**Quality: a contested concept in vocational education and training**

**Abstract**

The appeal to quality resides in the very genetics of the Australia’s national training system and its development since the early 1990s. Deploying Bacchi’s (2011) application of contested concepts, problem representation and their place in public policy development and implementation, it is argued that quality plays an important systemic transactional function. Rather than serving as a more traditional warranty, to do with the adequacy of skills transfer and acquisition, quality facilitates the operations of a highly complex system by both providing a field of contestation and being a boundary object (Mol 2002) allowing a variety of national organisations a space in which to manoeuvre, exert influence and seek control over vocational education and training. This paper’s discourse analysis of the contents of key 2013 documents, authorised by four national training system institutions, has produced two results. First is a demonstration of the contested nature of quality – something used as if it has a singular fixed meaning, but actually showing multiple realities. Secondly, the problems created and promulgated in the name of quality are identified and scrutinised for the related resolution mechanisms that give form to political aspirations.

**Introduction**

The federated nature of Australia’s polity, in which formal responsibility for education and training resides at the state level, provides the context for the clash of two opposing forces. Advocates for the benefits of national consistency are habitually confronted when states and territories exercise one of the few powers left in local control. As described by Whitlock (1974, p. 269), “Because of the accidents of personality or history, or local predilections and the chronic desire of Australian states to be different from each other, Australian adult education must seem a confusion of institutional eccentricity to the layman”. While Duncan’s proposal to establish a national system for post-school training in World War Two was not taken up (Whitelock 1973), the move towards uniformity of training became a possibility in the 1990s when the State, Territory and Commonwealth Governments agreed to establish a statutory body for the provision of nationwide direction to the training effort (Australian National Training Authority 1993).

One of the Authority’s six goals was “to improve the quality of the system” (Australian National Training Authority 1993, p. 6). The historical patchwork of eccentricity was to be bred out of the newly identified system through national standards, nationally recognised qualifications, nation-wide assessment processes and consistent competency standards (Australian National Training Authority 1993, p. 8). This coast-to-coast provision would be driven in the pursuit of quality. Indeed, “quality issues will be at the forefront of change” (Australian National Training Authority 1993, p. 9) in spite of a situation where the “lack of data is a serious weakness which hampers system policy and planning decisions” (Australian National Training Authority 1993, p. 18). Quality is in the national training system’s DNA.

Two decades and numerous organisational iterations later, quality’s hereditary function in vocational education and training has survived. The usefulness of this concept will be explored by examining four 2013 documents in order to observe how these different training bodies used quality as a rationale for both their existence and role in the sector.

The publications include:

* The *Annual Report 2012-2013* (National Centre for Vocational Education Research 2013)
* *Future focus: 2013 national workforce development strategy* (Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency 2013)
* the *VET quality project* (Allen Consulting Group 2013) produced on behalf of the 12 Industry Skills Councils and
* *NSSC standards policy framework – improving vocational education and training: the Australian Vocational Qualification System* (National Skills Standards Council 2013).

These exemplars will demonstrate that quality plays an important transactional role in the vocational education and training system, rather than a warranty on the skills possessed by those who are trained in the system. It will also be shown that staking a claim for legitimacy in the policy making process on the basis of being the guarantor of quality does not necessarily place one in a privileged position.

**Method and literature**

According to Schwartz (1992, p. 11), concepts serve as simplified models and “it is at the basic level we structure most of our knowledge about things”. Building upon Gallie’s (1956) seminal description of ‘essentially contested concepts’, Bacchi (2011, p. 32) believes that “contested concepts” are used as if they have permanent importance, but in fact they do not have a fixed meaning; “giving meaning to concepts is what politics is all about”. When significant groups choose to label an ideology or practice as ‘quality’, they seek to grant it enhanced status and importance, allowing it to become a political apparatus that can be applied to a range of ideologies (Schwartz 1992, pp. 42-43). Because the concept of quality is contested, the bodies that seek to direct the national training system evoke quality to give “a particular meaning in order to give shape to particular political visions” (Bacchi 2011, p. 32). Gaining an understanding of the policy process in vocational education and training by using the notion of contested concepts means that “the issue then is not the word we use but the proposals that accompany it” (Bacchi 2011, p. 41). By using Bacchi’s (2009) adaptation of Foucauldian discourse analysis methodology that probes how problems are represented, we can study the nature of the problem that these national groups address through an appeal to quality. From this, we can gain a better understanding of how policy works and how we are governed.

