

VET SIDE STORY

TAFE Practitioners and the AQTF 2007:

Key Issues of Relevance and Management Support

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Abstract

Although the past decade has seen an increasing inclusion of vocational education and training (VET) in research and scholarly discourse, there is a paucity of comprehensive data on the practices of, and influences on, VET practitioners. The majority of 'national' research has been conducted along the eastern seaboard states and in South Australia. The Western Australian (WA) VET sector remains largely unexplored. This paper presents some of the findings of a quantitative survey of 269 VET practitioners throughout WA which highlighted the pivotal role of management support for practitioners. Path analysis clearly identified strong and positive relationships between management support and (i) practitioners' perception of the relevance of the AQTF to their own practice; (ii) the value that practitioners attributed to professional development activities, and (iii) their adaptation to sector changes. There was also a strong but negative relationship between management support and practitioners' experiences of stress.

Introduction

Quality of education has been a focus of an extensive array of literature and academic discourse nationally and internationally. In the last decade, in particular, the focus on vocational education and training (VET) has increased. The Australian literature attests to the myriad social, economic, technological and political changes across the VET sector. Examples of change include the move to competency based assessment; the introduction of Training Packages, traineeships, VET in Schools, and employability skills. The literature addresses these changes and the challenges posed on the VET practitioner. ('Practitioner' is used in this paper to represent the diversity of the role, and to encompass the diversity of terms, such as trainer, teacher, lecturer, facilitator and assessor). A number of new national frameworks were also developed for the sector, among them, the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF), the first mandated national quality system.

How much is understood of how practitioners practice and what influences them in their adjustment to these changes to their role and workload? A quantitative research project was developed to address this question with TAFE practitioners across WA. This paper presents excerpts from the literature review, and an overview of the major findings.

Literature review

Research on the impact of change on VET practitioners and their practices has largely been conducted within the context of competency training (Cornford, 1997; Docking,

1992; Hellwig, 2006) and national training packages (Clayton & Blom, 2004; Clayton, Fisher, Harris, Bateman & Brown, 2008; Down, 2003; Smith, 2005).

By the early 1990s, both the World Bank and United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) had identified quality of education as a key reform (Mok & Currie, 2002), and throughout the 1990s quality became a priority for the higher education sector. The literature attests to the extensive contestation of educational quality, including the teaching process versus the student outcome; the value of programs versus value for money; excellence versus fitness for purpose; and conformance versus continuous improvement. The concept of educational quality opened floodgates of academic discourse, sagely observed by Henry, Lingard, Rizvi and Taylor (2001, p. 71):

For many it is no more than a shorthand way of expressing value discontent with the present outcomes of education while covering up a lack of cogent policies and priorities for action. Quality will always remain a subjective entity.

The monitoring of the quality of Australian vocational education and training was formalised at the national level with the implementation of the AQTF in 2002. Interestingly, although this framework purports to ensure quality training and assessment as well as quality skills for Australian industry, employers and individuals, it rarely features in the Australian VET literature.

Hellwig (2006) in her comparative study of competency based training in Australia and Germany, does not identify the role of the AQTF as the driver of quality and national consistency, but concluded that “difficulties that need to be addressed in the future are mostly concerned with the organising framework of the Australian VET system” (p. 69). She identified that VET practitioners perceived the changes in the VET sector in recent years as being related to: (i) greater industry focus in training; (ii) reduction in theory and a greater focus on practice; (iii) increased flexibility in delivery and self-paced learning; (iv) national training packages, their focus on outcomes and emphasis on assessment; and (v) work-based training and assessment. Hellwig further highlighted the need to address the pending shortage of VET staff and the importance of focusing more on professional development of the VET teaching workforce. Cornford (1999) had also argued that the quality of VET trainers was being neglected and diluted by increasing numbers of inadequately trained part-time and casual staff, stating that the “increasing skills required by Australia could only be produced by highly skilled and qualified vocational educators” (p. 44).

