‘The elephant in the room’: 
Audit culture and TAFE teachers

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‘The elephant in the room’  
(idiomatic expression that applies to an obvious problem no one wants to discuss)

- There is little indication in the Australian VET research literature that audit compliance is a significant issue or problem for VET practitioners
- Yet, recent research (Black 2009, Rice 2005) demonstrates the significant administrative burden of audit compliance experienced by Head Teachers in TAFE NSW
- Have audits transformed the work of VET practitioners?

Research Method

- Survey questionnaire emailed to Head Teachers in TAFE NSW. Open-ended responses to audits.
- Semi-structured interviews with 12 Head Teachers in two Institutes
- Three focus groups conducted with groups of teachers (8-12 in each group) from TAFE Access sections

Audit society and audit cultures

- Audit explosion in late 80s and early 90s in UK (Power 1997)
- Now common world-wide with ‘new public management’ (NPM) for assuring quality in public sector organisations using business derived concepts (Apple 2007; Rose 1999)
- In NPM, audit is a key technique for limiting risk and assuring trust in public service systems - audit culture (Strathern 2000; Apple 2007)
- Audit - “control of control” (Power 1997) that is acting on control systems from a distance rather than earlier supervisory inspections

Audit society and audit cultures

- Shapes the ‘governed’ (teachers, head teachers, managers) by prescribing processes to be audited setting outcomes/ record-setting systems and effects on identities
- Emphasis on “paper trail” rather than professional expertise - ‘the logics and technical requirements of audit displace the internal logics of expertise’ (Rose 1999:154)
- Groundwater-Smith and Mockler (2009) “mind the gap” between professional judgement and measures of audit processes

Audits and VET

- UK – audit culture and the rise of evidence-based practices. FE College ‘inspections’ (Ofsted)
- But there remains a ‘space for struggle as well as outcomes that are contrary to those of policy makers and curriculum designers’ (Avis 2007:125-6)
- Australian VET – an audit culture focused exclusively on government and industry agendas. ‘There is compliance but not commitment’ (Seddon 2009:69)
Facing up to an audit culture

- What is a formal audit?
- ‘Financial management, RPL targets, ASH targets, AQTF audits, ITSE audits, ISO audits, internal audits, ICChecklists’ (Black 2009:5)
- A ‘huge increase in the volume of work around audit requirements’
- ‘We’re now always being audited … sometimes you feel they are ready to pounce …’

‘More and more we operate for auditors, not students’

- Reporting requirements that are ‘absolutely absurd … you just can’t see the educational value’
- ‘it will frighten the students away’
- Assessment validation - (the assessment tasks) ‘just sit in a drawer, just in case, in case an auditor comes along …’

Tensions between audit requirements and professional expertise

- ‘My teachers prepare all my notes for me and tell me what I’m doing each week … I don’t do the sort of lesson preparation I used to do as a teacher. I just don’t get time’ (Head Teacher)
- All I’m doing is reacting to everything that comes across my desk … I’m flat out trying to keep up with the correct assessment, so, that’s what the auditors want to see when they come in’ (Head Teacher)

Responding to audits

- Deniers: ‘I just tick everything … Give me a box, I’ll tick it’
- Pragmatists: ‘I’ll do it in one session, tick the boxes. But the rest of the time I’ll do what’s needed’
- Compliers: ‘…you feel like, you know, you’ll get into trouble’

References