Australian Government

Department of Education and Training

Template for submissions to the *Quality of assessment in vocational education and training – Discussion Paper*

Key consultation areas

The Department of Education and Training (the department) seeks stakeholder input on the *Quality of assessment in vocational education and training – Discussion Paper* (the discussion paper). The paper covers the following broad themes to improve assessment in vocational education and training (VET):

Chapter 1: Foundation reforms

- ensuring the requirements for VET teachers and trainers provide the strongest platform for high-quality assessment
- ensuring those teaching VET skills are highly competent professionals with high-quality, contemporary skills in assessment.

Chapter 2: Reforms to the assessment of VET students

- assuring the quality of assessment through industry engagement with assessment review and control mechanisms as a gatekeeper before qualifications are issued
- ensuring employers have clear and realistic expectations of VET graduate capabilities which align with the assessment of students.

Chapter 3: Reforms to the regulatory framework

- improving the detection of poor quality assessment
- ensuring quick action can be taken against registered training organisations (RTOs) delivering inadequate assessment
- managing the consequences of inadequate assessment by removing invalid qualifications from the system where necessary and supporting students if this occurs.

How to provide feedback

To support the Training and Assessment Working Group to provide the Australian Government Minister for Vocational Education and Skills with recommendations on how to improve assessment, stakeholder consultations will begin with the release of the discussion paper in January 2016 and continue through to Friday 11 March 2016.

Respondents may provide feedback on some or all of the discussion paper's themes. To assist with the compilation and analysis of the views of all stakeholders, respondents are encouraged to provide feedback via this preferred submission template, with attachments as required. Submissions in alternative formats will also be accepted.

All written submissions to the discussion paper and queries on the consultation process may be directed to the department via email at trainingpackages&VETquality@education.gov.au.

All written submissions will be made publicly available on the department's website, unless respondents direct otherwise. See the terms and conditions for public submissions.

Submission details

1. Submission made on behalf of: ☐ Individual ☑ Organisation

2. Full name:

    Belinda McLennan

3. Organisation (if applicable):

    AMES Australia

4. Please indicate your interest in this discussion paper:

    RTO

    (i.e. as a student, VET practitioner, RTO, third-party provider, peak body, business, industry representative, regulator or other government agency or community member)

5. Do you want your submission to be published on the department's website or otherwise be made publicly available? ☑ Yes ☐ No

    a. If yes, do you want your name and organisation (if applicable) to be published alongside your submission, OR would you like for only your submission to be available and your details kept anonymous? ☑ Published ☐ Anonymous

    b. If no, please advise the department upon submission that you do not want your submission to be published or otherwise be made publicly available.

1. Discussion questions – RTO limitations:

- Is it appropriate for relatively large numbers of RTOs to deliver TAE qualifications or skill sets? Should the number be reduced to a targeted number of RTOs focusing on high-quality provision?

- Should RTOs be restricted from issuing TAE qualifications or skill sets to their own trainers and assessors?

- Are TAE qualifications and skill sets so significant that evidence of competence should not—or cannot—be appropriately demonstrated via recognition of prior learning?

  - Is recognition of prior learning for TAE qualifications or skill sets granted with sufficient rigour to ensure the quality of student assessment? Should the practice be restricted?

- Are there opportunities to improve the assessment skills of the VET workforce through changes to the delivery and assessment of TAE qualifications and skill sets?

  - Should TAE qualifications and skill sets only be delivered by VET practitioners who can demonstrate a specific period of training and/or assessing employment history in the VET sector?

  - What circumstances would support a change requiring some VET trainers and assessors to hold university-level or higher-level VET qualifications, for example, practitioners delivering and assessing TAE qualifications and skill sets?

  - Should the TAE Certificate IV and/or Diploma require a practical component? If so, how long should the practical component be?

  - Should entrants to the TAE Diploma be required to demonstrate employment history in the VET industry before being issued with the qualification? Would this condition help to improve the relevance and validity of assessment? How long would this period of time be?

COMMENT:

AMES Australia supports the intent of the Discussion Paper to identify the best ways of ensuring that a strong platform for high-quality assessment in VET is in place. Competent teachers, trainers and assessors with appropriate TAE qualifications and skills are a significant part of this. These teachers, trainers and assessors must work within a pro-active regulatory system whose role is to ensure RTOs demonstrate sufficient levels of competency for high quality assessment.

