



## **‘Closing the loop’**

**Listening and responding to learner voice  
in Vocational Education and Training in Australia:**

**Principles and models for effective practice**

**Final Report to**

**NVEAC (National VET Equity Advisory Council)**

30 April 2012

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## Preface

This final (30 April 2012) report is provided to NVEAC (National VET Equity Advisory Council) by the University of Ballarat *Learner voice* Project research team led by Barry Golding. The report's summary findings, observations and recommendations are structured around the ten NVEAC project requirements.

The evidence that supports the findings is drawn from the five phases of the project, as below. The researchers responsible for each phase and the sections of our report which contain the main body of data from each phase are indicated in brackets:

- *Phase 1: Interviews and consultations within Australia* about learner voice regulatory frameworks and provider accountability for acting on feedback from learners, particularly disadvantaged learners. (Prof Barry Golding & Dr Annette Foley; a separate report of this phase can be found in Appendix 1).
- *Phase 2: UK (United Kingdom) and European (Ireland, UK & Norway)* Interviews and consultations about learner voice regulatory frameworks and provider accountability for acting on Feedback from learners, particularly disadvantaged learners. (Dr Peter Lavender; see report in Appendix 2).
- *Phase 3: A critical analysis of the current obligations, processes and mechanisms under the AQTF and other provider legislation* for gathering and acting on feedback from learners, particularly disadvantaged learners in VET and ACE. (Prof Lawrie Angus).
- *Phase 4: Critical review of the Australian and international literature* from a range of recent sources to advance a case for new ways of optimising the VET and ACE experience for disadvantaged learners. (Prof Barry Golding, Dr Peter Lavender & Prof Lawrie Angus; this review is presented throughout the main report).
- *Phase 5: Insights and examples of new ways of learning and teaching* that are more engaging and inclusive of all sectors of the community, particularly disadvantaged adults and young people. (Prof Barry Golding, Dr Peter Lavender & Prof Lawrie Angus; these are drawn mainly from the material reported in Appendices 1 and 2, and illustrative examples are used throughout the main report).

## Structure of the report

In order to increase the readability and coherence of the report, the detailed accounts of the interviews and consultations conducted within Australia, the UK, Ireland and Norway, on which the findings and recommendations are based, are provided in Appendices 1 and 2. The scope and limitations of this research are more comprehensively identified in Appendix 3. The most frequently used acronyms and terms are provided in Appendix 7.

## **Closing the loop: Listening & responding to learner voice**

### **Executive Summary**

This research project, commissioned by NVEAC (National VET Equity Advisory Council), explored effective models of gathering and acting on learner voice and learner feedback in Australian vocational education and training (VET). The research was particularly concerned with the potential role of learner voice for disadvantaged learners. The analysis and recommendations are based on field interviews and document research in all Australian States and Territories as well as in the UK, Ireland and Norway.

Interviews were conducted with a wide range of stakeholders associated with VET provision and delivery, as well as with participants in other adult education sectors. Although the research design did not include the involvement of VET students as an interviewee category, we heard insights about learner voice from several student representatives. We also interviewed members of industry and employer groups. What follows is a brief summary of our main findings, conclusions and recommendations.

In relation to regulatory frameworks, we found a general lack of clarity and detail in the current obligations for providers under the Australian Qualification Training Framework (AQTF). We recommend that the Users' Guides associated with the AQTF conditions and standards for registration of Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) should indicate that more rigorous and complete demonstration is required that the standards and conditions are being met. The conditions and standards themselves should also be reviewed.

We found that learners tend to be regarded in VET primarily as clients and 'products' for industry, rather than as active co-participants in processes of learning and teaching. We conclude that any genuine engagement with learners generally, and with students who experience disadvantage in particular, requires more informal, personal relationship building if the desired skills and vocational outcomes are to be achieved. There is considerable scope to use the existing Learner Questionnaire in RTOs not just as an outcomes indicator but also, and more importantly, as a generator of information that can be used as a starting point for internal critical analysis at all levels of the VET organization, including by teachers and students. In this way the institutions can demonstrate that they are serious about learner voice, and the voices and perspectives of all learners can be more actively promoted, utilized and responded to.

The voices of learners must be seen as an important resource that can be utilized, not only in enhancing the learning and teaching experiences of students and teachers, but also for improving the VET system and making it more relevant both to employers and the society more broadly. This requires a certain amount of regulatory change and, more importantly, attitudinal change on the part of all VET participants.

In order to meet the ambitious targets that have been set by government for increased equity participation in VET, we regard it as imperative that specific,

targeted funds are made available to support VET for students who are disadvantaged in various ways. As a champion of the social and cultural, and also economic, importance of fostering a culture of social inclusion and democratic equality in VET, NVEAC is well placed to work within the sphere of VET governance and policy to ensure the positive promotion of educational equality and learner voice. These must become accepted priorities in the general policy discourse of VET and in all policy texts and official documents, as well as engrained in government rhetoric.

It is important and timely for VET in Australia, as an important social institution, to overtly acknowledge that all Australians of all ages have multiple voices and needs for learning that is lifelong and lifewide. There is much to be learned from approaches to learner voice elsewhere, particularly in the UK and Norway, as well as from the higher education and adult and community education sectors in Australia. Successful education systems in countries like Norway are inclusive of outcomes that go well beyond the strictly vocational.

It is timely to recognize the importance of the voices of all learners and potential learners in VET, and to implement new strategies for learner involvement. The lessons from overseas make it clear that learner engagement, learner participation and learner voice can contribute substantially to a more responsive, inclusive and educationally effective VET system that will produce the kinds of 21<sup>st</sup> Century skills that are essential for the Australian workforce.

We are concerned by evidence that some VET 'solutions' in relation to disadvantaged groups focus heavily on deficit, paternalistic or compensatory models of disadvantage. Disadvantage is widespread amongst learners, particularly at lower VET qualification levels and in some rural and remote areas in Australia. But we urge policy-makers to be particularly cautious about routinely naming and treating individuals and groups as 'disadvantaged' on the basis of one or more self-defined 'indicators of disadvantage'. Such labelling is fraught with ethical and pedagogical problems.

It is well established that presupposing certain learners are incapable tends to be self-fulfilling, and that the most disadvantaged students benefit most from positive reinforcement, excellent teaching and adequate resources. It is these learners who most need their voices: their perspectives, differences and aspirations, to be acknowledged, respected and engaged with. Learners who engage in VET, whose voice is heard, could make a difference to their environment in a way that encourages more like them to participate. The link between widening participation and learner voice requires more research but is likely to be a positive causal relationship.

Our interviews reveal an undue emphasis on top-down surveys that reinforce a somewhat simplistic compliance mentality in RTOs. Moreover, survey results are seldom fed back to learners and teachers in a timely fashion. There appears to be no mechanism for 'closing the loop' to learners. New and more effective ways of ensuring program compliance and the quality of teaching and learning are required. It is important to recognize, however, that it is only possible to provide a wider range of support mechanisms for learners if there are sufficient

resources and properly trained teaching, guidance and support staff. The level of teacher education required by VET instructors should immediately be reviewed. Our study identifies significantly less evidence of learner voice among private training providers in both Australia and Europe. To encourage greater feedback and learner involvement, a distinct strategy is required which includes addressing this issue.

There needs to be a much greater research effort into learner disadvantage and lack of student engagement in VET. Current research tends to focus on the advantages of participation as opposed to the disadvantages of not participating. In an era in which greater levels of participation in training is deemed essential, research into non-participation is vital. Despite the considerable interest of VET stakeholders in improving and broadening learning, teaching and educational outcomes in VET, there is in practice a great deal of inertia, particularly in the narrow way in which outcomes are defined and learner voice data are collected.

We have identified a suite of learner voice and feedback mechanisms that, if properly researched, resourced and implemented, have the potential to broaden the role and impact of VET in Australia for *all* learners. Current research in VET tends to be limited to those who enrol and complete their courses. It is important both for Australia's future, and for the future wellbeing of the Australian workforce, that potential learners, particularly currently disadvantaged non-participants in VET, are '.... encouraged to become engaged in learning contexts in which they can feel their voices are heard and acknowledged, and in which they can feel they are genuine participants, and become engaged in learning'.

## List of recommendations

- **Recommendation 1.** *That in order to meet the ambitious targets that have been set for increased equity participation in Vocational Education and Training (VET), it is imperative that specific, targeted funds are made available to support the vocational education and training of students who are disadvantaged in various ways. Although the States might be requested to contribute to such funding, the main responsibility should be taken by the Commonwealth as part of its social inclusion agenda and policy direction of establishing a national vocational education and training system.*
- **Recommendation 2.** *That the National VET Equity Advisory Council (NCVEAC) liaise with the National Skills Standards Council (NSSC) to ensure that the standards and conditions of registration for RTOs (Registered Training Organizations) to provide greater clarity and detail in respect of the requirements to demonstrate compliance with equity-related legislation.*
- **Recommendation 3.** *That NVEAC liaise with the NSSC to ensure that the standards and conditions of provider registration include emphasise to governments and official participants within the vocational education and training sector that any genuine engagement with learners generally, and with students who experience disadvantage in particular, requires informal, personal relationship building that acknowledges who students are and where they come from. It must be recognized that, of the many important reasons for promoting 'learner voice', the most important is that 'voice' contributes to student learning and learner empowerment. The relationship of RTOs with learners therefore needs to be respectful of their needs and their aspirations. It is essential that learners be regarded, not just as clients, and certainly not as 'products' for industry, but as co-participants in processes of learning and teaching.*
- **Recommendation 4.** *That NVEAC develop specific requirements for RTOs to demonstrate, when applying for continuing registration, that they have seriously and genuinely attempted to engage with all students, and have taken particular steps to engage with and encourage the voices of disadvantaged students. Such attempts at student engagement, and resulting student feedback, should be described in a self-evaluative narrative, which includes illustrative data generated through listening and responding to student voices. Requirements should include provision of evidence of follow-up actions including feedback loops to learners.*
- **Recommendation 5.** *That NVEAC should assist RTOs in developing learner voice practice by, in conjunction with relevant authorities, developing and providing high-quality advice and guidance to RTOs. In this process, NVEAC should:*
  - *investigate the resources developed and published by the Learning and Skills Council in England, the Excellence Gateway, maintained by the Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS), as well as the publications of the LSIS referred to in this report*

- ensure that, because Australia is a long way behind a number of countries in developing policies and practices of inclusive education and learner voice, NVEAC personnel visit England and Norway to see learner voice policies and developments in action
  - extend its collection of good practice case studies of learner voice and making them available to individual organizations as resources from which they can develop ideas for inclusive practices that may be relevant in their own contexts.
- **Recommendation 6.** *As a champion of the social and cultural, and also economic, importance of fostering a culture of social inclusion and democratic equality in VET, NVEAC must work within the sphere of VET governance and policy to ensure the positive promotion of educational equality and learner voice in the general policy discourse of VET. Such promotion should be encouraged by:*
    - ensuring that concepts of redress of inequality and promotion of learner voice are prominent in all position papers, advisory briefs, policy texts and official documents as well as in government rhetoric
    - emphasising the importance of these concepts in formulating requirements for learner-instructor (and learner-instructor-employer in the case of apprenticeships and other work-based training) engagement and negotiation in the development of student learning plans and assessment activities
    - requiring that all providers develop a learner voice strategy for their institutions, which might include the establishment of a student organization as well as a Learner Voice Committee comprised of members from both the student organization and the RTO Management Committee.
    - recognising through awards and celebratory events the best practice in encouraging learner voice in VET.
  - **Recommendation 7.** *That NVEAC advise NSSC of the possible use of the existing RTO Learner Questionnaire as a generator of information from learners that can be used as a starting point for internal critical analysis, at all levels of the organization, of ways in which the voices and perspectives of learners can be more actively promoted and utilised to enable the more complete participation of learners in their own education.*
  - **Recommendation 8.** *That NVEAC prepare and submit to SCOTese (Standing Council on Tertiary Education, Skills and Employment) a persuasive case that the Commonwealth government apply in the VET Sector similar financial inducements to those already provided in the higher education sector for institutions to enrol and retain students who are disadvantaged. Such funding should be sufficient to cover the additional costs of engaging, supporting and teaching students who are disadvantaged.*
  - **Recommendation 9.** *That NVEAC lobby for VET in Australia, as an important social institution, to overtly acknowledge that all Australians of all ages have multiple voices and needs for learning that are lifelong and lifewide, and that learning in VET affects wellbeing in all its forms in very diverse contexts well*



beyond VET. If learner voice can be heard and strengthened through learning, VET will make a stronger contribution to Australian society and citizenship and the polity generally, as well as to the workplace, innovation and industry.

- **Recommendation 10.** *That examples of good practice derived from recent European experience of learner voice, which are identified in this report, be embraced and promoted in NVEAC advice and policy briefings. These examples illustrate the importance of the voice of all learners (and potential learners) in VET being recognised, and indicate that new strategies are needed to actively promote the educational, social and economic benefits of learner involvement.*
- **Recommendation 11.** *That more effective and timely mechanisms are identified in VET for hearing, responding to and feeding back to learners what they say they want and what they say about their learning experiences. In essence, internal review procedures within all RTOs need to incorporate the principle that all learners need to be overtly acknowledged as partners who have agency in interactive, relational and negotiated learning processes.*
- **Recommendation 12.** *That effective ways of achieving equity and promoting learner voice, which do not presuppose or reinforce provision from deficit, paternalistic or compensatory models, must be promoted. The policy vacuum in relation to learner voice must be addressed urgently, and clarity about the purposes of learner voice activity, particularly higher-order purposes associated with empowerment, learning and citizenship, needs to be established.*
- **Recommendation 13.** *That the emphasis on RTOs conducting surveys for VET compliance is overdone and currently ineffective. Without feedback loops to learners, or follow-up actions as a consequence of the surveys, new and more effective ways of ensuring program compliance and the quality of teaching and learning need to be developed.*
- **Recommendation 14.** *That VET follows the lead of other education sectors, in which the most effective quality lever has proved to be an improvement in teacher quality. Such improvement, in relation to learner voice specifically, would provide alternatives to the commonly-accepted unidirectional 'delivery' model of training by such methods as:*
  - *embracing collaborative, constructivist methods that are respectful of, and which utilize, learners' existing resources, knowledge and perspectives*
  - *encouraging learner engagement and learner voice by making the learning more enjoyable and relevant to students*
  - *using a range of formal and informal techniques to gauge the appropriateness to learners of the teaching they receive*
  - *using interviews, tact and insight to develop agreed, negotiated Individual Learning Plans*
  - *promoting independent thinking, lifelong learning and active citizenship through practicing critical enquiry with students.*

- **Recommendation 15.** *That the current emphasis by NCVER (National Centre for Vocational Education Research) on annual surveys of all public VET without provision of feedback to learners is ineffective for hearing or responding to learner voice. Instead, we recommend more survey by sampling, better use of new and interactive information and communications technologies, more targeted qualitative research, and greatly improved feedback to students and teachers.*
- **Recommendation 16.** *That there is scope for immediate improvement in acknowledging learner voice by ensuring that RTOs more quickly fed back to all stakeholders, including learners, the results of surveys that are currently being undertaken. A large amount of data is already collected within programs, institutions, sectors, states and territories, but learners and teachers rarely benefit from any analysis of this data.*
- **Recommendation 17.** *That NVEAC conduct more research into learner voice, learner disadvantage and lack of learner participation in VET. Current research questions tend to focus on the advantages of participation as opposed to the disadvantages of not participating. Better understanding of the latter, and engagement with the voices of non-participants in order to learn how they might be encouraged to become involved in VET, would be more helpful in working towards the attainment of government priorities and participation targets.*
- **Recommendation 18.** *That NVEAC conduct further research on learner voice mechanisms that are proven to be effective in feeding back in a timely manner to students and teachers/trainers, information which reinforces and supports good teaching and learning for existing students, and which utilizes new information and communications technologies.*
- **Recommendation 19.** *That, because diverse learners need equally diverse ways of expressing their voices and engaging with their learning in meaningful ways, some of which rely on information and communications technologies, a range of ICT-based communication practices among students, teachers/trainers and RTOs need to be employed. Measures to be considered include:*
  - *the use of assistive, adaptive and rehabilitative devices [AT] for learners with disabilities*
  - *the use of blogs and wikis, with links to Twitter, Facebook, You Tube, LinkedIn and other media*
  - *the use of 'talking mats' (currently used in Scotland), Text Joe (Cornwall College, and development of specific social networking sites ('City Lit' – City Literary Institute, London).*
- **Recommendation 20.** *That, despite a relatively high level of interest of many stakeholders in learning and teaching, it is important to recognize that there is significant inertia in VET for changing the way data is collected. It is important that RTOs provide a wider range of support mechanisms for learners who currently have limited voice. Such mechanisms will require extra resources and*

*properly trained staff.*

- **Recommendation 21.** *That the widespread nature of disadvantage amongst VET learners, particularly at lower VET qualification levels, is acknowledged and recognized. However, we recommend that the process of routinely naming and treating individuals and groups of learners as 'disadvantaged' on the basis of one or more indicators of disadvantage, despite the good intent, should be avoided. Such labelling is fraught with ethical and pedagogical problems.*
- **Recommendation 22.** *That the current trend of 'collecting everything' by means of aggregated surveys that are conducted and analyzed remotely, be recognized as inappropriate and ineffectual. The process is invasive, expensive and unnecessary unless it has outcomes that will lead to the improvement of programs, and of teaching and learning. Instead, more effective ways of collecting data on disadvantage, on site and in context, should be used.*
- **Recommendation 23.** *That each VET provider be required to formulate an institutional strategy on learner voice that includes:*
  - *a strategy to include learner voice in organizational governance at program committee, non-executive board and council levels*
  - *staff representatives from each course/curriculum area meeting regularly with students*
  - *systems to feed back to learners what learners have said and what the institution has done in response to what learners have said*
  - *electronic/digital systems to ensure learner voice to and from all learners, particularly those disadvantaged in any way*
  - *ways of hearing the voices of potential learners who are not yet involved in VET, and the voices of learners who have left VET courses prior to completion*
  - *provision of financial support for student organizations by each institution.*
- **Recommendation 24.** *That NVEAC develop an overall national learner voice strategy, which includes a way of acknowledging and celebrating institutions and programs that develop good practices in relation to learner voice. The development of a national strategy must be a collaborative exercise, and is one NVEAC is best placed to undertake. Again, useful information to assist this process can be followed up in the references provided in this report.*
- **Recommendation 25.** *That NVEAC undertake further research to identify effective mechanisms for ensuring that learner voice is heard in the context of learners as co-participants in the process of learning and teaching. The most urgent type of research that is required by NVEAC to enable it to claim that its recommendations are evidence-based is rigorous, systematic, qualitative, and preferably longitudinal research that engages primarily with learners on-site in RTOs and, equally importantly, with non-completers and non-participants in education and training in communities. The existing knowledge base, such as it is, seems to be confined to the perspectives of those who advocate for learners rather than the real experts – learners and potential learners.*

# Introduction

## Some starting definitions

From the outset, it is important to observe that *learner voice* and *learner feedback* are different things and that the meaning of each is ambiguous. We believe that the concept of 'learner voice' is especially problematic. While this notion has been utilized in literature on school education for a long time (e.g. Fielding, 2004), its use in Australian vocational education and training appears quite recent and follows the extensive use of this term in the UK during the final years of the New Labour government. Some sense of the many meanings of the term 'voice' in educational discourse is provided by McLeod (2011, p.181):

Voice is not simply speech; it can mean identity and agency, or even power, and perhaps capacity or aspiration; it can be the site of authentic reflection and insight or a radical source for counter narratives. Voice can be a code word for representing difference, or connote a democratic politics of participation and inclusion, or be the expression of an essentialised group identity. It can evoke practices attuned to the power of inter-subjectivity and the politics of the personal; it can have a therapeutic resonance; it can be a latent yet-to-be-released attribute attached to some groups and not others. It can suggest an ideal, a political agenda and a basis for policy of reform and action; it can declare difference and can homogenize it; it has methodological and pedagogical dimensions and is rarely – if ever – simply a matter of creating opportunities for unfettered expression.

Clearly, the meaning of 'voice' is complicated. It implies much more than just getting learners to speak. In education, the idea of 'learner voice' has consistently been associated with notions of educational reform in the interests of students. It is associated with student empowerment and agency, usually in recognition of the asymmetrical power relationship between learners and the representatives of the educational institution. The idea of 'giving' voice to students/learners is also contentious and is particularly associated with the notion that learners have not generally had any ability or power to influence the environments in which they are attempting to learn.

Therefore, advocates of learner voice reject any factory-like model of education in which students are, as it were, merely cogs in a machine. Instead, learner voice advocates regard students as important participants in the educational process who should have a say in what and how they learn, and also in shaping the kind of institution in which they do the learning. The onus is then on teachers/trainers and institutional staff, including managers, to recognize and respect the diversity of student backgrounds and cultures, and the great variety of knowledge that students bring with them to educational contexts. This is the kind of perspective on learner voice that informs this report.

We acknowledge, however, that as the term 'learner voice' becomes increasingly commonly used in education policy discourse, there is a danger that its meaning can become weakened and even trivialized or tokenistic (Angus, 2006). This happens when the voices of learners are channeled only into 'safe' outlets

through forms of managed student participation that may give the impression that the perspectives and views of students are important in their education when, in reality, the students might merely be participating in an exercise used for assessing teachers on certain performance criteria. Or the multiple voices of diverse students with different backgrounds and different needs, strengths and weaknesses in engaging with learning, are reduced to the voice of an 'official' student who is admitted as a 'representative student' on an important committee. And sometimes the level of diversity is reduced to averages on survey responses and called 'learner feedback'. None of these mechanisms can be regarded as engaging with genuine learner voice.

This is not to say that using the opinions and perspectives of learners in assessment, or developing a system of student representation on important bodies, is not an important aspect of promoting learner voice - far from it. But unless the voices are part of dialogical process that has possibilities (at least in principle) of re-shaping the way vocational education and training is 'done' in the organization, and therefore of leading to genuine transformation, then the full potential of learner voice will not be realized. The point is that 'learner voice' does not refer just to opportunities for students to express opinions. At its core is the principle of learners having sufficient power to influence change. In our view, the aim should be that engaging learner voice would become the major mechanism of learning and teaching, and of organizing learning and teaching in inclusive ways around the needs of students.

There are very 'thin' forms of learner voice, such as students providing input into a broad consultative process that goes into the mix of a number of other inputs, the significance of which is never clear. There are also strong forms of learner voice, such as the direct involvement of students in negotiating with their teacher to shape the curriculum that is provided within a particular classroom. Learner voice can be seen in different forms as a continuum, from empowering learners at one end, to merely informing learners about certain things at the other. Both learner voice and learner feedback do have some similarities, however, and for students in vocational education and training both are influenced by:

1. what is defined as the *purposes* of vocational education and training, including the width or narrowness of these definitions
2. the extent to which the *learner* is recognized as an active participant in the teaching and learning process
3. the *context* in which learning takes place, including the national, cultural, geographic, policy, regulatory and institutional environments
4. the *capability* of diverse learners to actively respond when consulted and to access feedback
5. the *rationales* for valuing and seeking learner voice and feedback
6. *who* seeks learner voice and provides the feedback
7. the *mechanisms* used to seek learner voice and to provide learner feedback
8. *presuppositions* about how students are located within a VET context (e.g. as clients, employees, customers, citizens, community members, student learners)

This set of influences on the nature of learner voice informed our research on VET in Australia and parts of the UK, Ireland and Norway. Some of the main conclusions from this comparative component of the research are that:

- learner voice and feedback have been important throughout the history of ACE and VET, but have not necessarily been named or theorized as such.
- the notion of learner voice has become more important during the past few years, particularly in England and Scandinavia, but perhaps the voice of learners has become more difficult to hear and to respond to as many national governments have move towards client and customer models of provision which tend to disempower students as co-participants in learning
- there appear to be some fundamental differences in the way learner voice is being theorized, developed and promoted in different national contexts
- the advantages of implementing policies and practices that enable the voices of learners to be heard, valued and acted upon may not be the same as those anticipated by governments and providers.

With the above set of influences on the nature of student voice in mind, and taking into account these general conclusions from our comparative research, we approached our analysis of learner voice in VET in Australia in the manner described below.

#### **Four key starting points in the learner voice literature**

Throughout this research we have found a wide range of Australian and international literature that has investigated learner voice and learner feedback generally, and which has described the experience of VET and ACE for disadvantaged learners in particular. In the report that follows, we have chosen to make reference to this research where relevant, as we conduct our analysis, rather than isolating it 'up front' in a comprehensive literature review. Nevertheless, as a way into this extensive literature, we identify four aspects of the broad field of learner voice research, each with its own body of literature, that are particularly pertinent to our own research and this report. These four aspect are concerned with:

- how learners are *conceptualized* within a learner voice framework
- the *equity* principles that underpin learner voice
- new ways of *hearing* learner voice, including the voices of learners who are disadvantaged by lacking the means and power to assert their voice
- how learner voice can be implemented *in practice*.

#### *Conceptualising learners*

As we stressed at the outset in explaining the complexity of the term 'learner voice', it is important to be clear about *how* learners are construed and constructed in alternative discourses about VET. While VET learners tend to be constructed as 'students' involved in vocational skills acquisition in a 'delivery' model dominated by 'training providers', there are many other possible ways of constructing VET learners and the nature of the learning transaction. One body

of literature on learner voice acknowledges alternative ways of conceptualising learners. Potter (2011), for example, sees four different ways of conceptualising learners, each of which assumes a different role with different implications for learner voice.

1. Learners are used simply as a *data source*, assessed against normative targets.
2. Learners are *active respondents* to questions with teachers able to listen and analyse the responses that they give in particular settings when they have the freedom to discuss aspects of their learning.
3. Learners are *co-researchers* with increased involvement in the learning decisions made by teachers.
4. Learners are themselves *researchers*. (Potter 2011, p.175; emphasis in original)

While most VET learners are encouraged, in practice, to take on a number of active roles while training, this learner typology raises questions about the extent to which their voice is actually heard, valued or assessed.

### *Learner voice principles*

Learner voice is examined in a second body of literature in relation to a set of principles that have emerged out of struggles for educational equity and equality over a number of decades. For example Sellar and Gale (2011), researching in a higher education context, identify a relatively recent merging of 'voice' with 'identity' and 'representation'. They see the concept of voice that emerged in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century as being tied up with claims for political recognition of difference and identity politics, alongside struggles for equality (McLeod, 2011). They cite Bragg (2007, p.344), who puts the argument for student voice as 'part of a larger emancipatory project, hoping it would be transformative not just of individuals, but of the oppressive hierarchies within educational institutions and even within society.'

Sellar and Gale (2011, p.116) advocate a conception of student equity that '... focuses on *capacities* - in relation to mobility, aspiration and voice - rather than on barriers to *access*'. They argue (p.116):

... that strengthening [learners'] capacities to cultivate networks (mobility), shape futures (aspirations) and narrate experiences (voice) increases people's ability to access, benefit from and transform economic goods and social institutions.

Sellar and Gale (pp.127-129) also identify five learner voice principles:

1. Voice requires resources - practical and symbolic - if it is to be valued and recognized by others.
2. Voice involves an ongoing exchange and narratives with others.
3. Voice speaks for our embodied histories.
4. Our lives are not just composed of one narrative.
5. Voice is denied when social relations are organized in ways that privilege some voices over others.

In general, then, the learner voice principles identified by these writers place emphasis on what might be called of student voice. There is a strong relationship in this literature between voice considerations and considerations of power and influence. The particular imperative is on giving voice to those whose voices have been, for various reasons, silenced or marginalized within contemporary

social relations and everyday politics. This understanding of learner voice being directly related to issues of power and equity is consistent with the perspective of the *Equity Blueprint 2011-2016* (NVEAC, 2011), and is one that we have adopted in this report.

### *New ways of hearing learner voice*

There is a rich body of literature on alternative ways of hearing learner voice, particularly the voices of individuals and groups perceived to have less ability to express voice in education and training. This literature, much of which is emerging and published on line, advocates the use of assistive or adaptive technologies (AT) which can empower the generally less powerful to assert their voices. Assistive or adaptive technologies (AT) is ...

... an umbrella term that includes assistive, adaptive, and rehabilitative devices for people with disabilities and also includes the process used in selecting, locating, and using them. AT promotes greater independence by enabling people to perform tasks that they were formerly unable to accomplish, or had great difficulty accomplishing, by providing enhancements to, or changing methods of interacting with, the technology needed to accomplish such tasks.

Examples of Assistive technology include the curb cut in architecture, standing frames, text telephones, accessible keyboards, large print, Braille, and speech recognition software. (Wikipedia, 2012)

There is also wide range of new and emerging technologies and websites that are reshaping what is possible in terms of hearing learners' voices in very diverse education and training sectors. A good example, which includes the use of blogs and wikis, with links to Twitter, Facebook, You Tube and LinkedIn, is the Involver (2012) 'Doing democracy' website in the UK. This site is focussed on resources, training and audit tools for encouraging student voice in the school sector.

