Troubleshooting guide: Assessment in VET

5th Edition 2013

Government of **Western Australia**
Department of **Training**
and Workforce Development

DISCLAIMER as at March 2014: A number of changes are underway within the National Training Framework, including a transition to the new Standards for Training Packages to be implemented by the end of 2015. See http://www.nssc.natese.gov.au/training_packages.

As the transition to the new standards will vary according to each Industry Skills Council's timeline, these publications will continue to address the content of the previous Training Package model. It is anticipated that content related to the new standards will be incorporated into the publications as they become more widely adopted.

While every effort is made to maintain their accuracy, currency and usefulness, the publications are edited only once a year and may not remain current with changes implemented at state and federal level. The publications are accurate as at the date of publication shown on this page. If in doubt, please check the many websites referenced within each publication.

Troubleshooting guide: Assessment in VET

Contents

Introduction

This guide was developed by the Department of Training and Workforce Development to help registered training organisations (RTOs) to develop, implement and refine competency-based assessment processes.

It identifies a number of common challenges related to assessment which RTOs and assessors face in their daily training delivery and assessment practices. It also discusses the challenges RTOs face, and offers a range of strategies for RTOs to consider.

The information in this publication has not been referenced to specific regulatory standards such as the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF) or the Standards for NVR Registered Training Organisations (SNRs). However, the information provided is based on current standards and reflects good practice.

RTOs may choose to use or adapt the suggested strategies or they may decide that a completely different approach is required to meet their students' needs.

The information applies only to training package qualifications and accredited courses with a vocational outcome. Assessors should always check to ensure that they are using the most recent version of the training package, regulatory standards or other materials.

This publication can be downloaded from www.vetinfonet.dtwd.wa.gov.au.

Section 1 – Unpacking the unit of competency

'Unpacking' is the term commonly used to describe the process of consulting training packages or units of competency to locate and interpret the crucial information they contain. The systematic unpacking of a unit of competency enables trainers/assessors to identify the critical aspects of workplace competency which need to be built into their delivery and/or assessment strategies and plans. Unpacking also helps in the selection and development of delivery and assessment methods and tools, and the provision of accurate information to prospective students.

This section explores five challenges that commonly arise from the complex task of **unpacking or interpreting a unit of competency**. Each challenge is discussed and strategies are suggested to help trainers/assessors to address such challenges should they arise.

1.1   Assessing the essential requirements

Challenge

Competency-based assessment relies on the establishment of well-defined standards against which an individual's competence can be assessed. Detailed specification of these standards is found within units of competency.

Unless a unit of competency is unpacked systematically and carefully, there is a danger that some of the mandatory requirements may be missed.

The challenge for trainers/assessors, therefore, is to ensure that all mandatory requirements are captured in their assessment materials and plans.

Discussion

Units of competency contain both mandatory requirements and advisory information. The concept of a standard in competency-based training and assessment relies on **all** trainers/assessors identifying the essential requirements of a unit of competency, so that they can be confident that a student's performance encompasses these essential requirements.

The components of a unit of competency that **must** be addressed are as follows:

- the elements of competency and the related set of performance criteria;
- any component of the range statement that must be included according to the specifications; and
- the evidence guide including:
  – critical aspects of evidence;
  – required knowledge;
  – required skills and attributes;
  – any prerequisite or co-requisite units;
  – any other aspect of the evidence guide stipulated as mandatory (such as a range of assessment contexts, methods of assessment or assessment over time); and
- key competencies/employability skills.

Listing these mandatory requirements is an important part of the analysis you need to undertake as you develop your assessment materials and plans, choose your assessment methods and design your tools.

Failing to systematically identify the mandatory requirements in this way will risk the credibility of your whole assessment and certification process, and may jeopardise your compliance with the regulatory standards.

Strategies

- Look at the evidence guide first, as it will give you a good overview of what a student needs to be able to do in order to demonstrate competence.
- Highlight all the mandatory components on a copy of the unit of competency or your preferred planning tool then develop or review your assessment plans, methods and tools to ensure that you are gathering sufficient evidence for each mandatory aspect.
- Participate in moderation sessions within your organisation and with other RTOs to ensure that your interpretation of the mandatory requirements is consistent with other assessors in your industry.

Remember

The judgement of competence can be made only when an assessor is confident that the required outcomes of the unit of competency have been achieved and that consistent performance has been demonstrated.

1.2   Prerequisites and co-requisites

Challenge

Many training packages identify prerequisite units of competency that must be assessed **before** other units are assessed, and co-requisite units, which need to be assessed **with** other unit(s). Prerequisites and co-requisites mean that students cannot be deemed competent in a particular unit of competency until they are competent in the prerequisite or co-requisite unit(s).

The challenge for RTOs lies in early identification of any such relationships between units of competency, so that the necessary links between them can be factored into learning and assessment strategies, including programming/timetabling, determining the resource requirements and the sequencing of learning and assessment activities at the qualification level.

Discussion

Prerequisites specify the skills and knowledge students should have acquired before they are assessed in a unit of competency. Prerequisites can have a significant impact on resource requirements because the student must have completed them.

Co-requisites specify the skills and knowledge that should be delivered and assessed at the same time. These may minimise the assessment load for both assessors and students, but may impact upon the programming/timetabling of courses.

To ignore or overlook these requirements is to:

- disadvantage the student;
- invalidate the delivery and assessment of the unit of competency; and
- risk non-compliance with the regulatory standards.

Strategies

- As part of the planning/development process before assessing a unit of competency, check whether the unit specifies any prerequisites or co-requisites. This will ensure that you have captured all the mandatory components (see Section 1.1). You should then factor these requirements into your learning and assessment strategy.
- If there is a student who believes he/she is ready to enrol in a unit of competency without first undertaking training in its prerequisites, arrange for the student to be assessed against the prerequisite unit(s) of competency.
- Cluster co-requisite units of competency.

Remember

Prerequisite or co-requisite requirements for units of competency must be adhered to otherwise you invalidate the assessment of the unit or cluster.

1.3   Customisation and contextualisation

Challenge

Industry requires training and assessment practices to be flexible and relevant for individuals and to respond to the needs of local workplaces. Training and assessment practices also need to conform to national standards and policies.

The challenge for trainers/assessors is to meet both these requirements at the same time.

Discussion

Indicators of quality that all RTOs will be required to report on include:

- students' satisfaction with the quality of training activities and the support available to them;
- employers' satisfaction with the overall quality of training and assessment practices; and
- completion rates.

The extent to which RTOs are able to accommodate the particular/local needs of students, employers and workplaces will influence their satisfaction levels.

Three important ways RTOs can meet the needs of their local customers are by:

1 **customisation** of qualifications to meet their requirements;

2 **contextualisation** of units of competency; and

3 **making reasonable adjustments** to learning and assessment strategies to accommodate the needs of individuals (refer to Section 2.4 for a discussion of reasonable adjustment).

1. Customisation

Customisation relates to big-picture changes to the structure of a qualification. You can legitimately use customisation to meet a student's needs through:

- selecting a specific type of qualification; and/or
- selecting elective units of competency for particular roles; and/or
- clustering units of competency to suit enterprise and individual needs.

Note: It is not acceptable to modify the rules of a qualification by deleting core units of competency or by reducing the prescribed number of electives. Likewise, it is not generally acceptable to add extra units of competency to those required for the qualification as set out in the training package rules. However, this may be done in some cases, if feedback is received from industry to suggest that this is required or if a state legislation requires additional units.

What RTOs need to do in this case is tell students before they enrol that they are including extra units, explain what those extra units are and why they are being included, and then the students can make an informed choice. RTOs then need to make sure that they award appropriately; that is, in accordance with the training package rules, and that they issue statements of attainment for the extra units.