In recognition of the reductionist role played by concepts, Mol (2002) proposes that reality is multiple but our general experiences are singular, having been shaped by our personal training, environment and political orientation. In order to negotiate competing views of the world, contested concepts of quality (logical multiple versions with no fixed meaning) actually facilitate communication and cooperation between ideologically diverse and competitive groups. This function is achieved by using quality as a boundary object. As a result of not stressing the differences, a boundary object’s multiple specific meanings allow it to be fuzzy enough to be shared by various training system groups and facilitate collaboration across conceptual barriers (Mol 2002, p. 137-138). This allows the contested concept quality to be ‘enacted’ differently (but perfectly logically) by different organisations that bring assorted modes of operations to bear on the problems of the national training system. Quality can be done in sundry ways, each bringing with them a particular ideological disposition but also high levels of openness and adaptability.

**Quality as policy**

Quality is a prominent feature of the national training system. The four key documents described earlier together occupy just over 400 pages and quality or one of its ubiquitous acronyms is used nearly 750 times. This is more than an uncritical use of a single word. The boundary object and contested concept of quality is hard at work in staking out operational and ideological territory by engaging diverse groups in support of the system.

Each of the four groups has chosen to frame and address a problem whose lineage can be directly traced back to the major issues facing the Australian National Training Authority’s efforts to establish a national system (Australian National Training Authority 1993, 1997). In the first case, the National Centre for Vocational Education Research’s mission is to provide “high quality, independent information” that will be published subject to the meeting of “quality standards” (National Centre for Vocational Education Research 2013, pp. 4-5). As noted earlier, the lack of data was seen to be a problem from the very start of the national system and this view has guided the Centre’s activity because they believe that the quality of national vocational education and training delivery will be improved through mandatory reporting of VET activity from all providers, because “such information underpins and supports effective regulation of the system” (National Centre for Vocational Education Research 2013, p. 7).

However, this data is not floating around in a homogenous void (Mol 2002, p. 58). What is gathered and how it is gathered prioritises some behaviours over others. For example, training providers must establish and maintain systems for reporting training activity in centrally determined formats; this diverts resources from the educational effort (Australian Council for Private Education and Training 2012). As described by Miller and Rose (2008, p. 66), information gathered from the national training system is not the outcome of a neutral recording function; “The inscriptions of the world which an individual or a group can compile, consult or control play a key role in the powers they can exercise over those whose role is to be entries in their charts”. For the National Centre for Vocational Education Research, quality is a rationale for the gathering, analysis and dissemination of information as a response to a perceived predisposed systemic deficiency. This knowledge can be used to support efficient markets and/or to feed the needs of centralised bureaucracies while giving effect to the ideological view that complex social phenomena can be reduced, quantified and manipulated (Scott 1998).

In 2012 the Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency colonised the space of national leadership of the training system that was created when the Australian National Training Authority was disbanded in 2005. This industry-led national agency aimed “to improve long-term workforce planning and development to address skills and labour shortages” by “giving industry a stronger voice on the direction of policy and industry skills funding” (The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia 2012, p. 2). In a sweeping deployment of quality, this agency neatly summarised the training system’s problems as follows:

Both higher education and VET are large, diverse and highly complex sectors, which makes the delivery of consistent, high-quality education, training and assessment a fundamental concern for government, industry and individual students. Further, as both sectors experience rapid growth, associated with the introduction of demand-based funding, it is essential that high-quality delivery be maintained (Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency 2013, p. 129).

The examples used throughout *Future focus* and summarised above, demonstrate that the Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency believed that markets are unreliable, training providers cannot be trusted, national consistency remains elusive and their leadership could serve as the arbiter of “delivery (including quality)” (Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency 2013, p. 117). Quality was represented as being best achieved through centralised control, direction and reporting mechanisms, rather than relying upon the capricious actions of consumers in markets populated with unscrupulous training providers.

The problems associated with nationally consistent qualifications, assessment processes and training content have been claimed by the Industry Skills Councils, who also proposed quality as the solution. Their version of this contested concept is based upon “specific quality concerns” about teaching, design of training, education design and the depth and duration of training (Allen Consulting Group 2013, p. 9). For these keepers of content, systemic quality will be achieved through the setting of standards requirements for all units and qualifications (Allen Consulting Group 2013, p. 1) and that their proposed training package standards could serve as ‘one bookend’ of vocational education and training regulation (Allen Consulting Group 2013, p. X). Centralised prescription of standards and regulation, to control the actions of inconsistent training providers, will act as a “quality assurance process” (Allen Consulting Group 2013, p. 7). In common with the Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency, there is deep distrust in the efficacy of the marketplace and the trustworthiness of training providers; the proposed solutions reflect the ideological benefits ascribed to concentration of decision-making power, the efficacy of rational planning and the detailed specification and auditing of operational criteria.