We heard about many innovative uses of some of these new and emerging technologies in VET in Australia and elsewhere in our interviews. The literature that informs each of these fields, however, is voluminous and the technologies are changing extremely rapidly. This means, in essence, that the many technical implications and possibilities for hearing and responding to learner voices by using these assistive and new technologies is running well ahead of practical or systemic implementation. Further, while many existing information and communications technologies (such as via mobile phones, iPads and the internet) create the possibility of simple, cheap and instant feedback from the learner to the teacher (and vice versa), there are many unresolved ethical and industrial issues associated with directly hearing and responding to the voices of students within and, particularly, beyond the classroom.

### *Learner voice in practice*

This fourth body of literature explores how learner voice activities might be developed. Some writers have been considering different levels of engagement of educators with learner voice and reasons to promote it. Rudd, Colligan and Naik (2006, pp.i-ii), for example, in a comprehensive handbook about *Learner Voice*,



identify a number of questions (and sub-questions) under four key headings to help people in 'schools or colleges' in the UK to think about how learner voice activities might be developed. These headings and main questions are paraphrased below:

1. Before engaging in learner voice activities:
  - Is anything already happening ... to promote learner voice?
  - If not what might be done?
  - Are learners being listened to?
2. Removing the barriers:
  - Who is being heard?
  - Does the institutional culture and ethos support the development of learner voice?
3. Involving learners:
  - Are there clear ways in which learners are involved in decision-making processes?
  - What tools or methods, if any, are being used to listening to learners' voices?
4. Taking learner voice forward in your institution:
  - Which area(s) and issue(s) might be good for developing and embedding learner voice?

Rudd, Colligan and Naik (2006, p.11) conclude that learner voice can occur on a number of levels that are summarized in a somewhat simplified form in Table 1. We return later in our report to frame some of our findings around this useful 'ladder of participation'.

*Table 1 Learner Voice Ladder of participation*  
(adapted from Rudd, Colligan & Naik, 2006, p.11)

<b>Types of participation</b>	<b>Types of involvement</b>	<b>Levels of engagement</b>
Manipulation	Learners directed and not informed; Learners 'Rubberstamp' staff decisions	Non-participation
Decoration	Learners indirectly involved in decisions, not aware of rights or involvement options	
Informing	Learners merely informed of actions & changes, but views not actively sought	
Consultation	Learners fully informed, encouraged to express opinions, but with little or no impact	Tokenism
Placation	Learners consulted & informed & listened to, but no guarantee changes made are wanted	
Partnership	Learners consulted & informed. Outcomes result of negotiations between staff & learners	
Delegated power	Staff inform agendas for action, but learners responsible for initiatives & programs that result	Learner empowerment
Learner control	Learners initiate agendas, responsible for management of issues & change. Power delegated to learners; active in designing education.	

Rudd, Colligan and Naik (2006, p.ii) also identify ten reasons to promote learner voice (in schools and colleges in the UK), which are paraphrased and enumerated below.

1. A number of national and international conventions state learners should have their views listened to and accounted for in relation to services that affect them.
2. Research shows that embedding learner voice in mainstream school and/or college practices has a range of benefits.
3. Despite the vast changes that have recently occurred within the education system, learners are still seldom heard or consulted.
4. The Government in the UK is pursuing personalized education.
5. Learner voice needs to be viewed as a push towards a change in cultural attitude.
6. Despite a range of tools for promoting learner voice, examples of good practice remain relatively rare.
7. Learner voice must not be tokenistic or an add-on exercise.
8. Learners and young people are increasingly being consulted about, and expected to take responsibility for, other aspects of their lives beyond school or college.
9. Digital technologies represent a powerful, new mechanism to support learner participation.
10. There is the potential for new technologies to change the way learners consume, create, communicate and share information.

This field and literature, then, not only identifies different levels and styles of learner participation and engagement of institutions with the voices of learners, but also raises a multitude of possibilities for ways in which learner voice can be given appropriate recognition and importance in the learning and teaching experience of students. These factors are extremely important in considering ways in which learner voice if can be incorporated into VET in ways that support and enhance the learning opportunities of all students.

### **The diversity of approaches to learner voice by sector in Australia**

Although our report is focussed specifically on learner voice in the VET (vocational education and training) sector in Australia, it is important to stress that VET is far from a homogenous sector. It includes apprenticeships and traineeships, where the learning is mainly through industry and workplace training, as well as programs largely delivered in conventional classrooms or totally on line. Its courses range from higher-level diploma and degree level in some TAFE institutes, to lower level pre-vocational, enabling and VET in schools programs. The appropriate way in which learner voice might be heard varies across each of the diverse contexts. One type of approach will not be appropriate for all learners. Similarly, while there are some Australian VET providers that mainly or exclusively deliver VET courses, there is a growing diversity and sectoral porosity across school, VET, ACE and higher education sectors. Some providers that mainly provide 'higher education' also do some form of VET. Many ACE providers also provide VET, and vice versa.

Despite these caveats about diversity of the education and training sectors in Australia, and at the risk of oversimplification, the following table, Table 2, is a summary of what our research suggests about the engagement with learner voice in each of the sectors. The similarities and differences between other sectors and the VET sector are emphasized.

*Table 2 Factors that enhance and prevent learner voice by sector*

<i>Education &amp; training sector</i>	<i>Enhancing learner voice</i>	<i>Limiting learner voice</i>
<b><i>VET (vocational education &amp; training)</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Availability of support services and staff (in public providers)</li> <li>- Small size of many programs and providers</li> <li>- Strong connection to quality improvement systems across most VET institutions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Narrow focus on delivery of vocational skills</li> <li>- Relatively low teaching skills</li> <li>- Little use of progressive or graded assessment</li> <li>- Variable learner communication skills and few opportunities for engagement of teachers with learners.</li> <li>- Lack of clarity on the purposes of learner voice activity (e.g. is it for quality improvement; improving learners' citizenship'; getting better customer feedback – or all three?)</li> <li>- A policy vacuum in relation to learner voice.</li> </ul>
<b><i>Higher education</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- More flexible curriculum and assessment</li> <li>- Less emphasis on external regulation and audit</li> <li>- Higher level communication skills of students</li> <li>- Longer courses</li> <li>- More student choice over assessment tasks.</li> <li>- Less accountability in terms of qualification</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Large and impersonal classes in major universities</li> <li>- Variable teaching skills</li> <li>- General loss (until recently) of student bodies</li> <li>- Lower student contact hours.</li> </ul>
<b><i>ACE (adult and community education)</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- More accountability traditionally in terms of customer satisfaction</li> <li>- Typically small class size</li> <li>- Higher levels of volunteerism and community involvement</li> <li>- Student Representative Councils (SRCs)</li> <li>- Parent representation on School Councils</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Less teaching skills</li> <li>- Learner voice sometimes seen as course evaluation or feedback on sessions (i.e. less on whole experience; less on involvement; less on influencing nature of provision).</li> </ul>
<b><i>Schools</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Highly trained teachers</li> <li>- Regular and direct reporting back to students</li> <li>- students have higher-level ICT skills.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Ethical difficulties surveying and interviewing students &lt;18 years</li> <li>- Some resistance possible where staffing shortage prevents this being a priority</li> <li>- Learners' disability or use of English used as an excuse for non involvement</li> <li>- Student' experiences of representation when at school is not utilized in TAFE.</li> </ul>

## **The diversity of education and training regimes in the UK, Ireland and Norway**

Our report draws interviews conducted with diverse VET stakeholders (although not with students) in Ireland, the UK and Norway (see detailed account in Appendix 2). The aim of the interviews was to gain insight into the perspectives on student voice and student feedback of various players in the management of VET institutions and the delivery of VET programs. Our intention was to draw from the interviews possible new insights that might be relevant for Australian VET.

Field (2010) has reviewed recent categorisations and models of European lifelong learning systems employing a typology developed by Green et al. (2006). Field sees adult education as comprising 'three, distinct regional models of lifelong learning and the knowledge economy' (Field, 2010, p.386). The first of these, 'the Anglo-Saxon, neoliberal model' has 'sharply polarised skills distributions [and] is typified by rather weak initial education followed by high levels of compensatory training among adult workers' (Field, 2010, p.386). This Anglo-Saxon model is more similar to the Australian model than the second model proposed, 'the continental European social market model' (Field, 2010, p.386).

This second model, according to Field (2010, p.386), 'is characterised by high levels of skills distributed widely across the workforce, usually as a result of strong investment in initial education.' The third model proposed by Field (2010, p.386), the 'Nordic model', 'combines high levels of social cohesion with strong support for economic competitiveness'. This model somewhat matches the Australian approach in its rhetoric, but the policy, funding and practice are very different. Field (2010, p.386) explains that the:

... Nordic nations tend to combine high levels of attainment in initial education with strong support for general adult education and training, promoting a relatively equal distribution of skills ... [There are also] targeted funding measures aimed at engaging disadvantaged groups in the adult education system. ... The Nordic nations have created popular adult education systems that have led to the attenuation of differences amongst otherwise disadvantaged groups.

In contrast to the Nordic approach, the Australian higher education and VET systems have arguably tended to race each other towards the vocational bottom in competition for clients in increasingly market-driven systems. In the process, public provision of adult and community education has at best been neglected and at worst deliberately run down (Golding & Foley, 2011). Where adult and community education (ACE) has been retained, the part of ACE that is not vocational (that is, its community-oriented component) has tended to be colonized by the already educationally advantaged. Unsurprisingly, the extent of inequality and social exclusion in Australian education and training, and attempts to redress disadvantage through education and training (particularly VET), have become important research and public policy issues. Learner voice, however, has rarely been systematically examined prior to this study through field research in Australian VET.

## **What is learner voice and what are its associated presuppositions?**

In the discussion that follows, we critically examine what we identify, on the basis of our combined research over the past two decades, as six simplistic and somewhat questionable propositions about learner voice and disadvantaged groups that are widely accepted in Australian vocational education and training (VET) discourse. While each of the six presuppositions examined below is questionable, our research also leads us to challenge the common, *a priori* assumptions that each learner:

- *has a voice*
- *has the means of expressing voice*
- *is being asked to speak, is listened to and is responded to during the learning and teaching process.*

### ***Some questionable presuppositions about learner voice and feedback***

*First questionable presupposition: That learner voice and feedback are simple*

'Learner voice' and 'learner feedback' appear to many VET practitioners to be simple concepts. We suggest they are not.

*Learner voice* in its simplest form refers to the opinion or 'voice' of learners that that is engaged with and utilized in various ways in their experiences of learning. *Learner feedback* refers to opinions provided by students in response to questions about their experience of learning, typically as a consequence of a request from an education or training provider. Beneath these simple statements lie a number of complex and interrelated questions about:

- the processes for *listening to* the voice of learners
- the *authenticity* and *source* of the learner voice
- the *ability* of the learners to express their voices and respond to requests for feedback
- the *context* for and *purposes* of the learning that the learner is undertaking
- *which* learner opinions are being sought
- *when* the opinion is sought
- the *intentions* of the learner in expressing an opinion
- *who* is seeking the opinion
- the *rationale* for seeking the opinion
- the processes for *hearing* what learners say
- the processes for *responding* to learners.

*Second questionable presupposition: That learner voice is mainly about barriers to participation and completion*

One of the inherent problems with relying on existing research into education and training that purports to hear learner voice through participant surveys and interviews, as Gorard (2010, p.355) noted in an international analysis of the literature on 'barriers' to learning and participation, is that the research evidence

about barriers 'is almost entirely based on the self-reports of existing participants'. If learner voice studies are restricted only to those learners who come to education *despite* the hypothesised barriers, or only to those who manage to *complete* programs, there is a risk of not hearing about non-participation and non-completion. Importantly, the research into non-participation (Selwyn et al., 2006) shows that non-participants usually cite reasons for people not participating at all are different from the reasons given by people who start but don't complete.

People who participate in and complete a course in post compulsory education and training, in spite of the barriers they face, presumably see their learning as relevant to their needs and capacities. Unsurprisingly, those who 'failed' at school tend not to see learning in the same way.

Gorard (2010) argues that conventional explanations of hypothesized, metaphorical 'barriers' to participation in further study, particularly for disadvantaged groups,

... tend towards tautological non-explanations at the expense of more far-reaching institutional, lifelong and societal change. ... [T]here is little direct evidence that [approaches to participation for low-participating groups] are differentially effective for the groups for whom they are intended. (p.356)

Gorard (2010, p.353) also notes that, while 'government policy focuses on the removal of the impediments or "barriers" which prevent those people from participating who would benefit from doing so', there are other important factors at play. Gorard concludes that 'while the metaphor of barriers to participation is an attractive one that apparently explains differences in patterns between socio-economic groups' (p.354), the most obvious barriers are not institutional or dispositional but 'situational, stemming chiefly from the life and lifestyle of the prospective learner' (p.354).

For these reasons our research interviews sought to explore what is known by VET stakeholders about the voice of potential learners (including some potential disadvantaged learner groups) who tend *not* to participate, and who therefore seldom have a voice in VET or in government education and training policy. It cannot be assumed that all students will complete their programs and get a chance to express their voice after completion. Hence, we were also interested to explore mechanisms for hearing the voices of learners who leave their VET programs prior to completion. Also, the voices and attitudes of those who actively decide to leave their studies are presumably different from those of learners who persist and complete. The concept of 'barriers', therefore, needs considerable unpacking.

*Third questionable presupposition: That VET is all about 'institutional delivery'*

Much discourse in VET, including simple notions of learner voice and feedback, is based on a unidirectional 'delivery' model of instruction that presupposes that the industry competencies and skills that are meant to be taught in particular programs are in fact transferred to the learners as intended. Aside from the fact

that this assumption of faithful transfer of a standard product runs counter to most contemporary, constructivist views of learning and teaching that now prevail in all other education sectors, it is also challenged in recent learner voice research. Research conducted in Ireland by Bailey (2011, p.275) indicates that collaboration is essential in learning environments which value learner voice, particularly when the learners are members of 'harder to reach groups' (p.275). Bailey concluded that:

... the openness of the learning environment was crucial to the achievement of outcomes measured, meaning that learners were engaged in participatory, dialogical learning where the tutor/facilitator could change direction in order to respond to learner needs. ... The collaborative environment ensures that learners' voices are heard and are valued. (p.275)

VET teachers therefore need to be introduced to ways of teaching other than didactic methods. There is an urgent need for professional development generally, and particularly in alternative pedagogies that incorporate constructivist approaches and adopt a much more participatory, collaborative and dialogic approach to the teacher-student relationship.

*Fourth questionable presupposition: That learner voice is about surveying clients about the match between their vocational intentions and outcomes*

The overwhelming accountability emphasis in VET is on surveys of clients as the main method of institutional evaluation and enforcement of regulatory and compliance mechanisms. The assumption seems to be that the intended purpose and outcomes for the learner are primarily or solely about paid work. We have deliberately broadened our study to enable ourselves to hear about other possible learner voice and feedback mechanisms and outcomes of VET, and particularly to investigate what we now hypothesize to be a gaping hole in learner feedback. Learners are already subjected to many surveys, but few people appear to be listening or hearing the survey results. Our research indicates that very little is being fed back to individual institutions, and less again to students.

We have titled our report 'Closing the loop' for this reason. As the Australian National University Centre for Higher Education (ANU, 2012) puts it:

Evaluation does not only require you to gather and act on feedback. Rather, a critical part of the evaluation cycle is acknowledging the value of that feedback to students, so they can clearly see its significance as a means of improving teaching and learning outcomes. If students cannot see that their feedback is of value, what they contribute is more likely to be superficial, rushed or ill conceived. Closing the feedback loop in this way is essential to building the credibility of the evaluation process. This in turn is likely to improve the engagement of students in subsequent evaluation processes. (ANU, 2012)

We agree entirely with the above comment and would argue that such closing of the feedback loop, starting with evaluation surveys that are already mandated and being conducted, is essential for embracing learner voice.

*Fifth questionable presupposition: That learner voice is the best means of redressing disadvantage*

There have been rhetorical attempts in the life of the current national government in Australia (e.g. Gillard, 2008) to acknowledge and address issues of known inequity in education. Looking across all education sectors, the 'higher' the form of education and qualification level, the less equity there is and the more likely it is that there are entrenched intergenerational cycles of educational disadvantage for what are universally described as 'disadvantaged groups'. In this context, the Australian Prime Minister (Gillard, 2008) pointed out that: 'Traditional priorities and modes of service delivery won't do. .... In equity terms we have been heading in exactly the wrong direction ... Old ways haven't necessarily worked, so we want new ideas.'

Underpinning our report and its recommendations is a conviction that new ideas are indeed needed. We need to move away from deficit models of disadvantage toward models that have the potential to engage and include *all* learners. There is a need for the system as a whole to hear and respect learner voice (including the voice of disadvantaged learners). However, we are concerned that, if all learners (and particularly prospective learners) are increasingly consulted and still get close to no feedback, then nothing will change.

The research of Black and Yasukawa (2011) illustrates our argument. These researchers recently investigated the provision of literacy, language and numeracy (LLN) support for students in Australian VET. They concluded that it was patchy and ad hoc, falling largely within a deficit model of provision in which students with LLN 'problems' were 'provided' with remedial responses to these 'deficiencies'. Black and Yasukawa identified alternative pedagogical models relevant to this learner voice study. They note (p.33) that deficit approaches reinforce the erroneous idea that people, rather than structural inequalities in society, are held responsible for their own failures'.

Black and Yasukawa propose alternative pedagogies that challenge 'deficit accounts by drawing on the existing skills and practice of people – students and teachers, to question the pedagogical status quo' (2011, p.37). The approach that they advocate is based on earlier research by Lea and Street (2006) on 'academic literacies' approaches to learning and teaching. According to Lea and Street, such an approach 'is concerned with meaning making, identity, power, and authority, and foregrounds the institutional nature of what counts as knowledge in any particular academic context' (2006, p.369, cited in Black & Yasukawa, 2011, p.37).

While Black and Yasukawa's (2011) research was designed to explore learner voice, they identified (p.40) 'considerable scope to draw on the existing resources of students ... to make learning more enjoyable and relevant, and to improve VET pedagogy' through critical enquiry *with* students, rather than focusing on delivery models that assumed students had skills deficiencies. This is the kind of open learning environment that is needed in VET institutions, and which, by acknowledging and respecting the knowledge that learners bring with



them that can be built upon, is an essential prerequisite for genuine multi-directional dialogue.

In some senses, the model of 'disadvantaged groups' that underpins the NVEAC brief that we have responded to for this research presupposes, albeit unintentionally, that learner voice is associated in some way with disadvantage and deficit. Such an approach in VET contexts causes unnecessary barriers to learning for many students. To quote Black and Yasukawa (2011, p.39):

Assessing students to indicate their deficiencies based on criteria which may not be directly relevant to successful vocational learning, has the potential to present additional barriers to learning for some students. ... A dynamic, changing world of work requires a dynamic, changing VET system. The existing practices in the delivery ... in VET courses generally do not reflect change, rather, they reflect accommodation to the status quo. ... [T]eachers are usually required to 'fit in' to existing VET pedagogical practices. ...

We take this argument one step further and argue that most VET students are typically required to fit into (and not to critique) existing pedagogical practices. But students who are already disadvantaged through life are likely to already have 'failed' within such pedagogical relationships in traditional schooling. As they mature they increasingly need to have agency and voice. They need opportunities to provide feedback about what learning they value, what they are able to bring to the learning context, and how they have experienced their VET programs. If not, students are unlikely to enjoy their programs, achieve their intended outcomes, or find their course relevant. As emerging citizens and members of the 21<sup>st</sup> century workforce they should be treated equitably and socially included as legitimate participants in education process. In summary, promoting learner voice is not necessarily the only means to deal with disadvantage, though it is an important mechanism.

*Sixth questionable presupposition: That learner voices are authentic and equally valued and heard*

The NVEAC research brief, and therefore our research design, ironically required us to ignore the voices of most learners and to concentrate on the voices of those responsible for introducing learner voice mechanisms. We heard from diverse people at state and territory level in VET (and to a lesser extent ACE), who have managerial, policy, coordination, provider, sectoral, research and advocacy roles, particularly in capital cities. While we heard some important insights from some learners, teachers and providers, a subsequent research project with a focus on learner voice narratives is highly recommended. Such research should also identify and listen to groups of learners that are not currently being heard clearly in diverse VET providers and contexts.

It was relatively easy in this research project to hear the voices of stakeholders who are 'responsible' for, or knowledgeable about, specific disadvantaged groups, particularly groups with strong support and advocacy networks. These include Indigenous people, people with disability (Cotton, 2009) and migrants, and their advocates. An important question that we attempted to pursue in this research is: 'Whose voices and which learners (i.e. with which disabilities,

backgrounds or languages) are heard least?' It is possible that some learners' voices are filtered and mediated by their advocates. It is extremely difficult to tap into the voices of some learners, including many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians in diverse locations and circumstances, who tend to withdraw (or deliberately resist) 'mainstream' VET learning. Without actually speaking to a large and purposefully selected sample of learners in each disadvantaged group, it is very hard to summarize the voices of disadvantaged learners who have limited advocacy networks. This is the case, for instance, for adults in rural and remote contexts with limited formal literacies and low socio-economic status.

Before proceeding to discuss evidence from our interviews, which examined each of these questionable presuppositions, the next section critically analyses current obligations, processes and mechanisms mandated under the AQTF (Australian Qualifications Framework) and other provider legislation that is related to learner voice.

## UK, Irish and Norwegian insights on learner voice

Earlier in our report we identified important differences among post-compulsory education and training regimes in Europe, based in part on global (mainly European) categorisations by Field (2010).

In this section, we summarize and explore a number of aspects of VET in the UK, Ireland and Norway which are relevant to several of the original project requirements, namely:

- legislative requirements and current obligations related to learner voice for providers (NVEAC project requirements 1 & 2)
- relevant approaches being implemented related to learner voice in post-compulsory education and training sectors in Europe (NVEAC project requirement 3)
- nature and type of feedback currently collected from learners (NVEAC project requirement 4).

A fuller account of the interview data that helped inform this section is found in Appendix 2.

### Definitions, regulatory frameworks, legislation and policy

*(NVEAC project requirements 1 & 2)*

Although ‘learner<sup>1</sup> voice’ is not defined as such, government policy documents in the UK identify ‘learner engagement’ and ‘learner involvement’ in the same terms as this study. For example, the government for Wales set out a new approach to quality improvement in 2010. Clearly evident in the Strategy is attention to learner voice (‘involvement’):

[Emphasis on learner involvement] is a significant change of direction for our quality assurance strategy; it goes beyond undertaking surveys of learners’ views, to give them a key role in taking decisions which will affect their whole experience of learning. This is a dialogue which goes to the heart of the citizenship agenda; it is about treating learners with respect, helping them to take ownership, and breaking down barriers which may prevent them from speaking up and being heard. Involvement in decision-making has proven benefits for learners. As well as making them feel more motivated and engaged in their learning experiences, it can help them to develop important skills which will equip them for their futures as active citizens. This will also help providers<sup>2</sup> to improve their retention and achievement rates, by shaping a generation of learners who will actively work with staff to improve the quality of learning.<sup>3</sup> (Welsh Assembly Government, 2010, p.1)

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<sup>1</sup> The word ‘learner’ is used here to mean ‘learner’, ‘trainee’, ‘student’, ‘apprentice’ or ‘participant’.

<sup>2</sup> The word ‘provider’ is used instead of ‘organisation’, ‘college’, ‘service’ or ‘institution’, to mean any kind of provider in the further and adult education system.

<sup>3</sup> Welsh Assembly Government (February, 2010) *Learner involvement strategies: Guidance for lifelong learning and skills providers in Wales*. Welsh Assembly Government Circular No: 002/2010 See <http://wales.gov.uk/docs/dcells/publications/100414learnerinvolvementen.pdf>

In Scotland, also, the Government sees learner voice as central to quality improvement and sets out criteria for 'learner engagement':

Learner engagement' is one of the three key principles on which the revised quality arrangements are based and is reflected in the HMIE quality framework for reference during the external review of Scotland's colleges, September 2008 as 'Engagement of learners in enhancing their own learning and the work and life of the college' and 'How well are learners engaged in enhancing their own learning and the work and life of the college? (HMIE, 2008, Annex 2)

This key principle in Scotland's quality improvement strategy is overarching and informs one of the four 'confidence statements' generated through external review by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education (HMIE). The definition is embedded within the statement:

Across the sector, many colleges in Scotland are already engaging effectively with their learners to enable improvements to be made both at programme and whole-college level. The high priority now given to this key principle will help to ensure that learners have the potential to engage in all areas of college operations and that colleges acknowledge learners' contributions effectively<sup>4</sup>. (HMIE, 2008, Annex 2)

As a result, it is proposed, learners can be supported to become more active participants in both their learning and in the work and life of the college. All colleges, states the HMIE, should have appropriate arrangements in place to ensure that they are enhancing their learners' experiences across a number of particular themes. They include:

- learners having a strong sense of influence and ownership of their learning experience through greater engagement
- the learning experience should not be a product but a process in which learners participate
- learners should be supported to engage constructively with their own learning
- learners are involved in decision-making about their curricula, learning and teaching, and all aspects of their learning experience
- when learners progress from college they are as well equipped as possible with the skills, attributes and attitudes that will enable them to become effective lifelong learners.

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<sup>4</sup> HMIE (2008) *External quality arrangements for Scotland's Colleges*  
<http://www.hmie.gov.uk/documents/publication/eqafsc.html>

In England in 2007, the then Learning and Skills Council published guidance for the further education and skills sector in England, which was aimed at supporting providers to develop a learner involvement strategy<sup>5</sup>. From 2007/8 every college and provider was expected to have such a strategy. Previously the Government had set up a National Learner Panel (2006) to hear the voices of learners, who were carefully selected from applications to represent a variety of learners. The Panel was facilitated by an independent consultancy and funded by the Government. Many draft documents and policies were offered to the Panel for their opinion. Ministers attended the Panel to hear the learners' views. The public policy which launched the Strategy was set out in a White Paper, *Further education: Raising skills, improving life chances*<sup>6</sup>, which stated in relation to the mandated learner involvement strategy:

[The] systematic collection of the views of learners is a rich source of valuable feedback, and when acted on effectively it can influence the shape and availability of services to ensure maximum benefit to the learner. (DfES, 2006a, p.14)

In the White Paper which set out the Government's expectations of providers, no particular template was given but the following outline was offered:

### **Learner involvement strategy outline**

#### **1. Baseline review**

It will be important to review and evaluate existing learner involvement arrangements and policies with a view to deciding whether you plan to continue and develop these arrangements.

#### **2. Improvement and implementation**

The learner involvement strategy should be forward-looking. It may include the steps you will take to **improve** existing learner involvement mechanisms or policies, as well as any plans you may have to **implement** new ones. For instance, a learner involvement strategy might include a plan to review the questions used in a learner survey, or to pilot a course representative scheme [which should] ...

- involve learners individually, and strengthen teaching and learning and responsiveness to individual need
- involve learners collectively, and strengthen learner participation and representation to improve services
- develop the organisation, and create a culture of learner involvement.

#### **3. Evaluation and reporting**

The learner involvement strategy should set out clearly the ways in which its effectiveness will be **measured and reported** and how learners will be informed of the changes made in the light of their comments. (DfES, 2006, p.14)

Professional development, guidance and much policy attention were given to learner involvement. For example, a recent publication from LSIS (charged with

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<sup>5</sup> <http://readingroom.lsc.gov.uk/lsc/National/nat-281718-learn-strat-may07.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> *Further Education: Raising skills, improving life chances* (DfES, 2006)

responsibility for improving quality in the further education sector in England) asked 'What is learner voice?' The response was:

By asking for the opinions of learners, providers gain valuable insight into what their learners think of them and their performance. Acting on this feedback allows providers to have a:

"More responsive, more engaging, higher quality offer that empowers learners in shaping their own experience, and delivers improved outcomes for more learners, especially those who might otherwise not succeed." (LSC, 2007)

Consulting and involving learners needs to happen at all stages of the learner experience; from pre enrolment activity, target setting, assessment, to the day the learner leaves the organization and beyond. (LSIS, 2011, p.4)<sup>7</sup>

The spirit of the national policy was attractive to providers and received widespread support. Before long 'user involvement' appeared in the Ofsted Inspection guidance. In addition, national occupational standards for staff were published. During interviews for this study, almost all providers could cite at least one of these three initiatives – the Government White Paper; the inspection guidance; the National Occupational Standards. Predictably, it was the way in which inspectors approached user or learner involvement as part of their inspection programme that was most remembered. From these arrangements, providers are able to design their own self-assessment annually.