Strategies

- Engage workplace personnel in the development and monitoring of training and assessment methods and tools.
- Ensure that you provide sufficient flexibility to meet the needs of your students by offering individual units of competency or a skill set, and by issuing a statement of attainment instead of a full qualification.
- Offer an existing accredited course or seek to have a new qualification accredited through the Training and Accreditation Council (TAC) or other regulatory bodies, if training package units of competency or qualification structures do not address the need.

2. Contextualisation

Contextualisation relates to changes in wording (but not meaning) within units of competency. When contextualising a unit of competency, you must not damage the integrity and meaning of the unit of competency by:

- deleting or adding any elements of competency or performance criteria;
- ignoring any other mandatory requirements (see Section 1.1);

- rearranging any of the performance criteria (see Section 1.2); and
- adding to the mandatory requirements such as required knowledge.

Care must be taken in the process of contextualisation to ensure that validity is not compromised and that the unit of competency is not restricted in its transferability and applicability, eg by the excessive use of enterprise-specific terminology.

Strategies

- For the purpose of contextualising the unit to meet the needs of an organisation, consider replacing terms with more commonly used enterprise terminology, choosing appropriately from the range statement or other aspects of the evidence guide.

Remember

Customisation and contextualisation for students are valuable ways of ensuring that your training, assessment and support services meet the needs of individuals and local businesses. Engaging them in the development of your training and assessment strategies will increase the relevance of your programs and generate confidence in the quality and integrity of nationally recognised training.

1.4   Qualification levels

Challenge

Units of competency within a training package can be included in qualifications at different Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) levels. This can cause confusion for some assessors about the level at which their assessment should be targeted.

The challenge for RTOs is to ensure that the assessment of the unit of competency is undertaken at the correct AQF level.

Discussion

Alignment to the AQF occurs when a group of units of competency are packaged into a viable AQF qualification. Individual units of competency are not individually aligned to the AQF; however, a coding system for units of competency is used to inform trainers/assessors of the qualification level at which the unit was first packaged. This qualification level is the level at which the unit is to be delivered and assessed.

For example:

TAEASS403A

TAE	ASS	<u>4</u>03	40<u>3</u>	A
Refers to the training package that contains the units.	Refers to an industry field of learning – in this case, assessment.	Refers to the AQF level in which the unit is first packaged.	Is a sequence identifier – in this case, the third unit in the assessment sequence.	Is a version identifier – this is the first version of this unit.

This unit will always be delivered and assessed at the AQF level IV.

Note: Some training packages provide advice related to the span of application of a unit of competency across a number of qualification levels. The unit is assessed at the level at which it first appears in a training package qualification.

- If the training package you use does not follow the national coding system, the unit is assessed at the level at which it first appears in a training package qualification. New assessors may like to visit www.tpatwork.com for some information on the national coding system.

As far as the student is concerned, once a unit of competency has been achieved, it is always recognised for a qualification at any level in which the unit appears.

When a unit of competency is part of a higher level qualification or when it is clustered with other units (see Section 2.6) of a different AQF level or with a different generic/employability skills profile, it is important not to inflate the performance requirements of the unit.

Remember

It is important that the unit retain the character of its original performance standard, regardless of the level of the qualification in which the unit is included.

Section 2 – Managing the evidence-gathering process

Other critical decisions that need to be made by assessors include deciding what and how much evidence to collect, by whom and for what purposes – taking into account the fact that assessment decisions must be based on evidence that complies with the rules of evidence, namely: validity, sufficiency, currency and authenticity.

This section explores several challenges that can arise in the establishment and management of evidence-gathering processes.

2.1 Gathering too much evidence

Challenge

In responding to the challenge of meeting the assessment requirements of training package qualifications, assessors can sometimes fall into the trap of over-assessment. This may take the form of gathering unnecessarily fine-grained evidence, rather than evidence that supports the integrated/bigger picture of competence that units of competency seek to describe.

The challenge for RTOs is to collect **sufficient** evidence to enable a judgement to be made regarding a student's performance against the requirements of a unit of competency, without creating unmanageable, expensive processes for themselves or making unrealistic demands on students.

Discussion

Section 1.1 discussed identifying and assessing the mandatory components of a unit of competency. Sometimes assessors are tempted to go beyond those requirements and assess:

- each performance criterion separately;
- the dimensions of competency as though they were unconnected;
- key competencies/employability skills independently;
- all the items in the range statement, instead of only those that are applicable; and
- underpinning knowledge and skills, rather than required knowledge and skills (see Section 1.1).

While each of these components provides significant information to help with your understanding of the requirements of a unit of competency, it is not the case that each has to be assessed independently.

The **performance criteria** establish the standard of performance required for an element of competency (the smallest building block of competency), but they cannot be assessed as separate, unrelated items.

The **dimensions of competency** help to ensure that you are addressing all workplace aspects of competency, ie task, task management, contingency management and job role/environment skills. However, it is not appropriate to assess dimensions of competency as disconnected entities.

Employability skills embedded in a unit of competency or described in the employability skills summary should be assessed as an inherent part of the skills, knowledge and aptitudes required for effective workplace performance.

Items in the **range statement** identify the range of contexts and conditions that may apply to a unit of competency. Statements might include applicable legislation; equipment; locations; or the particular needs of students. The evidence guide will indicate whether it is necessary to assess some or all of these. Many range statements include '**must**' statements, so it is important not to rely solely on the evidence guide.

The following definition of skills and knowledge is taken from the *Training Package Development Handbook*.

Required skills and knowledge

The essential skills and knowledge are either identified separately or combined. *Knowledge* identifies what a person needs to know to perform the work in an informed and effective manner. *Skills* describe the application of knowledge to situations where understanding is converted into a workplace outcome.

Training Package Development Handbook – Unit: of Competence Mandatory Text by the National Quality Council available at http://www.nssc.natese.gov.au/__data/assets/ pdf_file/0014/71303/TxtCompStandardSection.pdf used under Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Australia license: http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/au/

Strategies

- Refer to the training package assessment guidelines and the evidence guide for each unit of competency to ensure that all mandatory requirements are incorporated into your assessment tools (see Section 1.1).
- Identify opportunities for performance to be assessed holistically, at either the element, unit or cluster of competency level. Undertaking integrated assessment gives you more opportunities to demonstrate real work tasks and therefore demonstrate the dimensions of competency.
- Refer to the range statement to guide your assessment plans/tools.
- While all the information contained in the underpinning knowledge section of the unit of competency may be used to support your training delivery, it is the required knowledge that must be assessed.
- Develop an evidence matrix (a map which demonstrates that all requirements have been included in the assessment) for the unit(s) of competency.

Remember

Deciding 'how much is enough' requires the professional judgement of an assessor. If you have been guided by the evidence guide of a unit of competency and the training package assessment guidelines, and are comfortable that a student can consistently apply his/her knowledge, skills and attitudes in a range of workplace contexts over time, you will have gathered **sufficient** evidence of competence.

2.2 Knowledge versus performance

Challenge

Competence refers to an individual's capacity to apply his/her knowledge, skills and aptitudes to perform in the workplace to an expected standard. New trainers/assessors are often more comfortable teaching and assessing required knowledge than making judgements about performance which requires the application of knowledge.

The challenge for assessors is to recognise the difference between knowledge and its application, and to design appropriate assessment tasks that enable judgements to be made about all aspects of competence.

Discussion

Competence is a combination of both 'know-how' (knowledge) and 'can-do' (performance).

The 'know-how' component is expressed in the evidence guide as 'required knowledge'. 'Can-do' is expressed through the elements of competency (and their attendant performance criteria) and sometimes through a list of 'required skills and attributes' in the evidence guide.

'Know-how' and 'can-do' are not substitutes for one another. For example, there is a wide gulf between knowing what is required to make a sales presentation and actually making a presentation. Assessing a student's knowledge is not the same as assessing the application of his/her skills, knowledge and attributes.

