



NATIONAL
QUALITY
COUNCIL

INVESTIGATION INTO
INDUSTRY EXPECTATIONS
OF VOCATIONAL EDUCATION
AND TRAINING ASSESSMENT

FINAL REPORT
JUNE 2008

Investigation into industry expectations of Vocational Education and Training Assessment

Final Report - June 2008

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Disclaimer

This work has been produced on behalf of the National Quality Council with funding provided through the Australian Government Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations and state and territory governments. The views expressed herein are not necessarily those of the Australian Government or state and territory governments. Recommendations are under consideration by the NQC but it should not be assumed that they will necessarily be implemented in the future.

Executive summary

Assessment in the vocational education and training (VET) system is defined most recently in Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF) 2007 as the judgement of evidence against the standard of performance expected in the workplace. It is therefore reasonable that industry has expectations of the assessment process and its outcomes.

This research was carried out on behalf of the National Quality Council (NQC) Training Packages Standing Committee with the prime purpose of examining the perceived mismatch between assessment outcomes and industry standards. The NQC are seeking to establish a strong evidence base for future work to build industry confidence in the outcomes of VET assessment.

The AQTF 2007 uses the following definition of competency:

The broad concept of industry competency concerns the ability to perform particular tasks and duties to the standard of performance expected in the workplace. Competency requires the application of specified skills and knowledge relevant to effective participation in an industry sector or enterprise.

Whether an experienced employee being trained and assessed in the enterprise, or a full time VET in school student seeking skills and qualifications before entering the workforce, the definition of competency, the definition of assessment and the 'rules' of training packages and AQTF 2007 apply equally. In essence, the VET system makes the same claim as to the ability of the person who completes a VET qualification – that they can perform particular tasks and duties to the standard of performance expected in the workplace – regardless of the context in which they gained those skills. Employers disagree with this claim, and have different expectations depending on where the skills were gained and how the candidates were assessed.

Tensions about where and how to assess whether a candidate meets the expectations of the workplace have been ongoing. For some of the more traditional trades, where apprentices typically work with skilled tradespeople in order to learn their craft and attain their qualifications, engagement with industry and the identification of workplace requirements are more straightforward. However for institutional pathways, where students undertake their learning and often their assessment in classroom settings, and where there is no direct link to a workplace, it is more difficult to ascertain whether students can meet the requirements expected in industry.

This research arose out of reports which raised concerns on the part of industry and regulators about the quality and integrity of registered training organisation (RTO) assessment, particularly perceptions that learners are being deemed competent inappropriately. Because of other work focussing on licensed occupations, this project only collected information about non licensed areas.

The research design included the collection of data from a range of sources, including a literature review, a call for submissions focussed on peak bodies and industry associations, an online survey of enterprises and telephone interviews with employers, and other informants such as industry associations and group training organisations.

The data in this report is the outcome of more than 60 interviews, the responses of approximately 80 people to an online survey and submissions from peak bodies and industry associations. Key findings are listed below, and are accompanied by issues for consideration.

Level of involvement with assessment

92% of respondents regarded themselves as having a good or excellent understanding of assessment. The level of involvement with assessment processes and decisions varied widely amongst respondents, and individual respondents often commented in interviews that they were highly involved in some areas, and less involved in others. Enterprises were more likely to want to be involved directly in the assessment of their current workforce, rather than their potential or future workforce. They felt that they ought to be more involved in the assessment of apprentices and trainees rather than assessment related to totally off-the-job or institutionally based training. Some case studies of good practice in industry engagement in assessment processes are provided in the body of the report. Strong communication between the provider and the enterprise are a key aspect of good practice. International experiences with programs such as Unionlearn in Britain suggest possible mechanisms which may aid communication between enterprises and training providers.

Issues for consideration

What further work would be required to expand and enhance the positive case studies of industry engagement in assessment presented here, and to promote those widely? Could this be part of the NQC's role in supporting the implementation of AQTF2007?

Could industry expectations of assessment be quantified and measured over time by the addition of a specific question to the NCVET Employer satisfaction with VET survey?

Could relationships between enterprises and providers be improved through developing a model similar to the British Unionlearn model (in Britain unions work with employers to improve enterprise engagement with learning and skill development and to match learners' development programs with current work requirements and individual aspirations)?

Different expectations in different circumstances

There are different expectations of assessment that is undertaken within the workplace, or in partnership with the workplace, and assessment that takes place at the RTO or in a simulated environment. Industry was much more likely to be satisfied with assessment processes and outcomes when there was a strong partnership between itself and the RTO or where it had developed its own enterprise RTO. The closer the industry person interviewed was to the decision making process of assessment, the more satisfied they were. Some submissions by industry associations focussed particularly on institutionally based training for specific occupations and dissatisfaction with the judgement of competency in those circumstances. Other research, mentioned in the literature review found that 90% of employers surveyed "valued qualifications in at least one area in managing their business". Qualifications were considered more important for professional, technical/trades and managerial employees than for people in operational type positions. The report concludes with a challenge to the VET system to ensure that it provides "an appropriate match in the array of training products and services" to meet the complexity of individual enterprise needs.

Issues for consideration

How can these different expectations be met?

Can the NQC develop a strategy which recognizes the different purposes and contexts of training and assessment? In particular industry expectations of broad preparatory programs delivered in institutional settings, and more narrowly focused, occupational on-the-job training are vastly different.

Can a one size fits all approach to the definition of assessment and expectations of outcomes be sustained, or will it lead to an overall loss of integrity in the system?

What difference have recent COAG RPL projects made to the practice or update of RPL?

Consistency

Issues related to consistency and reliability were mentioned by many respondents. These ranged from criticisms about a lack of consistency (perceived or real) between assessors conducting assessments to variations in assessment techniques and tools. There is a perception that there is inconsistency in assessment practices between RTOs, some of which may be eliminated by the use of common assessment tools and or by moderation and validation across providers. Many respondents claim to have built strong trusting relationships with particular RTOs, yet are still sceptical about the capacity of all RTOs to deliver the same level of quality in assessment practice. Although there was general support for increased consistency, there were

different opinions about how best to achieve it, and to what extent it can be achieved while still permitting flexibility at enterprise level.

The issue of quality around the TAA04 Training Package has been raised in a number of forums.

Issues for consideration

What, if any, changes are required to the content, structure and delivery of the TAA04 Certificate IV in Training and Assessment are required to increase industry confidence and to widen the skill development options available to workplace assessors? Should a national strategic audit of TAA04 be conducted to provide more data?

The AQTF 2007 (and its predecessors) requires RTO assessors to 'have relevant vocational competencies at least to the level being delivered or assessed'

How can the VET sector more clearly specify the vocational industry competencies requirement for assessors in RTOs to have current vocational competencies?

Should training and assessment undertaken with a Training Contract in place require 'dual sign off' by the RTO assessor and a workplace supervisor?

How could the NQC investigate further international models of assessment moderation (particularly those in use in the UK and NZ) where the agency that sets the standards (the equivalent of the industry skills council) is involved in moderating assessments of the standard in appropriate industries?

Risk management in assessment

Issues arose in relation to the relative risk of different areas of competency, or groups of skills. For example, some units or elements, or combinations of units are regarded by industry as critical, yet current requirements dictate that all will be treated equally. Industry would like to see a way of differentiating between crucial competencies that must have the highest level of rigour about "assessing to the standard of performance expected in the workplace" and those that are either less important, or where the expectation is that the skill will be developed by experience in the workforce over time and is not expected in new employees. This perhaps links to the consistency area above, but in some circumstances enterprises wish to highlight particular competencies as critical and desire a higher level of engagement in the assessment process for those areas.

Issues for consideration

Is it desirable for the VET system to take a 'risk management approach' to the development of Training Packages to ensure that where units or elements, or combinations of units, are regarded by industry as "critical", they are clearly identified and accompanied by prescribed assessment tools?

Strategies to increase confidence in assessment

When the process of assessment is examined in the broad sense there are many possible points of intervention which may lead to increased confidence.

Although assessment is not entirely a linear process, it is possible to set out these potential points of intervention as

a continuum. They begin with the defining of the unit of competency and the assessment guidelines in the original training package, and go on to assessors as interpreters and users of those standards and the ways in which those individuals are trained and assessed themselves. Other points of intervention include the interactions and communication between RTOs and industry, and the work context within the enterprise. As assessment is the judgement of evidence against a recognised standard or benchmark; the first potential point of intervention is in the setting of that standard. Following a review of the literature, a suite of potential strategies to increase industry confidence in assessment were developed. These strategies were tested with participants who were asked to comment on their support for each approach. There was general support that each of the following potential interventions would increase confidence in the outcomes of assessment.

Potential points of intervention

POTENTIAL POINT OF INTERVENTION	ACTION REQUIRED
Training package development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Clear conditions for assessments written into evidence guides of competencies ■ Identification of priority units of competency where consistency would be enhanced by the addition of related, standardised national assessment tools.
Training and ongoing professional development of assessors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Delivery of training/short courses for assessors in the workplace to assist them in supporting or working with RTO assessors in the identification of relevant evidence and agreeing on enterprise contextualized units of competency ■ Assessors regularly attending professional development activities with industry people ■ More quality in the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment.
Validation and/or moderation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Assessors meeting with each other and industry representatives to discuss approaches, agree common assessment tools and check consistency ■ Endorsement or registration of assessors by an appropriate body in some industry areas.
Relationship between enterprises and RTOs (for current employees undertaking training)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Joint sign off on assessments (enterprise and RTO) ■ More detailed AQTF audits of assessment processes, involving industry representatives and including an examination of the assessment tools used ■ Better communication between the enterprise and the RTO about processes, expectations and information provision.
Other suggestions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Strategies for assessors to update their industry knowledge and ongoing monitoring of the effectiveness of this ■ Better monitoring of the requirement to assess 'over a period of time' and more clarification about these time requirements ■ Better use of workplace evidence by taking workplace tasks and mapping them to competencies, rather than asking the enterprise to find evidence in the workplace to match the competency. This could include processes to recognise enterprise based, non accredited training so that the outcomes of such training could lead to statements of attainment and/or qualifications. Work which is being undertaken in Britain could help here ■ Undertaking more holistic assessment that encourages the collection of 'workplace evidence' ■ Communication of the benefits of RPL to the enterprise, particularly in terms of return on investment.

