

Aligning Compliance, Quality, and Service Excellence in Vocational Education: A Case Study of Australian Harbour International College (AHIC)

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Abstract

The Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector operates at the intersection of regulatory compliance and service-quality imperatives, yet management scholarship has only partially examined how individual providers reconcile these tensions through integrated organisational frameworks. Addressing this gap, the study asks a

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single guiding question through what organisational mechanisms does a regulated training provider co-produce compliance and service quality over time? This article addresses that question through a qualitative single-case study of Australian Harbour International College (AHIC), a Registered Training Organisation in Sydney that has developed a coherent Service Quality Management Framework spanning curriculum design, multi-source feedback systems, trainer development, digital infrastructure, and stakeholder engagement. Adopting a theory-elaborating case design grounded in the methodological tradition of qualitative research, the study triangulates institutional documents, audit reports, performance indicators, and stakeholder feedback. The analysis identifies five interlocking pillars through which the institution co-produces compliance and quality. Triangulated evidence shows measurable improvements in completion rates, learner and employer satisfaction, audit performance, and staff retention. The article reframes the compliance – quality dichotomy as a productive duality rather than a trade-off that is, as two organisational logics that, when structurally and culturally integrated, become mutually reinforcing rather than competing, in the manner theorised by the literature on organisational ambidexterity; refines the service-quality literature by foregrounding stakeholder feedback as a continuous-improvement governance device; and extends qualitative theorising on case-based inquiry by demonstrating how an embedded single-case design can illuminate context-sensitive organisational processes.

Keywords: Vocational Education and Training (VET); Service Quality Management; Student Experience; Australian Harbour International College (AHIC); Stakeholder Governance; Compliance; Dynamic Capabilities.

Sommario

Il settore dell'istruzione e formazione professionale (VET) opera all'intersezione tra imperativi di conformità regolamentare e istanze di qualità del servizio; tuttavia, la letteratura manageriale ha esaminato solo parzialmente le modalità con cui i singoli erogatori ricompongono tali tensioni attraverso quadri organizzativi integrati. A fronte di questa lacuna, lo studio muove da un'unica domanda di ricerca: attraverso quali meccanismi organizzativi un provider formativo regolamentato co-produce nel tempo conformità e qualità del servizio? L'articolo affronta il quesito mediante uno studio di caso singolo qualitativo sull'Australian Harbour International College (AHIC), Registered Training Organisation con sede a Sydney che ha sviluppato un coerente Service Quality Management Framework esteso alla progettazione curricolare, ai sistemi di feedback multi-fonte, allo sviluppo dei formatori, all'infrastruttura digitale e all'engagement degli stakeholder. Adottando un disegno di caso orientato all'elaborazione teorica e radicato nella tradizione metodologica della ricerca qualitativa, lo studio triangola documenti istituzionali, rapporti di audit, indicatori di performance e feedback degli stakeholder. L'analisi individua cinque pilastri interconnessi attraverso i quali l'istituzione co-produce conformità e qualità. L'evidenza

triangolata mostra miglioramenti misurabili nei tassi di completamento, nella soddisfazione di discenti e datori di lavoro, negli esiti di audit e nella retention del personale. L'articolo riformula la dicotomia conformità – qualità come dualità produttiva anziché come trade-off, ossia come due logiche organizzative che, se integrate sul piano strutturale e culturale, divengono mutuamente rinforzanti anziché concorrenti, secondo quanto teorizzato dalla letteratura sull'ambidestrisimo organizzativo; affina la letteratura sulla qualità del servizio ponendo in primo piano il feedback degli stakeholder quale dispositivo di governance del miglioramento continuo; ed estende la riflessione metodologica sull'indagine case-based dimostrando come un disegno di caso singolo embedded possa illuminare processi organizzativi sensibili al contesto.

Parole chiave: istruzione e formazione professionale (VET); gestione della qualità del servizio; governance degli stakeholder; conformità regolamentare; capacità dinamiche.

Introduction

Vocational Education and Training (VET) institutions operate within one of the most heavily codified service environments in contemporary education. Across mature regulatory regimes, providers are required to satisfy externally imposed standards while simultaneously delivering personalised, industry-relevant learning experiences to increasingly heterogeneous student populations. In Australia, the institutional architecture governed by the Standards for Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) 2015 and overseen by the Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA) exemplifies this duality. According to the Productivity Commission (2025), 89.3 per cent of government-funded VET completers in 2024 reported satisfaction with the overall quality of their training, while only 66.4 per cent of engaging employers expressed satisfaction – a decline of roughly six and a half percentage points from the 72.9 per cent recorded in 2015. The widening provider-employer perception gap signals that compliance alone, however meticulously enacted, no longer guarantees service excellence. Crucially, this national-level erosion of employer confidence is not merely a contextual backdrop but the precise pressure point that the present case is selected to illuminate. The provider-employer satisfaction gap is a macro-level symptom of a coordination failure between regulated provision and industry expectations; the organisational mechanisms examined at AHIC, notably the absorption of employer feedback into curriculum review through a defined committee cadence, and the treatment of audit findings as continuous-improvement inputs rather than terminal compliance verdicts, constitute provider-level responses to exactly the gap that compliance-only models have proven unable to close. Reading the national decline and the case-level mechanisms together thus reframes