Strategies

- Consulting with industry representatives as you develop your assessment strategies/plans will help to eliminate any tendency to assess knowledge outside the context of its application in the workplace.
- Review your assessment plans to ensure that you are capturing sufficient evidence about all aspects of competence.
- Refer to the training package assessment guidelines and the evidence guide for the unit of competency to identify appropriate methods of assessment.

Remember

Competence focuses on the application of knowledge and skills to the standard of performance required in the workplace.

2.3   Using simulated assessment environments

In most cases, the most appropriate environment in which to gather evidence and assess competence is the workplace. This is not always possible or appropriate so assessors then need to create/use a simulated environment.

Challenge

The challenge for assessors is to create/use realistic simulations that enable valid and reliable assessment to occur, and to ensure that assessment decisions made on this basis are considered to be as credible as those made in the workplace.

Discussion

Most units of competency specify the workplace as the first preference for assessment. There may be instances, however, where this is impractical, or even impossible, particularly where issues of safety, environmental damage or cost are limiting factors.

If you recognise these limitations, you will find that most units of competency indicate that assessment can take place in a simulated environment where students perform simulated work tasks.

Some recently developed training package assessment guidelines provide guidance on appropriate simulation techniques. Situations where simulation would be an appropriate substitute for workplace demonstration include:

- where suitable employment or work placement is not available;
- where the workplace does not use the competency involved;
- where the assessment of the competency may be disruptive to the workplace;
- where demonstration of the competency is dangerous to life, valuable equipment and/or resources; and
- where confidentiality or privacy must be maintained.

The key to realistic simulations can be found in the four dimensions of competency. To be effective, a simulation must allow for demonstration of:

- task skills (the skills needed to perform a work task);
- task management skills (the skills needed to manage all tasks in the unit of competency or cluster);
- contingency management skills (the skills needed to cope when things go wrong); and
- job/role environment skills (the skills needed to perform effectively in the social and cultural work environment).

Strategies

- Refer to the training package assessment guidelines for advice on how to make simulations more realistic. If the training package does not provide sufficient advice, visit http://www.vetinfonet.dtwd.wa.gov.au and search for more information on Industry Skills Councils (ISCs).
- Ensure that:
    - a range of up-to-date equipment is used;
    - time pressures and deadlines are involved;
    - difficult customers and colleagues are dealt with;
    - occupational health and safety issues are identified and addressed;
    - problems are identified and solved; and
    - competence is demonstrated in conditions that simulate a workplace.

Remember

The attributes of good simulations include incorporating the four dimensions of competency, and aiming to make the situation feel, rather than simply look, like a workplace. Simulations need to reflect the unpredictable, untidy, complex and sometimes frustrating world of real work.

2.4   Reasonable adjustment in assessment

Challenge

Reasonable adjustment is one of those terms that is often used but not always fully understood. Reasonable adjustment in assessment requires the adoption of flexible and fair approaches to assessment in order to accommodate the diverse needs of students.

There are legislative requirements that the principle of reasonable adjustment be applied in the design of assessments. The assessment process should not prevent any student from demonstrating his/her competence, skill or knowledge because the design of the assessment fails to take account of his/her requirements.

The challenge for RTOs is to make sure that assessors adopt a student-centred approach to learning and assessment in which the principles of flexibility and fairness are applied with the same rigour as the principles of validity and reliability. Adjustments cannot be made to the mandatory requirements of the unit of competency for the evidence-gathering process or making the competency decision.

Discussion

The regulatory standards require that RTOs maximise outcomes for students by ensuring that their needs are met. In order to make appropriate and reasonable adjustments to your teaching and assessment practices, it is critical that you communicate with students in order to assess their needs and to determine whether the strategies you plan to adopt will meet them.

Strategies

- Refer to the Department's 2013 publication *Reasonable adjustment: A guide to working with students with disability*.
- When developing your learning and assessment strategy, consider how you would revise your proposed assessment methods/tools taking the following into consideration:
  – age/gender;
  – cultural beliefs, traditional practices and religious observances;
  – intellectual and/or physical disability;
  – medical requirements of students; and
  – language, literacy and numeracy skills.

- If you have a student who requires adjustments to be made to the assessment process to cater for special needs, you could consider some of the options identified in the 2010 TAE10 Training and Education Training Package namely:
  – providing personal support services, such as involving a reader, an interpreter, an attendant carer, a scribe or a member of the community;
  – using adaptive technology or special equipment to support the student;
  – providing flexible assessment sessions to allow for fatigue or the administration of medication;
  – formatting assessment materials, such as Braille, first language, use of audiotape/videotape; and
  – making adjustments to the physical environment or venue.

Remember

Flexibility and fairness in assessment are requirements of the regulatory standards. They do not override the requirements for validity and reliability. All four principles of assessment need to work together to ensure that assessment practices are flexible enough to accommodate difference, without compromising the validity and reliability of judgements about competence.

2.5   Language and literacy requirements

Challenge

Language and literacy skills influence the performance of almost all workplace tasks and underpin most employability skills. The ability to use technology, manage change, and communicate and work constructively with people requires a basic foundation of language and literacy skills.

The challenge for RTOs is to make sure that the language and literacy requirements embedded in units of competency are not overlooked **and** that they are assessed in ways that are consistent with the actual requirements of the unit(s) of competency being assessed.

Discussion

We use language all the time to express our thoughts, experiences and actions. It is not surprising, therefore, that we may depend heavily on language when we are assessing students. Sometimes we make the mistake of asking oral or written questions when we are really interested in the actions the students perform. There are many occasions where a student can demonstrate a competency but is not able put his/her actions into words.

Assessments **must not** require students to have language and literacy skills beyond those intrinsically required by the elements/unit(s) of competency being assessed.

Particular care needs to be taken when assessing students who have limited literacy in English. It is advisable not to use language-intensive assessment strategies that are not required by the unit of competency.

Strategies

- Review the unit of competency being delivered and assessed, and make sure that your learning and assessment strategy does not place inappropriate demands on students' language and literacy skills.
- Discuss the language and literacy requirements required on the job with a range of stakeholders, including employers and other RTOs/assessors through moderation sessions, so that you can gain a clear understanding of the industry requirements.
- In an effort to ensure that students receive training, assessment and support services which meet their individual needs, consider whether you have sufficient expertise and resources to provide language and literacy support or whether you need to engage specialist expertise or refer your student to external agencies for support.
- Make sure that prospective students are told what your organisation can and cannot do to provide support.
- When planning how you will assess the employability skills embedded in a training package qualification, remember that language and literacy are an important part of most employability skills and their facets.

Remember

Assessment tools and process must take students' language and literacy skills into consideration. Assessments should not demand language and literacy skills beyond those intrinsically required by the unit of competency being assessed, and in the workplace.

2.6   Clustering units of competency

Challenge

Many assessors are aware that clustering units of competency is an effective and efficient learning and assessment strategy.

The challenge is to ensure that the selection of units within a cluster interact in ways that reflect actual workplace functions or tasks.

Discussion

There are many advantages to be gained by clustering units of competency. These include:

- increasing the efficiency of delivery and assessment by teaching and assessing several units of competency together. This is particularly valuable:
  - where units share a common application and/or the same required knowledge reflecting the complexity of the workplace;
  - where many competencies need to be applied simultaneously addressing the dimensions of competency; or
  - where individual units of competency do not reflect all four dimensions (see Section 2.1);

- providing a basis for integrated/holistic evidence gathering; and
- catering for co-requisite units of competency (see Section 1.2).

When units are clustered, it is essential that the elements of competency are assessed and that the assessment plan shows how this is done. It is important not to:

- cluster units which do not share the same AQF level characteristics or a similar employability skills profile;
- mix units of competency together to form an element 'stew', where no unit is recognisable as a distinct entity, as this may cause problems for some entry-level students;
- create overly large clusters – one of the purposes of the unit approach is to create a set of reasonably small and readily attainable outcomes; by combining too many units you may create very large and unwieldy assessment tasks; and
- make invalid judgements – while holistic/integrated evidence gathering is very useful, judgements about evidence need to be based on the verification that each unit requirement has been demonstrated (see Section 3.3).

