



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:
3. Organisation (if applicable):
4. Please indicate your interest in this discussion paper:

(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:

The Training and Education (TAE) qualification is unique within the VET system, as it provides the basis upon which all other qualifications are undertaken and assessed. Therefore, the quality of the qualification, as well as the Registered Training Organisations (RTO) that deliver it, requires careful consideration.

The AMCA highlights the fact that the Australian VET system is based on the demonstration of competency; therefore, it is our view that the same principles should be applied to those undertaking a TAE qualification, including the recognition of prior learning. Having said this, the AMCA does support the view that the standard of competency and the assessment process for TAE qualifications does need to be held to a higher standard. Not only would this ensure that TAE graduates have the level of skills required, but also serves as a benchmark for their own approach to training and assessment.

Restricting the number of RTOs authorised to deliver TAE qualifications has been proposed to reinforce quality assurance with respect to TAE qualifications; however little detail is available on how these numbers would be capped, what the application process would involve, or what selection

criteria would be used. A cap on authorised RTOs might also result in unintended consequences, such as cost increases or access restrictions for those in regional Australia.

The suggestion to prohibit RTOs from issuing TAE qualifications to their own trainers and assessors is based on sound governance principles and is supported by the AMCA.

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:

The AMCA doubts whether making TAE Certificate IV a core unit of the design and development of assessment tools would make much difference to the quality of assessment outcomes. However, we stress the distinction between knowing how to develop effective assessment tools and knowing how to apply them. Consequently, we would support the decision to make the design and development of assessment tools a specialist unit that can only be undertaken at diploma level.

Of more common concern to the AMCA and its members is the level of vocational competence of trainers and assessors. Little mention of vocational competency is made in the discussion paper; however it is vital to an individual's ability to deliver quality training and assessment.

The AMCA would caution against making updates to the TAE qualification based on majority considerations alone. We query whether many individual employers are likely to be aware of, let alone respond to, this consultation. Training providers have a more vested interest in doing so. It is our concern that the number of submissions is likely to be skewed towards the views of training providers. Key stakeholders that represent the views of core constituencies (employers, employees, trainers and assessors, training providers) should be weighed against one another in to provide a balanced assessment.

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:

The AMCA acknowledges that the quality of VET trainers and assessors would likely improve as a result of a VET professional association, and it may also offer a career pathway for vocational experts seeking a career change. Therefore, the AMCA would support an undertaking by government to further develop the proposal.

There are likely to be some barriers.

For example, there may be instances where individuals are already members of another professional body aligned to the vocational competencies of the qualification they deliver. Would membership of the VET professional association be a pre-requisite for these individuals, or indeed all trainers and assessors? It may also act as a barrier to potential trainers and assessors drawn from within industry, who may see it as an unnecessary obstacle; therefore discouraging them from taking on the role.

Notwithstanding the abovementioned hurdles, the AMCA can see merit in a professional body that is guided by an unerring commitment to innovation, lifelong learning, and ethical practice—three areas that require redress.

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:

The activities cited in the discussion paper appear a logical starting point. The AMCA would also like to see some involvement in the verification of vocational competencies (See discussion above and below).

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

- Which of the suggested models for a VET professional association would be considered most preferable 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:

As stated earlier, a primary concern to the AMCA and its members is the level of vocational competence of trainers and assessors. For this reason, the AMCA has cultivated TAE trainers and assessors from within industry, and it is our view that any model for a VET professional association must adequately respond to the needs of this cohort.

Of the models proposed in the discussion paper, Model A appears to provide scope for professional associations to be established with industry specific needs. For example: VET Professionals Association - Building and Construction. This type of approach is the AMCA's preference.

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:

Capability frameworks can provide useful guidance for VET practitioners, and would fall neatly within the auspices of the professional association/s being proposed. Conscientious VET practitioners will refer to such frameworks to improve their skills; however, poor practitioners will ignore them. Therefore, the AMCA cautions against relying upon such frameworks to ensure the quality of VET trainers and assessors.

7. Discussion questions – increasing industry confidence:

- 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:

The job readiness of apprentices and trainees has been an ongoing area of concern for industry and employers. Therefore, as a statement of principle, industry must have some level of input into the assessment process in order to have confidence in the training outcomes.

In the AMCA's experience, roundtable forums have been used to good effect to bring together representatives from trade regulators, training providers, industry associations and their members on issues of shared concern. The terms of reference for such a group could be tailored to focus on the validation of assessment tools and methods, which would provide industry with an opportunity to have input into the assessment process; therefore confidence in its outcomes.

Such a model would also alleviate the concerns about the capacity and capability of industry, as experienced VET representatives would also have input. While concerns about the time commitment, burden and cost to industry can be an issue, the AMCA has found that industry is prepared to contribute where tangible benefits can be demonstrated.

With respect to regulated trades, the role of the industry regulator is an important consideration. Most regulated trades require students to undergo a formal examination when seeking registration. Therefore, a more integrated approach to the assessment of trade qualification competencies with trade licensing requirements is advisable.