Chappell and Johnston (2003) had also sought insight into the way that changes within the VET sector had “influenced the construction of VET practitioners’ identity at work” (p. 4). Their study addressed the challenges facing practitioners when moving beyond the institutional-based methods of delivery into the workplace, within a commercially contestable market. The study drew on the literature relating to the labour market, VET systems and economic reforms. The issue of ‘change’ dominated the interviews with the TAFE lecturers in particular, who related their tension to changes within government policy, and to pressures induced by the commercialisation of training. They considered that having to prepare students for specific jobs meant narrowing the scope of personal

development and breadth of training. In contrast, VET consultants in the private sector spoke positively about the focus on enterprise training and commercialisation (p. 20). Cultural norms for the TAFE practitioner were identified as those inherent to public service. Hence, it was concluded that when TAFE practitioners enter the competitive commercial training market, they face contradictions and new challenges associated with corporate and business practices.

Similar to the study by Chappell and Johnston (2003), Harris, Simons and Clayton (2005) explored how the changes that had occurred across the VET sector in the previous five years, had affected the role of practitioners. They also explored the implications for the future role of VET practitioners and quality of VET training and assessment. This research drew on literature that “conceptualised the changes which have impacted on educational provision” (p. 26). The greatest changes for the practitioners were to their work responsibilities and their relationships with industry. The critical factors *influencing* change in the role of the VET practitioner were identified as (i) the increasingly competitive environment; (ii) the expanding diversity of expectations of VET practitioners; (iii) shifts from teaching to facilitation and from delivery to assessment; (iv) pressure to act as mentors to less qualified or experienced colleagues; and (v) rapid developments in technology.

There were significant differences in respondents’ views of their interaction with students, colleagues and managers, and their relationships with others outside the college. The public provider respondents noticed the work-role changes more, but their relationships with students had changed to a lesser extent. This echoed the point made by Chappell and Johnston (2003), who had found that VET practitioners shared an ‘education identity’ that placed greater importance on the teacher-student relationship and on broad education versus job-role preparation. The study of Harris, Simons and Clayton also emphasised the personal nature of the change process and found that management support was an important factor in coping with change. Those who reported feeling supported by management gave examples such as ‘taking a proactive stance’, ‘changed the culture’, and ‘provided infrastructure’.

Conceptual model

The ‘Open Systems Theory’ was introduced in the late 1970s to emphasize two important characteristics of organizations: (i) the dynamic character, where movement in any part of the organization leads to movement in other parts; and (ii) the openness to environmental inputs. While input-output analysis has been used most frequently in the field of economics, the method has also been applied to evaluate the impact of external change, such as demands for change in the outputs of an organization (Correa & Craft, 1999). The input-output model is represented as an open system comprising interdependent components; most commonly *input*, *throughput* and *output* as depicted in Figure 1 below. For this study, the inputs were defined as the endogenous characteristics of the VET practitioners: age, gender, length of service, employment status, location, and background vocational and education qualification.

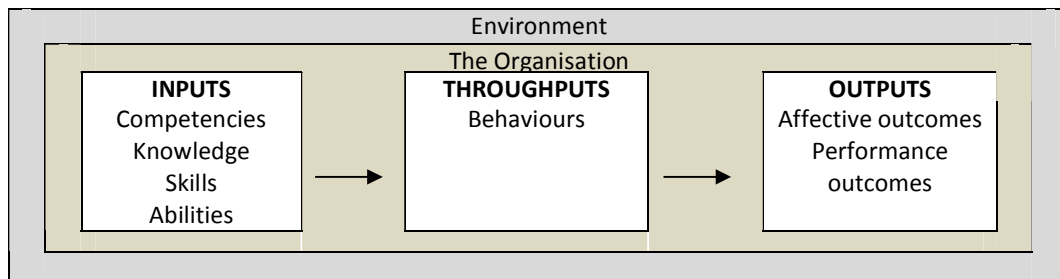


Figure 1 Input-Output conceptual model (Wright & Snell, 1991, p. 209)

The throughputs (itemised in Table 1 below) were those factors expected to have impact on the practitioner, and with the potential to mediate the relationship between the inputs and outputs. While the original model defined throughputs as ‘behaviours’, throughputs were further defined for this study as extrinsic (behaviours or actions of others) and intrinsic (one’s own responses or behaviours).

