

Quality a critical issue in teaching, learning and assessment in vocational and further education – a three country comparison

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1. Purpose and focus

Purpose

This paper provides a comparative commentary and analysis of critical issues in teaching, learning and assessment in vocational education and training (VET) in Australia and in further education (FE) in Scotland and England, in order to promote continuing discussion concerning the future directions for change in these areas of practice.

The paper draws on field visits in the UK in May 2005, for interviews with VET/FE¹ staff. The paper also draws on recent reports published in Scotland, England and Australia. The paper builds on the previous work undertaken by this research project, summarised in the literature review *Critical Issues* and the discussion paper *Complexities and Opportunities*, available for downloading from the research consortium website <http://www.consortiumresearchprogram.net.au/html/>

The argument in brief

An analysis of recent policy documents from the three countries suggests that there is a number of common themes influencing the broad policy directions for reforming VET/FE. Issues of skill shortages, ageing populations, older workers, increasing the engagement of young people in vocational studies, the central role of industry and business in VET/FE decision making, the quality and standards of education and training and the development of new ways of learning are all high on the policy agenda in Australia, Scotland and England.

Overall the argument of governments is consistent. Continuing economic development and social cohesion rely more than ever on a vibrant, high quality VET/FE sector, capable of rapidly responding to new skill demands, new labour market conditions, new contexts for learning and the increasing expectations of a diversifying group of clients of the system. One of the outcomes of this broad agreement is that there is increasing recognition by all governments that improving the quality of practices in teaching, learning and assessment is crucial if the sector is to respond to the new challenges that now confront it.

We investigate this quality issue by outlining the kinds of policies and practices that are being deployed in the three countries and the critical quality issues for teaching, learning and assessment practices that are emerging. We undertake this comparison in order to stimulate discussion in the Australian VET sector concerning the quality of teaching, learning and assessment.

¹ The term VET/FE is used throughout this paper to encompass the major deliverers of VET in the three countries.

2. Broad policy directions

The policy directions of the three governments are broadly similar in a number of areas in relation to contemporary VET/FE reform. For example, a reading of the most recent government reports including, *Skilling Australia – New directions for Vocational Education and Training*. (DEST 2005), the English government report *Skills: Getting on in business, getting on at work- Part 1*, (DfES 2005) and a number of Scottish government reports (SFEU 2005, Scottish Executive 2003, Scottish Executive 2005) reveals there is considerable agreement regarding the drivers of change impacting on VET/FE. These change drivers are outlined in a companion document produced as part of this research activity, *Critical issues*. Common change drivers include the following:

- **changing labour markets, skill shortages and ageing populations**

All three governments highlight the impact globalisation has had on domestic labour markets. They are also aware of skill shortages and gaps emerging in their economies. They recognise that the ageing of their populations is also likely to exacerbate these shortages in the future.

...part-time, casual and contract employment characterise the working life of around half of the Australian workforce. ...Skills shortages and ageing populations are global phenomena for mature economies. (DEST 2005:2)

...People are living longer, fewer young people will be coming into the labour market, and the average age of the workforce is rising. We cannot rely solely on a flow of better skilled young people entering the labour market. (DfES 2005:7)

the labour market has a greater supply of older workers than younger workers and the demographic trends indicate that this will continue. (Scottish Executive 2005:17)

- **increasing importance of skills and innovation in economic development**

The three governments emphasise the importance of a highly skilled workforce in a globalising economy and suggest that new skills are needed alongside the more traditional vocational skills of the past. These new skills include ‘employability’ skills and the skills needed to undertake ‘knowledge work’ (Chappell et.al. 2003), as essential ingredients of innovation.