#### *Ofsted's approach to inspection in the learning and skills sector in England*

Ofsted, the inspectorate for England, routinely seeks out the views of learners during all inspections. In addition, the inspectorate is keen to find good practice on learner voice. On the Ofsted website, good practice guidance on learner voice is evident. For example, South Devon College is described as having, 'Highly effective engagement with users to support and promote improvement in an FE college'.<sup>8</sup> The current inspection handbook, updated in 2011, by which all providers draw their information for the self-assessment process and inspection guidance, sets out under 'Capacity to Improve' (a key and graded assessment of the provider), a 'user engagement strategy' in each of the exemplars. To be 'outstanding', for example, a provider needs to have a user involvement strategy such that:

The user engagement strategy is highly effective, with the views of learners and employers systematically collected and acted upon to bring about improvement, and subsequent actions clearly communicated to these users. (Ofsted, 2009, pp.42-43)<sup>9</sup>

Similarly, to be deemed to be 'good', a provider needs to have in place a user engagement strategy which 'is effective, with the views of learners and employers acted upon to secure improvements' (Ofsted, 2009, pp.42-43). It is

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<sup>7</sup> LSIS (2011) *Creative listening: Hearing the voices of learners with profound and multiple learning difficulties in the further education and skills sector*, <http://www.lsis.org.uk/AboutLSIS/MediaCentre/NewsArticles/Pages/The-Learner-Voice-creative-approaches-for-learners-with-learning-difficulties.aspx>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/good-practice-resource-user-voice>

<sup>9</sup> Ofsted, 2009 *Handbook for the inspection of further education and skills from September 2009 (updated in 2011)* <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/node/1455>

impossible to underestimate the impact on providers of this kind of focus in the UK, at a time when a poor inspection grade might mean a difference in an institution's reputation, income, permission to take risks or expand, and may lead to a forensic external focus on their management and effectiveness.

One Ofsted inspector, commenting on the learner voice concept, said:

Learner voice, when you use that concept that actually covers a very broad range... You have got policy, you have got decision-making, you have got evaluation, you have got involvement. There is a whole raft of things that fall under that one concept and I don't think it is very useful to have a concept like 'voice' or 'involvement' where you have got a myriad of those kinds of things that go on or are expected to go on. [Ofsted inspector]

He went on to note the historical roots of this concept:

Perhaps the most significant part for me was the introduction of citizenship within the curriculum ... back in the late 90s which was really a catalyst for saying it's about involvement and that really started to spread out into ... national policy. [Ofsted inspector]

In answer to the question, 'What would you see as the minimum providers are expected to do', an Ofsted inspector responded:

Surveys and questionnaires and feedback. I mean that is something we inspect against, we would expect them to be doing some form of that which would then feed into their self-assessment and quality improvement processes, but they don't always do that very well. [Ofsted inspector]

Confirmation that inspectors also find this difficult to do well formed an echo to the above comment:

It is a big challenge for us now in inspection where our resources are being cut that actually when you are inspecting and there is a group of learners like that [with cognitive impairment] or you have learners for whom English isn't their first language, you need to plan in time to sit and talk with either individuals or with small groups and time is exactly what you need to do, it can't be by 5 or 10 minutes or whatever. And with our resources being cut that becomes incredibly difficult but it is critical because otherwise... we are not getting to the bottom of what those people think. [Ofsted inspector]

Providers saw inspections as a motive for action too:

It forms part of the Common Inspection Framework for Ofsted so there is part of the judgements there that would take account of how the College collects learner voice and how responsive the college is. I think our governors also have an expectation and would have something to say very quickly if the student executive committee were to be suddenly disbanded. [Morley College vice principal]

### *Public policy and inspection: 'learner involvement'*

In Wales the Government has provided information on how learner involvement will be...

*...central to Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills Quality and Effectiveness Framework (QEF), and to Estyn's [the education inspectorate for Wales] new Common Inspection Framework from autumn 2010. We will be looking at how providers place learners at the heart of their planning, decision-making and*

*quality assurance processes, and seeking evidence of the impact these processes have on learners' experiences.*

[\[http://wales.gov.uk/topics/educationandskills/learningproviders/raisingqualityandstandards/responsiveness/learnervoice/learnerinvolvement/?lang=en\]](http://wales.gov.uk/topics/educationandskills/learningproviders/raisingqualityandstandards/responsiveness/learnervoice/learnerinvolvement/?lang=en)

One respondent commented that:

...when Estyn comes for an inspection they will be interviewing the learners and one of the questions will be 'was your voice heard and listened to?' ... so what you should be doing is talking to your learners between inspections so that you find out what they think, what's wrong and what can be put right before the inspectors come in... and of course they have even gone a step further in that they are now employing learner inspectors.

This is a direction attempted by the Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) in England but abandoned when the ALI merged with the inspectorate for children and young people, to form the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted). However, some providers are actively using learners as part of the internal observation system that routinely observes classroom practice and evaluates the quality of teaching and learning as part of their quality improvement strategy. 'It is the next stage in the process', observed one college director in England.

The experience in Wales suggests a greater level of feedback from learners occurs when they know that other learners are already part of the process:

The idea of learner inspectors is ... to interview the learners because what we have found in the past is if somebody comes in with a suit and a briefcase learners are not quite truthful in the answers they give, but if they are talking to a peer member then hopefully we will get a more truthful answer, so the learners are there to interview the learners on their experiences, they are not there to inspect the professionalism of the tutors.

### *National Occupational Standards in the UK*

In 2009 National Occupational Standards (NOS) were created for learner involvement. These standards are:

... statements of the standards of performance individuals must achieve when carrying out functions in the workplace, together with specifications of the underpinning knowledge and understanding<sup>10</sup>.

The NOS are fundamental to the design of qualifications and to a common understanding of what is expected of staff in further education in the UK. They describe what an individual needs to do, know and understand in order to carry out a particular job role or function. As the NOS database explains:

- NOS are National because they can be used in every part of the UK where the functions are carried out.
- NOS are Occupational because they describe the performance required of an individual when carrying out functions in the workplace, i.e. in their occupation (as a plumber, police officer, production engineer etc).

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.excellencegateway.org.uk/node/61> accessed 06 March 2012



- NOS are Standards because they are statements of effective performance which have been agreed by a representative sample of employers and other key stakeholders and approved by the UK NOS Panel.  
[<http://www.excellencegateway.org.uk/node/61> accessed 6 March 2012]

There are fourteen NOS for Lifelong Learning designed for the whole of the UK. The NOS for 'Learner Involvement' makes clear that its scope covers all staff and all the 'learner voice' areas of our inquiry:

This section defines the role of all those involved in learner involvement, in engaging with learners to improve their overall learning experience. This Standard is about encouraging the learner to be involved in learning and the learning organisation<sup>11</sup>.

The NOS sets out a list of seven performance criteria, which include being able to promote opportunities available to the learner and prospective learner; to identify the benefits of involvement; know the roles, rights and responsibilities of 'involved learners'; and recognize their aims and aspirations within the organisation, workplace or community. Of particular interest are the proactive criteria (pp.4-7), which are stated as:

- encourage the learner to propose opportunities to enhance involvement and influence (p.4)
- respond positively to learner proposals which enhance involvement (p.5)
- work in partnership with the learner and prospective learner to find ways to overcome actual or perceived barriers to involvement (p.6)
- facilitate opportunities that involve the learner. (p.7)

Arising from these there are some 24 key criteria which set out what an individual member of staff should know and understand, ranging from knowing and understanding ...

.. the values and principles underpinning learner engagement and involvement [K1] through to possible barriers and constraints that may hinder the learner in becoming fully engaged and involved [K18] ;... ways in which perceived barriers may be overcome, including through accessing new and emerging technologies [K19];... how to engage the hardest to reach learners and prospective learners within the workplace and community [K20];... and the types of activities that might be used to increase learner involvement [K21]<sup>12</sup>.

The NOS were constructed following consultation with the sector by the then national body for setting occupational standards in the sector for lifelong learning. It was clearly envisaged that such standards were designed for staff across the whole post compulsory education sector and across the whole UK.

<sup>11</sup><http://www.ukstandards.co.uk/NOS%20Directory/NOS%20PDF%20%20LLUK/ConversionDocuments/LSILI04.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup><http://www.ukstandards.co.uk/NOS%20Directory/NOS%20PDF%20%20LLUK/ConversionDocuments/LSILI04.pdf> pp.3 & 4

## Practitioner views about what is meant by 'learner voice' in the UK

Unsurprisingly, education and training providers in the UK saw 'learner voice' in many different ways. In one focus group five themes emerged: learner voice was regarded as:

- information exchange
- quality improvement or because of external imperatives (usually inspection)
- learning democracy
- obtaining ownership of their education
- marketing.

The commonest response was about learner voice as *information exchange*:

- Learner voice is basically a feedback system to enable students to properly give their opinion of certain college procedures and the way the college goes about its day to day routine really. In a nutshell. [Student Union president]
- ...it is utilized on a daily basis for numerous things, consultation and social space for things like this [i.e. interviews by researchers] [Curriculum area manager]

However, learner voice as *quality improvement* was a close second:

- We want to be an outstanding college, we want to be a good college that responds to the learner needs so we try and create every opportunity for the learner to come to us. [Curriculum area manager]
- I see learner voice as a quality assurance process really. So my point of view it is about making sure that we have the right services and the best service. [Student services manager]

Part of the quality improvement theme included recognition of what external regulators, usually inspectors, might say.

Some respondents felt learner voice was about *democracy and democratization*, including preparing people for having a voice in their communities and enabling them to learn new democratic skills:

- It's part of the democracy, being in a democracy is putting it into action... so it is actually part of teaching and learning as well because it is something about helping the student to learn something new to probably open up new doors for them... [T]he issue was the changes in ESOL fees and our learners took a lot of part in it... we organized meetings with the local MPs, so they came and talked to the three MPs and signed a petition. [Program area manager]
- We are always trying to make sure that our learners are on the same playing field as all the other learners so that they can operate in society in the same way that everybody else in the society can, and the learner voice is part of that. [Curriculum area manager]
- I wonder how many people who stood for the student union post this year were also reps last year. There would be quite a number wouldn't there? I would say nearly every single one was a course rep last year. Yes it was 12 wasn't it? Yes, 12. [Student services manager]

Others liked the idea of learner voice as being about *learner ownership* of the curriculum and of college activity:

...learner voice is a way that learners have an ownership in their education, an ownership of the courses that are run in the college as a whole and having advice from the tutors is a way of having their voice helps them feel like they do belong here [Curriculum area manager]

Learner voice as a process for assisting in widening participation and enhancing the *marketing* of college programs was also evident:

- ...it's about a partnership between staff and students to get the most out of the institution. There are two main factors. Who are the college's biggest marketers – our students. And who are our biggest consumers – our students ... so it is trying to get that complete and show it together. [Quality manager]
- ...and doesn't the college make good use of ex learners to talk to potential learners? I mean that happens in our area and you need to see for yourself that the best marketing people for the college are actually learners, so when [curriculum] areas go out to schools they take learners with them. When we have open days we make sure we have got learners about to actually be talking to prospective people. [Program area manager]

## Approaches to Learner voice

There appears to be a number of levels of learner voice involvement in different institutions and organizations in post compulsory education in the UK. Each of them can be related to the hierarchy of user involvement devised by Rudd, Colligan and Naik (2006) which was refer to earlier in this report. We have adapted their model in Table 3 below:

*Table 3 Learner participation and engagement hierarchy*

*(adapted from Rudd, Colligan & Naik, 2006, with illustrative quotations from interviewees in UK)*

Types of participation	Types of involvement	Levels of engagement	Typical responses (from interviews)
Manipulation	Learners directed and not informed; Learners	Non - participation	'Learners aren't here long enough to consult them.'
Decoration	'Rubberstamp' staff decisions. Learners indirectly involved in decisions, not aware of rights or involvement options.		'We had to have learners on the Governing Body.'
Informing	Learners merely informed of actions & changes, but views not actively sought.		'We ensure that learners know what is happening through our tutor groups.'
Consultation	Learners fully informed, encouraged to express opinions, but with little or no impact.	Tokenism	'We consult our learners in view of planning so all our courses we put on pretty much are planned with the learner in mind.'
Placation	Learners consulted & informed & listened to, but no guarantee changes made are wanted.		'Learners attend a termly meeting'
Partnership	Learners consulted & informed. Outcomes result of negotiations between staff & learners.		'We have a "you said, we did" policy here.'
Delegated power	Staff inform agendas for action, but learners responsible for initiatives & programs that result.	Learner empowerment	'The student liaison committee advises the governors and executive each term.'

Learner  
control

Learners initiate agendas,  
responsible for management of  
issues & change. Power  
delegated to learners; active in  
designing education.

‘Learners have a strong  
influence on the kinds of  
courses we offer. They are  
involved at every level:  
interviewing directors;  
membership of the Board;  
judging the quality of  
teaching. We wouldn’t  
make any major strategic  
decision without their  
involvement.’

Where providers are setting out to develop a complete learner involvement strategy, they may have several purposes in mind. They may wish to:

- give learners more opportunities to get involved
- help learners develop the skills they need to get involved
- give learners the support and confidence they need to get involved
- motivate learners to get involved
- identify and meet the needs of groups of learners who are currently less involved
- ensure staff and managers have the skills, support and confidence they need to involve learners.

Each of these intended purposes will determine the actions taken. Frequently a number of these aims will be running in parallel and some may lack congruence. If the sole purpose, for example, is to help learners improve their citizenship skills while there is little real opportunity for them to influence the outcomes of discussions, this becomes no more than merely ‘informing’ learners, although the curriculum might be laudable. If, on the other hand, the intention is to include learners fully in every action of a college, including full participation in governance and all quality improvement processes (including judgements on teaching quality), then it might be safe to say that ‘learner empowerment’ is the aim. In most cases respondents told us that their provision was somewhere on the continuum between these two extremes.

### **Nature and type of input/feedback to learners**

Most adult and further education colleges in the UK have systems for identifying learners’ views. As summarized by Morley College, these can feel overwhelming:

We also have the class representatives association and the student executive committee. These are autonomous groups that have been at the college for many years. One of them produces a magazine ... There are also student representatives on the governing body and on the committees of governors ... and a new community learning students’ forum... We have course evaluations, student evaluations, tutor evaluations, when we observe lessons by the observation team ... We also have the students’ survey... over five per cent of the whole student body... We also have a formal tutorial practice... and learner disability forum.  
[Morley College, Curriculum Manager]

The Ofsted expectation is that ‘surveys, questionnaires and feedback’ is what they are most likely to find a provider doing in order to generate learner voice. This would indicate that the simplest forms of input/feedback are in place. There

are clearly many different methods being used by which providers can generate and utilize feedback and input from learners. Some of these are more common than others. The challenges posed can be varied:

It is a very difficult issue for me about learner voice ... in terms of people with complex needs and so on because very often they don't remember what happened that morning .... So looking at learner voice is much more complex for those kinds of students. Very often they will be satisfied with provision which we can see is far from adequate because that's what they have always had, so that whole issue about students with learning difficulties is very difficult ... You need to get behind that ... so 'can you tell me about when you?' ... kind of questions rather than 'are you satisfied with?' [Ofsted inspector]

One provider said that 'students with high support needs' require better listening:

It should be a sort of negotiation but I do think the whole thing about inclusive practice is that you have to know which questions to ask and in what order so that real communication starts. [Leeds College]

For those with complex cognitive impairments, it is suggested by most respondents that there needs to be a more well-rounded dialogue - one which is part of the whole learning process and is embedded in the curriculum. LSIS respondents commented that:

My interest in learner voice is around learners who have got learning difficulties ... because for those learners very often their voice is taken away from them or people have very little expectations of them and they don't have a voice. They would also... have competing voices in their lives telling them what to do and they are in the middle of it trying to make some choices. [LSIS National development officer]

At Leeds College, the organizer has arranged for staff to be trained in 'intensive interaction' as part of the 'person-centred planning' process, which usually involves other agencies working in partnership. The same occurs in relation to learners with mental health difficulties. A common concern here is that learners with disadvantages should have an equal right to have their voices heard, and that it is the provider's job to make this happen. It is through effective, intensive working by staff that learners can be heard. The equality theme was evident elsewhere too:

One of the key things we have to do is make reality [the] equality of opportunity that is central to what an FE college does, so the learner voices help them to do that ... So we are always trying to make sure that our learners are on the same playing field as all the other learners so that they can operate in society in the same way that everybody else in the society can. [Leicester, Program Area Manager]

A number of methods described by respondents are being used to break down some of the barriers posed by those experiencing particular disadvantages. For example, some providers have course representatives in relation to learners with complex needs; they are provided with a greater level of support. Others use different systems, occasionally running in parallel, which are not always effective:

They don't link with the learner voice practitioners... so they almost have like their separate structures. They might have their own class reps and feed into their own forum without linking with those sorts of structures that work across the organization, and that should be accessible and inclusive structures. [LSIS national development officer]

Some of the more creative ideas about learner voice were thought by interviewees to be eminently transferable. For example, tutorial systems and curriculum development sometimes included considerations of 'voice':

Went to Gateshead College and spoke to the Head of teaching and learning. It was all about developing resilience in learners and giving them voice [so that] when they leave college they have got the skills to cope in life. I think it could be part of the curriculum... [But this is] not going to be helped by the decimation of the tutorial process. [LSIS national development officer]

Probably the most common system in place from a management perspective is simply 'talking to learners'. Managers generally regard this as an essential, necessary condition:

Members of the leadership team have occasions, when we visit the canteen, [when] we just sit down and interrupt people's lunches ... and chat to them about what they feel about the course and what they feel about the college. It is in my view the most successful method we use ... People are always very willing to talk to us. [College vice principal]

Other systems for getting input from, and feedback to, learners include the course rep system. One FE college alone has 28,000 learners and 651 course reps. This same college has evolved to include 'super reps' who may speak for, say, twelve course reps covering a curriculum area. Course reps may attend a termly curriculum meeting to give their views and might go to the Student Liaison Committee that has the directorate present but is chaired by a governor and learner rep together. Such a model is not uncommon and runs in parallel with the student union, which has elected learners and might meet with the student council made up of course reps. The Governing Body for each college is likely to have two students on it – usually elected (e.g. the president of the students' union or the chair of the Student Liaison Committee). They are voting members. Such a model is particularly well used in adult education colleges where learners are often on many other significant committees too – including appointments committees, course validation committees and self-assessment report validation days. Training and support for course reps is a large task and some colleges put a great deal of effort into supporting the course rep system during the tutorial program.

For learners for whom English is not their first language, who are often taking lower level courses, the course representative system is sometimes supported by an ESOL handbook, as at Leicester College. For those with cognitive impairment, the handbook communicates through ideograms and pictures:

The information is given across where they understand so they have pictures there, so pictures of the curriculum area manager ... [and] boxes where they can write and say what their views are. [College Super rep]

A key element, popular in UK colleges, is the 'You said, we did' type of statement from managers, which was mentioned earlier. These statements are often displayed publicly as posters and put online so that learners' suggestions and requests made through the course rep system are made visible to all, as are the actions undertaken in response by the college. Speed of response, of course, can be variable:

'We did' is a much used process, but I think even within that there is often things like speed of response and their communication to them is whether to provide a social media or internet... feeding back to the course rep system ... there's accessibility and lack of feedback and the number of students.[LSIS national development officer]

One imaginative approach, developed at Cornwall College, is called 'Text Joe'. The president of the students' union suggested that the college invest in texting ...

...so that every single learner in the college can text any concern about anything to do with anything, whether it is teaching, learning or car parking... and the college management commitment is that they will be dealt with within the week... that they will get an automatic text back saying we are looking at this and will get back to you. You will get a response within three days from Joe. [LSIS national development officer]

Although 'Text Joe' had just started, the union president commented, 'Every learner is a class rep, everybody has this impact, it doesn't matter where they are coming from'<sup>13</sup>. The impact on learners who are living in rural areas or attending part-time has yet to be evaluated, but clearly there are opportunities for urgent and responsive feedback – provided the workload can be managed. Other forms in which electronic media can enable input and feedback are being developed in a number of places – in work-based learning providers for example, and for those with complex cognitive impairments. For instance, in Scotland a program using 'talking mats'<sup>14</sup> has evolved for students with the most severe communication difficulties:

...most classes would have a student rep and that would feed into the Student Association or Student Guild or whatever it is called in that particular college, and there would be various officers within that guild and they would receive various training... So what we have done with talking mats is we have actually put together 6 sets of symbols, not more than about seventeen in each set ... one to review learning, another one to review the College program and the other one to consider areas of responsibility that the students might wish to take. So these are the ones we are looking at just now. Everybody has been given the training before this and taken these sets away and they are using them with a student or a group of students and filming this and then you photograph the mat at the end which would hopefully show the areas with the symbols of what the students are finding as positive or going well or is good ... or areas they are not sure about and the areas that are not going so well. The great thing about the mats is when you go through the mats it is not just based on the conversation because you can look at the conversation because it is based on the mat ... so when you have finished having the discussion you then go and look at the placements within the mat and if there is a particular problem or an area that needs further development or discussion you could do a sub-mat to that ... now we haven't gone into that but it

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<sup>13</sup> Comment from an LSIS national development officer.

<sup>14</sup> [www.talkingmats.com](http://www.talkingmats.com)

means there might be another area that you might want to explore ... but it also means that you can look again at what you decided earlier on and move any of the cards into a different position. When everything is out and you have got blank cards as we did last week then that is an issue for the student ... and then you take a photograph of the mat and you have got a record of that discussion of that particular topic and that particular mat. [Scotland's Colleges national development officer]

The attractiveness of such an electronic medium to learners is that it assists those with poor concentration or those for whom literacy is a problem. The record of discussion is visual. However, it has not yet been evaluated and the cost would need to be taken into account.

Many providers are rapidly developing electronic social networking sites. A sophisticated web site for the City Literary Institute, London ('the City Lit'), incorporates a prospectus that is changing daily, complete with enrolment that can take place at any time and a 'trip advisor' system for displaying comments from learners that are publicly visible<sup>15</sup>. In this way, learners can offer immediate feedback on every course. The site is monitored each day. The risk to reputation is one that City Lit is pleased to take:

A lot of the staff felt that you will only get people who want to rant and you won't get people who had a good time go on it, but actually it is the complete opposite, actually most people want to be helpful and constructive... [City Lit, administrator]

Some rather simpler approaches have been tried elsewhere. For example, volunteers are brought in to support the voices of some learners in Norway's voluntary sector. In adult education, Norwegians have worked across Scandinavia to enhance learner voice in information, advice and guidance work<sup>16</sup>. A comment from the Norwegian Government's VOX indicates the situation most people would like see, which is a long way from where UK colleges find themselves. We were advised by a Norwegian official:

But looking at it with foreign eyes ... what is important for your study is to say that listening to learners is a little bit in the general attitude of Norwegians and they don't notice it, but they do listen to their users and they do listen much more than the rest of the world ... The learner knows he can come up and say 'this doesn't work for me' in a way that would not work in other countries. So a lot of listening is done without structures and without the teachers and the users noticing that it is going on. It is just there. [Coordinator of VOX, Norway]

Several respondents cited the usefulness of volunteers in promoting learner voice. For example, in Ireland the national adult literacy student committee suggested that having an experienced learner waiting at the door during enrolment evenings might encourage those they knew of who came to the door, but could not find the courage to enter, to go through with their enrolment.

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<sup>15</sup> <http://www.citylit.ac.uk/>

<sup>16</sup> Guðbjörg Vilhjálmsdóttir, A. Dofradóttir & G. Kjartansdóttir et al. (2011) 'Voice of users: Promoting quality of guidance for adults in the Nordic countries' submitted to the Nordic Network for Adult Learning  
[http://www.nordvux.net/download/6821/voice\\_of\\_users.pdf](http://www.nordvux.net/download/6821/voice_of_users.pdf)



### *Challenges for work-based learning providers*

Respondents offered several specific comments on work-based learning providers and the challenges they face. Ofsted suggested that the different culture in work-based learning compared with college-based learning has meant that development of learner voice had not progressed in the same way in worksites. Some work-based trainers only see their learners once every two weeks because they are out on placement:

I emailed a few [training providers] yesterday morning to ask them to give me some examples about how they used their ...learners' voice to push forward policy in their organization... I think I sent about four emails and two came back to me saying "We don't actually do this. We need to think how we do this" and one of them came back to me this morning saying, 'We have had a meeting after your email and what we will do is put some learner counsellors together but it will be a real struggle because we only see the learners every two weeks. So I think the challenge is to support them in ways to do that. [LSIS national development officer]

This is a situation recognized by the national inspectorate in England:

- ...We try on all our inspections to actually involve learners and ask about learner representatives, but I find that in workplace learning... it is much more difficult for them because people are only part-time with the training provider and therefore that creates a problem for them, [Ofsted national inspector]
- ...the area where it hasn't necessarily evolved as much is the workplace learning areas because it isn't that kind of set up... apart from questionnaires and so on, if you try to get them to think and do things like forums and to get representatives involved they...have an issue about timing, about location, about numbers...I always find it easier to talk to people in workplace learning about what they are saying about involvement in improvement, not decision-making... [Ofsted national inspector]

There may be something in this view that the involvement of learners in decision-making is not part of the official agenda, whereas involvement in quality improvement might be. If trainees are seen as 'employees' rather than customers or students, this might explain the difference between the extent of learner voice in workplace settings compared with college settings. The part-time nature of the work cannot be the problem, given that some of the most successful organizations developing learner voice strategies are almost all part-time – the City Lit or WEA or Morley College for example. It has something to do with workplaces being 'a different culture', which might be that of employment itself. In addition there is the problem of individualization:

Providers will tell you that part of the review process [in the workplace] with their assessor, their key contact person, is that on an individual basis they will be asking for feedback and that's part of their feedback process. But then that becomes difficult if the learner is finding it difficult and feels that the assessor isn't out that often etc... It is not a confidential system; it is a system that can be influenced by the fact that I am sitting next to my assessor and I am unlikely to say to my assessor that, 'I don't like this'. [Ofsted national inspector]

Nevertheless, some systems that promote learner voice in workplace learning have been developed. These include using a neutral person to collate views from different trainees in a central training centre. Electronic systems, 'like suggestion feedback boxes...suggestion box', are typically used. The judgement nationally is that things are improving in England:

I see people in workplace learning settings involving their learners in evaluation of what they receive, which is the training ... those are starting to become more commonplace. [Ofsted national inspector]

### **Some examples of learner voice initiatives in practice in the UK**

Learner voice, particularly in the UK, has been recognized and applied in several ways through practical initiatives, both directly and indirectly. These include learner voice awards, citizenship initiatives, learning and skills policies, resources for learner voice development, learner surveys and advice, and guidance for teachers, as briefly reviewed below.

#### *Learner Voice Awards*

For three years the Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS, 2012) has been running England-wide learner voice awards for institutions in the FE (Further Education) sector. Called the 'Leading the Learner Voice Awards', they are a joint partnership between LSIS and the National Union of Students, although funded by LSIS. LSIS is a sector-owned voluntary organization which until recently was a government agency reporting to the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS). These awards celebrate innovation, effort and action through individual and organizational achievement and success. The various award categories reflect the different leadership roles that are vital to ensuring learners' views are actively collected, listened to and acted upon. The awards are very popular. Winners of the categories, along with others who are highly commended, receive awards. The categories are:

- Learner Practitioner of the year
- Leading Learner of the year
- Student Governor of the year
- Principal or Senior Leader of the year
- Outstanding Contribution to the Leadership of Learners
- Social Cohesion and Civic Participation
- Health and Wellbeing
- Most Improved Provider of the year: Further Education College
- Most Improved Provider of the year
- Provider of the year.

These initiatives provide examples of how learner voice has been used to celebrate and improve learning.

#### *Citizenship initiatives*

Closely related to learner voice is the concept of citizenship. The Citizenship initiatives program, which started under the New Labour Government in 1994 in

the UK, ended under the Coalition Government in 2011. A web site contains resources, relevant news and information, and details of support provided for post-16 citizenship (see <http://www.excellencegateway.org.uk/node/15948>, Accessed 27 March 2012) is available from the Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS). The Post-16 Citizenship Support Programme ended in August 2011. Particularly relevant to the current study is the LSIS (Learning and Skills Improvement Service) citizenship training pack *Listening to Learners?* (LSIS, 2009).

### *Learning and skills policies*

*The further education and skills system reform plan: Building a world class skills* (BIS, 2011c) sets out the ways in which the UK Coalition Government wishes education and training providers to take forward its policies. They include letting providers have more responsibility for their own destiny.

### *Resources for 'learner voice' development*

The Learner Involvement Strategy was developed as a major policy by the previous UK New Labour Government but only applied as a national strategy in England (the other three countries, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, manage their own education policies and are committed to learner involvement in different ways and to different degrees). The resources include information on Recognising and Reporting Progress and Achievement (RARPA: see LSIS, 2012). This is seen as a means to ensure that educational provision that is not accredited is just as rigorously monitored in relation to success and outcomes and accredited provision.

