

# *Student Learning: 'the heart of quality' in education and training*

**ROB CARMICHAEL**, Swinburne University of Technology, Victoria, Australia  
**JOSEPHINE PALERMO**, Victoria University of Technology, Melbourne, Australia  
**LINDSAY REEVE**, Mill Park Primary School, Victoria, Australia  
**KEVIN VALLENCE**, Bendigo Regional Institute of TAFE, Victoria, Australia

**ABSTRACT** *This paper surveys the development of various approaches to quality that are essentially learning-centred:*

- *In the Schools sector: a brief overview of the Victorian Quality in Schools project;*
- *In Higher Education: work in progress at two Australian universities (Victoria University of Technology and Swinburne Universities of Technology in Melbourne); and*
- *In Vocational Education and Training: work in progress in re-orienting the policy approach to Quality towards a more flexible and learning-centred model.*

*This paper will argue that when looked at from the perspective of the individual learner, there is a strong case for student learning to be placed at the very heart of Quality Systems in all sectors of education, and also therefore in related sectoral Quality Assurance programs and processes.*

## **Introduction: Quality across the Sectors**

This paper is about various approaches to 'quality' in education and training. Thinking about what constitutes 'quality' in education and training has spawned many different operational definitions. Harvey and Green (1993), working in the UK, gave a range of concepts of quality in education as:

- achieving excellence, the 'exceptional';
- 'perfection' (or consistency), such as demonstrating conformance to a standard;
- 'fitness-for-purpose', appropriateness to situation;
- providing 'value-for-money';
- and the one that Harvey (1998) obviously prefers as being closest to the true nature

and purpose of the educational process, the ‘transformation’ (or improvement) of the learner, through the empowerment and value-adding effects of learning.

Against this learning-centred thinking, it is interesting to observe that the Australian Government has now indicated that the agenda of the new Australian University Quality Agency (AUQA) will (among other things) provide a formal approach to Quality [1] that:

signals to the community and the rest of the world that the quality of the higher education system is assured through a rigorous, external audit of university quality assurance processes. (Kemp, 1999)

Moreover, reviews by the agency will focus on:

- the appropriateness of quality assurance and improvement plans in relation to institutional contexts and missions;
- the rigour of the mechanisms employed to review courses and academic organisational units, and monitor performance against institutional plans;
- research activities and outputs;
- effectiveness in the implementation of outcomes of Quality Assurance (QA) processes; and
- communication with stakeholders. (Kemp, 1999)

These statements shift the focus to universities providing accountability for their performance to stakeholders, by satisfying the requirements of an external Quality Assurance process, an approach that historically has not sat entirely comfortably with either ideas about learner-centred education or continuous quality improvement based approaches to Quality. However, in these statements there is no clear specification of the essential thing that is to be ‘Quality Assured’, and interestingly the word ‘improvement’ has disappeared from the implementation of outcomes of QA processes to be reviewed.

There is then the potential for misapprehension about quality between:

- University educators, who habitually like to indulge in thoughtful reflection on the essential nature of what quality might be from a purely educational construct;
- University managers/administrators, who are more likely to be mainly concerned about how to meet the institutional performance reporting requirements of any new national Quality Assurance agency; and the
- Federal bureaucrats/politicians calling the shots on the nature of the programme.

Meanwhile, in the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector, in Victoria at least, for some time it has been typical for VET practitioners to define quality through the language of industrial and market-place metaphor. It is our impression that VET speaks almost exclusively of Quality, in terms of ‘products’, ‘customers’, ‘suppliers’, ‘processes’, ‘outputs’ and usually defines it as ‘conformance to specified customer requirements’ or some such phrase. This language shows the unmistakable influence of external Quality Assurance systems of industrial origin (ISO 9000), and of the market-driven thinking that has turned the Technical and Further Education (TAFE) sector into an ‘industry-driven’ vocational training system (‘Quality Endorsed Training Organisations’). Where does the nature of the teaching and learning process and the ‘transformation’ of the learner or ‘trainee’ fit into such an approach? Just who is ‘the customer’—the learner, their families, employers, industry, or the Government and its

training agencies? What can be done to promote a learner-centred approach in this sort of environment?

In the Schools sector on the other hand, there has been much interest recently in trying to define quality from the perspective of classroom experience, of ‘quality’ being talked about in terms of the teaching/learning event (ie the ‘transformational’ process that is shared between learners, teachers and the curriculum). This type of thinking about quality in education is probably best captured by Tribus (1996) in his use of the term ‘joy in learning’. This is much closer in approach to Harvey’s (1998) ‘transformational’ definition of quality than approaches typically operating or being developed in the VET and higher education sectors. Those with more ‘hard headed’ ideas about quality might say “yes, this is all very well, but is it possible to actually measure ‘joy’ in learning”? It will be argued that it is not sufficient to only measure that which it is easy to measure, and that it is in fact more challenging (i.e. ‘harder’) to try to assess the often complex factors involved in the nature of the actual learning event.