Skill are an essential contributor to a successful, wealth creating economy. ...Lack of skills makes it harder for employers to introduce the innovations, new products and new working methods that feed improvements in productivity. (DfES 2005:6)

great leaps in technology, innovation and investment are driving our need for different and more sophisticated skills for both new and existing employees. (DEST 2005:2)

the knowledge skills and competencies people gain through learning contribute to economic activity. Investment in knowledge and skills brings direct economic returns to individuals and society. (Scottish Executive 2005:9)

- **the central role of industry in driving training policies and delivery**

Australian, Scottish and English governments all promote the crucial role of business and industry in the development of VET/FE policies and practices. An industry-led VET system has been of the highest priority of the Australian government for some time. Scotland and England are also now focusing on the central role of industry and business in VET/FE.

To work in partnership with employers to enhance skills by putting their needs and priorities centre stage in the design and delivery of training for adults...To give employers a stronger voice in shaping the supply of training at every level. (DfES 2005:9)

...business and industry leadership and engagement at all levels of training... Industry and business needs must drive training policies, priorities and delivery. (DEST 2005:3)

employer-led Sector Skills Councils play a vital role in articulating employer demand for skills and bringing influence to bear to facilitate relevant provision of training by the supply side. (Scottish Executive 2005:13)

- **ensuring delivery customised, flexible, responsive products and services**

The diversifying client base of VET/FE has different expectations and requirements. This has led to pressure on providers to offer more customised and flexible programs that suit the particular client group in terms of the style and timing of delivery. New information and communications technology (ICT) developments are likely to increase the opportunity for greater flexibility (Moynagh & Worsley 2003).

Reforming training supply is an essential part of creating a new, responsive system. (DfES 2005:9)

Our goal is to ensure that in the future Australia's training system will be even more responsive to the ever-changing needs of industry. Training providers can customise the delivery of Training Package competencies to suit the needs of different industries, individual enterprises and particular learners. (DEST 2005: vi)

A more integrated and flexible system remains the only comprehensive solution to wider access...Training providers need to be flexible about the routes into and around the learning arena. (Scottish Executive 2003:57)

- **the delivery of high quality training outcomes**

The quality of VET/FE provision appears a central concern of the three governments, with the development of new quality agencies occurring simultaneously in the three countries. In Australia, *Skilling Australia* (DEST 2005) proposed that a new quality agency will oversee quality in VET. In England a Quality Improvement Agency (QIA) is also about to begin its work in the Further Education sector. In Scotland there is a move to expand the work of the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) for Higher Education to cover Further Education. This direction was also considered briefly as an option by the Australian government (DEST 2005).

Enhancing the national approach to managing quality - including establishing a national quality agency to promote quality, strengthen quality assurance mechanisms and improve the national consistency of State registration and auditing activity. (DEST (2005:vi)

Ensuring we have the leaders, middle managers, and frontline workers with the skills to develop and provide high-quality public services that put the interests of the user at the heart of their delivery. (DfES 2005:1)

Investment in quality-assured learning offers benefits to the individual, economy and wider society. We need to ensure that whatever learning a person takes is of the highest quality. (Scottish Executive 2005:39)

- **the need for the sector to exploit new technologies in training**

The three governments recognise the possibilities that new technologies have in terms of learning. The rapid uptake of ICT, particularly the use of broadband and the world wide web, not only has implications in terms of flexible delivery of learning, but also opens up the possibility that this technology can be used to tap into groups that are often uninvolved in training including older workers, early school leavers, the unemployed and other disadvantaged groups within the world of work. In addition these new technologies are increasingly embedded in workplaces, therefore all workers need to have the skills needed to work with this technology.

Providers and institutions must continue to innovate and adopt new technologies and practices to reach out to existing and new learners. (DEST 2005:2)

The pervasiveness of ICT, both at work and for leisure purposes, means that functional competence in using ICT needs to be counted as an essential skill for the modern world. (DfES 2005:19)

e-learning offers the potential of changing the relationship between providers and learners. It is able to package learning in new ways e.g. by combining games technology and learning. It can build on the way people are making use of the internet as a place to shop, communicate and find information. (Scottish Executive 2005:13)

Given that the three governments are in broad agreement about the drivers of change that require new and improved responses from the VET/FE sector, it is perhaps unsurprising that some of the policy initiatives in relation to the reform of VET/FE are similar. For example the three countries have developed:

