

Delivering high-quality VET: what matters to RTOs?

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About the research

Delivering high-quality VET: what matters to RTOs?

Hugh Guthrie, Lusid Pty Ltd; Melinda Waters, d'Novo Consulting

A priority for governments is ensuring public confidence in the quality and value of vocational education and training (VET) available to learners throughout their lives. The delivery of high-quality teaching, learning and assessment is an important element of this and is known to directly impact on outcomes for students. However, little research has examined what high-quality training delivery looks like in practice and how it might be measured.

Based on consultations with registered training organisations (RTOs) from the public, private, adult and community education (ACE), and enterprise segments of the sector, this research investigated how the quality of delivery in VET is currently defined and measured. It also set out to identify the barriers to high-quality delivery, as well as approaches that might better encourage and sustain high-quality delivery into the future.

Key messages

- The definition of high-quality VET delivery differs among RTO types, depending on their purposes, missions and goals, their student types, the courses and qualifications they offer, and the context in which they operate.
- The key principles underpinning a definition of high-quality delivery in VET, which are common across the RTOs participating in this project, are that it is:
 - transformational: how well students are achieving
 - student-centred: how well students are supported and encouraged to learn
 - fit for purpose: how well stakeholders' needs and purposes are met
 - evolutionary: how well delivery adapts to changing stakeholder and workplace needs.
- The size and type of an RTO influences the ability to define and measure the quality of VET provision.
 - Quality appears to be most easily described and measured in enterprise-based RTOs, smaller private RTOs and ACE providers, where the scope of delivery tends to be narrower and there is direct oversight of the teaching and learning environment. The resources and expertise required to collect and analyse data, however, can be limited in smaller RTOs.
 - Larger RTOs tend to have more resources to collect and analyse data, but monitoring quality in organisations supporting a broad spectrum of students with diverse backgrounds and needs, a large suite of courses and qualifications and multiple delivery sites, can be challenging.
- RTOs use a wide range of information and data to evaluate quality, including a mix of quantitative data, qualitative data, and information gained through informal ways.
- High-quality delivery depends on many factors, some of which are beyond the control of RTOs. The barriers identified by participating RTOs include a compliance view of quality, funding, the quality of training packages and difficulties in recruiting, developing and retaining teachers and trainers.

Simon Walker
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Executive summary

This report is the second part of a project investigating how the quality of delivery in vocational education and training (VET) in Australia is currently defined and measured, and how registered training organisations (RTOs) use and value measures of quality. The project also set out to identify the approaches that might be more effective in encouraging and sustaining high-quality VET delivery into the future. This report builds on the first component of the project (Guthrie & Waters 2021) and is focused on the views of RTOs from the public, private, adult and community education (ACE), and enterprise segments of the sector.

An emphasis on the views of RTOs is timely as they are the principal instruments for success for VET students, employers, industries and communities and in implementing the national reforms to the sector currently underway.

We use the term ‘delivery’ throughout this report to encapsulate all of the activity involved in producing high-quality learning experiences and outcomes for students; that is to say, not only the more visible teaching, learning and assessment practices, but also the wraparound administrative and support services that enable students to engage fully in learning, which include course planning, design and development. We use the terms ‘teacher’ and ‘trainer’ to apply to all of those who deliver VET courses and qualifications to students.

What quality means to RTOs

The RTOs with whom we interacted for this project, all of which are recognised for good and high-quality delivery, are strongly focused on improving learning experiences and outcomes for students and meeting their needs, along with those of employers (when employment outcomes are involved). This indicates that Harvey’s (2007) fitness-for-purpose view of quality – which judges quality on how well a product or service meets its stated purpose – is primarily driving their delivery efforts.

We also heard quality described by RTOs in more aspirational terms, such as ‘exceeding expectations’, ‘striving for excellence’ and adding ‘real’ value for stakeholders, particularly students. Comments such as these reflect Harvey’s exceptional (excellence) and transformational views of quality and suggest that both indicators are also motivating RTOs to do a good job. The transformational view in particular conceptualises quality as a process of change that adds a personal growth dimension to VET learning experiences. This leads to two notions of transformative quality: one that enhances learning experiences and outcomes for students and another that empowers those students to succeed in life (Harvey 2007).

The three views of quality (fitness-for-purpose, excellence and transformational) are moderated by the need for consistency (Harvey’s perfection view) and accountability (a value-for-money view). All of Harvey’s views of quality are valid and important to delivery in VET and are exemplified by what our informants told us. The challenge for RTOs is finding the right balance between them to meet their specific purposes and objectives. And this was the first important message we received during our consultations for this project: definitions of quality differ, or at least the emphasis does, across RTO types. The right balance for each depends on their purpose, mission and goals, their student types, the courses and qualifications they offer, and the context in which they operate.

Overall purpose has a strong bearing on how RTOs define quality. We found Euler’s (2013) three purposes of VET (the individual, social and economic) useful in demonstrating that, while all RTOs have a strong individual purpose (focused on students), some have a broader social purpose, whereas others have a

stronger economic (business) purpose. The balance between these purposes determines how they define and measure quality.

Size matters too. We found that the quality of delivery is most easily described and measured in enterprise-based RTOs, as well as in smaller private and ACE RTOs, most of which have narrow scopes of delivery and more direct oversight of daily teaching and learning activities and environments. Small size, however, means that fewer resources and expertise are available to implement the comprehensive data-collection and analysis systems used by larger RTOs to attain consistency in quality across multiple courses and delivery sites.

Large size also has its drawbacks, especially when RTOs service a broad spectrum of students from different backgrounds, offer a large suite of courses and qualifications, and have varying purposes and cultures across multiple delivery sites. This makes the job of describing, measuring and monitoring quality especially challenging and means that, for larger multi-purpose public and private RTOs, a one-size-fits-all approach to measuring quality of delivery by using aggregated results is not that useful, especially at course level.

When participating RTOs were asked to define high-quality delivery, their responses revealed common points of view, also confirming our earlier findings (Guthrie & Waters 2021). It was generally accepted that good-quality delivery:

- has a transformational aspect for students, in that it changes what they know and can do, and how they see themselves, to varying degrees
- is student-centred,¹ in that it motivates and supports students of all types to learn and achieve their purposes and aims
- prepares students for work (or other destinations) and for life
- develops an occupational identity, where applicable
- is closely tied to industry and the workplace
- meets the needs and expectations of employers, where applicable
- results in employment or other desired outcomes.

We conclude from our discussions with RTOs that the key features or principles defining high-quality delivery in VET can be summed up as:

- transformational: how well students are achieving and developing
- student-centred: how well students are supported and encouraged to learn
- fit for purpose: how well stakeholders' needs and purposes are met
- evolutionary: how well delivery adapts to changing stakeholder and workplace/industry needs.

The clear message from the participating RTOs is that high-quality delivery involves much more than contact hours between teachers, trainers and students. It depends on many dynamic factors, many of which are beyond their control, as their feedback in this report shows. They unanimously agree that

1 In our first paper we used Cedefop's (2015) description of learner-centred as meaning being responsive to learner interests and needs and slowly increasing their ability to be independent learners. This approach places an emphasis on learner outcomes, communication skills and capability for learning and is less reliant on teacher-led pedagogies.

highly capable and passionate teachers and trainers, with currency in their dual teaching and training and industry professions and engaged in continuing professional development (CPD), are absolutely key to high-quality delivery. They also confirmed the importance of RTO leaders and managers driving and supporting a culture of quality improvement and excellence to delivery quality.

How RTOs currently measure quality

Our participating RTOs use a wide range of information and data to gauge and evaluate the quality of delivery. These include:

- The impact of delivery on business aims, objectives and purpose: according to RTO type and operating environments
- The effectiveness of a course or qualification: measured by enrolments, the extent to which it met student purpose and employer needs, student achievement, completion rates and graduate outcomes
- The quality of learning experiences for students; levels of satisfaction, attendance, retention, attrition, engagement, student–teacher ratios and student support. The quality of facilities, equipment and organisational culture is also considered
- The impact of delivery on learning; student progress and achievement
- Engagement with employers and industry: their involvement in course design and delivery, satisfaction and confidence in an RTO and its students, employment of graduates and work-placement students, repeat business and recommendations to other employers
- The capability of teachers, trainers and others supporting delivery: level of qualification, industry currency, participation in CPD, levels of satisfaction and engagement with students, in some cases at a team level but mostly at an individual level.

Our discussions with RTOs revealed that the most important aspects of delivery quality are students' performance, experience, engagement, satisfaction and progression towards their goals, as well as their personal growth and wellbeing.

Many well-known quality measures are used collectively and over time to evaluate current delivery performance and performance trends. The larger RTOs tend to focus on quantitative data, collected through sophisticated systems (mostly online), while also making good use of qualitative information, collected formally via surveys and other means. Smaller RTOs tend to place more reliance on less-formal qualitative information, to 'keep a finger on the pulse' of delivery quality on a daily basis, obtaining the information largely through observation, casual conversations, word of mouth and gauging the 'the vibe' of a learning environment.

The value of this wide range of information to the RTOs lies in its immediate relevance to specific students and its ability to highlight emerging issues, flagging the need for appropriate action to address the issues. While longer term and wide-ranging data can show performance trends, anecdotal information, although often not recorded or reported externally, can tell a richer story of students' experiences and the quality of learning environments – as well as the factors enabling or constraining their progress – than more formal and standardised measures of delivery quality.

Irrespective of how RTOs collect data on delivery quality, all those we interviewed use the information to paint a comprehensive picture of learning environments and how they are impacting on their students, including how well they are progressing and barriers or impediments to learning. How RTOs interpret and use this information to improve delivery is a hallmark of their quality performance (Ofsted 2014).

Benchmarking, observation and peer review of delivery practices are valuable approaches to quality improvement for some RTOs but are not used systemically. Expanding this capacity will be critical to improving quality assurance across the sector. Networks and communities of practice are used systematically and are effective in building delivery capability and quality.

Challenges to delivery quality

The RTOs interviewed for this project are finding it difficult to deliver high-quality learning experiences and outcomes for students within the current regulatory, policy and industry environment. The common challenges of concern to them (and crucial for some) are:

- Funding; specifically formulae, levels, duration of contracts and inconsistencies between jurisdictions
- compliance-driven regulation, with multiple regulatory bodies; for example, VET regulatory bodies, industry bodies and jurisdictional contract managers
- the quality of training packages (when seen as too prescriptive and not meeting their purpose), coupled with the significant cost and effort associated with updates to remain 'compliant'
- difficulties in recruiting, developing and retaining teachers and trainers, especially attracting industry professionals into teaching roles and professional development for casual and part-time teachers and trainers. Working conditions and initial and ongoing teaching qualifications remain major issues.

Some of these challenges are the focus of reforms currently underway being led by the Commonwealth Department of Education, Skills and Employment (DESE), including the development of a VET Workforce Quality Strategy; the transition to self-assurance by the Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA) in response to the Rapid review (mpconsulting 2020); and reviews of VET pricing arrangements and costs of delivery across jurisdictions, being conducted by the National Skills Commission (NSC). These reforms are welcomed by the RTOs we consulted due to the opportunities they will provide for: building effective quality systems, tailored to their specific operations, missions, purposes and delivery circumstances; improving funding arrangements; and relieving what they see as a disproportionate amount of time, effort and resources devoted to compliance. This compliance focus does not accord with their efforts to improve quality through innovation, collaboration and capability-building initiatives.

Ways forward

The participating RTOs offered several suggestions to assist them to provide high-quality delivery into the future. These include, at a system level:

- Establishing a national VET body to coordinate, promote and support high-quality delivery
- Developing a genuine approach to quality assurance, one based on trust that proven RTOs will continue doing a good job, while actively supporting others to improve
- Developing funding models and formulae that support and incentivise efficient but excellent delivery
- Taking greater heed of the learnings from VET's significant body of research, conducted by experts and practitioners, to inform policy reforms.

At an RTO level, we found many examples of good and excellent quality practices that could be shared more broadly across the VET sector, especially as RTOs prepare for quality self-assurance. These include:

- building a culture of quality improvement within RTOs
- using good data for short-term quality improvements

- building a longer-term evidence base of high-quality delivery at RTO and system level, particularly for use by smaller RTOs
- fostering greater collaboration and partnerships between RTOs to facilitate the sharing and benchmarking of good practices and innovation in delivery for specific student groups and learning environments
- improving workforce recruitment, retention and development strategies.