the case not as an isolated success story but as an analytically revealing instance of how the sectoral tension is, or is not, metabolised at the level of the individual provider. This tension between compliance and quality has long animated debates in service management, total quality management, and educational governance. The literature has tended to treat the two as either competing logics or as elements to be sequentially aligned, yet studies in adjacent service contexts increasingly suggest that high-performing organisations reconcile them not by trade-off but by embedding both within an integrated framework where compliance procedures and quality-of-experience initiatives become mutually constitutive (Iqbal, 2026; Taraza *et al.*, 2024). What remains under-theorised is how individual providers operationalise this integration over time and through what micro-level mechanisms. The article addresses this gap through a single-case study of Australian Harbour International College (AHIC), a private RTO based in Sydney delivering nationally accredited qualifications in business, management, health, hospitality, and information technology. The primary purpose of the study is to elaborate how compliance and service quality are co-produced in a regulated educational setting, using AHIC as an analytically revelatory site rather than as an exemplary outcome to be celebrated. The specific research question is through what organisational mechanisms does a regulated VET provider integrate compliance and service-quality logics over time? A detailed description of the institution, its five-pillar framework, and its 2021-2024 performance trajectory is deferred to the empirical-context and methodology sections, so that the introduction can foreground the research gap, question, and theoretical framing. Methodologically, the study responds to recent calls for qualitative case-based research that produces theoretically meaningful and practically relevant knowledge about complex, context-embedded phenomena (Cornelissen, 2017; Lindgreen *et al.*, 2021; Simsek *et al.*, 2025). Rather than treating AHIC as an exemplary outcome, the analysis treats it as a revelatory case (Yin, 2009) in which the underlying mechanisms of integrated service-quality management can be excavated and dialogued with the broader management literature. In the service of this single theoretical purpose, the article advances three subordinate and tightly connected contributions. First, it reframes the compliance – quality relationship in regulated service contexts as a productive duality rather than a zero-sum choice, specifying the duality through the lens of organisational ambidexterity compliance and quality are not balanced by sacrifice but rendered mutually reinforcing when audit and feedback are absorbed into a common governance architecture. Second, it refines the service-quality literature by foregrounding stakeholder feedback as a continuous-improvement governance device,

complementing the SERVQUAL/SERVPERF tradition with a process-oriented account of how feedback is institutionally absorbed, and connecting this account to the dynamic-capabilities view in which feedback systems operate as sensing, seizing, and reconfiguring mechanisms (Teece, 2007). Third, methodologically, the study contributes to ongoing debates on rigour and theoretical leverage in qualitative case research by illustrating an embedded single-case design that combines longitudinal documentary evidence with multi-stakeholder data triangulation (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Hoorani *et al.*, 2019), and by making its analytical chain transparent through an explicit data-structure (Gioia *et al.*, 2013). The remainder of the article is organised as follows. The next section develops the theoretical framework, including the definition of core constructs and a set of explicit theoretical propositions. The methodology section then explains the research design. After describing the empirical context, the findings are organised around the five analytical pillars. The discussion elaborates the theoretical implications and practical contributions, before the article closes with limitations and avenues for further inquiry.

1. Theoretical background and conceptual framework

Three bodies of literature converge on the empirical background examined in this article: service quality in education, continuous improvement and stakeholder governance, and the methodological tradition of case-based theorising in management research. A fourth literature on digital transformation is treated as a moderating, sociotechnical layer rather than as a separate body of conceptualisation. Together, these literatures provide the scaffolding through which the AHIC case is analysed.

2. Defining the core constructs

Because the analysis turns on the interplay of several closely related terms, it is necessary to specify their conceptual boundaries at the outset. Quality is understood here in the multidimensional sense developed by Harvey & Green (1993), who distinguish quality as exception, perfection, fitness for purpose, value for money, and transformation; in a VET setting the fitness-for-purpose and transformative meanings are the most pertinent, since training must simultaneously satisfy codified standards and effect a change in learner capability (Ramsden, 1991). Compliance denotes the verifiable conformity of organisational processes to externally imposed regulatory

standards in the Australian case, the Standards for RTOs 2015 as enforced through ASQA audit. Service excellence refers to the perceived superiority of the service experience along the SERVQUAL dimensions of reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibility (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1991), extended in education to the relational and developmental dimensions of provision. Continuous improvement is defined as the institutionalised capacity to convert evidence into incremental and recurrent organisational adjustment, of which the Plan-Do-Check-Act cycle is the canonical expression. Stakeholder feedback is treated not as a measurement output but as an input to organisational decision-making, generated by learners, trainers, employers, and regulators. Finally, the productive duality at the centre of the argument designates a relationship in which compliance and quality, although analytically distinct and potentially competing, are organised so as to reinforce one another a formulation that draws explicitly on the literature on organisational ambidexterity, which conceptualises apparent dualities as productive tensions managed through structural and cultural integration rather than as zero-sum trade-offs. Two clarifications distinguish this notion from organisational ambidexterity, on which it nonetheless draws. First, the relations differ, a classical ambidexterity concerns the simultaneous pursuit of two organisational activities (exploration and exploitation) that a firm elects to balance, whereas the productive duality theorised here concerns the reconciliation of two governance logics, an externally imposed compliance logic and an experientially oriented quality logic, that a regulated provider is not free to trade off but is simultaneously obliged to satisfy. Second, the integrative mechanism is more tightly specified in the VET setting, whereas ambidexterity is typically achieved through structural separation or contextual switching between exploratory and exploitative units, the productive duality observed here is achieved through a single shared governance architecture - the same ownership, cadence, and decision rights- into which both audit-driven compliance signals and stakeholder-driven quality signals are absorbed and converted into common improvement actions. Organisational ambidexterity thus supplies the broad theoretical intuition that apparent opposites can be rendered mutually reinforcing, while productive duality names the specific, audit-inflected form this reconciliation assumes when a regulated provider must metabolise compliance obligations into quality inputs through one and the same continuous-improvement apparatus.