Table 1 Throughput (process) factors

Throughput (Process) Factors	
Extrinsic	Intrinsic
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participation in academic audits • Perceived management support • Attendance at formal WA TAFE professional development activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Response to previous changes in policy and practice • Feelings of stress, tension • Perceived relevance of role-related Standards to own practice

The outputs were defined in light of the outcomes required of the AQTF 2007 where achievement relies, at least partly, on the practices of practitioners, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2 AQTF 2007: VET practitioner role-related Standards

Standard/Element of the AQTF 2007	Standard
Strategies for training and assessment ... are developed in consultation with industry	1.2
Strategies and materials for training and assessment meet the requirements of the relevant Training Package or accredited course.	1.2, 1.3, 1.5a
VET practitioners continue developing their vocational and training and assessment competencies to support continuous improvement in delivery of the RTO’s services	1.4c
Assessment, including RPL, is conducted in accordance with principles of assessment and rules of evidence	1.5b
Assessment, including RPL, meets workplace, and where relevant, regulatory requirements.	1.5c
The RTO continuously improves client services by collecting, analysing and acting on relevant data.	2.1
Employers and other parties who contribute to each learner’s training and assessment are engaged in the development, delivery and monitoring of training and assessment.	2.3
Learners receive training, assessment and support services that meet their individual needs.	2.4

The *Standards* and their elements were grouped to facilitate data collection and analysis. An ‘academic-focus’ of *training and assessment* measured the extent to which practitioners:

- ensured that their training and assessment met the requirements of the Training Package or accredited course;
- were familiar with the entire unit of competency; and
- validated their assessments.

A ‘*student-focus*’ of *training and assessment* measured the extent to which practitioners:

- customized their training and assessment strategies to meet the needs of students;
- sought, analysed and acted on feedback from students; and
- ensured that students were aware of their progress.

Industry engagement measured the extent to which practitioners discussed the development, delivery and/or monitoring of training and assessment with employers and other staff who contributed to learners’ training and assessment , as well as the extent to which they sought feedback regarding students.

Making improvements to their own practices measured the extent to which practitioners maintained currency of their vocational, teaching and assessment competencies and made changes in both their academic and compliance practices.

It was acknowledged that although the individual was defined largely by demographic input variables, each brought to the role a multitude of other characteristics and experiences which were beyond the scope of a single study.

Survey methods

In the absence of a suitable tool for this study, an electronic questionnaire was developed with advice from auditors, survey developers and quantitative analysts, and piloted through focus groups. The questions were mapped to the input-output model as shown in Table 3 below.

Table 3 Mapping of survey questions against input-output conceptual model

Question	Mapping to the model
1	Location of RTO
2	Length of service
3	Full-time status
4	Gender
5	Permanency status
6	Age group
7	Teaching qualification
9	Vocational qualification & background
8	Vocational field
12	Curriculum source
13	AQF level of major component of delivery
15	Typical class profile
18 c,d,e	Management support
18a, b	Access to professional development

Individual characteristics of the VET practitioner (Input)

Environment

Organisation process factors (Extrinsic throughput)

25	Participation in prior audits	
19	Perception of the <i>AQTF 2007</i>	
24	Response to previous sector changes	Organisation process factors
23	Perceived relevance of role-related outcomes of the	
21	Feelings of stress or tension	
Question		Mapping to the model
20	Made improvements	
14, 22c	Student focus of delivery and assessment	
16	Academic focus of delivery and assessment	Academic practices
17	Industry engagement	(Output)
22d, f	Compliance focus	
22a,b,e	Quality focus	

Western Australia (WA) is a vast state served by 456 state-based registered training organisations (RTOs), of which 10 are TAFE colleges, funded by the State Government (Training Accreditation Council Annual Report, 2007/2008). The TAFE colleges were defined by location: four colleges in the Perth metropolitan area; three in rural/regional WA and four in 'remote' locations. Distribution of the tool was via the Managing Directors of the colleges.