Strategies

- Refer to the training package for advice on clustering units of competency. In some instances, this advice may be explicit and include clustering arrangements and co-requisite requirements.
- Consider any identified skill sets and whether they can be clustered for learning and assessment purposes.

- Discuss clustering options at moderation meetings to gain consensus among trainers/assessors on the requirements of local industry.

- Undertake a mapping of the units of competency that will be included in the cluster, as some units may duplicate knowledge and skill requirements. This mapping document will also enable you to choose appropriate methods, construct meaningful assessment tools and demonstrate that you are capturing all the evidence requirements. See the Department's 2013 publication *Clustering units of competency: A guide to how to cluster for delivery and assessment*.

Remember

Make sure that your assessment plan demonstrates how all elements of competency have been addressed.

2.7   Third-party evidence gathering

Challenge

Assessors sometimes use third-party evidence-gathering techniques to support their assessment decisions.

The main challenge for RTOs is to ensure that the evidence collected by others enables them to make assessments on the basis of evidence that meets the rules of evidence, namely: validity, sufficiency, currency and authenticity.

Discussion

Assessment involves:
- gathering evidence; and
- making professional judgements about competence on the basis of that evidence.

Third-party witnesses who are not trained assessors can be assigned to **gather** the evidence. These people, usually supervisors or co-workers, are often incorrectly referred to as third-party assessors rather than evidence gatherers.

Only **assessors** who have the competences determined by the National Skills Standards Council (NSSC) and who meet other requirements specified in the regulatory standards can make assessment judgements.

Using third-party evidence gatherers is a powerful aspect of competency-based assessment. It enables assessors to extend the evidence-gathering process beyond the classroom and into workplaces and, in some cases, communities. It also involves considerable risk, if the evidence gatherers do not fully understand what is expected of them or do not have the necessary skills or tools to be effective.

Strategies

- It is possible to minimise the risk by using the following commonsense strategies.
  - Select third-party evidence gatherers wisely. You need to know that they are well placed to observe the student for extended periods of time and that they understand the aspects of competency they will be observing. Check whether the training package assessment guidelines that govern your assessment activities specify any particular requirements for third-party evidence gatherers.
  - Prepare them thoroughly. Make sure that they have read the relevant assessment plan. Answer any questions they may have.
  - Provide them with a comprehensive briefing on the specific role they play in the evidence-gathering process.
  - Provide them with any relevant observation protocols, checklists or other tools. Make sure that they know how to use these tools.
  - Provide them with as much support as possible. For example, invite them to take part in relevant professional development activities and, where possible, moderation.
  - Encourage accountability. Make sure that they are willing to sign their name to the evidence, to defend their record and to participate in quality assurance monitoring.
  - Monitor their evidence-gathering and recording practices by building in a way of checking the quality of their evidence very early in the evidence-gathering process.

Remember

You, the assessor, make the judgement about whether or not the student is competent or not yet competent, and you are accountable for that judgement. Therefore, it is extremely important that you have confidence in the quality and quantity of the evidence gathered by others.

2.8 Workplace evidence gathering

Challenge

Most training package assessment guidelines specify the workplace as the preferred location for assessment.

The challenge for all assessors is to plan and conduct workplace-based assessments that minimise disruption to employers and, at the same time, enable the collection of valid, sufficient, current and authentic evidence of competence.

Discussion

The regulatory standards require that when training or assessment is undertaken in the workplace, RTOs should, where appropriate, involve workplace personnel in aspects of the planning and delivery of the training and assessment.

Involving employers and others in this way will make them more open to using workplace settings for assessment, where it is possible to do so.

However, workplaces can be chaotic places in which to conduct assessments and can present a number of challenges, including the following.

- Workplace practices may not exactly reflect the requirements of the unit of competency.
- The seasonal nature of work means that not all competencies of interest are used all the time, eg harvesting, stocktaking and budget planning may occur at different times of year.
- The unique structure of individual workplaces means that opportunities to demonstrate units of competency may not exist, eg where work has been outsourced, equipment inappropriate or the range of students narrow.
- Workplaces may find assessment processes disruptive or threatening, or at the very least, an unwelcome distraction.
- Workplaces may have limited value as a venue for assessing required knowledge.

Strategies

- Some challenges can be resolved through the use of off the job simulation (see Section 2.3), additional work placements, job exchanges and by extending evidence-gathering processes to embrace different aspects of the work cycle, eg seasonal changes.
- Strategies to engage businesses willingly in workplace assessment practices include:
  – making explicit the practical relationship between skills development, assessment and the enterprise's business strategy; and
  – suggesting that the evidence-gathering process be extended and used to support other organisational practices such as the management of performance or the analysis of training needs.

Remember

You will need to work with employers and other workplace personnel to develop strategies to conduct quality workplace-based assessments. Keeping them fully informed will help to facilitate their engagement.

2.9   Online and distance assessment

Challenge

Online and distance learning and assessment are attractive options for many students, especially those in regional and remote Western Australian locations.

The challenge for RTOs and assessors is to ensure that assessment which occurs online or at a distance is conducted in accordance with the principles of assessment, ie validity, reliability, flexibility and fairness, and the rules of evidence, namely: validity, sufficiency, currency and authenticity. Authenticity is one of the biggest challenges.

Discussion

Regardless of the mode of learning and assessment, all students should receive training, assessment and support services that meet their individual needs.

Assessors need to be confident that:

- the evidence provided online or from a distance reflects the performance of the student and not someone else;
- they have obtained evidence of the application of knowledge and skills;
- resources are available to observe the application of skills and knowledge in a range of contexts; and
- they can provide support to online or distance students so that they enjoy a level of preparation equal to students assessed in person.

Strategies

- Make use of new technologies where possible. Some students may be able to access webcams or send evidence as images via video or mobile phone.
- Use third-party evidence gatherers where possible to authenticate and validate the assessment (see Section 2.7).
- Use a portfolio that requires evidence to be drawn from a wide range of training-related experiences, work experiences, leisure, and home and community activities. This is a useful strategy that could be validated by a third party to satisfy questions related to currency and authenticity.
- Face-to-face observation can be achieved either through the assessor travelling to the student, the student attending an assessment venue or the use of technology. Such observations could be used to validate and authenticate evidence already accumulated through third-party observation, portfolios or new technology.
- To support judgements about its authenticity, discuss the evidence with the student.
- For other useful ideas, refer to the TAE10 Training and Education Training Package units TAEDEL403A Coordinate and facilitate distance-based learning and TAEDES503A Design and develop e-learning resources.

Remember

Make sure you use a wide range of strategies when you collect evidence for online and distance assessments.

2.10 Assessor panels

Using assessment teams or assessment panels can add value to a RTO's assessment strategies and practices.

The challenge for RTOs is to make sure that assessment panels are clear about their terms of reference and that assessment teams do not become unwieldy, expensive to maintain or overwhelming for students.

Discussion

It is quite common for an assessment expert and a vocational expert to work as a team to make assessment judgements. The NSSC—the body responsible for determining the training and assessment competencies held by trainers/assessors—has determined that in certain prescribed circumstances, people may work together to conduct an assessment.

However, some industry areas also bring together teams of individuals who provide specialised expertise to the process of determining a student's competence. If vast expertise is recruited for this purpose, then the team can become large and the process unwieldy.

A large assessment team, which includes industry representatives, employers' representatives, regulators and administrators will be expensive and unnecessary in many cases.

Some RTOs have also established formal assessment panels whose mandate is to provide high-level administrative and policy advice to trainers/assessors and management teams in order to foster consistency and confidence in the assessment service of the RTO. Industry representatives, managers or assessment experts and assessors are appointed to monitor the area of assessment for which they are responsible.

