

Quality Indicators Used In International VET Systems

Dave Meyers and Kaaren Blom
Centre Undertaking Research in Vocational Education (CURVE)
Canberra Institute of Technology

Definitions And Concepts Surrounding Quality Indicators

This paper reports on an NREC funded consolidation review entitled ‘international perspectives on quality indicators in the VET system’. (Blom and Meyers, 2002) The project establishes a contemporary and international perspective on what is understood by ‘quality’ in systems of vocational education and training (VET), by exploring which indicators are chosen by various systems as their preferred means of measuring their efforts to achieve quality.

The project focused primarily on countries that have well-established and documented VET systems, and from whom Australia might learn in its ongoing evaluation of its own VET system. The study focused on quality and performance indicators used in the European Union, the United States, South Africa, and New Zealand.

While comparative studies can assist policy-makers in setting standards and allow them to monitor the success of their educational systems, care needs to be exercised when making comparisons between VET systems in different countries, as without the provision of detailed contextual information to assist in the interpretation of international data, inappropriate comparisons can easily be made.

The concept of ‘quality’ is a multi-faceted one, and it should not be surprising that its meaning within the VET environment is open to argument and negotiation. Throughout the world, various VET systems make choices as to which indicators they will use as their preferred means of measuring their efforts to achieve quality.

The two main driving forces for the application of quality indicators in VET are firstly, the need to have accurate data about the system for accountability purposes, and secondly, the desire to improve the effectiveness of the management of the system.

Van den Berghe defines quality indicators as ‘performance indicators that refer to a quality characteristic or objective’, thus alluding to the broad context of performance evaluation in which they operate. He also provides the following definition ‘*A quality indicator is a figure, which is helpful for the assessment of a quality characteristic or the achievement of quality objectives*’ (Van den Berghe, 1997).

Stakeholders in the VET system include: funders, purchasers, providers and users, and naturally, the different interests that motivate each of these groups will lead them to have differing perspectives on quality, and within each group there will be further idiosyncrasies as individual experiences and preferences impact on people’s determinations of quality (Baker, 1997).

The researchers propose that VET systems may be thought of as being comprised of four interacting subsystems, the performance of each being measured against its own quality criteria. VET systems measure the quality of their performances in the areas of learning experiences, programs, administration and policies. A diagrammatic representation of these interacting subsystems follows at Figure 1.