This report notes that, despite best intentions over many years, substantive improvement and change in VET delivery has been difficult due to the sector's diversity, its many stakeholders (with divergent expectations) and an inherent inability to change (Guthrie 2021).² Many of the RTOs consulted expressed frustration and fatigue that the major issues impacting on delivery quality, especially those beyond their control, have not been adequately addressed, despite a long history of ongoing sectoral change. There is still only so much they can do to improve delivery quality in the current system.

VET's stakeholders are entitled to expect high quality in the delivery of VET, but we see real tensions between the sector's regulatory and bureaucratic requirements and demands on RTOs to be innovative, and flexible and responsive to the needs and objectives of a wide range of student and employer groups. The expectations for high-quality delivery, as some of our informants told us, are almost impossible to meet within current settings. From an RTO perspective, all aspects of VET's quality system need to work together to enable, encourage and sustain high quality.

2 Guthrie (2021) describes this inertia as an inability to make substantive changes to improve the sector despite good intentions to do so. The problem, he suggests, are piecemeal and short-term approaches to change, which have resulted in battles between jurisdictions and interest groups over whom has responsibility for implementing the changes.



Renewing focus on the quality of delivery

The current context

It is timely to have discussions with RTOs about the quality of delivery in the VET sector, given the recent disruptions to delivery due to the coronavirus pandemic, along with exploratory moves by VET's regulatory authority, the Australian Skills Quality Authority, towards self-assurance for RTOs with effective quality systems in place (ASQA 2020³), and reforms underway under the auspices of the Department of Education, Skills and Employment (2021a) and jurisdictions. After all, RTOs are the principal implementers of reforms and the foremost vehicles for fostering success for students, governments, industries and communities.

The 'Heads of Agreement Statement for Skills Reform' (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet 2020) includes reforms to: the role of industry and employers in the VET system; VET qualifications (DESE 2021b, 2021c); and, most relevant to this report, the quality of training at RTOs (DESE 2020). Reforms to improve the quality of training include strengthening quality standards; building RTO capacity and capability for continuous improvement; and developing a national VET workforce quality strategy. These reforms aim to support quality across the sector and enhance the capacity of RTOs for quality delivery. Work is underway to revise the *Standards for Registered Training Organisations 2015*, develop a workforce quality strategy, and establish a framework for quality improvement (DESE 2021d, 2021e)⁴. In addition to these reforms there is also a review of pricing arrangements of delivery across jurisdictions (National Skills Commission 2021).

Several reviews of VET over past years have raised concerns about the quality of delivery in VET, especially the quality of teaching and assessment and of training packages (Braithwaite 2018; Joyce 2019; mpconsulting 2020; Macklin 2020 [in Victoria]). Each of the reviews has highlighted a range of factors impeding delivery quality, some of which have intensified during recent pandemic lockdowns such as the quality of online delivery. One perennial challenge is the need to better define the characteristics of high-quality delivery in VET and to reconcile differing views across the sector about what quality really means (mpconsulting 2020).

While attempts have been made at various times to achieve this,⁵ questions about the real nature of quality remain unresolved. Stakeholders are still looking for a clearer definition to assist RTOs to reflect on and improve their performance (DESE 2021a, p.2).

Key points

- Quality in VET continues to have a significant policy focus, especially in teaching, training and assessment.
- A definition of delivery quality that fits all stakeholders remains elusive in VET.

3 This move is also supported by Recommendation 6.7 of the Macklin Review (Macklin 2020) and by Braithwaite (2018).

4 These activities were preceded by an issues paper titled, 'RTO quality: strengthening RTO standards and fostering excellence' (DESE 2020) and a series of consultations with stakeholders regarding what makes for high- or poor-quality training, what limits RTOs in delivering high-quality training and how effective the Standards for RTOs actually are for them.

5 See, for example, Misko, Guthrie & Waters (2021); Griffin (2017); Noonan & Condon (2013), Lucas, Spencer & Claxton (2012) and Blom & Meyers (2003).

This research project

This report is the second part of a project investigating the quality of delivery in VET and, more specifically, how it might be better defined and measured. The project was guided by the following questions:

- What are existing definitions and measures of quality in VET delivery?
 - What are the features or characteristics of high-quality delivery?
- How do RTOs use and value various measures of delivery quality?
- What approaches might better encourage and sustain high-quality delivery into the future?

The first component of the project (Guthrie & Waters 2021) examines the findings of a significant body of VET literature (some of which is historical) relating to these questions. This publication reports the views of a sample of RTOs across Australia selected from the Technical and Further Education (TAFE) and dual sector, private, adult and community education, and enterprise RTO (ERTO) segments of the sector, all of which are recognised for the quality of their delivery. We also obtained the views of VET experts, many of whom specialise in education quality in VET and/or in higher education.

Further detail on the methodology, including the selection process, number of interviewees and participating RTOs by type, is provided in appendix A. In both publications, we draw on Harvey's (2007) five views or dimensions of quality in higher education: the transformational view; the exceptional view; the perfection (or consistency) view; the fitness-for-purpose view; and the value for money view (table B1 in appendix B) and Euler's (2013) individual, social and economic dimensions of VET (also in appendix B) to frame the discussions. These dimensions also proved useful in guiding our conversations with RTOs.

This report culminates in a discussion about the possibility of a framework for high-quality delivery that could assist RTOs to improve delivery and to adopt quality assurance practices more broadly. It does not claim to represent the views of all RTOs, or that all RTOs will agree with its findings and recommendations. Industry and employers were not consulted for this project, but it is likely their views will be different – more focused on how well students and graduates are meeting their workforce needs, their level of return for their investment in VET, and the ease (or otherwise) of accessing and navigating the system.

A note about terminology

We use the term 'delivery' throughout both publications to encapsulate all the activities involved in producing high-quality learning experiences and outcomes for students; that is not only the more visible teaching, learning and assessment practices, but also the wraparound administrative and support services that enable students to engage fully in learning. We also use this term to challenge VET's preoccupation with assessment, which, while important, does not stand apart from the processes of teaching, training and learning or from program and resource design. We note this shift in ASQA's approach to quality in VET as well.

We acknowledge that the term 'delivery' is contentious among some RTOs, as it perpetuates an outdated understanding of teaching and training and needs to be conceptualised more broadly. We agree wholeheartedly with this sentiment but use it here, with a recommendation to discontinue its use, along with other outdated terms used in VET, described later in this report.

We use the terms 'teacher' and 'trainer' to describe individuals who teach and train in VET and to capture all the terms we encountered during our consultations and in the literature (such as 'educator', 'lecturer', 'practitioner' and 'facilitator'). According to some of the RTOs we talked to, the meanings ascribed to the two differ, and this is articulated in the data. The terms 'teaching' and 'training' are used similarly.



How RTOs define quality

General reflections on quality

In our discussions with RTOs, we found that most, if not all, aspire to high-quality or excellent delivery. Interviewees expressed their aspirations to exceed quality standards and the needs and expectations of students and employers, or at least to do their utmost, at all times, to ensure quality VET experiences and outcomes for both parties. This aspiration accords with Harvey's (2007) exceptional (excellence) view of quality in higher education.

Most of the RTOs agreed that high-quality delivery in VET is highly engaging for students, closely tied to industry and the workplace, establishes the foundations for life and work, and leads to employment (where possible) and/or further learning pathways, regardless of a student's academic ability. Good-quality delivery is generally described as flexible, inspiring, engaging, collaborative, continually improving and well-organised, and augmented by a range of support services for students. All of our interviewees highlight the importance of teachers and trainers who are, according to one RTO:

vocationally competent and current, immersed in their field of practice, committed to professional development, and able to use a range of different teaching and assessment methodologies and strategies and flexible delivery options to accommodate student preferences and needs. (TAFE)

These insights reflect the literature and the Australian Government's findings from recent stakeholder consultations (DESE 2021a, p.2).

Beyond these general indicators of quality, however, there are nuanced differences in what high-quality delivery means to individual RTOs, and these depend on the organisation's mission, types of students, delivery contexts, and purpose of a course and qualification. This is the first important message we received from RTOs: definitions of quality differ, or at least the emphasis does, across RTO types. For example, an RTO dedicated to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) students bases VET programs and delivery on Indigenous perspectives, traditions and values, and 'what our community and elders say they want and are interested in':

This affects the way students are involved, the processes we have and how we measure their effectiveness. It puts us in a very different position to other RTOs. (Private RTO)

In comparison, a large private RTO delivering a significant portion of courses and qualifications online describes delivery quality in terms of student engagement and how well they are progressing through their studies. For a small ACE RTO, if 'students are happy and engaged' and attending class, they know that the quality of delivery is good.

Views of delivery quality are thus dependent on the context in which an RTO is operating, its business mission and objectives, and the needs, expectations and desires of students and employers and other stakeholders. This fits Harvey's (2007) fitness-for-purpose view of quality, which judges quality on how

Key points

- Definitions of quality differ for RTOs and depend on their purpose, mission, student characteristics and operating context.
- Overall, high-quality delivery is highly engaging for students, closely tied to work, lays a foundation for life and leads to employment or another desired outcome.
- Teachers and trainers are major contributors to delivery quality.

well an organisation – in this instance, an RTO – fulfils its stated purpose and the needs and expectations of its stakeholders (including external regulatory and disciplinary expectations). We also found that views of quality differed within RTOs according to the role of individuals working within them and the program being delivered. For example, quality delivery from a management point of view, is necessarily focused on:

making sure we have all the technical documentation, mechanisms etc. in place as required by the regulatory body. We have a variety in place but they are not documents for documents' sake, they reflect true and purposeful ways to deliver to our students. That's how I look at the quality of delivery. (ACE RTO)

This might be described as a perfection (consistency) view of quality, which focuses on processes to 'get things right', according to set specifications (Harvey 2007), but still with the intention of attaining high quality. A teacher at the institution highlighted above describes good-quality delivery as:

being all about 'the vibe'. Even though it's a subjective thing, you can really get a sense of what's going on by walking around and observing the enthusiasm of students to come to class, their interaction with teachers, the teachers' interaction with them. To me, that subjective feeling is a great part of it. I don't know how this can be measured, but I think it is important. (ACE RTO)

For Harvey (2007), this teacher's view has a strong transformational dimension, one interested in enhancing learning experiences and empowering students to succeed. In our interviews, this view is most prominent in the ACE sector. When asked how the different views might be consolidated into a common definition of quality, the general feeling among the RTOs interviewed is that VET's 'broad church of delivery' makes this a very difficult task. For one respondent:

It is hard to get an answer that doesn't lean on the independent lens of the role people are playing or potentially their vested interest ... Governments think it is all about completion rates and maybe satisfaction rates and it is hard to get beyond those. (Private RTO)

To explore the nuanced differences in how quality is understood between RTOs, we looked more closely at how high-quality delivery is described for each provider type – their commonalities and differences.

TAFE RTOs

The TAFE sector can be distinguished by the large size of the many RTOs operating within it and by their direct accountability to their respective state or territory governments. TAFE institutes are committed to their jurisdiction's vision and mission for VET, which usually includes a social as well as an economic contribution to local communities. They are often large employers and purchasers of goods and services, as well as providers of skills for the workforce. The 'public good' element of TAFE expects RTOs to accommodate students from a wide range of cultural and socioeconomic groups and to offer a broad scope of courses and qualifications to meet local employer and community needs. This remit implies a longer involvement with students, beyond training 'just to get a job or to upskill' (TAFE).

The broad mission and diverse student base of TAFE is reflected in how quality was defined during our discussions. The institutes we talked to described delivery quality in terms of the student experience or journey from enrolment to employment or other desired outcomes, and beyond. As one CEO reflects:

People judge us as a service provider so we need to ask: did they get what they wanted and did they have a good experience doing that? We are interested in evaluating our performance at all touchpoints in the student journey. This means looking at all aspects of delivery, including teaching and assessing, and our underpinning systems and processes, such as IT connectivity, enrolment and support. (TAFE)

High-quality delivery was described as a four-prong process of: building constructive and inspiring learning environments and continually identifying ways to improve them; having industry at the core of program design; teachers and trainers who are current in their industry and in teaching; and meeting the purpose of ‘why students choose us’ (TAFE). Most importantly, delivery creates an ‘educational space’ around students that fulfils their learning and support needs.

Each of our student cohorts requires a different approach. For example, our apprentices already have exposure to industry but our [other] students don’t, so we need to adjust our delivery to suit.

(TAFE)

The challenge for many of the TAFE institutes we encountered is achieving consistency in delivery quality across multiple disciplines, locations and cultures. As one CEO commented:

When I look into the classroom, I see great teaching happening in migrant English, nursing, health and the trades, but then I see students asleep in the classroom in other areas and I wonder how we can get more consistency in what we do.

