

CHAPTER 2

CONDUCT OF THE INQUIRY

Process

2.1 The Senate referred this inquiry to the Committee on 10 August 1999. In response to press advertisements and other means of publicity, the Committee received 140 primary submissions. The Committee heard 158 witnesses over ten days of hearings in Canberra, Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Adelaide and Perth. The Committee held informal discussions and inspected facilities in Brisbane (Construction Training Centre, Salisbury), Sydney (Sydney Institute of Technology), Melbourne (Holmesglen Institute of TAFE) and Geelong (Gordon Institute of TAFE). Lists of submissions received and witnesses heard are contained in Appendices 1 and 2.

Approach

2.2 The Committee, needing to put its task in context, examined the history, scope, characteristics and recent developments in VET and apprenticeship and traineeship training in Australia, with particular reference to such matters as the role of VET, roles and responsibilities in policy development, planning and management at both national and state level, current and past policies; and VET delivery arrangements. An overview of the aspects of VET which the Committee considered is provided in Chapters 3 and 4.

2.3 As the central concern of this reference is the quality of vocational education and training in Australia, the Committee considered, at the outset, a range of definitions, indicators and measures of quality, and adopted an outcomes-based approach based primarily on the evidence of the effectiveness with which formal national VET objectives are being achieved. The Committee's approach is described in more detail later in this chapter.

2.4 Having adopted this approach to assessing quality, the Committee considered a range of outcomes, consistent with national VET objectives, that could reasonably be attributed to participation in VET or recent changes to the VET system. These are discussed in Chapter 5.

2.5 Much of the Committee's work focused on an examination, in the light of its assessment of the quality of VET outcomes, on the key constituent parts of the VET system to determine their contribution to the achievement of quality outcomes. The Committee's findings and the evidence on which they are based is discussed in Chapters 4 and 5.

2.6 Finally, the Committee formulated a series of recommendations which address aspects of VET which the Committee believes need reform in order to maximise quality outcomes.

Evidence considered by the Committee

2.7 Evidence was received from a wide range of sources. The Committee considered the perspective of employers, including small business employers, and employer and employers associations; Registered Training Organisations, both public and private; respective RTO associations; TAFE, industries, private provider and school teachers and trainers; unions; industry training advisory bodies; Commonwealth and state and territory governments and agencies; academic and other specialist VET commentators; and organisations representing the interests of both government and non-government schools. A great deal of information was provided to the Committee by the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA), the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER), and the Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA).

2.8 Wide-ranging perspectives were evident in submissions. National employer organisations, including the Australian Industry Group (AiG) and the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCI) provided a perspective on the extent of the VET system's ability to deal with high-level skills training and provide for consistency across state borders in the regulation and implementation of training. Private and public RTOs gave their perspectives on User Choice and its consequences to their operations. Unions had particular interests in the quality of training, the ethical standards of some employers, recognition of prior learning and funding issues. The evidence from state government agencies was particularly useful for the information and views provided on the implementation of quality control measures, which are a state and territory responsibility.

2.9 Quantitative evidence relied on by the by the Committee was drawn largely from national VET statistics, employer satisfaction surveys, graduate and student satisfaction surveys, graduate destination surveys and a range of ANTA reports such as its 1988 Annual National Report.

2.10 VET statistics provide important information on outputs and outcomes from the VET system. However, the Committee agrees with the NCVER's view that statistics are only one indicator of the quality of outputs and outcomes and that a genuine assessment of quality requires more intensive and qualitative analysis and evaluation of processes and outcomes of the program.

2.11 The primary source of published VET statistics is the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER). Data relating to VET as a whole comprises information about VET providers and programs, including level and field of education, student characteristics, and level of activity. Data is reported by training organisations in March for activities in the previous year. Standard statistical reports are available in July each year. Apprentice and trainee data relating to apprentices and trainees, their characteristics and program information is reported quarterly and

consolidated in an annual publication. Financial data, the primary source of information about how VET in Australia is financed and where the money is spent, is reported and published annually.