Results – broad overview

1. *Brief summary of the inputs/individual characteristics*

The sample of 269 practitioners was 8.4% of the estimated WA TAFE practitioner population of 3,200 (Collier, 2008), and cannot therefore be considered representative. There was, however, a proportionate distribution of respondents from the metropolitan, rural and remote colleges. The sample was slightly biased towards women. There was a considerably higher percentage of males in full-time employment compared with State figures for 2002 (Rumsey, 2002). Of the 106 staff who had been in the sector for less than six years, 48.1% were permanent and 40.6% on contract, in contrast with those in the sector for more than 6 years, with 86.7% being permanent and 7% on contract. Data from this study also reinforced the different experiences of tenured, contract and casual staff, as well as those of full-time and part-time staff.

Questions on teaching qualifications attracted a number of comments that alluded to the contested terrain of mandated VET qualifications, and the lack of recognition of a university teaching qualification. Five percent had neither the Certificate IV in Assessment and Workplace Training nor the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment.

Respondents delivered a range of Australian Qualification Framework (AQF) level qualifications and represented a diversity of vocations, giving breadth to the study. Almost 52% (n=139) had completed vocational award courses, the majority of whom (56.1%) had completed before 1998. Similarly, of the 118 who had completed a formal undergraduate vocational qualification, 66.1% had completed before 1998. The data were insufficient to complete a picture of how competency and currency are maintained.

2. *Brief summary of the throughput factors (extrinsic and intrinsic)*

Respondents were asked to what extent they perceived that the role-related Standards were relevant to their own practice. The requirement for practitioners to *continue developing their vocational and training and assessment competencies to support continuous improvement in delivery of the RTO's services* (Standard 1.4c) was considered the least relevant (M = 2.89, SD = 0.91) with only 27.6% responding with 'to a large extent', and 41.8% 'to some extent'. Also of interest was the 25% who considered that the Standard requiring *assessments to be conducted in accordance with the principles of assessment and rules of evidence* to be 'not relevant at all' or of 'minimal relevance' to their own practice.

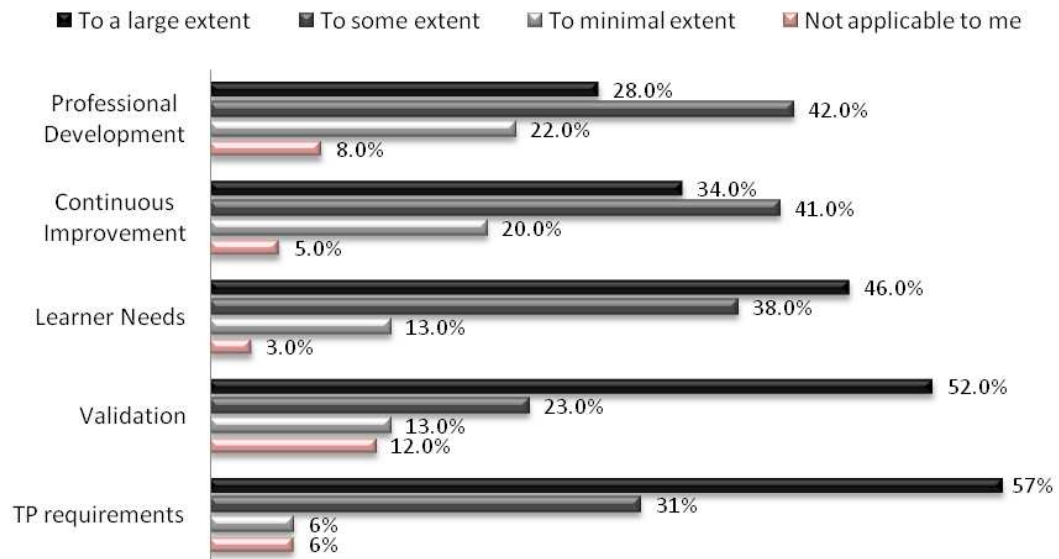


Figure 3: Perceived relevance of selected AQTF 2007 role-related Standards
 Note: The results for industry engagement have been omitted from this discussion.