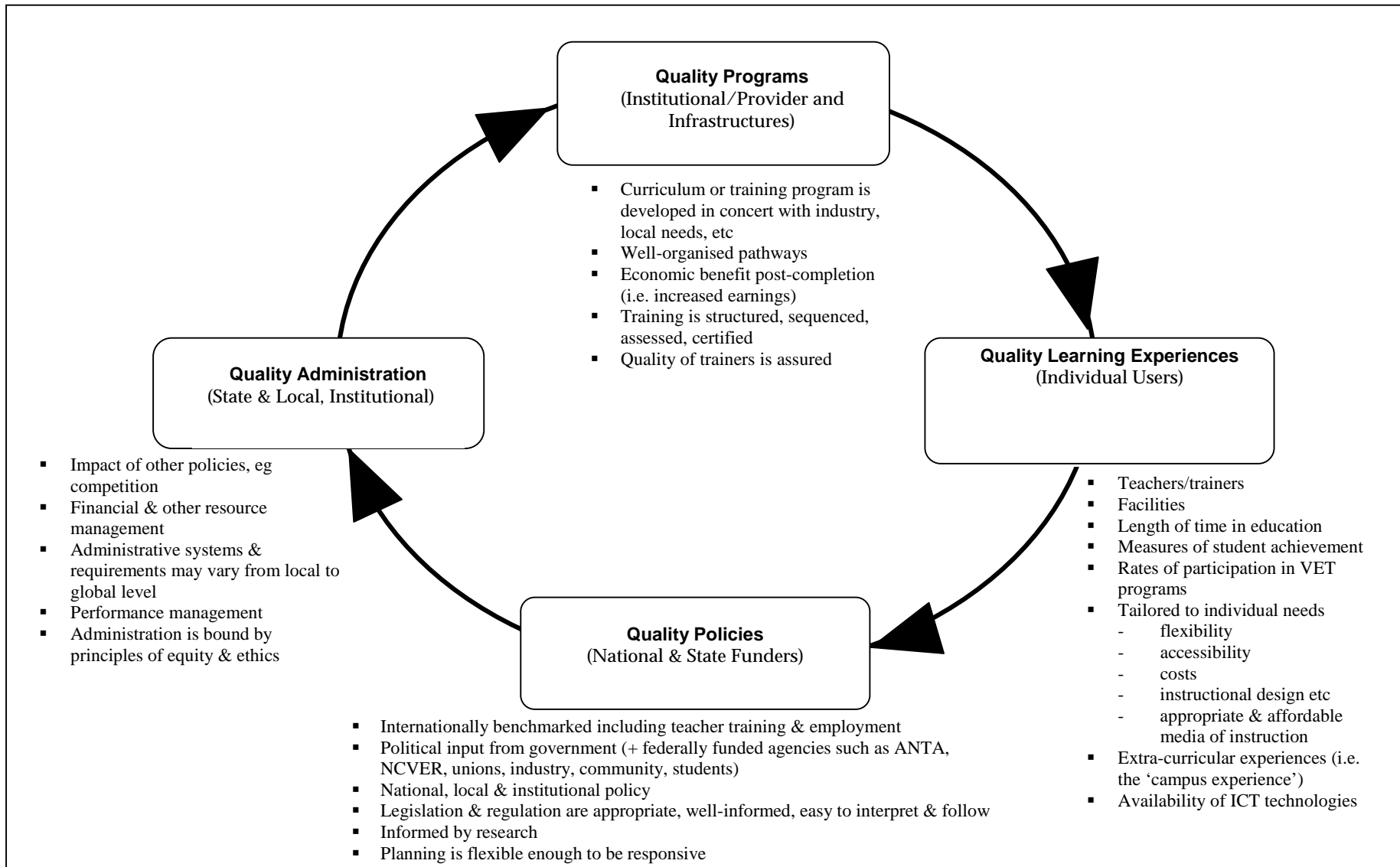


Figure 1: Interacting Sub-Systems Within The VET Quality Model

Australian Approaches To ‘Quality’

Quality has been a stated consideration in the Australian VET system since the advent of the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA), the National Training Framework (NTF) and the implementation of the national training reform agenda. Australia’s National Strategy for Vocational Education and Training 1998–2003, identifies a range of system level indicators in the form of the seven key performance measures. The national VET system has in place three key quality assurance mechanisms to support the KPMs: the registration of training providers, the registration of training agreements and the endorsement of Training Packages.

The major set of legislated quality indicators in the VET system in Australia are embodied in the recently revised Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF), whose key objective is to provide the basis for a nationally consistent, high quality vocational education and training system.

The AQTF consists of a set of twelve Standards for Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) and also Standards for the State and Territory Registering/Accrediting Bodies. The Standards for RTOs focus on: Systems for quality training and assessment; Compliance; Financial management; Administrative and Records Management; Recognition; Access, equity and client service; Staff competence; RTO assessments; Learning and assessment strategies; Issuing of qualifications; Use of logos; and Ethical marketing and advertising. (ANTA, 2001)

What Do International Comparisons Reveal?

Several of the systems considered in this report share certain approaches to the implementation of quality in VET. National qualifications schemes like Australia’s AQTF have been introduced in Scotland, the United Kingdom, Denmark, New Zealand and South Africa.

Typically, the establishment of regulatory authorities, which impose quality controls, conduct inspection of some sort, and monitor compliance by means of auditing, accompanies these. However, some countries adopt the latter elements of quality control without a national qualifications scheme. For example, Sweden has not found a national scheme appealing, preferring instead to rely on strong links at the local level between stakeholders and VET providers to ensure that quality outcomes are achieved for the communities that have vested interests in VET delivery. The European Union has common quality goals despite the absence of a single set of standards unilaterally applied. Instead, there is talk of striving for ‘harmonisation’, ‘comparability’ and ‘transparency’, goals that the EU may be said to share with more centrally structured systems.

The Evaluation Framework

The researchers developed a framework that was used to evaluate the use of international VET quality indicators (Figure 2).

The first part of the framework is the background context comprised of: personal characteristics and background of learners; community influences; labour market and family factors. Economic considerations have a large degree of influence on this background context. Quality indicators are not used to measure this background context, however these context factors do influence VET policies, and ultimately influence the outcomes of training and should be considered when analysing training outcomes, particularly if comparisons between countries are made.