Many of the resources needed to implement the learner voice strategies described can be found on the Excellence Gateway (2012a) maintained by LSIS. There are over 100 resources at this web site. For example, 'Developing the Expert Learner' (compared with 'the expert patient' in health service terms) has many resources that are very well laid out on the web site, although the site is only accessible once registration has been achieved. The Excellence Gateway (2012c) also contains most of the recent historical resources such as the Learner Engagement Strategy advice and work undertaken at national level in the UK.

The largest organization for learners in the UK is the National Union of Students (NUS), with many further education providers having a student union branch, though not all. The NUS (2012) recognizes that it is largely a 'young' organization but, contrary to public belief, it is about more than higher education and has a dedicated FE team and a FE vice-president is elected each year.

The oldest intermediary body in England and Wales with learners at the heart of its purpose is the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE). For information about their learner voice work, see NIACE (2012a). NIACE managed the only regional learner panel in Humberside (NIACE, 2012b). The National Learner Panel was wound up at the end of the previous New Labour Government.

Perhaps the most significant recent publication in relation to disadvantaged learners has described the work done by LSIS on learner voice in relation to adults with profound and complex learning difficulties (LSIS, 2011). An example of a summary report for 2009/10 can be seen at BIS (2011d). It is worth noting that all learners in the publicly funded FE system are asked key questions about their experience of teaching and learning.

### *Learner Surveys*

A number of BIS reports cover results from the England learner satisfaction surveys (See: BIS, 2011a). In 2011 a survey of learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities was carried out (BIS, 2011b), partly to inform government strategy in relation to this group of learners in further education.

### *Advice and guidance to teachers*

Two of the inspectorates in the UK offer guidance on their website in relation to learner voice. Estyn (2010), in regard to the inspectorate for Wales, provides supplementary guidance to teachers about listening to learners in a Welsh further education college. These include self-assessment manuals for adult and community learning and further education. Ofsted (2012), the inspectorate for England, offers several good practice examples of learner voice, such as an example of developing a good students' union in a further education college. Advice and guidance about learner voice for teachers and providers has also been effective in several parts of Scandinavia (Vilhjálmssdóttir et al., 2011).

### *Australia lags behind in learner voice developments*

Our research in the UK, Ireland and Norway, although rushed and relatively small in scale, makes it abundantly clear that Australia is a long way behind these countries in developing policies and practices of inclusive education, student engagement and participation, and learner voice generally. If there is to be a serious policy emphasis on developing learner voice in Australian VET it would seem sensible that those who are charged with providing policy advice on these issues and/or with developing policies to acknowledge, promote and act upon learner voice should urgently investigate what is going on in those systems that are at the forefront of such policies and commitment. We would particularly recommend such personnel visit England and Norway to see learner voice policies and developments in action.

## **FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS RELEVANT TO THE PROJECT REQUIREMENTS**

In the following, main section of this report, our key findings are mapped against the ten project requirements and are accompanied by a discussion based on the evidence derived from the literature and our interviews. The detailed accounts of the interviews conducted in Australia and Europe that support these findings are provided in Appendices 1 and 2. The scope and limitations of our research are summarised in Appendix 3.

Where appropriate, we have made 22 specific recommendations related to the project requirements, which, if implemented, we believe will lead to improvement in the ways in which the voices of learners are utilized to contribute to quality improvements in VET. We make three additional recommendations in the brief, final section of our report. All 25 recommendations are listed after the Executive Summary on the front of this report. We stress that these recommendations, although informed also by our research in the UK, Ireland and Norway, are intended to contribute specifically to the improvement of education and training in the VET sector in Australia.

### **1. Current obligations for providers under the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF)**

Our research brief required us to undertake:

... a critical analysis of the current obligations, processes and mechanisms under the AQTF (Australian Qualifications Framework) and other provider legislation for gathering and acting on feedback from learners, particularly disadvantaged learners in VET and ACE.

The project work plan specifically required that consideration being given to:

- identifying the current obligation for providers under the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF)
- identifying relevant legislation and current obligations for providers.

Both of these issues are broad and complex, as discussed in detail in this section.

### **Policy and legislation**

There appears to have been no systematic review of legislation that relates to vocational education and training since the publication in 1999 of *Law and policy in vocational education and training: A contemporary survey* (Mitchell, Robertson & Shorten, 1999). Although this text was not concerned directly with issues related to learner voice, it covered in some detail the full range of legislation, policies and obligations to which VET providers are required to be responsive and which applied at the time. These include Commonwealth legislation, particularly laws related to social security and welfare, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People, and laws that incorporate international conventions and obligations such as the *Commonwealth Racial Discrimination Act 1975*, *Sex Discrimination Act 1984*, and the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992*.

There is also a range of state legislation, including laws related to Ombudsman functions, Freedom of Information, privacy, audit legislation, fair trading laws and Company law. Contract law, industrial relations legislation, and Occupational Health and Safety (OH&S) requirements are also important to the operations of VET providers. Specific OH&S requirements may be particularly important depending on the scope of operations of a particular provider. For instance, there are laws related to trades involving the handling of liquor or, in an example cited by Mitchell, Robertson and Shorten (1999), specific health legislation that applies to the establishment and operation of veterinary surgeries.

Clearly, while most of these laws are not directly related to the issue of learner voice, all of them may have some application to the health, wellbeing and educational experience of students and their relationship with VET providers. A number are directly related to issues of fairness, equity and discrimination, which are directly related to the brief for this project. Anti-discrimination is particularly reflected in Commonwealth legislation, the most significant of which are the:

- *Commonwealth Racial Discrimination Act 1975*
- *Commonwealth Sex Discrimination Act 1984*
- *Commonwealth Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Act 1986*
- *Commonwealth Disability Discrimination Act 1992*
- *Commonwealth Age Discrimination Act 2004.*

There is also relevant State legislation such as the Western Australian *Equal Opportunity Act 1989*. The full range of such legislation can be obtained from the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) website (<http://www.hreoc.gov.au>, accessed 27 March 2012)

At a general level, Commonwealth and State policy and legislation that has directly targeted VET operations since the launch of the National Training Reform Agenda in the late 1980s is generally referred to as vocational education and training legislation. This is summarized at the [www.training.com.au](http://www.training.com.au) website as follows:

Fundamental to the VET system are Australian laws such as:

- The *Skilling Australia's Workforce Act 2005*. This is the vehicle for the Government's new National Training Arrangements for the funding period 1 July 2005 - 31 December 2008 and provides the authority to appropriate some \$4.4 billion in grants to States and Territories over the funding period 2005-2008. A key feature of the *Skilling Australia's Workforce Act* is the strengthening of the funding framework, which links funding for the States and Territories to a range of conditions and targets for training outcomes;
- the *Skilling Australia's Workforce (Repeal and Transitional Provisions) Act 2005*. This legislation repeals the *Australian National Training Authority Act 1992* and the *Vocational Education and Training Funding Act 1992*. This Act also provides for the transitional arrangements for the transfer of functions and responsibilities from ANTA to the Department of Education, Science and Training, including arrangements for the transfer of assets, liabilities and custody of records to the Commonwealth;
- the *Workplace Relations Act 1996*. This Act provides for awards, certified agreements and Australian Workplace Agreements.  
(<http://www.training.com.au>, accessed 27 March 2012)

Until very recently, VET legislation has not placed great priority on issues of learner voice or equity. Indeed, VET requirements over the past three decades would seem to have been driven mainly by a strong policy agenda directed at improving the international competitiveness of the Australian economy through developing a national vocational education and training system that is responsive to labour market needs. Therefore, it can be said that, while the recent emphasis in Commonwealth VET policy on national VET regulation reflects a constant trend over the last three decades, the renewed emphasis on equity, redress of disadvantage and social inclusion in VET, and thinking about such equity issues in relation to learner voice, comes as something of a surprise, perhaps a welcome surprise, to many participants within the VET system.

The priority now being given to equity and student engagement is most readily apparent in the formation of the National VET Equity Advisory Council (NVEAC) to provide advice to the Ministerial Council for Tertiary Education and Employment (MCTEE) on the issues and barriers that affect the access, participation and outcomes of students from disadvantaged groups<sup>17</sup>. The link between these issues and learner voice has been strongly articulated by NVEAC since its inception (NVEAC, 2011). The Advisory Council is therefore committed to reforms that will improve the social and educational outcomes of disadvantaged students. The priority given to equity and learner engagement is linked to the economic competitiveness agenda through an emphasis on increasing workforce participation and productivity in Australia. This policy framing is reinforced by advice to the Federal government from Skills Australia that national economic growth may be constrained in future due to skills shortages.

The strong message from Skills Australia is that it is necessary to both 'increase' the pool of skills available for workplace participation and to 'deepen' the available workplace skills in order to lift productivity (Skills Australia, 2010). The continual reinforcement of the message that VET reforms are related to the promotion of national economic growth, while obviously reasonable in themselves, may have had the unintended consequence of reinforcing concerns with efficiency and productivity at the expense of genuine considerations about social and educational equity and the importance of engaging with learners.

It would be extremely unfortunate if the current work that is being done to reinforce equity concerns and to acknowledge and respond to learner voice were to be limited to human capital considerations instead of addressing the social and moral purpose of the education system in promoting equality of opportunity and social justice concerns alongside the promotion of high levels of student involvement and engagement in their education and training. Hence the current interest in learner voice issues which have enormous potential to enhance the quality of student participation and contribute to educational improvement.

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<sup>17</sup> From November 2011, the Standing Council on Tertiary Education, Skills and Employment (SCOTESE) replaced the Ministerial Council for Tertiary Education and Employment (MCTEE).

There is also a range of other Commonwealth government policies which address issues of access and equity and which are therefore relevant to the operations of VET providers, particularly in relation to addressing disadvantage and empowering students through acknowledging the importance of learners' voices. Although the legislative requirements that follow from such policies are not always clear, they add significantly to the general climate of expectations and obligations of the VET sector.

It is important to acknowledge that advocacy of 'voice' is also occurring in areas beyond education and training in Australia and comparatively well advanced in some other sectors. The Australian national commissions on mental health, for example, have strongly promoted 'voice' issues. Australia was almost the first place in the world to link mental ill health and adult education in a positive and intelligent way in *Human rights and mental illness: Report of the national inquiry into the human rights of people with mental illness* (Australian Government Publishing Service, 1993, Chapter 13). This major report specifically identified the significant potential of engagement in education for adults with mental health difficulties.

The most relevant of recent equity policies are summarized on the Western Australian VETInfonet website ([www.vetinfonet.det.wa.edu.au](http://www.vetinfonet.det.wa.edu.au), Accessed 27 March 2012). It is notable that these tend to promote issues of collaboration, participation and engagement, although the concept of 'voice' is not used specifically:

- *Shaping Our Future: National Strategy for vocational education and training 2004-2010*, developed by the Australian National Training Authority, outlines the objectives and strategies for VET until 2010. It states that RTOs are expected to continue to take active measures to reduce barriers to learning and achieving in VET.
- *Closing the Gap - Indigenous Employment Program*. The Indigenous Employment Program (IEP) aims to increase Indigenous Australia employment outcomes and participation in economic activities, by supporting employers and Indigenous Australians to develop sustainable employment/business opportunities, take up training or employment and developing strategies that support local and regional economic growth.
- *Disability (Access to Premises - Building) Standards*. The Premises Standards will commence operation on 1 May 2011. The Disability (Access to Premises - Buildings) Standards will achieve more consistent, systemic and widespread improvements in non-discriminatory access for people with a disability to publicly accessible buildings.
- *The 2008 Ministerial Declaration on Adult and Community Education (ACE)* provides a national policy framework that supports collaborative approach to ACE. This Declaration acknowledges ACE as a significant contributor to education and training provision and demonstrates the commitment of the Commonwealth, State and Territory Ministers to work collaboratively to maximise positive outcomes from this sector in Australia.
- *A National Disability Strategy (NDS)* is currently being developed. The Strategy will provide a national framework to drive future reforms in the disability service system and, importantly, mainstream systems for people with a disability, their families and carers.



## National VET Regulation

The current round of national cooperation in VET was flagged in 2006 by the agreement of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) to a new national reform agenda (NRA) which emphasized the development of Australia's human capital, particularly through education and skills development. By 2008 COAG had agreed to a new intergovernmental agreement on Federal Financial Relations (Inter Governmental Agreement: IGA) that incorporated six national agreements. Four of these are directly related to the renewed commitment to addressing disadvantage through increased educational and workplace participation, productivity and social inclusion.

These agreements are summarized by Deloitte Access Economics (2011, p.5) as follows:

- The objective of the *National Education Agreement* is to ensure that all Australian school students acquire the skills and knowledge to effectively participate in the workforce and the broader community. Significantly, the Agreement recognises the importance of education in promoting social inclusion and reducing the educational disadvantage experienced by some children, especially Indigenous children. It also highlights the need to ensure successful transitions to work and further study (such as VET). One of the specific targets within the Agreement is to halve the gap for Indigenous students in reading, writing and numeracy within a decade.
- The *National Indigenous Reform Agreement* (Closing the Gap) is geared towards addressing social inclusion and 'closing the gap' in Indigenous disadvantage. The Agreement lists a number of objectives, including closing the life expectancy gap within a generation. In terms of education and workforce participation, targets include halving the gap for Indigenous students in Year 12 (or equivalent) attainment rates by 2020 and halving the gap in employment outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians within a decade.
- The *National Agreement for Skills and Workforce Development* is aimed at boosting workforce participation by ensuring that all Australians have the opportunity to develop skills or receive training that will enable more effective involvement in the labour market. The Agreement recognises the importance of helping individuals overcome systemic barriers to education, training and employment and encouraging them to gain and use new skills. The Agreement also includes specific VET targets, such as halving the proportion of Australians aged 20 to 64 years without qualifications at Certificate III level by 2020, and doubling the number of higher qualification completions by 2020.
- A *National Partnership Agreement on Productivity Places Program*, part of the Federal Government's Skilling Australia for the Future initiative, is also targeted towards reducing skills shortages and increasing workplace productivity. The purpose of this Partnership Agreement is to help achieve the outcomes specified in the National Agreement for Skills and Workforce Development. The Productivity Places Program offers VET places to job seekers and existing workers in skills shortage areas.

The references to increasing participation in skills development and training are consistent with the Commonwealth's commitment to transforming Australia's high education system which, in keeping with the recommendations of the

*Review of Australian Higher Education: Final Report* (Bradley Review) (Australian Government, 2008), has committed funding to universities to encourage them to increase the participation and completion rates of students of low socioeconomic background, typically referred to in policy documents as 'low SES students' (Socio-Economic Status). The specific target for universities, for example, is that 20 per cent of higher education undergraduate enrolments will be students of low SES backgrounds by 2020. Targets have also been set for participation in vocational education and training. These are specified in the *National Agreement for Skills and Workforce Development* as reducing by half the proportion of Australians aged 20 to 64 years without qualifications at Certificate III level or higher by 2020, and doubling the number of higher qualification completions by 2020.

The point we want to emphasize is that, in relation to university enrolments, the university funding mechanism is tightly aligned with the policy agenda through the commitment of targeted Higher Education Participation Project (HEPP) funds to enable the foreshadowed increased participation in higher education. That is, targeted funding directly supports the policy intention. However, no equivalent Commonwealth funding, specifically targeted at supporting the engagement of low SES students in vocational education and training, has so far been forthcoming.

One of the conclusions of this review of VET policy and legislation is that a similar alignment of targeted funding with the policy agenda is necessary if policies of greater inclusion and more successful outcomes of disadvantaged students are to be realized and the ambitious targets met. However, as NCEAC (2011) has realized and made clear, once such students have managed to make their way into the VET sector, which they are likely to experience as somewhat unfamiliar and 'foreign', special attention needs to be directed at encouraging their engagement with learning. This can be done, in part, by encouraging and listening to their voices.

### ***Recommendation 1***

- *That in order to meet the ambitious targets that have been set for increased equity participation in Vocational Education and Training (VET), it is imperative that specific, targeted funds are made available to support the vocational education and training of students who are disadvantaged in various ways. Although the States might be requested to contribute to such funding, the main responsibility should be taken by the Commonwealth as part of its social inclusion agenda and policy direction of establishing a national vocational education and training system.*

In a further significant step, in 2009 COAG agreed to establish an independent Commonwealth statutory authority as the national regulator of the VET sector. This has entailed, in addition to the Commonwealth's exercise of its traditional constitutional powers in the Australian Territories, a voluntary referral of the relevant powers of the State governments to the Commonwealth, with the exceptions of the Victorian and Western Australian governments. This has meant

that, once the national regulator commenced operating in July 2011, it has had responsibility for the registration of VET providers operating in States or Territories other than Victoria or Western Australia, and for those offering courses to international students. Providers who operate only in Victoria and/or Western Australia, and only offer courses to domestic students, are still regulated by their State regulation bodies. However, both the Victorian and Western Australian governments have agreed that they will enact legislation that replicates the requirements of the Commonwealth legislation for the purposes of VET provider registration.

## **Registration of VET providers**

VET providers must comply with various Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF) requirements (see: [www.training.com.au](http://www.training.com.au)). The registration requirements, spelled out in the *Essential Conditions and Standards for Continuing Registration* (AQTF, 2010a), are the most obvious forms of regulation with which they are obliged to comply. All institutions must be accredited and registered in order to commence operation and, once registered, an audit is usually conducted within the first year of operation. After that, compliance can be audited at any time and the provider *must* be audited against the conditions and standards when applying for re-registration every five years.

Auditing outside of that conducted for initial or continuing registration, however, is conducted according to principles of risk analysis and usually occurs only if there has been some complaint or obvious irregularity, change in the RTO's scope of offerings, or substantial change in the management or nature of the organization. As pointed out on the ASQA (Australian Skills Quality Authority) fact sheet related to the audit process:

Applicant organisations and RTOs that are complying with the conditions and standards of the *VET Quality Framework* can expect a low level of regulatory intervention, while those displaying a high risk of not complying can expect increased scrutiny from ASQA auditors' (ASQA, 2012).

All providers must adhere to the Standards and Conditions of registration. Two of the standards relate particularly to voice/equity issues, as does one of the conditions, Condition 3. But the standards, in our view on the evidence, are quite bald and tend to be comprised of declaratory 'should' statements without any explication or detail. We would agree with Brown and North (2009, p.12) that this paucity of detail is apparent in relation to 'statutory requirements of VET providers as they relate to particular equity groups'. Certainly, as we discuss below, there is a lack of clarity about what compliance with Condition 3 would actually entail. There are explanatory notes for the standards and conditions, and the *AQTF Users' Guide to the Essential Conditions and Standards for Continuing Registration* (AQTF, 2010c), which includes FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions).

However there is very little that is helpful to providers in dealing with equity/voice issues. For instance, there is almost no guidance or advice or specification about matters relevant to equity considerations, such as special entry requirements for disadvantaged learners, the nature and amount of

learning support required, or adaptation of infrastructure and provision of resources that might meet the needs of particular equity groups.

Moreover, Brown and North (2009, p.14), writing in 2009, argue that:

... importantly, the level of detail pertaining to statutory requirements has become less explicit and given less prominence in the revised AQTF 2007 than was previously the case in the former regulatory document, *Standards for Registered Training Organisations* established by the Australian National Training Authority in 2001 (ANTA, 2001).

Brown and North (2010) point out that the previous Standards document was much more explicit in identifying the areas of legislation, including equity legislation, with which RTOs were required to comply. They suggest that the NCVER refer to the New South Wales *Charter for Equity in Education* (NSW Government (1996) in search for somewhat stronger and more specific wording.

The current AQTF 2011 version, like the AQTF 2007 version, does not mention specific equity groups within its set of standards and conditions, although it does refer to providers being required to meet the individual needs of learners in general. Given NVEAC's nomination of 'listening to the voice of the learner when designing the VET' as one of its six areas of reform intended to ensure an 'embedded approach to equity ... [in] ... redesigning the system to meet the diverse needs of learners experiencing disadvantage' (NVEAC 2011, p.15), we would suggest that wording in relation to disadvantage and equity, as well as learner voice, needs to be strengthened in the standards and conditions.

In attempting to demonstrate their compliance, RTOs, according to Brown and North (2009), typically point to the various policies and procedures that they have in place or are developing, which are intended to be relevant to the particular requirements for registration. These authors point out that there can be a 'myriad' of such policies and procedures, and that, although the wording invariably seems to indicate that the institution is dealing appropriately with the particular requirements, it is not necessarily easy to tell whether these policies and procedures are largely 'symbolic' rather than 'real' policies or 'policies-in-use'.

The national VET regulator, the *Australian Skills Quality Authority* (ASQA), came into operation in April 2011 with the registration of the *National Vocational Education and Training Regulator Act 2011*. There has also been agreement within COAG to establish a National Skills Standards Council (NSSC) to advise the Standing Council on Tertiary Education, Skills and Employment (SCOTese) on developing standards for the regulation and registration of VET qualifications and providers. It is further anticipated that, from 2013, there will be a single national regulator that will cover both the VET and higher education sectors (TVET Australia, 2010).

The *Australian Quality Training Framework* (AQTF) is the current national set of standards that is intended to assure nationally consistent, high-quality training and assessment services for the clients of Australia's vocational education and training system. New *Essential Conditions and Standards for Continuing*

*Registration of Training Organisations* (AQTF, 2010a) and *Essential Conditions and Standards for Initial Registration of Training Organisations* (AQTF, 2010b) were approved by MCTEE and came into effect from 1 July 2010. As we foreshadowed earlier, and will go on to discuss below, one of the standards and one of the conditions are directly related to issues of equity and learner voice.

According to the Productivity Commission's research report, *Vocational Education and Training Workforce* (Productivity Commission, 2011, p.76):

Forms of VET regulation seeking to ensure quality of VET products include the Australian Qualifications Framework and the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF), with current VET regulatory bodies including the National Quality Council and the State and Territory regulators. Regulation of the sector is overseen by the Ministerial Council for Tertiary Education and Employment (MCTEE).

ASQA will undertake its regulatory role by assessing relevant organisations against the conditions of registration found in the *National Vocational Education and Training Regulator Act 2011*. This sets out the core conditions of registration, one of which is that VET providers must comply with the requirements set out in the new *VET Quality Framework* that comprises:

- Standards for NVR Registered Training Organisations: these specify the standards and conditions required for the initial for continuing registration of a VET provider (Part 2 of the Standards in the case of initial registration and Part 3 in the case of renewal of registration).
- Fit and Proper Person Requirements: these are designed to ensure that key registered training organisation (RTO) personnel have the characteristics and principles necessary to ensure the delivery of high-quality services and outcomes for VET graduates.
- Financial Viability Risk Assessment Requirements: these are intended to ensure that an applicant or RTO has the necessary financial resources to operate as an ongoing concern and deliver quality training and/or assessment services throughout the registration period.
- Data Provision Requirements: these set out the requirements for applicants and registered training organisations (RTOs) to capture and provide to ASQA data that relate to registration and performance requirements, including quality indicated data and information derived from the Australian Vocational Education and Training Management of Information Statistical Standard (AVETMISS). AVETMISS is intended to ensure that is consistent and accurate national reporting of VET information about students, their courses, units of activity and the qualifications reported.
- Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF): this is a national policy through which the qualifications from each education and training sector are incorporated into a single comprehensive national qualifications framework.

As can be seen from the *VET Quality Framework*, the conditions of registration tend to emphasize issues of management and financial responsibility, and compliance with the specified reporting and auditing mechanisms. The most important obligation on any VET provider, however, as we emphasized at the beginning of this section, is that it must satisfy the requirements for initial and continuing registration. Unless a VET provider is registered and accredited with ASQA (or with the state registering body in the case of providers in Victoria and Western Australia) they are not permitted to operate. It is within the wording of

the Standards for NVR (National VET Regulator) that the most explicit legislated obligations for Registered Training Organisations in relation to disadvantaged students and, to a lesser extent, student voice, are located. In the following section, the discussion draws upon the 2010 *AQTF Essential Conditions and Standards for Continuing Registration of Training Organisations* as specified in Part 2, Division 1, Sections 21-30 of the *National Vocational Education and Training Regulator Act 2011*. We use the requirements for continuing registration to avoid repetition because they are in most respects identical to the requirements for initial registration.

### **Conditions and standards for registration**

The most important resources for RTOs to use in coming to grips with requirements for registration are the 2010 *AQTF Users' Guide to the Essential Conditions and Standards for Continuing Registration* (2010c) (referred to below as the *Users' Guide* or simply the *Guide*) or the equivalent *Guide* for initial registration. Importantly, although the *Users' Guide* state that it is intended 'to help RTOs interpret and apply' (p.2) the AQTF essential conditions and standards, and 'to help RTOs manage and continuously improve their training and assessment outcomes in order to meet the needs of industry and learners' (p.2), the *Users' Guide* also makes it clear that it 'does not prescribe how an RTO should manage its operations, nor does it mandate the form that evidence used in an audit must take' (p.2). The onus is therefore on RTOs to interpret the requirements of the legislation and decide upon the nature of evidence that they will use to demonstrate compliance with the mandated requirements.

The AQTF *Essential Conditions and Standards* (for both initial and continuing registration) consist of nine Conditions of Registration that form an RTO's contractual agreement with the registering body, AQSA. Of these, *Condition of Registration 3 – Compliance with Legislation* is the most relevant to this review of legislation that is related to equity, disadvantage and student voice.

*Condition of Registration 3 – Compliance with Legislation* states that 'The RTO must comply with relevant Commonwealth, State or Territory legislation and regulatory requirements that are relevant to its operations and its scope of registration. It ensures that its staff and clients are fully informed of these requirements that affect their duties or participation in vocational education and training' (AQTF, 2010a, p.10).

The wording of the *Users' Guide* makes it clear that, in order to satisfy this Condition, the RTO must, firstly, systematically identify the legislation that is relevant to its operations, scope and size; then ensure that staff are informed about such legislation and are able to act in keeping with the legislation; and also ensure that clients of the RTO are provided with information about relevant legislation and their related rights and responsibilities.

It is noticeable that, in the final point above, the term 'client' is used but there is no specific mention of learners or students, although both these terms are used reasonably often in other places throughout the *Users' Guide*. The term, 'clients,'

is presumably intended to include students. However it could be argued that the needs and interests of students, and the nature of their relationship with the institution are significantly different from those of all other 'clients'. From this point of view, students should always be regarded as a separate category by virtue of that special relationship. Moreover, VET providers are increasingly expected to take into account specific consideration of equity and learner voice issues in relation to the nature and quality of student engagement. This is a point to which we shall return later.

In relation to the kind of evidence that would indicate 'adherence' to Condition 3, the *Users' Guide* does make reference to learners/students at two points:

- Records of participation by learners in orientation programs that include information on relevant legislation and related rights and responsibilities
- Information provided to students that describes how legislation affects their participation in education and training (AQTF, 2010c, p.10).

A major concern is that this wording does not provide sufficiently adequate or detailed information to enable VET providers to readily comply with this Condition of Registration. Moreover, it is not clear how auditors would make a reasoned judgment as to whether the obligatory compliance has been demonstrated. The *Audit Handbook* emphasizes that ...

... it is up to each RTO to determine how it meets the [AQTF essential conditions and standards] and how it can best demonstrate the outcomes being achieved for clients in the manner best suited to its unique business environment (AQTF, 2010d, p.5).

The problem here seems to be that there is confusion and a lack of clarity all round about the Condition requirements. Bateman and Dyson (2009), in their *Review of access and equity requirements for RTOs under the AQTF and associated legislation*, conclude that 'there are no clear expectations [of RTOs] regarding specifically what access and equity legislation should be implemented' (p.15), and some 'uncertainty about registering body requirements under Conditions 3 of the AQTF' (p.15).

It would seem appropriate that, at a minimum, the new national registration body will provide in the *Users' Guides* a reasonable indication of the amount and nature of evidence that would be required for VET providers to demonstrate compliance with Condition 3. The *Guides* should also contain a listing of all of the legislation with which it is generally agreed that VET providers should comply, along with a brief indication of the relevant issues associated with that legislation that providers should address. That is, providers need to be clear about what they must comply with and what they need to do in order to be regarded as compliant.

## ***Recommendation 2***

- *That the National VET Equity Advisory Council (NCVEAC) liaise with the National Skills Standards Council (NSSC) ensure that the standards and conditions of registration for RTOs (Registered Training Organizations) to*

*provide greater clarity and detail in respect of the requirements to demonstrate compliance with equity-related legislation.*

There are three Standards for registration, and these focus on the quality of services and outcomes provided by the RTO and the outcomes being achieved for clients. According to the *Users' Guide*:

[The standards] focus on the quality of services and outcomes being achieved for clients. They allow RTOs some flexibility in demonstrating how they are meeting clients' needs in the context of the scope and nature of their business ... [E]ach Standard is supported by elements that provide more detail about achieving the outcome described in the Standard. Each Standard describes continuous improvement requirements. Continuous improvement relates to RTOs achieving a standard of operations over and above compliance demonstrated at the previous audit (AQTF, 2010a, p.18).