2.12 In using NCVER VET statistics to make judgements about quality the Committee had regard to their consistency and validity.

2.13 Qualitative evidence was drawn from submissions to the inquiry, oral evidence and documents provided at public hearings, and research, evaluative and other investigative studies.

Committee's approach to assessing quality in VET

Defining Quality in VET

2.14 The central concern of this reference is the quality of vocational education and training in Australia, therefore a major consideration for the Committee was what constitutes quality in vocational education and training.

2.15 The Australian Recognition Framework defines 'quality' as 'the level of satisfaction with and effectiveness of vocational education and training organisations, their products and services, established through conformity with the requirements set by clients and stakeholders'.

2.16 ANTA, in November 1999, reported to The ANTA Ministerial Council (MINCO) that 'the important aspects of VET from a client's perspective are the products and services that facilitate the acquisition of relevant vocational skills and that what matters is quality learning products, quality facilitation of learning, quality learning outcomes, relevant information, confidence in the integrity of the provider and appropriate support.'¹

2.17 The Committee noted that most submissions to its inquiry referred to quality repeatedly, in different contexts, but few attempted an explicit description or definition. Some address quality issues in terms of VET as a whole, some in terms of particular components or elements, some in terms of processes, some in terms of outcomes. Some use the existence of 'quality' processes or products, such as National Training Packages, or the implementation of quality assurance measures to imply the presence of quality. In general, however, in submissions, quality appears to be equated with effectiveness, that is, the extent to which VET is achieving certain outcomes.

2.18 The Committee also noted the Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs view that 'quality of outcomes depends primarily on two factors: the quality of the VET programme and the extent to which individuals meet the desired outcomes.'

1 Australian National Training Authority, *Implementation of the National Training Framework and New Apprenticeships, Progress report to Ministers from ANTA*, November 1999, p.11

2.19 After considering a range of definitions, indicators and measures of quality, the Committee adopted an approach which involved an examination of both outcomes and processes, the latter including the way VET policy is developed, how the system is managed, and how VET is delivered to clients.

2.20 In considering the quality of outcomes, and of processes, the Committee adopted the five indicators of quality used by Schofield in her reports on the quality of apprenticeship and traineeship training in different states.² These are effectiveness, fitness for purpose, efficiency, accountability and ethical practice.

2.21 The Committee considers that effectiveness is the principal indicator of the quality of VET outcomes, while the other factors are indicators of the quality of processes, and the likelihood of achieving quality outcomes.

2.22 Fitness for purpose of the constituent parts of the VET system is a determinant of the quality of outcomes. Fitness for purpose in this sense is the capability to contribute to achieving stated objectives. Conformity with specifications is not sufficient: the specifications must be such that they allow the objectives to be achieved. The incidence of service failure is an indicator of fitness for purpose.

2.23 Efficiency is a measure of the extent to which the resources used, the program delivery processes and activities, the purchasing system and the outputs deliver value for money to the taxpayer. Greater efficiency has been a driving force in VET reform.

2.24 Accountability, as defined by Schofield, is the degree to which stakeholders meet and are perceived by others to meet their obligations both in terms of planning, actions and their role in achieving identified objectives. Accountability is a factor contributing to the achievement of outcomes, but is not evidence of the quality of those outcomes per se.

2.25 Ethical practice, the fifth criterion identified by Schofield in her reports on the quality of VET in Victoria and Tasmania, is of particular interest to the Committee because this inquiry owes some of its impetus to a number of allegations of fraud in VET delivery. According to Schofield, even when unethical practice is unsubstantiated, the view that it exists, even in subtle and invisible form, undermines the market and community confidence in the quality of the traineeship system.³

2 K Schofield, *Independent Investigation into the Quality of Training in Queensland's Traineeship System*, July 1999. K Schofield, *A Risky Business: review of the quality of Tasmania's traineeship system*, December 1999. K Schofield, *Report of the Independent Review of the Quality of Training in Victoria's Apprenticeship and Traineeship System*, May 2000

3 K Schofield, *A Risky Business: review of the quality of Tasmania's traineeship system*, December 1999, p.44