3. Service quality in education as a managerial construct

The conceptualisation of service quality in education has been dominated since the late 1980s by frameworks adapted from the SERVQUAL tradition originally developed by Parasuraman *et al.* (1991). Recent applications continue to identify tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy as analytically useful dimensions for capturing learner perceptions of service delivery, and comparative work has confirmed that perceived service quality exerts a significant influence on student satisfaction, institutional loyalty, and post-graduation outcomes (Alemu, 2023; Seitova *et al.*, 2024; Magasi *et al.*, 2022; Kovaci *et al.*, 2020; Brooks & Everett, 2009). While these contributions have undeniably advanced the measurement of service quality, they have also been criticised for an over-reliance on cross-sectional, perception-based instruments that struggle to capture the temporal, processual, and relational dimensions of educational provision (Cornelissen, 2017; Parker *et al.*, 2024). In the VET sector specifically, the gap is more pronounced. What makes VET theoretically distinctive and therefore more than a local instance of generic service provision is the simultaneous and tightly coupled operation of four features that rarely co-occur in other service settings. First, VET is competency-based: quality is defined not by satisfaction alone but by demonstrable attainment of externally specified competencies, so that the “service” and its regulated “product” are inseparable (Billett, 2011). Second, provision is punctuated by recurrent regulatory audit cycles that render compliance a continuous rather than episodic concern. Third, quality depends on trainer currency: trainers must maintain up-to-date vocational competence in their industry, coupling service quality to a labour market external to the institution. Fourth, provision must remain aligned with fast-moving labour-market demand articulated through competency frameworks issued by Jobs and Skills Councils. These features inscribe quality requirements into the architecture of training itself rather than locating them solely in the customer – provider interface, and they make a regulated RTO an unusually demanding test-bed for theorising how compliance and quality are reconciled. A second strand of work has begun to reconceptualise service quality in education as a co-produced outcome between providers, learners, employers, and regulators, consistent with the broader services-marketing turn towards service-dominant logic and with insights from total quality management on the centrality of stakeholder orientation (Iqbal, 2026; Taraza *et al.*, 2024). For VET providers, the implication is that service quality cannot be fully delegated to compliance procedures or assessed solely through learner surveys; it must be enacted through ongoing organisational practices that integrate the perspectives of multiple constituencies.

4. Continuous improvement and stakeholder governance

The second relevant literature concerns continuous improvement (CI) and the governance mechanisms through which organisations maintain a culture of quality. The Plan – Do – Check – Act cycle remains a foundational reference, but contemporary research has emphasised the cultural, relational, and political dimensions of sustained CI (Taraza *et al.*, 2024). Studies of higher education converge on the finding that CI initiatives are most effective when embedded in a stakeholder-engagement architecture characterised by psychological safety, transparent communication, and clear accountability lines (Iqbal, 2026). This perspective resonates with research on organisational learning and dynamic capabilities, which positions feedback systems as sensing, seizing, and reconfiguring devices rather than administrative routines (Teece, 2007). Framing the matter in these terms clarifies the governance dimension that is central to the present study: a feedback architecture with defined ownership, cadence, and decision rights is, in effect, an internal governance mechanism through which an organisation senses its environment and reconfigures its resources. Read this way, continuous improvement is the organisational analogue of a research-and-development function, a recurrent, evidence-driven renewal of the service offer, while audit and stakeholder feedback constitute the control and accountability structures that govern that renewal. In a service-intensive environment such as VET, where curricular content must remain aligned with rapidly evolving labour-market demands, the capacity to convert stakeholder feedback into actionable adjustments constitutes a strategic asset. The literature, however, contains several silences. Few studies have traced how feedback flows from heterogeneous stakeholders—students, trainers, employers, regulators, and external referrers—are organisationally absorbed into operational decision-making. Equally, the question of how compliance audits themselves function as feedback channels, rather than merely as external impositions, has received insufficient empirical attention. The AHIC case offers a productive site for examining these gaps, because the institution has explicitly architected its feedback systems as a governance device rather than as an isolated quality-assurance function. A complementary literature on digital transformation in education suggests that Learning Management Systems, Customer Relationship Management platforms, and learning-analytics tools can amplify these feedback flows when integrated with pedagogical theory and stakeholder needs, while their value remains limited when adopted as discrete technological interventions disconnected from organisational governance (Sharma *et al.*, 2023; Hernández-Campos *et al.*, 2025; Pan *et al.*, 2024; Paulsen & Lindsay, 2024).

5. Single-case based research

The third literature underpinning this study concerns the methodological status of case-based research within management scholarship. Recent contributions have insisted that qualitative case studies, when carefully designed and systematically conducted, generate forms of knowledge that quantitative and computational approaches cannot easily replicate (Cornelissen, 2017; Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2009). Cornelissen (2017) argued that the explanatory potential of qualitative inquiry lies precisely in its capacity to preserve theoretical divergence and to surface mechanisms that would otherwise be obscured by aggregation. In a similar vein, Wickert *et al.* (2021) urged management scholars to broaden the meaning of impact, embracing in-depth, contextually grounded analyses that speak to both theory and practice. Methodological research has further specified the conditions under which case-based studies achieve high theoretical leverage. Hoorani *et al.* (2019) showed that the rigour and articulation of case-study design correlate with citation impact, while Lindgreen *et al.* (2021) provided detailed guidance on transparent methodological reporting. Gioia *et al.* (2013) offered a now-standard template for demonstrating analytical rigour in inductive research by making visible the movement from first-order, informant-centred codes to second-order, theory-centred themes and aggregate dimensions; the present study adopts this template explicitly (see Table 2). Simsek *et al.* (2025) and Bergh *et al.* (2022) emphasised that methodological rigour is not reducible to procedural conformity but encompasses the careful articulation of research logic, evidentiary base, and inferential warrant. Parker *et al.* (2024), drawing on historical methods, demonstrated how systematic case construction can support inference to the best explanation in strategy research, reinforcing the credentials of qualitative inquiry as a theory-building enterprise. The present study aligns itself with this tradition, heeding Alvesson and Sandberg's (2013) call for theoretically ambitious management research and Reinecke *et al.*'s (2016) insistence on the suitability of qualitative methods for examining ethically and contextually complex managerial phenomena.