By collating all the data from the research we can conceptualise an 'ideal' assessment system, at least in terms of meeting industry expectations, which comprises:

1. A very well written training package with clearly expressed standards and stronger assessment advice, including clarity about the required conditions of assessment
2. Prioritisation of critical units of competency in terms of the level of specificity applied by developers, and the level of scrutiny applied by assessors and by auditors
3. Competent assessors with current industry knowledge and experience preferably working in partnership with the enterprise
4. Assessors working with the national competency standards to contextualise the standards for individual enterprises or workplaces
5. Moderation of assessments including input from industry, assessors and Industry Skills Councils as developers of the Training Packages.
6. Assessment processes to be rigorous and to add value to the enterprise as well as to the individual learner
7. Communication between the RTO and the enterprise to contribute to a partnership approach
8. A system which encourages consistency within and across RTOs in assessment decisions
9. In some cases, a way of differentiating between institutional pathways preparing individuals for the workplace (where it is expected they will develop competency over time), and assessment of current employees
10. An auditing system which can remove poor performing RTOs from the market place.

Issues for consideration

How best can this 'ideal' be achieved?

1. Introduction

BACKGROUND

Debate about how best to ensure quality in assessment, and particularly how to build employer confidence in assessment, has been alive for many years in Australia. Yet there are various assumptions about what is commonly understood to constitute quality in assessment, and whether the issues about quality in assessment are the same across different industries and work contexts.

Competency-based assessment was described in Australia in 1992 by the National Training Board in this way:

*The concept of competency focuses on what is expected of an employee **in the workplace** rather than on the learning process; and embodies the ability to transfer and apply skills and knowledge to new situations and environments. This is a broad concept of competency in that all aspects of work performance, and not only narrow task skills, are included...*

The definition has since been reworked, yet the emphasis on workplace expectations has been maintained. The Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF) 2007 uses the following definition of competency:

*The broad concept of industry competency concerns the ability to perform particular tasks and duties **to the standard of performance expected in the workplace**. Competency requires the application of specified skills and knowledge relevant to effective participation in an **industry sector or enterprise**.*

The tensions about how to assess whether a candidate meets the expectations of the workplace have been ongoing. For some of the more traditional trades, where apprentices typically work with skilled trades people in order to learn their craft and attain their qualifications, the expectations of the workplace are more identifiable. However for institutional pathways, where students undertake their learning, and often their assessment in classroom settings, it is more difficult to ascertain whether students can meet the requirements expected in the contemporary workplace.

Whether a current employee, or a full time student seeking skills and qualifications before entering the workforce, the definition of competency, the definition of assessment and the 'rules' of training packages and AQTF 2007 apply equally.

The VET system's aim is to produce graduates with skills that meet current workplace requirements. This project investigated whether employers believe that the VET system is producing graduates who are deemed to be 'competent' according to the above definition as a result of assessment processes, and if not, why not.

PROJECT OBJECTIVE AND OUTCOMES

The project objective was:

Through research, consultation and analysis, to establish a strong evidence base for future NQC work to build confidence in the outcomes of VET assessment.

Project outcomes

- Provide indicative information about industry (including both employer/employee) perceptions and expectations, across non-licensed industry sectors, around VET assessment processes and outcomes
- Identify examples of best practice around industry engagement in VET assessment processes
- Identify strategies for increasing industry confidence in VET assessment; and
- Identify the level of industry support for various strategies for increasing industry confidence in VET assessment.

RESEARCH FOCUS

The research focus was clearly on industry perceptions and expectations. Key research questions were:

- What does industry expect of individuals with VET credentials in terms of workplace performance?
- Are these expectations reasonable?
- Are these expectations being met?
- What issues does industry see as affecting their confidence in the outcomes of VET assessment processes?
- What evidence is available to support industry perceptions of VET assessment processes and outcomes?
- To what extent do industry perceptions about the outcomes of VET assessment relate to issues outside the assessment process itself (e.g. training package content and/or advice and development processes, assessor qualifications/experience)?
- To what extent and in what ways is industry currently involved in VET assessment processes?
- How might industry be more effectively engaged to improve the validity and reliability of VET assessments?
- To what extent would industry support engagement strategies designed to increase industry confidence in RTO assessments?

PROJECT METHODOLOGY

The research design included the collection of data from a range of sources.

Literature review

The project commenced with a review of current literature on assessment and the factors affecting confidence in assessment outcomes. It also looked at other research about employer perceptions of VET. The key trends in the literature are summarised in the report.

Call for submissions

A Call for Submissions was disseminated through various channels including NQC members. A total of 12 submissions were received. The list of organisations that provided submissions is provided in Appendix I. Most of the submissions came from peak bodies or industry associations.

Online survey

The original intention of the project brief was to conduct a national, cross industry, online survey of approximately 2,000-2500 employers/employees with the intention of getting 500 respondents. Two surveys were developed, one aimed at employers or their representatives, another aimed at employees.

An online survey was developed and publicised through a range of communication channels. 82 representatives from a total of 52 organisations participated in providing responses to the survey. There were only a handful of respondents to the employee survey. The list of respondents' organisations is provided in Appendix II.

Interviews

A standardised structured interview tool was developed to gather quantitative and qualitative data. Industry Skills Councils were requested to nominate up to ten industry based people who could be interviewed. Industry peak bodies provided the names of other informants and others were suggested by those interviewed. All of those interviewed were based in Australia. The research methodology did not extend to those RTOs delivering training overseas. Sixty-two one-on-one interviews were conducted with representatives from different organisations.

Most interviews were conducted by telephone with a small number of face to face interviews and meetings.

LIMITATIONS TO THE RESEARCH

Readers should be wary of comparing outcomes of this research with larger surveys, in particular the biennial survey of employers undertaken by NCVET. Since 1995 NCVET has conducted surveys aimed at employers with a focus on the VET system. In 2005 and 2007 the *Survey of Employer Use and Views of the VET system* surveyed the 'manager responsible

for staff training' using computer assisted telephone interviews. Approximately 4700 interviews were conducted in 2007 using the Australian Business Register as the sampling frame. Such a large sample allows for differentiation of results across states industry area and other variables.

By contrast this was a relatively short project which focussed on Australian employers' opinions of assessment. This report provides quantitative and qualitative data, together with some examples of best practice. It does not provide a comparative analysis of the efficacy of assessment practices in RTOs.

Other factors to be acknowledged in this project follow.

Informed respondents

Although efforts were made to contact all types of businesses and people at different levels in the organisation, in many cases the people who availed themselves for interviews and completed the surveys were often in training management or human resource management roles. This meant that they were typically more knowledgeable than their business colleagues about the training system, and could provide informed comment about the system's strengths and weaknesses from their own business perspective. It also means that the data about perceptions is not wholly typical of people across all job-roles in Australian business.

Response rate

When it became apparent that only a low number of enterprises were responding to the online survey, the methodology was changed to increase the number of telephone interviews, thus enabling more qualitative data to be collected and in particular more examples of the characteristics of assessments likely to increase industry confidence in assessment. It provides data from a cross-section of industries, and key informants with extensive networks have provided input through submissions and interviews.

General perceptions versus individual experience

Respondents were asked to comment on their perceptions of assessment practices. In many cases respondents advised that there were vast differences between their perceptions of assessment process in the VET system and their own experiences, because they had located good RTOs and ensured that assessment practices addressed their business needs. Many respondents and interviewees claimed that they had found ways to ensure that assessment practices met with the high standards of their business, but that they did not believe that all RTOs and assessment practices were equally thorough.

2. Literature review

The purpose of this literature review is to explore relevant national and international literature on industry perceptions and expectations around VET assessment processes and outcomes.

The literature on industry expectations of the Australian VET system, and also international literature, is relatively broad and does not often separate assessment from the wider training issues, particularly when discussing industry engagement. Contemporary VET strategies are focusing on the dual challenges of providing on-the-job training and the customisation of this training to workplace needs. While most of the discussion has been around delivery, the challenge extends to assessment strategies. An assumption has to be made that discussions about the expectations and satisfaction with the VET system often include both delivery *and* assessment.

Providers of VET services have multiple responsibilities in meeting their stakeholders' needs. The flexibility to meet workplace needs may be critical to employers; the credibility of the VET system necessitates that there is quality assurance in the delivery and assessment of VET services that lead to qualifications.

This review begins with an examination of the literature around skill shortages and employer and employee expectations of VET, followed by an examination of industry and government involvement in potential solutions to identified issues.

Skill shortages

When examining industry expectations of VET, research shows some issues driving these expectations, both in Australia and internationally. A critical issue is that of skill shortages and the need for skill development.

The Australian Industry Group (AiGroup) represents 10,000 employers in a range of industries including manufacturing, construction, automotive and transport, and aims to help them become more competitive domestically and internationally. Its report *World Class Skills for World Class Industries* (2006) surveyed 526 employers, both large (60%), and small to medium enterprises (40%). A large proportion (64%) of respondents came from manufacturing, with 32% from service industries. This research shows that most employers reported difficulty in recruiting people with the skills needed, particularly middle level and trade skills, as well as soft skills. Inadequate skills in existing employees were also reported.

The National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER), funded jointly by the Commonwealth and state and territory governments, regularly collects information about the various ways employers meet their skill needs, how they engage with the VET system, and their level of satisfaction with the products and services of this system in the previous 12 months. Surveys have been conducted every two years since 1995, although the focus of the surveys has changed somewhat over the years.

The 2007 survey conducted telephone interviews with 4,701 employers. The report on the 2007 survey results supports the AiGroup results about skills shortages, revealing some skill shortages in Australia, with 44.4% of employers experiencing difficulty in recruitment, particularly large employers and mining employers.

This difficulty in recruitment increased from 40.6% in 2005. Employers cited recruitment difficulties as being a result of a shortage of skilled people in the industry, as well as limited applicants.

This skill shortage is not confined to Australia. The Leitch Review, *Prosperity for all in the global economy – world class skills* (2006), considered the United Kingdom's "long-term skills needs". An ageing population and low "economically valuable" skills were some of the issues highlighted in this report.

The New Zealand Department of Labour, through its quarterly Survey of Business Opinion conducted by the New Zealand Institute of Economic Research also reports an increase in skill shortages, with 64% of firms having difficulty finding skilled staff in the December 2007 quarter, up from 41% in the September 2007 quarter. The biggest increase in skill shortage was reported in the building sector, although it was high in all sectors, and it is expected that labour conditions "will remain tight over 2008", with "skill and labour shortages ... set to remain a major issue in the New Zealand economy".