Does it then make any difference how ‘the concept of quality’ is constructed and communicated in the different sectors of education? This paper will argue that when looked at from the perspective of the individual learner, there is a strong case for student learning to be placed at the very heart of Quality Systems in all sectors of education, and also therefore in related sectoral Quality Assurance programmes and processes.

The paper will investigate some of the implications of these various approaches in the different sectors of education:

- In the Schools sector: a brief overview of the Victorian Quality in Schools project and a case study of a school with a focus on quality in the classroom;
- In Higher Education: local research into the concept of quality in the university sector, and work in progress at two Australian universities to place the actual learning process at the very heart of their approaches to Quality (Victoria University of Technology and Swinburne Universities of Technology in Melbourne);
- In Vocational Education and Training: work in progress by some VET practitioners to try and re-orient the policy approach to Quality in the Victorian VET sector towards a more flexible and learning-centred model.

### **Quality in the Schools Sector: a case study in quality as learning**

It is now almost three years since Mill Park Primary School was chosen as one of the original 28 schools selected to become part of the Victorian Quality in Schools Project. The motivation for the school to become involved in the project came from a perceived need that there had to be a better way for schools to organise themselves at a management level and more importantly that a fresh approach to learning and teaching needed to be explored. The monumental changes that had occurred in Victorian education prior to this time had taken a huge toll on staff and of course there was a flow on to students and their learning. The first year of the project involved performing a whole school self-assessment, developing a common set of values and focusing on the management structures within the school. The focus of year two, and this has continued to grow, is taking the principles of quality into the classroom.

As you enter Mill Park Primary School, you immediately notice a large sign. This sign encapsulates our school’s philosophy and it states:

THE CORE PURPOSE OF OUR SCHOOL IS STUDENT LEARNING,  
EVERYTHING ELSE IS ON THE EDGE OF THAT CORE PURPOSE

Our involvement in the Quality Project has given the school, and in particular the teaching staff, a new lease of life. Everything is centred about student learning and in particular direct involvement of the students in their own learning.

At Mill Park Primary School we decided to have a whole school focus on students taking responsibility for their own learning. This item is concerned with students learning to develop initiative, independence, creativity and self-reliance. This is achieved through individual goal setting, monitoring of students own progress and achievement and active participation in learning activities. There has been a strong movement away from teacher directed instruction and planning to a student centred approach. Students are now an integral part of the planning evaluation and assessment process.

The Curriculum and Standards Framework very clearly sets out the curriculum to be covered and of course schools must adhere to these guidelines. There is however, ample scope for schools to deliver the curriculum in a variety of ways. At Mill Park the students are part of the planning process, being asked what they want to know about the particular curriculum and what they already know. Planning takes place on a term basis with the staff working in teams, this modelling demonstrates to the students that working cooperatively occurs across the entire school. Every effort is made to incorporate the ideas from the students into the planning for two main reasons: (a) to make the curriculum as relevant as possible to the students; and (b) to demonstrate to the students that their ideas are valued. The planning document is shared with the students and parents so that all stakeholders are included in the learning process. Students set individual goals and regularly monitor individual performance through the use of a 'capabilities matrix' and other data collection tools. As students work through the curriculum they continuously self-assess each category as follows:

- (1) Information: I have heard of it. I am aware of it.
- (2) Knowledge: I understand and can explain it.
- (3) Know-how: I can do it.
- (4) Wisdom: I can evaluate it and apply it in most appropriate ways.

As their knowledge and experiences build they move closer to the ultimate, wisdom.

The introduction of learning technologies into primary schools on a large scale and the challenge of incorporating its use as an integral part of the curriculum, is moving at a rapid pace. Teachers can no longer see themselves as the centre of all knowledge, as in many cases the students know infinitely more than the teachers. In this situation learning becomes shared and students and teachers alike become co-dependants. Many of the classes at Mill Park operate what we call a Yellow Pages Directory. Students put their name in the directory when they feel they have developed sufficient expertise to assist others in a particular area. An example of this is that a student may have developed expertise in using Power Point, he/she puts their name into the Yellow Pages. When someone requires help with Power Point, including teachers, they go to the directory and then to the person. As this system goes on, the directory grows as does the skill level, confidence and self-esteem of the students. Students become empowered, learning takes on a new meaning, responsibility grows as does intrinsic motivation. As Principal of the school I have on many occasions visited the Yellow Pages seeking assistance and the help I received has been first class. The technology example is only one case in point, an example could be given for almost every curriculum area.