(TAFE)

Quality in this instance was evaluated by walking around and observing the ambience – or ‘vibe’, as expressed by an ACE respondent – in different classrooms. While this approach has real validity, it is hard to define in measurable terms.

Consistency is a complex challenge for large TAFE institutes and other multidisciplinary RTOs, because, as our discussions revealed, it can mean different things in different industries and in different delivery contexts, such as the workplace. It can also vary significantly as a consequence of the many factors that impact on it. In addition, some delivery areas within a large TAFE institute may support stronger systems for monitoring quality, or are delivering to students with higher academic capability, or have a different delivery culture. Even exceptional teaching:

can lead to false expectations if students have a teacher who goes over and above what is expected and sets high expectations for other teachers who may not reach those levels.

(TAFE)

For example:

We had students in one department realise they were not getting as good quality training and went to another campus because they had heard the teacher was really good. That was an eye-opener for us.

(TAFE)

The TAFE institutes we interviewed are focused on strengthening internal quality processes and data-collection systems to identify discrepancies in quality across delivery areas, especially those attuned to quality assurance systems in higher education.⁶ This is evident in the multiple surveys, forums and consultative work they undertake to obtain feedback from staff, students and employers and their efforts to convey the data to teachers and other practitioners to help them to improve their practice; for example:

We’ve been able to develop our systems and have become more sophisticated in our quality processes to focus more on continuous improvement of good practice. I’ve always had the view that we aim to be compliant on those things we have to, but to excel on the student experience and the quality of their journey.

(TAFE)

The institutes we interviewed appear to support well-developed systems and procedures focused on continuous improvement (to varying degrees). These include participation in established quality networks

6 Such as those registered as higher education providers (HEPS) or TAFE divisions of dual-sector universities.

within and across RTOs at state and national levels to share and benchmark knowledge, performance, good delivery practices and quality approaches. However, while the size, diversity of purpose and multiculturalism of individual TAFE RTOs are major assets to local communities, a one-size-fits-all approach to defining and measuring delivery quality based on aggregated results, is not particularly helpful to delivering quality improvements at a program level. Institutes need the flexibility and capability afforded by self-assurance to meet the needs of a diverse range of student groups effectively, and this requires an appropriate level of self-management and empowerment (Guthrie & Clayton 2010).

Private RTOs

While private RTOs can be large, most of those we spoke to are small, localised and specialised in the delivery of a relatively small number of programs and vocational disciplines. On the whole, we found that their smaller size and industry specialisation enables leaders, teachers, and support and administration staff to maintain a close watch on what is working or not for students on a daily basis, and to ‘shift things instantly for meaningful movements in quality metrics’ (Private RTO). The CEO of a small and specialised trade RTO explains:

The feedback loop is there because I’m working alongside the apprentices in tutorials and the trainers tell me what needs to be done to make things better. I see the areas we struggle in and can constantly work on them. (Private RTO)

Smaller size and industry specialisation are also helpful to building relationships with employers and industry bodies. In the RTOs interviewed, these groups are closely involved in course development and delivery, through advisory boards, training or assessment roles and work-placement programs for students. This means, as one reflected, that local employers ‘always know what we are doing and how well we are doing it’ (Private RTO). It also keeps RTOs highly attuned to local demand for courses and qualifications, especially in fee-for-service (FFS) and non-accredited VET markets.⁷ Several references were made to recent growth in these areas; for example, one regional private RTO now has:

twice as many students in our FFS non-accredited programs because they have astronomically better outcomes for students and industry. (Private RTO)

High-quality delivery in this sector is defined largely in terms of employment outcomes for students and employers. Its purpose is to help students to ‘be as good as they possibly can be’ in the job for which they are training, which involves:

giving them a good sense of what the industry is about by basing training on its core values and what it means to be a good worker. (Private RTO)

These definitions demonstrate a desire to develop a student’s professional identity as well as competence in an industry discipline.

Quality, for the private RTOs we spoke to, means satisfied students and employers (as it does for all categories of RTO interviewed). However, their relationships with employers and students and their reputation are all-important to business success in competitive training markets, especially for those operating in regional areas.

⁷ This is also evident in NCVER’s 2018 paper Unaccredited training: why employers use it and does it meet their needs? (White, De Silva & Rittie 2018).

The larger private RTOs we interviewed are similarly focused on student experiences, progression and employment outcomes and, like the TAFE institutes, rely on good data to assure consistency in quality across multiple delivery areas. They also use data to select students ‘with a good chance of completing’ (Private RTO), who are then closely monitored throughout their course of study to gauge their levels of satisfaction, engagement and progression, in some cases, ‘down to the point where I can see where students are clicking [on the learning management system], how often they are clicking and how long they hover over a link’ (Private RTO). These measures, along with completions and employment outcomes, are important business imperatives.

You can’t measure everything. We have a huge amount of data available about student and trainer behaviour and progression rates ... When you have 100 000 students, you can drown in information and need really good data engineers to work out how to move the needle for students on things that are important to move. (Private RTO)

Adult and community education (ACE) RTOs

The ACE RTOs with which we had discussions are also small and specialised. Most are delivering accredited VET courses in aged care and early childhood education and care, as well as pre-accredited training for students prior to their enrolling in a VET qualification and during their study. Some are also registered providers of the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) and others are part of organisations that include independent secondary schools, Learn Locals (in Victoria), and/or neighbourhood houses. This delivery eco-system ensures that a range of ‘wraparound’ support services are available for students (such as youth workers, psychologists, counsellors and subsidised cafeterias and childcare centres) that might otherwise be unavailable in small standalone RTOs.

Wraparound services play a critical role in the quality of delivery for ACE RTOs, given that the majority of their students come from disadvantaged backgrounds, or are disengaged from mainstream education or are mature people needing language, literacy and numeracy (LL&N) and other learning and personal support. Hence, the ACE sector, similar to TAFE and some of the private RTOs we interviewed, has a strong social dimension to its mission, as one RTO explains:

We believe there is a space for education programs for young people outside mainstream schools. There are a lot of young people who fall through the cracks and if we can pick them up it helps solve a lot of problems. We are talking about young people who face disadvantage ... that’s always a challenge and then there are lots of mental health and drug and alcohol issues. These young people have complex issues and need lots of support, pastoral care and attention (ACE RTO)

Consequently, class sizes are often small in this sector – sometimes as few as eight students in some RTOs interviewed – to allow teachers and trainers enough time to support students during their studies. This can be stressful for teachers and other RTO staff members, especially when students have complex needs and/or experience triggering events.

High-quality delivery in this sector is defined as helping students to move to their preferred destination or to a pathway to further learning. It is also described as preventing ‘anyone from falling through the gaps’ and keeping students as happy and engaged as possible (ACE RTO). Quality starts with careful pre-training assessment to ensure ‘we know our students, what their needs are and that this is this the right course for them’, and then:

it’s all about how well a teacher can build an initial connection with the student and show real care in welcoming them and making sure they are aware of the support they need. We check in with them

across their programs to make sure. Then it is about good consistent delivery especially face-to-face because this is what our students crave. (ACE RTO)

If students are not ready for a course, they are given other options such as pre-accredited, lifestyle or foundation courses, which are also offered alongside a certificate II or III qualification as additional support.

Close relationships with employers are also important drivers of quality for the ACE RTOs interviewed, especially for qualifications requiring work placement and workplace assessment. Some indicated that they are producing very good employment outcomes. The quality part, one interviewee explained:

is when the employer says our students are really good; that they knew what they were doing and understood their stuff. This is the most honest feedback we get because employers are realistic and compare us with other RTOs. (ACE RTO)

ACE providers generally, however, are not as reliant on employment outcomes as a key measure of delivery quality, since this may not be the motivation of their students, or it may take some time for students to achieve. One RTO explains:

For those with academic ability, getting them into a vocational program with links to employment is important. For others, an outcome might be a supported employment place or placement with another provider who can support them a bit longer than we do. Students who do not have the skills they need to move on when they finish a qualification may need to re-enrol. (ACE RTO)

Similar to smaller private RTOs, the RTOs we talked to in this sector rely heavily on anecdotal information (as well as more formal measures) to monitor the quality of delivery and, importantly, the progress and welfare of students. Teachers and trainers are in constant contact with students and each other, which means they ‘start to hear whispers pretty quickly’ and gain a good understanding of what is happening (ACE RTO).

We heard several examples of high-level collaboration among ACE RTOs and teachers and trainers, of sharing and benchmarking good delivery practices for specific student cohorts, learning and assessment resources and quality improvement approaches. We also noted that the quality of facilities is not necessarily a mark of quality delivery. Indeed, making learning environments ‘homely’ and welcoming is more important to the quality of learning for their students, who often feel uncomfortable in formal education settings.

Enterprise RTOs

We spoke to three large enterprise RTOs (ERTOs), two of which are delivering across several jurisdictions, while the third delivers within one state. All operate in different industries and, despite their size, have narrow scopes of delivery, comprising just one to three VET qualifications and numerous short and specialised courses designed to meet specific skill needs. Notably, they are based within an organisation (the defining feature of this sector) and therefore align the design and delivery of VET courses and qualifications directly with business missions, goals and objectives. This was the most direct relationship between VET and the workplace we encountered during our consultations. According to an ERTO respondent, this has many advantages:

The first is marrying theory with practice. Our educators are putting theory into practice every day and we see a big uplift in student capability as they progress through their qualification. They also progress into leadership positions quickly and become a senior educator. (ERTO)

The second is that ERTOs have a pretty clear picture of what high-quality delivery needs to look like, as the following quote from one in a volunteer organisation illustrates:

In our organisation, we cannot afford to have someone who is not competent because people might die. Therefore, we need to have a really clear picture of what competence means and our assessment tools and processes have to capture the right evidence. (ERTO)

For this ERTTO, external industry regulations take priority over training packages in course design and delivery.⁸ The knowledge, skills and capabilities a student (volunteer) needs to do the job at the required level are identified first and then mapped to fit relevant units of competency. The result is often ‘well above’ what is stipulated in the units.

The third advantage relates to the nature of the ERTTO itself: because delivery is aligned with the ERTTO’s business policies and expectations, students generally receive consistent information and quality in training wherever they are working in the organisation. As most delivery occurs on the job from trainers and assessors who work in the same organisation (although external assessors are brought in at times), traineeships are popular VET models, supported by workplace supervisors who monitor and report student progress. The close proximity of ERTTOs to their industry:

happens organically for us. It also means our trainers and assessors regularly go back on the floor to carry out day-to-day routines in our centres to keep up their industry currency. They can do more if they feel they need or want to find gaps they would like to address. They also stay current by working in the industry and talking to other practice teams first-hand. (ERTO)

High-quality delivery, as one ERTTO describes, is about preparing people for a particular type of work and finding the right balance between all of the elements that contribute to it. In the end, it’s the practical application on the job that defines it. Consistency in delivery quality is a common theme (as it is for other large RTOs) and, for the ERTTOs we spoke to, is reliant on strong collaboration between trainers and assessors:

This is critical because of our large volume. We have to make sure we talk to each other. We also need to be functioning well to start with as an organisation, making sure we have suitable training and assessment strategies to meet needs of our trainees and staff. (ERTO)

Assessment is kept separate from training in all three ERTTOs, because, as was explained, assessors may see what the trainers might not. Industry experts underpin the quality of course design and delivery and are brought in to confirm that students can perform as required:

The voice of industry experts is all-important. Decisions of what competency looks like comes out of a long joint process of designing and continuously improving assessment tools. We rely on those [industry experts] with a lot of experience to come up with a picture with correct scenarios and different questions. This is always changing because things pop up all the time in our industry that add to what needs to be learned and demonstrated. (ERTO)

According to the ERTTOs interviewed, the advantages of ERTTO delivery are not well understood by regulatory authorities in terms of quality risk. They see the risk as minimal because poor-quality delivery would, in the end, harm their business. Data are collected and used extensively to evaluate the impact of training on business to prevent this from occurring:

We need data on three areas from our quality assurance system: industry, students and business impact to show how an increase in skills and knowledge in students has assisted the business (e.g. profitability, safety etc.). We have to prove our training is fit for purpose with zero defects for our COO [Chief Operating Officer] to be happy with how training is going. (ERTO)

⁸ That is, if the training isn’t right and their teachers and trainers are not properly trained, people can die.



How RTOs measure and monitor delivery quality: current metrics

We asked RTOs to explain how they know they are doing a good job in delivering VET to students. Almost all cited positive student and employer feedback; strong relationships with employers; the desired outcomes for students (employment and other destinations); high rates of attendance, engagement and progression through their studies; and highly skilled teachers (with strong backgrounds in industry and in contemporary teaching practices) as indicators that delivery is likely to be up to standard.

