Summary of:

THE VRQA ANNUAL EDUCATION PROVIDER AND STAKEHOLDER RESEARCH 2012

Ref No. 22652 • 27th February 2013 • V7

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Summary

Background

The Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority (VRQA) has conducted an annual education provider and stakeholder satisfaction study since 2008. In 2012, the VRQA engaged the services of Sweeney Research to conduct the annual satisfaction survey.

The overall objective of the research was to provide the VRQA with longitudinal and representative insights into its stakeholders and education providers' knowledge and experience with the VRQA, its products/services, and communication, with the aim of better understanding their needs and expectations.

Methodology

The research program comprised two phases of research:

- *Quantitative internet surveys with education providers…* where a total of 378 surveys were completed (with a 53% completion rate); and
- *Qualitative in-depth interviews with stakeholders…* where a total of 15 phone depths were conducted (of 23 nominated contacts).

(Note: Education and training providers who transferred to the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) and the Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA), and related stakeholders were not included in this study).

All respondents for both the Qualitative and Quantitative research components were identified by the VRQA. The sample was made up of Senior Executives including Principal Executive Officers, Chief Executive Officers, or those acting in a similar capacity.

Fieldwork took place between 22 November and 18 December 2012.

Key findings

Overall, most are satisfied with the VRQA and its services

Identical to the 2011 study, satisfaction with the management and operations of the VRQA is positive, with close to two-thirds of education providers being very/fairly satisfied with the VRQA and its services.

Among stakeholders, all are generally satisfied with the quality of interactions with the VRQA. Many believe that the VRQA is effective in meeting their responsibilities, and the majority are happy for the VRQA to assume this role.

Understanding of business, respect, and assistance important considerations for providers

The key factors to a satisfactory relationship with education providers, as identified in the survey, can be summarised as follows:

- *A better understanding of their business…* in being prepared to listen and understand the position of providers;
- *Respect…* as reflected in the tone and approach of auditors;
- *Assistance…* through information/advice and facilitating the support of peak bodies. VRQA staff are generally applauded for their helpfulness, timeliness, and responsiveness.

Open communication, responsiveness, and currency main expectations of stakeholders

In identifying the needs of stakeholders, three main themes emerged:

- *Open and ongoing consultation…* which promotes respect, transparency, and collaboration. The VRQA has generally done well in this respect;
- *Responsiveness…* as it demonstrates the value of stakeholders to the VRQA; and
- *Currency and pro-activeness…* in being ready to act and to communicate in response to the broader environment.

Varying experiences and engagement methods

Engagement and perceptions of various VRQA information sources varies:

- The **VRQA website** is well patronised by providers (90% have accessed). Ease of accessing information and easy navigation are strong features of the website. It is modestly rated for adequacy and sector specific information.

- Providers are generally content with the customer service provided by **VRQA staff** (78% agree that staff demonstrate the RITE values). There is room to improve perceptions of auditors' tone and engagement styles;

- There is good awareness (65%), readership (67% almost always/often), and feedback (66% agree with the relevancy of information) of the **E-news** among providers;

- Half (47%) of providers have attended a VRQA **seminar/workshop**, which is significantly lower than levels reported in 2011 (58%), where additional workshops were conducted by the VRQA the last year as a result of legislative changes. Feedback among attendees has been positive; and

- Few (35%) providers were aware of the VRQA's **Future Direction Statement** prior to the survey. While awareness was higher among stakeholders, being the main target audience, few had read the statement since receiving it. Nonetheless, the feedback suggests that it was useful in clarifying the VRQA's position.

Trend analysis

Satisfaction with the VRQA and most performance measures has remained unchanged since 2011. A dip is however reported in terms of providers' attitudes towards the adequacy of information provided, particularly among VET providers. Throughout the research, schools have generally been more positive than VET providers.

Other aspects that reported a significant change mainly relate to providers' access to the VRQA's communication sources – particularly relating to the VRQA's publication materials, where there has been a shift in awareness levels, access, and perceived helpfulness across the mix.

Suggested actions

Overall, the VRQA has done well in its client engagements, with stakeholders and providers both expressing appreciation for the VRQA and its regulatory function.

Stakeholders and providers identified a number of areas that can be expanded on in the working relationship. To deliver to their needs, a number of priorities have been identified. Some comprise existing practices that the VRQA currently does well, which are critical to maintain. Others are recommendations for the future:

Quick checks and priorities	
Process mapping	Inform clients of how the VRQA intends to implement its strategic plan, in line with the new Future Direction Statement. Particularly, 'how' will plans be rolled out and what are the identified priorities according to sector needs and the environment.
Regular review	Stay fluid by being at the forefront of issues relevant to the sector. Regularly review the VRQA's position – its strategic direction, priorities, and business processes to ensure relevance and integrity to the sector.
Pro-activity	Be pro-active in response to the vagaries of the environment, being ready to act, communicate, and deliver in a timely fashion.
Communicate	Maintain the dialogues and two-way interactions to promote receptivity and collaboration.
Clarify	Clarify the role of the VRQA as a regulator, ensuring providers and stakeholders are clear of the responsibilities within the VRQA's jurisdiction vis-à-vis other supporting bodies (e.g., peak bodies).
Behaviour	Ensure auditors' behaviours are appropriate (i.e., demonstrate respect, choice of tone, have a listening ear, and demonstrate understanding of providers' businesses).
Engagement	Provide better targeted assistance by facilitating discussions with peak bodies and the type of assistance appreciated by providers (e.g., information about compliance, practical guidelines).

As with most relationships, there is scope for improvement – particularly in terms of the behaviour of auditors and how information is disseminated. Stakeholders and providers expect the VRQA to be more than just a "box ticker" regulator but one that is truly concerned in the delivery of quality educational outcomes.

The existing study has raised the question if existing forms of engagements (e.g., through auditors, information on the website, publication materials etc) have been consistent and effective in maximising satisfaction levels and in communing with providers. A review of existing processes would be valued in clarifying any confusions and in lining up any misalignments around the role and expectations of the VRQA.