The perceived relevance of the *AQTF 2007* standards, from the practitioners' point of view, may also be related to the perceived purpose of the framework which is to ensure quality and consistency in the *registration of providers* to undertake training delivery and assessment; and not a guide, per se, for effective or quality teaching. Schofield and McDonald (2004) argued that while compliance with the AQTF was necessary, targets of creativity, professional judgement and growth were also needed. Marginson (2000) proposed continuous *innovation* as a new capacity building focus for the VET sector, and further highlighted the need for practitioners to:

think critically about their own skills and knowledges (*sic*), comparing their personal profile to the requirements that their jobs make of them, and identify the areas in which their skills and knowledges (*sic*) need to be improved (p. 26).

Overall satisfaction with the AQTF as supporting quality training and assessment as well as national consistency attracted only 15 responses of 'considerable' satisfaction, with comments such as:

I love it. It is a clear road map and guideline for both lecturers and students.
Good resource once I got through the minefield of information to get where I wanted to be.
Supports, highlights the importance of industry.

At the other end of the scale, five respondents expressed varying degrees of ignorance of the *AQTF 2007*, one year after its nationwide implementation. These practitioners were from metro, rural and remote RTOs; were permanent and full-time; had completed either the Certificate IV in AWT or TAA; had undertaken some PD; and had been in the VET sector for more than five years. Their comments included:

I have no idea there was an AQTF 2007 document. My information about AQTF filters down through colleagues who pass on the important bits (hopefully). I was interested and surprised to find that there was a new AQTF – I can't remember any formal announcement and definitely don't remember any training or what it represents. I'd be surprised if many of my colleagues know much about it.

Participation in audits was suggested to be a potential mediating factor. The level of participation in audits against the AQTF 2007 is shown in Table 5.

Table 5 Participation in internal and external audits

	Nil exposure	Preparation only	Interviewed	Materials audited
Internal audit <2007	29.2%	20.2%	28.1%	22.5%
Internal audit @ 2007	51.6%	24.4%	14.6%	9.4%
External audit <2007	39.1%	18.2%	24.1%	18.6%
External audit @ 2007	68.9%	17.7%	7.5%	5.9%

This survey took place one year after the introduction of the AQTF 2007 and the high percentage of practitioners claiming no exposure to, and no preparation for internal audit (52%) or external audit (69%) was unexpected. Based on the open-ended comments, a number of respondents saw the audit process as responsible for excessive documentation and as a source of angst:

Constant threat of audits is stressful; everyone spends hours developing documents to comply. Constantly changing templates devised for auditors, not managers, lecturers or students -went into storage as soon as auditors left.

The majority of respondents perceived management support 'to some extent'. Time and resources for change attracted 'to no extent' responses from 45.4% of respondents, see Figure 2 below.