The types of jobs that students are finding, repeat business from employers (return for more training or to recruit trainees and graduates) and success in re-registration audits (as an objective, independent indicator) were also mentioned. All of these align with commonly used quality measures identified in the literature. As one RTO explained:

Think of it like a big pie. There's a bit for results, a little bit for attendance, a bit for student evaluations, a little bit for teacher evaluations and a little bit for auditing results, which in my pie would be a small part.

(ACE RTO)

Measures tailored more specifically to RTO type include, for the ACE sector, personal growth and development of students; for TAFE institutes and some private RTOs, their contribution to local community development; and for ERTOS, external validation of assessment in some industries and the business impact of training. All the RTOs we spoke to use data and information to build a comprehensive picture of delivery quality throughout the student life cycle or learning journey. Regular internal audits are undertaken to monitor their performance against these and other external quality indicators.

Full-time teams devoted to quality improvement are a feature of the TAFE institutes and larger private RTOs we spoke to. These are focused principally on improving teaching, learning and assessment practices and on resource development and student support services. Some, particularly non-government RTOs, employ external consultants to assist with compliance, especially with state and territory funding contracts, or have full-time quality teams dedicated to this and to overall quality improvement.

As noted earlier, smaller RTOs often rely on anecdotal information to monitor delivery quality and to pinpoint any issues meriting improvement. This is achieved by tapping into teachers' knowledge of their students (who is doing well and who is not and what the problems may be) and into teachers' industry networks to determine where students are working and how they are progressing in their careers and through 'corridor conversations' with staff, students and support professionals (youth workers, counsellors etc.). The value of anecdotal or tacit information lies in its immediacy and its signalling of problems that need to be investigated further. Monitoring the atmosphere or mood of learning environments – the enthusiasm of students to come to class, the interaction with the teachers and the teachers' interaction with them – is also a useful quality-assessment tool:

To me, that subjective feeling is a great part of it. Sometimes this is reflected in the objective side when we have students and teachers who are keen to come to class [attendance rates] and are happy.

(ACE RTO)

These approaches are also utilised by larger RTOs at local levels, but the information is not necessarily formally recorded as far as we could ascertain, nor is it reported externally.

Most of the RTOs we interviewed collaborate with peers to monitor quality through validation, information-sharing and benchmarking activities. However, this is not easy due to contextual and profile differences, as two RTOs explain:

We benchmark with RTOs with high numbers of people from non-English-speaking backgrounds. We also do external validation with other community colleges, but they become incredibly complicated because the cohorts are so different ... we did some stuff with an RTO with clients aged between 18 and 24, all with generational unemployment and all English speaking. Our students were Chinese born, all highly educated and had no issues with numeracy but were not so good at oral communication. It was completely different contexts even though we were delivering the same qualification. (ACE RTO)

We've always struggled with benchmarking because there is not another college like ours. We can't benchmark against anyone else. It would be good to benchmark with others in other jurisdictions but we tried that with a college in Victoria but that was difficult too due to different parameters and contractual arrangements. (TAFE)

The quality measures of most interest to the RTOs we spoke to are discussed in detail below.

Student satisfaction

To monitor satisfaction, student feedback is commonly collected via focus groups and internal surveys at various points (usually at the start, mid-way and end of a course or at the end of a subject or group of subjects). RTOs also make use of NCVER's and other external surveys – which are valued for the data that RTOs do not collect internally – for validating quality decisions based on internal data, or for benchmarking against other RTOs where they can. External surveys have their limitations, however, as discussed later in this section.

For the RTOs interviewed, the aim of surveying students regularly is to identify problems quickly and to implement changes 'while our students are still with us' (TAFE). They want to know whether:

- training is meeting or has met student needs and expectations at particular times and how it can be improved (Private RTO)
- students are happy, engaged and progressing (ACE RTO)
- any problems or trends are occurring for specific students or student groups and why (TAFE)
- they are delivering what they say they will (TAFE)
- the purpose for which a student chooses a qualification has been met (TAFE).

Online surveys allow students to provide feedback anonymously if they prefer and make it easier for RTOs to sort the collected data by teacher or trainer, course and location. Surveys are also used to determine levels of student engagement and 'sense of belonging and personal growth:

We look at how engaged students are in learning, how engaged they are with each other, how satisfied they are and how satisfied their carers and parents are too because they are big factors in the mix. (ACE RTO)

Complaints in particular provide rich feedback for RTOs because they identify precisely what is not being done well and how it might be improved. Exit interviews are also useful.

Focus groups were mentioned as a way to gather more immediate feedback, to have discussions with students and to cross-pollinate their ideas for improvements across different delivery areas. We were

told that these tend to be more effective when external facilitators⁹ are used and when an RTO contacts students a few weeks later to let them know how their concerns are being addressed. Social media was also mentioned as a way to bring students together to discuss quality issues publicly or privately.

Once analysed, the information gained from surveys and focus groups is relayed back to teaching teams to enable them to identify, plan and implement opportunities for improvement. Individual teachers and trainers are encouraged to discuss feedback with mentors or academic leaders as part of their continuing professional development (CPD). In some RTOs, teachers and trainers can invite peers in to observe and provide feedback (TAFE). That said, we gleaned that teacher and trainer review by peers or by teaching experts is not always a welcome option, which can affect the extent to which issues are addressed locally. Internal surveys are also used by participating RTOs to monitor teacher satisfaction and overall organisational health and to highlight issues impacting on the quality of delivery, such as staff morale and a lack of professional development due to casualised working conditions or administrative issues.

Employer satisfaction

Employer feedback is similarly obtained via surveys, forums, focus groups and casual conversations to monitor their satisfaction and confidence in how well an RTO's delivery is enabling students to 'function well in their workplace' (TAFE). Measures used to monitor employer satisfaction include repeat business, the number of referrals given to other employers and the involvement of industry in delivery and assessment (such as guest speakers, industry excursions, work placements and partnerships).

Student engagement and progression

Levels of student engagement and rates of progression and retention are critically important, not only as indicators of satisfaction, but also because they are linked to attendance and completion rates, which, in turn, can be tied to funding. This is a substantial issue for ACE providers in particular when:

Just getting here can be an issue for students. If you have young people with social anxiety and they are turning up, that is a massive achievement. (ACE RTO)

Similarly, for RTOs delivering to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students:

there is such a bad history with education and training. A lot of our students are older and have limited education. We try hard to get them to attend but we can lose a whole class if someone passes [dies]. This has a ripple effect on everything. (Private RTO)

RTOs monitor student attendance, progression, retention and attrition rates not only because they 'are telling you something' about quality (Private RTO), but also because they impact directly on class sizes, revenue, business performance and reputation. Attendance levels can be an early indicator of both declining and improving engagement and have flow-on effects on progression and completions. Several RTOs explained that they make use of data obtained from their learning management systems to gain insights into what is happening with attendance, progression and completion metrics and what is and isn't functioning well.

⁹ That is, external to the immediate course area, but not necessarily outside the provider. Perceived independence is an issue in getting true and frank feedback.

Teacher and trainer capability and currency

We were told that some RTOs are going to extreme lengths to monitor and measure the currency, competency and level of qualification of teachers and trainers, through the use of skills matrices, capability frameworks and/or teaching standards, and elaborate systems to monitor their participation in CPD, including industry currency activities. Industry currency has become a prized quality indicator, both in recruitment and in CPD for teachers and trainers; for example:

This is really important and our reputation depends on it. If we don't have it, industry is not interested. In many cases these days, I don't care if new teachers don't have the Certificate IV in TAE [Training and Assessment] already, as long as they have industry currency, then we can give them the Cert IV and train them to teach well. It's a slower process but in the current environment, it's what we have to do. (TAFE)

Concerns about current metrics

Most of the concerns expressed about the metrics used to measure delivery quality relate to how well they account for the diversity of students and delivery environments; for example:

Existing tools and metrics are framed for a particular demographic and do not cater for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. If you an Indigenous kid from Sydney or Coffs Harbour, for example, the metrics don't speak to what is a good learning experience for you. (Private RTO)

There is a perception among participating RTOs that measuring quality in VET is oriented towards quantitative input and output measures (such as completions and employment rates etc.) rather than qualitative measures, which can provide complementary and deeper insights into delivery quality. The value of the professional judgment of teachers came into this conversation. While both types of measures are valuable to RTOs, qualitative data are, we observe, more aligned with quality as excellence, fitness for purpose and transformation (Harvey 2007).

RTOs fully acknowledge, however, that qualitative feedback can be compromised. We heard examples of student feedback being skewed by socio-cultural factors (such as those preventing students from making a complaint) and feedback from employers being biased (for example, if they don't like a student when employed or in work placement; they don't understand training packages or find it difficult to navigate the sector). Over-surveying students was also raised as a significant concern, as was the unreliability of results when student numbers or response rates are low. In addition:

What's the baseline? What is the methodology used to collect data and build a quality process? Otherwise, it is a snapshot at a particular point in time. (TAFE)

External surveys, such as NCVER's Student Outcomes Survey and surveys administered by the jurisdictions, are critiqued for being too long and complicated to enable many VET students to provide considered feedback. In particular, the language used in survey instruments is seen as too complex for those with medium to low levels of English language. Talking to these students is often a more fruitful approach. RTOs are also concerned that external surveys report historical results, which, while useful for validating quality decisions, do not necessarily reflect change in an RTO, or the process of change in response to more immediate and nimble data collection. They also 'lump all students together to get an average' (TAFE), which does not necessarily help larger RTOs to monitor delivery quality across multiple program areas, as mentioned earlier; an issue was also highlighted by Misko (2017). One RTO expressed concerns that external surveys, without context, become more of a popularity contest:

As an educator, one of the best things I can do is to tell someone they are not competent when they are not and encourage them to go back to study. The problem is that this doesn't lead to great rapport with

employers. For example, I had four apprentices hand in the same test, which was a clear case of academic misconduct. I told their employers that they have do the unit again, which was one of the worst PR exercises I had all year. I hate to think what happened when the government surveyed those apprentices and employers. As educators we did the right thing but I wonder how much that is really captured and appreciated ... I do however get a very good idea of which trainers are popular (Private RTO)

Some of the interviewed RTOs consider that feedback from internal surveys, including those administered to employers, is not valued enough by regulatory authorities. RTOs highly value this feedback in their quality efforts but they feel it is not valued by auditors unless collected externally. Resolving this issue could be critical to self-assurance.

Employment outcomes are a priority measure for most RTOs, but not so much for those delivering to students who are disadvantaged, those not interested in getting a job, those unable or not ready for work or those who are living in areas where jobs are scarce. While VET is critically important to these students, expectations of immediate employment are not always realistic and can mask a much larger, but less obvious, story about their learning experiences and the impact of delivery on personal growth and confidence. As one RTO explains:

Success can be a subjective judgement depending how they [the students] see it. If they see success as being gainfully engaged in learning and don't have the intent to work, we can't view getting a job as a quality measure. We talk to our trainers instead about participation, completion and progression rates and how much they are engaged in class discussions etc. (ACE RTO)

RTOs also flagged that reliance on employment rates for a particular course or qualification does not take into account the type of job a student obtains, its relevance to the training undertaken and the time taken to obtain the desired employment. When and how often employment outcomes are measured after a student completes their course or qualification are relevant and important, as is information about the labour market where students are trying to get a job, as Misko (2017) found.

Completions, while a useful measure of student success, do not take into account the extent to which a course or qualification met its purpose or fulfilled a specific personal interest or need for students or the impact it had on them. For example, a student may not want to complete a full course or qualification or may need more time to complete it or want to change to a different course. In addition, high completions on their own do not necessarily indicate high quality 'when RTOs down the road sell certificates to the highest bidder' (Private RTO). Equally, low completion rates do not necessarily indicate low quality, as the ACE sector and pandemic lockdowns have demonstrated.

The downside in the drive for detailed measures of teacher and trainer industry currency is a concern that an inability to prove industry currency may have regulatory consequences. It also appears that a disproportionate effort is being put into record-keeping which can be at the expense of developing and maintaining overall delivery capability, especially when RTOs believe they need to demonstrate industry currency at unit of competency level. It was pointed out to us that industry professionals would not be subject to these measures.

The concerns raised by RTOs suggest that current indicators of delivery quality, particularly those used externally, are not capturing the full picture of quality for different types of students and are obscuring a much richer story. Much goes on in the background that is not necessarily captured by baseline quality measures such as requisite student contact hours.

