Fitness for purpose: quality assurance

K. Navaratnam and L. Stephenson say that accreditation must be concerned with reducing the quality gap, while increasing the standards of training courses.

In line with national trends for more, and increasingly disparate, quality training, the providers of training need to become equally diverse, and their training systems more complex. Existing courses and awards need to be reviewed and changes will occur in training facilities. These factors will critically influence accreditation of courses and ratification of those locations offering accredited courses.

Accreditation agencies will need to stimulate quality assurance in training through clearly defined, well-understood and widely accepted criteria for the accreditation of programmes of vocational education and training.

**What is accreditation?**

Accreditation is more than the mere description of an administrative process that ticks boxes, crunches numbers and takes anecdotal information at face value. It has breadth and intensity that will ensure the ultimate consumers (students, learners, course participants) enjoy fitness for purpose of training.

Accreditation can provide assurance that:

- the standard of a course is appropriate to the designated award; and
- the methods adopted in delivery the course are likely to achieve the purpose(s) for which it was developed.

Hence accreditation affirms the integrity of courses and awards. By doing so it paves the way for the effective transfer of skills, and the articulation and recognition of training in order to enter a profession or skilled occupation.

In vocational education and training, graduates are produced for work. As training is the nucleus for developing occupational skills and competencies it is at this level that accreditation is needed to ensure the courses have integrity and quality.

Sound accreditation practices demand a lot of time, human resources and money. Also, support from industries, unions, students, providers, professional associations and governments is essential. As yet no national accreditation agency exists, nor any uniform process that has numerous issues associated with accreditation—such as compliance to national and State standards, representation on and advice to accrediting bodies, demand for self-accreditation, quality assurance, equity, or cost implications across the nation.

**Accreditation as a means of quality assurance**

A training system that does not pay attention to consumer requirements cannot be competitive in the training market. Identification of consumer needs is the basis for the course design and specifications—a consumer-based system starts and ends with consumer requirements.

It is important to understand consumer logic. Identification of consumer requirements must include what they want—and what they will and won’t get. Understanding the requirements of accreditation can be crucial to the success of training.

The design and use of an appropriate accreditation checklist is necessary for quality assurance in vocational education and training. Designing the accreditation checklist needs experience from different segments of the training context. An understanding of course development is included and coupled with devotion to total-quality management.

What needs to be emphasised in accreditation are the diagnosis, selection and gathering of information or consumer requirements, and the analysis and evaluation of action taken on the basis of such information. The accreditation checklist is the basis for quality assurance before delivery of any vocational educational or training.

**Accreditation checklist**

Public, commercial and enterprise (in-house) providers, who intend to submit courses of vocational education and training for accreditation, need to be acquainted with the standards that they will be judged against. Three States and the ACT have established, or are in the process of establishing, appropriate checklists or schedules for government-sponsored accreditation. As one would hope, most elements seem to be held in common.

The Queensland checklist, which is the most comprehensive of those sighted, has been in use for over three years. It contains some sixty-four questions as general guidance for course assessment committees. The following is a checklist adapted from the *Approved Training Organisation Status, Accreditation and Ratification Manual* published by the Queensland Employment, Vocational Education and Training Board (QEVET) in July 1991.

**Components of the accreditation checklist**

1 **Documentation**

- Is the syllabus documentation complete, appropriately formatted, free from
2 Course design

Course aims
Are the course aims based on:
- an occupational analysis?
- other investigations?
Are the course aims consistent:
- with the stated and perceived student/industry/community needs in terms of content, level, depth and breadth?
- with the proposed award?
Do the course aims:
- clearly outline the fundamental concepts that underlie the course?
- state the occupational/vocational/community area for which the course is designed?
- state what the student is expected to have achieved at the end of the course?

Subject objectives
Do the subject syllabuses have objectives that:
- reflect and further develop the course aim/s?
- adequately define the subject's content and scope in terms of skills, knowledge and attitudes?
- are achievable and demonstrable/accessible?

Subject content
- Does the content (as shown in the list of topics) indicate systematic development of the subject matter and logical progression in the material to be learned?
- Is the content coverable in the stated duration?
- Are the difficulty levels appropriate to the entry qualifications or prerequisite subjects, and to the level of the award?

Are there a brief statement relating to the need for the course and how the need was established?
- Does the documentation demonstrate that participation of all interested parties has occurred in the course development, including that of material relating to quality?