Apart from taking responsibility for their own learning, other areas have been addressed in various classrooms. Some of these are:

- Goal setting
- Student leadership
- Class resources
- A sense of belonging

Our schools journey along the quality pathway has only just begun but the momentum is beginning to build as is the excitement and a refocusing on the students and their learning needs. Obviously the basic skills of Literacy and Numeracy are still necessary prerequisites for all students if they are to be successfully prepared for their place in society. However, we must go further. Society is marked by rapid social, economic and technological change, learning institutions must attempt to prepare all students for this 'new' society. In many primary schools we have made a great deal of progress in this area and will continue to do so in the future. For many years senior school primary teachers have felt obligated to prepare their students for secondary school, however this view is beginning to change. Secondary schools must be prepared to change their teaching style and philosophy to continue the work that occurs during primary education. The challenge for our secondary schools and tertiary institutions is how can this good work be continued and built upon?

## **Quality in the Higher Education Sector**

### **Victoria University: quality as a transformative framework**

Quality research and policy statements from overseeing bodies in the higher education sector alike impart learner centred rhetoric. Researchers (Harvey, 1998; Horsburgh, 2000; Mezirow, 1990; West, 1998 etc.) have shown that the focus of quality in higher education should be on attributes of the graduate, where transformation of the learner is central. Yet in practice, quality mechanisms focus on anything but the student, and habitually fail to demonstrate direct links to student learning. More often, what is actually being assessed is the end product, the award, or the institution as a whole, rather than the quality of the learning process (Hinett & Knight, 1996).

According to Harvey (1998), a transformative view, in relation to students, involves transforming not just what they know, but how they think and how they act. If students are to achieve transformation, teachers must role-model critical reflection. They must themselves participate in transformative learning (Horsburgh, 2000). This notion can also be applied to individuals, in learning organisations, assigned the roles of facilitating, driving and developing quality in teaching and learning. What has become evident in our work at Victoria University, in the approach we have adopted for the Quality Enhancement Project, is the impact of modelling a transformative framework.

### *Beginnings*

The Quality Enhancement Project was an initiative of the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Higher Education) and was initially termed 'Performance Management Study'. The study proposal outlined a need to construct a coherent and institutional framework which results in a systemised, effective and efficient performance management approach in the university.

After discussions with key staff at the university, we decided against including the word 'performance' in the title of the project. It would be inappropriate for the culture of the university, which was not favourable to traditional performance monitoring and

was wary of management attempts to initiate programmes that were reminiscent of performance appraisal. The response to the brief was re-titled Quality Enhancement Project and the methodology was re-addressed to reflect an action learning perspective. The main purposes of the project were redrafted and later further evolved through the research process:

- Developing an institutional system to ensure that new and established quality assurance mechanisms for teaching and learning can provide answers to the following:
- What do you do?
- How do you demonstrate what it is that you do?
- How do you know that you are improving?
- How tell your colleagues, students (prospective, current, past), employers, other universities and external agencies that you are improving?

### *Why Action Learning?*

Action learning is characterised by reflecting on the learning experience in order to identify exactly what it is that has been learned, in order to internalise the lessons and pragmatically devise action plans to take effective action in the future in a new and different situation (Bunning, 1991). I would like to say that the implications of using an action learning approach were clearly planned out from the beginning, but in fact, the justification for our approach has evolved throughout the research, as we have formed theoretical understandings out of our own practice. Factors that contributed to choosing the approach included:

- an understanding of the cultural and political sensitivities to the concept of quality at the university; due to poor leadership in past initiatives coupled with years of mergers that have continually challenged the identity of the university;
- the background of researchers at the Workplace Studies Centre, which cover the gamut of qualitative and quantitative social research, in aspects of productive diversity, industrial relations, human resource management, labour market analysis, psychology of work and organisational behaviour and social demography;
- the realisation that a grass roots approach that involved all stakeholders at all levels, and recognised the diversity of experiences within the university, was the best way to achieve maximum engagement in changing ossified practices;