6. Theoretical propositions

Synthesising the three literatures, the study advances four propositions that are subsequently examined against the case evidence. P1. In regulated service settings, compliance operates as an input to service quality rather

than as a competing constraint when audit findings are absorbed into continuous-improvement routines rather than treated as binary pass-or-fail events. P2. Stakeholder feedback functions as a governance device – rather than as a passive measurement output – when its conversion into action is endowed with defined ownership, cadence, and decision rights. P3. Digital infrastructure enhances service quality only when embedded in organisational governance, acting as an enabler that amplifies other mechanisms rather than as an autonomous driver. P4. The reconciliation of compliance and quality is configurational: institutional outcomes derive from the mutually reinforcing integration of the pillars rather than from the strength of any single pillar in isolation. These propositions are not tested in a hypothetico-deductive sense; consistent with theory-elaborating case logic, they organise the interpretation of the evidence and are revisited in the discussion.

7. Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative, theory-elaborating single-case design (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2009). The choice of a single case is justified because the phenomenon under investigation, the integrated reconciliation of compliance and quality logics through an articulated organisational framework, is intrinsically processual, multi-actor, and context-embedded, and is therefore best examined within its real-life institutional setting (Gummeson, 2017; Patton & Appelbaum, 2003). Second, AHIC constitutes a revelatory case in Yin's (2009) sense. The revelatory claim rests on three specific grounds rather than on the institution's success *per se*. First, AHIC is among a comparatively small number of private Australian RTOs that have publicly articulated a comprehensive, documented service-quality framework, making organisational processes that are normally opaque available for analysis. Second, the institution has sustained the framework across a full multi-year regulatory cycle (2021 – 2024), so that the dynamics of integration rather than a static snapshot can be observed. Third, AHIC is strategically informative because it operates at the precise pressure point identified in the introduction: the widening provider-employer satisfaction gap that characterises the Australian VET sector. It is therefore selected not because it is typical, but because it renders visible mechanisms that are theoretically important and ordinarily inaccessible. The case is approached through what Yin (2009) terms an embedded design: the institution as a whole is the unit of analysis, while five subordinate units -curriculum design, feedback systems, trainer development, digital infrastructure, and student support and stakeholder engagement- operate as sub-units within

which mechanisms can be examined. Consistent with established practice in case-based research, the study triangulates multiple data sources to mitigate single-method biases and to enhance construct validity (Lindgreen *et al.*, 2021; Yin, 2009). The evidentiary base spans the 2021 – 2024 period and comprises four categories of material, summarised in Table 1. Table 1 makes the evidentiary base transparent by specifying, for each category, the materials drawn upon, the period covered, and the analytical use to which the evidence was put. Where exact counts and individual audit dates are governed by the institution’s confidentiality arrangements, the table indicates the items to be confirmed in the final author-verified version; the analytical claims do not depend on any single undisclosed figure.

Table 1: Data sources, coverage, and analytical use

Source	Materials drawn upon	Period	Analytical use
Internal documents	Service Quality Management Framework; Quality Assurance Framework; strategic-planning documents; annual self-assessments; professional-development plans; individualised learning plans N=34	2021-2024	Reconstructing the design logic of the five pillars
Performance and audit	Completion-rate and retention trajectories; employer-satisfaction summaries; ASQA audit findings across successive registration/audit cycles; internal compliance-review outcomes	2021-2024	Corroborating reported outcomes; tracing audit-to-action loops
Stakeholder-feedback	Termly student-satisfaction surveys (academic, administrative, and resource domains); trainer peer-review and evaluation summaries; employer feedback associated with work placements N 42	2021-2024	Evidencing the feedback-as-governance mechanism
Contextual sectoral	Productivity Commission (2025); NCVER (2024); Department of Employment and Workplace Relations publications	2015 – 2024	Situating the institutional case within national VET trends

Where institutional metrics are reported in the findings, they are corroborated by at least two independent sources to attenuate the risk of reputational bias. The design relies on documentary, archival, performance, and survey-

summary evidence rather than on primary interviews. This choice is defensible on two grounds. First, the research question concerns organisational mechanisms, review cadences, ownership of feedback conversion, audit-to-action routines, that are inscribed in institutional documents, committee records, and performance series, and are therefore better evidenced by archival traces than by retrospective accounts vulnerable to recall and impression-management bias. Second, the longitudinal documentary record (2021-2024) affords temporal depth that a small set of cross-sectional interviews could not. The authors nonetheless acknowledge that interviews would have enriched the account of lived experience, and identify this as a limitation and an avenue for future work. Data analysis followed an abductive logic in which empirical patterns were iteratively confronted with theoretical concepts drawn from the service-quality, continuous-improvement, and case-methodology literatures (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013; Cornelissen, 2017). Analysis proceeded through the three-stage structure codified by Gioia *et al.* (2013), summarised in Table 2. Initial open coding identified recurrent first-order categories such as feedback loops, trainer capability, digital enablement, and audit responsiveness; these were progressively organised into five second-order pillars that structure the findings, and ultimately consolidated into three aggregate theoretical dimensions presented in the discussion. Concretely, first-order codes were assigned to data excerpts (for example, a documented monthly committee decision converting survey results into a curriculum action was coded as “feedback ownership”); cognate codes were then clustered into the second-order pillars; and the pillars were related to one another to yield the three aggregate dimensions. Table 3 illustrates, for selected mechanisms, the link between specific evidence and the analytical claim, in line with the reviewers’ request for a transparent evidence-to-claim chain. Throughout the coding process, attention was paid to disconfirming evidence and to within-case variation, in line with Hoon’s (2013) discussion of meta-synthetic logic and Hoorani *et al.*’s (2019) emphasis on rigour. The study addresses the standard quality criteria for qualitative inquiry articulated by Johnson *et al.* (2006): construct validity is supported through triangulation; internal validity is reinforced through pattern matching against theoretical propositions; external validity is approached through analytical rather than statistical generalisation; and reliability is supported by maintaining a transparent case database. Reflexively, the authors note a potential conflict of interest requiring explicit management: one member of the author team is affiliated with AHIC. To mitigate the associated risk of confirmation and reputational bias, the AHIC-affiliated author contributed institutional access and factual verification but did not lead the coding or the theoretical interpretation, which were conducted and cross-checked by authors external to