- **Skills Councils.** The Industry Skills Councils (ISC) in Australia and the Sector Skills Councils in England and Scotland have similar responsibilities in the area of skills training. In all three jurisdictions recently there has been a move away from single industry involvement with the Skills Councils, towards Councils representing industry clusters. In part, this is a reflection of greater labour mobility across industries and also reflects the changing relationships among industry players such as supply chains and outsourcing arrangements.
- **Qualifications frameworks.** The Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) and the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) in England and the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) are designed to recognise and delineate all national qualification levels. They provide guidance regarding the appropriate level of award for programs and courses and inform learners of the qualification pathways available nationally.
- **Quality frameworks.** The Australian Quality Training Framework, the Quality Framework managed by the Office of Standards in Education (OFSTED) in England and the Scottish Quality Framework managed by the Scottish Further Education Funding Council (SFEFC) are all designed as mechanisms to ensure quality. As Blom and Meyers (2003) note, there are widely different conceptions of quality in education and training. Therefore the ways in which these quality frameworks operate are at present quite different. However, as was outlined earlier, there are proposals at least for quality agencies to operate in all three countries. How these agencies interpret and judge quality will be known in the near future.
- **Articulation and credit transfer guidelines.** These guidelines remain a policy goal of governments, with progress being made. In Scotland, for example, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) has issued guidelines² for negotiating credit transfer between Further Education and Higher Education and in Australia the Ministerial Council for Employment Education Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) has produced good practice principles for credit transfer and articulation. However local credit transfer arrangements between VET/FE and universities remain the norm in England and Australia, with at present no national arrangements in place.

² http://www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland/scottishadvisory/credit_based.asp

3. Quality - a critical issue for VET/FE

Our analysis of these policy directions and initiatives suggest that the three governments are pursuing a reform agenda in which quality has become an overarching critical issue for contemporary VET/FE, not least in the areas of teaching, learning and assessment. To date, the quality agencies in England and Scotland have taken an inspectorial approach to assessing quality and Australian agencies have taken a compliance approach. The ways in which the new agencies in each country manage quality assessment of providers is yet to be determined.

The focus on quality in teaching learning and assessment in VET/FE is in part an outcome of the many changes that have impacted on the sector in recent times (ANTA 2003) and has been made more urgent in the three countries as a result of the general acknowledgement that skill shortages and rapid advances in ICT technologies require additional responses from the sector.

In order to compare quality issues in teaching learning and assessment in the three countries, we will utilise the three categories developed in our earlier literature review, *Critical Issues*, and discussion paper, *Complexities and Opportunities*:

- client wants
- practitioner skills
- innovation development and implementation.

Using these three categories to organise the discussion below, quality issues emerge at systemic, organisational and individual practitioner levels.

Client wants – industry

At the systemic level, one of the critical issues is to increase involvement of industry in VET/FE. The initial development and recent modification of industry skills councils in the three countries is a strategy to encourage greater industry involvement. The skills councils provide VET/FE with industry intelligence regarding skills gaps and shortages. They also have other responsibilities including monitoring and maintaining competency standards, which are then used by VET/FE to develop relevant vocational programs and assessment activities. These councils also inform the sector on industry delivery preferences. This input is designed to ensure VET/FE focuses on developing the relevant skills and standards required by industry in ways that are responsive to the particular preferences of industry clients. At the same time, the broadening of the industry skills councils in the three countries is a response to the new cross-industry relationships that increasingly characterise the organisation and distribution of work in the contemporary economy.

A focus on the delivery of learning in the workplace is another critical issue shared by the three VET/FE systems (Glass et.al. 2002, Hughes & Montiero 2005, Woods 2004). In part, this issue is a consequence of the current competitive business environment, which

often prevents companies releasing staff for training. Workplace learning is also seen as having other advantages including reducing or eliminating the problem of transfer of skills and increasing the motivation of learners particularly in terms of relevance. There has been a steady increase in this form of delivery in recent times in the three countries. There is however a need to ensure that workplace learning is not only relevant to the needs of the learner but also adds value to the enterprise through the use of strategies such as project-based learning (ANTA 2003). This 'mutual benefit' criterion has become an important feature of workplace learning.