What is not measured

The indicators of quality that participating RTOs are not using systematically, but were raised during our discussions as important to delivery quality, include:

- the effort expended by RTOs 'to not leave anyone behind' (Private RTO)
- the longitudinal effectiveness of delivery beyond post-assessment validations to determine student performance in the workplace down the track (TAFE)
- the amount of networking and collaboration RTOs undertake to support quality improvement (ACE RTO)
- the transformational aspect of learning and personal growth (for example, students' perceptions of their learning at the start and end of their course) (ACE RTO, TAFE)
- increases in demand in the provision of student support services by students with mental health, anxiety and other issues (TAFE)
- partnerships with industry and other RTOs for innovation and applied research (TAFE)
- the subjective qualities that underpin high-quality teaching and training (such as passion, care, motivation and setting high expectations for students) (all RTOs)
- the real cost of good and high-quality delivery (all RTOs).



Challenges to delivery quality

The VET literature historically contains a great deal of commentary on the challenges RTOs face, both internally and externally, in delivering high quality. These are explored in detail in our first paper (Guthrie & Waters 2021) and we summarise them briefly in appendix B. While there is much an RTO can do to improve the quality of delivery at a local level, the literature shows that many challenges sit beyond their control yet impact on how readily they can act to improve the quality of delivery.

While many of these challenges are being addressed by the national reforms currently underway, we report them here from the perspective of the RTOs participating in this research. They point to six main challenges to delivery quality.

A compliance view of quality

The biggest challenge for our interviewed RTOs (which received the strongest response across the board during consultations) is compliance with the current regulations, standards and contractual requirements. They raised two key issues: compliance does not necessarily equate with high-quality delivery; and the associated burden of providing documented evidence of compliance works against their efforts to provide good quality. Too much effort is focused on the ‘bare quality minimum’. While RTOs appreciate the importance of regulation to quality and the sector’s reputation, the disproportionate amount of time, effort, focus and resources required for compliance interferes with their efforts to improve delivery quality:

We need to bust the myth that quality means or equates to compliance, especially assessment. Instead, we need to ask: is the training and courseware meaningful for students, fit-for-purpose and relevant to industry and then ask how do I put this on a quality assurance dashboard. (TAFE)

We heard that the workloads for teachers and trainers associated with compliance allow no time (or incentive) for them to undertake the type of delivery they need and want to; to talk about teaching and how to improve it; and to spend time with students, especially those who most need their assistance. According to one manager, this is impacting on the quality of the student experience, from enrolment through to learning and assessment. Some RTOs report that teachers and trainers are returning to jobs in industry because of the extra workloads. Others report that a fear of non-compliance is driving their staff to ‘stay within safe boundaries’ and to continually align their practices with what they think ASQA might require, for example:

After our ASQA audit, many teachers wanted to redevelop their assessment tools to be word by word compliant with each unit of competency. We don’t want that. We want the student experience and industry requirements to be at the centre of what they do. (TAFE)

We heard that it is very difficult to innovate and experiment with new delivery practices in what is seen as a tight regulatory environment, as three RTOs explain:

We have a really digitally smart teacher who developed QR codes to support students with online assessments during COVID. But to get our compliance team to consider this as a new way of doing things was incredibly challenging because they didn’t want to risk changing anything. (ACE RTO)

We don’t let teachers do anything without it passing through compliance. If they want to make any changes to learning and assessment materials, it goes through our compliance team. This dulls their creativity and passion and stops them from wanting to do anything new or better.

(Private RTO)

We have the best trainers, who have excellent industry knowledge and engagement with students. For them to be passionate about dotting I's and T's – they are not, and it drives the passion out of people.
(ACE RTO)

While the RTOs interviewed acknowledge that regulatory authorities and those administering state and territory government funding contracts are listening to their concerns and things are improving, they still report immediate and crippling administrative and regulatory burdens. These are compounded for RTOs with multiple contracts across jurisdictions who need to report essentially the same information in different ways to different authorities – in addition to the requirements of ASQA and other quality regulators.¹⁰

The problem with a compliance mentality is that RTOs who have demonstrated their effectiveness – at least some of those we interviewed – perceive this as a lack of trust by authorities in what they do. This, according to one, is evident in comparisons between higher education teachers and VET teachers and trainers:

Higher education teachers are more trusted to do their work, whereas VET educators are not. They are much more controlled and constrained and limited in what they feel they would and could do because they are fearful of the regulator.
(Private RTO)

Interviewees revealed that VET teachers and trainers feel their professional judgment is not trusted, valued or respected due to an environment of fear and low trust in VET. This culture, as Professor Braithwaite (2018, p.30) warns, is likely to drive RTOs and their teachers and trainers 'to seek refuge in formulaic compliance' to satisfy regulators. Yet, as Harvey (2006) writes, good quality assurance is premised on governments having strong trust in training providers. It also depends on a culture of trust within (Ofsted 2014) and across RTOs, although this is difficult to achieve in highly competitive training environments.

Uncertain and inadequate funding

Another pressing issue for all of the RTOs interviewed is funding – both the amount required to support good-quality delivery and the duration of funding contracts. We heard numerous cases of inadequate and short-term funding impacting on the ability of RTOs to offer high-quality delivery and to dedicate the appropriate resources for future delivery. Some told us that funding has not increased in real terms for years, while demands from students have increased their costs of delivery significantly. These RTOs continue to deliver courses and qualifications regardless, often relying on the good will of their staff and employers and, in some cases, retired volunteer industry professionals to 'see them through' tight funding situations (Private RTO).

The sudden capping of trainee numbers in some regional jurisdictions also raises barriers to quality, especially when employers rely on a steady stream of new staff in tight labour markets. RTOs operating in competitive fee-for-service markets (largely the private RTOs in our study) tell us they are limited in how much they can charge for VET courses, given that students and employers are often looking for the cheapest and shortest options available.

The impact of inadequate funding on delivery quality is unambiguous in the interview data, evident in: VET's highly casualised teaching and training workforce; the lack of systematic CPD over time, especially

¹⁰ RTOs operating in all states and territories except for Victoria and Western Australia are regulated by ASQA. Those in Victoria and Western Australia are regulated by the Victorian Registration Qualifications Agency (VRQA) and the Training Accreditation Council (TAC), respectively, unless they deliver across domestic or international borders, in which case they are regulated by ASQA. RTOs that are also higher education providers (HEPs) are regulated by TEQSA. Some RTOs also adhere to relevant ISO standards (as this has a value in the international education market). RTOs are also accountable to industry regulators, where relevant to their scope of delivery.

in the use of technologies and instructional design expertise (as the coronavirus pandemic reveals); heavy workloads; and the difficulties associated with attracting industry professionals into teaching roles due to uncompetitive remuneration rates and working conditions (affirmed in a recent paper by Tyler & Dymock 2021 and discussed further below). For students, the impact is evident in increased class sizes; less access to support services; reduced time with teachers and trainers; aging and sometimes inadequate facilities and equipment; and the use of ‘off the shelf’ learning and assessment resources purchased by RTOs to meet the requirements of updated training packages.

Funding levels and instability, therefore, have a significant effect on how much time and effort RTOs can give to the educational thinking and resources required to plan and deliver high-quality VET, including associated infrastructure and student support services. In particular, we heard that activity-based funding contradicts good-quality teaching, in that it focuses on the immediate and obvious aspects rather than on a holistic view of what high quality delivery really entails. The issue here is not that funding is or should be a measure of delivery quality, although it is important as a measure of efficiency; the issue is that the real costs of high-quality delivery are not measured and therefore are not recognised by authorities demanding high quality, including an understanding that RTOs need to plan well ahead in order to achieve it consistently.

Maintaining teaching and training expertise

Recruitment and retention of teachers

A related and urgent challenge for many of the RTOs we interviewed is attracting industry professionals into teaching and training roles. Teacher and trainer shortages are acute for RTOs delivering in the early childhood education and care, health, mining and infrastructure, and agriculture industries, even when they can match salaries offered in these industries. They are even more acute for ACE RTOs struggling to compete with the higher salaries offered by TAFE and private RTOs. It was reported by some interviewees that teaching roles in VET are no longer attractive to industry specialists, especially to young people looking for a career. Working conditions (tenure, salary, workload and career prospects) and the requirements to have a Certificate IV in Training and Assessment (TAE), are cited as the main deterrents. In agriculture, for example:

[the] biggest challenge is getting good teachers with an appropriate Certificate IV in TAE. It is getting harder and harder because why would a veterinarian bother spending 12 months to get one. These people are really important to the quality of what we do but they don't want to take it on and don't have the time. (Private RTO)

The challenge is significant for many RTOs beyond those we interviewed (Tyler & Dymock 2021) and is common in VET systems in other countries (OECD 2021). While those we interviewed mentioned a range of strategies to overcome the challenge, such as team teaching and supervision of industry professionals by qualified trainers and assessors, the costs are prohibitive, especially for RTOs in regional areas and those requiring small class sizes. The smaller private RTOs we spoke to often operate with a pool of part-time industry professionals who teach under supervision. Their challenge is finding industry experts who are willing to take on full-time teaching roles and give up contracting businesses or secure jobs in industry.

Shorter induction courses to develop initial teaching and training capability were suggested as a means for attracting attract industry professionals into teaching, before they commit to a Certificate IV in TAE; a

suggestion also made by Tyler & Dymock (2021) and Wheelahan and Moodie (2011).¹¹ RTOs delivering to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students report difficulties finding enough new teachers with appropriate cultural knowledge, capabilities and expertise to deal with language, literacy and numeracy issues and:

the factionalisation of community members and students with lots of baggage. If trainers can't deal with that then quality goes down. That's our biggest challenge. (Private RTO)

Retention is a related challenge. We heard stories of teachers and trainers being lured back to industry by lucrative contracts and working conditions when they return to industry to update their currency.

Maintaining dual expertise

Maintaining the dual expertise of teachers and trainers remains a critical issue for RTOs, especially those with larger permanent (and ageing) workforces. We reported earlier the extraordinary lengths to which larger RTOs go in order to measure and monitor industry currency. We also encountered some confusion among RTOs about the CPD activities that are acceptable for teachers and trainers to claim as vocational currency, these vary according to the types of work and industries in which they work. Clayton and Guthrie (2013) also raised this issue.

More controversial among participating RTOs however are the qualifications required for VET teachers and trainers, specifically, the Certificate IV in TAE. There was very strong feedback from some on this issue, as highlighted in the following quote:

I've yet to find a comparison between the TAE and good teaching; that is, people who understand how to teach. Teachers who have it understand performance criteria and rules and regulations really well but not how to teach. (Private RTO)

Others report that, while the Certificate IV in TAE covers the necessary material, it is not always delivered in the right way. Others again consider it to be adequate as a minimum entry-level qualification, as long as teachers are encouraged to undertake a diploma or bachelor degree, a proposition also supported by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD 2021) after research showed that initial VET teacher education does not provide what teachers and trainers need throughout their career.

We understand that the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment is presently being reviewed by the Commonwealth's Education Industry Reference Committee (IRC) but emphasise, in line with Tyler and Dymock (2021), the importance of making it easier for RTOs to import highly knowledgeable and experienced industry professionals to teach and train.

Many of the RTOs we talked to cite a lack of systematic CPD for teachers and trainers as a significant challenge to delivery quality, particularly in relation to those in casual and part-time positions. While DESE is consulting widely on the proposed national VET Workforce Quality Strategy (DESE 2021d, 2021e), we also emphasise the importance to RTOs of resolving longstanding issues related to teacher qualifications, career pathways and CPD (see Wheelahan & Moodie 2011; Clayton & Guthrie 2013; Guthrie & Jones 2018; Harris 2020). The quality and effective implementation of the strategy will play an important part in developing and maintaining VET's future workforce capability.

¹¹ Wheelahan & Moodie (2011) recommended an introduction to teaching and training and assessing strategies that fit the teaching or training context, including how to translate industry knowledge into lesson plans or learning programs, engage students in learning (understanding inclusiveness), how to assess and a basic understanding of an RTO's requirements.

Training packages

The contribution of training packages to delivery quality also sparked vigorous debate among RTOs, because, as they explained, so much of what they do depends on how well the packages are written, how easily they can be interpreted and how often they change. The feedback (on the training packages relevant to them) is that many are too prescriptive and not focused enough on the student experience or skilling students for the future. Some of our informants also felt that assessment is a weak point, especially when assessment tools are mandated. Others told us that the requirement to assess every unit of competency individually does not reflect actual workplace practices and, while a suitable approach for shorter courses, it is not the best way to deliver comprehensive VET qualifications. Clustering competencies and assessing them more holistically has more validity in this regard.