Industry and employee expectations of VET

Despite the expected skill shortages, NCVER research into employers' use and views of the VET system reveals that the proportion of employers in Australia, particularly small employers, using the VET system declined from 57.1% in 2005 to 54% in 2007, although the percentage of employers with apprentices and trainees increased, from 28.2% in 2005 to 29.1% in 2007. The NCVER research found that over the next three years, substantially more employers believe the skill shortage will increase compared to those who believe it will decrease (NCVER, 2008).

The NCVER research revealed that about half (49%) of employers use "unaccredited training", outside the VET system (AiGroup, 2006). Even when nationally recognised training was available, a large proportion of employers did not use it because of cost or flexibility issues, whilst others did not know accredited training was available. One of the differences between nationally recognised training and unaccredited training is that nationally recognised training always includes assessment. However, this NCVER survey does not explore attitudes towards assessment, so it is not possible to draw any conclusions directly from this data about assessment (or the lack of quality in assessment) being a factor in the choice to use unaccredited training.

The 2007 NCVER survey also found that despite the slight decline in use of the VET system, since 2005 there has been an increase in employers' satisfaction with all forms of training, and satisfaction is high. The satisfaction rate for employers with jobs requiring vocational qualifications is 80.8%; for employers with apprentices and trainees the satisfaction rate is 83.3%, and for employers using other nationally recognised training, 80.5 % are satisfied. However, the increase in satisfaction with unaccredited training was smaller, the percentage of satisfaction of employers using this training was highest, 92.5%.

Other in-depth industry specific studies have been conducted recently, commissioned by the National Training Quality Council (NTQC – now the NQC). The first in 2004 was the National Strategic Industry Audit of Training which focused on the transport industry, and the second in 2005 investigated the hospitality industry.

The first audit into the transport industry (DEST, 2004) was undertaken to allow the NTQC to obtain a national picture of the operation of the National Training Framework in one industry. It was determined that the audit should concentrate on the key risk areas of fully on the job training and apprenticeships and traineeships. Sixty-six RTOs were audited and 216 employers and 1,900 trainees surveyed.

The audits identified serious compliance issues with AFTF Standard 8 – Assessment and Standard 9 – Learning and assessment strategies, across the majority of the registered training organisations audited. This audit also showed a low rate of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL).

However, overall employee satisfaction with the quality of training and assessment provided by registered training organisations was high (78%) and 87% of employers considered that when trainees were assessed as competent, they could do the job. Some reasons for dissatisfaction included comments about the trainer, for example the organisation did all the training with the trainer only completing the forms for assessment. A small percentage (5%) was dissatisfied with the skills and capabilities of trainers and assessors.

The trainees were generally satisfied with the quality of training and assessment provided by the registered training organisations, with 60% being "very satisfied" with the fairness of the assessment process, and a further 29% being "fairly satisfied".

The second audit, into the hospitality industry (DEST, 2005), has some similar findings about the skills of the workforce which could have an impact on the VET system. An objective of this audit was to gain employer and student opinion about the quality of delivery and assessment in the hospitality industry. Three hundred and sixty-five employers with apprentices and trainees were surveyed by telephone, and a student survey was made available online, with 474 out of 9,765 students responding. One of the training challenges for the hospitality industry listed in the report is a "perception

that there is a disparity between the skill level of apprentices and trainees provided by the training system and industry requirements".

The audits of RTOs found "significant non compliance against AQTF Standard 8.2 – RTO Assessments", including lack of holistic assessment, assessments not always being conducted in a realistic workplace, and lack of sufficient evidence, unreliability of assessment across assessors, and lack of validity of assessment tools and outcomes.

One area that employers were asked about was related to assessment strategies. 71.3% of employers surveyed rated the effectiveness of the assessment process as either "very effective" or "effective". However, 16.7% found the process "ineffective" for a number of reasons including that there had been no assessment, they had not seen any assessors, the apprentice/trainee was not skilled/qualified when signed off, and employers received no information on the trainee's progress. Satisfaction with the skills and capabilities of the trainers and assessors was 75.4%, and satisfaction about when apprentices or trainees were assessed as competent, they could actually do the job was 73.7%. So, although employers rated reasonable to moderate levels of satisfaction, the report concludes that there are some areas of concern.

Apprentices/trainees reported a high level of satisfaction (88%) with the quality of training provided by the RTO; with 90% being satisfied with the fairness of the assessment process, and 92% of respondents believed that they had gained the skills they need to do their job. However, there was concern expressed about the level of information provided about assistance with literacy and numeracy, how to obtain RPL, the expectations of the employer, the role of the trainer, and methods of assessment.

This research identified some good practice examples in four registered training organisations that negotiated a direct relationship between workplace skills requirements and the subsequent training and assessment. The process of determining what the "employer needed" was seen as superior to a process based on "what the training organisation could deliver".

Flexibility

The AiGroup research (2006) shows that there has been a lack of growth in training investment by enterprises, leading to skill shortages and gaps, with barriers including the constraints of accommodating training around business, but also a lack of flexibility and relevance of the training system. The report argues that the training system needs to have greater emphasis on technical, employability and soft skills; that it needs to respond more to industry needs, e.g. inclusion of adult apprenticeships, and training for non-entry level participants; that there needs to be flexibility at a system level, e.g. more regular updating of training packages, and provision of more adequate RPL; and that training providers, in particular TAFEs, need to be more flexible and proactive.

In research conducted in 2005 into issues in teaching and assessment in VET, some critical issues in relation to assessment arose. These issues, which remain “the subject of debate within the sector” include whether the focus of the assessment process should be the outcome or the process (Mitchell, 2006). This report also identifies other unresolved issues such as how best to provide services for recognition of current competence (RCC), grading of assessment and support for assessors. These issues all impact on the flexibility and quality of assessment.

In research into TAFE practitioners work with private enterprise (Harris 2005), it was found that in the broad context, in order to meet industry’s call for greater workplace specialisation of skills and customisation of training and assessment, VET practitioners need to work in different and more complex ways. VET practitioners need to be able to develop the collaborative linkages with key industry or employer personnel. As well, there is greater demand on the professional capacity of VET personnel to be able not only to contextualise the learning in a meaningful way but also ensure the assessment processes and outcomes support the learning.

Qualifications

Although some research does not discuss attitudes to assessment in particular, it does examine the importance of qualifications, which intrinsically include assessment. A recent study into the relevance of higher-level VET qualifications for enterprises and employment outcomes for students, to address skill needs, found that “a relevant qualification together with workplace experience is valued by employers” (Foster, 2007). This supports an earlier study (Ridoutt et al, 2005) about the value employers give to qualifications, which found that 90% of employers surveyed “valued qualifications in at least one area in managing their business”. Qualifications were considered more important for professional, technical/ trades and managerial employees than for people in operational type positions. The report concludes with a challenge to the VET system to ensure that it provides “an appropriate match in the array of training products and services” to meet the complexity of individual enterprise needs.

Employee expectations

Employees and potential employees of industry also want the VET system to meet industry needs. Graduate destination surveys consistently find that around 75% of students undertake VET qualifications for employment purposes. Overall satisfaction with VET training is high, with 82% of TAFE graduates rating the quality of their course as “above average” or “excellent” (NCVER, 2001).

However, some dissatisfaction of the VET system is apparent in the research. A series of focus groups, *Student Experience Roundtable*, conducted by the National VET Equity Advisory Taskforce in 2007 and attended by 55 participants, mainly students across the five target equity demographics,

indicated that there were some issues about the quality of teaching and support.

One criticism was the lack of industry experience of the trainers, and students felt that more VET staff should be sourced from industry. They also expressed dissatisfaction with the “competent and not competent assessment method”, as it did not recognise higher levels of performance. Many students expected to gain a job after completing a VET qualification, but had some problems with the level of careers information, remarking that they expected VET institutions to “foster relationships with employers and act as a ‘go between’ for students, employers and industries” (DEST 2007).

Quality

The introduction of the AQTF in 2001, which evolved from the original Australian Recognition Framework, placed an increased emphasis on quality in the national VET system. An updated version was put in place in 2007, to continue to provide “nationally consistent, high-quality training and assessment services for the clients of Australia’s vocational education and training system” (AQTF 2007). A change in focus of these standards is the focus on the “quality of services and outcomes being achieved for clients rather than inputs used to get there”. Assessment has a critical emphasis in these revised standards, with one of the three standards ensuring that RTOs provide “quality training and assessment across all of its operations” (Standard 1). This includes continuous improvement of training and assessment, ensuring that training and assessment meets the requirements of the training package or course and that industry is involved in the development of assessment strategies. Standard 1 also emphasises the training/ assessment and vocational competencies of trainers and assessors, and the provision of RPL.

Rather than being focussed on audit processes, the New Zealand approach to ensuring quality assessment is underpinned by the Principles of Best Practice Moderation. These principles “assert that best practice moderation occurs when it is based on partnerships between assessors and other assessors, and also assessors and moderators” (New Zealand Qualifications Authority in Clayton et al, 2004). Within this system the “standard-setting bodies” that produce the unit standards also produce unit standards for assessment and moderation, and they meet together with assessors to moderate or validate the standards. Together with training providers, the standard-setting bodies “are responsible for ensuring that assessors participate in the designated process for ensuring validity and consistency in assessment”. Industry is also engaged in this process through involvement in the standards development.

Rating training and assessment

The Institute for Trade Skills Excellence was established in 2007 to advance teaching and learning in trades education. A key strategy of the Institute is the introduction of a Star

Rating scheme of RTOs, based on a set of evaluation criteria. The criteria apply to teaching departments within the RTO, rather than the RTO as a whole. Some of the criteria relevant to this study include showing evidence of conducting assessments "in conjunction with the enterprise and learner to reflect holistic work activities", and employment of trainers with "up-to-date knowledge", "recent industry experience ..." and "a good understanding of the skill and workforce issues confronting ... industry" (www.tradeskills.com.au).

Recognising non-accredited training

In the UK, enterprises are being encouraged to recognise the value of their own training. The UK report *Implementing the Leitch Review of Skills in England (2007)*, acknowledges that some companies "offer outstanding training". By having enterprises recognise what they do well, individuals could gain credit for "what they achieve through their company's training schemes, and put that towards a nationally-recognised qualification". This promotes the development of transferable skills that have currency across a range of jobs.

To encourage employers and employees to commit to the development of workforce skills, the UK Government is promoting the take up of the Skills Pledge. The Skills Pledge, gives employers "an opportunity to demonstrate their commitment to investing in the skills of their employees. By making the Skills Pledge, employers are investing in their employees and in their business; supporting their employees to increase their skills will also support increased productivity and profitability for their business" (DIUS 2007). Employers who take the pledge, can access funding to training.