One of the critical issues that has emerged with the extension of workplace learning is the need for VET/FE providers to have a good understanding of the human resources (HR) environment of the specific client. There is increasing recognition that the benefits of workplace learning are best realised when attention is also paid to organisational issues such as job structure, work organization and managerial climate. This is particularly significant for some small to medium sized (SME) enterprise clients who may not have the time or resources to manage these aspects of workplace learning. Increasingly VET/FE providers may be called on to assist clients in these areas. Indeed this may well be an emerging area of VET/FE provision.

The creation of new Australian Technical Colleges (ATCs) and Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVE) in England can also be seen in part as a systemic response to the need for VET/FE to develop even closer collaborations with industry and encourage greater industry involvement in skill development. Although different in terms of their provision and governance, they share at least one common goal: increasing the national skills base. For instance, in England CoVEs are charged with increasing skills:

Proactive employer/provider engagement to underpin, develop and strengthen innovative and flexible approaches to meeting the nation's current and future skill needs. <http://cove.lsc.gov.uk/background.cfm>

In Australia, the ATCs are expected to generate more apprentices:

Industry will play a pivotal role in both leading and supporting the (Australian) Colleges, particularly through the employment of the students as New Apprentices.
<http://www.australiantechnicalcolleges.gov.au/faq.htm#1c>

Industry collaboration with VET/FE is also encouraged in a number of other ways. A recent report in the UK (OFSTED 2004), while recognising that many providers were collaborating with employers, also criticised the sector for over-reliance on learner demand rather than employer demand when making decisions regarding training programs. It also indicated that providers also used labour market information that was at *a too high a level* (OFSTED 2004:2) to be useful in working with individual employers.

An important new focus in terms of collaboration therefore is the local level. In Scotland some colleges are appointing staff as innovation and enterprise leaders whose

responsibility is to work with local employers to deliver flexible and relevant training programs that meet their needs. Others have created Learning Workplace Development Units. In Australia, TAFE NSW has established a TAFE Industry Partnership Centre to collaborate with emerging industries related to new technologies. In Victoria and Tasmania Industry Liaison officers and agents have been appointed to develop closer links with industry and VET providers. The Local Learning and Employment Networks (LENs) initiative in Victoria is also designed to focus on local employment needs and emphasises local collaborations and networks (<http://www.len.vic.gov.au/len/>).

The skill ecosystem project in Australia offers a different perspective on the issue of collaboration (www.skillecosystem.net/), arguing that workforce skills and knowledge are shaped by a number of factors within a region and that the following all contribute to the development of a skill ecosystem:

- the business environment - competitive pressures, inter-firm relationships, access to finance and product markets
- the technology in use
- the role of government and industry regulators
- modes of engaging labour and the operation of labour markets
- production processes and the way work is organised
- the quality of education and training and its ability meet industry's and workers' developmental needs.

Consequently collaboration in skill development requires collaboration with more players than simply employers and providers.

Client wants – learners

The discussion paper *Complexities and Opportunities*, a complementary paper in this research activity, identified the main services and support individual learners prefer (Mitchell et al. 2005:9-10), including relevant training, 'just for me' training and the recognition of informal learning. Individual learners also appreciate services and support that take into account differences in student background and learning styles. These preferences are for the most part similar to those that providers in Scotland (SFEFC 2002) and England (senet.lsc.gov.uk/reviews/learnersneeds/latest.cfm) recognise as important for individual learners.

As outlined in the literature review *Critical Issues* (Mitchell et. al. 2005a), rapid developments in information and communications technology including the mass social uptake of broadband technology are creating a new context in which learning can be managed, delivered and experienced. Alongside this is the rise of consumer culture in VET/FE where learners are expecting learning products to be tailored to their individual needs, including utilising the new media increasingly available to them.