However, most of the frustrations attached to training packages we heard relate to the cost and effort of implementing updates, which is diverting the attention of RTOs from improving delivery quality, especially when new versions are not equivalent to previous versions. Even when minor changes are required:

The amount of money spent rewriting course materials is astronomical. If we change one element in a unit of competency, we have to rewrite all the assessments. (Private RTO)

Some RTOs reported that up to 50% of their qualifications on scope are currently in transition. While they understand that changes are necessary to keep pace with industry, some are questioning the value of some changes to delivery quality, given the effort required to implement changes, the impact on students and the duplication of effort in developing new resources across the system. Not all of the RTOs interviewed agreed with these views, however; for example:

The new package is looking great. It's really clear and there are no grey areas. There is a lot of knowledge for our students and the way we shape out assessment pieces will help too. (ERTO)

It was pointed out that smaller RTOs often do not have the instructional design capacity to rewrite resources and need to buy ones developed externally. However, these resources may often need further development to meet their particular needs or to be compliant with the current version of the training package. The quality issue here is what the external resources are actually designed for: regulatory compliance (as a commercial venture) or high-quality educational outcomes. Some RTOs expressed concerns that they are not consulted adequately on the implementation of changes to training packages from an educational perspective.

We note that reforms to training packages are underway, including reducing their duplication and complexity, as well as implementing more broadly conceived vocational outcomes and improved articulation and pathways (DESE 2021b, 2021c). Nevertheless, many of these reforms have been recommended and attempted before (National Quality Council & COAG 2009; Schofield & McDonald 2004) and getting the basis for delivery right this time will be essential to supporting RTOs to deliver high quality.

The issue of trust in RTOs and their teachers and trainers is relevant here too. Schofield and McDonald (2004) argued some time ago that training packages need to place more faith in the professionalism of teachers and trainers and be open to the 'disorderly but effective' processes of teaching and training and training package development (p.4).

Underestimating the complexity of VET delivery

Some RTOs evinced frustration over what they perceive as a lack of understanding of the complexity of teaching, training and assessment in VET by those not directly involved in it, especially when students

have complex needs. This is in part due to perceptions that VET is concerned only with training for the trades, which is clearly not the case, and that teaching and training is a simple process of skills and knowledge transfer and acquisition. These simplistic perceptions not only skew understandings of quality in VET, they also underestimate the complexity and amount of work teachers and trainers undertake to deliver high quality (Clayton & Guthrie 2013). As one person commented, ‘how can we measure and quality-assure that which we don’t fully understand, certainly at a system level?’ (Private RTO).

Simplistic views of what it takes to deliver high quality teaching and training also underestimate the knowledge, skills, capabilities and personal attributes that VET teachers and trainers require – in pedagogy, assessment, instructional design, resource development, compliance, LL&N, counselling and student support and inclusiveness, as well as industry knowledge and expertise. This, we heard, has led to expanding roles for them with increasingly unrealistic expectations. A more constructive and contemporary view offered by one RTO is that:

Some people are great curriculum and assessment developers, whereas others will be great communicators. We look at a teaching area as a wheel where all the non-teaching skills and capabilities are spokes. The idea is to spread the skill base across teaching units so they fill all spokes and draw on the strengths of individual teachers and the collective. (TAFE)

The emphasis then would be on developing collaborative teaching teams, with the right mix of skills, attributes, capabilities and backgrounds to meet the complexity of high-quality delivery, rather than on individual teachers and trainers, a point also made by Wheelahan and Moodie (2011) and Mitchell et al. (2006).

Language matters

According to some RTOs, both public and private, the language used in VET perpetuates these simplistic notions of delivery, in particular the terms ‘skills’, ‘skills transfer’ and ‘skills and knowledge acquisition’, because they infer ‘filling a student’s head’ with inert information without consideration of the process students go through to interpret and translate the information into new knowledge and skills according to their individual needs, backgrounds, desires and learning contexts. The term ‘delivery’ similarly came under fire for its inference of a transmission model of learning, again without context or consideration of the complex processes of learning and the many factors impacting on the processes that need to be balanced to achieve high quality. As one respondent reflected, ‘when we narrow what we do down to skills, we miss so much about what we are and could be doing’ (TAFE).

The issue of language is also relevant to what people who teach and train in VET are called. This may appear semantic, but to some of the RTOs we talked to there is a big difference, as three respondents explain:

Teachers have longer connectivity with students and are laying the foundations for life and future work. They see themselves as future influencers, crafting future citizens and professionals. Trainers are more short term and in the here and now and often come in and out of the sector. (Private RTO)

There is a very different mindset among teachers who are passionate about helping people from A to B rather than just training people and assessing them as competent or not competent. Trainers don’t see themselves as professional teachers who are devoted to teaching and learning. I see it in the way they interact with students. (Private RTO)

A lot of the tradies are very strong about being called professional teachers. Our teachers in the higher education space want to be known as academics in line with their university peers. (TAFE)

Educational values emerged strongly throughout these discussions. It was suggested that more enabling terminology at a system level, such as ‘quality’ instead of ‘compliance’, ‘vocational education’ instead of ‘delivery’ and ‘skills’ (Karmel 2021); and ‘educational quality’ rather than ‘quality of teachers and teaching’ (Zoellner 2020) could improve VET’s quality discourse. The binary language of VET – competent or not; or compliant or not – is also problematic because it creates mutually exclusive categories with fixed meanings, which obscure the complex realities caused by policy changes (Zoellner 2021) and the complex practices that exist between them.

The coronavirus pandemic

Finally, the RTOs we spoke to readily acknowledge the challenges to delivery quality encountered during pandemic lockdowns. Many struggled to keep students engaged in theory subjects and with online assessment; for example:

Our students love the practical stuff and there is only so much theory you can impart to them in one go. We had to deliver all the practical in a glut at the end so engagement from disadvantaged students was almost non-existent. (ACE RTO)

A small private RTO delivering to apprentices found that students and their employers preferred ‘any other format to online possible’ that adhered to the pandemic social distancing and hygiene requirements. Other RTOs struggled to find suitable work placements for students to complete their qualification, not surprisingly, in early childhood, aged care and health settings.

The workplaces didn’t want our students, wouldn’t take them and didn’t want them back on site, understandably, because they are at the front line of COVID. We had to wait until they would, which meant we had to deliver the workplace training component the following year with no money. (ACE RTO)

Many RTOs made difficult decisions in very short timeframes to keep students learning online and through blended delivery models. Some reported shortages of online learning expertise and instructional design capacity and issues with access to technology for students, especially in rural areas and among disadvantaged students. Their experiences during the coronavirus pandemic highlighted to us that important measures of delivery quality, such as completions, progressions, levels of student and employer satisfaction, rates of attendance, and attrition and employment outcomes need to be considered in context. As one RTO explains, this year our student surveys results were ‘not so good’ (ACE RTO).



Enabling and sustaining quality delivery

What quality VET looks like at a system level

The RTOs and VET experts we consulted offered valuable insights into the factors most likely to enable and sustain high-quality delivery. These are represented as enablers in figure 1 using an adaptation of Blom and Meyers's (2003) four interrelated subsystems of VET at a system level: quality learning experiences; quality programs; quality policies; and quality administration, all of which impact on the extent of quality delivered by RTOs.

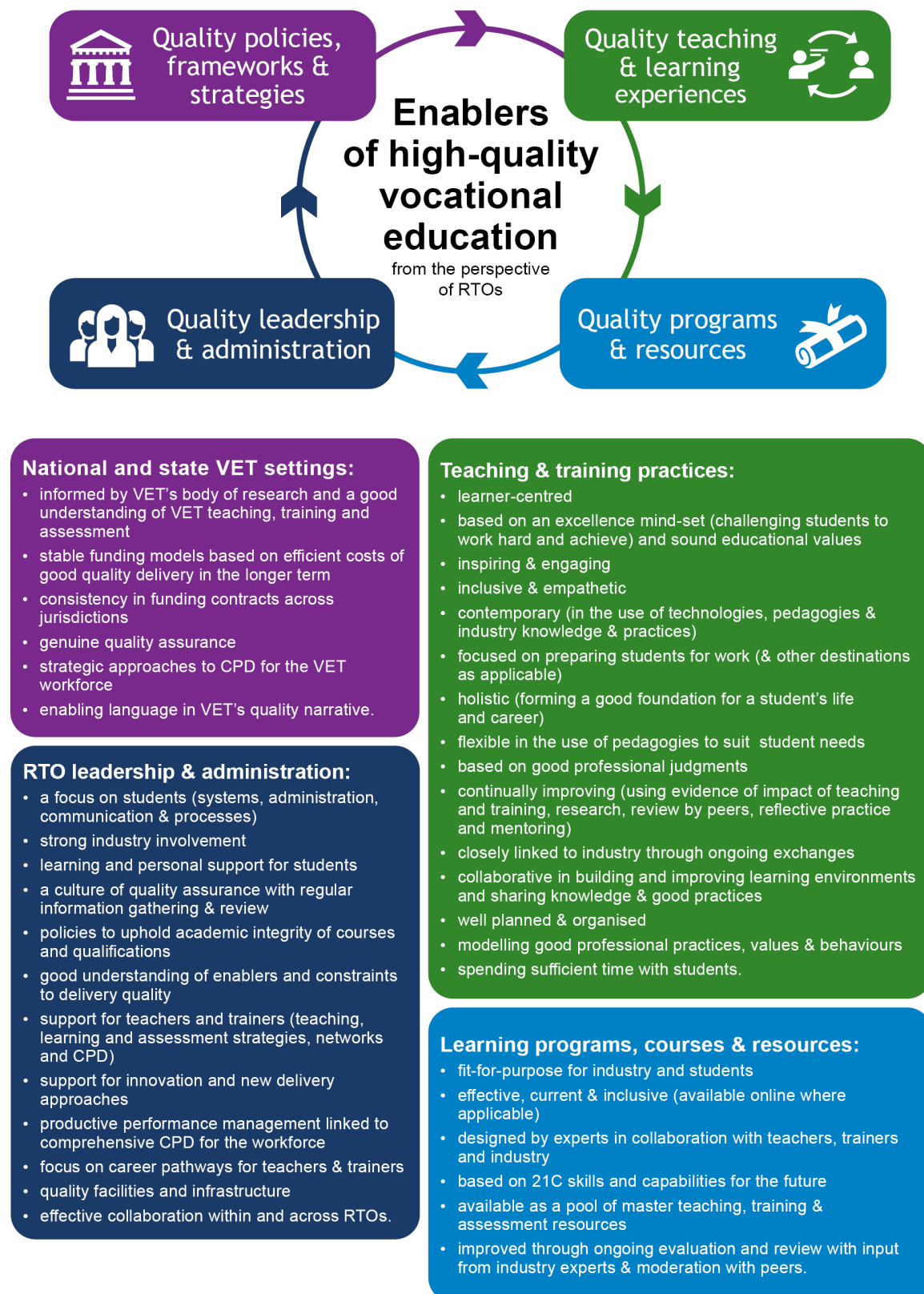
The enablers are, in essence, value judgments that can change over time (Blom & Meyers 2003) and do not capture the 'essential embodiment' or essence of quality delivery (Harvey 2006). They show, however, the complexity of the environments in which RTOs work and the urgent need for VET's quality subsystems to work together to support improvements in delivery quality.

Figure 1 also highlights the importance of RTO leadership and management to the quality of delivery, a theme that emerged strongly in our interviews with the leaders and managers doing their utmost to drive quality improvement and build a culture of quality in their RTO. The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted, 2014) in the United Kingdom similarly found that the factors contributing to delivery quality in VET (further education) are inextricably linked to the actions, behaviours and the examples of leaders and managers as they anticipate and tackle the issues associated with quality, including at governance levels. This, as one of our respondents noted, is essential to quality assurance.

Key points

- Suggestions from RTOs to enable and sustain high quality in VET at a system level include:
- more appropriate funding models
- a shift from compliance to quality improvement and assurance
- a national body for VET that oversees and provides required resources to support quality improvement.

Figure 1 Enablers of high-quality delivery across quality subsystems in VET (as reported by RTOs and VET experts)



Source: Adapted from Blom & Meyers (2003)

Suggestions from RTOs to move forward

Funding that supports high-quality delivery

The introduction of funding models that cover the true cost of delivering a course or qualification efficiently, to a high standard and according to their particular circumstances is a key pillar of high-quality delivery. The current funding models, based on student contact hours, are not necessarily covering the full costs of student support services, investment in technology, innovation, and CPD and support for teachers. Furthermore, overall levels of VET funding have been declining nationally for some time, even though it has increased in some jurisdictions (Hurley & Van Dyke 2019).

