The ferocious tiger: What should quality mean for a 21st century TAFE institute?

Robin Shreeve, CEO, Skills Australia

Many TAFE institutes assert that they are quality or even world class providers. But how can they publicly demonstrate this when there is little outcome data publicly available at the individual provider level to support these claims?

External bodies such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) confirm that at the systemic level the Australian tertiary sector delivers vocational training that is valued by its industry and individual customers.¹ National and State Training Awards recognise that there are many exemplary VET providers across public, private, community and enterprise-based Registered Training Organisations (RTOs). However, recently there has been closer public scrutiny on the overall quality of the VET system as a result of media reports on the poor experiences of some international students. Australian VET is being challenged to demonstrate quality of the whole system in order to drive excellence and restore public confidence.

An expression of action on this concern has been the agreement to establish a new National VET Regulator that is likely to be operational from 2012. While this is a very welcome development, more needs to be done. The issues affecting quality in the current VET system include inconsistent regulation, variable assessment practices and insufficient transparency. While there are undoubtedly many good VET providers operating across Australia, it is difficult to demonstrate the public value, or the value to employers, of the breadth of activities undertaken by the VET sector without evidence-based information in the public domain. For example, individual providers maintain internal records and data of various performance measures, however providers are not legislatively bound to publish their information.

Inconsistent regulation

Quality of the VET sector is regulated by the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF), but there is inconsistency in interpretation and auditing of the AQTF across state and territory jurisdictions. The components of the AQTF include conditions and standards governing the initial and continuing registration of Registered Training Organisation (RTOs), quality indicators, standards for state and territory registering bodies and voluntary excellence criteria. In addition, a risk management framework, which is now part of the new AQTF arrangements, aims to focus the regulatory effort on those RTOs that pose the greatest risk to quality. Consistency across the whole VET system would guarantee that a Certificate I in one state is of the same quality in other states of Australia. It is also important to remember that while nationally consistent regulation is a step in the right direction, to be effective it needs to be less bureaucratic and not unnecessarily burden high performing VET providers.

¹ Hoeckel, J (2008) Learning for Jobs: OECD Reviews of Vocational Education and Training, Australia
Variable assessment practices

Concerns have been raised about variation in assessment practices across the VET system and between qualifications. The National Quality Council (NQC) has established a Quality of Assessment Action Group to develop strategies to improve the quality of assessment practices within the VET sector. Its final report is due by September 2010.

Another issue that has affected confidence in the quality of VET qualifications is assessment moderation. Better moderation processes and standards should be developed and implemented in a manner that ensures independent scrutiny and consistency across RTOs, industries and jurisdictions. Among possible options to address this issue is for the AQTF to make assessment moderation and validation compulsory. Further consideration and public discussion should be undertaken to establishing a formal assessment moderation body as part of the establishment of the National VET Regulator currently underway in Australia.

At the core of the VET qualifications system is the training package. There is growing concern from industry about inconsistent competency standards, particularly in relation to institution-based programs. Recent work by the NQC has focused on addressing these concerns. Critical to achieving better quality and higher levels of confidence in Australian VET involves analysis and identification of the most effective means to improve assessment practices.

Insufficient transparency

Public reporting of national data and performance indicators is available at the national level, however individual provider information is not. Therefore, there is a strong case that if little or no public information is available on an individual VET provider, how can quality be demonstrated?

Under the AQTF, individual RTOs are required to collect, use and report data on 3 key performance indicators (KPIs): 1. competency completion – measuring the rate of qualification and module completion, based on data provided by RTOs on the previous calendar year’s number; 2. learner satisfaction – measuring learner engagement, perceptions of the quality of training and resources available and the support they receive; and 3. employer satisfaction – measuring employer perceptions of learner competency, relevance to work and further training, and the overall quality of training.

From July 2010 reporting against the 3 KPIs become mandatory. However, the performance of individual VET providers is not publicly available.

As part of the 2010-11 Budget, the Australian Government announced that it would establish a MySkills website, an online database to inform students or potential students of their VET options to help them find the provider that best meet their needs. It will also allow students to make more informed choices about how to strengthen their skills base and will link with other sites such as the MyUni/website. In

---

3 TVET, ‘NQC Quality of assessment action group’
4 NQC (2008) Investigations into industry expectations
5 NQC (2009) Quality assessment practices, Stage 1 report, p.7
6 AQTF (2007) AQTF Essential Standards for Registration
the longer term, it is expected that with the inclusion of student outcome data, the site should also achieve improvements in the quality of training by showing providers where they excel and where improvements can be made.7

While MySkills will publish valuable data, it will be limited to information relating to RTOs that receive public funding for accredited training delivery. The scope of public information on MySkills should be available for all VET providers, particularly since Australian providers operate under a national infrastructure. Perhaps then VET providers would be held accountable for their actions.

Greater transparency of outcome information will not only enable students and employers to make informed choices of provider, the evidence is that it positively impacts on provider behaviour. In England where the publication of qualification course and success rates is mandatory, the percentage of students completing whole courses has gone up from 50% to 75% in the last few years.8

Summary
While the Australian VET system has some exemplary providers and prominent amongst these are some TAFE Institutes, more can be done to increase the overall quality of VET. There are undoubtedly some excellent practices being applied but without nationally consistent regulation, clear assessment practices, and better accountability, the overall quality of the VET system will continue to remain unclear. In my opinion, TAFE institutes should be more proactive in the pursuit for change – one simple way would be to get on the front foot and voluntarily publish individual provider information. This would go a long way to confirm a growing public confidence in the system.

---

7 DEEWR (2010)  

8 Skills Australia (2010) Forging a vision for Australian vocational education and training: A discussion paper on the future of the VET system