A response is provided in relation to selected questions, italicised below.

Is it appropriate for relatively large number of RTOs to deliver TAE qualifications or skills sets?

Should the number be reduced to a targeted number of RTOs focusing on high-quality provision?

AMES Australia believes the starting point for delivery of TAE qualifications should be a strong focus on proven capacity and capability for high-quality provision. Rather than focussing on the number of RTOs delivering these qualifications / skills sets, the focus should be on evidence- based, high-quality

provision, including assessment. This approach should include a focus on the outputs of assessment (i.e. what people can actually do as a result of the training), rather than focussing solely on process.

The likely outcome of this focus will be a reduction in the number of RTOs with capacity to deliver appropriate TAE qualifications.

Should RTOs be restricted from issuing TAE qualifications or skill sets to their own trainers and assessors?

It is possible for RTOs to assess and issue TAE qualifications to their own trainers and assessors. There are potential benefits and drawbacks with this approach. The benefit is that an RTO's own trainers and assessors are very familiar with the specific qualifications and content that their RTO delivers and the assessment leading to TAE qualifications will be highly relevant to this specific field. They will be content experts and their TAE training will be embedded in this content area. The TAE training will result in the RTOs own trainers and assessors having a very detailed exploration of specific training packages relevant to their RTO.

The drawback can be that trainers become so familiar with the way the RTO always delivers and assesses content that attention to detail, validation and incorporation of new assessment practices may be overlooked. It also has the risk that the holders of the TAE qualification provided by their own RTO will not have a sufficiently broad view or experience of applying their assessment skills in other fields.

Independent validation of assessment is a way that the validity and consistency of assessment outcomes can be improved.   Whilst AMES agrees that RTOs should be able to issue TAE qualifications to their own trainers and assessors, these RTOs should expect to be subject to high levels of scrutiny in the validation of assessment tools and in audits of assessments.

The addition of an independent element in the validation process reduces the risk of localised bias and ensures that fresh expert viewpoints are consistently available to improve the RTO's assessment methods and the robustness of assessment outcomes."

Can TAE competence be appropriately demonstrated via RPL? Should this practice be restricted?

It is possible that TAE competence can be appropriately demonstrated by RPL. However, the RPL assessor should be independent, particularly if TAE competence is being assessed by the trainer's own RTO.   The RPL assessor also needs to look for evidence of specific requirements of TAE i.e. pedagogical knowledge rather than only considering the trainer's knowledge and skills in a particular industry.

Should the TAE Diploma include a practical component?

AMES Australia believes that a practical component would enable authentication of required workplace skills and knowledge. It is a basic expectation of employers and industry that candidates come out of training with the ability to actually do the job i.e. perform tasks relevant to that qualification in a practical hands-on way / on the job. If the job is training and assessing, then the person performing that role must have demonstrated in practice the ability to train and assess, particularly at Diploma level.

Should the TAE Diploma graduates have an employment history in the VET industry?

Experience in undertaking vocational training and assessment in the specific industry and workplace area is a strong preference. It should be noted that employment history in the VET industry alone would not necessarily improve the relevance and validity of assessment.

As well as and employment history in the industry TAE diploma graduates also must have broad current knowledge in the 'Education' focus of Vocational Education and Training.

2. Discussion questions – skills and qualifications of trainers and assessors:
• Should the TAE Certificate IV be changed to a core unit on the design and development of assessment tools? How would this improve assessment outcomes for students?   – Should the core unit be the existing *TAEASS502B Design and develop assessment tools* unit of competency? Are there alternative approaches, such as developing a new unit on the design and development of assessment tools?   – Is the *TAEASS502B Design and develop assessment tools* unit of competency a specialist unit that should only sit at the diploma-level on the basis the Certificate IV is currently designed for delivery to new entrants seeking to be trainers and assessors?   • In the case of making any updates to the TAE, is it appropriate to form judgements based on majority considerations? Or is it too risky to do so? Is it a better basis for decision makers to give strong weight to key stakeholders and the nature of the argument put forward?

COMMENT:

No comment provided

3.	**Discussion questions – benefits and purpose of a VET professional association:**

- Is there a need to establish a national professional association for Australia's VET system?
    - Specifically, is there a clear role for Australian governments in assisting the development of professional skills of the VET workforce by funding a professional association?
- What are the barriers to establishing a national professional association? How could these be overcome?
- What would be the most useful guiding purpose of a national professional association?