### *Linking Practice to Theory*

Action learning requires that we build or link theory out of our practice. In a recent paper by Gore *et al.* (2000), descriptions of two paradigms were offered to illustrate the differing and similar perspectives that inform models for measuring quality in higher education. They stated that the dominant model is based on a technical-rational perspective of quality control as a scientific process. This perspective is based on a behaviourist model of human behaviour. It assumes that professional activity is a matter of technical performance and follows a logical sequence as part of an efficient system. It values empirical quantitative evidence and standardisation of procedures. This paradigm can be contrasted with the self-reflective perspective that views education and quality as a practical art rather than scientific process. This approach takes a holistic and multi-stakeholder view of quality, that is understood as contextualised. It values learning, creativity, innovation and exploration of alternative and sometimes contradictory per-

TABLE 1. Principles and values of perspective s that inform models for measuring quality in higher education

| Quality as Science                           | Quality as Art  |
|--|---|
| Rules, laws ad schedules                     | Starts where rules fade   |
| Routines, prescriptions                      | Prepared to abandon routine   |
| Efficient systems                            | Creativity, room to make mistakes   |
| Permanent knowledge                          | Knowledge is transient  |
| Empiricist approach, technical skills        | Professional expertise is more than the sum of its parts  |
| Standards to be raised                       | Quality comes from deep insight   |
| Pre-determined goals                         | Need to plan for the unexpected (flair and innovation in teaching and learning occurs in unexpected places and times) |
| Theory to be learned and applied to practice | Theory comes from practice  |
| Technical accountability                     | Moral responsibility  |
| External appraisal and audit                 | Reflection and self-assessment  |
| Training                                     | Education and development   |

Source: adapted from Gore *et al.*, 2000, p. 78.

spectives on quality. Table 1 sets out the principles and values of each paradigm as it is fully realised. As expected practice within the Quality Enhancement Project has reflected the values more aligned with those inherent in the self-reflective perspective.

### *The Way Forward*

Responses from higher education to quality are far from homogenous. Findings from the Quality Enhancement Project have not supported Gore *et al.*'s (2000) contention that the two paradigms described are in opposition and describe quality in dichotomous terms. Findings have instead revealed that quality mechanisms and processes adopted in most higher education institutions can be mapped across the contours of both approaches. There is a trend, albeit a slow one, towards mechanisms originating in the more traditional technical-rational perspective being adapted to embrace principles of the self-reflective paradigm. This can be seen, for example, where institutions are moving from a focus on external audit processes to systems of self-assessment.

In order for this trend to continue, we need an environment that allows for mistakes and is forgiving—universities should be, however governments are not. However, responding in a market driven economy means that ‘mistakes do matter’. The key factor is in the ability to appropriately target either perspective at different processes, and contextual situations within organisations. This may be represented within a system as a line of best fit mapped over multiple systems, systems that link formative and summative processes in a coherent institutional framework that encourages shared knowledge rather than compliance.

For Victoria University this means working within a transformative framework to develop, with all stakeholders, a system, or range of systems, that will articulate a cohesive, multifaceted approach to improving learning across the university.

### **Swinburne University of Technology (SUT): a Quality System approach**

A survey of Swinburne staff carried out in 1999 revealed that ‘the adding of value through learning’ was the most popular working definition of ‘quality in education’ of

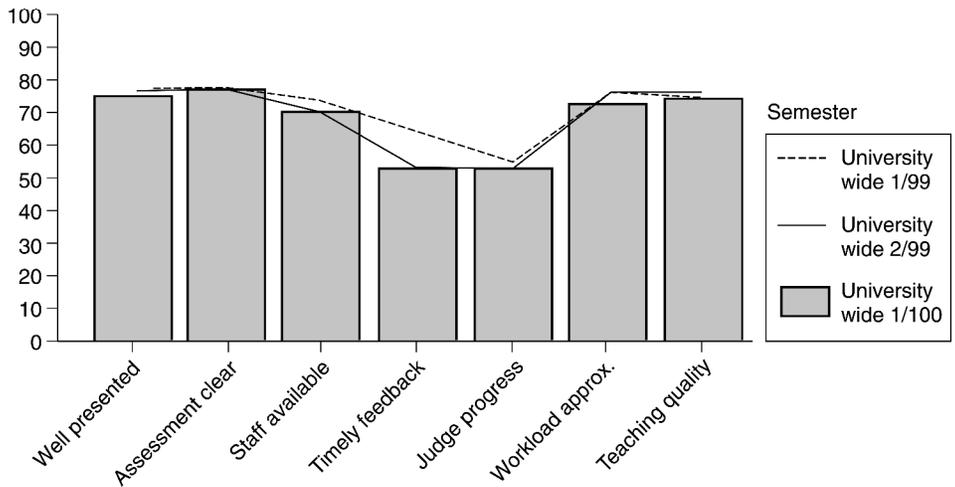


FIG. 1. 'Assessment of Attainment' processes derived from the university's in-house Subject Evaluation System.

academic staff, compared with 'fitness-for-purpose' among administrative staff [2]. Is it possible to achieve consistency across competing discourses on quality?