Encouraging relationships between enterprises and the training system

Trade unions have also played a role in raising the profile of quality training and assessment in the UK. In 1998 the Government funded Union Learning Fund (ULF) was established to promote activity by trade unions in support of creating a learning society. One of the key objectives of Unionlearn, funded by the ULF, is to work with employers to improve their engagement with learning and skills, promoting learning to match learners' starting points and current needs and aspirations (www.unionlearningfund.org.uk). Within enterprises, learning representatives (Enterprise Learning Representatives – ELR) are recruited to encourage the take up of learning opportunities. In turn they encourage and promote good relationships between the company and training providers. This scheme has not only encouraged workers into learning programs and raised the skill base of the UK, but it has also set up a productive management and union dialogue on learning and made advances in establishing a culture of learning at work. A similar scheme operates in New Zealand.

Industry involvement in assessment

The AiGroup considers assessment to be a critical component of the apprenticeship system. In their report

Contemporary Apprenticeships for the Twenty First Century (2005), they state that the "credibility of a new, competency progression apprenticeship model will be derived from the quality and rigour of assessment." They recommend industry endorsed "assessment-centres" which specialise in recognition for a range of clients including adult apprentices, the skills of existing workers and catering also for entry level apprentices.

The Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCI), in ACCI Policy Review (February 2008), highlights the importance of assessment for employees to maintain and improve quality standards within an industry. If a person is assessed and issued with a qualification without having the satisfactory skills, employers will need to retrain the person in the workplace, which is costly. It would also "drive down standards of industry", and give the training industry a "bad name". ACCI argues that the necessary relevant vocational competencies of VET assessors be maintained through the RTO "supporting them (assessors) in meaningful engagement with industry and relevant professional bodies". ACCI suggests that in order to encourage the workplace to be actively involved, the RTO approaches industry directly for involvement in the assessment process. They recommend a set of principles, including up-skilling and training of workplace supervisors to contribute to the assessment process, and sign-off of competency by employers. This would encourage assessment to be conducted on-the-job and "in a more meaningful way that suits business requirements". ACCI also encourages industry "to be more assertive" about a collaborative approach to the assessment process and argues that the audit process is critical to engender employer confidence in assessment.

Future trends

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD), publication *Going for Growth (2007)* provides an overview of structural policy developments in OECD countries from a comparative perspective. Based on a broad set of indicators of structural policies and performance, this publication examines recent progress made in implementing policy reforms for each OECD country. The Australian VET system is seen as a mechanism that can provide not only a work-related qualification but also access to direct experience in the modern workplace and an understanding of the world of work - key ingredients for ongoing employability.

Most recently, the Australian Government has increased investment in skills training to meet identified skills shortages through its *Skilling Australia for the Future* initiative. This initiative includes an expanded role for Industry Skills Councils (ISCs) to contribute to workforce development. ISCs will be funded to provide industry intelligence and advice to Skills Australia, government and enterprises on workforce development and skills needs. Under the expanded role, ISCs will conduct an environmental scan to provide an overview of the workforce issues in the industries covered by their jurisdiction.

They will also be required to assist enterprises undertaking a training needs analysis, to closely examine the skills of current workers, the current work of the enterprise and areas for potential expansion. The ISC will then be able to make recommendations for how enterprises may improve productivity by identifying the training that employees require to upskill. This role will include assisting the enterprise to make informed choices about qualifications, skills recognition and gap training, and about which RTOs are best placed to provide what is required (DEEWR, 2008). Information gathered through training needs analyses will inform updated environmental scans and training package development. This change to the role of ISCs does not appear to include the NZ approach of having the standards developers included in moderation of assessments.

Summary

A search of the literature shows that the major surveys of employers' opinions about VET focus only broadly on the outcomes of assessment, and the characteristics of assessment processes that provide confidence are not easily identifiable.

Mechanisms in other countries such as the recognition of unaccredited training in the UK and moderation of assessment in NZ by industry bodies equivalent to our ISCs, offer potential for further investigation as strategies that may increase industry confidence in assessment outcomes.

3. Industry perspectives

This section details both quantitative and qualitative data provided through an online survey, interviews and submissions.

- 141 people provided quantitative data
- 62 people provided data through interviews
- 79 people provided data through the online survey.
- 12 organisations provided submissions
- Qualitative data was gathered through one-to-one and telephone interviews.

Appendix I lists the organisations that provided submissions, Appendix II lists the organisations of staff who participated in the online survey, and Appendix III lists the organisations of staff who participated in interviews. Data from the telephone interviews and the online survey is included in Appendix V.

Industry areas

In both online surveys and interviews, respondents were asked to nominate their industry, using Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) categories. The data covered all industry areas.

- Property and Business Services had the highest number of respondents (9.9%)
- Wholesale Trade had the lowest number of respondents (2.0%)

States and Territories

Interviewees were asked to advise the states and territories in which their business operates (rather than in which state or territory they were located).

Note: many businesses operated in more than one state or territory

Numbers of staff employed in Australia

- 51% of respondents and interviewees were from businesses employing more than 200 people. 22% were from businesses employing 20-200 people and 27% were from businesses employing less than 20 people. N=134

Note that a number of respondents were from industry bodies and while they had small numbers of employees, they were representing the views of organisations of varying size.

Participation in apprenticeship programs, traineeships or hired VET graduates

- 48.5 % of respondents were from organisations that had participated in an apprenticeship program in the past 12 months
- 66% of respondents were from organisations that had participated in a traineeship in the past 12 months
- 77% of respondents were from organisations that had hired someone with a VET qualification in the past 12 months.

Level of understanding of assessment

- 92% of respondents regarded themselves as having an excellent or good understanding of how VET qualified employees are assessed.

EMPLOYER PERCEPTIONS

Increased participation in assessment

Respondents were asked whether they would like to be more involved in the assessment process.

- 50% of respondents stated that would like to be more actively involved in the assessment process.
- The 50% who did not wish to be more involved in the assessment process mostly stated that this was because:
 - They were already very involved in assessment and so did not need to increase their participation in assessment
 - They felt that pressure of time would not permit them to be more involved in assessment.
 - They were industry bodies and so this was not part of their role.

Most of the interviewees however believe that industry or employer involvement is critical to an effective assessment process.

Levels of satisfaction

Respondents were asked how satisfied they were with the assessment of people in their organisation who have obtained, or are working towards, a vocational education qualification.

- 25% of respondents were very satisfied
- 41% were satisfied
- 19% were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
- 15% were dissatisfied.

In what State or States/Territories does your organisation operate?		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
VIC	55.0%	33
NSW	60.0%	36
SA	45.0%	27
TAS	33.3%	20
WA	46.7%	28
NT	30.0%	18
QLD	45.0%	27
ACT	33.3%	20

Many interviewees who were satisfied or very satisfied advised that this was because they had worked hard to locate an RTO which was responsive to their business needs. They stressed that their comments about satisfaction did not apply to the system as a whole.

Satisfaction was seen to rely on:

- The calibre of the RTO (particularly in hospitality)
- The currency of the assessors industry knowledge
- Whether the assessor took a 'tick and flick' approach or used a variety of evidence gathering techniques.

Many interviewees advised that their levels of satisfaction varied with different qualifications. For example, a Human Resources Manager from the manufacturing sector advised that he was very confident of the assessment processes for the people they employed from the traditional trades, but that he was not at all satisfied of the assessment of people with a Certificate IV in Training and Assessment.

Additionally many interviewees commented that while they were satisfied with assessment generally, this was not the case with RPL, which was often regarded as burdensome and problematic.

Confidence in Outcomes

Respondents were asked how confident they are that an assessment of competence reflects workplace requirements for competence.

- 25% were very confident
- 33% were confident
- 25% could not say whether they were confident or not
- 17% were not confident.

Again, interviewees explain that their levels of confidence very much depended on their opinion of the awarding RTO and which qualification. Interviewees stressed that there are great variations in assessment practices across the system, and between qualifications.

Additionally, it is seen that some units of competence and some qualification structures do not reflect workplace requirements. Where this is the case the individual may have been appropriately assessed against the unit – and assessed as competent – but still not be competent in the workplace, according to the employer.

Work readiness

Respondents were asked how long they expected it would take someone who had graduated with a VET qualification to be competent in a job role in their organisation, following appropriate induction and support.

- 16% said immediately
- 21% said within 1-2 months
- 40% said within 3-6 months
- 26% said between 6-12 months.

Generally employers felt that it was part of their role to support people to become competent in their workplace and that it was unreasonable to expect that VET graduates would be immediately competent in their workplace following induction. Certain job-roles were regarded as needing more support.

Apprentices from the traditional trades, who had more workplace experience, were regarded as typically requiring less time to be able to perform effectively in their work role, however some interviewees were critical of the skills of 'fast-tracked' apprentices. Variables to consider when ascertaining how long it takes someone to become workplace competent were:

- The individual and their learning style
- The extent of specialisation in the workplace / job role
- The requirement to work with complex and high-end technology that is not available in training institutions

- The amount of previous workplace experience of the incumbent
- The time it takes to get the qualification
- The amount and quality of support from the employer.

Employers expect to provide orientation and support for new employees.

How often are expectations of workplace competence met?

- 15% of respondents stated that their expectations of workplace competence of people with a VET qualification were consistently met
- 50% of respondents stated that their expectations of workplace competence of people with a VET qualification were mostly met
- 36% of respondents stated that their expectations of workplace competence of people with a VET qualification were sometimes met
- 4% respondents stated that their expectations of workplace competence of people with a VET qualification were almost never met.

Again, interviewees remarked that they knew that certain RTOs were more likely to produce graduates who met their expectations. Some interviewees were more critical of graduates who had taken an institutional pathway in order to obtain their qualification.

There are concerns about the variations across the system.

The quality of recruitment and selection processes was seen to be a factor. Larger businesses with more sophisticated selection processes claim that their expectations are more likely to be met because they have systems and processes to review potential employees' skill levels. That is, they place less reliance on the qualification as a marker of skills and more emphasis on their own assessment.

Amount of assessment

Respondents were asked whether they believed that their employees undertaking VET qualifications were over-assessed.

- 20% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that their employees were over-assessed
- 20% were undecided about the statement that their employees were over-assessed
- 60% of respondents strongly disagreed or disagreed with the statement that their employees were over-assessed.

Most respondents do not believe that over-assessment is currently a problem for their employees.

- 34% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that employees are under-assessed
- 24% were undecided about whether employees are under-assessed
- 42% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that employees are under-assessed.

In summary there are more employer concerns about under-assessment than over-assessment.