COMMENT:

Is there a need to establish a national professional association for Australia's VET system?

As background to deliberations with respect to the establishment of a national professional association the following current arrangements are relevant.

- ASQA sessions and guides such as the Users' Guide – Standards for RTOs 2015, are effective and efficient in keeping VET professionals informed. AMES Australia's experience is that the support offered through ASQA sessions and guides is highly beneficial.
- There are current VET professional organisations- for example, RTOs are currently free to undertake professional development as required with professional organisations such as velg Training (National) and VET Development Centre (Victorian).
- Both organisations offer seminars, webinars, news, information, workshops, conferences and other activities for VET professionals to build knowledge and professional skills on a broad range of relevant topics. High-quality, contemporary skills in assessment have been prominent in the professional development options offered by both organisations. Similarly links and relationships with industry are prominent in these organisations - for example, partnerships with industry is one of the five key areas of the VET Development Centre's Professional Learning Framework.

Given the range of effective supports and professional development options currently available AMES Australia believes that any new asssociation would need to be cognisant of its particular role (to be defined) and complement, rather than duplicate, existing provisions and resources.

The value of such a professional organisation would be that it would require registration and regular PD and engagement in updating skills that could serve to lift the quality and reputation on VET more generally. Existing organisations could continue to deliver this required PD.

4.	Discussion questions – potential activities of a VET professional association:

- What activities would be most beneficial for a national professional association to undertake? For example, would it:

    – coordinate, approve or design professional development programs
    – develop capability frameworks
    – positively promote the profession of VET trainers and assessors as an employment destination and career path to attract professionals
    – act as an advocate and voice for VET trainers and assessors
    – interact with industry to respond to their emerging needs
    – register VET practitioners?

- What advantages would there be to conducting these activities at a national level rather than through existing professional development undertaken through membership of existing groups, or that which is currently organised by RTOs?

- Are there any existing organisations that could fulfil this role?

COMMENT:

Refer response to Question 3

5. Discussion questions – models for a VET professional association:

- Which of the suggested models for a VET professional association would be considered most preferrable and viable in the current VET environment? Model A, B or C?

- What value would a VET professional association, or associations, add to the VET sector?

- What mechanism would sustain a professional association, for example, membership fees from individuals or RTOs?

- Should VET teacher and trainer membership with a professional association be mandatory or voluntary?

COMMENT:

No comment provided

6. Discussion questions – capability frameworks:

- What can be learnt or applied from the capability frameworks that have been developed or are currently being developed?

    – Is there an opportunity to make better use of these frameworks, irrespective of proposals to develop a professional association?

COMMENT:
No comment provided

- Are there alternative approaches not covered in this discussion paper on how industry can increase engagement with the conduct of assessment, but not specifically the validation?

- Are there other ways to ensure industry confidence in assessment without requiring independent validation of assessment? For example, are industry-endorsed, externally administered tests a practical alternative to ensure that VET graduates are competent?

  – What would be the benefits and drawbacks in requiring such tests? Under what circumstances would they be mandated, for example, for particular student cohorts? Should these be specified in training products?

  – Who should regulate the tests?

  – Should such a test be a pass/fail dichotomy, or would it be more important to use the test to identify gap training?

  – Is the concept of an externally administered test, such as a test required before receiving a qualification, inconsistent with the premise of a competency based VET system?

  – Should the results of tests be made public at the RTO level?

COMMENT:

Are there other ways to ensure industry confidence in assessment without requiring independent validation of assessment?

Industry and employers are interested in the outcomes of the training process – i.e. competent, compliant and skilled graduates.

A regulatory process that ensures RTOs are capable of consistently delivering this outcome is essential in fostering and maintaining industry confidence. This process should ensure a relevant, practical component is included in training, so that training is not purely theoretical. Industry confidence will be improved if trainees who are awarded a qualification are appropriately skilled to do specific tasks required in their jobs.

It remains important that industry and employers are involved by articulating what their workers need to be able to do and that this is fed into training and assessment processes.

Industry-endorsed, externally administered tests would be worth piloting particularly in assessing skills where public and personal safety are critical.

- What role should industry, for example, employers and industry organisations, play in validation of assessment? Does the varied interpretation of 'industry' inhibit a proper appreciation of the topic and should it be defined? If so, who would best define 'industry' when considering the practice of validating assessment?