the institution. Concretely, factual verification followed a three-step protocol designed to insulate the analysis from the affiliated author's standpoint. First, the AHIC-affiliated author supplied institutional documents and factual statements but did not adjudicate their interpretation. Second, each factual claim subsequently reported in the findings, for example, the existence and monthly cadence of the Quality and Compliance Committee, the routinisation of curriculum review as a calendar event, or the direction of the reported performance trajectories, was independently checked by at least one author external to the institution against a corroborating source drawn from a different evidentiary category, namely ASQA audit findings, performance and retention series, or sectoral publications, rather than against the affiliated author's testimony alone. Third, any claim that could not be corroborated by such an independent source was either reformulated as an explicitly institution-attributed characterisation or removed, and the affiliated author was excluded from finalising any contested claim. This separation of access from inference was intended to convert the potential conflict of interest into a controlled division of labour rather than an unmonitored source of bias. Emerging interpretations were deliberately confronted with disconfirming evidence and with sector-level critical literature highlighting persistent systemic tensions (Productivity Commission, 2025), in keeping with the methodological standards advocated by Bergh *et al.* (2022) and Simsek *et al.* (2025).

Table 2: Data structure: from first-order codes to aggregate dimensions

First-order codes	Second-order pillars	Aggregate dimension
Curriculum review embedded as calendar event; individualised learning plans; corrective/preventive actions integrated with survey insights; audit-as-learning-loop	Curriculum design as service co-creation; Feedback architecture as governance device	Compliance – quality as a productive duality (P1)
Role-specific PD plans; industry currency; peer observation; LMS/CRM deployment; analytics with pre-specified intervention thresholds	Trainer capability as relational quality; Digital infrastructure as enabler	Sociotechnical and relational enablement (P3)
Heterogeneous feedback channels; Quality and Compliance Committee ownership and cadence; employer and agent engagement; integrated welfare and academic support	Holistic support and stakeholder integration (with the governance reading of the feedback architecture)	Stakeholder feedback as governance and integration (P2, P4)

Tab. 3: Illustrative evidence linked to analytical claims

Mechanism / claim	Data source(s)	Evidence
Audit findings absorbed as feedback (P1)	ASQA audit findings; corrective-and-preventive-action (CAPA) records	Actions logged after audit cycles feed into curriculum and PD review rather than a one-off remediation
Feedback ownership and cadence (P2)	Quality and Compliance Committee monthly review records	Documented monthly conversion of aggregated feedback into prioritised improvement actions
Curriculum review as routinised rhythm (P1)	Curriculum-review schedule; individualised learning plans	Review scheduled as a recurring calendar event; plans issued for learners needing academic or English-language support
Analytics restraint / actionability (P3)	Learning-analytics dashboards; student-support workflow	Pre-specified thresholds trigger student-support contact, prioritising actionability over dashboard sophistication

8. Empirical context: the Australian VET sector and AHIC

Australia's VET sector is a large, mixed-provider system that delivered training to approximately 5.1 million students in 2023, of whom 2.3 million were enrolled in nationally recognised qualifications (NCVER, 2024). The sector is regulated nationally through the Standards for RTOs 2015 and overseen by ASQA. Private providers deliver the majority of accredited training, accounting for approximately 81.7 per cent of the 2023 cohort. National student satisfaction has remained high, at 89.3 per cent in 2024, but employer satisfaction has declined steadily over the past decade, from 72.9 per cent in 2015 to 66.4 per cent in 2024 (Productivity Commission, 2025). This widening provider-employer gap has intensified pressure on private RTOs to demonstrate not only regulatory compliance but tangible alignment with industry expectations. Within this environment, AHIC operates as a private RTO based in Sydney, delivering nationally accredited qualifications across business, management, health, hospitality, and information technology. The institution serves a diverse student population, including significant numbers of international learners and students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Strategically, AHIC has positioned itself around three commitments: alignment with the national VET Quality Framework, service excellence as a competitive differentiator, and continuous improvement as an organisational identity rather than a procedural artefact. Between 2021

and 2024, AHIC implemented a Service Quality Management Framework articulating five interconnected pillars: student-centred curriculum design, systematic feedback and monitoring, professional development for trainers, digital transformation, and holistic student support. Over the same period the institution recorded an 18 per cent increase in completion rates, a 22 per cent reduction in staff turnover, sustained student satisfaction above 85 per cent, and favourable findings across multiple ASQA audits. These figures, relocated here from the introduction, describe the empirical setting; the analytical question, pursued in the findings, concerns the organisational logic by which such outcomes were produced rather than the outcomes themselves. Between 2021 and 2024, the institution undertook a system-wide redesign of its service architecture, the outcomes of which constitute the empirical material analysed in the next section.

9. Findings

The analysis identifies five interlocking pillars through which AHIC has architected its Service Quality Management Framework. Each pillar is presented as a discrete analytical cluster, but it is the integrated configuration, rather than the individual elements, that constitutes the institution's distinctive contribution to compliance-quality reconciliation.

10. Reframing curriculum design as service co-creation

The first pillar concerns curricular design. Rather than treating curriculum as a static deliverable mandated by training packages, AHIC has reframed it as an ongoing site of co-creation between learners, trainers, employers, and external referrers. Curricula are designed and periodically reviewed to integrate learner needs and industry relevance, with updates coordinated through periodic consultation with industry stakeholders. Individualised learning plans are systematically developed for students requiring additional academic or English-language support, and flexible delivery modes (face-to-face, blended, and online) accommodate the institution's heterogeneous learner base. This pillar resonates with the service-dominant logic perspective on educational provision and with recent contributions in service-quality research that conceptualise students as co-producers of learning value rather than as passive recipients of teaching (Seitova *et al.*, 2024; Magasi *et al.*, 2022; Harvey & Green, 1993). Empirically, this pillar coincides with the eighteen per cent rise in completion rates between 2021 and 2024. Because

a single-case design provides no counterfactual, this association cannot be read as a causal effect; it is offered as evidence consistent with – rather than proof of – the proposition that curricular responsiveness supports learner outcomes (P1). Two micro-level mechanisms warrant attention. The first is the routinisation of curriculum review as a calendar event rather than as an exceptional response to audit failure: by embedding review cycles into the academic calendar, AHIC has converted what is often experienced as compliance friction into a continuous-improvement rhythm. The second is the deliberate articulation of individualised learning plans as instruments of service personalisation, signalling that the institution treats learner heterogeneity as a design parameter rather than as a problem to be standardised away. Both mechanisms reinforce the broader argument that compliance and quality are co-produced through the design of organisational rhythms.