In addition, predictions that ageing populations will create general skill shortages across the economy are common in the three countries. A shrinking labour market pool will require greater efforts to re-engage, into the labour market, older learners, people with disabilities and those who have left education and training with little by way of

vocational skill. VET/FE providers will be expected to undertake this task and this is likely to require different approaches to learners and learning.

There is evidence that these particular groups are now a new focus of VET/FE interests. For example retaining and re-training older workers is a key finding of recent reports in the three countries (LSC 2005, Scottish Executive 2003, ANTA 2004). The role of VET/FE in assisting people with disabilities to enter the workforce through training is also a common focus (ASC 2004, LSDA 2005, ADTAC 2004). Further, in Scotland and England this aspect of VET/FE provision forms an integral part of the quality framework on which providers are judged in terms of provision.

The re-engagement of people who have left education without the acquisition of basic skills, including early school leavers, is a high priority with Scottish and English VET/FE providers. For example, a recent report on basic skills (Ofsted 2005) acknowledged that a number of FE colleges were successful in attracting learners from priority groups including the unemployed and people in low skilled work. An emerging issue however was a shortage of qualified teachers able to teach in this specialist area (Ofsted 2005:2).

The Ofsted (2005) report also acknowledged that this success was in part where colleges actively developed community-based and workplace-based basic skills programs. In Scotland this strategy was also seen as important. A number of colleges visited by a team member in May 2005 had developed community based 'shop-front' provision of basic skills and also had college-based centres that offered basic skills support that was integrated with career advice and ICT support. In West Lothian College for example, 'The Hub' is a one-stop location for student services and support in the college where advice and learning support was available to all students.

A study by McKenna and Fitzpatrick (NCVER 2004) that investigated adult literacy policy and provision in six English-speaking countries, including Australia, concluded that England had developed the most comprehensive policy and provision in this area particularly as it had developed national literacy goals and targets. They also suggest that the VET/FE sector is particularly important, as significant numbers of workers require improvement in their literacy skills particularly with the adoption of new information and communication technologies in the contemporary workplace.

The concept of 'personalised learning' (<http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/personalisedlearning/> accessed 12 May 2005) is actively promoted by the British Government and by organisations such as the Demos think-tank (Leadbeater 2004), as a response to meeting the specific needs of all students. The concept stems from the belief that every student can benefit from individualised attention and support. In the UK, personalised learning entails collaborative approaches to learning combined with rigorous use of assessment information to set targets for achievement, based on an understanding of a student's current skills and capacity. While most UK initiatives in personalised learning are applied in schools, there is a new recognition that the approach is applicable within the Australian VET sector. The NSW Board of Vocational Education and Training (BVET) and the NSW Department of

Education and Training (DET) are currently undertaking research on personalised learning (Mitchell 2004).

Practitioner skills

There is a general acknowledgement that the work of VET/FE practitioners has become much more complex as the sector responds to a changing economy and labour market and the increased and more diverse expectations emerging from an expanding client base. This complexity is also compounded by the expansion in the number of sites and contexts in which vocational learning occurs and the wide variety of people who now have some training responsibility as part of their work (Scottish Executive 2004; DfES 2005). As described in the Australian report, the Phase 1 Review of Training Packages:

VET programs are now delivered both on and off-the-job; by public, private and non-government providers; in workplaces and in classrooms; in schools, colleges and in-house; face-to-face, on-line and by distance. Furthermore, VET programs are delivered by practitioners with quite varied qualifications and work experience, and to a wider variety of client groups and students. (Chappell et al. 2003:13)

This complexity presents a number of significant challenges regarding the quality of teaching, learning and assessment, not least in terms of the skills sets required by practitioners working in VET/FE.

(VET) requires practitioners who have a sophisticated appreciation of the pedagogical choices that are not only available to them but which are consistent with the context, clients and learning sites that make up the arena in which they work. In short, the successful implementation of VET programs relies on learning specialists who have expertise and a pedagogical orientation that they are able to deploy to meet the increasingly diverse requirements of clients. (Chappell et al. 2003:13)

For the most part in the three countries, this need for VET practitioners to develop new skills has revolved around finding solutions to the challenges of

- initial qualifications
- continuing professional development
- quality learning resources.