Since 1995 SUT has been using an approach to continuous quality improvement based originally on the Scottish Quality Management System [3] framework. The reason that this particular framework was selected at that time was that it was designed with education and training in mind and hence adopts a very learner-centred approach. For example, the Teaching and Learning part of the SQMS framework focuses on the following processes:

- Guidance & Support of Learners;
- Programme Design (includes specification of learning outcomes);
- Program Delivery (including '*joy in learning*' type issues); and
- Assessment of (learner) Attainment.

However, in Scotland the system is driven by external Quality Audit. At Swinburne, SQMS has been revised and refined for application in a university setting and consists of the following approach:

### Self-assessment

All higher education and corporate organisational units undertake Self-assessment of selected processes on an annual basis. Processes are selected for improvement on a fitness-for-purpose basis, with academic organisational units focussing on educational processes (administrative and support units select relevant process-management ones). This year all academic units chose to self-assess their 'Assessment of Attainment' processes. This decision was made at the divisional level. It was made primarily on the basis of the consistent quality data in Figure 1 below, derived from the university's in-house Subject Evaluation System, which evaluates the quality of teaching and learning in all accredited subjects at least once in a 12-month cycle.

Notice that it is the formative aspects of assessment (i.e. the 'timeliness of feedback' to students, and ability to 'judge (own) progress' in the assessment of learning) which

are the two areas that provide the greatest scope for the improvement of teaching and learning across the university as a whole. In contrast, the overall quality of teaching is rated to be much higher, with the ‘% broadly satisfied’ figure currently running at about 88% [4]. Self-assessment of the Assessment of Student Attainment involves each academic organisational unit establishing a Self-assessment Team to examine:

- Documented Assessment policies, procedures and strategies (i.e. the Approach);
- Assessment practices being implemented, both formative and summative assessment (i.e. Deployment); and
- Assessment Outcomes (i.e. Results and Improvement).

Teams review their unit’s performance against a series of qualitative good practice indicators. At the very heart of the Self-assessment instrument for the Assessment of Attainment lies this statement of good practice as a Deployment indicator:

Individual student progress towards the achievement of the designated learning outcomes is systematically monitored; educationally sound assessment techniques are used, and constructive and timely feedback is provided to learners in order to assist them to improve their performance.

Together, the qualitative assessments make an overall ADRI Self-assessment (Approach, Deployment, Results and Improvement). Self-assessment culminates in the writing of unit-based ‘Developmental Action Plans’ (DAPs), these identify areas of strength, opportunities for improvement, and Actions required. Responsibility for implementation of the actions identified in DAPs lies with unit managers.

### *Validation*

As Self-assessment is a ‘first-party’ quality review process, it requires validation and this is currently handled in two different ways:

- Internal Benchmarking of Self-assessment outcomes; and
- Quality Validation Review (internal quality audit).

Increasingly, we are moving towards trying to validate unit Self-assessments through a combination of: second and third parties participating in Self-assessment teams; formal reporting through the university’s performance reporting system; and internal benchmarking. Formal Internal Quality Audit is being reserved mainly for Quality Assurance applications, such as following up any incidences of ‘system non-compliance’ (e.g. units not completing Self-assessment).

### *Validation through Internal Benchmarking/BenchLearning:*

In Semester 2 this year, all higher education academic units at Swinburne will share the outcomes of their Self-assessments to learn about how the assessment of student attainment (i.e. learning) is handled in other units, and to share good practice, as well as share any Opportunities for Improvement/Actions identified.

Perhaps a better description of this process would be the term coined by Martin Carroll of Victoria University, Wellington in New Zealand, ‘BenchLearning’, but as Self-assessment does require an assessment outcome we have kept the term ‘benchmarking’ and added a quantitative dimension to the assessment process.

To assist units in the internal benchmarking process, the Self-assessment phase now includes a method for all units to evaluate some specific benchmarking data. This also assists units' Self-assessment Teams to make more objective and insightful assessments of their unit's actual performance in relation to the process being assessed. For the 'Assessment of Attainment' these benchmarks are:

(1) *Approach*

'Fitness of Courses': a rating of how the overall assessment of graduate attributes is approached at the course level. Source: *Benchmarking: A Manual for Australian Universities*.

(2) *Deployment*

- 'Timely Feedback Score': a rating of the % of students satisfied with the timeliness of feedback received, from below 45% (min.) to above 90% (max.)
- 'Judge Progress Score': a rating of the % of students satisfied with the usefulness of feedback to judge their own progress, from below 45% (min.) to above 90% (max.)