Standard 2 states that: 'The RTO adheres to principles of access and equity and maximizes outcomes for its clients' This Standard is particularly relevant for the purposes of this review as it includes the strongest endorsement among the AQTF documents of the importance of access and equity issues in VET operations. Indeed, the wording of the standard implies an unequivocal focus on access and equity issues. Again, however, the ubiquitous use of the term 'clients' in each of the elements of the standard fails to distinguish between learners/students and other clients. Moreover, as Bateman and Dyson (2010, p.6) point out:

... the relevant elements to this standard are more broad-ranging [than a specific focus on access and equity], are more about the implementation of the principles and relate to clients and client services in general rather than emphasising any disadvantaged groups or the diversity of learners.

The specific Elements of Standard 2 are as follows (AQTF, 2010a, p.35):

- 2.1 The RTO establishes the needs of clients, and delivers services to meet these needs.
- 2.2 The RTO continuously improves client services by collecting, analysing and acting on relevant data.
- 2.3 Before clients enrol or enter into an agreement, the RTO informs them about the training, assessment and support services to be provided, and about their rights and obligations.
- 2.4 Employers and other parties who contribute to each learner's training and assessment are engaged in the development, delivery and monitoring of training and assessment.
- 2.5 Learners receive training, assessment and support services that meet their individual needs.
- 2.6 Learners have timely access to current and accurate records of their participation and progress.
- 2.7 The RTO provides appropriate mechanisms and services for learners to have complaints and appeals addressed efficiently and effectively.

Elements 2.1, 2.2, 2.3 and 2.5 would seem the most significant in relation to learners/students, their particular needs, and the barriers to learning that they might encounter.



Element 2.1 is particularly strongly worded in its expectation that providers will actively identify the particular needs of specific clients (students and other clients) and adapt their services and the ways in which they are delivered in order to meet those particular needs. This point is reinforced in Element 2.2, which not only requires organisations to generate and collect data, but also to act on the data in a process of continuous improvement. The strong connection here with the concept of learner voice is obvious. There is also a clearly implied expectation in Element 2.1 that appropriate services will in fact be available and that clients will find these services readily accessible. This message is strongly reinforced in Element 2.5, the focus of which is squarely upon learners, this time mentioned specifically and not in combination with any other 'clients'.

Element 2.5, then, provides the most unambiguous direction to VET providers that they must give great care and attention to the specific needs of diverse learners. The *Users' Guide* (AQTF, 2010c, p.47) states that in order to comply with this Element RTOs must ensure that:

- Learners' training and learning support needs are systematically assessed.
- Learners have access to relevant learning support services, including assistance with language, literacy and numeracy.
- Training, assessment and learning support services provided to each client are consistent with the training and assessment strategies.
- Learning, assessment and learning support services are monitored and improved.

Although Standard 2 signals that VET providers must engage with their students, identify their particular needs, and respond to those needs in ways that support the students' learning, the association of learners with clients, and therefore the tendency to approach student issues as if they were merely issues of client satisfaction, results in thin conceptions of both 'learner voice' and 'equity'.

### **Recommendation 3**

- *That NVEAC liaise with the NSSC to ensure that the standards and conditions of provider registration include emphasise to governments and official participants within the vocational education and training sector that any genuine engagement with learners generally, and with students who experience disadvantage in particular, requires informal, personal relationship building that acknowledges who students are and where they come from. It must be recognized that, of the many important reasons for promoting 'learner voice', the most important is that 'voice' contributes to student learning and learner empowerment. The relationship of RTOs with learners therefore needs to be respectful of their needs and their aspirations. It is essential that learners be regarded, not just as clients, and certainly not as 'products' for industry, but as co-participants in processes of learning and teaching.*

There would appear to be a very strong case for a review of the registration standards and conditions, the nature and amount of guidance given to VET providers, and the ways in which providers are required to demonstrate their compliance with the standards and conditions, particularly in relation to issues of student disadvantage and learner voice. We would urge NVEAC, acting on its

brief to provide advice to the Standing Council on Tertiary Education, Skills and Employment (SCOTESE) about issues and barriers that affect the access, participation and outcomes of students from disadvantaged groups, to argue that the audit process for RTOs applying for re-registration should be strengthened.

We believe the process should require RTOs to provide evidence that its members of staff are actively engaging with learners, are improving learner-teacher relationships, are promoting the involvement of learners in their organisational policy and management, and are acting upon continuous learner feedback. Building the kind of relational learning and teaching institutions in which issues of disadvantage and learner voice can be approached honestly and genuinely is a matter of embracing attitudinal change within VET rather than coercive regulation. Nonetheless, it would be useful if RTOs were required to produce not just statistical evidence but also an honest and considered narrative about developments and measures taken during the period of registration to address the needs of learners in general, and of disadvantaged groups in particular. Such developments could be reported against a RTO's Learner Voice Strategy in a self-evaluative process rather than simply being audited. NVEAC should also seek adequate funding to extend its collection of good practice case studies of examples of VET teaching and ways of supporting learners who have been affected by forms of disadvantage (NVEAC, 2011). In the narratives explaining their institutional developments and innovations in relation to equity and student voice, providers would be expected to include examples of adaptations they had made from the NVEAC illustrative examples of perceived good practice, to discuss whether they worked or not, and to indicate what was learnt from the exercise.

#### ***Recommendation 4***

- *That NVEAC develop specific requirements for RTOs to demonstrate, when applying for continuing registration, that they have seriously and genuinely attempted to engage with all students, and have taken particular steps to engage with and encourage the voices of disadvantaged students. Such attempts at student engagement, and resulting student feedback, should be described in a self-evaluative narrative, which includes illustrative data generated through listening and responding to student voices. Requirements should include provision of evidence of follow-up actions including feedback loops to learners.*

#### ***Recommendation 5***

- *That NVEAC should assist RTOs in developing learner voice practice by, in conjunction with relevant authorities, developing and providing high-quality advice and guidance to RTOs. In this process, NVEAC should:*
  - *investigate the resources developed and published by the Learning and Skills Council in England, the Excellence Gateway, maintained by the Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS), as well as the publications of the LSIS referred to in this report*

- *ensure that, because Australia is a long way behind a number of countries in developing policies and practices of inclusive education and learner voice, NVEAC personnel visit England and Norway to see learner voice policies and developments in action*
- *extend its collection of good practice case studies of learner voice and making them available to individual organizations as resources from which they can develop ideas for inclusive practices that may be relevant in their own contexts.*

## **Beyond compliance with regulation**

According to McDonnell and Elmore's (1987) seminal analysis of policy implementation, a number of policy instruments can be employed by governments and managers to bring about policy compliance. McDonnell and Elmore emphasize five of these; namely, 'mandates', 'inducements', 'capacity-building', and 'system-changing' policies. To this list Youngs and Bell (2009) have recently added 'hortatory' policies.

The kind of compliance with the regulations that is emphasized within the *Essential Conditions and Standards for Continuing Registration* (AQTF, 2010a) is obviously a typical example of the use of policy mandates. Compliance with the mandates is usually reinforced by some form of penalty or punishment (such as deregistration, withholding or reducing of funds, or forms of 'naming and shaming') but simple compliance does not usually lead to positive cultural change or indeed to active support for the policies or their intended outcomes. While mandates imply the application of the 'stick', the use of inducements within policy recognizes that compliance can also be obtained through offering some kind of 'carrot'. This type of policy instrument is generally believed to be more likely to encourage the building of positive support and commitment to policy directions. The type of reward in this case is usually some kind of financial benefit or positive recognition.

The other types of policy instruments do not necessarily involve rewards or punishments but may do so. For example, the systematic introduction of a national training market, and of open competition between VET providers for students and government funding, has had a profoundly system-changing effect on the VET sector as a whole, and rewards and penalties have flowed to the good and bad market players. Particularly common in attempts to build cultural change are hortatory policies, which rely on harnessing the values, beliefs and ideals of institutional participants. In the case of the VET sector, particularly TAFE institutions, the values associated with social justice and the redress of disadvantage, once championed during the Kangan era of the 1970s and early 1980s, would appear to be still widely held within the field of VET practice, according to recent research (Angus & Seddon, 2000; Bean, 2004; Figgis et al., 2007; Ryan, 2011). This is despite the previous two decades of emphasis on markedly different values of market efficiency and economic competitiveness. This finding is reinforced by our own research reported here.

There is now legacy of several decades of VET policy, during which the emphasis has been on the responsiveness of the VET system to the needs of business and industry and the use of market mechanisms to create a national market in VET (Figgis et al., 2007; Ryan, 2011). This fairly relentless pursuit of market arrangements is thought by many to have created a situation in which, as discussed above, 'the cause of equity seems to have lost traction during the past decades of vocational education and training (VET) reform' (Figgis et al., 2007, p.8). Such lack of traction seems to have occurred to the extent that there is now a perceived need within the sector 'to reinstate equity as a matter of principle, in line with the social justice foundations of VET laid down by Kangan in 1974.' (Figgis et al., 2007, p.8). This recent historical perspective reinforces the point that the importance of the renewed emphasis on addressing the disadvantages experienced by various students needs to be flagged quite strongly throughout *all* policy documents in VET and not left to the limited resources of NVEAC.

Perhaps one of the most important policy initiatives that can ensure the success of the renewed attempt by government and the VET sector to redress educational and social disadvantage is simply to emphasize in official documents and policy statements that equity, and respect for learner voice, are priorities of the highest order. Continuous clarification and reinforcement of this priority is necessary given the reduced priority given to equity concerns within the VET policy framework and debates in recent years. Instead, there would appear to have been increasing emphasis on competition and market efficiency.

If there is to be cultural change in keeping with the current social inclusion agenda and respect for learner voice, then mandates and regulations alone will not be able to do the job. Active championing of equity and the perspectives of students, particularly students who have been put at some kind of disadvantage, is necessary at all levels of the system but especially from those in leadership positions. A vision of equity needs to be clearly apparent in official policy documents and statements as well as being alive in classrooms and other training venues.

## Quality indicators

In keeping with the evidence-based and outcomes-focused approaches to identifying and measuring quality indicators within the VET sector, the AQTF has specified three quality indicators against which all RTOs must provide annual reports (AQTF, 2008). The three quality indicators are:

- **Learner engagement** – This indicator focuses on the extent to which learners are engaging in the types of activities likely to promote high-quality skill outcomes and includes learner perceptions of the quality of their competency development and the support they received or have received from RTOs.
- **Employer satisfaction** – This indicator focuses on the employer evaluations of learner competency development and the relevance of the learner competencies for work and further training, as well as employer evaluation of the overall quality of the training and assessment.
- **Competency completion** – This indicator shows the number of enrolments and qualifications completed and units of competency awarded in the previous calendar year by each RTO.

The most important of these for our purposes is the 'learner engagement' quality indicator, although data generated about course completion, which can be used at both the local level and more broadly to inform policy and practice in relation to disadvantaged students, is also obviously important. In reporting on learner engagement, RTOs are required to use as evidence of the level of their performance the feedback they receive from applying a nationally endorsed 'Learner Questionnaire'. The particular reason for this, stated in the *AQTF 2007 Learner Survey Guide* (AQTF, 2008, p.2), is that:

... specifically, collecting data from learners helps RTOs assess their performance against the AQTF 2007 [now 2010] Essential Standards for Registration and most of the underpinning Essential Elements. In short, the data can help support continuous improvement processes to ensure that:

- the RTO provides quality training and assessment across all of its operations
- the RTO adheres to principles of access and equity and maximizes outcomes for its clients
- management systems are responsive to the needs of clients, staff and stakeholders, and the environment in which the RTO operates.

In other words, the use of the Learner Questionnaire is the main mechanism through which RTOs are expected to demonstrate that they are compliant with the equity requirements specified in the essential conditions and standards for registration. It would appear that much is expected of this questionnaire, particularly since 'the Learner Questionnaire (LQ) is designed for online or paper administration in less than 15 minutes' (AQTF, 2008, p.7). This makes us somewhat dubious about the extent to which a single questionnaire, which is comprised of 35 items, and which is to be completed somewhat impersonally by individual students within 15 minutes, can be claimed to provide sufficient opportunity for the adequate expression of learner voice.

Each RTO must submit a summary of the results of the Learner Questionnaire annually by email to the registering body. For example, an analysis of the data from the three quality indicators for 2011 must be reported by 30 June 2012. The argument is that reporting against the quality indicators serves two particular purposes. The data can be used to:

- Improve the efficiency of the collection and the utility of the data for RTOs and registering bodies for both continuous improvement and regulatory purposes; and
- Inform data on total VET effort and activity. (NCSS, 2011, p.1)

The use of the Learner Questionnaire is regarded by the AQTF (2007c) as 'engaging the learner voice', and advice is provided in various documents (in particular AQTF 2007d/2008) and websites to assist RTOs to ensure that the sample survey is reliable and useful. Moreover, the language used to describe the use of the survey is decidedly student-centred and indicates the importance of an open and respectful attitude to learners. For example, the AQTF document, *Engaging the learner voice* (2007c), states that:

... the LQ [Learner Questionnaire] is an effective input to quality improvement only if enough learners believe it is worth completing. If too few complete it, your results will be unreliable. Only quality results can support quality improvement.

What can you do to ensure that each year enough learners respond to the LQ to give you a reliable picture?

This document goes on to state that:

Learners are more likely to complete the LQ if they believe you take their feedback seriously. If they feel you respect their views, there are more likely to answer the two open-ended questions on the back of the document. Responses to these questions can be very helpful in interpreting other document results.

The two open-ended questions referred to here are:

- What were the best aspects of this training?
- What aspects of the training were most in need of improvement?

RTOs are advised to 'use the LQ as a prompt for dialogue with learners' and to plan how they intend to report back to learners about the questionnaire results and the actions that the RTO plans to take in response to student views. The document contains advice with which, on the basis of our own research, we would totally agree:

By reporting back [to students] you maximize ... the chances [that your learners] will tell others you are serious about quality and that when you ask for learner opinions you act on them. That's great word-of-mouth advertising that reaches key stakeholders involved in training operations. There are benefits for you and for your learners. (AQTF, 2007c, p.1)

The problem is that, despite these laudable sentiments, our research indicates (see Appendix 1) that feedback reported in the LQ is rarely discussed at the level of individual organization, and extremely rarely with students. We elaborate on this situation later in the report.

The the main rationale given for regular use of the Learner Questionnaire (LQ) is that the data derived can be used as evidence to demonstrate that the RTO has satisfied one of the three Quality Indicators used to demonstrate compliance with elements of Standard 2 of the Conditions and Standards for Registration. We recommend that its use in facilitating positive internal dynamics of student engagement with their courses, teachers and their VET institutions at the local level should be heavily promoted. The LQ is an existing mechanism, already mandated, the usefulness of which at the individual organizational level, we believe, has been seriously underestimated. While the data about the system as a whole that can be garnered from the accumulated Learner Questionnaire results is obviously useful and important, the questionnaire can be used at all levels of VET providers, from individual student consultations, to classroom discussions, right through to Board level meetings to demonstrate that the institution is serious about, respectful of, and responsive to, learner voice.

### ***Recommendation 6***

- *As a champion of the social and cultural, and also economic, importance of fostering a culture of social inclusion and democratic equality in VET, NVEAC must work within the sphere of VET governance and policy to ensure the*

*positive promotion of educational equality and learner voice in the general policy discourse of VET. Such promotion should be encouraged by:*

- ensuring that concepts of redress of inequality and promotion of learner voice are prominent in all position papers, advisory briefs, policy texts and official documents as well as in government rhetoric*
- emphasising the importance of these concepts in formulating requirements for learner-instructor (and learner-instructor-employer in the case of apprenticeships and other work-based training) engagement and negotiation in the development of student learning plans and assessment activities*
- requiring that all providers develop a learner voice strategy for their institutions, which might include the establishment of a student organization as well as a Learner Voice Committee comprised of members from both the student organization and the RTO Management Committee.*
- recognising through awards and celebratory events the best practice in encouraging learner voice in VET.*

### **Recommendation 7**

- That NVEAC advise NSSC of the possible use of the existing RTO Learner Questionnaire as a generator of information from learners that can be used as a starting point for internal critical analysis, at all levels of the organization, of ways in which the voices and perspectives of learners can be more actively promoted and utilised to enable the more complete participation of learners in their own education.*

### **Community Service Obligations**

The Productivity Commission (2011) has taken particular note of the report of the 2008 Bradley Review of higher education (Australian Government, 2008) which found that a much higher proportion of disadvantaged students enter the VET sector than undertake higher education (p.63). The Commission also is quite explicit about government intervention in VET being justified in circumstances in which it is likely that there would be a number of market failures without such intervention, particularly in areas of thin markets such as in rural and remote areas, and also in circumstances in which 'government intervention can be used to pursue equity objectives' (Productivity Commission, 2011, p.60). In some states, notably New South Wales, State Governments intervene considerably in VET for exactly these reasons. For example, the Commission received a submission from the New South Wales Department of Education and Training which states:

Technical and further education services are available across the state, placing TAFE NSW in a unique position to support the longer-term strategic objectives of Government in relation to economic, industry and community development. It is this strategic role that further distinguishes TAFE NSW from other providers [which are] focused primarily on returns to stakeholders. For example, in relation to:

- regional development – TAFESW does not avoid the markets although the cost of delivery in newly developing or relatively remote areas is significant; and*

- industry development – requiring substantial infrastructure investment in areas where enrolment numbers may be unpredictable. (quoted in Productivity Commission, 2011, p.65)

The New South Wales case is interesting and provides perhaps the best illustration of the operation of Community Service Obligations in TAFE. TAFE NSW is obliged to ‘provide educationally or vocationally disadvantaged groups (such as women, Aborigines, persons of non-English speaking background, persons with disabilities and persons in rural areas) with access to technical and further education services’ under the requirements of the *Technical and Further Education Act 1990*, s. 6.1 (e). TAFE NSW institutes there are accordingly funded through a system of financial loadings that take account of the costs associated with program delivery to students in circumstances of disadvantage. In these circumstances, a TAFE institute is said to be funded to deliver its ‘community service obligations’. In some other states, notably Victoria, where competitive markets and contested funding in VET are most advanced, specific funding for community service obligations no longer occurs and the terminology is rarely heard. In these jurisdictions there is often criticism from TAFE personnel that private providers are extremely selective about their course delivery and avoid less profitable areas that cater for disadvantaged students, which must generally be picked up by TAFE.

Although this disparity, perceived or otherwise, would seem to raise an important issue of equitable educational access and social equity, it seems to have been taken up in the field as an issue of funding equity or lack of ‘competitive neutrality’ (Productivity Commission, 2011, pp.69-71) in that, in most jurisdictions, ‘the use of explicit Community Service Obligations (CSO) payments does not appear to be widespread’ (p.69). In these circumstances, according to the Commission, TAFE institutes claim that they are inadequately funded compared with their private provider colleagues in that they are obliged to deliver programs to a high proportion of disadvantaged students who are regarded as more difficult and more expensive to teach. It would seem appropriate that the funding of VET delivery should reflect the real cost of such delivery. Following this logic, the Productivity Commission (2011) recommends the use of formal CSO payments by government on the basis that institutions would then receive appropriate compensation for responding to the broader equity objectives of governments, and also that opening up CSO loadings to private providers as well as TAFEs can potentially facilitate greater competition between private and public sector providers.

While we are not in favour of increasing the existing level of competitiveness within the VET market, we do recommend that NVEAC and the VET sector generally give close attention to the policies introduced by the Commonwealth Government in response to the Bradley review of higher education. The Review has resulted not only in targets for participation in higher education being set, but also in supplementary funding to institutions that is proportional to the number of students at a disadvantage that are enrolled in their programs. Such an arrangement, if introduced into the VET sector, should be simple and efficient and should reflect the real additional costs of delivering programs to



disadvantaged students. Such funding should also be guaranteed in budget forward estimates so that institutions can undertake medium to long term planning for redressing educational disadvantage.

### ***Recommendation 8***

*That NVEAC prepare and submit to SCOTese (Standing Council on Tertiary Education, Skills and Employment) a persuasive case that the Commonwealth government apply in the VET Sector similar financial inducements to those already provided in the higher education sector for institutions to enrol and retain students who are disadvantaged. Such funding should be sufficient to cover the additional costs of engaging, supporting and teaching students who are disadvantaged.*

#### *The current policy environment and background*

It is important to acknowledge that, while the purpose of VET is (or should be) to provide skills for *all* individuals, communities and the workplace, dealing with disadvantage and social justice has historically been the norm for VET, particularly through what until very recently was recognized as its public core technical and further education, TAFE. It is therefore reasonable to anticipate that the TAFE/VET sector should have good mechanisms to hear, listen and respond to what learners want and experience in VET/TAFE. In essence, our report finds that these mechanisms are lacking with respect to learner voice and, particularly, learner feedback.

In reality, despite some reservations expressed throughout this report and embodied in our report recommendations, VET/TAFE still plays a critical equity function. The majority of VET students in Australia fall into at least one 'disadvantaged group' category, and the most disadvantaged are in several. But the issue of equity, and indeed the championing of social justice and learner voice, has badly lost traction since the late 1990s. The Kangan report (Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission [TEC] Kangan Report, 1974) contributed to a period of consensus with a strong and unambiguous emphasis on the educational importance of dealing with equity issues and the development of non-vocational and social skills as well as vocational training through second chance education. The Commission articulated a vision for TAFE as a major social and educational institution, not just a provider of workplace skills. This vision, and the choice about vocational education it implies, is summarized in a particularly prescient paragraph of the original Kangan report:

There are at least two alternatives to the emphases that can be given to the purpose of technical colleges and like institutions. A manpower orientation expresses their purpose as being to produce the skilled manpower necessary to the development of the economy. And educational and social emphasis is on their function to enable people to develop their potential as individuals but within the realities of the job opportunities by means of which they are aiming to use their education to earn a livelihood. The committee has adopted the educational and social purpose of technical and further education as the more appropriate without overlooking TAFE's vital manpower role. (TEC, 1974, p.xvii)

There was, in effect, recognition by Kangan of the importance of dealing with

equity issues through second chance education and seeing TAFE as a major social and educational institution, not just a provider of technical and workplace skills. This is what justified the inclusion of 'FE' (further education) in TAFE.

The period of reforms from the late 1990s has arguably been influenced largely by employers and industrialists, but only in a minor way by educationalists. This period gave rise to the claimed 'two cultures' of VET that Kangan had warned about: the Kangan culture of social and educational ideals, and the post-Kangan culture which sees VET largely as a tool of the economy which mainly serves the needs of the economy, industry and employers rather than the needs of students, people, society, and community. By 1993 Ahearn (1993, p.14) had noted:

... a quite remarkable ideological eruption which saw a swing away from what could be loosely described as the Kangan student-centred 'culture of access' to the industry –and employer-centred culture of the 'new vocationalism'.

These two cultures continue to coexist in contemporary VET, and particularly in TAFE, but the Kangan ideals have largely been pushed to the side by the almost total dominance of neoliberal themes of competition, market and managerialism, as well as somewhat simplistic, numerical notions of efficiency, accountability and choice (Figgis et al., 2007; Pusey, 1992; Ryan, 2011). According to Ryan (2011), by the 1990s the Kangan philosophy had effectively been replaced by the National Training Reform Agenda, which made it clear that 'vocational education should no longer be regarded as a community service but as a training market' (Ryan 2011, p.11).

The deliberate and persistent attempts by successive governments in Australia to establish a 'training market', through the subsidized introduction of private providers and making the provision of VET subject to competitive tendering, best indicate the currently prevailing VET ideology and culture. The ubiquitous use of the term 'client', in which students are sometimes clients and sometimes not (and in which students are often the 'product' being marketed to the real clients, employers and industry) is illustrative of the ambiguity that now exists. The result of all of this is that there is now an urgent need to seriously address the question of 'what are the purposes of TAFE/VET?' as part of any analysis of learner voice. It would seem axiomatic that any serious attempt to promote, and to be responsive to, learner voice must necessarily entail a high degree of student-centredness. Of direct relevance here are our insights and data from the UK and Ireland, and particularly from Norway. It is surely extremely significant that the countries whose VET systems are working best are ones like Norway where technical and vocational education is not totally distinct from more general education.

The entire VET policy framework currently militates against anything like the above happening. To somehow 'add on' learner voice to the existing framework as being just or mainly for 'disadvantaged learners' or those already enrolled risks not hearing the voices of educationalists, learners or prospective learners. The prevailing discourse is about Australia's international economic standing and performance and the unquestioned need for the VET system to provide only the skills that are believed necessary for Australia to compete better

economically and to service industry. It is critically important to acknowledge that to be really effective economically, Australia needs to learn from the experience of educators and researchers in diverse contexts and harness and acknowledge the views and ideas of all current learners and potential learners.

### ***Recommendation 9***

- *That NVEAC lobby for VET in Australia, as an important social institution, to overtly acknowledge that all Australians of all ages have multiple voices and needs for learning that are lifelong and lifewide, and that learning in VET affects wellbeing in all its forms in very diverse contexts well beyond VET. If learner voice can be heard and strengthened through learning, VET will make a stronger contribution to Australian society and citizenship and the polity generally, as well as to the workplace, innovation and industry.*

### ***Provider registration standards***

Provider registration standards are the most obvious forms of regulation with which all VET providers have to comply under the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF) (see: [www.training.com.au](http://www.training.com.au)). All RTOs must be initially registered and then must be re-registered every five years. Since all institutions must be registered in order to operate, compliance with the *Essential Conditions and Standards for Continuing Registration* (AQTF, 2010) can be audited at any time. Auditing is, however more likely if there has been some complaint or obvious irregularity. Two of the three standards relate to voice/equity issues, as does one of the nine conditions, Condition 3. However the standards, in our view, are quite bald and declaratory ‘should’ statements without any explication or detail. There is certainly a lack of clarity about what compliance with Condition 3 would actually entail in practice.

When asked about ‘learner voice’ in our Australian interviews, Registered Training Organisation (RTO) personnel, as well as State and Territory training managers responsible for tendering for the delivery of training service, usually pointed to the policies and procedures that they currently had in place. Most interviewees claimed that these policies and procedures resulted in what they described as ‘unnecessary overload’ in terms of the data required, but very few regarded the procedures as robust or effective. There is widespread agreement that these policies and procedures are symbolic rather than ‘policies-in-use’. The *AQTF Users’ Guide to the Essential Conditions and Standards for Continuing Registration* (AQTF, 2010c) (and the similar guide for initial registration) includes FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions) intended to help managers manage the provider registration process. However there is very little in this mechanism that is regarded by VET stakeholders as effective, timely or helpful, either to inform them about how to better engage with learner voice or to address issues of equity and lack of voice for disadvantaged groups of learners.

There is, however, considerable evidence that many stakeholders would like things to change. For example, a manager of a state/territory training authority pointed out:

We are at a point in history where the whole skills reform agenda is moving into an environment where the Commonwealth and ourselves are going to be interested in more transparency and, essentially, more consumer information for students. ... Learner voice ... at the moment is probably too quiet for us in terms of the data we get from RTOs. The only voice I hear day to day is through complaints ... so that is really a very negative space. ... I'm not sure we feed right back down to the learner, that is not our connect.

### **Recommendation 10**

- *That examples of good practice derived from recent European experience of learner voice, which are identified in this report, be embraced and promoted in NVEAC advice and policy briefings. These examples illustrate the importance of the voice of all learners (and potential learners) in VET being recognised, and indicate that new strategies are needed to actively promote the educational, social and economic benefits of learner involvement.*

The perception of NVEAC is that the requirements for registration as a RTO have been strengthened. Our reading of earlier versions of the regulations leads us to conclude that the AQTF standards published in 2007 actually weakened the previous requirements, and that the 2011 version somewhat weakens them again. Previously, there were specific requirements about monitoring and reporting on students with a disability and Indigenous students. NVEAC currently espouses the principal of mainstreaming equity concerns across the board into the existing mechanisms and regulations. This is, of course, 'a double-edged sword'. There is some relatively strong regulation about equity matters in some of the state legislation, particularly in New South Wales and Western Australia. South Australia has also developed fairly robust equity expectations that are worthy of national examination.

The AQTF *Users' Guides* require that students should be interviewed at enrolment and asked about their particular needs. They should also be asked to indicate whether they are Indigenous or have a disability. Most institutions have an enrolment form that asks these questions. Despite the good intention of this mechanism, there is a general reluctance of many people to self-identify as Indigenous or disabled. The question was regarded by some interviewees as being indicative of paternalism and deficit attitudes, and it is unlikely to be openly responded to because of wariness on the part of many students about institutional authority. If there is a genuine concern about needs, *all* students should be asked about their needs, and also be routinely responded to.

### **Recommendation 11**

- *That more effective and timely mechanisms are identified in VET for hearing, responding to and feeding back to learners what they say they want and what they say about their learning experiences. In essence, internal review procedures within all RTOs need to incorporate the principle that all learners need to be overtly acknowledged as partners who have agency in interactive, relational and negotiated learning processes.*

## *Reporting requirements*

Current requirements, on our evidence, require a large amount of work in collecting data, but it is not apparent to our interviewees that the data supplied is put to any good use. Our conclusion is that, if institutions and RTOs are mandated to report certain information, and do report it, then the data should be used productively in ways that they can see will contribute to system improvement. Hence the importance attributed by many of our informants to trying to get equity/voice indicators included in the things that VET providers have to report. The registration standards specify that institutions are expected to meet the needs of students and to support students, but it is unlikely that institutions will be able to identify and genuinely respond to student needs until there is much better reciprocal engagement with learners and their diverse voices. Recent developments in the UK and longer-standing dialogic, relational practices in Norway provide useful examples of such support.