The remaining three parts of the framework are structured as a flow chart. The second part of the framework identifies the *stakeholders and their expectations* and while they usually do not have quality indicators applied to them directly, they are a crucial part of the VET quality assurance cycle as they inform the policy development stage of the cycle. VET training policies govern the *process* of training delivery, administration and management that is the focus of the first cluster of quality indicators. The ultimate outcome from the training process is learning. The second cluster of quality indicators is focused on *outcomes and outputs* represented by learning, its impact on individual learners, and the broader context of economic and social outcomes.

The information provided by the two clusters of quality indicators comprises feedback that is used to inform stakeholders and further iterations of the policy development process and forms a critical part of the cycle of continuous improvement of VET systems.

Stakeholders and stakeholder expectations

Learners, business and industry, community representatives, government representatives at the national and state level, managers of VET institutions and teachers constitute the main stakeholders in international VET systems. Achievement of competency; work readiness of students who have completed training; cost effectiveness of training; and issues of transformation and development of the individual constitute the main expectations that stakeholders have of training.

The degree to which particular stakeholders influence VET quality policy varies considerably between different countries, due largely to variation in the background contexts of the various countries.

Some VET systems have a diverse range of stakeholders who have quite different expectations. The unique split structure of the dual system of training in Germany illustrates the point that the structure of VET systems strongly influences the selection of quality indicators that can be applied. In the case of the German dual system there is a wide range of stakeholders, located in different levels of both government and private enterprise, all with different interests and reporting requirements.

The degree of influence exercised by business and industry on VET quality systems has greatly increased recently in countries such as Scotland, England New Zealand, (and Australia) mostly due to the formation of national training authorities that regard business and industry as their key stakeholders while other classes of stakeholders have less influence in the formulation of VET quality policies. European Union countries, South Africa and the United States place a high degree of emphasis on the

requirement to meet broad community needs in the formation of VET quality policies. National and state governments are particularly influential stakeholders in European Union countries, the United States and South Africa. Learners are given prominence as stakeholders in Denmark, while teachers are regarded as important stakeholders in the Netherlands.

Gauging the quality of the process of VET delivery

Once stakeholders' expectations of VET have been interpreted into policy, the implementation of that policy becomes apparent in the process of VET delivery. Here we find a preponderance of quantitative measures of quality, for the focus is understandably on the extent to which programs are resourced in physical and human terms, on how well programs are administered and managed, on the effectiveness of teaching and external links, and on the place given to the activity of evaluation. There is widespread concern with the provision of learner support, including the quality of VET infrastructure, and the quality of teachers and the teaching process, but beyond these there are interesting differences in focus from one system to another.

Scotland's SQMS prescribes that the quality assurance of VET processes must itself be subject to evaluation – a level of self-consciousness not often found in other systems. It is EU policy that collaboration be fostered among member countries, and Denmark clearly articulates the importance of this aim. In Sweden, cooperation is interpreted at a local level, with strong links between small enterprises and private training providers, for whom enrolment numbers are considered quality indicators. In South Africa, provider accreditation is contingent demonstrating that stakeholders inform quality management systems. In England and the USA concerns are expressed that teaching quality can only be ensured if the quality of teacher education and ongoing professional development are themselves subject to assessment. In the Netherlands, the learner's movement through the system is monitored carefully, reflected in such measures as influx, transfer and outflow. Further, this strong focus on the learning process itself sees teachers, other staff and students all contributing to final program evaluations in the Netherlands. Safety in the working and teaching environment is an expressed concern in Denmark and Scotland, reflected in its inclusion as an indicator of quality in both systems.

Gauging the quality of VET Outcomes / Outputs

Participants move through the VET system, engaging in its various processes, pursuing the learning that is its objective, and finally emerging at some end point of exit, if not completion, at which the so-called outcomes or outputs of the processes in which they have been engaged will be measured. Here again, certain quantitative measures will predominate in such areas as participation and employment rates – indicators that seem to be universally adopted because they meet the demand for measures that can be used to demonstrate accountability. However, this is also the area in which we find many qualitative measures as systems seek to establish how satisfied their stakeholders are, and how effective their programs have been. Some of these are very difficult to measure.