(3) *Results*

- Student Progress Unit Score: a rating of SPU performance, from less than 70% (min.) to over 95% (same limits as used in the Benchmarking manual)
- Appropriate Assessment Score: a rating of performance on the GCCA CEQ Appropriate Assessment Scale, from more than 10 points below National Average (min.), up to more than 10 points above National Average (max.)

(4) *Improvement*

- Trend Analysis Score: a rating based on longitudinal analysis of all five benchmarks above, from negative trends in all categories (min.) to positive trends in all categories (max.).

The great value of using this sort of approach in a formal Quality Review process, is that it places the measurement of the quality of the student learning experience at the very heart of the institution's Quality Management System. Rather than making the System focus just on the usual gross indicators of institutional efficiency/effectiveness (as currently required by DETYA and as seems likely also to be required by AUQA), it is focused squarely on the institution's effort to improve the quality of the educational experience of its students.

In addition, such an approach also provides a valuable form of organisational learning about how to systematically improve the quality of student learning, in this case by focusing on improving: our assessment policies and procedures (Approach); our current assessment practices (Deployment); and on the educational outcomes being achieved (Results and Improvement).

From a Quality Systems perspective, this year in the higher education area of the university, the Swinburne Quality Management System now looks very much like that shown in Figure 2.

SQMS is nothing more than a 'quality toolkit' that has been designed to assist the staff of the university to review its key processes in a systematic manner, in this case it happens to be the process through which student learning is assessed.

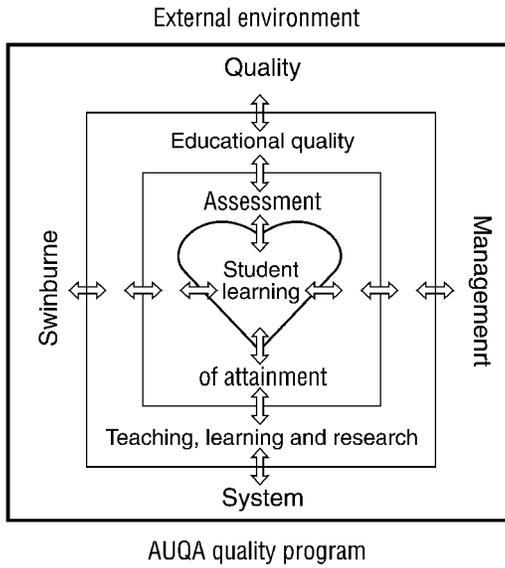


FIG. 2. Swinburne Quality Management System.

**Quality in the Vocational Education and Training Sector: quality in transition**

What follows is based on the experience of the VET sector in Victoria. Whilst some specific details will vary for the sector in other states, the story will be much the same.

The following shows very broadly the alterations to the critical relationships around what is taught and how it is assessed, i.e. how student learning has been interpreted.

It shows, first of all, five periods in the modern (Post-Kangan or 1974) VET sector. It also shows, again in an oversimplified way, the juxtaposition of two sets of influences.

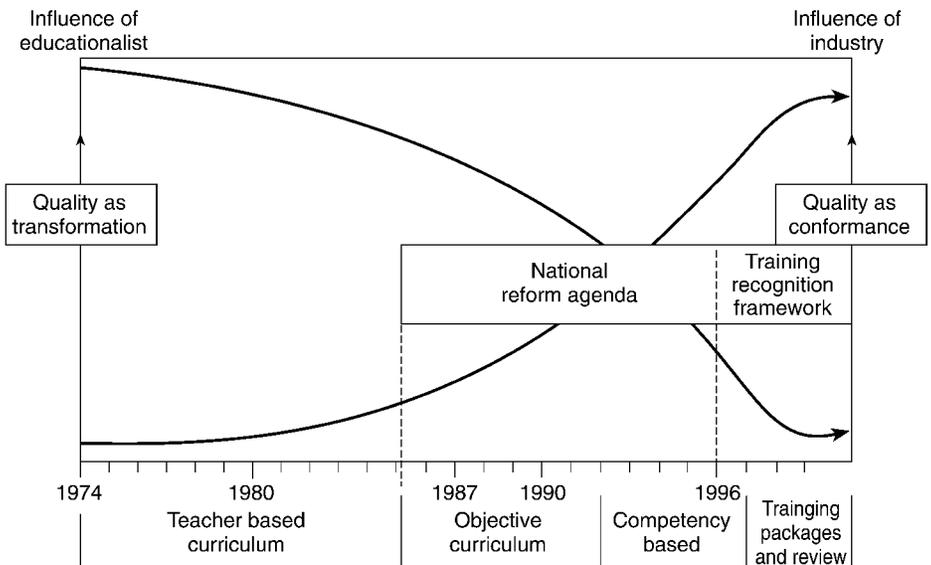


FIG. 3. The VET Sector: influences on learning.