## **2. Relevant legislation and current obligations for providers**

Australian provider managers provided a large amount of insightful information in interviews about their perceptions of the relevant Australian legislation as critiqued above, particularly in relation to their current, perceived obligations as provider managers. This data is presented in detail in Appendix 1.

Provider managers identified three main areas of learner feedback: formal feedback (usually via surveys), unsolicited formal feedback (typically in the form of comments or complaints) and informal feedback. As already emphasized, there is a strong perception among the interviewees that formal surveys are over-used. Such formal feedback, including the VET Learner Questionnaire survey, is required as part of the AQTF quality framework. It is designed, analysed and reported by NCVER, administered by each provider, and collected through ACER. This is very roundabout and indirect. The loop is never closed since the data is not fed back to students. While several other surveys of satisfaction and program outcomes are conducted by state and territory authorities as well as by ASQA as part of compliance regimes, that loop is also seldom closed and the copious data are rarely fully analysed or reported back to the institutions and students. This contrasts with the way data is fed back in the UK and, particularly, in Norway.

### ***Recommendation 12***

- *That effective ways of achieving equity and promoting learner voice, which do not presuppose or reinforce provision from deficit, paternalistic or compensatory models, must be promoted. The policy vacuum in relation to learner voice must be addressed urgently, and clarity about the purposes of learner voice activity, particularly higher-order purposes associated with empowerment, learning and citizenship, needs to be established.*

### **Recommendation 13**

- *That the emphasis on RTOs conducting surveys for VET compliance is overdone and currently ineffective. Without feedback loops to learners, or follow-up actions as a consequence of the surveys, new and more effective ways of ensuring program compliance and the quality of teaching and learning need to be developed.*

### **3. Relevant approaches to learner voice and feedback being implemented in the VET sector, as well as practices in the ACE, higher education and schools sectors, and overseas which would be pertinent to VET**

The Australian interview data presented in Appendix 1 confirms that students enrolled in VET courses in Australia are regularly surveyed as part of service agreements at commencement, less regularly during their courses and reasonably often at completion. As we have emphasized, this information is rarely fed back in any usable form to students or teachers and trainers other than in highly aggregated form.

Information collected from students in VET and ACE (adult and community education) on attitudes to learning is extremely variable across and within various Australian states and territories. At one extreme, in a very small number of learning organisations, a number of techniques are used as part of the learning process that are extensive, strategic, systematic and learner-focussed. These techniques include the use of interviews and surveys that can result in negotiated ILPs (Individual Learning Plans), sometimes involving diagnostic tests such as tests for literacies. More commonly, surveys of student attitudes to teaching and learning are sporadic, ad hoc and driven only or mainly by minimum statutory and regulatory requirements.

In some learning contexts, particularly where there are experienced and fully trained teachers and trainers, there is an expectation that, at the classroom, workshop or workplace learning level, teachers and trainers should, as part of normal professional practice, use a range of techniques, both formal and informal, to gauge the appropriateness to learners of the teaching they receive and of the program.

NCVER (National Centre for Vocational Education Research) attempts to collect 'the cold hard facts' for all Australian, government-funded VET programs, including apprenticeship programs, using apparently robust and comparable standard data elements and processes that include identifying whether students are in any designated equity groups. NCVER routinely collects commencing and completion data and undertakes a number of other surveys that sometimes include items intended to generate information on student intentions and outcomes. Since this is done indirectly through VET institutions and RTOs, and not directly reported to learners, it is not effectively making use of the voices of

learners. Further, the existing NCVER student outcomes survey data could be more effectively used (Lee & Polidano, 2011).

In general, although with some exceptions, student attitudes to teaching and learning in VET are seldom systematically explored. The exceptions are usually brief and often superficial surveys that rarely go beyond the minimum regulatory requirements. Few institutions systematically collect data on student perceptions of teaching and learning, graduate outcomes or graduate perceptions of VET teaching or programs. The NCVER Graduate Outcome Survey includes some questions on student perceptions of their learning experiences, but this data is collected after students complete. This seems too late. Moreover, it is aggregated and analysed in a form that is unable to be fed back to students and institutions and used effectively.

There is a widespread understanding that, in general, the voices of learners in VET are seldom sought or heard in Australia. Student engagement may or may not be working at a lecturer/teacher/trainer-to-student level, but from a system perspective, as we have emphasized, there is general agreement from industry training boards, VET teachers, institution managers, student representatives, policy makers and researchers that 'we are not doing that well'.

*How is the information analysed, summarized and fed back to learners?*

The limited amount of information that is gathered (other than by NCVER) is seldom used strategically at any level. There is evidence that what is collected is seldom systematically analysed or summarized, and very rarely fed back to learners or even to teachers and trainers. The NCVER data, in terms of its analysis, tends to be of a summary nature, and feedback tends to be directed to industry. It is policy and provider focussed rather student or teacher focussed.

#### **4. The nature and type of input/feedback that should be collected from learners**

A large number of ideas about the nature and type of input and feedback that should be collected from learners was heard through both the Australian and overseas interviews. This data is presented in more detail in Appendices 1 and 2. On the basis of this interview data and our other research, we need point out that the models of good practice in learner voice and feedback that are employed elsewhere in the world cannot necessarily be simply transferred to Australia's very different VET system – at least not without changing several other related system intentions and attributes.

Despite this caveat, it is apparent from the interviews that the mechanisms employed for utilising learner voice and feedback in Australia are extremely limited, apart perhaps from what happens informally in some classrooms or workplaces. The current systems in place to hear learner voice are extremely limited, particularly for learners from disadvantaged groups.

Learners in VET in Australia, while they are learning, are essentially considered

as clients, customers and consumers of a vocational product. When (and if) they complete their courses, the assumption is that they become clients of industry on the basis of the industry competencies that have been delivered to them and which they have learnt. Work obtained by successful students as a consequence of VET is widely regarded as the primary outcome of their engagement in VET. Very little account is taken of the reasons for a significant proportion of students not completing their VET programs. Almost nothing is done to track and research non-completion in VET, compared to the voluminous literature in school and higher education contexts on early school and higher education leaving. The voices of those who do not complete courses in VET are, in essence, unheard.

Although the answer is certainly not to conduct even more surveys, there is a strong case for the use of selective, high quality, qualitative and longitudinal field research into non-participation, non-completion, and learner intentions and outcomes, aside from those that are directly vocational. Such research should ideally be funded independently of the VET system and must take account of intention, place and context.

#### **Recommendation 14**

- *That VET follows the lead of other education sectors, in which the most effective quality lever has proved to be an improvement in teacher quality. Such improvement, in relation to learner voice specifically, would provide alternatives to the commonly-accepted unidirectional 'delivery' model of training by such methods as:*
  - *embracing collaborative, constructivist methods that are respectful of, and which utilize, learners' existing resources, knowledge and perspectives*
  - *encouraging learner engagement and learner voice by making the learning more enjoyable and relevant to students*
  - *using a range of formal and informal techniques to gauge the appropriateness to learners of the teaching they receive*
  - *using interviews, tact and insight to develop agreed, negotiated Individual Learning Plans*
  - *promoting independent thinking, lifelong learning and active citizenship through practicing critical enquiry with students.*

#### **Recommendation 15**

- *That the current emphasis by NCVER (National Centre for Vocational Education Research) on annual surveys of all public VET without provision of feedback to learners is ineffective for hearing or responding to learner voice. Instead, we recommend more survey by sampling, better use of new and interactive information and communications technologies, more targeted qualitative research, and greatly improved feedback to students and teachers.*



## **5. Assessment of mechanisms for collecting student feedback (e.g. individual learning plans, student online surveys, mobile phone texting, assistive technologies, etc)**

It is important, in the process of examining specific, possible and new assistive learner survey and feedback technologies referred to earlier in our report, to look broadly at the use of all of the diverse, current methods used to hear and feed information back learners in VET. There are at least ten different current methods of hearing and feeding back learner voice in Australia through a range of mechanisms that are enumerated and summarized below.

Learner voice in VET can (and is) being heard to a greater or lesser extent through each of the following:

1. *Teachers in class* who seek and respond to student views and opinions.
2. *Student representatives* on committees, such as those that oversee courses, programs or institutions.
3. *Student Services*, based in provider organizations, which seek and respond to student views and opinions. In rare instances students gain voice through providing part of the service.
4. *Provider and system regulations* that require institutions to seek student feedback.
5. *Industry and employer groups*, including registered private training organizations, group training, traineeship and apprenticeship stakeholders.
6. *Advocacy workers* for disadvantaged groups, including Indigenous Australians, people with a disability, migrants and refugees.
7. *Non-completers* of programs.
8. *Non-commencers* of programs.
9. NCVER, ABS, government and provider *surveys*.
10. Independent, critical and field research.

In a more detailed discussion of each method, below, we have asterisked (\*) and added notes to flag the student feedback mechanisms that have been or could be adapted to be inclusive of new information and computer technologies.

*Learner voice can be heard through:*

1. *teachers in class*: The feedback from learners to teachers or trainers in class is the most widespread, direct and effective learner voice and feedback method (and arguably the most simple to enhance). It is immediate, interactive and dialogic, involving learner-teacher/trainer interaction in the class or training/workplace. (\* enhanced by on line feedback or texting directly to teachers).
2. *student representatives*: Student representation is highly effective for the small number of students typically involved, but is currently ad hoc and tokenistic. Demand from students for greater representation in some multi-sectoral VET contexts may grow with the reintroduction of a student services fee. In some TAFE institutes there are student-run

associations, and individual students on institution and course committees, boards and councils. We believe that much can be learned from the learner involvement strategies in England and Wales. As one TAFE manager summarized, 'There are some student voices but not as many as we would like to have'. (\* enhanced by on line consultation, feedback and texting from and between students and student representatives).

3. *student services*: Student services staff have the capacity, through their service delivery, to hear and respond to what students want. However, these services are restricted mainly to public VET providers. Moreover, such services are mainly available for designated equity groups, and deficit or compensatory service models often apply.
4. *industry and employer groups*: There is a great deal of potential for industry and employer groups to hear what trainees and employees experience and achieve as a consequence of their programs, although such feedback is typically oriented to market intelligence and limited to issues of work readiness and perceived industry skill shortages.
5. *provider and system regulation*: Students are routinely requested to respond to surveys about course experiences and outcomes as part of national, state/territory and provider compliance and regulatory arrangements. The difficulty is that these surveys focus almost entirely on two performance indicators: the number assisted in particular designated categories and the rate at which job outcomes are achieved. (\* enhanced by on line survey and comments by texting).
6. *disadvantaged advocacy groups*: There are several different views about hearing the voices of disadvantaged learners. On one hand there is a view, as one state/territory training manager put it, that 'it is probably *more* important that they be listened to ... than the "normal" learner, because the normal learner would tend to say what they think ... Whereas this group is not necessarily as forthcoming.' A related view is that without advocacy (for example for and by Indigenous Australians, refugees or people with a disability) there would be less equity. One contrasting view is that the voices of all learners should be heard in a truly inclusive education and training system. As one VET academic put it, the current VET 'system itself is operating on a compensatory model ... which defines some groups as deficient'. (\* enhanced by on line feedback or texting involving students or advocates).
7. *non-completers*: All stakeholders agreed that, with few exceptions (the NCVER apprentice and trainee destination survey being one), the voice of non-completers is (currently) rarely heard in VET in Australia. (\* good potential for on line feedback, survey and texting by non-completers).
8. *potential learners*: Again, the views of potential learners in VET are rarely sought or heard. As a training industry representative put it:

Accessing new learners in new ways is increasingly difficult because the learning ... is becoming increasingly privatized. ... VET needs to adopt outreach principles that would enable it to access learners that it doesn't know about and doesn't think about rather than running a menu-based approach.

(\* enhanced by on line and text surveys of defined groups, assuming a data base with ethical access).

9. *existing surveys*: Aside from what occurs in class, most current methods for undertaking surveys of students at any stage of their education and training in VET in Australia are slow and hopelessly outdated. Most current surveys are centralized, conducted mainly for regulatory purposes, paper-based and do not result in learner-appropriate feedback mechanisms, not only to students who provide the data, but, surprisingly, not to teachers and providers either. Such systems are increasingly inappropriate for a generation of young people with relatively high levels of information and computer technology literacies and connectivity. Learner voice is nevertheless heard and widely sought, albeit indirectly, via existing, mainly quantitative, national surveys conducted by NCVER (National Centre for Vocational Education Research), state/territory and provider course experience and outcomes surveys, and to a lesser extent through ABS (Australian Bureau of Statistics). As one senior VET academic put it, NCVER is constructed around 'top down ... mass surveys and mass data collection ... using data collection that is not uniform between states and territories. There is a big claim about data-led decision-making, and I am suspicious that [NCVER] can hold that claim'.

Current plans are directed at making the NCVER collection broader and more robust, and to include in it VET that occurs beyond the scope of public funding. But there seems to be no current plan to strengthen or broaden learner voice or feedback. (\* enhanced by on line and text surveys of defined groups).

10. *independent, critical qualitative field research*: Academic VET research has the capacity, if independent of government and inclusive of qualitative data, to critically investigate a wide range of perceptions of VET learners. Such research would go well beyond 'the cold hard facts' of narrow, vocationally-oriented participation and outcomes. Funding for such research in Australia is currently extremely limited. (\* enhanced by on line and text surveys of defined groups, assuming a data base with ethical access).

Table 4 summarizes the extent, effectiveness and limitations of these learner voice and feedback mechanisms in Australian VET based on the data we have collected. Where the data suggest that the mechanisms appear, on the evidence, to be working significantly better in the English context than in Australia, they are asterisked (\*).

*Table 4: Mechanisms and effectiveness of learner voice and feedback in Australian VET*

<b>Learner voice Mechanisms</b>	<b>Extent in VET</b>	<b>Effectiveness for learners</b>	<b>Limitations for disadvantaged groups</b>	<b>Feedback to learners</b>
1. Teachers in class	Widespread	Effective at a local & individual learner level	Variable; few teachers have the necessary specialist skills *	Direct & effective, where present
2. Student representatives	Very limited *	Highly effective for students involved	Limited to few students and groups *	Variable & limited *
3. Student Services providers	Restricted beyond TAFE *	Effective for groups with advocacy workers & networks	Indirect; poor for some groups *	Very limited *
4. Industry and employer groups	Limited to worker need	Indirect & currently ineffective	Very narrow notion of outcomes	Rarely fed back
5 Provider & system regulation	Widespread, systemic	Tokenistic & ineffective *	Complex, mainly for statutory compliance *	Not done *
6. Disadvantaged advocacy groups	Variable by group & provider *	Highly variable by group *	Minimal voice for several groups *	Limited & variable *
7. Withdrawal without completion	Seldom consulted	Potentially effective with guidance	Hard to trace students post-course; limited literacies *	Not done
8. Potential learners	Rarely consulted *	Potentially effective with guidance *	Low returns from low literacy groups *	Not done *
9. NCVER, ABS, government & provider surveys	Widespread client surveys	Very limited *	'Cold and hard' numbers; limited context; limited use & value *	Rare# *
10. Independent, critical & field/qualitative research	Limited by research funding	Potentially useful for shaping policy	Difficult to achieve ethical access; needs highly skilled researchers	Uncommon
<b>SUMMARY STATEMENTS</b>	Highly variable extent *	High potential, limited current effectiveness *	Multiple & severe limitations for most groups *	Very limited other than through teaching

KEY: Shading is used to highlight mechanisms that are widespread or effective; \* UK mechanisms or effectiveness significantly better; # One exception is LSAY (2011).

In summary, aside from teacher feedback in class, which can be of benefit to the particular students in that class, no current learner voice mechanism is both widespread *and* currently effective for most learners across all forms of VET in Australia. All existing mechanisms are ineffective for disadvantaged groups of learners. Many of the existing mechanisms would be greatly enhanced by improving feedback mechanisms to students, and, in the case of non-completers and those who do not come to VET, by providing guidance at appropriate times.

Given that we gathered extensive insights from the UK adult and further education sectors, it is pertinent to reflect on how similar or different from the Australian experience these mechanisms and their effectiveness are. Even a cursory examination of Table 4 confirms that most mechanisms used in the UK are significantly more widespread and effective, in terms of hearing and responding to learner voice, particularly for disadvantaged groups, than in Australia. While we would not argue a case for the introduction of an inspectorial system in Australia, it is evident that, partly as a consequence of the inspectorial system in the UK (particularly in England and Wales), as well as significantly greater provision of guidance and support, there is much better public knowledge of what is occurring within providers.

There is also a significantly better research and knowledge base through university and NIACE supported research in England and Ireland (e.g. Hendry, Swinney & Ward, 2008; Duffen & Thompson, 2003; Forrest, Lawton et al., 2007; Fryer, 1997; Lukes, Donohue & Mayhew-Smith, 2008; NIACE, 2008; Nightingale, 2006; Ravenhall, 2001; Richards, Drury & Anderson, 2007). There is also a more professional training and guidance system (Plant, 2006) for adult and further education teachers and trainers.

### **Recommendation 16**

- *That there is scope for immediate improvement in acknowledging learner voice by ensuring that RTOs more quickly fed back to all stakeholders, including learners, the results of surveys that are currently being undertaken. A large amount of data is already collected within programs, institutions, sectors, states and territories, but learners and teachers rarely benefit from any analysis of this data.*

We have attempted in Table 5 to summarize the likely ease and effectiveness of improving learner voice for disadvantaged learners and groups in VET in Australia using existing ICTs (Information and Communications Technologies). We acknowledge here, as in the enumerated ten mechanisms listed above, that several new and likely future ICTs have the potential for enhancing learner voice.

*Table 5: Relative ease and effectiveness of improving learner voice for disadvantaged learners and groups in VET in Australia*

	<b>Very effective</b>	<b>Moderately effective</b>	<b>Very ineffective</b>
<b>Very simple (inexpensive, quick or easy)</b>	Teachers in class Using existing survey data	Student institution representation	Industry & employer surveys
<b>Moderately easy</b>	Qualitative field research Potential learner research Advocacy groups	Institution surveys Student Services	
<b>Very complex (expensive, slow or difficult)</b>	Non-completion research		NCVER & ABS surveys Provider and system regulation

## 6. Factors which make some learners reluctant to express their views and ways of overcoming these factors

Although our interview data, presented in Appendices 1 and 2, indicate a wide range of reasons for learners being reluctant to express their views, there is widespread evidence of survey inertia and fatigue. Students who leave VET without completing are identified as the most difficult to track. As a VET equity manager said:

There is a lot of survey inertia around. ...Those who have more of an opinion are the ones less likely to [respond] so they will be the ones who have additional barriers to engagement in learning. You ring up people who withdraw to find out the reason why they disengage. ... They won't answer phone calls or SMS or emails. ... We are not getting to the heart of the matter to those that matter most.

In the words of an ACE peak body representative:

Disadvantaged learners .... often have very few services so they are really hesitant to make critical comments of the services they are given. From their perspective even a crutch service is better than no service at all. From their point of view they will often say, 'This was terrific', when what they actually mean is, 'I would rather have that than not. I wouldn't want to lose it. I don't want to jeopardize my chances of other opportunities.'

A VET student representative said of students from diverse cultural backgrounds (as well as Indigenous Australians):

[Students], particularly from Asian counties, probably [have] a very high respect, bordering on fear of authority. ... For them to really have a genuine learner voice that is reflective of student's experiences, they need to be supported to do that, independently of the institution.

An industry training manager explained that students who leave without finishing ...

...are not minded to necessarily respond to the institution that they have been with and they perhaps may wish to go back some time in the future, so they are not about to respond with a barrage of criticism about why they paused study.

Disability managers and advocates were consistent in their view that ...

People who have an intellectual disability have less voice than anybody else, and there are people in that cohort who literally have no voice, they are non-verbal, they don't speak. The problem with this in adult education and the battle we are fighting all the time is 'Should people like this *deserve* adult education?'

### **Recommendation 17**

- *That NVEAC conduct more research into learner voice, learner disadvantage and lack of learner participation in VET. Current research questions tend to focus on the advantages of participation as opposed to the disadvantages of not participating. Better understanding of the latter, and engagement with the voices of non-participants in order to learn how they might be encouraged to become involved in VET, would be more helpful in working towards the attainment of government priorities and participation targets.*

## **7. Strategies to assist learners who require extra support to express their opinions and needs**

The Australian interviews (Appendix 1) identified a number of small and relatively isolated initiatives in most states and territories which training managers point to as alternative ways of supporting learners in VET to express their needs and opinions. The difficulty in a regulatory environment is that the need to be flexible for diverse learners is regarded as less important in some management environments than is the consistency and comparability of the information from learners. By contrast, the interviews in Europe (Appendix 2) indicate that a much wider range of institutional mechanisms are used for hearing *and* responding to learner voice.

Several of the models used in individual Australian higher education institutions are worthy of consideration. One way of hearing learner voices in higher education is to move away from separate, formal and structured surveys which identify people as 'members of disadvantaged groups' on the basis of a tick on a survey, towards integrating the support of individuals into group studies and learning environments through early, continuing and interactive mentoring and discussion with teaching staff. Feedback by survey, as a higher education transition officer observed,

... to me is not the student voice. It is allowing students to speak in a comfortable environment and drawing out those students who are silenced for whatever reason. [Those typically silenced are] students with low socioeconomic status and the first in the family to attend university.

While student counsellors and disability liaison officers work in many public VET contexts and informally hear learners' voices, their role is more about providing information and referral than encouraging and setting up ongoing mentoring relationships. A disability officer observed:

Student experiences and attitudes to learning would probably be anecdotal. Students might access the counselling service of the disability liaison officer or the employment service and may well talk about their experiences ... but we don't have a formal means of collecting data,

The biggest perceived impediment to authentically engaging student voices, based on the interview data, is system inertia. As a state VET manager said in response to a question about using ICT to enhance the quality and number of respondents:

I think at this point our response rate is sufficient enough, and I don't feel that we have to pursue other avenues. We are getting a statistically significant response rate. Certainly, we need to think about broadening the scope of our survey, but we also need to consider the cost benefit of doing it. Our key performance indicator is getting people into work.

Of particular interest here is the advocacy role of the teachers and support staff in further education contexts in England, Scotland and Wales. There, examples of the use of electronic media to aid communication are significant. These include

texting questions and feedback (as in ‘Text Joe’ in Cornwall College<sup>18</sup>) from any student; using ‘talking mats’ in Scotland for people with complex learning difficulties; through to developing powerful advocacy voices as exemplified in Leeds<sup>19</sup>. In England a free publication available on line offers ideas about how to develop a stronger voice among learners with profound and complex learning difficulties<sup>20</sup>. Citizenship programmes and strong tutorial programmes within further education colleges provide the skills and opportunities for learners of all ages to participate as course representatives or to have their voices heard in other ways.

### ***Recommendation 18***

- *That NVEAC conduct further research on learner voice mechanisms that are proven to be effective in feeding back in a timely manner to students and teachers/trainers, information which reinforces and supports good teaching and learning for existing students, and which utilizes new information and communications technologies.*

## **8. The timing/scheduling of learner input/feedback to influence and optimize the learning experience**

The interview data from Australia, the UK, Ireland and Norway (Appendices 1 and 2) confirm that information is collected and feedback is sought from students in most education and training contexts during three broad time periods for somewhat different purposes. This information tends to be gathered: at or soon after enrolment, during the teaching and learning process, or at or soon after exit, as summarized below.

### *At or soon after enrolment*

Screening surveys and tests sometimes seek to determine which learners might be disadvantaged as learners in particular, predetermined categories. For example, tests and surveys can provide valuable commencing information for teachers, employers and trainers on students’ literacies or learning and sensory disabilities. If this information is collected and used sensitively and appropriately by educators with appropriate training, there is no doubt it can be used to optimize the learning experience. If it is not, there is a real danger the information can be counterproductive to learners. Any teaching method that presupposes deficit, particularly if this judgement is based solely on student self-perception risks teachers and their peers unfairly and inaccurately labelling and

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<sup>18</sup> ‘Over the past year as your CCSU President I’ve worked hard to ensure that your voice here at Cornwall college is louder than ever. From introducing a text-in service to relaunching the website, I’ve made sure that your opinions have been heard at every level in the College...’ (election address by presidential candidate, student union, Cornwall College)

<sup>19</sup> See Berkeley (2011)

<http://www.lsis.org.uk/AboutLSIS/MediaCentre/NewsArticles/Pages/The-Learner-Voice-creative-approaches-for-learners-with-learning-difficulties.aspx>

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.lsis.org.uk/AboutLSIS/MediaCentre/NewsArticles/Pages/The-Learner-Voice-creative-approaches-for-learners-with-learning-difficulties.aspx>



categorizing students. Teachers who presuppose students *will* be less capable are known from decades of research to produce self-fulfilling prophecies regardless of student ability.

There has been a tendency for state and federally funded programs to be funded on the basis of learners identifying themselves as being members of designated 'disadvantaged groups'. This data is part of the Australian VET information standard, and is routinely collected from students enrolled in publicly funded VET programs. Typically in Australia, the collection of data requires learners to tick a box that they are, for example, an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person, with a disability, from a culturally or linguistically diverse background, or from a particular socio-economic area, postcode or group. There are a number of advantages to funding bodies, institutions and researchers of knowing they have 'hit the target group'. There also are a number of significant disadvantages, as elaborated below, using Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as a salutary example.

Research shows that *on average* Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are significantly disadvantaged in education and training in all sectors of Australian education. There is a tendency to wrongly presuppose, on this basis, that *all* Indigenous Australians will be similarly disadvantaged in the teaching and learning process. In essence, there is a slippery and dangerous slide between average disadvantage and perceived universal deficit. In the case of Indigenous Australians (and any group defined by self-defined criteria such as impairment, sexuality or ethnicity), there is a real danger that their social marginalization (including through education and training) can be compounded through being labelled and shamed by the dominant, hegemonic and often negative social attitudes of more advantaged groups.

Recent international research into the relationship between learning and wellbeing (e.g. Cooper et al., 2010) highlights the adverse impact of social marginalization on learning and mental wellbeing *and* the vicious circle that tends to connect them:

People who are marginalized have relatively little control over their lives and the resources available to them; they may be stigmatized and are often on the end of negative public attitudes. Their opportunities to make social contributions may be limited and they may develop low self-confidence and low self-esteem. ... A vicious circle is set up. ... The impacts of marginalization, in terms of social exclusion are similar, whatever the origins and processes of marginalization. (Kirkwood et al., 2010, p.30)

There is a danger that any information about VET students and their 'disadvantaged backgrounds' (including ethnicity, literacy or disability), if not carefully and ethically collected and used by trained professional educators, can feed 'the vicious circle' and lead to further social marginalization through 'stigmatization, feelings of shame, victim mentality, stress, lack of control, loss of self-confidence and low expectations' (Kirkwood et al, p.30). The circle may be further expanded if other teaching staff, most fellow students and employers identify as members of advantaged groups and are aware of the disadvantaged labelling process.

### *During the teaching and learning process*

Teacher and trainer feedback, including from formative surveys, interviews and discussion in class, while learners are still in training is the *only* timely method of hearing and interacting with learner voice and feedback that is of direct and potential benefit to existing learners. This is the best and most effective method for ensuring improved quality of teaching and training. It results in interactive dialogue and information that can be fed back to learners while they are still able to benefit from the feedback.

### *At or after exit*

Exit, graduate and employment outcome surveys can and do give teachers and trainers a good sense of what worked and what did not. Extensive research in other education sectors shows that the timing and context of surveys has a big influence on the result, on student attitudes to the course, their learning and the teaching they received. Students are much more likely to be positive once they have successfully completed the assessment or the qualification and achieved an outcome (such as employment). Conversely, if they are not succeeding in the course, do not complete it, and do not achieve the outcome they intended, they tend to be much more negative. In any case, surveys, if administered post-course without any mechanism to feed results back to the students who completed them, have little or no impact on teaching.

In the UK, the timing of surveys sometimes deliberately takes account of schedules of student representative meetings and student parliaments. In both the UK and Australia, some institutions link student satisfaction and graduate surveys to central planning in the institution and hence into quality improvement cycles.