In considering the use of an assessment panel, it is important to first determine the ways in which the expertise of others will strengthen your assessment processes. Make sure that when you extend an invitation to other people, you make it very clear what their role in the assessment process is.

Some of the functions that an assessment panel might fulfil which can add credibility and instil confidence in the quality of assessment decisions include:

* reviewing assessment strategies;
* reviewing assessment outcomes;
* determining what constitutes reasonable adjustment;
* providing advice on, and signing off, assessment strategies;
* developing assessment exemplars;
* overseeing professional development for assessors; and
* providing a network of mentors and coaches for assessors.

Strategies

- Contact local industry/employer groups to discuss the role that they could undertake in providing expertise at the planning stage.
- Identify and clarify the roles you want members of assessment panels or teams to undertake.
- Identify the skills you require of the assessment team to meet the NSSC and training package requirements for assessor competence.
- Where a team is used to undertake assessment, clearly explain to students the reason for each member's appointment to the team, and their specific role in the assessment process.

Remember

Using an assessment team or panel can add credibility, quality and confidence to the assessment process, but it may also add unnecessary costs to the assessment process, and may be daunting for the student if the process is not properly planned and managed.

Section 3 – Using evidence to make good judgements

Two important steps in the assessment process include the gathering of evidence and the making of assessment judgements on the basis of that evidence.

This section explores four challenges associated with evidence gathering and making assessment decisions.

3.1   Gathering enough evidence

Challenge

In Section 2, the challenge of over-assessment was discussed.

In this section, the challenge of collecting sufficient evidence over time in order to make an assessment judgement about a student's competence will be looked at.

Discussion

In earlier training packages, it was not always clear how much evidence was needed for assessment purposes. More recently developed/reviewed training packages are quite explicit about the amount of evidence required. Some indicate a specific number of assessments, while others refer to 'multiple assessments over a period of time and in a range of contexts' which reflects the reality of most workplaces.

Given that consistency is a critical element of workplace performance, it is important that assessment judgements:

- are based on evidence collected over a time span that matches the nature of the workplace tasks being assessed; and
- occur in a range of situations, including occasions where contingency management is needed.

Except in cases where the number of assessments is specified, you need to make sure that:

- your observations occur over time in a range of contexts and in a variety of situations;
- your collection of evidence allows you to observe the student over sufficient time to demonstrate the handling of a range of contingencies; and
- your observations over time or in different contexts provide corroborating evidence of the student's competence.

Strategies

- Read the training package assessment guidelines for advice related to the requirement of conducting assessments over time and in a range of contexts.
- Discuss strategies for collecting sufficient evidence with other RTOs and assessors at moderation forums.

Remember

You need sufficient evidence gathered from a range of contexts and on a number of occasions to enable you to judge the student's competence. Competence means that the student can consistently perform the tasks from the unit of competency to the standard required in the workplace.

3.2   Judgement without marks

Challenge

Many students do not understand competency-based training and assessment. This is partly due to the way in which most assessments are reported, and partly because students are used to being assessed against the performance of other students, rather than against established criteria.

The challenge for RTOs is to feel confident when making assessment judgements against established competency standards and to be able to provide useful advice on this criterion-referenced assessment to students and employers.

Discussion

From an early age, each of us has been assessed against norms, eg our weight, our IQ and our performance at school and in sport have all been judged in comparison with others. Competency-based approaches seek to redress this by establishing well-defined and fixed standards towards which students can strive and against which each student can be assessed.

These standards are derived from real life, so they represent a kind of norm, and when combined to form a qualification, they are graduated across a scale as detailed in the AQF so that they represent a range of levels. Integral to competency-based learning is the fact that students know the standards **before** they embark on the learning and assessment pathway, therefore, the standards are not dependent on the performance of a particular cohort of learners or students.

Each of us has become used to being assessed by marks – numbers assigned to our performance and calculated to provide a total that can be compared with others to produce a rank or a normative score.

It is a process we are so familiar with that when it is challenged, we are confused. Have a look at the following table.

Unit requirement (each marked out of 5)	Ann	Bill	Chris	Don	Evan	Fred
Requirement V	5	5	5	5	0	4
Requirement W	5	5	5	0	5	4
Requirement X	5	5	0	5	5	4
Requirement Y	5	0	5	5	5	4
Requirement Z	0	5	5	5	5	4
Unit total (out of 25)	20	20	20	20	20	20

Each student above earned the same total mark (80 per cent), but it can be easily seen that, despite having the same total mark, each student met different requirements to arrive at his/her final score. The conversion of each student's performance into marks may be acceptable for a single requirement (5 is better than 4, which is better than 0), but we cannot add the marks up to find a final total, without destroying important information and creating a less meaningful result. This loss of information not only leads to an error of judgement, it also hides useful information for guidance and further assessment.

The same table—now in competency format—is far more useful for the assessor.

Unit requirement (each marked out of 5)	Ann	Bill	Chris	Don	Evan	Fred
Requirement V	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗
Requirement W	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗
Requirement X	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓	✗
Requirement Y	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗
Requirement Z	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗

If 5 is replaced with a ✓ and anything less than a 5 is replaced with a ✗, it is clear that none of the students has achieved competence – Fred has failed to reach the requirements in every unit, and the others have just one requirement each to work on.

Behind every ✗, evidence would reveal why the requirement was not met, and this would provide the necessary guidance for further learning. We do not need numbers, norms or ranks; we just need real standards to which we can say yes ✓ or no ✗.

Strategies

- Discuss the concept of competency-based training and assessment with your peers to gain a clearer understanding of the benefits of the system for your students.
- Develop a brief handout for students to explain competency-based training and assessment.

Remember

Competency-based approaches rely on the establishment of well-defined and fixed standards towards which individuals can strive and against which they can be assessed.

3.3   Making judgements using integrated assessment methods

Challenge

Many assessors use integrated assessment and collect evidence for a cluster of competency standards in a single assessment activity. It is also a requirement that employability skills are assessed with technical skills in an integrated manner. However, there can be some confusion over how judgements are made on this evidence.

The challenge for assessors is to ensure that their judgements are based on their verification that each mandatory requirement of the unit of competency has been demonstrated.

Discussion

Integrated or holistic assessment means an approach to assessment which covers the clustering of multiple units and/or elements from relevant competency standards. This approach focuses on the assessment of a 'whole-of-job' role or function that draws on a number of units and/or elements of competency. This assessment approach also integrates the assessment of the application of knowledge, technical skills, problem solving and demonstration of attitudes and ethics.

There has been considerable enthusiasm for integrated or holistic assessment expressed through some training package assessment guidelines and through other publications promoting effective assessment practices.

Integrated assessment usually involves:

- actual or simulated workplace tasks, especially tasks which require the integration of a range of competencies and associated underpinning knowledge;
- the use of analytical skills to solve problems associated with the tasks;
- a combination of theory and practice; and
- the clustering of multiple units of competency in one assessment activity (see Section 2.6 for more on clustering).

One of the risks associated with integrated assessment is that assessment judgements may not be made correctly. While it is important to gather evidence holistically, it is not always as easy to make judgements about the evidence. Assessors have to be certain that what they think they see in an assessment is the same as what they are being told by the evidence.

Assessment judgements based on holistic or integrated evidence need to be supported by the verification that each distinct unit requirement has been demonstrated. Failure to do this puts the requirements for validity, reliability, fairness and sufficiency at risk. Other risks associated with integrated assessment are discussed in Section 2.6.

Strategies

- Use a range of methods and tools to support integrated assessment.
- Ensure that your assessment tool checklists provide enough detail for you to be able to record evidence against all the mandatory requirements of each of the units of competency.
- Involve other people in the assessment process for areas that are particularly difficult to assess (see Section 2.10).
- Map the assessment to the mandatory requirements in an evidence matrix. See the Department's 2013 publication *Guidelines for assessing competence in VET*.