The influence of educationists (teachers, curriculum experts and so on); and the influence of ‘industry’ (industry specialists, expert advisory groups). In simple terms, in the space of less than a decade, the sector changed from one led or dominated by educationists (to the exclusion of ‘industry’) to one led or dominated by ‘industry’ (with the exclusion of educationists). Only in the last 12 months or so, with the commencement of the first reviews of Training Packages, have the views of educationists been again taken into consideration.

Figure 3 also clearly illustrates the accelerating rate of change in the sector. Two definitions of quality have been superimposed onto the diagram. At the educationists’ end of the diagram the implicit definition of quality is *Quality as transformation* (i.e. ‘Art’). At the industry led end of the diagram, the explicit definition of quality is *Quality as conformance* (i.e. ‘Science’) (conformance to specified criteria or standards).

### VET as Transformation

The contents of the mid-1980s publication, *Victorian TAFE Papers*, provide an insight into what was occupying the attention of the TAFE (Technical and Further Education, now VET) sector. In the first four editions there were a total of 66 articles. A cursory examination based on the titles and a quick skim read suggests that attention was concentrated in the following areas:

- Future plans for TAFE (e.g. *The Changing Context of TAFE*)19.5% of articles
- Teaching methods (e.g. *Navigation Training through Simulation*)12%
- Research & Evaluation (e.g. *The Kirby Report*)12%
- Access and Equity (e.g. *Access Programs in TAFE*)12%
- Curriculum (e.g. *The Language of TAFE Teaching Materials*)9%

In the *Changing Context of TAFE* section there are references to: the need to revamp the traditional apprenticeship system to cover a much wider number of occupations; recognition that industry/employers will need to play a greater role in training; and periodic references to developments in Europe. However, no writer foresaw the rapid acceleration of change which commenced less than five years later.

There were no references at all to ‘quality’. This absence does not to suggest that quality had not been on the system’s agenda before the 1990s. It had but in different guises.

### VET as Conformance

It is interesting to realise that the changes in the late 1980s that have given us the VET sector we now have, had industrial relations origins. The current sector was not formed by educational decisions. (Chappell *et al.*, 2000)

The sector, and inevitably the quality assurance agenda within the sector therefore fell easily into the hands of Federal industrial relations bureaucrats, union officials (eg. Laurie Carmichael) and to representatives of (large and predominantly urban) businesses and industry. The Victorian VET sector enthusiastically and some would say uncritically, adopted an ISO based quality assurance system translated or interpreted from a manufacturing industry standard.

In most aspects, notwithstanding its uncritical introduction, the overall experience has been quite a positive one. Gibb (1999) lists a number of positive statements about ISO based quality systems:

- it is empowering and encourages teachers to look at different ways of improving delivery ... and to self-assess and reflect
- it creates greater enthusiasm for teaching/learning
- it creates greater cohesion and cooperation between teachers.

Nonetheless, there remain widespread apprehensions, which include:

- quality in VET has not focused on the learning process yet, except in superficial ways
- quality has been implemented as a way to improve business and the way an institute is run, not as a means to improve learning.

### **What then, did this ISO-based Quality Assurance Movement look like?**

The standard was generally applied in a predictable and unimaginative way with the guidance notes for the standard being followed closely. The limitations of the ISO system were clear from the start. The ISO international standards were not concerned with *what* is done but with *how* it is done. Meeting the *industrial standard* for quality management systems was not necessarily sufficient to guarantee a quality product or service.

The difficulty which is only now being debated and hopefully addressed is that the systems put in place were generally confined to the administrative and management areas of organisations and not to the core business of teaching and learning. This also meant that much of the system's data available to measure the effectiveness of the quality system would not relate directly to the quality of the teaching and learning processes.

Gibb's (1999) research reports on what a number of teachers said and felt when they were interviewed "... to find out ... what impact they felt implementing quality was having on the classroom". Central to Gibb's consultations with teachers was to find out how they defined quality. In summary, two definitions of quality were given to teachers:

- By quality I basically understand it to be a set of processes and procedures.
- By quality I basically understand it to be a philosophy and commitment to continuous improvement that is built into the culture of the training organisation.

All of the teachers interviewed preferred the second definition.

