value to my practice as a manager. But one must be seen to be 'always doing things' in this Organisation.' (Rozario 2004: 192).

Most participants (68 per cent) were not convinced that the FMI would be very useful in 'transferring' skills across industries, or that it would help them

with careers *outside* their current organisation. On the other hand, 40 per cent of respondents believed that the FMI had changed their experience of work from 'quite a lot' to 'a great extent'. These individuals mentioned that previously they were not aware of how the different parts of the organisation related to each other or even the implications of their own functions for the organisation at large. A frontline manager from Regulatory Department also commented that the FMI had made her more cognisant of her work, "I feel that this FMI course has broadened my horizon in my approach to the management of issues within my daily workload, and management of teams." For the non-managers and frontline managers from Government Operations and Area Hospital, the FMI gave them the opportunity to increase their knowledge and learning about issues at an organisational level even though they may not have been able to use this learning and knowledge in their current jobs (Rozario 2004, ch. 6, passim).

Transforming Managerial Identity?

The FMI outlines what is expected of 'high performing frontline managers' (ANTA 1998b: 1), and thus seeks to create and sustain managerial identities tied to distinctive ways of thinking, interacting and valuing (Reid 2001). Frontline managers in the FMI texts are discursively constructed as enterprising and strategic managers, leaders, coaches and creators of best practice (Mulcahy 2001). Workplace learning thus becomes a mechanism for senior management to instil the organisational culture and to ensure that frontline managers become 'good managers' — that is, 'managers like us'. Enterprising managers are not encouraged to doubt or question, but are rewarded in several ways through promotions and secondments for conforming to the dominant culture. The FMI seemed to have a powerful effect in forming and managing perceptions and judgements regarding individuals' attitudes and abilities, in particular 'cooperativeness', which can then implicitly determine their future progress through the hierarchy. As one manager put it:

> The FMI will play an impact through performance and rewards when people go for interviews. It will be recognised totally within the company as showing initiative, self-starting ability … I think that demonstrated 'willingness to learn' will always aid in people's promotion generally speaking. So while doing the FMI will not give you the job definitely, it demonstrates to any panel that you have a willingness to stretch yourself *a little bit further* (Senior Manager, Regulatory Department, emphasis added) (Rozario 2004: 189).

Possession of FMI qualifications may also act as a signal that employees have transferable skills, and thus be effective outside the organisation — irrespective of whether the qualifications do really indicate the possession of such competencies, or whether the skills are transferable as opposed to bound to their current organisation (Hirsch & Jackson 1996). Graduates may be more employable due to the possession of the qualification — if not the skills themselves.

Success by Numbers?

The FMI is depicted as a success by policymakers, largely on the basis of increasing participation (ANTA 1998a, 1998b; Barratt-Pugh & Soutar 2002). The *increase* in the number of FMI users allegedly supports and is part of the overall claimed success of the broader NTF. But when FMI statistics are presented by FMI advocates, interestingly the data include *all* FMI enrolments but no attrition rates. Of a total of 26,026 enrolments in the three years between 1999–2001, only 16,588 trainees have been successful in attaining the FMI qualification — hardly hundreds of thousands as commented by an enthusiastic Karpin committee member. As an amusing, if alarming instance of this tendency, examination of national FMI enrolment statistics for the years 1999 to 2001 (NCVER 2002) reveals a significant increase in traineeships conducted under the FMI, from 1,190 in 1999 and 9,861 in 2000, to 15,155 in 2001. Of these, 1,116 were teenagers, falling into the 14–19 age bracket. The relevance of training in management competencies to such an age group is questionable, but perhaps explicable through the range of incentives which impact on NACs and RTOs (Rozario 2004: 156).

Conclusion

This paper has reported results of what may be the first critical empirical inquiry into Australia's Frontline Management Initiative. The political circumstances surrounding the establishment of the inquiry which gave rise to the program were in some ways typical of the time: a promising inquiry, into the skills of management, was stacked with senior management and business school academics, which predictably defined the problem of 'unskilled' management as lying further down the hierarchy. The poor quality of analysis which characterised the Karpin report led to recommendations which were difficult to implement, and which ignored established critiques of CBT, and echoed uncertainties in the academic literature on management — whether there were such things as generic management skills. The report argued that there were such things, but that they should be defined by 'the enterprise', thus giving an impossible brief to those who were to implement the recommendations – that is, to write generic *and* enterprise specific management competencies, to be administered within a national set of toothless training institutions, themselves based on a suspect training technology — CBT, and prone to uncertain assessment practices.

Not surprisingly, the majority of the participants in this study found the process and the competencies vague and confusing, and doubted that they learned much that was transferable from their training. But, notwithstanding that, they found that participation in the program would boost 'promotability' within the organisation, as the participant was seen to conform to managerialist and unitarist notions of enterprise. The episode is an object lesson in the difficulties of management development as public policy — now, a number of managers will be promoted on the basis of doing a training program that many of them would claim is valueless if gaining real managerial skill is the aim.

Notes

1 This paper is an outcome of the PhD research of Dr. Anne Rozario, supervised by Dr. Ian Hampson and Dr. David Morgan. Dr. Anne Rozario now works at the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, Canberra.

2 Albeit a heavily circumscribed one, in which the content and delivery of business education was controlled by an institution representing senior management — see Hampson and Morgan, 1997.

3 Significantly, the training package for trainers and assessors (in which trainers are supposed to be accredited, if they are to deliver nationally recognized training) is itself in process of replacement by a new package.

4 Policy Department commenced the FMI program but later cancelled it for several reasons. Data from this organisation are only used to supplement evidence from other organisations.

5 BSTA is the advisory body for business services. Industry skills councils are progressively replacing existing ITABs. In line with this change BSTA has been replaced by Innovation and Business Skills Australia (IBSA).

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