Some systems have more specific social goals than others in the international community. South Africa has a strong social agenda, which foregrounds the needs of

its learners, especially in order to redress past inequities, as well as the needs of society as a whole. One stated objective of the bilateral partnership between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland is that ‘mutual understanding and cultural tolerance’ be considered as measures of quality. In Germany, efforts are being made to integrate disadvantaged groups into the labour market, in recognition that the impacts of teenage unemployment, for example, are being felt throughout the society. In a similar fashion, Sweden extends its focus from those with disabilities to those who need ‘vocational rehabilitation.’

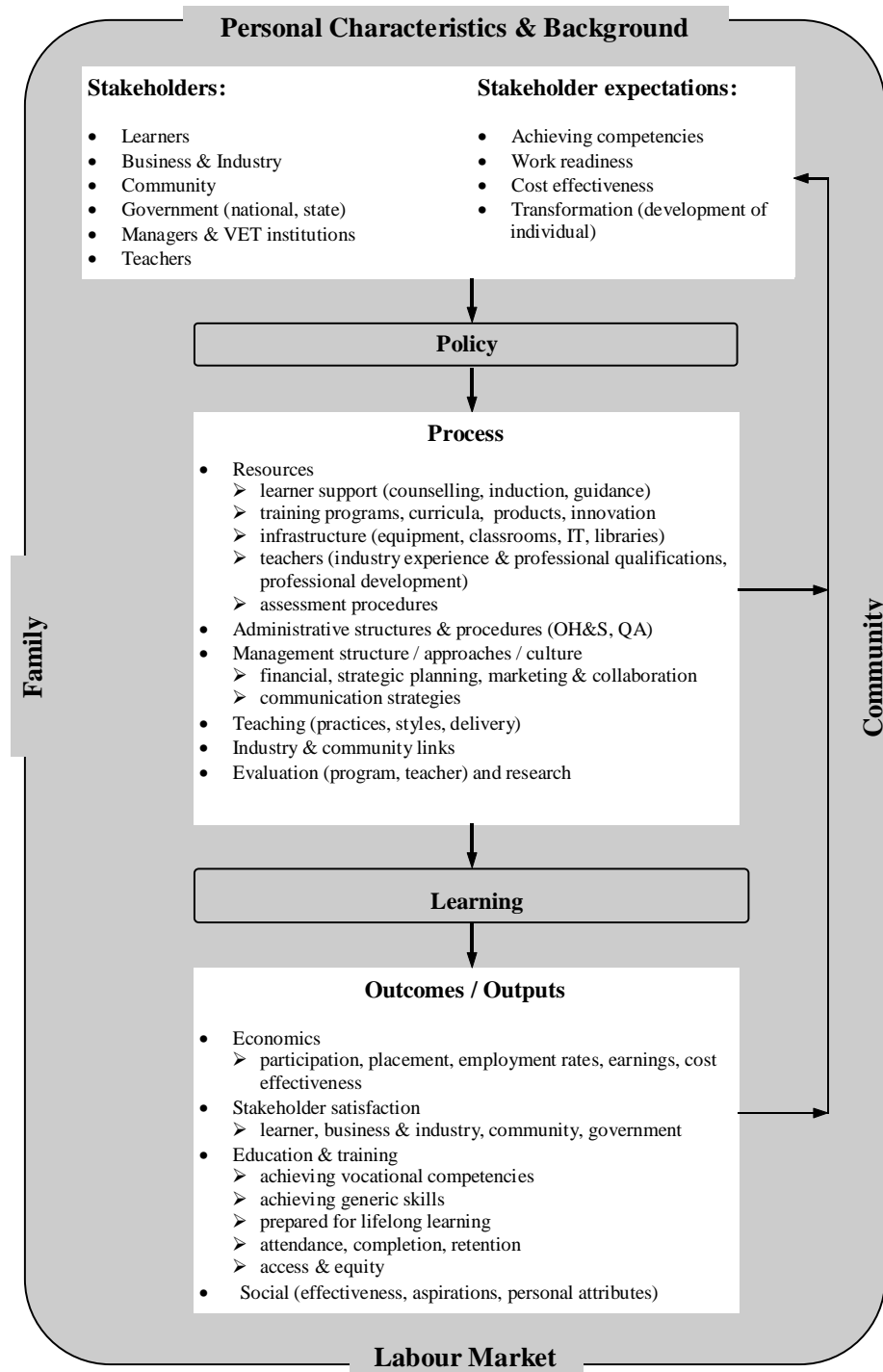


Figure 2: Evaluation Framework For VET Quality Indicators

Distribution of quality indicators according to countries:

The following figures show the distribution of quality indicators identified in the evaluation model according to the countries included in the study. The figures serve only as a guide to quality indicator distribution as the study includes only selected examples of types of quality indicators used in each country and can therefore not be regarded as an exhaustive list.