The National Skills Standards Council’s genealogy traces directly back to the Australian National Training Authority’s identification of the need for national standards in vocational education and training (Australian National Training Authority 1993, p. 8). In spite of the Australian National Training Authority’s (1994, p. 9) preference for “facilitation, not regulation, of standards to guarantee high-quality outcomes, rather than concentrating on the approval or regulation of standards”, the operational programs proposed by the National Skills Standards Council rely upon centralised and detailed setting of standards as a “key mechanism for ensuring quality vocational education and training” (National Skills Standards Council 2013, p. 6). These standards are monitored by the national vocational education and training regulator, who has progressively gained access to both civil and criminal sanctions that can be used against non-compliant training providers (Australian Government 2011).

The National Skills Standards Council’s major concern is maintenance of systemic integrity and ensuring that a perceived lack of quality is not “tarnishing the reputation of Australia’s education and training system” (National Skills Standards Council 2013, p. 10). In a now familiar pattern, markets are represented as dangerous places inhabited by unreliable and inconsistent providers who require strict control and regulation so as not to call into question the value of vocational qualifications, which are “the property of all Ministers responsible for skills and employment” rather than the issuing organisations or even the individual. Clearly quality in this context is a deeply political commitment to the ideological expression of the superiority of the state’s knowledge over the actions of individual consumers. This also facilitates the concentration of power in the training bureaucracies and ministerial offices, thereby ensuring that the vocational education and training system is politically responsive.

**Conclusions**

The progenitors of Australia’s national training system wanted to ensure that “quality in all aspects of vocational education and training is a key objective of the National Strategy” (Australian National Training Authority 1994, p. 11). Without doubt they have been wildly successful, but less obvious is whether they would recognise how quality has assumed so many guises and has been used to justify a host of ideological and political aspirations. Were they clever enough to realise the usefulness and flexibility of contested concepts such as quality, to allow for numerous political and ideological offspring to be accommodated, or did that come about for other reasons?

Each of the bodies discussed were able to take an issue that was identified at the birth of the national training system and nurture it into a problem, which they then can best solve on the behalf of governments. The National Centre for Vocational Education Research provides quality information that inevitably invites the need for further information – there is never enough data for good policy-making. The Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency deployed quality in order to remove inconsistency, the vagaries of the market and undesired effects caused by a lack of centralised planning and direction. The Industry Skills Councils are equally concerned with inconsistency of teaching and assessment, course content and the relativity of qualifications. These 12 bodies are ideologically committed to centralised standard-setting and exacting specification as the best method of providing quality assurance. Finally, the National Skills Standards Council believed that markets, providers and industry each present a threat to the good name of the system that can only be defended through the rigorous enforcement of national standards and centralised control. These problems were identified at the gestation of the national training system and have continued to flourish. This is because there are organisations who nurture the issues in order to use the contested concept of quality to enhance the policy clout and influence exerted by their own body. They give political meaning to the solutions they promote by invoking the concept of quality. This contested concept is interpreted in order to give priority to their preferred political ambitions for the nature of our social and economic future.

As a both a contested concept and a boundary object, quality has provided a transactional space for these national bodies to use their specialities of information gathering and usage, provision of leadership and guidance, specification of training content and regulation of integrity to coalesce into a national system. And, rather oddly, a training system where the individual learner does not even own the qualification that is intended to serve as some sort of warranty as to the quality of their skills and knowledge. Certainly, embracing quality and the related provision of information is the cost of entry into the vocational education and training space where systemic control is politically and ideologically contested and, as a result, turned into programs and processes.

The political and ideological disputes associated with quality have been further demonstrated in a series of decisions taken by the Coalition Government in the wake of the 2013 election. Both the Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency and the National Skills Standards Council were disbanded by the new government and their functions brought into the Department of Industry, resulting in a further concentration of policy and funding inside the Australian Government bureaucracy. The removal of arm’s-length purveyors of quality in favour of more direct bureaucratic and politically responsive control is described by the Department of Industry (2014a) as follows:

The Australian Government takes a lead role in promoting a post-school education and training system that is nationally consistent and coherent, responsive to individual, industry and community needs and recognised as providing quality outcomes. To achieve this, the Australian Government works with state and territory governments, education and training providers and industry.

Similarly, the current federal government is also seeking to curtail the deployment of quality by the Industry Skills Councils through the creation of a quasi-market for the development and maintenance of training packages when their existing contracts expire in mid-2015 (Department of Industry 2014b). Only the National Centre for Vocational Education Research has survived the struggles for control of the quality agenda. This centre’s pivotal role in the provision of vocational education and training information is too important to governments for them to consider a substantial change (Zoellner 2013). High quality data and knowledge will always be valued by any government because it is required to operate the technologies used to manage the population (Miller & Rose 2008). This means that the National Centre for Vocational Education Research’s version of quality is currently the most politically useful one.

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