Appropriateness of assessment

Respondents were asked whether they thought assessors conduct appropriate assessment to determine workplace competence.

- 59% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that assessors conduct appropriate assessment to determine workplace competence
- 21% of respondents were undecided about the statement that assessors conduct appropriate assessment to determine workplace competence
- 23% disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that assessors conduct appropriate assessment to determine workplace competence.

Again interviewees commented that there were wide variations between RTOs and that many of them had worked with good RTOs to relevant assessment practices. Problems were seen to exist when:

- Assessment occurs within the classroom and/or does not include employer feedback
- Assessors do not have current industry knowledge
- The assessment context does not reflect the reality of the workplace, such as being required to work under time pressure and multi-task
- The competency standards and/or training do not reflect current industry practices.

Relevance of assessment to current industry practices

- 61% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that assessment tasks and processes used by assessors are relevant to current industry practices.
- 24% of respondents were undecided about whether assessment tasks and processes used by assessors are relevant to current industry practices.

- 16% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that assessment tasks and processes used by assessors are relevant to current industry practices.

Interviewees belonging to organisations that were enterprise RTOs were more convinced of the relevance of assessment practices. Again wide variations between RTOs were reported.

Perceptions of flexibility in assessment

- 66% agree or strongly agree that assessors are flexible in the way they conduct assessments.
- 17% neither agreed nor disagreed that assessors are flexible in their assessment practices.
- 17% disagreed or strongly disagreed that assessors are flexible in the way they conduct assessments.

Consistency in assessment

- 20% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that RTOs are consistent in the way they conduct assessment.
- 21% of respondents neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement that RTOs are consistent in the way they conduct assessment.
- 59% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that RTOs are consistent in the way they conduct assessment.

Wide variations were reported in approaches to assessment – in some cases it was seen that this is merited. Industry needs assessors to be flexible and responsive to their needs, however there is also a perception that there are wide variations in the quality of how people are assessed and hence the level of confidence in the outcomes. There is a particular concern about ‘tick and flick’ assessment.

Preference for formal assessment

- 75% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement ‘I think training outcomes are better if formal assessment of training occurs’
- 15% of respondents neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement ‘I think training outcomes are better if formal assessment of training occurs’
- 10% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement ‘I think training outcomes are better if formal assessment of training occurs’.

Despite concerns raised about assessment practices, these respondents demonstrated a widespread preference for recognised training which includes assessment.

Perceptions of currency of assessors’ knowledge and experience

- 73% of survey respondents believed that, in their experience, assessors had current industry knowledge and skills

Interviewees were asked a slightly different question. Their responses showed that:

- 41% believed that, based on their experience assessors always had current industry knowledge and experience
- 52% believed that, based on their experience assessors sometimes had current industry knowledge and experience
- 7% believed that, based on their experience assessors rarely had current industry knowledge and experience.

Some interviewees believed that the lack of currency was a problem resulting from the training package rather than the assessors’ practices. Other issues raised were that:

- RTOs could not necessarily afford to provide access to the latest equipment and technology
- In industries such as health and community services, it is seen that RTOs do not keep pace with changes in service models, government policy and legislation
- Assessors who had been in the training system for a long time, and who had permanent jobs would almost invariably become out of touch with industry unless they actively went and worked in contemporary workplaces.

There was conflicting data about whether the problem of currency of assessor knowledge was more likely in public or private RTOs. Some interviewees regarded private RTOs with a specific focus on a given industry or job role as more likely to have assessors with current and relevant industry knowledge; others saw the public system as offering advantages (stronger systems, less driven by the dollar).

KEY THEMES

The research identified that employers and employer representatives are often concerned about the skill levels of graduates from VET qualifications. A number of factors contributing to this perception were identified.

Training packages

Sometimes the problem appeared to be with the training package or qualification structure, where skill levels are not clearly specified and industry standards are not clear. In many cases, assessors assess to the levels specified in the training package, but this standard is not representative of what industry requires (R&CA submission and telephone interviews). There were suggestions from several sources that training packages needed to be more specific when referring to performance levels and industry standards (SSA submission, R&CA submission).

Units of competency need to reflect what's required in the workplace... in Aged Care, people can hold a Certificate III in Aged Care but never have showered a client, showering is a key part of the work.

Assessors may conduct valid and reliable assessment against the documented competency standard/s, but if those competency standards or qualification structures do not reflect the required work outcomes for their respective job roles, it is inevitable that employers will have little faith in training and assessment.

Many units of competency specify that "where possible" assessment should take place in industry contexts. But often, assessments are undertaken in institutionalised contexts that are not representative of industry settings (SSA submission, GTA submission, R&CA submission).

Assessment of competence must be in the workplace or under workplace conditions. Even simulation is a problem.

There is no doubt that the maximum industry confidence in assessment is achieved when the assessment judgement is made on the basis of evidence from the workplace.

Large numbers of students obtain VET qualifications without any exposure to a real workplace.

Assessors' skills

Skills of assessors vary. Some businesses noted that assessors had current industry experience, others said assessors had vague experience, others none at all. "People think because they have a Cert IV they can assess anything." There is general concern in the hospitality and tourism industries that assessors often do not have industry experience, or if they do, the experience is often not specific to the particular unit of competency, or it is not current (SSA submission, R&CA submission). From the hospitality industry, there is also concern that the intent and outcomes of training packages "are not being translated well on the ground" (R&CA submission).

Training package assessment guidelines usually specify that assessors must have industry experience, but the guidelines often do not specify that the experience must be current or up-to-date. When they do make this specification, they may not provide advice about how this currency should be judged.

It was suggested that assessor requirements outlined in training packages be more specific about vocational competence, and describe exactly what is meant by recent industry experience (SSA submission).

Many interviewees advised that they had little faith in the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment (TAA).

Many of the current problems arise from the current Certificate IV in TAA – the package is weak on assessment.

You can't teach someone to be a trainer in a week!

Some interviewees claimed that there were RTOs awarding a Certificate IV in TAA on completion of a two day program. This qualification is seen as the VET system's lynchpin. If assessors perceive that there is no rigour involved in the qualification for their own job, it is unlikely that they will in turn model rigour in the assessments they conduct. It was beyond the scope of this research to examine the validity of those claims but there is at least a **perception** by industry that there is too much flexibility in how that particular qualification is being assessed.

Industry participation in assessment

When asked if they would like to be more involved in the assessment process, many employers and employer representatives said that they "couldn't be more involved than they already are". Many others said they would like to be more involved, and those who lodged submissions were clear that they wanted to see industry more involved in the assessment process to ensure that industry standards were met (R&CA submission, ACCI submission, MLA submission, SSA submission, RWWA submission).

In the fitness, sport and recreation industry, there are long held views about the quality and consistency of VET assessment. Calls are increasing for greater industry involvement and a much stronger emphasis on workplace-based assessment.

I like the idea of closer working relationships between industry, RTOs and assessors – that seems essential and it rarely seems to happen.

Respondents generally said they would like to see more flexibility in assessments. This call is related to a desire for assessments to be applicable to particular workplace contexts, where assessments tasks match up with tasks of particular job roles in organisations and enterprises, and the standards required by industry.

It was great when an RTO contextualised the learner guides and assessment tools to link directly to our workplace and used real examples of the job they were employed in.

Increasing flexibility leads to difficulty in ensuring that standards of training packages are being upheld.

There's huge variation in standards between providers.

There's extreme variation between the states.

There are differing levels of consistency between RTOs – it's all over the place, really.

Many suggested that a more consistent approach could be developed through moderation. Moderation sessions are conducted across various industry sectors, serving as a forum to discuss and compare assessment tools, completed assessments and required standards.

This process works well in some instances, but on the whole it seems that industry involvement in moderation is low. In both the UK and in New Zealand, the standard setting bodies (the equivalent to our ISCs) are involved in moderation of assessments.

Low industry participation rates are often due to cost factors. The cost of releasing an employee from his or her work to attend moderation or collaboration sessions with RTOs is too great for many businesses to afford, particularly small businesses. This is problematic because in several instances, industry stated they would like to be more involved with training and assessment processes, but the cost of doing so was prohibitive.

[There's a need to fund] workplace supervisors of trainees/apprentices to come together with RTOs to build a strong relationship between the RTO and those in the company working day to day to build capability. Needs communication and ongoing relationship building.

Some RTOs put forward a similar approach.

Rigorous assessment is expensive. Engaging with employers takes time and costs money.

...strongly believe [communication] is the essence of the whole thing. Issue is how? ISCs should develop communication tools in consultation with RTOs and employers that can be used.

Enterprises that incorporated an RTO are more confident that assessment levels meet requirements of the workplace, and representatives from enterprise RTOs stated that they were content with their level of involvement in assessment process.

A number of interviewees believe that assessors need to build stronger and more dynamic links with industry bodies.

Time

Within the submissions, there was concern expressed about huge variations in the time taken to obtain qualifications (ATA submission).

In some industries rapid change in industry standards or legislation means that it is difficult for assessors to keep abreast of change. Sometimes rapid change leads to a lot of pressure on RTOs to quickly train and assess for the required qualification. In such situations quality outcomes can be overlooked. There were criticisms of this approach in some areas of disability services, and as mentioned earlier, with the Certificate IV in TAA.

Some RTOs are unscrupulous and give out easy Certificate IVs – they simply have no integrity.

Pressures also exist around the assessment of students undertaking qualifications in skills shortage areas, often when there are influxes of students from overseas.

Some RTOs are offering AUR30405 – delivered and assessed in 12 months! The problem is that this sits side by side a 4 year apprenticeship program. Students end up with the same qualification.

The Cert III in Hospitality – too easy to get – quality issue – issued with lack of industry experience in 12-15 weeks. (from SSA submission)

And there is concern from employers about apprentices being “moved through when they shouldn't be”, when they are not competent (AiGroup submission).

Although there is general agreement that Competency Based Training (CBT) means there is not a requirement for a ‘time served’ approach there are very strongly voiced concerns about what are seen as the ‘extremes’ – the ultra short version of a program. In general terms, respondents seem to be raising the issue of sufficient practice, namely that a skill may be learned in a short time but competence comes after sufficient practice. Assessment should only be undertaken after that practice period.

Assessment strategies

Assessment strategies are often developed in isolation from industry, without any industry input (WAHTTTC submission, AiGroup submission).