Brief comments on each of these challenges are set out below.

Initial qualifications

In Scotland and England, until 2001 there was no national requirement that FE teachers be trained, although many colleges encouraged staff to gain educational qualifications (Ofsted 2003). The Ofsted report, *The initial training of further education teachers*, published in 2003, began a process of reform in England that today has resulted in the development of a new national award the QTLS –Qualified Teacher Learning & Skills

(DfES 2005). This award is open to ‘*anyone with a teaching role*’ in the learning and skills sector and the full qualification is designed to provide learning and skills sector teachers with ‘*parity of esteem and professionalism with schoolteachers*’ (DfES 2005:6). It is designed to become the standard qualification of teachers in the sector. (DfES 2005:5)

Scotland is also considering the introduction of a similar award, however is currently engaged in a debate to establish a professional body for FE staff in Scotland’s colleges (Scottish Executive 2004). This proposed body would have a similar function to the Institute for Learning (IfL) in England that is the awarding body for the new QTLS.

These developments are in sharp contrast to the Australian TAFE sector where a Diploma of teaching became the standard qualification for teachers, after the publication of the Kangan Report. By the 1980s almost all full-time TAFE teachers in Australia were undertaking a Diploma level educational qualification (Hewitt 2003:12-13).

Although arriving by different routes, there are a number of similarities with the current position of the three countries in terms of initial qualifications. In Australia, the creation of a VET provider market, a greater focus on workplace training and assessment and the accreditation of VET providers with quite different profiles, client groups and services led to the development of a certificate level award that has become the minimum qualification required to deliver and assess accredited vocational programs³.

The new QTLS in England offers a ‘passport to teaching’ as an exit point. This ‘passport’ program consists of thirty guided learning hours (excluding teaching practice and observation). It is designed for those whose ‘teaching role is limited to the delivery and assessment of their specialist area’ (Ofsted 2005:7). Ofsted anticipates that ‘all other teachers (in the learning and skills sector) whether part-time, fractional or full-time should go on to the full QTLS award’. It also expects this award will be embraced across the whole of the skills and learning sector, including trainers in work-based learning, tutors in adult and community learning, trainers who work in the wider public sector and for large private sector employers.

In many ways the three countries have moved to a similar two-tier qualifications system from opposite directions. In Australia, prior to the national reforms to the sector in the 1990s, diploma and degree level qualifications were the norm. However with the changes to VET provision, a certificate level award was also introduced and that has become the minimum qualification needed to deliver accredited vocational programs. In England and Scotland initial teacher training has until recently not been the norm in the sector and both countries are moving towards a diploma style teaching qualification (up to 5 years) for teachers/trainers in the learning and skills sector, with a lower award provision for those with a limited role in delivering vocational programs.

³ Initially this was the category II certificate IV which has now been replaced by the Certificate IV in training & assessment.

It is important to note however that the largest VET provider in Australia, TAFE, had a reservoir of highly qualified staff prior to the reforms. Today TAFE's ageing workforce and the preference by many TAFE institutes to recruit fractional-time and casual teaching staff with Certificate IV qualifications rather than full-time diploma/degree level teaching staff will alter the ratio of staff working in the VET sector who have obtained a diploma or degree. In future, extra efforts may well need to be made to recruit and retain highly qualified staff who have the skills to cover the increasingly diversified work that is expected to be performed in contemporary VET.

This provides the sector with a challenge and an opportunity to re-invigorate teacher training for the sector by ensuring that initial qualification programs are relevant and adaptable to the working context of people whose major interest is in delivering high quality teaching learning and assessment in the various sites and to the various clients that utilise the services of VET providers.