### **Recommendation 19**

- *That, because diverse learners need equally diverse ways of expressing their voices and engaging with their learning in meaningful ways, some of which rely on information and communications technologies, a range of ICT-based communication practices among students, teachers/trainers and RTOs need to be employed. Measures to be considered include:*
  - *the use of assistive, adaptive and rehabilitative devices [AT] for learners with disabilities*
  - *the use of blogs and wikis, with links to Twitter, Facebook, You Tube, LinkedIn and other media*
  - *the use of 'talking mats' (currently used in Scotland), Text Joe (Cornwall College, and development of specific social networking sites ('City Lit' – City Literary Institute, London).*

## **9. Ways in which training providers can systematically (1) gather and consider feedback from learners and (2) convey to learners how this feedback has been considered and/or acted upon**

Based on our interview data in both Australia and overseas (Appendix 1 and 2), feedback gathered from learners is rarely reported back to them or discussed with them; thus the title of our report *Closing the loop*. Few VET teachers and trainers have the ability, time or resources to seriously consider, analyse and act on survey data about teaching and learning during the relatively short teaching cycle. If such data gathering and feedback was to be individualized and personalized, there would be issues of confidentiality and privacy that would have to be considered. Some of the most highly developed and effective mechanisms for providing feedback to learners that we heard in Australia, particularly in the overseas interviews, involve the use of student representatives, student committees, student liaison groups, student parliaments, student councils and student forums (see also Cumming, 2011).

In the UK some institutions have a 'you said: we did' process which seeks to make institutions and teachers accountable and responsive to existing policies and practices. In some institutions in the UK, posters and print publications feed back information on 'you said: we did', as well as information being fed back through meetings, institution governing bodies, governance committee presentations and discussion groups.

## **10. Existing and/or potential strategies for resourcing the gathering and implementation of learner input/feedback**

Our interview data with VET stakeholders and students (Appendix 1) confirm an environment in Australia of widespread cynicism about the usefulness of surveys, and serious concerns about survey fatigue and regulatory overload. This cynicism is understandable given there is almost no useful feedback to teachers or learners. Conducting more surveys without more feedback would be most unwise.

Aside from the survey activity required to meet national (AQTF) reporting requirements, all VET providers are also subject to stringent audits by State and Territory authorities. As an example, one of many submissions to the *Inquiry into Victoria's regulatory framework* conducted in 2010 suggested that:

By far the most onerous, time consuming and inefficient audits are those imposed by the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority (VRQA). (Northern Melbourne Institute of TAFE (NMIT, 2010, Submission, p.24).

The sentiments in NMIT's submission, though they relate specifically to Victoria, were heard in very similar tones in most interviews with managers involved in VET delivery. As the NMIT (201, p19) submission argued strongly in its conclusion:

[In] relation to the regulatory framework, governments need to start from a base of defining what they want to achieve and for what purpose, authorise the public

service to gather information and regulate activity and nothing more. [In] Victoria we have a data gathering and compliance regime which is completely rampant and out of control. Information which is universally considered useless and irrelevant is nonetheless gathered each year as part of someone's job or to protect and maintain someone's scope of authority.

The extensive use of outcome surveys, particularly those conducted by NCVER, and the reporting of data required by all State and Territory authorities, seems to have resulted in survey overload. Our interview participants typically commented that the large amount of statistical data leads to a false sense that, since everyone has been counted, everything is OK, and the public VET dollar is being wisely spent and accounted for.

The attempt to aggregate and 'count everything' could be supplemented by, or replaced by, ABS-type research and sampling techniques that are inclusive of qualitative, on site interviews. Such an approach would be much more likely than routine quantitative surveys to detect *why* things have changed *in particular contexts* for groups, providers, communities and individuals. NCVER and other data can show that things *have* changed in a broad-brush sense on the basis of the limited number of standard questions asked, but it is impossible to gain insight into *why* these changes have occurred and what wider outcomes VET has produced than employment and vocational skills development. Importantly, there is such a delay in compiling and analysing national VET data that the VET system (and industry) is only belated able to respond to quantitative trends without knowing why things have changed or what might be done in response. In an ideal world where employment, the economy, education policies and funding were stable and guaranteed by governments, such surveys might be useful to determine trends in training quality. In a market driven system and unstable world economy, where a number of these factors are directly and immediately related, aggregated national surveys tend mainly to identify what numbers have changed and how greatly, but they are not particularly useful for separating out relationships and causality.

As an example, if governments (or organization like NVEAC) want to know whether VET is effective and equitable (or not) for Indigenous Australians (or any other disadvantaged group) in one or more national, regional or employment contexts, the most effective way is get a research team, that has no vested interests in the result, to go there and investigate the situation. Typically this will involve talking about it in a respectful way with all of the stakeholders. While such research may also involve surveys of 'learner voice' with current students, teachers, employers and the community, it also has the capacity to 'hear the voices' of the many more people who, for various reasons, are not VET students, or who have previously tried and not completed VET programs, or who have not achieved the outcomes they had anticipated.

The main advantage of such research is that it takes account of the many aspects of context, the varying perspectives of participants, and the many wider benefits of learning. Learners in VET are affected in terms of their participation and outcomes by many factors that we know from international research are much more important to them than the quality of the training, the learning

environment or the provider. Feinstein, Vorhaus and Sabates (2010), for example, show that these include the place, the community, learner identity, home and family environment, and the workplace environment as well as the global environment. They conclude that:

The explicit structural barriers to adult participation [in education and training] such as cost, access and time constraints may be less important than the valuation by individuals of the intrinsic value of the experience, based on prior experience. (Feinstein, Vorhaus and Sabates, 2010, p.316)

While it is widely assumed that education and training will lead to more (and more highly paid) work, research in the UK (as in Australia), including work by Feinstein, Vorhaus and Sabates (2010), suggests that completion of lower level VET courses does not necessarily lead to a significant increase in wages or employment prospects (p.318), and that economic returns from lower level VET courses are very difficult to demonstrate. We know from the research by the Wider Benefits of Learning Research Centre<sup>21</sup> that there are significant social benefits of engaging in learning, much of it unanticipated and hard to measure. These benefits are not necessarily any less valuable than employment outcomes. The voices of learners, when properly facilitated, can help to fill the gaps in our knowledge about what learners think and feel about their experiences. Without such voices our planning is poorer and quality is slower to improve.

There is a heavy reliance in Australia on the 'cold and hard', aggregated statistical national data collected by institutions, states and territories, as well as nationally by NCVER, on the simplistic assumption that more or any participation at any level in VET is good. Our view is that better value would be gained by more rigorous, in-depth research conducted on site, through institutions and with learners, on particular issues and target groups which are perceived to require independent scrutiny. Such research respects and engages institutions, teachers and students, and data and findings can be fed back to them in accessible, descriptive ways that enable them to engage in informed discussion and debate.

It is important to observe that while some useful longitudinal research relevant to VET is being conducted in Australia through the LSAY (Longitudinal Survey of Australian Youth), that research is affected over time in its accuracy and representation by low and decreasing response rates. It is also relevant to note that, in the UK, Central budget bears the cost of surveys. This same budget pays for student union grants and the cost of forums for consultation. All are perceived to be part of the necessary costs of quality improvement. Provider stakeholders we interviewed in the UK stressed the point that there was a substantial cost of *not* consulting and doing surveys. There was a possibility in an audit-based regime of being found wanting, of producing poorer quality programs, which can result in diminished reputation, poorer results from audit and inspection, and a lack of congruence with citizenship curriculum.

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<sup>21</sup> <http://www.learningbenefits.net/>

### **Recommendation 20**

- *That, despite a relatively high level of interest of many stakeholders in learning and teaching, it is important to recognize that there is significant inertia in VET for changing the way data is collected. It is important that RTOs provide a wider range of support mechanisms for learners who currently have limited voice. Such mechanisms will require extra resources and properly trained staff.*

### **Recommendation 21**

- *That the widespread nature of disadvantage amongst VET learners, particularly at lower VET qualification levels, is acknowledged and recognized. However, we recommend that the process of routinely naming and treating individuals and groups of learners as 'disadvantaged' on the basis of one or more indicators of disadvantage, despite the good intent, should be avoided. Such labelling is fraught with ethical and pedagogical problems.*

### **Recommendation 22**

- *That the current trend of 'collecting everything' by means of aggregated surveys that are conducted and analyzed remotely, be recognized as inappropriate and ineffectual. The process is invasive, expensive and unnecessary unless it has outcomes that will lead to the improvement of programs, and of teaching and learning. Instead, more effective ways of collecting data on disadvantage, on site and in context, should be used.*

## **Additional Recommendations**

Aside from the recommendations above that are specific to the ten project requirements, we identify three broad opportunities for VET in Australia to incorporate some aspects of UK best practice in learner voice. Our recommendation below is that it is timely for learner voice to become a strategic and coherent national strategy. We anticipate this may be attractive to all stakeholders in the VET sector if it also involves collecting less unnecessary, aggregated data for regulatory purposes and leads to improvements in *all* learner experiences, including those of currently disadvantaged learners.

Aside from this system level recommendation, we recommend that each VET provider be required, as part of their registration and re-registration, to identify an appropriate institutional strategy for learner voice. These strategies will likely be as diverse as the sector, its provider and its students, rather than being common to all VET providers. Indeed, scope for innovation and use of new interactive learner survey and feedback mechanisms and technologies should be encouraged.

### **Recommendation 23**

- *That each VET provider be required to formulate an institutional strategy on learner voice that includes:*
  - *a strategy to include learner voice in organizational governance at program committee, non-executive board and council levels*
  - *staff representatives from each course/curriculum area meeting regularly with students*
  - *systems to feed back to learners what learners have said and what the institution has done in response to what learners have said*
  - *electronic/digital systems to ensure learner voice to and from all learners, particularly those disadvantaged in any way*
  - *ways of hearing the voices of potential learners who are not yet involved in VET, and the voices of learners who have left VET courses prior to completion*
  - *provision of financial support for student organizations by each institution.*

### **Recommendation 24**

- *That NVEAC develop an overall national learner voice strategy, which includes a way of acknowledging and celebrating institutions and programs that develop good practices in relation to learner voice. The development of a national strategy must be a collaborative exercise, and is one NVEAC is best placed to undertake. Again, useful information to assist this process can be followed up in the references provided in this report.*

### **Recommendation 25**

- *That NVEAC undertake further research to identify effective mechanisms for ensuring that learner voice is heard in the context of learners as co-participants in the process of learning and teaching. The most urgent type of research that is required by NVEAC to enable it to claim that its recommendations are evidence-based is rigorous, systematic, qualitative, and preferably longitudinal research that engages primarily with learners on-site in RTOs and, equally importantly, with non-completers and non-participants in education and training in communities. The existing knowledge base, such as it is, seems to be confined to the perspectives of those who advocate for learners rather than the real experts – learners and potential learners.*

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## Appendix 1 Interview data from Australia

This Appendix provides an overview of the research methods and data from interviews and consultations within Australia about learner voice regulatory frameworks and provider accountability for acting on feedback from learners, particularly in relation to disadvantaged learners.

### Interview method

The research team conducted a total of 36 interviews in Australia with a total of 54 interviewees (some were group interviews) from all Australian states and territories (see Table 6). Most interviews were conducted on site but some involved telephone interviews. All interviews were taped and most were fully transcribed. The method used for the interviews is summarized in the Plain Language Statement for interviewees included in Appendix 4. The statement of Informed Consent, which was completed by each interviewee prior to interview, is provided in Appendix 5. The questions asked at interview are provided in Appendix 6.

*Table 6 Australian learner voice interviews by State & Territory*

States & Territories	Interviews	Interviewees
Victoria	5	8
South Australia	6	8
Western Australia	6	7
Northern Territory	5	8
Queensland	5	10
New South Wales*	3	4
Australian Capital Territory*	2	3
Tasmania	4	6
<b>Totals</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>54</b>

KEY: All interviews by Barry Golding, except those marked \* by Annette Foley.

### Profile of interviewees

While not all the following categories of interviewee were covered in every Australian State or Territory, interviews included perspectives from:

- Disability Services Officers and representatives
- Equity Services Coordinators
- Indigenous VET (Vocational Education & Training) Managers
- Student Liaison Officers
- Student organisation representatives
- Directors of VET Programs, Quality and Student Services
- VET students, teachers, researchers and trainers
- Government VET Policy, Strategy & Program Officers
- Government VET Contract and Performance Managers
- Private Provider Managers
- Community Centre managers
- VET and ACE (Adult & Community Education) Directors and Managers

- Apprenticeship Coordinators
- Industry representatives
- University Academics and Postgraduate researchers
- People with VET data management or research roles.

### **Themes emerging from and explored in the interviews**

In order to help structure the findings, the research team created the headings below based on an analysis of patterns of responses to our interview questions.

Findings from our interviews about *'How information is collected from students on attitudes to learning?'* and *'How is the information analysed, summarized and fed back to learners?'* is summarized in our main report against the ten project requirements.

*What regulatory frameworks are in place for collecting information about student experience of teaching and learning?*

This interview question was particularly relevant and widely discussed by State and Territory VET managers responsible for VET contracting and policy. It complemented and provided a 'reality check' to the comprehensive desk review of the regulatory frameworks applying to government-funded VET in Australia. These stipulate that all Registered Training Organisations (RTOs), as one government policy manager put, it are designed to:

... seek feedback from their clients which includes employers and students about the services they offer. And they need to use that feedback to either improve or make changes depending on what the learner is actually feeding back.

While this understanding is widely shared in each Australian State and Territory, there is a similarly shared and widespread perception that:

...the extent to which the RTOs actually do [seek feedback] effectively might be questionable sometimes. ... I mean some RTOs comply, other RTOs don't see benefit in feedback and informing continuous improvement.

There was considerable frankness on the part of interviewees, many of whom were critical of the perceived weakness of the current regulatory framework. They also criticized the minimal use, even by industry training bodies, of the data already collected as stipulated within this framework. As one industry training representative summarized this view, there is ...

... nothing in the regulatory framework that requires us to collect information. We get a lot feedback from students but it's not made use of in any shape or form, to my knowledge. ... No one analyses it. No one reports on it. It sits in those files never to be seen again.

Another industry training board representative stated:

There are no pathways to seek learner voice at all through the Board. The Board is what we call 'market intelligence' and is about the industry, it is not about students, so it's the employer's perspective of the work readiness of the staff. ... In terms of closing that loop ... back to the training, organisations, the quality [registration] bodies within the system, we don't do that.

Our conclusion here is summarized neatly by a VET academic:

There is a big question about the extent to which vocational education and training is dominated by a regulatory regime around an instrumental notion of audit which is meant to capture and provide a guarantee as a proxy for students.

*What account is taken of the diversity of experiences of students who may be disadvantaged in the learning context?*

This question elicited the most diverse set of responses, which were framed largely according to the interviewee's role and previous experience of student diversity. Representatives and advocates of disability organisations, for example, focussed particularly on the difficulties experienced by people with a very wide range of disabilities in responding to a standard, written survey. These respondents also discussed difficulties with alternative (often qualitative) learner feedback mechanisms because it was difficult to tell who was actually responding. Was it, for example, the learner, the teacher, the parent or the carer? There were also related discussions about the often-related difficulties posed by feedback from learners with limited cognitive, prose, written, computer and conversational literacies.

Representatives of learners from culturally and linguistically diverse groups tended to focus, aside from the issue of language, on the different cultural expectations of these students and the power relations embedded in different learner feedback mechanisms. Migrants, refugees, and Indigenous Australians, for example, were said to be more likely to be suspicious of surveys and other feedback mechanisms, fearing the consequences of speaking and feeding back honestly.

Some interesting and important insights were provided by some younger interviewees who tended to shine the spotlight less on deficit models of traditional literacies and disability. They indicated that they felt more at home with new and different literacies. For example, a younger, 'Generation Y' Aboriginal person reflected on the different attitudes of many 'Gen Y' people, including herself, to written surveys sent to the home. She explained that:

[If] I have to take the effort to write it out and then go and find a post box to send it to, I haven't done it. If it was on line [as a blog, on Facebook, on a TAFE website] ... absolutely, I would. For Gen Y, it's more inviting than having a piece of you.

During the Northern Territory interviews, particularly strong views and informed insights were expressed about the way Indigenous Australian voices are seldom sought, heard, considered or acted. This is despite the copious quantitative evidence that VET programs are generally not working in many parts of remote Australia, where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders comprise a significant proportion of the population (37% in the case of the Northern Territory: NT). There was agreement that learner voice mechanisms used in the NT and other remote learning and training contexts were very poor and that standard mechanisms for eliciting student feedback do not work in these locations.



A wide range of reasons were suggested for this perceived failure, including (but going well beyond) language and cultural difference. As one industry interviewee said, “You wouldn’t hear from [Indigenous students] at all.” There are particular concerns that market mechanisms on their own are inappropriate in these thin market contexts. There was broad agreement from several interviewees in the Northern Territory with the statement that ‘Remote Australia can be considered a “failed state”, and that government arrangements and administration and policy significantly contributes to these conditions’ (Desert Knowledge, 2006, p.9)

*What is understood by learner voice and learner feedback?*

In general there was a poor understanding amongst interviewees of either learner voice or, particularly, learner feedback, either theoretically or practically other than at a classroom, workshop or workplace level. There was a widespread perception among the interviewees that in the ‘competitive training market’ learner voice is rarely sought or heard other than when students make their feelings known ‘by their feet’: that is, when they stop coming to programs. As one VET academic put it, there is little thought or consideration given ‘to really, genuinely give voice. ... It’s a low order priority. I don’t think much is done at all.’

Learner voice and feedback is particularly poorly implemented in VET at an institution, course, or faculty level. Students are rarely consulted or included on Committees or Boards. When they are, it is typically only one person on a Committee or Board with little effective voice or mechanisms to hear, consult with, or feed back to the student body in the relatively small number of VET contexts in Australia where such a body is active and democratically elected.

In our final section, where we report against the ten project requirements, we conclude that there are poor understandings of the concept of learner voice in Australia and apparently limited interactions of VET staff with learner voice. In that same section of the report we compare the limited learner feedback that is available in Australia with insights and understandings that are reported in the European literature and discussed in interviews conducted for this project in the UK, Ireland and Norway.

*What aspects of learner voice and feedback are most effective?*

Consistent with the answers provided by respondents to the previous question, learner voice, though still perceived as weak, is regarded by most interviewees and being most effective at the classroom and workshop level. Learner voice was perceived to be more active and best developed within adult and community education provider contexts. While disability organisations and advocates are relatively highly organized and networked to advocate *for* learner voice on a number of levels including nationally, the extent to which people with a disability themselves express learner voice is much less clear. On the basis of the evidence collected so far, it seems fair to conclude that students in general, much less disadvantaged students and those with disabilities, are rarely consulted or heard.

*What aspects of learner voice and feedback are not effective?*

There is copious evidence that the voices of the high proportion of people who have left VET courses without completing are rarely heard. Learner voice is also seldom heard by industry training bodies. A large amount of quantitative data is collected by survey at the commencement and completion of courses, mainly for national, state and institutional regulatory purposes. The data that might help inform learner voice are seldom analysed and very rarely returned in a timely way to the teachers or learners. When the data are returned it is seldom in a form that is useful or effective to improve either teaching or courses, or to feed back to the students who supplied the data.

An industry interviewee in the Northern Territory described the perceived problem quite emphatically:

There is no learner voice, especially in remote communities. No one could give a rat's. The only learner voice that you might get is something from the RTO, and they are just as likely to say, 'I had a bad experience in the remote community and we weren't able to complete', because everything in remote communities is centred around there being enough trainees to make it economic for a trainer to go and train. ... And once you get below that level you stop training. ... Once you have lost someone you have lost them. ... No one is interested in why.

*What mechanisms are used to hear and give feedback to learners who leave before they finish their courses?*

Consistent with the quote directly above, and with minor exceptions, the response given to this question by a wide range of respondents was overwhelmingly consistent: 'Nothing', 'Almost nothing' or 'I have no idea'. This is despite all parties interviewed recognising that hearing the voices of this group of students is, as one interviewee put it, 'getting to the heart of the matter to those that might matter the most'. A point frequently made was that heeding the voices of non-completers might provide clues about why so many students fail to complete their courses, why they disengage from learning or from courses, and particularly about the barriers they face due to intervening life and work circumstances.

One ACE provider representative complained that, despite the best efforts of teachers to track students who leave before they finish their courses, 'You ring people up who withdraw to find out the reason they disengage, [and] they won't answer phone calls or SMS or emails. ... It is very intensive work.' One VET manager summed up the responses to this question from most interviewees by saying, 'We have done it in some isolated cases but there is no system wide approach to [following up learners who have left before they finish their courses].'

By contrast, some higher education providers, concerned about high levels of non-completion and attrition and with a rich body of research evidence into the first year experience in higher education, have set up mentoring and counselling programs to detect and support students in difficulty before they leave. As a

coordinator of one such program said that the mentoring program allows him to 'hear that it's going pear shaped for them and that they want to leave.' The point is that, having heard the message, the coordinator can then try and diagnose and address the student's situation before they leave.

Similarly, in some ACE and VET contexts, individual learning plans can provide a mechanism for teachers to work with students as individuals with different and diverse learning and other needs. This way of teaching requires teachers to interact directly with their students. In the case of some apprenticeships and traineeships, there is a formal process of interviewing students before they leave a course. In one instance, a former VET manager said that he found home visits particularly useful. This manager claimed, 'It gets very revealing going to a home or what counts as home; that tells you an awful lot about why the student is not attending.' In another instance, potential non-completers of an Adult Migrant English Program were identified and contacted by phone after three absences since non-attendance in the program would lead to suspension of their Centrelink (federal income support) payments.

NCVER has undertaken several surveys that have addressed the phenomenon of non-completion of some VET sub-groups, primarily to inform research and policy rather than as a form of learner feedback. In 2004 NCVER conducted an Indigenous outcome survey using interviewees with appropriate Indigenous cultural awareness. This survey was able to elicit some useful insights into students' non-completion. In addition, on two occasions NCVER have undertaken an apprentice and trainee destination survey with purposeful selection of respondents who had and had not finished their courses.

One of the main issues in this area, as a VET academic noted, appears to be the perception that students may leave before completing their course for reasons other than difficulties they have experienced with the learning:

[The reasons for leaving] are associated with the difficulties of being a student, [poverty], living costs, transport, poor community resources to engage with learning, not being able to get accommodation and living stressed-up lives. The TAFE and VET sectors have traditionally seen themselves in the position of a second chance education, so you are going to get many people on the margins of very inequitable economic situations, so they find it very hard to live and that prevents them from continuing.

In one instance where a non-completion survey had been undertaken, a TAFE provider manager noted that the survey showed that:

95 per cent of the time [the reason for non-completion] was for personal reasons. Husband had got a job interstate, they just found out they were pregnant, they got a new job, they were moving house, whatever the domestic reasons were.

This same manager blamed outdated customer management and administration systems in that State for poor data management. The state systems, he suggested,

...are just so out of date. The investments are so great. The lead-in times are so great and by the time you get to technology it is already out of date. The private RTOs are the ones who have a distinct advantage over us because we just can't

respond to chasing technology [like a private sector organisation can]. As a public provider we don't have the systems. We don't have the technology that would allow us to [track non-completers] without a massive investment in a manual survey.

*What is done to identify potential learners who for whatever reason, do not enrol?*

Consistent with the general of lack evidence throughout the VET system about people who leave before completing, there is even less evidence about, or effort to identify, who is *not* participating in VET programs. As one industry manager said, 'I don't think at the moment that anyone is asking questions of people who don't participate. I think it's extremely important to ask.' An NCVER informant noted, 'From the administrative collection we are only looking at those who are participating so we don't know very much about the people who don't enrol.'

The perceived lack of market research to identify people who are not accessing and purchasing VET services compared to those who do was regarded as a huge failing of the VET system by many interviewees. One ACE manager illustrated the general view:

It's just a common sense approach rather than asking people who [already] have lots of access to education how much they value the education. I would be much more interested in looking at parts of Australia and particular cohorts who have really limited access and talk to them about whether there are barriers to their participation or whether the research doesn't suit them or the offerings don't suit their particular needs.

A disability manager pointed to other ways of thinking about this question, suggesting that there are inadequate mechanisms in VET to provide adequate counselling and career advice people who *don't* and also who *do* enrol. He explained: 'There is not a lot of career information or career education resources for the teacher and students. [Sometimes] students do enrol when they shouldn't.'

A VET academic neatly linked this question with the similar issue of non-completion in higher education.

We can have all these outreach things and we can go out to the market, but unless we can fundamentally change the system ... to engage them in authentic learning that speaks to where they are at... they are going to encounter the same problems that excluded them in the first place and [that means] they get double failure.

*How does the role of the interviewee affect their perceptions of learner voice?*

As might be expected, interviewees responded quite differently to the same broad set of semi-structured questions. The difference often seemed related to the substantive position they held. The range of responses is briefly summarized in point form below.

- VET and ACE managers responsible for contracting, delivery and policy formulation and implementation of VET programs at State, Territory and provider level were typically very careful to ensure that their answers

and the discussion did not unduly contradict their management, statutory, policy or regulatory roles.

- Advocacy and Equity managers were more likely to concentrate their discussion on the group or organisation that they were advocating on behalf of.
- NCVER interviewees restricted their comments mainly to their own area of responsibility for their respective VET collections.
- Industry representatives were surprisingly open and frank about their perceived lack of learner voice in the current VET system, including in apprenticeships and traineeships.
- Education and VET academics, possibly by virtue of their relative independence, were more likely to take critical perspectives and identify parallels and differences in learner voice between education sectors, particularly between higher education and school education.

#### *Learner voice is also affected by location*

Given that interviews were conducted in all states and territories, it is possible to make some broad comparisons among state and territory jurisdictions. While beyond the brief in this research, one aspect that is striking is the significant and widespread concern about the need to better listen and respond to Learner Voice in the Northern Territory (NT). The Territory's unique and relatively remote location and hinterland, its unusual VET arrangements (without a TAFE presence or history), and the high proportion of Aboriginal people amongst its population are all reflected in the different perceptions of how well the system is working or not in the NT. On balance, the perception is that it is not working very well.

It would be desirable in any future, comprehensive, research study about learner voice to also hear learner and teacher perspectives, and to conduct some interviews in regional, rural and remote sites in several different states or territories selected on the basis of their objective remoteness and accessibility (such as measured by Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia: ARIA+).

## Appendix 2

### Interview data from the UK, Ireland and Norway

This Appendix provides an overview of the research methods and presents data from interviews and consultations in the UK, Ireland and Norway about learner voice regulatory frameworks and provider accountability for acting on feedback from learners, particularly in relation to disadvantaged learners. This data is summarized within our main report under the heading, 'UK, Irish and Norwegian insights into learner voice'.

Because of language issues and the cost of interpreting, it was agreed to seek interviews in countries in which participants were likely to speak English quite well. Table 7 summarizes the interviews completed with interviewees in England, other parts of the UK, Ireland and Norway. In most cases interviews were conducted in person but some interviews were conducted by phone. In total, fifteen audio taped and fully transcribed interviews were conducted in twelve sites with a total of 59 interviewees.

*Table 7 Learner voice interviews completed in the UK, Ireland & Norway*

<b>Institutions/Countries</b>	<b>Interviews</b>	<b>Interviewees</b>
Leeds City College & Leeds City Council, England	1	2
Ruskin College, Oxford, England	1	3
NALA, Dublin, Ireland	2	9 <sup>22</sup>
NIACE Dysgu Cymru, Cardiff, Wales	2	6
Morley College, London, England	1	7
Scotland's Colleges, Stirling, Scotland	1	1
Leicester College, Leicester, England	1	8
Ofsted (national inspectorate), England	1	6
College of Haringey, Enfield and NE London, England	1	6
Learning and Skills Improvement Service for England, England	1	3
VOX, Oslo, Norway	1	6
City Literary Institute, London, England	2	2
<b>Totals</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>59</b>

Notes: All interviews by Peter Lavender: VOX is a 'National Agency for Lifelong Learning' in Norway.

### Profile of interviewees

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<sup>22</sup> Interviews were also held with nine other staff but not transcribed.

While not all categories of interviewees were covered in every situation, care was taken to cover many different roles and interests. Interviews included perspectives from:

- Principals, Chief Executives, Vice Principals and Deputy Principals of vocational education and training institutions
- Learning Support Coordinators in further education
- Head of Unit for those with profound and complex learning difficulties
- Coordinator for foundation studies/basic skills
- Adult learner representatives of diverse ages (including President of Student Union; Coordinator of adult learners' forum)
- Board Trustee
- Course tutors, Heads of Department, Heads of Faculty
- National Project Managers, National Development officers
- National Inspectors of Education
- Civil servants in a relevant government department dealing with education and training
- Data analysts.

### **Common themes emerging from the questions in Europe**

The data from the interviews in Europe are analysed under a number of thematic headings.

#### *How is information collected from students on attitudes to learning?*

There is variable practice among VET organisations in collecting data from students in the countries sampled. Most education providers in England commented that too much information has been collected in the past. They are now looking forward to reduced expectations of the amount of data required by the Skills Funding Agency and the Young People's Learning Agency in response to the Government's intention to reduce bureaucracy and to give the sector greater freedom from central government control. This intention was set out in the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) document, *The further education and skills system reform plan: Building a world class skills system* (BIS, 2011s). There is an immense amount of data on individual learners stored at college and national level that identifies learner characteristics and course information.