One employer reported that he had approached [an RTO] and asked if assessment could be completed in the workplace so his apprentices could be assessed on the most current equipment used in the industry. While [the RTO] were ‘all for it’ they have not been able to follow up on the initial enthusiasm which the employer puts down to lack of staff and some internal disorganisation. (AiGroup submission)

Industry seems to often miss out on the opportunity to contribute to training and assessment plans to help determine assessment requirements.

Far too often the training plan is predetermined and assessment is not discussed. There can be variations across company size which influence the extent of involvement a company will be interested in – it is sometimes the case that small companies just don't have time for extensive involvement in assessments and just want the RTO to sort it out for them. While RTOs need to exercise their own judgement in these situations, they should also make it clear to all employers that it is their right to have a customised training plan, and that the RTO's assessments will affect the duration of an apprenticeship and an apprentice's wage progression. (AiGroup submission)

This theme also resonated through the telephone interviews.

AQTF

The research has identified that in many cases, employers and employer representatives believe that assessment is far too concerned with pre-2007 AQTF compliance (WAHTITC submission), ignoring a focus on industry standards. The focus has promoted a 'tick and flick' approach to satisfy AQTF auditors but fails to ensure that assessment processes address required standards.

Several telephone interviewees particularly noted frustration with the AQTF.

RTOs need to be more focussed on student outcomes and employability and less on audit results. They are top heavy with admin because of the onerous and almost useless requirements of the AQTF.

Some believe that the audit requirements of the AQTF have put an end to holistic assessment.

Holistic assessment of final competence at the completion of a VET qualification is something that has been lost due to competency based training, modular delivery and assessment.

The new AQTF does not directly address this issue. It requires that:

Training and assessment are conducted by trainers and assessors who:

- have the relevant vocational competencies at least to the level being delivered or assessed

- continue developing their vocational and training and assessment competencies to support continuous improvements in delivery of the RTO's services. (AQTF 2007)

Auditing "relevant vocational" competence is troublesome because it is open to different interpretations. Does it mean the assessor must have the specific competencies being assessed? Or is it competency that is somehow related to the competency being assessed? How in practical terms can it be audited?

The ACCI submission suggested that AQTF audits should occur in conjunction with "a person deemed by industry to have the knowledge and industry experience to make a judgement".

RPL

Barriers to assessment such as inappropriate levels of engagement from industry apply equally to RPL as they do for other aspects of assessment (ACCI). Employers regard RPL as a high priority (ACCI submission, R&CA submission) and expect that employees will be engaged in the RPL process. The research revealed a lot of dissatisfaction about RPL processes. The survey responses and submissions noted that RPL is a very cumbersome, time-consuming, expensive process (R&CA submission, ACCI submission, AiGroup submission, RWWA submission, OWA submission), exacerbated by the "burden of proof" (ACCI submission).

The RPL process relies heavily on supporting evidence supplied by the candidate, or on evidence or reports supplied by an employer, or someone who has first-hand knowledge of the applicant's capabilities. The task of collecting together vast quantities of evidence to satisfy the requirements of all the competencies listed in a qualification is often very daunting for applicants: it can also be a daunting task for assessors.

The theme of holistic assessment reoccurs around RPL. Generally, employers would like to see RPL take on a holistic approach, not an approach that has such a heavy emphasis on evidence to suit a 'tick and flick' approach (WAHTITC submission).

Holistic assessment must become the norm.

It would help if assessors could take evidence from workplace tasks and map that evidence to competencies. Employers don't want to be bogged down with trying to find evidence to match up with the competency.

It does seem that there is a trend toward tick and flick processes, and a lack of confidence about making professional judgments.

Stop making the whole process so full of red tape!

But is the emphasis on recording minute details and evidence about every performance criteria in a qualification really what is expected by the AQTF? Or is this a distorted interpretation that gets upheld by RTOs keen to utilise ready-made, or easily constructed AQTF compliance templates? (Docking, in McKenna & Mitchell, 2006)

The Skills First RPL model being developed in Queensland seeks to remove the heavy onus on paper-based evidence and puts more emphasis on the professional judgement of the assessor. How assessors (who use an atomistic approach driven by perceptions about auditing requirements) adjust to this style of assessment remains to be seen.

There are examples of RPL systems working well, where organisations have developed or located assessment resources to guide the collection of evidence for particular job roles, where performance is observed, and where processes are streamlined to be cost effective (see Metals manufacturing and CITT/TITAB case study in Section 6), but these examples tend to be the exception, rather than the norm.

VET in schools

There appears to be a serious industry lack of confidence in assessments in VET in schools programs in particular industry areas. Several submissions note that graduates of the Certificate II and III level qualifications from this area, often had nowhere near the level of competence required for targeted job roles (AiGroup submission, R&CA submission, SSA submission, GTA submission), and students had little or no exposure to industry contexts (GTA submission).

The SSA submission also noted concern with the VET in schools programs that equipment and teaching methods were often outdated, and there is real concern from the hospitality industry that standards are being eroded (SSA submission, GTA submission, R&CA submission).

RTO ratings

Several sources suggested that RTOs who meet industry required levels of training and assessment, should be recognised somehow.

There needs to be a register of really good RTOs - not enough just to have qualification on scope, and audited – there are too many bad RTOs out there.

I have found some RTOs to provide a better service than others – I immediately change RTO if I feel they are not doing my staff justice.

Two submissions reported on the benefits of the Star Rating Scheme implemented by the Institute for Trade Skills Excellence (ACCI submission, AiGroup submission). The scheme, which covers the skills shortage trade areas (automotive, manufacturing, building and construction, metals and engineering, electrical, mineral resources, hospitality and personal services, rural and farming), recognises high performing departments or schools within RTOs through a range of evaluation criteria relating to enterprise and learner need, for example, whether the RTO can conduct assessments to reflect holistic work activities, whether the RTO can use training package standards to meet local needs, or whether an RTO can deliver training at a time and place that meets business and learner needs.

The Star Rating Scheme provides a mechanism for the recognition of industry standards and expectations. It also recognises the employment of “excellent” trainers and assessors. According to the Institute for Trade Skills Excellence, excellent trainers and assessors have: up-to-date knowledge; recent industry experience that mirrors industry best practice; a good understanding of the skill and workforce issues confronting local, regional and national industry; and a leadership role amongst their peers. They also have a role in maintaining industry networks, maintaining training networks, and use state-of-the-art equipment and facilities.

Practitioners are also recognised for excellence in trade teaching, through the Trade Teacher of the Year process.

The R&CA submission also made reference to the ACCESS assessment system developed by the Australian Hospitality Review Panel, used in the late eighties and early nineties. The ACCESS system involved licensing of assessors with a scope equal to their industry experience, training assessors in specific aspects of industry standards, professional development to maintain status and the maintenance of appropriate assessment standards and tools. According to the submission, the ACCESS system wound up when State Training Authorities took control of training and assessment.

4. Industry engagement in assessment processes

The closer an enterprise is to the decision making processes in assessment, the greater the confidence of the enterprise in the assessment outcome.

Involvement in assessment processes

84% of respondents reported that they had participated with an RTO in the assessment of their employees. Follow up questions with the interviewees indicated that the level and type of participation varied across the enterprise's range of employees and across RTOs with which the enterprise was involved in some cases.

- 75% were involved in collecting evidence such as observing the employee, keeping examples of work
- 61% were involved in discussing the performance of an employee with an assessor
- 39% were involved in providing technical advice to the assessor on workplace standards
- 50% were involved in providing trained workplace assessors.

Interviewees were asked whether they would like to be more actively involved in the assessment process. 55% of the interviewees replied in the affirmative. Many of the remaining interviewees answered no because:

- they were enterprise RTOs and therefore felt they could not be any more involved
- they were already very involved in assessment
- they were industry representative bodies and therefore were not involved in assessment
- they felt that their business commitments would not allow them to allocate more time to involvement in assessment.

The enterprises which took part in the research and had their own RTO, either as an enterprise RTO or in a contracted relationship, appeared to be most satisfied with the level of engagement.

Amongst the suggestions for increased involvement in assessment were

- Employer input into final competency assessments
- More scope for supervisor feedback and observed competence
- Maintaining open and effective lines of communication
- RTOs informing employers regularly of the progress of its employees
- RTOs to use existing workplace measures to collect evidence of assessment rather than RTO developed or provided proformas
- Direct skill assessments in the workplace.

5. Strategies to increase industry confidence in assessment

Both the online survey and the interviewees canvassed strategies to increase industry confidence in assessment. In addition, some of the submissions received documented particular strategies to improve the quality of assessment outcomes and in turn, increase industry confidence.

When asked to respond to a number of statements about what would make the respondent feel more confident in the assessment outcomes from VET training online survey respondents responded in the following way.

- 62% either agreed or strongly agreed that they would be more confident in assessment outcomes if there was **better communication between their organisation and the RTO** managing the assessment process, 12% either disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Greater communication and understanding within industry and particularly at line manager level on what assessments are about and the variety of ways they can be conducted both on site and off site.

In my experience the critical point is the relationship between the employer and the RTO.

- 87% either agreed or strongly agreed that they would be more confident in assessment outcomes if assessors met with each other and industry representatives to discuss approaches, agree common assessment tools and check consistency, they would be more confident. 12% either disagreed or strongly disagreed. 5% either disagreed or strongly disagreed.
- 89% either agreed or strongly agreed that they would be more confident in assessment outcomes if **assessors regularly attended professional development activities with industry people** to discuss workplace expectations. 5% either disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Assessors must take ongoing professional development to ensure they are up with technology eg. chemical application – need a process to regularly update: - should be trained in the skill to work with another professional from industry – must have access to relevant funds and allow assessors to assess on site.

Interviewees were asked a related set of questions with more opportunities to expand on their responses.

- 72% either agreed or strongly agreed that they would be more confident in assessment outcomes if there was **endorsement or registration of assessors** by an appropriate body (in addition to the requirements for a Certificate IV in Training and Assessment). 19% either disagreed or strongly disagreed.

So long as its transparent and clear about in what capacity they have shown excellence and this can be communicated. The list could be endorsed by an industry association but the risk is that it may reduce access for new players who may be offering innovation. It can be difficult to maintain integrity and quality of these sorts of lists over time.

Good idea, but admin and support costly.

Depends on which body and how it's done.

- 66% either agreed or strongly agreed that they would be more confident in assessment outcomes if **clear conditions for assessments** are written into evidence guides of competencies eg number of times a person is assessed, where assessed, who they are assessed by etc (eg you must be assessed in a commercial kitchen). 14% either disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Better sets of performance criteria. The more explicit the training package is the better. Critical aspects and conditions of assessment also in user guide

May help but not in isolation as training packages are very complex technical documents and this may make them more complex. Won't make a difference on the ground unless there is more communication.

