Comments on the LH Martin Institute report The quality of teaching in VET: Options paper.

ERTOA is pleased to have been involved in the research that has led to the publication of the five papers that make up the interim project report. ERTOA would like to thank the researchers for involving the Association and hope we will have useful discussions as the final report is prepared.

The papers are:

- The quality of teaching in VET: literature review
- The quality of teaching in VET: overview
- The quality of teaching in VET: framework
- The quality of teaching in VET: evidence
- The quality of teaching in VET: options paper

ERTOA has chosen to make a series of general comments and then some specific comments on parts of the individual papers. ERTOA has chosen not to respond to the questions posed at the end of the Options Paper, as ERTOA feels that the report is constructed with such a narrow view of the sector, that the questions are not relevant.

1. General comments on the overall direction and ‘feel’ of the reports:

Even though the Options Paper defines ‘Teachers’ broadly (Options paper, page 4), this broad definition is not represented elsewhere in the reports and seems tokenistic at best. ERTOA acknowledges there are some reassuring references to the complexity of defining a VET workforce, however this is not reflected in the reports.

A good start was made in the Options paper at page 9

“...while there are workplace trainers and assessors who are employed exclusively to undertake teaching and training (and thus have the same responsibilities as other VET teachers), particularly in big enterprises that have attained registered training organisation (RTO) status to train their staff, much workplace training and assessing is by those who undertake these duties as a part of a broader job. They are not employed primarily as teachers or trainers.”

These VET professionals seem to be entirely forgotten in the rest of the report.
ERTOA disagrees with the fundamental assertion made in the Framework Paper (page 3)

“Quality teaching is the core of quality assurance and development in Australian vocational education and training because the quality of teaching is one of if not the most important factor in students’ learning. The quality of students’ learning strongly influences their attainment and their work performance as graduates. Quality teaching is the core of institutions’ quality assurance because teaching is their most important activity.”

This reflects a myopic view based on a strong belief that institutional pathways are the only ones in VET. Words such as institutions, teachers, students, learners and graduates; and assertions about teachers being:

“.. [The] institutions’ most valuable resource and are usually their biggest item of expenditure” emphasis the myopic view.

Of even greater concern to ERTOA is the reference to “mere competence”. This denigrates the achievements of the sector in meeting the needs of industry. ERTOA vehemently objects to the suggestions that RTOs do not develop students’ potential. We would suggest a generation of VET professionals and hundreds of thousands of skilled and productive workers would disagree as well!

“There are also arguments that VET teachers should have a higher education teaching qualification upon commencing teaching as do school teachers, or as other professions require of practitioners as a condition of practice. This is because the aim of teachers should not be to prepare students as just competent, but to develop students’ potential to achieve at their highest level which in many cases should exceed mere competence. It is hard for teachers to do this if they have not achieved a qualification at a higher level than the level they are teaching.” Options Paper page 16

This narrow view does not give ERTOA any confidence that the final report will reflect the industry led nature of the sector, the diversity of provision, nor the sophistication and professionalism of the wide VET workforce, especially the VET workforce involved in workplace delivery and assessment.

2. Comments on the Overview Paper.

ERTOA argues that the opinion:

“Increasing the size and capacity of the VET teaching workforce is essential if VET expansion and equity targets are to be met. There is an emerging consensus that Australia, like other countries, will need to invest in expanding and professionalising its VET workforce in response to the changing international economy and national social and economic imperatives” Overview Paper page 4

is simplistic and bound by a narrow view of the current skills development models, especially in the workplace. Whilst the opinion may resonate with TAFE Colleges there are other ways to meet development targets. For example, ERTOA has argued that to meet the COAG agenda in skills development a new view is needed. This view is described in detail in the ERTOA discussion paper at: http://www.ertoa.org.au/library/Response%20to%20Skilling%20Australian%20Workers%20-%20September%202009.pdf
A number of sections of the Overview paper only apply to the TAFE sector. ERTOA acknowledges this reflects the cross section of respondents to the survey but argues this should not be used as a basis for options for the whole sector. As difficult as it may be, all VET professionals need to have their views represented.

For example:

“Some senior stakeholders argued that current industrial structures and funding models are overly restrictive and argued they needed to be modernised. Others interpreted this as deregulation and marketisation that would result in less funding for teaching and diminution of teachers’ professionalism. A number expressed concerns that VET in schools was taught by teachers without experience in the relevant industry. Many participants identified constructing appropriate assessment as a key challenge for VET teachers.” (Overview Paper Page 5)

This paragraph is only applicable to institutional providers. For example appropriate assessment in a workplace context is clear and simple. “Industrial structures” and “funding models” apply to TAFE colleges.

And:

“Participants thought that VET teaching needed to be more highly valued and lead to in meaningful opportunities for careers and competitive levels of pay if VET was to recruit and keep teachers. Workforce development planning needs to employ external and internal strategies. External strategies include the need to develop careers in VET and rely less on a sessional or casual workforce.” (Overview Paper Page 5)

This paragraph shows little knowledge of the learning and development and assessment practices in workplace training and assessment. ERTOA acknowledges that this comment reflects the survey participants, but the report should clearly indicate that the views are not reflecting the scope of the VET workforce.

And:

“All participants in this research emphasised the importance of an industry focus and industry currency, but many were less concerned about generating business and more focused on ‘traditional’ concerns of teaching and learning.” (Overview Paper, Page 5)

ERTOA acknowledges difficulties in getting responses from all sectors of the VET profession. However, the research process needs to be inclusive. To take the comments from the narrow range of respondents and extrapolate to an entire sector undermines the robustness of the methodology.