However, information on attitudes to learning, being qualitative, is held more usually (if at all) at course tutor level - and this is common across Europe<sup>23</sup>. Only

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<sup>23</sup> Scale poses a problem here. Individual Learner Record data (provisional 2010/11) shows that in England alone in the 2010/11 academic year the State supported 3,129,200 learners aged 19 years and over who participated in some form of Government-funded FE and skills training (of whom 739,300 were aged 19-24 and 2,390,000 aged 25 or over). Of these, there were:

- 460,400 Apprentices
- 369,800 Below Level 2 (excluding Skills for Life)
- 956,200 Skills for Life (including Literacy, Numeracy and Language)
- 639,300 learners participating in Literacy courses
- 630,600 learners participating in Numeracy courses
- 972,100 Full Level 2
- 489,500 Full Level 3
- 36,100 Level 4 or higher.

where diagnostic assessment is routine did tutors keep this kind of data systematically, as in the case of learners with learning disabilities or those following literacy courses. In some instances education providers with adult learners were using the five-stage Recognising and Recording Progress and Achievement process (RARPA)<sup>24</sup> that was designed as a systematic way of introducing rigour in non-accredited work, such that it justified funding from the public purse. Where the RARPA process is used, individuals record their own perceptions and teachers would have information on student attitudes to learning from Stage 2 onwards. Use of RARPA is expected of all non-accredited programmes as good practice, though it was not evident outside England.

*How is the information analysed, summarized and fed back to learners?*

Where students with learning disabilities are enrolled, the process of generating feedback is a joint one between tutor or learning support worker and student. In Scotland, for example, use of electronic communication mats has made the process both more tangible and more collective. It was regarded as standard literacy practice (also in ESOL [English as a Second or Other Language] and numeracy) to have an individual learning plan for each student that recorded this kind of information as students progressed. Significant research work on 'catching confidence' and 'formative assessment' has also led to more systematic and widespread use in further education of joint recording of attitudes to learning and how this is influencing progress. Much attention is paid to advice and instruction from Ofsted (the national inspection organisation in England), Estyn (the inspectorate for Wales). Other bodies, such as NALA (National; Adult Literacy Agency in Ireland), suggest good practice for adult literacy programmes that involve learners having their own clear voice in any assessment process.

*What regulatory frameworks are in place for collecting information about student experience of teaching and learning?*

Few regulatory frameworks are aimed at collecting information about student experience. However, in England there are several such mechanisms. First, annual surveys are carried out of students' perceptions in relation to their experiences in the further education ('TAFE') sector. Second, an annual survey of student satisfaction is carried out for the Skills Funding Agency that is part of BIS. The survey is changing. The Learner Satisfaction Survey in 2011/12 (formerly known as Learner Views) will be part of the new Public Information Framework. It will make use of the existing Framework for Excellence (FfE) performance indicators (PIs), including the Learner Views survey. The FfE was designed as a way of assessing the effectiveness of individual institutions.

In line with Government policy, the new Public Information Framework is focused on ensuring that the public get good information about the courses and

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Some 685,800 adult learners were funded from the Adult Safeguarded Learning Budget. Not included in the data above are young people attending college rather than school; those taking higher education courses funded by the HEFCE (England) and adult students entirely paying for their own provision.

Source: Individualised Learner Record, based on provisional 2010/11 data.

<sup>24</sup> See [http://resources4adultlearning.excellencegateway.org.uk/themes/assessment/rarpa\\_thefivestages.htm](http://resources4adultlearning.excellencegateway.org.uk/themes/assessment/rarpa_thefivestages.htm) [accessed January 2012]



provision available to them. The Learner Satisfaction Survey for 2011/12 runs from 14 November 2011 to 25 May 2012. An example of a summary report for 2009/10 is available at BIS (2011e). It is worth noting that learners are asked key questions about their experience of teaching and learning. It is expected that all publicly funded FE institutions are included in their provider scope. Almost all providers interviewed in England found the survey of help but only for benchmarking. Most said they would find it more useful to survey students themselves because directly relevant course level data can then be obtained, which is more useful than the national survey data that is necessarily general. One institution processed the survey results independently (through a research company based outside the UK).

The new Learner Satisfaction survey is an online survey and can be completed at any time, 24 hours a day during the survey window from any internet-linked device including laptops, BlackBerrys and i-phones. In exceptional circumstances institutions can apply to use paper surveys with some of the learners if it is felt that it would be impossible for them to complete the survey online. The Skills Funding Agency (SfA) lists the providers in Table 8 as being 'in scope':

*Table 8          Learner satisfaction scope by provider grouping*

<b>Provider groupings</b>	<b>Learner Satisfaction</b>
General FE Colleges	Yes
Sixth Form Colleges	No
Independent Specialist Providers	No
Specialist Colleges (including Art & design, and Land based)	Yes
Dance and Drama Academies	No
Specialist Designated Institutions	Yes
Higher Education Institutions	Yes
Other Public Funded Institutions (e.g. local authorities)	Yes
Private Sector Public Funded Institutions	Yes

In terms of course-level feedback, a pilot in 2010/11 involved learners being given the option to answer a small number of questions at Course Level. It is SfA's intention that, subject to data reliability, course level responses will be published to provide useful information for prospective learners. Providers are asked to refer to a Course Level guidance note for more information on how to prepare learners for the Course Level questions of the survey.

However, a more immediate and less 'research-based' approach is in use in one England institution. Here learners complete a 'trip advisor'-type assessment of their course whenever they wish. This is online, and, of course, public and any prospective student can see the comments clearly, course by course for every course put on by the institution. Daily monitoring by the college means that there is immediate feedback to the management of what students think of their teaching in their courses.

Second, there are some research surveys. For example, in 2011 a survey of learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities was carried out, partly to inform Government strategy in relation to this group of learners in further education (BIS, 2011b). Most providers interviewed in that survey said they had received no feedback on difficulties experienced by their learners in relation to

completing the national survey, involving staff where students had barriers of communication (deaf, blind etc).

Third, the Public Information Framework, which is as strong as the SfA student satisfaction expectation, is the one required for inspection. Again, this is the case in Wales and England. In Wales the inspectorate set out their expectations very clearly:

The purpose of the guidance is to help inspectors to communicate effectively with learners in order to gain their views as part of the inspection process. In addition, the guidance may help providers to gather the views of learners as part of the process of their self-evaluation. Learner voice is a key source of evidence of achievement, attitudes and wellbeing. By listening to learners, inspectors will give learners the opportunity to show their knowledge and understanding of their work, how they are doing and what they need to do to improve. It will also give them an opportunity as to whether they feel supported, and to what extent the provider contributes to their wellbeing. The learners that are to be interviewed should be selected carefully... (Estyn, July 2010, Supplementary guidance for listening to learners Estyn, Cardiff, Wales)

Estyn suggest that, as in England, every institution write and publish a self-assessment report in which the views of learners form a key part. Estyn go on to suggest that any provider using public money ought to take account of appropriate methods of communication with learners (especially where there may be barriers) and that inspectors (and providers) need to listen well and ask a variety of questions. Examples are given in the guidance. Respondents in interview all mentioned the inspectorate's expectations as being a strong motivator for action within their institutions – far more so than SfA surveys. Ofsted in England have recently given notice that they will be listening even closer to what learners say about their experiences.

At this stage it is worth noting that a national committee on learner voice has been established in the UK to monitor the programme between the Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS) and the National Union of Students. It is expected that this monitoring will contribute ideas for a development programme for the near future. It is also worth noting that the Government has given notice of its intention to research further the wider benefits of learning, which had begun under the Wider Benefits of Learning Research Centre at the University of London (WBLRC, 2012).

*What account is taken of the diversity of experience of students who may be disadvantaged in the learning context?*

Most providers were well aware of the barriers some students face and made particular efforts to encourage these learners to persist in their courses. For example one provider talked of employing BSL (British Sign Language) signers to 'hear' from deaf students. Another mentioned their expectation that course tutors with particular skills in communicating with adults with profound and complex learning difficulties would assist students. In response to this question one provider, with over 2,000 students for whom English is not their first language, said they used native speakers and ESOL support tutors to identify

learners' views. Almost all respondents said they took great account of differences. Students confirmed this view. In Norway, learners are asked their views as part of their information, advice and guidance process, which in turn takes account of any barriers they might be up against.

*What is understood by learner voice and learner feedback?*

One respondent summed up the generally heard response: "Well, not student questionnaires, that's for sure." He went on to explain that in his provision (entirely learners with challenging behaviour or profound and complex learning difficulties) learner voice was an essential part of the curriculum and all its processes. He concluded his comments with a description of course reviews led by learners using information technology to speak for them. This willingness to use technology to enable learners to express their views was a common theme where students were faced with significant barriers.

*What aspects of learner voice and feedback are most effective?*

In Ireland learners in literacy schemes said that they found their voice was heard and effectively listened to through:

- forming a national committee to speak for learners
- having training in public speaking
- addressing the European Parliament about literacy matters
- establishing a person 'by the door' for nervous students on enrolment
- the participative way their tutors involved them in everything.

In Wales and England the Workers' Educational Association (WEA) uses a course representative system, and this was the case in several further education colleges – the largest with over 450 representatives<sup>25</sup> brought together at department and faculty level through facilitated discussion groups. Some learners commented on their role as giving them new citizenship skills (public speaking; listening to others etc) and some providers made strong points about the inadequacy of having learners on Boards and Trusts if there was not a system of learner meetings feeding in to this role.

The practice of inviting 'trip-advisor'-type feedback on courses and involving learners interviewing and selecting new staff are not yet widespread but are common enough to imply an emerging trend. Two providers made the point that having a learner engagement strategy was fundamental to their quality improvement as an institution. Another pointed out that it was fundamental to the curriculum planning and basic pedagogy that learners be involved as co-producers of the curriculum.

Common to many providers in England was the view that learner voice information was used as feedback on teacher performance and for ensuring student satisfaction. A key mechanism, echoed in at least three interviews, was

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<sup>25</sup> This institution had to invent 'Super reps' to take forward the views of other representatives, there being so many.

the 'you said: we did' process. This involved posters listing students' comments (sometimes in every classroom, corridor and intranet) contained in feedback through course representatives, learner liaison committees or learners/governors committees (i.e. 'you [student] said'), followed by what the college was doing in response (i.e. 'we [managers] did'). Some institutions said they were moving to more frequent (fortnightly) reporting of student responses in this way because of its impact.

*What aspects of learner voice are not effective?*

One national development officer made the point that learner engagement was so developed that she had great concern for the staff. Other interviewees confirmed this view: for example, learners involved in interviewing for new staff and in observing and judging teachers' teaching. There was some concern among VET providers about the cost of supporting learner voice initiatives. Several providers felt that having learners on their governing bodies had no real benefit for learner or college and needed re-thinking. The national committee on learner voice in England suggested that work needs to be done to improve the expectations of all governors in relation to student governors.

*What mechanisms are used to hear and give feedback to learners who leave before they finish their courses?*

Only one provider interviewed said they did this well. It is usually expected that course tutors will follow up students who leave, usually through email. It was suggested by one institution that swift telephone follow-up on absenteeism in part-time programmes makes a big difference to retention. It was agreed by most providers that they could do better in this area. One provider found that telephone calls to students at home asking them if they were all right ("We missed you today and were worried about you") brought the vast majority of students back to college with limited absenteeism. Retention rates increased to over 90 per cent from 85 per cent in one year.

*What is done to identify potential learners who, for whatever reason, do not enrol?*

This question led to most discussion in all interviews in the UK, Ireland and Norway. Three key points emerged. First, that robust information, advice and guidance (IAG) was key to learner participation (Norwegian experience suggests that this is critical). Second, that learners' positive stories attract other learners to courses. This is well proven through Adult Learners' Week activity in the UK and Australia, and confirmed through interviews where many respondents pointed to the marketing potential of learners' views and experiences. Third, that direct approaches to potential learners through groups, clubs, friends and relatives is both more immediate and more successful than blanket marketing.

For example, providers commented that some of the most effective outreach work was done in partnership with the voluntary sector and other bodies close to 'the front line' when it came to attracting those who need to enrol but, for reasons of diffidence, cannot actually do so. In Ireland the NALA students'

committee reported the positive impact of learners being stationed at enrolment points to catch those (like themselves) who found the process intimidating.

*How does the role of the interviewee affect perceptions of learner voice?*

There are similar findings here to the findings made about the Australian interviewees. For example:

- in the countries sampled, national development officers and policy makers focus on learner voice as a critical means of improving quality and ensuring that courses provided met students' needs;
- teachers, tutors and inspectors saw a direct link between learner voice and the preparation for active citizenship later on;
- principals and chief executives mentioned the importance of going beyond regulatory frameworks and the important place of learner voice in improving quality and enhancing a provider's competitive edge;
- the growing confidence of learner voice when supported by student union activities (such as leadership training, equality training or model constitutions).

*How is learner voice affected by location?*

There is a big discrepancy in views of learner voice between different kinds of providers. In institutions where learners are largely or entirely part-time, course representative systems were less popular, although the WEA is an exception here for some of their courses. The largest providers have developed system-wide approaches to obtaining learner feedback and see the next stage of learner voice development as being in relation to co-production or co-ownership of the learning and teaching process (such as through interviewing and judging quality of teaching).

All respondent providers in England and Wales had learners on their Trust or College Boards, with varying degrees of effectiveness. There was no difference between the experiences of providers in relation to programmes deemed to be largely vocational and those deemed not. Where there was no inspectorate or history of inspection the learner voice developments were much more focused on consulting adults (Jude, 2003), enhancing learner democracy (Horne, Lekhi, & Blaug, 2006) and promoting wellbeing than in improving quality or challenging poor teaching.

## **Appendix 3      *Scope and limitations***

The scope of the research and each of the discrete Phases above was subject to a number of limitations in terms of scope of the project, the budget, methodology, time lines, the number of interviews and the literature accessed.

### **Scope**

The funding body, NVEAC, specified that a key output of this project would be policy research paper that examines the key principles and effective models for gathering and acting on feedback to and from learners, particularly disadvantaged learners. The key anticipated outputs included (but was not limited by):

- identifying the current obligations for providers under the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF);
- identifying relevant legislation and current obligations for providers;
- examining relevant approaches to student engagement and student voice being implemented in the VET sector, as well as practices employed in the ACE, higher education and schools sectors, and overseas, which would be pertinent to VET;
- identifying the nature and type of input/feedback that should be collected from learners;
- assessing mechanisms for collecting student feedback (e.g. individual learning plans, student online surveys, mobile phone texting, assistive technologies);
- examining and identifying factors which make some learners reluctant to express their views and ways of overcoming their reluctance,
- determining appropriate strategies to assist learners who require extra support to express their opinions and needs;
- advising on the timing/scheduling of learner input/feedback to influence and optimize the learning experience;
- exploring ways in which training providers can systematically (1) gather and consider feedback from learners; and (2) convey to learners how this feedback has been considered and/or acted upon; and
- examining existing and/or potential strategies for resourcing the gathering and implementation of learner input/feedback.

NVEAC anticipated that a key outcome of this project would be provision of advice on principles and approaches for systematically obtaining and acting on feedback to and from diverse learners in VET in Australia, particularly disadvantaged learners, and on how the AQTF could be strengthened.

### **Methodology**

Our team (Prof Barry Golding, Dr Peter Lavender, Prof Lawrie Angus, and Dr Annette Foley) developed a detailed methodology for this project based on NVEAC specifications focusing on the development of a policy research paper for NVEAC.

The agreed methodology included:

- a review and analysis of the AQTF and available literature and research on effective student engagement models and responsive provider strategies in VET, ACE, other education sectors and overseas educational practice, with a focus on the engagement of disadvantaged learners;
- consultation with the Australian ACE sector, registered training providers, higher education providers, student organisations and student representatives;
- preparation of an initial draft paper for consideration by the NVEAC Action Group; and
- refinement and finalisation of the paper based on feedback from the NVEAC Action Group.

## **Research phases**

The research team recognized from the outset that there is the huge range of recent research that is potentially relevant to learner voice, much of which has been conducted internationally. The team used a strategic approach that broke down the research task in five achievable phases as elaborated below.

*Phase 1* (for which Golding and Foley were responsible) involved a series of interviews and consultations in Australia about learner voice regulatory frameworks and provider accountability for obtaining and acting on feedback from learners, particularly from disadvantaged learners. It involved a total approximately two hours of audio-recorded, group interviews in each of eight state and territory capitals with VET and ACE authorities, registered training providers, higher education providers and student organisation representatives. In some States and Territories interviews and consultations also included representatives of peak VET, ACE and national bodies responsible for disadvantaged learners, as well as with prominent researchers involved in learner voice research, including through the NCVER in Adelaide.

*Phase 2* (for which Lavender was responsible) involved UK and EU interviews and consultations about learner voice regulatory frameworks and provider accountability for obtaining and acting on feedback from learners, particularly disadvantaged learners. There was an expectation of at least four audio-recorded interviews in England and four in other locations within the EU. These interviews included representatives from VET and ACE authorities as well as prominent UK and European researchers involved in or responsible for learner voice study or implementation.

*Phase 3* (for which Angus was responsible) involved a critical analysis of the current obligations, processes and mechanism under the AQTF and other provider legislation for gathering and acting on feedback for learners, particularly disadvantaged learners in VET and ACE. This phase also included a parallel analysis of the operation of such obligations and processes in Australian school and higher education sectors. Where

appropriate, are illustrated with insights from relevant Australian and international research.

*Phase 4* which Golding led and was responsible for, and which both Angus and Lavender contributed to), critically reviewed Australian and international literature in the light of findings from Phases 1, 2 and 3. The review was based on a range of recent sources to advance a case for new ways of optimizing the VET and ACE experience for disadvantaged learners. This analysis was particularly cognisant of the fact that the majority of the Australian population (including around one half of the 2012 Australian workforce and most retirees), for a range of reasons, had not accessed or completed any post-school qualification.

*Phase 5* (led by Golding, with insights and examples contributed by Lavender and Angus) looked at potential new ways of learning and teaching that might be more engaging and inclusive of all sectors of the community, particularly disadvantaged adults and young people. This phase included (but was not limited to) a critical examination of the possible applicability of learner voice aspects of the Scandinavian Folk High School movement, which has strongly influenced recent adult education programs and initiatives for disadvantaged adult learners across Europe.

We anticipated that this five-phase methodology would be reflected in the composition of the final report, providing an effective mechanism for achieving the project requirements and the outcomes specified in the brief. The research planned to produce new insights and recommendations about ways in which learner voice might be encouraged, heard, collected, used in productive ways, and fed back in ways that will benefit all students, particularly those who are disadvantaged, and also the many who are currently missing from the Australian VET and adult learning environment. The report includes recommendations on policy options and extensive advice based on comprehensive review and analysis current practice and of the most interesting and successful attempts to introduce elements of learner voice into VET and ACE practice.

## **Limitations**

The project was limited by its A\$50,000 budget and by tight time lines, with a final report anticipated by NVEAC within approximately six months of commencement. The number of sites, interviews, and interviewees able to be accessed and the literature able to be synthesized were similarly limited. While only capital city sites in all Australian States and Territories were sampled a small number of telephone interviews were conducted beyond Australian capital cities. The budget also limited the scope of overseas interviews that were restricted to several parts of the UK, Ireland and Norway. Interviewees were restricted mainly to the VET manager and advocacy categories identified above. While there was no opportunity to interview current or past VET or ACE students and get their perspectives, a number of interviewees interviewed in other roles talked about recent and relevant experiences of being VET students, teachers and managers of VET programs.



# Plain Language Information Statement

University of Balla  
Learn to succe

## SCHOOL OF EDUCATION & ARTS

<b>PROJECT TITLE:</b>	<b>Listening and Responding to Learner Voice: Principles and models of effective practice</b>
<b>PRINCIPAL RESEARCHER:</b>	<b>Professor Barry Golding</b>
<b>OTHER/STUDENT RESEARCHERS:</b>	<b>Dr Annette Foley Professor Lawrie Angus Dr Peter Lavender</b>

We are involved in an Australian research project that examines the key principles and effective models for gathering and acting on feedback to and from learners participating in vocational education and training (VET) and adult and community education (ACE settings). We would like to invite you to be involved as a participant in the research. The research was funded by the National VET Equity Advisory Council (NVEAC) and was approved by the University of Ballarat Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC).

The research will be conducted by a team from the University of Ballarat comprising the Principal Researcher, Professor Barry Golding and Professor Lawrie Angus, Dr Annette Foley and UK-based researcher Dr. Peter Lavender. The project will involve interviews and consultations in Australia and Europe about obtaining and acting on feedback from adult learners, particularly disadvantaged learners, in vocational, adult and higher education settings in all Australian states and territories. It will result in a policy research paper about 'Learner Voice' that:

- identifies the current obligations for providers under the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF) and related legislation;
- examines relevant approaches to student engagement and student voice in the vocational training and other education and training sectors in Australia and overseas relevant to Australian training processes and contexts;
- identifies the nature and type of feedback which should be collected from learners and graduates;
- assesses mechanisms for collecting, analyzing and acting on student feedback;
- examines and identifies factors which make some learners reluctant to express their views and ways of overcoming their reluctance;
- determines appropriate strategies to assist learners who require extra support to express their opinions and needs;
- advises on when input and feedback should occur to best improve the learning experience;

The key outcome of this project will be the provision of advice on principles and approaches for obtaining and acting on feedback to and from diverse adult and vocational learners in Australia, particularly disadvantaged learners.

We invite you to meet with and be interviewed by a member of the research team (Dr Annette Foley in Sydney, NSW & Canberra, ACT; Prof Barry Golding in other State and Territory locations) to share your ideas about these research issues. If you agree to be involved in the project we anticipate that an interview time of 45-60 minutes should be sufficient. With your permission we will make a voice recording of the interview that will later be transcribed into a written record and the voice recording will then be permanently erased. We will not use your real name to identify you in the written record so that your privacy will be protected. If there are any questions you don't want to answer during the interview you don't have to answer them.

Your participation in this research is voluntary. If you don't want to be involved that is your choice and you do not need to explain this decision in any way. If you agree to participate and then wish to withdraw from the research at any time before, during or after the interview process any unprocessed information that you have provided will be withdrawn from the project. Withdrawal, however, is not possible after the results have been processed. Any data we obtain from you through the interview process will be managed to ensure your privacy and anonymity. Any information you have provided will be kept in a secure place and will only be accessed by the researchers. The written transcripts and our field notes will be stored for five years and disposed of in an approved, secure way.

At the conclusion of the research project a policy research paper that identifies models and the underpinning principles for gathering and responding to feedback from diverse learners in VET and ACE will be produced. The purpose of the report is to inform and advise NVEAC on effective student engagement in the VET and ACE systems and providers, particularly for disengaged learners. This report will also be available to you. The research data we create may also be used for presentations by us at conferences and in journal articles. As all times, the research will be presented in such a way as to ensure the privacy and anonymity of all participants.

It is not anticipated that the questions asked in the interviews will cause you any distress. If they do or you are feeling uncomfortable, you have the right to ask that the interview conclude or you may refuse to answer particular questions. If you still feel distress as a result of the Australian interviews you may contact the Lifeline telephone counselling service on 13 11 14 for further assistance and support.

If you have any questions, or you would like further information regarding the project titled **Listening and Responding to Learner Voice: Principles and models of effective practice**, please contact the Principal Researcher, **Professor Barry Golding** of the School of **Education and Arts**:  
**PH: (03) 5327 9733 EMAIL: [b.golding@ballarat.edu.au](mailto:b.golding@ballarat.edu.au)**

Should you (i.e. the participant) have any concerns about the ethical conduct of this research project, please contact the University of Ballarat Ethics Officer, Research Services, University of Ballarat, PO Box 663, Mt Helen VIC 3353.  
Telephone: (03) 5327 9765, Email: [ub.ethics@ballarat.edu.au](mailto:ub.ethics@ballarat.edu.au)

CRICOS Provider Number 00103D

*Appendix 5 Statement of informed consent*

<b>PROJECT TITLE:</b>	<b>Listening and Responding to Learner Voice: Principles and models of effective practice.</b>
<b>RESEARCHERS:</b>	<b>Professor Barry Golding Dr. Annette Foley Dr. Peter Lavender Professor Lawrie Angus</b>

**Consent – Please complete the following information:**

I, ..... of .....

.....

....

hereby consent to participate as a subject in the above research study.

The research program in which I am being asked to participate has been explained fully to me, verbally and in writing, and any matters on which I have sought information have been answered to my satisfaction.

I understand that:

- all information I provide (including questionnaires) will be treated with the strictest confidence  
and data will be stored separately from any listing that includes my name and address.
- aggregated results will be used for research purposes and may also be reported in scientific and academic journals.
- I am free to withdraw my consent at any time during the study in which event my participation in the research study will immediately cease and any information obtained from it will not be used.
- once information has been aggregated it is unable to be identified, and from this point it is not possible to withdraw consent to participate.

**SIGNATURE:** ..... **DATE:** .....  
.....

# Interview Questions

## SCHOOL OF EDUCATION & ARTS

PROJECT TITLE:	Listening and Responding to Learner Voice: Principles and models of effective practice
PRINCIPAL RESEARCHER:	Professor Barry Golding
OTHER RESEARCHERS:	Dr Annette Foley Professor Lawrie Angus Dr Peter Lavender

1. *How do you* (managers, teachers, trainers, curriculum designers, policy makers, student representatives, employers) collect information from enrolled students and graduates *about their experiences or attitudes to learning, and when?*
2. How do you *analyse, summarize and feed back* that evidence to learners and other stakeholders (teachers, trainers, managers, funding bodies)?
3. What are your understandings about *the regulatory framework* for collecting information about student experience of teaching and learning?
4. What account do you take of the diversity of student experience for students who may be disadvantaged in any way in the learning context (e.g. by disability, ethnicity, language, literacy, location)?
5. What do you understand by *learner voice* and *learner feedback*? Which aspects of both do you regard as being: 1. most effective, and 2. most in need of improvement (in Australia, this state/territory, this provider, for particular student groups)?
- 6a What *mechanisms* do you use to hear from and give feedback to *learners who leave before they finish their course*?
- 6b What do you do to identify potential learners who for whatever reason do not enrol?
- 7 What *final comments* do you want to make about any of the above?

## Appendix 7 Some key acronyms and terms

Some acronyms and terms that appear regularly in the report are expanded or clarified below. Those not from Australia (mainly those from the UK) are *italicised*.

### Acronym

or term	Expansion or Clarification
ANTA	(former) Australian National Training Authority
AQTF	Australian Qualifications Training Framework
ARIA	Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia
ASQA	Australian Skills Quality Authority
AT	Assistive (or Adaptive) Technologies
BIS	<i>[Department for] Business, Innovation and Skills</i>
BSL	<i>British Sign Language</i>
COAG	Council of Australian Governments
CSOs	Community Service Obligations
DfES	<i>Department of Further Education &amp; Skills</i>
ESOL	English for Speakers of Other Languages
Estyn	<i>Her Majesty's Inspectorate for Education and Training (Wales)</i>
EU	<i>European Union</i>
FAQs	Frequently Asked Questions
FE	<i>Further Education</i>
FfE	<i>Framework for Excellence</i>
Gen Y	Generation of people born between mid 1970s to mid 1990s
HMIE	<i>Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education</i>
HREOC	Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
ILPs	Individual Learning Plans
LSIS	<i>Learning and Skills Improvement Service (UK)</i>
MCTEE	Ministerial Council for Tertiary Education and Employment <sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> From November 2011, the Standing Council on Tertiary Education, Skills and Employment (SCOTESE) replaced the Ministerial Council for Tertiary Education and Employment (MCTEE).

NCVER	National Centre for Vocational Education Research
NIACE	<i>National Institute of Adult and Continuing Education (UK)</i>
NOS	<i>National Occupational Standards</i>
NRA	National Reform Agenda
NSSC	National Skills Standards Council
NSW	New South Wales
NT	Northern Territory
NUS	<i>National Union of Students</i>
NVEAC	National VET Equity Advisory Council
NVR	National VET Regulator
<i>Ofsted</i>	<i>Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (the national inspection organisation in England)</i>
OHS	Occupational Health and Safety
RARPA	<i>Recognising and Reporting Progress and Achievement</i>
RTO	Registered Training Organisations
SCOTese	Standing Council on Tertiary Education, Skills and Employment <sup>27</sup>
<i>SfA</i>	<i>The Skills Funding Agency</i>
TAFE	Technical and Further Education
TVET	(former) Technical and Vocational Education and Training
UK	<i>United Kingdom</i>
VET	Vocational Education and Training
WEA	<i>Workers' Educational Association (also in Australia)</i>

Note: A wider list of acronyms is available on the NVEAC website

<http://www.nveac.natese.gov.au/acronyms>

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<sup>27</sup> From November 2011, the Standing Council on Tertiary Education, Skills and Employment (SCOTese) replaced the Ministerial Council for Tertiary Education and Employment (MCTEE).