11. The feedback architecture as a governance device

The second pillar concerns the institution's multi-source feedback architecture. AHIC operates a structured feedback system that integrates termly student satisfaction surveys covering academic, administrative, and resource-related domains; employer satisfaction surveys associated with work placements; periodic trainer evaluations and peer reviews; and a Quality and Compliance Committee that reviews aggregated feedback monthly. The committee's mandate is not merely to record stakeholder views but to convert them into actionable improvement priorities feeding into curriculum review, professional development, and student-support decisions. This architecture distinguishes itself from conventional satisfaction monitoring in two respects. First, the feedback channels are deliberately heterogeneous – learners, employers, trainers, and regulators each contribute through differently configured instruments – generating a polycentric evidentiary base that no single instrument can produce. Second, the institutional absorption of feedback is governed by a defined cadence and ownership structure, rather than being left to discretionary management interpretation. In this sense, feedback functions as a governance device, in the spirit of recent work on continuous improvement and stakeholder engagement in higher education (Iqbal, 2026; Taraza *et al.*, 2024) and consistent with the dynamic-capabilities view of feedback as a sensing-and-reconfiguring mechanism (Teece, 2007). This pillar provides the principal evidence for P2: feedback becomes a governance device precisely because its conversion into action carries defined ownership (the committee), a defined cadence (monthly), and explicit decision rights. Empirically, sustained student satisfaction above 85 per cent across internal

and external surveys, coupled with favourable findings across multiple ASQA audit cycles, attests to the responsiveness of the architecture. Notably, the institution treats audit findings themselves as feedback inputs rather than as binary pass-or-fail events; corrective and preventive actions are integrated into the same continuous-improvement workflow as student-survey insights. This design choice operationalises the theoretical insight that compliance and quality are mutually constitutive: the audit cycle becomes a learning loop rather than a punctuated external imposition. A noteworthy mechanism is the de-coupling of feedback collection from feedback ownership: while surveys and reviews are administered through routine channels, the Quality and Compliance Committee assumes explicit responsibility for analysing patterns and assigning improvement priorities. By formalising who owns the conversion of evidence into action, AHIC mitigates the well-documented tendency of feedback systems to accumulate data without producing organisational learning, a pattern repeatedly observed in higher-education quality-management research (Iqbal, 2026). Three recurring feedback-to-action cycles, traceable across the committee records and the supporting documentary base, illustrate how this governance routine operates in practice rather than only in principle. In the first, a student-survey cycle, recurrent dissatisfaction signals in the academic-support domain of the termly satisfaction surveys are aggregated by the Quality and Compliance Committee and converted into a prioritised action, namely the strengthening and rescheduling of individualised learning-plan provision for cohorts identified as needing additional English-language or academic support, with the resulting adjustment logged against the originating survey theme. In the second, an employer cycle, feedback gathered around work placements, characteristically concerning the job-readiness of graduates in particular competency areas, is routed through the same committee into curriculum review, where it informs adjustments to unit sequencing and assessment emphasis so that provision tracks the articulated industry expectation rather than remaining fixed to the training-package baseline. In the third, an audit cycle, findings arising from ASQA audit and internal compliance review are recorded as corrective-and-preventive actions and deliberately fed into the same continuous-improvement workflow as stakeholder feedback, so that an audit observation bearing on assessment validity is resolved not merely through point remediation but through a corresponding revision of trainer professional-development priorities. In each case the defining feature is not the collection of the signal but its documented conversion, under a named owner and a fixed cadence, into a curricular, support-service, or professional-development change, the audit-to-action and feedback-to-action loops summarised in Tab. 3. The cycles are reported here at the level of routinised organisational form rather than through

individual dated incidents, in keeping with the confidentiality arrangements governing the institution's internal records and with the study's focus on mechanisms rather than episodes.

12. Trainer capability as relational quality

The third pillar concerns the systematic development of trainer capability. AHIC has implemented a layered professional-development architecture that includes role-specific training plans aligned with national training-package requirements; mandatory currency in industry engagement and continuing professional learning; and internal workshops covering pedagogy, compliance, and digital integration. Trainers are evaluated through a combination of performance review and peer observation, the outputs of which feed back into the institution's broader feedback architecture. Conceptually, this pillar reframes trainer development not as a human-resources function operating at the margins of teaching but as a constitutive element of service quality. Service-quality research has long emphasised that the perceived empathy, responsiveness, and assurance dimensions of educational service depend critically on the relational capabilities of front-line staff (Alemu, 2023; Magasi *et al.*, 2022; Kovaci *et al.*, 2020; Ramsden, 1991). The AHIC case extends this insight by demonstrating that trainer capability functions simultaneously as a quality determinant and as a compliance asset: trainers who are current in their industry and reflective in their pedagogy more readily satisfy ASQA expectations and more effectively engage learners. The empirical correlate is a twenty-two per cent reduction in staff turnover between 2021 and 2024, which the institution attributes to increased job satisfaction, structured career-development pathways, and a sense of professional purpose generated by the framework. As with completion rates, this attribution is the institution's own and is reported here as consistent with, rather than as demonstrating, the underlying mechanism. This outcome chimes with VET-specific scholarship that has identified trainer capability as one of the most underestimated levers of sectoral performance (Seet & Jones, 2021; Billett, 2011).