We note that the National Skills Commission recently published a report in which VET qualification subsidies, fees and prices across Australia were benchmarked (National Skills Commission 2021). Work in this area is ongoing, through explorations of the underlying drivers of cost differences, particularly variations in nominal hours, and attempts to arrive at a better understanding of cost structures and efficient prices for VET courses. Also useful to this discussion could be an identification of the real cost of delivery for RTOs across different types and locations, as well as for particular qualifications and student groups, especially those experiencing disadvantage or having learning difficulties and personal challenges (as per recommendations made by Mackenzie & Coulson 2015).

A national quality delivery framework

The RTOs we spoke to are looking forward to a capability-building approach to quality in VET, one that will guide and assist in facilitating quality improvement. A pressing issue for them is developing and maintaining high-quality and longer-term data and information-gathering processes for internal use and building the capability for their effective use. The data and information can then be used for a variety of external purposes, in addition to helping to improve practice through benchmarking and other quality activities – but only if the information is presented in comparable ways.

Several RTOs suggested that a framework for high-quality delivery could be developed to clarify required levels of quality and assist them to evaluate their performance against them. We found this suggestion surprising, given the number of quality standards and capability frameworks circulating in the sector, until it was pointed out:

there are hundreds of smaller RTOs out there who are confounded and confronted by compliance requirements and are struggling in this environment. A working blueprint could really help them achieve what they want and provide benchmarks for RTOs about what high-quality delivery should be.

(Private RTO)

Suggestions were offered for how a framework or working blueprint might work. It could, as one RTO explained, be flexible by containing a number of agreed dimensions of quality relevant to all RTOs but not in the same way; for example:

Each RTO could aspire to 10/10 on the dimensions that are mission critical to their business and less – say 6/10 – on other parts of the framework. This would need to be sufficiently robust so that a government can look at an aggregate and have confidence that a threshold of say 6/10 is fine for a less critical dimension for a particular RTO.

(Private RTO)

A peak RTO body suggested the development of a set of national student- and employer-based survey questions for use by RTOs to overcome variable quality in surveys presently developed and used by individual RTOs across the system. A way forward may be to adopt a ‘core and options’ survey approach

that captures the essential elements of high-quality delivery with a measure of uniformity but contains enough flexibility in survey instruments and analysis tools to meet the needs of all RTOs. Misko, Guthrie and Waters (2021) suggested a similar approach to capability frameworks for VET teachers and trainers.

We did receive some opposition from quality experts to the idea of distinguishing between RTOs, given that high-quality delivery is fundamentally about meeting the needs and expectations of students, irrespective of their type, purpose and circumstances. Nevertheless, a framework for high-quality delivery (or similar idea) with agreed and manageable measures could provide important goal posts for quality VET delivery into the future. As Hattie (2003, p.1) writes:

if we can discover the location of these goal posts, if we can understand the height of the bar of the goal posts, we then have the basis for developing appropriate professional development, the basis for teacher education programs to highlight that which truly makes the difference, the basis for extolling that our profession truly does have recognisable excellence which can be identified in defensible ways, and the basis for a renewed focus on the success of our teachers to make the difference.

Two important caveats were raised by RTOs in relation to the development of a quality delivery framework, that:

- It is not based on ‘a deficit view’ of delivery, as they feel has been the case in VET historically
- It is based on a good understanding of teaching, training, learning and assessment in VET and what it generally takes to deliver high quality.

A national body for VET

Relatedly, we heard several calls from RTOs for a national body for VET to ‘bring it all together’ across jurisdictions, RTO types and stakeholders.

We need a national body (like [the former] ANTA) that keeps knowledge and develops the sector. We have really struggled without it with revolving doors in government officials and RTO CEOs. This means that much of the wealth of research we have is not used or even referred to. (TAFE)

This suggestion has been raised several times under different guises to provide better coordination of the sector at a national level (Guthrie & Clayton 2018; Tyler & Dymock 2017; Wheelahan & Moodie 2011¹²) and to give RTOs and the individuals working in them a ‘concerted voice’ (Tyler & Dymock 2017, p.26). A national body could be a valuable resource for the sector, one that coordinates the quality-related elements suggested by RTOs including:

- a national framework (blueprint) for high-quality delivery with agreed measures¹³
- strategic CPD for VET leaders, managers, teachers, trainers and assessors, curriculum designers and student support professionals with opportunities to share good practices.^{14,15} A national body might

12 Wheelahan & Moodie (2011) argued for a professional association for teachers and trainers, as did the Commonwealth Department of Education and Training in 2016 (Tyler & Dymock 2017).

13 A number of very good measures already exist, such as Ofsted (2014) in the UK, quality and measurement approaches used in ISO standard 21001 for educational organisations, QILT (Quality Indicators for learning and Teaching) in Australia, and New Zealand’s Tertiary Evaluation Indicators.

14 Extensive work has been done on building VET’s workforce capability and especially CPD for teachers and trainers (a summary is provided in appendix B). Wheelahan & Moodie (2011) suggested different options for VET teacher preparation, qualifications and CPD.

15 This is cited as one of the strengths of ITECA’s College of VET Professionals.

also settle ongoing issues related to teaching qualifications, CPD and career progression for teachers and trainers and develop the professionalism of teaching and training¹⁶

- more cooperation and collaboration across RTOs. This is seen by RTOs as an untapped opportunity to improve the quality of delivery in VET, especially after the coronavirus pandemic. We heard several suggestions for sharing expertise, specialisation, facilities and resources at national, state and local levels, such as the provision of learning and LL&N support by ACE RTOs for students in RTOs in other sectors
- a bank of master teaching and assessment resources to:
 - overcome the ‘huge loss of productivity’ when RTOs develop and update their own resources
 - reduce the costs associated with continually updating resources
 - remove the inconsistencies in delivery that occur when RTOs interpret training packages differently
 - utilise the wealth of existing materials (‘there has been a lot of good stuff out there’)
 - relieve pressure on teachers and trainers, especially those new to teaching, allowing them more time to focus on teaching and training

The need for a bank of master resources for RTOs is consistent with comments received through DESE’s consultation processes in 2020 which were particularly focused on assessment tools and resources (DESE 2021a). One large public RTO we consulted has already developed and now maintains master resources, which are regularly updated by teaching teams across multiple courses.

- research and innovation in teaching, learning and assessment and student support.

There are several precedents for VET in Australia for acting nationally, including Reframing the Future, Learnscope, the Institute of Trades Skills Excellence and the Flexible Learning Advisory Group (FLAG) to mention a few. Internationally, centres of vocational excellence (CoVEs) have been operating in the United Kingdom and in Europe for similar reasons and are currently under trial in New Zealand in some industry areas. Their principal role is to promote collaboration among VET providers and assemble expertise, knowledge, practice and funding to support innovation and overall quality improvement (European Training Federation 2020). The establishment of several centres of vocational excellence on a trial basis, drawing on the experience of these initiatives, may be a useful initiative.

¹⁶ As Jones (2004) writes, a profession exists, when its members have the time and space to engage in professional conversations, share reflections and turn private experiences into public knowledge.



Towards a framework for high-quality delivery

We have learned a great deal from the interviewed RTOs about what high quality delivery looks like: how they define and measure it; the impediments to it; and how RTOs see themselves fitting within published models of quality. These insights can inform preliminary conversations about how quality delivery in VET might be defined more broadly.

We now know empirically that quality as a concept in VET is multi-dimensional (individual, social and economic); multi-level (depending on an individual's role in the system); multi-purpose (Harvey 2007); dynamic (subject to many contextual factors, which impact on how much quality can be achieved); unique (to the RTO delivering it); and subjective (dependent on the different motivations, interests and expectations of stakeholders).

All of the participating RTOs operate across Euler's (2013) three dimensions of VET, but with a varying emphasis on each dimension. This means that how quality is perceived and measured by an RTO is affected by the dimension that dominates in their circumstances. The strong social dimension of many RTOs confirms that VET has an important general education role (Karmel 2021), which is underestimated in current quality debates, especially when countries with strong VET systems have a core of general education in their VET courses and qualifications (James & Unwin 2016).

Similarly, all of Harvey's views on quality apply with different emphases, but with the exceptional, fitness-for-purpose and transformational views of quality predominantly driving the pursuit of high-quality delivery in the data, moderated necessarily by the need for the consistency and value-for-money views. All views matter and need to be understood and balanced. More value, however, could be placed on what really counts to student achievement in VET; that is, how inspiring, supportive and transformational learning can be. As one respondent reflected:

Maybe high-quality VET delivery means imparting a passion for learning. If a student finds the passion, the rest is sorted. (TAFE)

The enablers of high quality, as described by RTOs (figure 1), provide some insight into the essence, overall sense and defining characteristics of high-quality delivery. Clues also reside in what RTOs say is not measured but is important.

Good and high-quality delivery in VET might be defined as a set of principles that apply in varying degrees, according to an RTO's purpose and the purpose of the qualification or course, as suggested in table 1. While these principles may appear difficult to measure, especially using externally applied metrics, we found that RTOs are already using a broader range of formal and informal methods to monitor and measure delivery quality to obtain deeper and more timely insights into what fosters, sustains and impedes quality learning experiences and outcomes for students and industry. Thus, it should be possible to propose ways by which principles such as these could be measured effectively.

Table 1 An initial set of key principles defining good and high-quality delivery

Transformational <i>How well students are achieving</i>	Inspires students to learn and achieve their goals Develops professional identity and confidence in students Provides a good foundation for work, career and life Maximises opportunities for learning
Student-centred <i>How well students are supported</i>	Develops independent learners Supports students to succeed Fosters cultural diversity and student wellbeing Prevents students from falling through the cracks
Fit for purpose <i>How well stakeholders' needs are being met</i>	Meets the purpose for a student's choice of course Meets an RTO's mission and objectives Produces capable graduates for employers and communities
Evolutionary <i>How well delivery adapts to changing stakeholder needs</i>	Continually improves, based on evidence and reflections on what works best to meet student and employer needs Experiments with new practices to improve quality in line with changing work environments Collaborates with other RTOs for innovation and continuous improvement purposes

Once developed and agreed across the sector, principles might inform a framework for quality delivery in VET, which could sit at the centre of an RTO's quality assurance efforts. With accompanying realistic and achievable measures, the framework has the potential to provide a sound foundation for RTOs to benchmark quality delivery practices with like RTOs across the sector.

Final thoughts

Most of the people we interviewed for this project expressed their appreciation for the opportunity to discuss the *quality of delivery* in VET rather than *issues of compliance*. They are clearly passionate and motivated about what they do and this is clearly reflected throughout our discussions.

We detect, however, a collective weariness in RTOs' efforts to deliver high quality within current regulatory, policy and industry environments. As they see it, ongoing reforms to the sector thus far have not alleviated the significant pressures they face, despite good intentions, and have resulted instead in destabilising turbulence and inertia in the sector's development (Guthrie, 2021) and a lack of continuity in its corporate memory and vision. The result has been a failure to carry through and fully implement proposed changes.

RTOs' key concerns (a compliance-driven approach to quality; funding levels that do not reflect the full costs of quality delivery; inflexible and sometimes poorly designed training packages; and pressing teacher and trainer shortages) sit largely beyond their control yet pose significant operational, quality and regulatory risks to them.

Governments, employers and the public are entitled to expect integrity, good quality, efficiency and accountability in the delivery of VET courses and qualifications. However, we see real tensions between these expectations and demands on RTOs for high-quality learning experiences and outcomes and for innovation and flexibility in meeting the needs and objectives of a wide range of students and employers. These expectations, as some informants told us, are almost impossible to meet within the confines of the current system. There are clearly tensions between the way governments, regulators, funding agencies and RTOs understand and define quality in VET and who has responsibility to achieve it. The responsibility for improving the quality of delivery does not rest solely with RTOs, although the quality of teaching and training sits at the core.

A better understanding of quality in VET and clearer definitions of what it means could lead to more collaborative approaches to quality improvement between stakeholders and between VET's four quality subsystems. A more rational balance between student-centred and industry-focused ideals (Ryan, 2019), and between educational quality and demands for 'just-in-time' skills, could also promote a more coherent quality dialogue across the system.

RTOs need a regulatory environment that enables, fosters and supports high-quality delivery; that trusts proven RTOs to experiment, innovate and adapt to changing student, industry and local employer needs and supports under-performing RTOs to build capability to meet national standards.

Pleasingly, some of the challenges being faced by RTOs are the focus of current national reforms, including the move towards self-assurance, reviewing funding models and reducing the complexity of training packages. Nevertheless, many that are proposed have been recommended and attempted before, so getting the basis for high-quality delivery right this time, while avoiding the temptations of piecemeal or short-term solutions that do not comprehensively address both the underlying issues and problems, is essential for the sector to move forward. This also requires a clear understanding of who is responsible for proposing and implementing changes and ensuring all enabling resources are available.