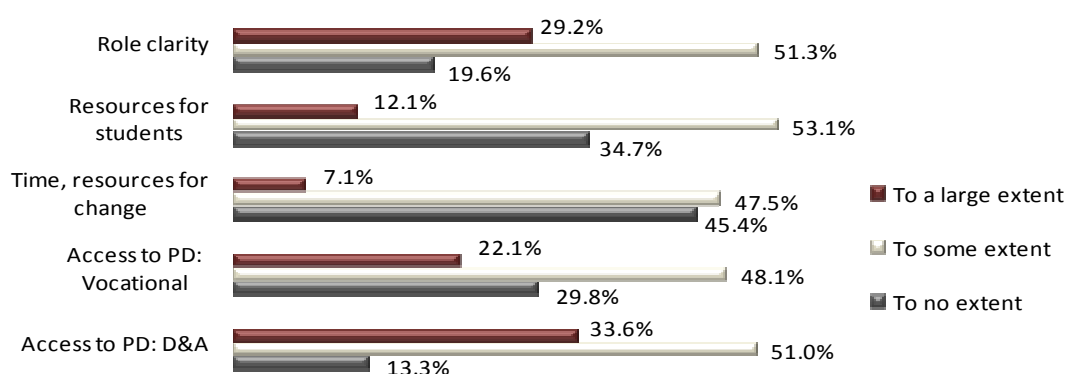


Figure 2: Perceived management support

The literature suggests that in light of the many changes within the sector over the past 10 to 15 years, there is risk of inertia or 'change fatigue', especially for long serving practitioners. The questions relating to this focus asked respondents, (i) what was their position when they first experienced a variety of changes and what was their position,

now, at the time of the survey. The sector changes included: (i) competency based delivery and assessment (CBDA); (ii) requirement for practitioners to gain the Certificate IV in Assessment and Workplace Training (CIV AWT) or the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment (CIV TAA); (iii) Training Packages (TP); (iv) introduction of employability skills; and (v) regulatory reporting requirements on students under 18 years of age. The response options were ‘active resistance’, ‘passive acceptance’ and ‘enthusiasm’. Although there was a very small upward shift to ‘enthusiasm’ in the first of the four categories above, enthusiasm was nonetheless expressed by only 15% to 44% of the sample. The overall impression however was one of predominantly ‘passive acceptance’. Future challenges facing the sector, such as an increased competitive training market, the need for innovation and industry/employer partnerships, present an urgent need for organisations to maintain motivation and energy.

Outputs - outcome practices

The outcome practices, derived from the *AQTF 2007 Standards*, included the (i) academic aspects, and (ii) student aspects, of delivery and assessment. Practitioners’ reflections on these aspects of their practice were very positive, as shown in Figure 4 below.

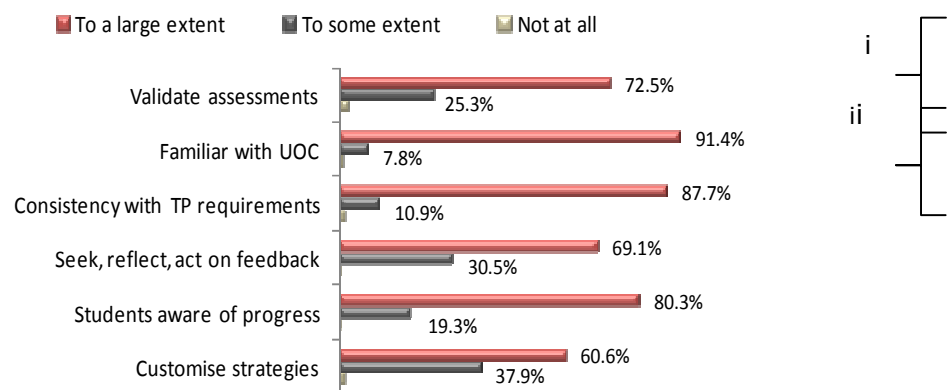


Figure 4: Student and academic aspects of delivery and assessment

Almost 100% of respondents claimed to have validated their assessment tools with at least one colleague to a large or some extent. These results contrast with the 75% who deemed this Standard as relevant to their own practice to a large or some extent. Two items in the survey tool questioned the respondents’ understanding of the terms ‘principles of assessment’ and ‘rules of evidence’ (Standard 1.5b) which underpin competency-based assessment. A clear majority (98%) of the respondents did not identify the flawed definitions provided for each of the terms.

Path Analysis

Path analysis was applied to identify the potential mediating influence of the extrinsic and intrinsic process factors.

The power of perceived management support

Perceived management support was a pivotal influence on practitioners in:

- i) their perception of the relevance of the AQTF Standards, $p= 0.30$ (SE= .06);
- ii) the value that they attributed to all but one PD category;
- iii) their adaptation to sector changes, $p =0.18$ (SE= .06);
- iv) their experiences of stress or tension, $p = -0.30$ (SE= .06).