- 62% either agreed or strongly agreed that they would be more confident in assessment outcomes if **standardised national assessment tools** were developed, (eg checklists for observations, questions, project descriptions etc) and approved by an appropriate body in critical areas. 24% either disagreed or strongly disagreed.

There is a danger of becoming too prescriptive at RTO level - they need to be able to build in for the workplaces that they are dealing with.

'One size fits all' is a problem, fixed national program not flexible enough but still need national minimum standard.

Difficult because the industry different. Template would be useful.

Against flexibility (OK if offered as exemplars say to set standards and levels).

Yes, but -Need to include unique aspects for assessment for each enterprise.

- 70% either agreed or strongly agreed they would be more confident in assessment outcomes if **funding for delivery of training/short courses for assessors in the workplace** to assist with assessment (eg record keeping, explaining workplace requirements to external assessors, observing employees at work) was made available. 11% either disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Should have a particular focus for SMEs and be on a day to day support basis to show them how processes work, provide advice etc.

2 units at Cert III. Skill set of TAA.

Needs to not be generic and needs to be flexible to industry needs.

- 84% either agreed or strongly agreed that they would be more confident in assessment outcomes if there was **joint sign off on assessments by both employer or company and the RTO**. 11% either disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Assessors should visit industry workplaces to gauge skill requirements and provide additional workplace assessment

This can only work if there is good communication. Tension arises when communication is not clear

- 63% either agreed or strongly agreed that they would be more confident in assessment outcomes if there were **more detailed audits of assessment processes, including assessment tools, outcomes** (eg as required by AQTF). 20% either disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Less focus on tools and administration and more focus on outcomes eg. expressed in business terms - demonstrated behaviours identified. Effort to develop auditors removed from business. Employers should be asked Did they (the RTO) add value to the business?

I want to see someone get in trouble for running a 'p*** poor' assessment

Needs to be an industry validation – annually

Concern is that some RTOs are unscrupulous and whip people through and assess people just to make it quick and cheap - this isn't picked up in audits

VETAB (NSW) undertake joint audits with regulators.

Patchy auditing. Resourcing required to undertake who pays the auditors. Strategic industry audits. Market driven - market will decide.

It won't work if they are just paper based. If they are more focussed on collecting feedback from the employer/employee that the assessment process is OK or on how it could be improved then yes.

Auditors should randomly talk to students to discuss quality in assessment.

Spot audits on assessment should be the norm; RTOs know when its happening and make processes look good. There should be separate audits for assessment with a focus on continuous improvement. Auditors should be more proactive in helping to improve, not so much compliance driven.

- 80% either agreed or strongly agreed that they would be more confident in assessment outcomes if there was **better communication between employers or the company and the RTO**, so that employers are better informed about and involved in assessment processes. 4% either disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Strongly believe this is the essence of the whole thing. Issue is how? ISCs should develop communication tools in consultation with RTOs and employers that can be used.

- 76% either agreed or strongly agreed that they would be more confident in assessment outcomes if assessor networks for moderation and ongoing support were created. 14% either disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Networks are a good idea. Should include both RTOs and companies and be open to supervisors and others who are not formally 'assessors'. People need a reason to keep coming back so need to be driven by good inputs and there needs to be communication around expectations of coming into a network.

Need clear goal of what they want to achieve.

Other suggestions included:

- Improving information provided to the employer

Often I receive statements of attainment or certificates that are little more than line items and completion dates. It would be good to include a longer description of what knowledge and skills the trainee now possesses.

- Assessor updates of industry knowledge

Assessors updating their own industry knowledge by scheduled returns to the workplace for regular blocks of work re-experience. Perhaps 2-3 blocks of 1-2 weeks per year...

- Assessment over a period of time

Recording of on-job evidence over time. RTO's should not sign anyone off as competent if the person has not consistently applied their Skills and Knowledge on job to the standard required over a range of conditions. Hence on job profiling/log book system/ or some other means of evidence gathering is important.

Follow up and further checks with those assessed -- the feeling seems to be, get your certificate and go! While people forget and a lot of the training is not assessed properly.

- Using workplace evidence

Industry knowledge by the assessors would mean that they could take evidence from workplace tasks and map to competencies. Do not bog down the employer with trying to find evidence to match the competency.

Contextualise assessment processes and products and utilise the resources made available by the enterprise

Ensure there is probity in what is occurring – demonstration of work readiness

- RPL

Fund workplace supervisors of trainees/apprentices to come together with RTOs to build a strong relationship between RTO and those in the company working day to day to build capability. Needs communication and ongoing relationship building. RPL is a major sleeper. Problems with perceptions of RPL are because employers have a poor understanding of how it can provide opportunities for them. Communication of the benefits needs to be outcomes and solutions focussed, building on case studies to provoke peer interest.

6. Best practice – Case studies

Through this research, a number of examples of good assessment practice were described by the respondents. Some of these case studies have been summarized below, but it is important to note that these are examples only, and the researchers came across many good assessment practices which are working well for a particular group. The case studies describe the assessment process, the strengths of the approach, and resource implications and transferability to other contexts.

The case studies have been summarised under four groupings:

- Linking assessment to enterprise needs
- RPL processes
- Customisable assessment tools
- Use of self assessment in the assessment process

LINKING ASSESSMENT TO ENTERPRISE NEEDS

There were many excellent examples of linking assessment to enterprise needs reported as part of the research. This section will describe three examples, one by an enterprise based RTO, one by an RTO working in partnership with an enterprise, and one by an RTO which organises assessment around real work tasks for an industry.

CASE STUDY 1

Use of performance indicators in assessment in an enterprise RTO

Business:

Insurance Australia Group

Contact:

Chris Butler - Accreditation Manager – 02 9292 3380
– Christopher.Butler@iag.com.au

Assessment process:

IAG has a commitment to offer staff qualifications and has developed an approach to assessment practices that is strongly aligned with the needs of the organisation. As an enterprise RTO they have established assessment outcomes for learners that link directly with the performance indicators already used in the organisation. Learners' managers, who are recognized by the business as 'subject matter experts', assess their staff as part of their normal role. The RTO acts in an advisory capacity, ensuring quality and consistency but not imposing any additional requirements other than those the business already has built in.

They use a combined 'Development and Accreditation' Model, which outlines 4 steps. Each step is focussed on the opportunities for the learner and the organisation; and the assessment of these is mapped back to units of competency. During this mapping a distinction is made between the tasks required to meet performance criteria, and other 'business critical' tasks. The assessment aspects are mapped and defined before training commences, and these are embedded in the performance indicators of the job function.

Strengths of the approach:

- Assessment is conducted at various stages, not just once
- Employees are provided with performance measures before commencement of training
- Assessment is embedded in the performance appraisal processes of the organisation
- Assessment is holistic and not atomistic to each competency.

Resource implications:

- Minimal additional resources are required as assessment builds on resources already in the organisation.

Transferability to other contexts:

This model has transferability to other organisations and industries. Organisations that have mature performance development and management systems are more fertile places for this model to establish and be amalgamated into business processes. However, the essence of mapping job role performance to competency units could be applied more broadly.

CASE STUDY 2

The Westin Hotel, Melbourne

Assessment process:

The RTO working with The Westin Hotel is flexible in the way it conducts training and assessment, and has been chosen specifically by the hotel because of this flexibility. When the RTO started working with The Westin Hotel they were given an office in the hotel so they could organise the training and assessment to meet the needs of the hotel. This included examining job descriptions and organisation documentation, and having open forums with key personnel, so that the training and assessment was linked to the hotel's tasks. By looking at the hotel requirements, they were able to link these back to the units of competency, rather than the other way around, meaning they could deliver and assess real outcomes for the hotel.

The flexibility of approach also related to the timing of training and assessment in a 24 hour a day, 7 day a week business, and the chosen RTO was able to be flexible to meet the delivery timetable of the hotel.

Strengths of the approach:

This approach means that the training and assessment is specifically tailored to the hotel's requirements, and the flexibility means that the RTO follows the hotel's 7 day a week, 24 hour a day timetable for training and assessment. The assessment is focussed on the hotel's requirements, not the RTO's requirements.

Resource Implications:

The main resource implication for this approach is the allocation of a working space in the organisation for the RTO. However, now that they system is set up, the RTO maintains a smaller presence in the hotel training area.

Another resource is the time taken by the RTO trainers/ assessors, and the hotel's personnel to discuss the real requirements of the hotel in relation to training, and to set up the system. However, the Director of HR feels that this investment in time is well worth the result.

Transferability to other contexts:

This flexible approach could be used with any RTO/employer relationship in most industry settings.

CASE STUDY 3

TAFE NSW, Western Institute

Assessment process:

Shearing

At TAFE NSW Western Institute, a holistic assessment process has been set up for the assessment of shearing, which can occur in the 'novice' shearing shed which provides a working shed training environment, and also on the job. The Head Teacher, Shearing/Agribusiness reported that in the past, they assessed by listing all the performance criteria in the units of competency in a 'lock step' manner. However, the application of this approach for on the job training in working shearing sheds was less than ideal. They realised it was not a good way to assess and it led assessors toward a 'tick and flick' process.

To overcome this problem, a group of trainers together unpacked the units of competency, to see what critical evidence they needed to demonstrate real work tasks, either in a notice training environment or working shed. They then mapped this back to the units of competency, to make sure everything was covered. The team then thought of the different ways to assess, mainly observation with observation checklists, some oral questioning with suggested questions and information for assessors about what they needed to cover. They also used casual and guided discussions, eg during 'smoko' and lunchtime, with the outcomes of this discussion being recorded and forming part of the evidence.

The assessment process also included joint sign off, by the assessor and a workplace representative, eg classer, shed manager, contractor.

Wool handling

For wool handling, they took this methodology further and obtained funding from Australian Wool Innovation (AWI) for a similar process. This project based assessment on work roles within the wool handling team and also included some resource development, trainer workshops and best practice examples from a range of RTOs nationally. One example for learners with low literacy was a series of slides showing a range of potential wool contamination situations, which people being assessed could choose from, rather than relying on words. AWI then disseminated this information nationally through a series of consistency workshops for trainers in a range of RTOs to help national consistency.

Strengths of the approach:

The holistic assessment process is based around the workplace and workplace tasks (or working shed in a training institution) and the assessment tasks are then mapped back to a unit of competency, rather than the other way around.