• Are the course aims consistent:
- with the stated and perceived student/industry/community needs in terms of content, level, depth and breadth?
- with the proposed award?

• Have appropriate guidelines/log books been provided for courses with on-the-job training components?

• Is there a direct link between the objectives of each subject and the method(s) of its assessment?

Student assessment

Are these:
- appropriate to the stated and perceived student/industry/community needs?
- consistent with the aims, subject objectives, content and duration?

Are the major areas of study supported by other relevant studies, and are the latter covered adequately?
- Are lists of references and texts accurately and adequately detailed?

Are modern principles, practices and strategies of quality improvement in the working environment included?

Course title
- Is the course title in accordance with departmental guidelines?

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Course structure
Is the course organised to provide appropriate flexibility via:
- electives?
- stranding?
Are these feasible?
Is work experience:
- an integral part of the course?
- additional to the course?
If integrated:
- what is its duration?
- how does it involve the teaching staff?
- are appropriate guidelines/log books provided for employers/work experience supervisors?

Entry requirements
Are the entry requirements (prerequisites) essential for the level of difficulty outlined in the syllabus?

Pattern(s) of attendance
Are these appropriate to:
- students' needs (e.g. age, location)?
- occupational/industry need?
Is it possible to vary the pattern according to need?
If external mode is offered or planned (state which), is the subject matter suited for this (e.g. need for practical work)?

Duration
Is the total duration of the course appropriate to:
- the award and level of course (stream)?
- the occupational expectations?
- the content coverage?
- the course aims and objectives?
- sufficient time for private study?

Courses as a whole
- Have the related social, industrial or legal issues (e.g. safety, systems design, work planning, problem solving, new materials and processes, quality control) been indicated and taken into account during design?
- Does the course cater for an area that is subject to licensing, Acts of Parliament or other regulations? If so, is this reflected in the course design?
- What degree of industry/community vocational group co-operation and assistance can be expected if the course is offered?
- Is there an adequate process for the ongoing development and evaluation of the course?

Quality
- Does the course include relevant issues?
- Are quality topics integrated at appropriate stages in the course?
- Is the procedure used for integration of quality topics explained?

Access and articulation
- Does the course have open entry, or are any entry requirements to the course appropriate or necessary?
- Is there any credit given for:
  - completion of other TAFE/other courses or subjects?
  - work/life experience?
- Are student selection criteria/tests (if any) valid and appropriate?
- Is the course an integral part of an educational strategy for the area of study?
- Has articulation been negotiated with the relevant (internal and external) agencies?
- If so, are the exemptions/credits available clearly stated?

Resources
- Are the staffing resources proposed as the minimum necessary to teach the course adequate?
- Are the physical resources proposed as the minimum necessary to run the course adequate?

The rationale behind the Queensland checklist is that course assessment committees should use a uniform and consistent approach to appraise courses of vocational education and training.

‘Design and use of an appropriate accreditation checklist is necessary for quality assurance in vocational education and training’

To be carefully considered are questions of correct documentation—quality aspects of presentation, completeness and clarity, course design—including course aims, subject objectives, subject content, student assessment, course type and level, course title, course structure, entry requirements, patterns of attendance, duration and the integration of relevant quality issues; course access and articulation; and the human and physical resources required to run a quality programme.

There are demands for the establishment and recognition of private accrediting agencies. There has been considerate growth of private commercial and enterprise providers in recent years and this is expected to continue as a result of national initiatives. Industries are concerned about accreditation, certification, recognition and portability of skills.

Some are seeking authority for accreditation. Such moves need to be integrated with the government-sponsored systems. Considering all the emerging trends, the use of a checklist with consumer orientation for a systematic accreditation process could be a step in the right direction in vocational educational and training.

Conclusion
From quality assurance perspectives, accreditation must be concerned with reducing the quality gap while increasing the standards of training courses. Both general and specific purposes must be identified—a process that needs time, resources, and contacts. More importantly, there are benefits which the accreditation process leads to—taxed decision-making and ensuring that the training provided conforms to consumer requirements.

By using a well-structured checklist, accreditation agencies of vocational education and training courses could provide quality assurance that each course is fit for the purpose for which it was designed. Thus, consumers of such courses can be confident that the skills and competencies nominated in the courses are truly the expected educational outcomes that they will achieve.

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