- Do employers or industry groups have the skills required to fulfil this role in validating assessment? Is assessment such a specialised skill that industry and employers either do not want to get involved or should not get involved?

- Is there a need to build industry capacity and capability regarding involvement with training and assessment? If so, how might this be done?

- How can we ensure engagement with industry is appropriately targeted so it does not add undue burden and is targeted to those within industry with appropriate expertise required for validation of assessment?

COMMENT:

Do you think industry has a role to play in providing independent validation of assessment as a meant to improving graduate quality?

Workplace skills and knowledge to be included in training and subsequently assessed should be informed by industry consultation. This is essential in ensuring relevance and currency of qualifications. RTOs should ensure that requirements put forward in consultation with industry inform course design, including specific learning objectives.

However, whilst employers and industry groups can provide essential content expertise, they are generally not expert in developing and validating assessment tasks, especially in relation to the requirements for procedural flexibility and fairness to cater for different cohorts of trainees. To be valid the assessment judgement needs to confirm that a learner holds all of the knowledge and skills described in the relevant part/level of the training package. It is the role of the RTO and the auditing body to ensure assessments are valid and compliant.

AMES Australia has had most experience of VET in the Aged Care and Children's Services sectors. Given the number of employers in these sectors it is a challenge to keep employers informed of changes and currency of qualifications. ASQA could consider including a broader cross-section of staff in briefings and consultations to target practitioners at a range of levels within these industries in development of training packages.

It is difficult to identify "industry experts" in a number of Foundation Skills domains. A "one size fits all" approach to the role of industry in Vocational and Foundation skills courses is problematic. AMES Australia recommends flexiblity in this area in regard to foundation skills assessments.

- How can independent validation be best applied to avoid a 'one size fits all' approach? For example should independent validation of assessment be triggered by:

  - improving RTO practice, for example, through a principles based model and best practice guide to support the VET workforce in identifying the most appropriate technique to validate assessment

  - mandatory requirement to lift quality in specific instances, for example, where a qualification is identified as high-risk

  - funding requirement, for example, independent validation of assessment could become a requirement for RTOs seeking to access government funding.

- Should there be an increased role for external assessment by industry, and in which situations? For example, should it be mandatory for certain industries where there is a concern for public safety if a learner is incorrectly deemed competent?

- If independent validation of assessment is to be risk-based, then what factors should be considered in the assessment of risk, for example, public safety, RTO profile, student cohort?

- Should high-risk student cohorts be required to undergo independent reassessment of industry-agreed sets of competencies before being issued with their qualifications?

  - For example, particular qualifications; students undertaking qualifications with RTOs with high levels of non-compliance; or that conduct assessment wholly online or on-the-job; or in areas of public safety.

- Would the burden be too great if independent reassessments were required for an entire student cohort, and should independent reassessment apply to a sample of students instead? If so, how could such a sample be chosen?

- Who would be most appropriate to oversee the reassessment of qualifications?

  - For example, could existing regulators or other organisations (such as firms that specialise in assessing students) take on this role?

COMMENT:

High risk qualifications

AMES Australia understands high risk qualifications to be those which qualify graduates to specifically work in areas involving public or personal safety. Where a qualification is identified as "high risk" industry should definitely be involved in identifying the currency of skills and knowledge required by graduates.

High Risk RTOs

The regulatory authority should take a proactive risk-based approach to RTO registration. High risk RTOs with significant levels of non-compliance are those which award qualifications in spite of questionable training and assessment practices, identified through audit. For example, truncating module delivery hours to implausibly low levels, enrolling students with insufficient language,

literacy and / or numeracy skills for a particular certificate level, and/ or providing responses for students to demonstrate knowledge components of certificates.

10. Discussion questions – industry expectations and graduate capabilities:

- Is there a role for Government or industry to develop resources outlining VET graduate expectations for particular training products? If so, who should take this work forward?

  – Do higher order issues need to be resolved regarding terminology such as 'competent' (as assessed against the training product) and 'job ready' (ready to undertake all aspects of a particular job)? Is there a common understanding of VET system outcomes?

COMMENT:
No comment provided

11. Discussion questions – evidence of assessment and graduate competency:

- Should the Standards for RTOs be revised to include strengthened and more specific rules around the conduct of and evidence to support assessment? Which elements that have a clear link to quality of student outcomes need to be strengthened?