Continuing professional development and quality learning resources

Continuing professional development is also an issue in the three countries. In Australia the national staff development and change management program Reframing the Future assists practitioners to develop a range of skills in teaching, learning and assessment in the context of Training Packages. The national program LearnScope assists practitioners to develop their skills in using ICT, particularly for the use of e-learning. These national programs are complemented by professional development programs offered by state and territory bodies and by individual training providers. In Scotland professional development initiatives have been introduced with the specific aim of engaging practitioners in defining and researching their own practice and at the same time developing good practice models that can be more widely disseminated across the sector (HMIE 2002; SFEU 2004).

In support of professional development, a number of initiatives have been undertaken to provide practitioners with easy access to models, tools and learning resources. For example, in England initiatives have included the establishment of the National Learning Network – an on-line site providing teachers/trainers with resources for e-learning (www.nln.ac.uk/index.asp) and the establishment of Learning and Skills Beacons (www.dfes.gov.uk/learningandskillsbeacons/) designed to disseminate good practice examples from providers who have been acknowledged as leaders in developing good practice innovations in the learning and skills sector of education. These English initiatives are comparable with a number of Australian VET developments: a resource generator (www.resourcegenerator.gov.au/); a platform for trading learning materials, AShareNet (www.aesharenet.com.au); and a set of 'toolboxes' of online training resources and activities (www.flexiblelearning.net.au/toolbox/). *Skilling Australia* (DEST 2005) foreshadows the development of a 'one-stop shop' for learning resources in Australian VET.

Innovation development and implementation

Parallel studies on innovation in teaching and learning were conducted recently in Scottish FE and Australian VET (Mitchell (2003)). The Scottish publication *Focus on Learning - Final Project Report* (SFEU 2004) reports on the two-year project funded by the Scottish Further Education Funding Council and led by four Scottish FE colleges. The primary purpose of the project was to develop, pilot and evaluate strategies designed to enhance student achievement. The principal aims included motivating staff to explore new approaches to raising achievement; raising staff awareness of recent developments regarding effective learning; and enhancing staff skill levels with regard to change and to planning, delivering and evaluating effective learning for their students. These purposes and aims have some similarities with those of the Australian project, described next.

The Australian research project on innovation in teaching and learning in VET (Mitchell et al. 2003), was funded by ANTA, managed by OTTE and published by Reframing the Future (http://www.reframingthefuture.net/publications/Emerging_Futures.pdf). There were two aims of the Australian VET project: first, to provide a national review of good practice in innovation that is drawn from current provider activity and achievements; and second, to investigate the development of a suitable national mechanism for ongoing information and support for the dissemination of teaching and learning practice and to strengthen and broaden innovation in the future.

The Australian and Scottish reports imply that the challenge for FE/VET is to work with and manage its practitioners in such a way that innovation can be supported to ensure new or improved outcomes for FE/VET's constituents, including FE/VET organisations. *Emerging Futures* provides a conceptual framework for understanding and supporting innovation in VET teaching and learning. The framework shows that innovation in teaching cannot be reduced to a formula of step-by-step actions, as innovation in VET teaching and learning cannot be reduced to simplicities. The framework demonstrates – as do the findings from the Scottish research – that extensive professional judgment, improvisation, experience and wisdom are needed by practitioners contributing to innovation in FE/VET teaching and learning.

4. Summary

This paper argues that governments across the three countries agree that a vibrant, high quality VET/FE sector is needed, capable of rapidly responding to new skill demands, new labour market conditions, new contexts for learning and the increasing expectations of clients. One of the outcomes of this broad agreement is that there is a heightened recognition by the governments that improving the *quality of practices* in teaching, learning and assessment is crucial if the sector is to respond to the new challenges that now confront it. Interestingly, the paper identifies similar policy directions designed by governments to stimulate quality practices, in Australia, Scotland and England.

In order to compare quality issues in teaching learning and assessment in the three countries, the paper explores quality in terms of client wants, practitioner skills and innovation. The paper demonstrates that governments in all three countries are seeking to improve the quality of VET/FE provision through a range of policies and programs. Given the complex nature of VET/FE, especially due to the demands of clients, it is clear that multiple and intense strategies and initiatives are needed to improve and sustain the quality of provision.

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