Paradoxically, it is the first definition that more accurately defines the bureaucratic, ISO based quality assurance systems that have generally been put in place in Victorian TAFE Institutes. It was the work of Gibb (1999) that has sparked the current interest in placing learning as the product of a training organisation. In Gibb's view, quality is too often seen as simply customer focus or integrated planning systems or control of documents. These are undoubtedly parts of what constitutes a quality assurance system or process but they are not the whole. In fact it can be argued that quality assurance systems derived from the managerial or 'industrial' model have added little to the critical and central issues to do with student learning.

### **Concluding Remarks**

In the present times of public policies that reduce the proportion of government funding available for education and training, and increase competition between providers of 'educational programmes and services' across all sectors, it is easy, even for educators, to lose sight of what the educational process is really all about, love of learning.

The various approaches to quality covered in this paper may not yet all be fully focused on ensuring that our students achieve 'joy in learning', for them to enjoy an opportunity to be 'transformed' by a love of learning! However, there is certainly an encouraging enthusiasm by the authors of this paper to acknowledge the 'transforming' value of the learning process in the various approaches covered. This holds true not just in relation to the institutions being better-able to look after the learning needs and requirements of their students (i.e. them being 'fit-for-purpose'), but also for the institutions themselves to learn about how to manage such things more effectively. For them to learn how to improve (as befits true 'learning organisations').

What difference would it make if as educators, administrators and managers we were all to conceive of quality as learning, the product of the educational process? We hold that if quality was to be conceived as 'joy in learning', it would enable us to think of it both as an outcome (a thing in itself- i.e. what is done), and as the process that delivers that particular outcome (i.e. the way that things are done).

### Notes on Contributors

ROB CARMICHAEL has experience as an educator in secondary education, in the vocational education and training sector and in higher education. He has seen service as a teacher, a head of department and division, and as a senior curriculum development officer. In his current role as Head, Office for Quality Education, he has responsibility for evaluation programmes, coordinating the university's excellence awards programme, and the development of its quality review system. He is a qualified quality assessor and auditor and has written a number of articles on educational quality, including the use of benchmarking in the evaluation of the student assessment process.

JOSEPHINE PALERMO has conducted research in the development and evaluation of equity and general performance indicators in tertiary education in Australia for nearly 10 years. She is currently managing the project, Quality Enhancement Study, at Victoria University, with a view to developing an institutional approach to quality in learning and teaching. She is also enrolled in the Department of Psychology as a doctoral student, investigating the impact of marginality for women in management roles. Her research interests include gender, diversity and organisational culture, and evaluation methodologies. *Correspondence:* Josephine Palermo, Victoria University of Technology, PO Box 14428, Melbourne City, MC 8001, Australia.

LINDSAY REEVE is currently Principal of Apollo Parkways Primary School, a school with 680 pupils and situated in residential Melbourne. Prior to his recent appointment, Lindsay was Principal of Mill Park Primary School for a period of six years. It was during this time that he became interested in the quality movement and in 1997 Mill Park Primary School was selected as one of 28 schools to trial a joint project with the Australian Quality Council and DEET. Lindsay was a member of the original Australian Quality Council/DEET steering committee and has spoken at numerous conferences throughout Australia on introducing the principles of Quality into a school setting.

KEVIN VALLENCE is the Manager, Quality and Research at the Bendigo Regional Institute of TAFE. He has a long history in vocational education and training, with previous roles including management of teaching centres, curriculum and professional

development; industry training and development consultant; and training and advising on competency based teaching and assessment. Kevin has written and facilitated a number of national professional development programs for TAFE staff and has taught VET methodology to higher education students. He has delivered training and quality assurance programs in Laos and Cambodia. He has extensive experience and skill in quality assurance, project management, vocational learning, survey and interview design and report writing.

## NOTES

- [1] Upper case is used when Quality is being used in the formal Quality Management sense.
- [2] About one-third of higher education academic staff chose 'Value-added' as their most favoured definition, followed by 'Academic Excellence', while nearly 40% of administrative staff selected 'Fitness for Purpose'.
- [3] SQMS © Scottish Enterprise.
- [4] '% Broadly Satisfied' as currently specified by DETYA as a Quality Assurance and Improvement Plan reporting requirement, includes those respondents who 'strongly agree', 'agree', or have no opinion. A much more accurate picture of student satisfaction is to be gained from the '% satisfied' figures used in this graph ('strongly agree' and 'agree' only). Using this method, the overall satisfaction with quality of teaching figure, though still at 75%, leaves ample room for improvement. If the focus of the institution's Quality System is on improvement, then the later method should always be used. All other '% satisfied' measures used in this part of the paper are calculated using this method.

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