These findings are well supported by Simons, Harris, Pudney and Clayton (2009) who concluded that:

The capability of managers to forge high-quality working environments for staff will be a key determinant of successful workforce development strategies in VET in the future. Get this wrong, and the VET sector will not be able to sustain its role in supporting the development of the Australian workforce at large (p. 10).

The literature on capacity building and professional development in the VET sector predominantly focuses on the practitioner; however there is an increasing awareness of the changing role of management and leadership and the need for adaptive capacity and continual renewal (Rhodes, 2007). Looking ahead to 2020, the performance of people will become increasingly more important, where financial and asset performance have dominated in the past (IBSA, 2007). The manager in the years to 2020 will need to work with three different generations of worker in a single workplace and accommodate flexibility in both the workforce and the workplace. IBSA considers that the generalist manager will be surpassed by the specialist manager and that there will be an increasing involvement of teams so that the workplace becomes one where “talented teams, not just talented individuals, flourish” (IBSA, 2007, p. 25).

Auditing – Lessons Learned

Participation in audits had both positive and negative effects. Participation in audits *before* the AQTF 2007 was *negatively* related to (i) making improvements, $p= -0.18$ (SE= .07); and (ii) an increased focus on academic aspects of the role, $p= -0.14$ (SE= .05); but *positively* related to an increase in the perceived relevance of the AQTF, $p= 0.29$ (SE= .07).

The earlier counterproductive responses, while concerning, were not entirely unexpected. After the implementation of the inaugural AQTF across the VET sector, it was widely acknowledged that acceptance, interpretation and practice of the Standards had been ad hoc and had resulted in excesses of paperwork and workload for all stakeholders (Favero, 2003; Harris et al., 2001). The recognition of this discord by the Council of Australian Governments in 2005 led to the revised, streamlined *AQTF 2007*. Although comparatively few practitioners had participated in audits against the *AQTF 2007*, the data indicated that benefits had arisen from the experience, in academic focus, $p = 0.15$ (SE= .05) as well as in continuous improvement, $p= 0.15$ (SE= .07). Colleges may consider the potential value in involving practitioners more in the audit process as a valuable professional development activity.

The Individual Difference

The final aspect of the statistical analysis was to gain an understanding of whether background characteristics of practitioners impacted on their responses to their environment and on their practices. The *absence* of relationships was more informative than were the few significant relationships. These included no significant relationships between: i) teaching qualifications and practice; (ii) location and practice; (iii) age; and (iv) length of service. These findings are not presented in this paper. There is more to the VET side story.

In Summary

The challenge for the Australian post-secondary sector, presented by Bloomfield in 2006: ...the concurrent need to provide a supply of passionate, innovative, flexible, context-responsive teachers capable of functioning as creative, knowledge producers; and at the same time to satisfy the demands of a political and policy climate that favours consistency, coherence, standards, measureable outcomes and control, to meet the goals of efficiency, effectiveness and accountability (p. 1),

is now the reality.

The dominant competence of an organisation is determined entirely by the competencies of the individuals within it. These competencies drive the organisation's response to environmental influences (Wright & Snell, 1991). The TAFE sector, as we know it in WA, is facing possibly its greatest challenges. In 2010, the 'TAFEWA' and 'TAFE' badging will be replaced and this heralds increasing competition not only between former TAFE colleges but between all providers for public funding, commercial activity and industry/employer partnerships. Further to the Bradley review, a unitary or more closely articulated higher education sector will demand a level of accountability well beyond that which was introduced by the AQTF.

This study suggests that change management must focus not only on professional development at the practitioner level but also at the management and leadership levels of the organisation. The results illustrate also the potential to use operational activities such as internal audits and staff meetings to be more constructively and productively in order to engage, support, recognise and develop staff.

The value of a national quality platform is in its perceived relevance. The results of this study also highlighted the pivotal role of management support for practitioners, particularly in appreciating the relevance of the AQTF to their academic practices. Unless this is communicated and shared by all in the organisation, and applied with energy and commitment, the VET sector will not sustain its status in Australian society nor in a unitary or more articulated higher education sector. The AQTF 2010 is pending.

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