We hope more consideration will be given to valuing, utilising and developing the professionalism of teachers, trainers and other parties involved in delivery because their judgments, qualities and expertise are central to the quality of delivery, especially when 'the going gets tough', when training packages are ambiguous or inconsistent (Jones, 2014, p. 13), and especially when students need support with their learning.

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Appendix A

Methodology

We set out to obtain the views of a spread of RTOs recognised for good-quality delivery from the TAFE/public, private, ACE and enterprise RTO segments of the sector, as recommended by their respective peak bodies,¹⁷ using a snowball sampling strategy. This involved selecting a small number of recommended RTOs, who then nominated other potential suitable RTOs, and so forth. Our aim was to tap into broader networks to identify RTOs that we may not have located otherwise and who could provide different insights into our research questions.

We continued sampling until we reached 44 RTOs, at which point we felt the sample was large and broad enough in RTO type and coverage to capture sufficient variation in views across a range of VET contexts. To overcome potential bias in our selection, we nominated a diverse range of RTOs in the first sampling round and used other sources of information to check the validity of our recommendations. We acknowledge there are many RTOs delivering good, even excellent, quality that we could not talk to, given the scope of the project, as well as RTOs that are not high-performing but whose views are important to the quality debate.

In all, we talked to 102 people, including 73 individuals working in 44 different RTOs across the four segments of the VET system, including CEOs, senior managers, teachers and quality managers; 11 experts in VET policy and practice and/or quality; 9 from funding or regulatory authorities; 7 peak bodies; and 2 industry associations (figure A1). These were spread over 46 interviews, including 25 with individual interviewees and 18 forums or focus groups of between 2 and 11 people of mixed expertise (quality managers, teaching and learning specialists, senior managers and CEOs), or in some cases, specialists only (such as quality managers).

A breakdown of participating RTOs by RTO type is provided in figure A2.

As interviews were conducted during the coronavirus pandemic, web-based conferencing technologies (Zoom and Teams) were used. Interviewees were asked a series of semi-structured questions about their RTO, what high-quality delivery means for them and what factors, both internal and external, impact on delivery quality. We also asked how they measure and monitor delivery quality and how they consider the VET system could better support them to improve it. Finally, we asked them what outcomes they would like to see from the project. All interviews were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis. Most were digitally recorded, with permission.

A list of questions was sent to participants before each interview (table A1).

¹⁷ Our selection was based on recommendations from TAFE Directors Australia (TDA); the Victorian TAFE Association (VTA); the Independent Tertiary Education Council Australia (ITECA); Community Colleges Australia (CCA); ACEVic; and the Enterprise Registered Training Organisation Association (ERTOIA).

Figure A1 Breakdown of people interviewed by sector

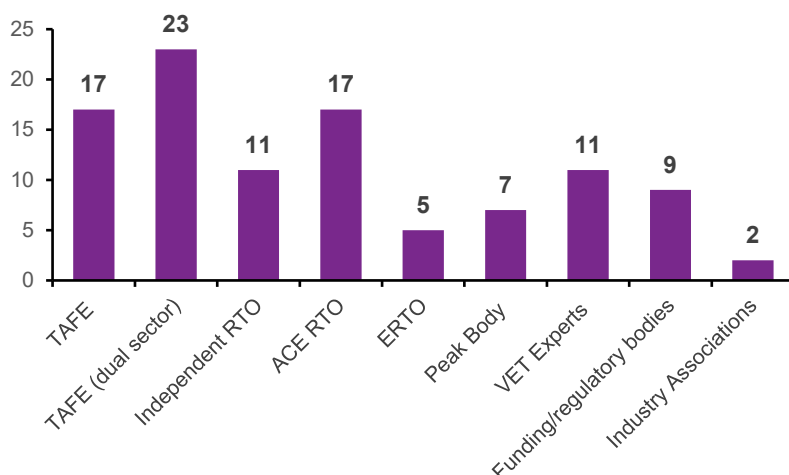


Figure A2 Breakdown of number of participating RTOs by sector

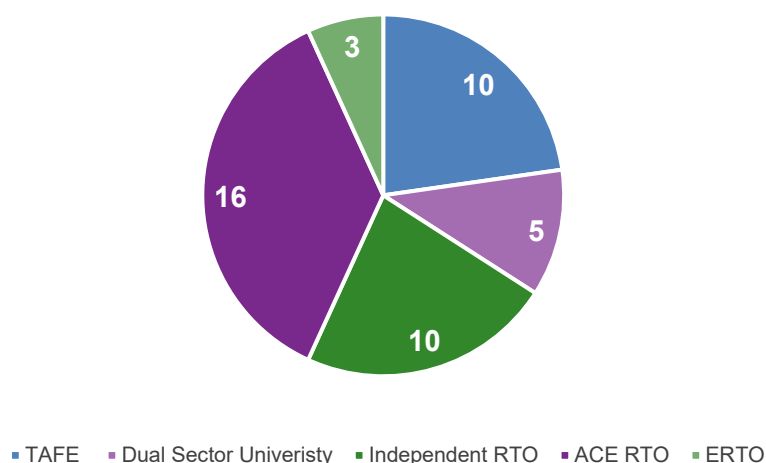


Table A1 Interview questions

Interview questions
<p>1. Tell us a bit about your VET organisation: Type of RTO (vision and objectives) Courses on scope.</p>
<p>2. What does high-quality delivery look like for your RTO? What do you think high-quality delivery incorporates?</p>
<p>3. How do you measure the quality of delivery in your RTO? How do you know the quality is good? What is not being measured?</p>
<p>4. What factors (internal and external) are impacting on the quality of delivery? How are they impacting?</p>
<p>5. How could the quality system be improved? What would you like to see changed</p>
<p>6. What outcomes would you like to see from this project? Any other comments</p>

Appendix B

What are the dimensions of quality delivery?

In our first paper, we reported what we found in a significant body of VET literature (some of which is historical) on the quality of delivery: how it is defined, the factors that enable and constrain it, and what best supports RTOs to improve their delivery performance. We drew on Harvey’s (2007) five dimensions of quality in higher education to frame the discussion (table B1).

Table B1 Five dimensions of quality in higher education

Quality	Definition
Exceptional or as excellence	A traditional concept linked to the idea of ‘excellence’, usually operationalised as exceptionally high standards of academic achievement. Quality is achieved if the standards are surpassed. There are three variations: exclusivity, exceeding high standards (excellence) through benchmarks, and ensuring minimum standards.
Perfection (or consistency)	Focuses on process and sets specifications that it aims to meet. Quality is explained as conformance to specification and the interrelated ideas of ‘zero defects and getting things right first time’.
Fitness for purpose	Judges quality in terms of the extent to which a product or service meets its stated purpose. The purpose may be customer-defined to meet requirements or (in education) institution-defined to reflect institutional mission (or course objectives). It offers two alternative priorities for specifying purpose: 1) meeting customer specifications and 2) meeting an institution’s mission and purpose.
Value for money	Assesses quality in terms of return on investment or expenditure. At the heart of the value-for-money approach in education is the notion of accountability. Public services, including education, are expected to be accountable to the funders. Increasingly, students are also considering their own investment in higher education in value-for-money terms.
Transformation	Sees quality as a process of change, in which education adds value to students through their learning experience. Education is not a service for a customer but an ongoing process of transformation of the participant. This leads to two notions of transformative quality in education: enhancing the consumer and empowering the consumer.

Source: Harvey (2007).

We concluded there is no right or wrong view about quality and the quality of delivery as such. A person’s view depends on their interests and perspectives and the circumstances in which they are articulating it (Harvey & Green 1993). Views also differ across stakeholder groups (Griffin 2017) and even within them, due to idiosyncrasies in individual preferences (Blom & Meyers 2003). When it comes to the quality of delivery, the common ground, as Griffin (2017) writes, is that students are provided with the skills, knowledge and broader capabilities they want and need.

We also found Euler’s (2013) three dimensions (or purposes) of VET helpful in reminding us that VET has an individual dimension (preparing individuals for work and life); a social dimension (that looks after the social integration of people at risk of marginalisation); and an economic dimension (providing skilled workers to meet the needs of industries and employers).

Good-quality delivery is defined in the literature as student-centred,¹⁸ industry-relevant and holistic, in that it addresses students’ needs for short- and longer-term skills, helps build capabilities and attributes

¹⁸ In our first paper (Guthrie & Waters 2021) we used Cedefop’s (2015) description of learner-centred as meaning responsive to learner interests and needs and slowly increasing their ability to be independent learners, less reliant on teacher-led pedagogies. This approach places an emphasis on learner outcomes, communication skills and capability for learning.

for work and life,¹⁹ develops an occupational identity (where appropriate) and an ‘inquiring mind’ (Braithwaite 2018), all of which establish a solid foundation for students to succeed in work and life. It also translates training packages into meaningful learning experiences.

Contemporary teaching and training practices are relational and draw on social and situated learning theories as much as on the traditions of Behaviourism and Constructivism (OECD 2021), although these are still important in VET contexts. They also encourage students to be active in the learning process, to learn from each other and to apply their knowledge and skills in a context of ‘practical problem-solving’ through a mix of teaching and training methods (Lucas, Spencer & Claxton 2012). Learning is:

hands-on, practical, experiential, real-world, as well as, and often at the same time, something which involves feedback, questioning, application and reflection and, when required, theoretical models and explanations. (Lucas, Spencer & Claxton 2012, p. 9)

Contemporary views of teaching and learning in VET have moved on from simplistic notions of acquiring or transferring skills or completing tasks – although these are important in some contexts as well, but within broader notions of vocational education. Networked, collaborative and peer learning, work-based, project-based (Billett et al. 2012), problem-based (Mussoto 2009), action learning and inquiry-based learning (Waters et al. 2015) are variously described in the literature as examples of good teaching and training approaches. Good teachers and trainers draw on a repertoire of pedagogies to suit their students, learning environments and changing circumstances. They also incorporate different professional practices from their industry, institutions, classrooms and labour markets (Smith & Yasukawa 2017), use technologies to enhance learning (OECD 2021) and continually question the impact of what they do.

Extensive research work has been carried out on building VET’s workforce capability and especially that of teachers and trainers (Harris, Clayton & Chappell 2007; Guthrie 2008; Wheelahan & Moodie 2011) and investigated more recently by the OECD (2021) and Misko, Guthrie and Waters (2021), among others. All emphasise the importance of continuing professional development and other support for teachers and trainers (along with other supporting RTO staff) to delivery quality, as well as the capacity of leaders and managers to develop an organisational culture of quality improvement.

The importance of good educational design (Noonan & Condon 2013); student support services (Macklin 2020; Bowman & Callan 2012); leadership and management in RTOs (OECD 2021; Ofsted 2014; Callan et al., 2007); and ‘soundly based’ teaching strategies (Ofsted 2014) to delivery quality are also highlighted. Thus, the literature tells us that high-quality delivery in VET goes well beyond the teaching and assessment of technical skills to fostering professional identity and helping students to prepare for complexity, change and uncertainty in life and work.

We then questioned how well the commonly used quality indicators in VET capture this complexity, including the attributes of teachers and trainers that underpin their part in good-quality delivery. We concluded that more substantive and collective agreement is required on what good-quality delivery entails in different VET contexts.

We argue that there is a core of quality elements or characteristics common to good and high-quality delivery across RTOs, but differences in emphases, depending on their circumstances and learner needs.

19 Which include twenty-first-century skills (21C) and other generic capabilities.

What are the challenges to delivery quality?

The VET literature historically has a lot to say about the challenges RTOs face, both internally and externally, to the quality of delivery. The most consistent issues we found are: the diversity and status of the sector (Harris 2015); different sectoral frameworks (differences between schools, VET and higher education) and institutional cultures (Clayton 2009a; Wheelahan & Moodie 2011); leadership (Callan et al. 2007); declining funding and investment in real terms (Hurley & Van Dyke 2019) and particularly for development of the VET workforce (Guthrie 2010; Harris 2015; Guthrie & Jones 2018); qualifications for VET teachers (Smith & Yasukawa 2017; Clayton 2009b); concerns about training packages (DESE 2021b, 2021c; National Quality Council & COAG 2009; Schofield & McDonald 2004), in particular their complexity and how well teachers are interpreting them (Hodge 2014); and, finally, too much regulation focused on compliance (Brathwaite 2018; Karmel 2021).

Karmel (2021) also reminds us of a poor match between the VET qualifications undertaken and the occupations that VET graduates work in.



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