Remember

Integrated evidence gathering is to be encouraged as it mirrors the actuality of workplace practices. However, assessors must be certain that their judgements are based on the actual evidence collected, and not what they think they see during an assessment event.

3.4   Challenges to assessment decisions

Challenge

Many assessors are concerned about their liability in relation to assessing students. Most assessors also want to avoid complaints and grievances where possible.

The challenge for RTOs and assessors is to ensure that there are appropriate strategies in place to minimise the risk of challenges related to assessment decisions.

Discussion

Under a competency-based system, when a student is assessed as competent, an assessor is stating that he/she can justify his/her decision that a student can demonstrate competence as specified in a unit or units of competency. This means that assessors are accountable for their professional judgements.

An assessor's decision can be challenged on the basis that:

- the decision maker did not adequately address the standards outlined in the unit of competency;
- the assessment was not conducted in accordance with the assessment plan provided to the student;
- the assessor was influenced by bias in reaching the decision;
- the assessor failed to afford the student natural justice in the means and methods of assessment;
- the decision failed to take into account relevant considerations or was otherwise unreasonable; and
- there was a conflict of interest between the assessor and the student.

A potential conflict of interest may arise when an assessor is required to undertake an assessment of colleagues, family and/or friends. A conflict or perceived conflict of interest should always be declared and managed by assessors. Not addressing a conflict or perceived conflict of interest may impact on the perceived validity, reliability and fairness of the assessment process.

RTOs are responsible under the regulatory standards for ensuring that processes are established to ensure that the assessment process is fair, and that complaints and appeals are dealt with efficiently and effectively. RTOs are also responsible for ensuring that they hold adequate records in order to justify their judgements of a student's competence.

Strategies

Some strategies that RTOs may adopt to avoid the risk of being challenged include:

- ensuring that assessors meet the standards set by the NSSC or its successors;
- ensuring that staff are supported to continue to develop their competency through professional development and engagement with industry and professional associations;

- ensuring that the necessary infrastructure and processes to conduct assessment, manage complaints, grievances and appeals, and obtain stakeholder input and feedback have been established; and
- demonstrating that the necessary infrastructure and processes for continuous improvement have been established.

Beyond these strategies, responsibility for judgements rests with the assessor. Acceptance of an assessment task by the assessor involves an implied warranty that he/she has the skill required to perform the assessment and an implied promise to exercise that skill.

Some additional strategies that assessors may adopt to avoid the risk of being challenged include:

- being fully aware of their responsibilities in relation to good administration and decision making as this will reduce, as far as possible, the potential for flawed competency assessments which can lead to grievances and complaints;
- declaring any conflicts or perceived conflicts of interest before undertaking any assessment activity;
- documenting/recording their assessment process and the basis upon which they make assessment judgements;
- ensuring that they comply with the standards, as reflected in the relevant training package (including the requirements specified in the assessment guidelines) and any relevant, industry-specific legislation or guidelines;
- taking care not to over-inflate the assessment requirements; and
- making sure they are familiar with all relevant legislation governing their assessment activities – in particular occupational health and safety legislation and regulations, including those related to the licensing of high-risk work activities.

Remember

Under a competency-based system, assessors are accountable for the assessment decisions they make. Good practice in the systems and processes, documentation, and ongoing development of vocational and assessment competencies and industry currency are key to managing the risks associated with assessment.

Section 4 – Providing feedback and guidance to students

This section explores the challenge of providing information that enables students to maximise the outcomes of their training and/or assessment.

4.1   Information for students

Challenge

The information, advice and support that students are able to access before, during and after their training and assessment is likely to be an important determinant of a student's level of satisfaction with the assessment process – a quality indicator for RTOs.

The challenge for trainers/assessors is to ensure that they provide students with the right amount of useful information and support at the right time.

Discussion

All students need to be provided with information, advice and support services before, during and after the assessment (including RPL) process.

Before students enrol, they need clear information about the course they are taking, including what it contains, RPL, the support services the RTO provides, and any other related information that will help them to choose the RTO that suits them best.

Before an assessment, students need to know the 'what', the 'when' and the 'how' of assessment. They also need to know what assessment options (including RPL) are available to them.

During the assessment, students need to know which aspects of competency they are expected to demonstrate, which tasks they have to perform, which resources are available and any time constraints or other conditions that apply.

After the assessment, students need to be told which aspects of competency they demonstrated, which aspects they did not demonstrate and why they did not, and the actions they need to take to rectify this.

Strategies

- Ensure that all staff who have contact with students before enrolment are equipped with the knowledge, skills and attributes to direct students to appropriately informed or specialist staff within your organisation.
- At the start of the course, give students an overview of the units of competency to be delivered and assessed, and remind them of the support services they can access.
- Give them a copy of an assessment plan, telling them what will be assessed, how it will be assessed, when it will be assessed and any other useful information. It is important that this information is written in plain English.

- Give students the opportunity to ask questions, and explain any requirements to them in accordance with the standards expected in the workplace.

- Give students feedback once they have completed the assessment activity. Make sure that you design your assessment tools so that you can provide constructive feedback on their performance and inform them of the areas in which they need further development.

Remember

Competency-based assessment should be an inclusive process for all parties. Inclusiveness is best achieved when information is accurate and provided in an appropriate form; when communication about progress is timely; and when students are provided with the support they need to help them achieve their particular learning goals.

Section 5 – Setting up and using recognition of prior learning processes

This section explores four challenges associated with recognition of prior learning (RPL).

5.1 Recognition terminology

Recognition terms, such as recognition of prior learning (RPL), recognition of current competency (RCC) and credit are often used in ways that confuse even those who work within the education and training system.

The challenge for assessors is to keep up-to-date with nationally agreed changes to recognition terminology.

Discussion

The following terms and definitions have been agreed upon and are used nationally.

Recognition of prior learning is a term that has been used in a number of ways by practitioners, researchers and policymakers over the last decade and differences of opinion have led to some confusion about what RPL is or does.

Since January 2007, the following Australian Vocational Education and Training Management Information Statistical Standards (AVETMISS) definitions for RPL and recognition of current competency (RCC) have been agreed upon and applied nationally.

The *Australian Qualifications Framework*, *First Edition July 2011* defines recognition of prior learning (RPL) as:

> an assessment process that involves assessment of an individual's relevant prior learning (including formal, informal and non-formal learning) to determine the credit outcomes of an individual application for credit.
>
> Reproduced with the permission of the Department of Industry, Innovation, Science, Research and Tertiary Education.

Recognition of current competency applies if a client has previously successfully completed the requirements for a unit of competency or module and is now required (eg by a licensing authority) to be reassessed to ensure that competence is being maintained. In this case, no extra skill or competencies are nationally recognised. An unsuccessful RCC assessment does not invalidate the previous competent assessment outcome.

The *Australian Qualifications Framework*, *First Edition July 2011* defines credit as:

> the value assigned for the recognition of equivalence in content and learning outcomes between different types of learning and/or qualifications. Credit reduces the amount of learning required to achieve a qualification and may be through credit transfer, articulation, recognition of prior learning or advanced standing.
>
> Reproduced with the permission of the Department of Industry, Innovation, Science, Research and Tertiary Education.

Strategies

Monitor national publications to ensure that you have the most up-to-date information regarding RPL, RCC and credit.

Remember

RPL is a true competency-based assessment process that must comply with regulatory standards.

5.2 Quality RPL processes

Challenge

RPL is an assessment-only pathway that provides for the formal recognition of the skills and knowledge an individual has regardless of how or where these skills may have been obtained. Superficial RPL assessment processes seriously threaten the credibility of VET qualifications.

The challenge for RTOs is to develop policies and procedures which ensure that the process is conducted and viewed as a quality and rigorous assessment.