For example:
- 76.6% of web respondents were from TAFE (less than 1% were from the enterprise sector);
- 6 out of 9 RTOs were traditional institutional providers (1 private RTO, 2 ERTOs and 6 traditional institutions with 30 staff from traditional institutions involved, 2 from private RTOs and 5 from enterprise RTOs);
- and out of 25 stakeholders interviewed 1 represented the enterprise sector and 2 represented the private sector.
At a minimum, the cross section of interviewees should reflect the percentage of activity conducted by the different sectors. Additionally, ERTOA would argue that innovative workplace delivery and assessment, which reflects and meets industry needs, should have a greater representation in defining the future VET workforce and its development needs.

ERTOA supports the view that

“These are not binary oppositions because participants saw teaching to be complex and multi-faceted, but it may be that this is an area that requires more research to develop a wider range of models of teaching that reflect VET’s diversity.”

and would certainly welcome research that sought to genuinely reflect the “.. wider range of models..” (Overview Paper, Page 5)

ERTOA also supports the opinion that

“Teachers/trainers in private and enterprise RTOs can face particular challenges in accessing appropriate CPD because most are quite small. It is important not to overly homogenise private and enterprise RTOs because there are a number of very large RTOs in these categories, and the needs of big providers may be very different to those of smaller providers.” (Overview Paper, Page 6)

and would welcome additional research into this area.

3. Comments on the Options paper

Whilst some attempt is made to include the complexity of RTOs such as:

“Teachers/trainers in private and enterprise RTOs can face particular challenges in accessing appropriate CPD because most are quite small. So too are many neighbourhood houses, community centres, and other small public RTOs. The costs of releasing staff to undertake CPD is an inhibiting factor, as is the cost of CPD itself. However, it is important not to overly homogenise private and enterprise RTOs because there are a number of very big RTOs in these categories, and the needs of big providers may be very different from those of smaller providers. More industry focused CPD may be more attractive to enterprise and private RTOs, particularly those that helped their teachers to participate in industry teacher networks.” (Options Paper, Page 22)

no attempt is made to address this complexity.

The claim in the Options Paper (Page 30)

“[that] There are two main ways of approaching VET teacher registration. One is for the profession itself to be the registering body. This may involve voluntary or mandatory registration. The other is to establish a registration process controlled by a regulatory board. The latter is a ‘tighter’ approach and is the model used in school teaching and many other regulated occupations. Practitioners are required to register as a condition of practice. Its disadvantage is that it does not require the profession to take responsibility for its development”
ignores the third way of approaching VET teacher registration. ERTOA has argued previously that any registration process for VET professionals is based on a false view that it is a homogenous profession and that anything would be gained. ERTOA argues that any registration process will fail if it is applied outside institutional providers. Would a team leader in a call centre whose staff appraisals are used as part of an assessment process need to be registered? Would a workplace trainer assisting a new starter to drive a truck in a quarry need to be registered?


The statement on page 6 of the Framework Paper seems to only apply to institutions:

“Even though the framework described in figure 1 is described as the conceptual framework for the study of the quality of teaching in vocational education and training, it may be readily generalisable to all education provided in institutions such as schools and universities. Thus, the provision of well accommodated and equipped institutions is a current issue in the quality of school education and the identification, attraction and retention of high quality teachers is currently an issue in higher education”

This broad generalisation shows little knowledge of cutting edge delivery and assessment that occurs in quality enterprises utilising the best facilities available (If you want experience on maintaining the A380 your options are limited!). Attraction and retention issues for workplace trainers and assessors, and even assumptions about the age profiles of this section of the VET workforce, need to be tested.

The comments on page 7 of the Framework Paper are of great concern. These are factors that should be central to institutions not external!

“Hence factors external to vocational education institutions such as the needs of work, workplaces’ support for education and the availability and quality of apprenticeships and other extended work placements have a bigger effect on the quality of teaching and learning in vocational education and training than in the other sectors. Likewise external factors such as graduates’ immediate usefulness at work, their employment outcomes and employers’ satisfaction have been more significant indicators of the quality of teaching in vocational education than in other sectors.”

This comment implies a division between the VET institution and workplaces. The comment suggests that 15 years of reform and a focus on an industry led sector has had little effect. This is certainly not true of enterprise RTO training and assessment. Enterprise RTOs are industry and they train and assess their staff within the quality assurance framework of the AQTF.

5. Comments on the Literature Review

ERTOA argues that the opinion at the beginning of the Literature Review is based on a narrow view of the current delivery in the sector.

“Australia needs to support existing VET teachers to maintain and build on their expert industry knowledge and to deepen their knowledge and skills in teaching, and it needs to support the many new teachers, who will have to be recruited very soon to replace an age-skewed workforce, to develop their professional expertise as teachers”. (Literature Review, page 2)
ERTOA argues that to meet the COAG agenda in skills development a new view is needed. This view is described in detail in the ERTOA discussion paper at: http://www.ertoa.org.au/library/Response%20to%20Skilling%20Australian%20Workers%20-%20September%202009.pdf

In part this paper comments “In responding to these [COAG] targets Government policies have looked to a range of initiatives to increase training places in the traditional TAFE and private provider learning pathways”. However, if Government policies were extended to explicitly encompass enterprise training pathways, the existing training investment of Australian enterprises can be leveraged into a significant contribution to the achievement of the COAG Agreement targets.”

The Conceptual Model (Literature Review, page 3) largely quotes research into School and Higher Education teaching including McKinsey & Company 2007: 5, Moodie 2010, Biggs 1999, Devlin and Samarawickrema 2010, Harris, Kerri-Lee; Farrell, Kelly; Bell, Maureen; Devlin, Marcia and James, Richard (2008). Even Guthrie and Clayton (2010), and Black (2009) focus on institutional pathways in VET. This may reflect a lack of research into non institutional VET pathways. Given the scale of non institutional delivery this focus, intentional or not, will not be reflective of the sector as a whole.