Country	Quality indicator number (from list below)											
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Australia		*		*	*	*	*	*		*		
Sweden	*			*								
Ireland	*	*	*	*	*							
Scotland	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*		
UK/ England	*	*			*	*				*		*
Germany								*			*	
Denmark	*	*	*	*	*		*	*				
Netherlands	*	*	*	*		*		*				
European Union								*				
United States	*	*	*	*	*			*				*
South Africa				*		*	*	*		*		*
New Zealand							*	*		*		

Figure 3: Quality indicators used to measure the quality of the Training Process

Key to quality indicators used in Figure 3 to measure the Training Process:

1. learner support
2. training programs
3. infrastructure
4. teachers
5. assessment
6. administrative structures
7. management
8. financial/strategic planning/ marketing and collaboration
9. communication
10. teaching
11. industry/community links
12. evaluation and research

	<i>Quality indicator number (from list below)</i>							
Country	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Australia	*	*	*	*		*	*	
Sweden	*	*	*	*	*	*		*
Ireland	*	*	*	*	*	*		*
Scotland	*	*	*	*			*	*
UK/England	*	*	*	*	*		*	*
Germany	*						*	*
Denmark	*						*	*
Netherlands			*	*				
European Union	*		*	*		*		*
United States	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	
South Africa			*		*		*	*
New Zealand	*		*	*			*	

Figure 4: Quality indicators used to measure the quality of outcomes/outputs

Key to quality indicators used in Figure 4 to measure the Training Process:

- 1.economics 2. stakeholder satisfaction 3. achievement of vocational competence
4. achievement of generic competence 5. lifelong learning 6. attendance/completion/retention 7.access and equity 8. social (effectiveness, aspirations, personal attributes)

Conclusions

The need to provide relevant training, that at completion produces people who are work ready, and which leads to credible qualifications, along with mutual recognition and portability of qualifications has led to the implementation of national qualifications authorities and qualification frameworks that form the foundation of quality assurance within the VET systems in several of the countries included in the study.

Economic considerations, the desire to improve the cost-effectiveness of VET systems and the balance between who benefits from, and who pays for, training have proved to be strong determinants in the formulation of policy pertaining to the quality of VET systems internationally. Qualitative and quantitative quality indicators are used which focus on both the training process and also on the outcomes of training.

The inclusion of ‘completion rates’ as a quality indicator is widespread across the international VET industry. However, students engage in vocational training for a variety of reasons and obtaining a credential may not necessarily be their main objective. For example, students may elect to engage in training to achieve a suite of work-related competencies rather than to complete a whole qualification. This is both a valid and an efficient training rationale, however it is likely to have a significant impact on completion rates. It may therefore be necessary to rethink the use, or at least the interpretation, of data pertaining to completion rates.

The Australian VET system has a well-defined structure, in that it bases training on national Training Packages that are strongly endorsed by industry, and has established

the Australian Quality Training Framework to underpin the quality assurance of the training system. Consequently, the current VET system in Australia is focused on meeting the expectations of business and industry. As a consequence, the needs of learners and broader community concerns are given much less of a priority and have much less impact on VET policy in Australia than they receive in the VET systems of many other countries.

It is recommended that the next round of quality imperatives and improvements for the Australian VET system should therefore focus on the need for greater inclusion of broad community needs and on the aspirations of lifelong learners.

References

- Australian National Training Authority (2001), *Transition Guide for Registered Training Organisations*. ANTA, Melbourne.
- Baker, J (1997), *Conflicting conceptions of quality - policy implications for tertiary education*, Education Directions Ltd, Accessed 3 September 2001, <http://www.ed.co.nz/docs/quality.pdf>.
- Blom K and Meyers D (2002), (forthcoming), International perspectives on the use of quality indicators in the VET system, NCVER, Adelaide.
- Van den Berghe, W (1997), *Indicators in perspective: the use of quality indicators in vocational education and training*. European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP), Thessaloniki.