Discussion

The inclusion of RPL under the guidelines for general assessment in regulatory standards emphasises the fact that RPL assessments must be treated in the same manner as all other forms of assessment. There can be no difference between the standard of assessment conducted as part of RPL and assessment conducted as part of a training program.

As with all assessments, an assessor judging evidence gathered for an RPL assessment must ensure that the evidence is valid, sufficient, current and authentic.

Strategies

- Ensure that you have a process for RPL. Refer to the Department's 2013 publication *Recognition of prior learning: An assessment resource for VET practitioners* available at www.vetinfonet.dtwd.wa.gov.au.
- Provide all students with information about RPL.
- Discuss your RPL process with other assessors and/or RTOs to identify opportunities for continuous improvement. This may be undertaken through moderation activities
- Consider the strategies outlined in Sections 5.3 and 5.4.

Remember

RPL may allow students to bypass or shortcut training but it does not allow them to bypass or shortcut assessment. This point is made very clear in the assessment guidelines of all training packages.

5.3 Evidence for RPL

Challenge

The challenge for RTOs is to apply appropriate assessment methodologies and tools when recognising prior learning, and to develop clear guidelines and advice for applicants to facilitate the collection of evidence for the units of competency in which recognition is being sought.

Discussion

RPL needs to be based on the mandatory requirements of the units of competency in which recognition is being sought (see Section 1.1). The assessment methods used by the RTO need to be fit for purpose.

In the past, the main method for RPL was to instruct students to collect a portfolio of evidence to be presented for assessment. In many cases, however, this method was found to be isolating, excessively demanding and not always a reliable indicator of competence. It is now widely considered that a portfolio of documents and other artefacts, on its own, is unlikely to be an appropriate methodology in many cases.

The 2006–2007 TAFE WA Trade Skills Recognition Project developed a task-based process for RPL that promotes holistic, task-based assessment and focuses on relating assessment activities to actual job tasks. (For a full description of this model, see the Department's 2013 publication *Recognition of prior learning: An assessment resource for VET practitioners*). The intention of this model is to streamline and simplify recognition processes for prospective students.

Integral to a task-based approach to RPL is the collection of initial evidence via self-evaluation, and an interview with an assessor where students are invited to give a verbal demonstration of their knowledge in relation to certain key questions or topic areas. This would then ideally be followed by direct observation of tasks performed in an actual or simulated workplace, with the observed tasks mapped directly to the critical aspects of evidence from the unit(s) of competency.

Portfolios or individual pieces of documentary evidence can be used to provide supporting evidence at the self-evaluation or interview stage to help determine whether the student can be 'excused' the training and is ready to be formally assessed. Documentary evidence may also be provided to complement the demonstration and observation of tasks in an actual or simulated workplace environment.

Strategies

- You are required to provide the same level of information and support to students seeking RPL as you provide to students undertaking a training program leading to an assessment of competence.
- The collection of evidence via the interview with the assessor and the direct observation of tasks provide a more effective, accurate and interactive form of assessment than methods that rely largely upon historic, paper-based evidence.

- A portfolio of evidence may be used as supporting, supplementary evidence to reinforce the competencies displayed either in the interview or task observation processes. They should not be considered on their own as evidence of competence.

Remember

There is no one RPL assessment process that is suitable for all qualifications and all situations. A task-based model provides a more flexible and dynamic approach for the assessment and recognition of prior learning than one based primarily on documentary and knowledge-based evidence.

5.4   Inclusive RPL practices

Challenge

RPL—like any other assessment—must be conducted according to the principles of assessment and must meet the requirements of the rules of evidence. The challenge for RTOs is to ensure that their RPL process is rigorous (without being unmanageable or resource-intensive), and that it is flexible enough to accommodate the diverse pathways by which individuals may have developed and applied their skills and knowledge.

Discussion

To make a fair judgement, evidence needs to be gathered from a range of contexts over a period of time. Some RTOs find it simpler to ask RPL students to complete the same assessments as those undertaken by students enrolled in a course. Asking RPL students to complete all course-based assessments, however, may be an expensive burden on RTOs.

The fact that RPL students enjoy none of the support networks that are part and parcel of training delivery means that they may need extra assistance and support while undertaking these assessments.

In the past, many RTOs preferred to use portfolios of paper-based evidence as the focus of their RPL processes. While there is value in a portfolio of evidence as an assessment tool, it also has limitations, as discussed in Section 5.3. Such methods are now considered too static and inflexible to be useful indicators of competence. They also fail to meet the criterion of inclusiveness.

For some students, the expectation of providing a largely document-based archive of evidence of competency might constitute an insurmountable barrier to having their skills recognised. For instance, a skilled refugee migrant from a war-torn country might not be able to provide such a compilation of documentary evidence, whereas structured interviews or direct observation in an actual or simulated workplace environment could provide him/her with the opportunity to demonstrate his/her competence in a practical context.

Strategies

- RPL processes need to be flexible enough to accommodate the needs of students from a diverse range of experiential and cultural backgrounds. It is for this reason that excessive reliance on the documentary or portfolio approach should be discouraged.
- Putting in place RPL processes based on the task-based model outlined in Section 5.3 will ensure that assessment processes are sufficiently flexible and inclusive while remaining rigorous and based upon quality evidence.
- See the Department's 2013 publication *Recognition of prior learning: An assessment resource for VET practitioners*.

Remember

The RPL process needs to be as rigorous as other assessment processes and should involve gathering a range of evidence. It should also be flexible enough to accommodate the diversity of pathways by which people arrive at competence.

Section 6 – Validating assessment strategies

This section explores two challenges around validating assessments and recommends the strategies to address them.

6.1   Assessing your assessment strategies

Challenge

While most assessors are comfortable with assessing their students, they are often less comfortable with assessing their own assessments. How do they know if their assessment strategies are any good? What can be done when two assessors differ in their judgement of the same evidence?

The challenge for assessors is to participate in validation and moderation processes to continuously improve assessment practices and processes.

Discussion

It is no accident that assessment is the dominant issue in the regulatory standards and in training packages. This preoccupation with assessment reflects the reality that, without quality assessment, there can be no credible certification. Assessors cannot, therefore, take their assessment judgements for granted. They must be prepared to put them to the test.

The regulatory standards, with their strong focus on continuous improvement, require that assessment materials be systematically reviewed and improved. Assessors can validate their assessment strategies by:

- reviewing – looking at their assessment processes, evidence-gathering tools, evidence records and judgements to ensure that they comply with the principles of good assessment (valid, reliable, flexible and fair) and the rules of evidence (valid, sufficient, current and authentic);
- comparing assessment processes, evidence-gathering tools, evidence records and judgements made by different assessors for the same units of competency; and
- evaluating – seeking reactions to their assessment processes, evidence-gathering tools, evidence records and judgements from key stakeholders including industry and students.

These processes encompass assessment moderation and go well beyond it. They also go beyond merely 'eyeballing' the assessment documentation to declare that it looks right.

With assessment, the acid test is that different assessors independently come to the same judgement about the same student on the same unit of competency, regardless of their means of gathering evidence.

When assessors reach different assessment judgements, what they disagree on needs to be identified. Unclear and ambiguous competency standards are a common source of discrepancy. Moderation sessions established to achieve consensus can help to reduce such differences.

Working together with other qualified assessors is a key aspect of validating assessment strategies. However, other stakeholders need to be involved as well – particularly in evaluation. Stakeholders who should be consulted include the students, third-party evidence gatherers (see Section 2.7), vocational experts, employers and industry representatives (see Section 6.2).

It is possible that the validation of assessment may recognise that the assessment strategy does not need to be changed as it meets all requirements. What is important is that the review has verified the integrity of the assessment and provided evidence of ongoing continuous improvement.

Strategies

- Participate in established moderation networks.
- Read the Department's 2013 publication *A guide to continuous improvement of assessment in VET* to gain a clearer understanding of what is required in validating assessment strategies, including moderation advice.