13. Digital infrastructure as enabler, not driver

The fourth pillar concerns AHIC's investment in digital infrastructure. The institution has deployed an LMS to manage course delivery, assessments, and feedback; a CRM platform to monitor student enquiries, enrol-

ments, and communication histories; and data-analytics capabilities to support early intervention for learners at risk of disengagement or underperformance. These tools collectively enable the institution to move from periodic, retrospective reporting to continuous, real-time monitoring of learning and service-delivery indicators. Importantly, the case suggests that digital infrastructure functions as an enabler rather than as a driver of service quality. The LMS does not, in itself, produce learner satisfaction; rather, it amplifies the responsiveness of the curricular and feedback pillars described above, providing direct support for P3. This interpretation aligns with recent literature on learning analytics, which has emphasised that the value of analytics platforms depends on their integration with pedagogical theory, stakeholder needs, and institutional governance (Hernández-Campos *et al.*, 2025; Pan *et al.*, 2024; Paulsen & Lindsay, 2024), and with broader scholarship on digital transformation in higher education that conceptualises technology as part of a sociotechnical reconfiguration rather than a discrete intervention (Sharma *et al.*, 2023). A subtle but important micro-mechanism is the deliberate avoidance of analytics over-reach: rather than maximising the technical sophistication of dashboards, the institution has prioritised actionability, organising analytics outputs around pre-specified intervention thresholds connected to the responsibilities of student-support staff. This pragmatic restraint reinforces the broader theoretical claim that integration – not technological intensity – is the determinant of service-quality outcomes.

14. Holistic support and stakeholder integration

The fifth pillar concerns the institution's holistic support architecture and its integration with industry and external stakeholders. AHIC has invested in academic support units focused on English, numeracy, and general learning strategies, alongside welfare services including counselling and referrals to community providers. International students benefit from tailored orientation programmes covering rights, responsibilities, and safety. Externally, the institution maintains active relationships with industry partners, education agents, and pathway institutions, and engages employers in curriculum review and placement design. This pillar operationalises the stakeholder-engagement dimension that recent continuous-improvement literature identifies as decisive for sustained quality (Iqbal, 2026; Taraza *et al.*, 2024). It also responds to long-standing concerns regarding the alignment of provision with the heterogeneous needs of culturally and linguistically diverse learners. By integrating support services with curricular and feedback systems, AHIC ensures that learner welfare is not treated as an ancillary function but as a

constitutive component of service quality. Empirically, the integration is reflected in two outcomes: employer feedback consistently characterises AHIC graduates as well-prepared and job-ready, and the institution has been recognised as a preferred provider by several education agents and pathway institutions, signalling reputational capital that translates into enrolment stability. The five pillars are most analytically powerful when read together. The institutional outcomes – rising completion rates, sustained learner and employer satisfaction, favourable audit findings, reduced staff turnover, reputational capital – are not attributable to any single pillar in isolation, but to their configuration as a coherent, mutually reinforcing system. Curricular responsiveness depends on feedback flows; feedback flows depend on trainer capability; trainer capability is amplified by digital infrastructure; digital infrastructure is rendered meaningful by stakeholder integration; and stakeholder integration is, in turn, enabled by curricular responsiveness. This circularity is theoretically significant and provides the evidence for P4: it suggests that service-quality management in regulated educational contexts is best understood as a configurational rather than a linear phenomenon, consistent with broader configurational theorising in management research (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). The configurational reading raises a further question of internal architecture: whether any pillar is especially foundational, or whether the framework operates only when all five are simultaneously present. The case evidence supports a two-part answer. On the one hand, the feedback architecture occupies a functionally foundational position, because it is the mechanism through which the other four pillars are coordinated: curriculum review is triggered and prioritised by feedback flows; trainer development is informed by peer-review and evaluation outputs that re-enter the feedback system; digital infrastructure derives its value from amplifying those same flows; and stakeholder integration is the means by which heterogeneous feedback is generated in the first place. In this sense the feedback architecture is best understood as the integrative hub, or keystone, of the configuration necessary for the system to cohere, since without a governed conversion of evidence into action the remaining pillars would revert to disconnected functions. On the other hand, foundational does not mean sufficient. The keystone status of the feedback architecture is precisely a status it holds within a configuration: a governed feedback system with no responsive curriculum to adjust, no capable trainers to enact change, no digital infrastructure to surface signals, and no stakeholder relationships to supply them would govern very little. The institutional outcomes are therefore attributable not to the feedback architecture in isolation but to the simultaneous co-presence and mutual reinforcement of all five pillars, with the feedback architecture serv-

ing as the coordinating mechanism that renders the configuration self-sustaining rather than as an independent driver. This formulation sharpens P4: the framework exhibits configurational sufficiency, outcomes require the whole, while assigning the feedback architecture a distinctive coordinating necessity within that whole.

15. Discussion

The first contribution concerns the relationship between compliance and quality. The dominant assumption in much educational-management discourse has been that compliance and quality stand in tension, with organisations either prioritising procedural conformity at the expense of pedagogical innovation, or treating quality of experience as the primary aim and absorbing compliance costs as friction. The AHIC case challenges this framing: when compliance procedures are themselves designed as feedback channels and integrated into a continuous-improvement architecture, they become productive inputs to quality rather than its competitors (P1). The originality of the claim lies less in noting that the two can coexist – which prior work has suggested – than in specifying the mechanism of coexistence: it is the absorption of audit findings into the same ownership-and-cadence governance that processes stakeholder feedback that converts compliance from constraint into input. This reframing extends recent work that has questioned the binary characterisation of compliance and quality (Iqbal, 2026; Magasi *et al.*, 2022) and resonates with broader theoretical traditions on organisational ambidexterity, which conceptualise apparent dualities as productive tensions managed through structural and cultural integration rather than as zero-sum trade-offs. The methodological implication is that future case-based research on regulated service organisations might fruitfully shift its analytical focus from the trade-off question (“how much quality must be sacrificed for compliance?”) to the integration question (“through what mechanisms are compliance and quality co-produced?”). A particularly suggestive aspect of the AHIC configuration is the treatment of audit findings as feedback inputs: by absorbing external compliance evaluations into the same governance architecture that processes student and employer feedback, the institution erodes the symbolic boundary between internal and external evaluation, with practical implications for regulators that audit regimes may be more effective when designed to generate organisational learning rather than merely to verify procedural conformity (Parker *et al.*, 2024; Simsek *et al.*, 2025). The second contribution concerns how stakeholder feedback functions within the in-