- Would a more prescriptive condition of registration, such as a requirement for RTOs to retain all assessment samples for a longer period, improve the quality of assessment?

- How could the focus of regulation move to evaluating assessment outputs, such as samples of students' assessment pieces, without incurring excessive costs or imposing excessive burden on RTOs?

  – Is ASQA the appropriate regulator to oversee this function, or are there better placed agencies such as firms that specialise in assessing students?

- Are there other mechanisms that you would like to see added to the regulatory framework to prevent poor assessment? For example, should training-only RTOs be recognised as a formal part of the regulatory framework?

COMMENT:
No comment provided

12. Discussion questions – enforcement:

- How could the focus of regulation move to evaluating assessment outputs?

- Which additional regulatory enforcement options should be considered in dealing with RTOs providing inadequate assessment? For example, should the regulator have an explicit administrative power to require a RTO to arrange and fund external reassessment, or should additional civil penalty provisions be created?

- To what extent should the characteristics of the RTO influence the response? Should the size of the RTO or the number of students involved matter?

- Given the need to balance procedural fairness with swift and effective enforcement action, what methods should be available to the regulator to manage RTOs that are repeatedly non-compliant with assessment requirements? How could such repeat offenders be defined?

- What role should regulators have in communicating their activities and findings? Does current regulatory practice provide adequate transparency and disclosure, or are there other approaches that should be taken?

COMMENT:
No comment provided

13. Discussion questions – cancellation and reassessment:

- Where inadequate assessment has occurred, should the power to cancel qualifications be exercised more frequently than it has in the past? What factors should affect this decision (for example, potential impact on public safety) and how should they be balanced?

- Should a scheme for the reassessment of students be implemented? If so:

  - Are there any situations where a student should not be offered the chance to be reassessed, for example, student fraud?

  - Should there be a time period after which ASQA should not move to cancel an individual's qualification? Noting potential public and other safety issues, should a decision to cancel consider whether or not the person involved is reliant on the qualification for their current employment?

  - Who should bear the cost of reassessment and any gap training found to be necessary? If the cost is to be recovered from the RTO, should this be pursued regardless of the RTOs financial viability?

  - Who should deliver the reassessment? Are there any circumstances in which it would be appropriate for the original RTO to undertake the reassessment?

  - What should the qualifications be for those doing the reassessment, and what industry experience and currency would they need? To what extent should ASQA, industry or employers be directly involved in the reassessment process?

- Should a tuition assurance fund be set up to further protect students in Australia's VET sector, particularly in the context of any scheme of reassessment or cancellation of qualifications? Should membership be mandatory for all RTOs? Who should operate such a fund, and who should bear the cost of its operation?

- What linkages with income support eligibility should apply for graduates impacted by any recall of qualifications?

COMMENT:

Where inadequate assessment has occurred should the regulators power to cancel qualifications be exercised more frequently?

The cancellation of qualifications is a significant decision that has major impacts on students, should ASQA have the power to direct reassessment of students?

AMES Australia believes that wherever inadequate assessment has occurred, resulting in the award of qualifications, the regulator should exercise the power to cancel these qualifications as frequently as is indicated. This is particularly important when lack of skills and / or knowledge prevents individuals from carrying out workplace duties, particularly in relation to duty of care / occupational health and safety/ unacceptable public safety risks. Sectors which involve some sort of caring role, such as aged care or child care, have received significant attention for this reason.

Given the significant impact a cancelled qualification can have on individual students, the right to challenge the decision through a properly constituted and rapid response appeals process would ensure any cancellation of qualifications is transparent and justified.

Where inadequate assessment has occurred should the regulators power to cancel qualifications be exercised more frequently?

Improving and maintaining quality, reputation and confidence in the training system under ASQA auspices will be seriously undermined if students are able to retain a qualification after it has been found that the assessments resulting in the award of that qualification are found to be inadequate. If a person's current employment relies on the qualification then re-assessment should take place.

Income support for graduates impacted by recall of qualifications.

The onus to recompense the individual (for example, income support in the case of loss of employment as a result of the qualification being cancelled) and any penalty or compensation required should sit with the RTO responsible for the inadequate assessment. This may serve as an incentive for high risk training providers to improve training and assessment practices.