Remember

Quality assessment is the linchpin of the VET system and assessors need to have in place a number of strategies to validate their assessment processes.

While assessor networks can do much to disseminate shared understandings, training package developers need to be advised of areas of ambiguity and of shared interpretations in order to improve the unit in the next version. Each ISC is required to have a continuous improvement register on its web page. Use this to provide feedback on the training package.

6.2   Industry input

Challenge

Regulatory standards require that RTOs develop learning and assessment strategies in consultation with industry. However, RTOs also have to make sure that they follow the requirements of training packages which have been developed with a national focus. Sometimes local industry requirements differ from the requirements of a training package, which can leave RTOs in a difficult position.

The challenge for RTOs is to make sure that both sets of requirements are met. Assessment judgements must be made against the national training package standards.

Discussion

RTOs are encouraged to consult with industry. They are required to collect and analyse stakeholder and student feedback, satisfaction data on the services they provide and to develop assessment strategies in consultation with industry. When assessing in the workplace, it is a requirement that the RTO negotiate the assessment strategy with the employer.

These requirements for consultation are important, as it is crucial that assessments meet workplace and regulatory requirements. The potential problem inherent in these consultations is that they may result in inappropriate and invalid changes in assessment standards. There have been a number of examples where a local industry group has sought to impose additional criteria for a qualification, to amend a unit of competency by deleting a locally irrelevant element or even to delete an entire unit of competency from the core of a qualification.

The standards laid down by the training package are **not negotiable**. They represent industry's voice, expressed through an extensive national consultation and design process. Once endorsed, these standards provide the basis for national consistency and national recognition, and assessment **must** be conducted against these standards.

Strategies

- Use the option of customisation and contextualisation (see Section 1.3) to reflect local industry needs. Using this strategy, the adjustments will not challenge the standards, but will allow local needs to be addressed directly.
- If the training package does not reflect the student's needs, the RTO should provide feedback and input into the next revision of the training package. The RTO can also encourage local industry/enterprises to take part in this activity. Information on the status of training packages can be found at www.vetinfonet.dtwd.wa.gov.au. RTOs can also provide feedback using the continuous improvement register on the web page of the ISC.

Remember

Consultation with industry is about seeking advice, not direction. The RTO is answerable only to its students, the training package, the AQF and the regulatory standards.

Section 7 – Minimising documentation

This section explores a key challenge of the competency-based system **documentation** and suggests some strategies for managing the level of paperwork.

7.1   Over-documentation

Challenge

An observation made frequently by RTO staff and auditors is the increased burden of documentation associated with the advent of competency-based training and assessment, and the introduction of the regulatory standards.

The challenge for trainers/assessors is to develop processes for managing the documentation required to support quality training and assessment while at the same time satisfying the requirements of the regulatory standards.

Discussion

One reason for over-documentation is a desire to reduce the risk of non-compliance with regulatory standards.

Competency-based assessment is a replacement for previous forms of assessment – not an addition to it. There have been examples of assessors maintaining their old assessment systems and tools, and adding new systems and tools to meet unit requirements, thus doubling their assessment load. In most cases, the old assessment resources fail to contribute to the ultimate judgement of competence and could either be dropped or used as self-evaluation tools by students The remaining competency-based components are often less arduous than the systems they replaced, particularly if a number of strategies to improve efficiency are adopted.

It is also worth remembering that the focus of regulatory standards is on the quality of services and outcomes rather than inputs and procedures. They also have a strong focus on continuous improvement. Providing additional documentation does not necessarily demonstrate either compliance or a continuous improvement process. It is more important and more effective to develop good processes, including good assessment validation processes (see Sections 6.1 and 6.2), and to then develop relevant and useful paperwork, which reflects and supports these processes.

Strategies

- Clustering units of competency so that evidence-gathering processes (see Section 2.6) can be shared will help to reduce the documentation load of assessment.
- It may be possible for assessors to deliver units which are not from the same training package simultaneously so that opportunities for assessment can be shared. For example, a theatre production can give assessors the opportunity to assess carpenters, electricians, graphic artists, front-of-house staff and students involved in accounting and project planning, as well as directors, actors, musicians and stage managers.

- The development of multi-use documentation, such as a single competency blueprint used by students, evidence gatherers and assessors, can also reduce the multiplicity of documentation.

Remember

Working to improve processes and continuing to develop and refine them are more important than simply providing more and more documentation of current processes.

Section 8 – Abbreviations, useful links and resources

8.1 Abbreviations

AQF   Australian Qualifications Framework

AQTF   Australian Quality Training Framework

ISC   Industry Skills Council

NSSC   National Skills Standards Council

SNR   Standards for NVR Registered Training Organisations

TAC   Training and Accreditation Council

8.2 Useful links and resources

Useful links

Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF)

www.aqf.edu.au

This is the policy framework that defines all qualifications recognised nationally in post-compulsory education and training in Australia. It comprises titles and guidelines that define each qualification, as well as the principles and protocols covering cross-sectoral qualification links, and the issuing of qualifications and statements of attainment available at http://www.aqf.edu.au and search for statement of attainment.

Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF)

www.nssc.natese.gov.au/vet_standards contains information and publications, including the following:

AQTF Essential Conditions and Standards for Continuing Registration

AQTF Essential Conditions and Standards for Initial Registration

AQTF Users' Guide to the Essential Conditions and Standards for Continuing Registration

AQTF Users' Guide to the Essential Conditions and Standards for Initial Registration

Employability Skills: From Framework to Practice – An Introductory Guide for Trainers and Assessors

http://www.aqf.edu.au

Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA)

www.asqa.gov.au

The national regulator for Australia's vocational education and training sector, this government authority regulates courses and training providers to ensure that nationally approved quality standards are met.

Western Australian RTOs which deliver courses interstate or overseas are required to register with ASQA.

Department of Industry, Innovation, Science, Research and Tertiary Education (DIISRTE)

www.innovation.gov.au

Responsible for policy, national strategies and Commonwealth funding for all education and training sectors.

National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER)

Australia's principal provider of VET research and statistics which informs policy and practice in Australia's training system, including the following:

- How to become AVETMISS compliant
  http://www.ncver.edu.au/content/compliancefaq.htm

- AVETMISS 6.1 for VET providers: what's new and why?
  www.ncver.edu.au/publications/2401.html

- Booth, R et al 2002, *Maximising confidence in assessment decision-making: Resource kit for assessors*
  http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/780.html

training.gov.au

http://training.gov.au

is the database on Vocational Education and Training (VET) in Australia. It is the official national register of information on training packages, qualifications, courses, units of competency and registered training organisations (RTOs) and has been developed for experienced training sector users.

Training Packages @ Work

www.tpatwork.com

Back 2 Basics, National coding system for training packages.

VETASSESS

http://www.vetassess.com.au/about_vetassess/about_vetassess.cfm

A VET assessment provider, helping industry groups and training providers to define and achieve their learning and assessment goals.

Information on how to design assessment resources is available at http://www.vetassess.com.au/resources/dt_designing_assessment_resources.cfm

Western Australian Department of Training and Workforce Development

www.dtwd.wa.gov.au

This site contains information about training and workforce development as it applies to Western Australia, and links to training courses available in Western Australia as well as to ApprentiCentre and the Career Centre.

Useful resources

Department of Training and Workforce Development publications

A guide to continuous improvement of assessment in VET

Apprenticeships and traineeships: Good practice guide for registered training organisations

Clustering units of competency: A guide to how to cluster for delivery and assessment

Designing assessment tools for quality outcomes in VET

Guidelines for assessing competence in VET

Professional development framework for vocational skills in VET

Reasonable adjustment: A guide to working with students with disability

Staying the course: A guide to working with students with mental illness

For electronic (PDF and Word) copies go to www.vetinfonet.dtwd.wa.gov.au.

9 781742 057521