stitution's continuous-improvement architecture. The case reveals that feedback exerts theoretical leverage not because it is collected at high frequency, but because it is institutionalised within a governance device with clear ownership, defined cadence, and explicit conversion into action (P2). Framed in corporate-governance and R&D terms, the feedback architecture operates as an internal control-and-renewal mechanism: it supplies the accountability structure (who owns the conversion of evidence into action) and the renewal function (the recurrent, evidence-driven adjustment of the service offer) that together govern organisational improvement. This finding refines the dominant SERVQUAL/SERVPERF tradition by foregrounding the organisational metabolism of feedback rather than its measurement. The refinement is consistent with recent contributions arguing that perception-based service-quality research must be complemented by process-oriented analysis of how feedback is internally absorbed and acted upon (Cornelissen, 2017; Parker *et al.*, 2024). The AHIC case provides a concrete illustration: the Quality and Compliance Committee functions as a translation interface between heterogeneous feedback flows and operational decisions in curriculum, professional development, and student support. Without such a translation interface, even sophisticated feedback instruments risk producing data accumulation without organisational learning. The implication for management theory is that stakeholder feedback is best conceptualised as a governance device—an institutional mechanism through which heterogeneous voices are processed, prioritised, and converted into action—rather than as a passive measurement output, in alignment with research on dynamic capabilities and continuous improvement that has emphasised cultural and political dimensions alongside technical procedure (Iqbal, 2026; Taraza *et al.*, 2024; Teece, 2007). The third contribution is methodological and practical. The study illustrates how an embedded single-case design can generate theoretical leverage in a regulated, multi-stakeholder service context. Three features warrant attention. First, the embedded structure—five sub-units within a single case—permits analytical disaggregation while preserving the holistic logic of the institution, responding to Hoorani *et al.*'s (2019) finding that case-study impact correlates with rigour and articulation of design and to Lindgreen *et al.*'s (2021) call for transparent methodological reporting, here met through the explicit data structure of Table 2 (Gioia *et al.*, 2013). Second, the longitudinal evidentiary base spanning 2021 – 2024 captures process dynamics that cross-sectional designs cannot, in line with Parker *et al.*'s (2024) emphasis on temporal depth. Third, the explicit articulation of triangulation across institutional documents, performance metrics, multi-stakeholder feedback, and sectoral data addresses Bergh *et al.*'s (2022) argument that meth-

odological contributions require explicit reflection on what the chosen approach uniquely affords. More broadly, the article supports Cornelissen's (2017) and Wickert *et al.*'s (2021) contention that qualitative case research has a distinctive role to play in producing theoretically and practically meaningful knowledge. From a practical perspective, the case suggests that for VET providers investments in any single pillar – digital infrastructure, trainer development, or feedback systems – are likely to yield modest returns unless accompanied by integration with the other pillars; institutional leaders should therefore prioritise architectural coherence over discrete excellence in individual elements (P4). For regulators, the findings imply that audit regimes can be designed to generate organisational learning, not merely to verify conformity, by foregrounding feedback channels and corrective-and-preventive cycles. For policy-makers, the persistent decline in employer satisfaction at the national level (Productivity Commission, 2025) suggests that structural rather than incremental responses may be required, and that integrated frameworks of the kind illustrated here may offer a useful template at sector level.

16. Conclusion, limitations, and future research

This article has examined how an Australian Registered Training Organisation reconciles compliance and quality through an integrated Service Quality Management Framework. Drawing on a qualitative single-case design and a multi-source evidentiary base, the analysis has identified five interlocking pillars and theorised their integration as a productive duality between compliance and quality. The contribution to management research is threefold: a reframing of the compliance-quality relationship in regulated service contexts, a refinement of service-quality theory through the conceptualisation of feedback as governance, and a methodological demonstration of the theoretical leverage afforded by carefully designed single-case research. Three limitations should be acknowledged. First, single-case designs sustain analytical rather than statistical generalisation; the mechanisms identified are likely to operate in similarly structured RTOs but their boundary conditions remain to be specified through comparative work. Second, the study draws extensively on institutional documents, raising the possibility of reputational bias even though triangulation with audit findings and sectoral data has been used to mitigate this risk. Third, the temporal scope of 2021 – 2024 captures a period of significant post-pandemic adjustment in the Australian VET sector and may limit the transferability of conclusions to substantially different macro-environments. Several promising avenues for future research follow. Comparative multiple-case designs across diverse

RTOs would test the boundary conditions of the configurational logic identified here. Longitudinal studies extending beyond four years would permit closer scrutiny of the path-dependent dynamics of integrated frameworks. Mixed-methods research could complement the present qualitative analysis with quantitative measurement of stakeholder-feedback metabolism, and primary interviews with trainers, learners, and employers would add experiential depth to the archival account offered here, in line with the call for methodological pluralism advanced by Reinecke *et al.* (2016) and Simsek *et al.* (2025). Comparative work across regulatory regimes would, finally, clarify the extent to which integrated compliance – quality architectures depend on, or operate against the grain of, the regulatory cultures within which they are embedded. In doing so, qualitative case research would continue to fulfil its theoretical promise as a generative engine of management knowledge (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013; Cornelissen, 2017; Wickert *et al.*, 2021).

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