Using a group of assessors for this development process leads to consistency of assessment, and assessment is valid as they are assessing real work tasks. The process also allows for moderation/validation sessions three times a year.

Resource implications:

There was a lot of resourcing to set up the system, in terms of assessor time, e.g. unpacking the units of competency, writing the assessment tools and other resources. The resourcing issues are greater in this situation where assessors work in different locations.

Once this was set up, the resourcing time was for:

- travel to site and spending 10 hours in the shed conducting assessments
- maintenance of the assessment tools – trainers meet three times a year for validation and refining of the tools.

Transferability to other contexts:

This process could be used in any context, for any training package, if there is a body of assessors prepared to put the time into the initial development of the assessment resources.

RPL PROCESSES

During the research, several industry training councils in Western Australia talked about their RPL processes, and discussed how they had set up streamlined yet rigorous processes. One process described below, focuses on support for applicants. The other process works with the enterprises to map the competency against enterprise training.

CASE STUDY 4

Metals, Manufacturing & Service ITC, WA

Assessment Process:

The Metals, Manufacturing and Services ITC, WA has a streamlined Skills Recognition Process which concentrates on support for the applicant. This is a fee for service process, mainly in the mining, engineering and resources industry for people who have been working for at least six years in the industry, and who need trade papers.

Support for the applicant occurs throughout the process.

- During an initial telephone conversation, the process is explained to the applicant.
- If an applicant decides to go ahead with the process, an application form which lists the units of competency is sent. This enables the applicant to do an initial self assessment.
- After payment of an initial non refundable amount, the applicant has an interview with the ITC officer, who goes over the evidence and talks the applicant through the whole process, including advice on types of evidence. The officer make suggestions about additional evidence if required.
- The ITC officer then assists the applicant to make contact with an RTO (usually TAFE) for the assessment.
- The ITC sends a copy of the portfolio of evidence to the assessor, who goes through it with the candidate. If assessment can occur in the workplace, that is preferable, and the assessors are encouraged to use professional judgment rather than a micro- approach.
- At the TAFE, the applicant is enrolled in the whole course, so if the need to pick up some gap training they can do this in a number of ways, including joining classes, off campus or by completing activities.
- The paper work is handled by the ITC.

Strengths of the approach:

The Executive Officer of the ITC believed this was a fair and rigorous process. The applicant gets a lot of personal support through the process, eg explanation of process, examples of typical evidence, application forms, initial meeting with Metals ITC before the skills assessment.

However, the Executive Officer also reported some weaknesses of the approach, including difficulty in getting suitably experienced assessors, and the unfamiliar evidence gathering processes for most applicants. The weaknesses provide a rationale for support.

Resource implications:

The primary resources needed for this process is making staff available for support, and for the assessment, particularly if assessment is to be conducted on the job.

Transferability to other contexts:

The Metals, Manufacturing and Services process could be used by other industries if an industry body is prepared to provide the kind of support used in this skills recognition process.

CASE STUDY 5

CITT and TITAB

CITT is a not for profit, national company, whose core business is to promote and facilitate training and employment opportunities within the Telecommunications and IT industries. TITAB Australia Cabler Registry Services is an ACMA Accredited Registrar, set up to provide the telecommunications industry with its own non-profit registry service. The work with organisations, eg telecommunications organisations and call centres, to ensure there is a rigorous and streamlined RCC process, which includes skill development where necessary.

Assessment process:

As part of the process, CITT:

- map training that occurs in the workplace against training package qualifications, including induction training, online courses for OHS, information about privacy (many of which are already assessed, to see what training has already been covered and assessed)
- identify areas to gather evidence, and skill gaps to be addressed through training or activities in the workplace
- use supervisors/managers to validate evidence
- use workplace assessors to assess the evidence, eg from an RTO
- set activities to fill gaps, and use assessment tool to assess after training and/or activity completed.

Strengths of the approach:

The main strength of this approach is that the initial mapping forms the basis of the process. This means that the evidence is based around tasks in the workplace, and helps streamline the assessment process.

Resource implications:

For this streamlined process to occur, there are some resource implications, including:

- committed organisations
- assessment tools, record books, activities to meet gaps
- time for the process – it often takes over 3 months
- training of workplace assessors within organisation and/or RTO
- supervisors who know the content, and understand assessment process broadly.

Transferability to other contexts:

This process is enterprise based, and the organisations do not get government funding. The process would be transferable if there was a funding model, such as taxation relief.

CUSTOMISABLE ASSESSMENT TOOLS

During the research, some organisations stressed the need for high quality and customisable assessment tools. The following case study describes an RTO which has developed assessment tools for a particular industry, and offers a service to customise these tools.

CASE STUDY 6

Performance Training

Performance Training's services include provision of customisable learning resources and assessments, mainly, but not exclusively for, the mining industry.

Assessment process:

Assessment tools to be used for mining training package competencies include check lists for practical tasks, direct questions for theoretical aspects and summative assessment tasks. These assessment tools can be used by enterprise trainers and assessors, or external RTOs, and can be customized for a particular enterprise.

Strengths of the approach:

- Generic tools means there is consistency of assessment.
- Tools can be customized for the workplace allowing for flexibility, eg using workplace procedures.
- All tools are mapped back to competency, so they are valid and cover all aspects of the unit of competency.
- The tools are well received and accepted in the industry.
- Assessment tools can be developed on a needs basis.

Resource implications:

Performance Training has a staff of approximately 18, including instructional designers, technical writers, graphic designers and desk top publishers.

Transferability to other contexts:

This is a business model that is used by many private organisations providing training related services to industry.

Use of self assessment

Several respondents to the research survey talked about the use of self assessment as part of the assessment process. The following case study shows how this can be used to successfully streamline the assessment process without compromising rigour.

CASE STUDY 7

Scouts Australia

Assessment process:

For practical assessment of ski touring instructors, assessment consists of demonstration of skills over several weekends, in all conditions. At the end of the weekend activity, participants self assess their skills against the criteria linked to the relevant training package qualification. Those not yet competent usually recognized it themselves. The assessor has to sign off on the practical assessment.

Formal assessment of theory also occurs.

Strengths of the approach:

This self assessment process takes pressure off the assessor, and puts the onus back on the trainee. Participants can see if they are not yet ready to cope with the requirements of the elements and performance criteria of the qualification.

Results were more accurate than expected when this system was first introduced. Some trainees tend to under estimate skills, but rarely overestimate them.

A range of assessment methods is used – it does not just rely on the self assessment, as there is also observation by the assessor during the outdoor activities, and formal assessment of theory.

Resource implications:

This system relies on an accurate and rigorous self assessment tool.

The self assessment must be done directly after the weekend activities.

Transferability to other contexts:

This method could be used for any practical skill.

Appendix I – Submissions Received

ACS Distance Education
Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCI)
Australian Industry Group (AiGroup)
Automotive Training Australia (ATA)
Group Training Australia (GTA)
Growcom
Meat and Livestock Association (MLA)
Outdoors WA (OWA)
Racing and Wagering WA (RWWA)
Restaurant & Catering Australia (R&CA)
Service Skills Australia (SSA)
WA Hospitality and Tourism Industry Training Council (Inc)

Appendix II – Data

All data is Available as a separate document on the NQC Website:
www.nqc.tvetaustralia.com.au/vet_assessment_report

Appendix III – Survey respondents

ABC Learning Centres
AFL Sports Ready
Anglican Care
Apprenticeships Queensland Limited
Australian Technical College - Hunter
BCG
Capitol Skills Centre
CGU Insurance
Charles Parsons
CICT, Box Hill Institute of TAFE
CitiPower/Powercor
Combined Team Services
Commerce Qld
ConocoPhillips Australia Pty Ltd
Department for Families and Communities
East Africa Cranes Ltd
Electrical Group Training Ltd
Emergency Services Agency
Ford Motor Company
Garfish Restaurant
GM Holden Ltd
Greening Australia
Hotel Motel & Accommodation Association
IAG - CGU Business partners - FI and Affinity
Ian Barker & associates Pty Ltd
IIT Training
IMS
Insurance Australia Group
JRD Communications Pty Ltd
Maxima Group Inc
McDonald's Australia Limited
MG My Gateway
Milcom communications
Mission Australia
Mount Isa Group Apprenticeship, Traineeship & Employment (MIGATE)
MPA Skills
National Safety Council of Australia Ltd
Norske Skog Albury Mill
Queensland Tourism Industry Council
Records Solutions P/L
Recreation Training Queensland
Roma Regional council
Royal Australian Navy
Rural Skills Australia
Small business owner/ RTO lecturer & assessor
Southern Cross Care
Sydney Training and Employment
TAFE NSW
The Rare Pear
TORGAS
Torgas Inc
Training Broker - Grains Industry

Appendix IV – Interviewees

90 degrees in the shade
ACTU
Ag Consulting Co
Australian Institute of Project Management
AMWU National Vehicle Division
Australian Chicken Growers Council
Australian Customs Service
Australian Institute of Management
Automotive Training Australia
Automotive Training Australia (WA Inc.)
Cabrini Hospital
CITT (Communications and Information Technology Training),
TITAB (Cable Registry Service)
Defence - (DMO) Defence Material Organisation
Defence - Defence Education Training and Development
Department of Human Services - Disability Services
Digital Education Services
Estate WA (Jones Ballard Real Estate WA)
Fortescue Metals
GM Holden
Goulburn Murray Water
Grains Industry Training Network
Green Corps - Greening Australia
Group Training Association QLD and NT
Group Training Australia
Group Training Australia SA
Heidelberg Graphic Equipment
Hertz
Hyatt Hotel Sydney
Insurance Australia Group
KR Castlemaine
Master Plumbers Association NSW and Master Plumbers
Apprentices Ltd.
Maxima Group Training
Metals, Manufacturing and Services ITC
Milparinka Inc.
Minerals Council of Australia
MVA Maritime Union of Australia
National Farmers Federation
National Safety Council of Australia
NSW Business Chamber
Patricks
Peter J Johnson Consulting
Port Waratah Coal Service
Pybar Mining Services
QTIC
Ray White Real Estate
Resources and Engineering Skills Alliance
Rio Tinto Iron One
RSL Care
S.I.S. Ltd
Sydney Ferries
Sydney Institute of TAFE
Tasmanian Small Business Organisation
The Federal Group
The Group Training Association of NSW
The Western Hotel Starwood Hotels and Resorts
Thomas and Coffey
Transport and Logistics Centre (TALC)
Transport and Storage Industry Training Council
Woodside Energy

NOTE: some individuals requested that the report did not name their organisation's participation.

Appendix V – Resources

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