8. Discussion questions – the role of industry in assessment:

- 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:

As a statement of principle, industry must have some role in the validation of assessment. The level of involvement will vary from industry to industry, but is particularly important in an industry such as building and construction, where health and safety is a key concern, and technologies, applications and practices are ever changing.

Simply stated, the challenge is to ensure that those conducting assessment have the required TAE skills set, adequate vocational competency, are able to apply appropriate judgement that assesses the competency of the student against the competency requirements of the qualification.

Concerns about the capabilities of those without TAE qualifications undertaking validation are legitimate. This is especially true of employers (even those with Certificate IV TAE qualifications), as they have a tendency to apply expectations that exceed the competency requirements.

In line with the current regulatory requirements, it is therefore important that the validation process include individuals with a strong understanding of the unit competency requirements, as well as a reasonably objective assessor skill set. The AMCA’s preference is to have a validation team, which would include individuals with vocational expertise, as well as those with the TAE skill set.

Another option is to target vocational experts that are approaching the twilight of their careers. These people have valuable experience and are often open to new opportunities that allow them to take on a reduced workload while still being engaged in their industry. Industry associations are often in a good position to identify and approach candidates.

With respect to the AMCA’s specific subsector of the building and construction industry—Heating, Ventilation, Air Conditioning and Refrigeration (HVACR)—there are a several strong industry associations with experienced VET professionals that could be better engaged in the validation process. This option is particularly valuable as industry associations also have access to individuals (E.g. training committees) that are committed to improving training within their sector, and have the specialist knowledge required.

9. Discussion questions – specific models:

- 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:

The AMCA supports the view, expressed in the discussion paper, that a 'one size fits all' approach is inadequate. The abovementioned roundtable proposal provides scope for each industry to vary the assessment process to suit its individual needs and risks, particularly those relating to specific skills sets or competencies.

While certain qualifications may be considered high risk, it is unlikely that all units within the qualification present the same risk. By taking a tailored approach, the burden of independent and external assessments can be minimised to those particular units that present the greatest risk or need.

For example, a roundtable for the Refrigeration and Air Conditioning qualification could identify specific units of competency (E.g. handling of dangerous goods) that present a higher risk, with

assessment requirements set accordingly. Factors leading to a determination of independent validation or external assessment would vary with the criteria set by the industry roundtable.

One example would be those units of competency that present serious risks to the health and safety of students or the community (e.g. flammable refrigerants); another might be units where industry has noticed consistently poor competency (e.g. welding).

As mentioned in the AMCA's response to question 7, the implied risks associated with regulated trades means that the individuals undertaking these qualifications are already subject to additional oversight at the point of registration. Greater collaboration with regulators that better aligns the VET assessment process with the trade registration process would be preferable.

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:

There is a gap between industry expectations and competency requirements. The AMCA recognises that, in many cases, this is a result of industry’s exceeding expectations driven by commercial pressures. This gap is unlikely to be bridged entirely; however scope exists for a clearer definition of competency and job readiness, which should be done in consultation with industry and with employers in mind.

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:

Investigating complaints is a timely and costly exercise, both for the regulator and the training provider. Complaints regarding a particular qualification or training provider may be entirely valid, but they may also arise for less valid reasons, such as overly high expectations of employers, personality clashes etc. Consequently, it is unreasonable to expect every complaint to result in reassessment. More likely is that an RTO is investigated following a series of complaints that demonstrates a trend in poor quality training and assessment.

Within this context, the current six month retention period for assessment records is too short. A retention period of, say, 3 years would send a clear signal to RTOs by providing regulators (auditors) with a larger evidence base upon which to evaluate the quality of a providers assessment process in the event of a series of complaints. This would not be a significant impost on RTOs as the cost of retaining electronic copies of assessments is relatively low.

The re-testing of graduates is problematic: it involves significant cost, and, depending on the time lapsed, graduates skills or knowledge may have regressed. This is a real possibility in trades where graduate apprentices go onto work in specialised areas of their respective trades.

The introduction of training only RTOs would increase the number of parties that a student and their employer needs to deal with and is unlikely to resolve the problem of poor assessment.

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:

The evaluation of assessment outputs could be improved by leveraging off existing instruments. For example, Quality Indicators are already required under the Standards for Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) 2015, and provide valuable feedback about the outcome from the perspective of both the student and employer. There might be ways to use this information to target audit RTOs that are consistently receiving poor results. One possible repercussion could be that RTOs are required to provide implementation plans for areas in which they have received particular poor results.

Another option would be to provide a database that allows students and employers to check whether a particular RTO has been subject to any penalties or enforceable undertakings in the past 12 months.

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:

Caution must be applied to the cancellation of qualifications, particularly at the fault of training providers. If the assessment processes of a particular RTO have been demonstrated to be particularly poor, and the qualification is deemed to be high risk, then a reassessment would be prudent, but not at expense to the student.

The AMCA would support the design of a scheme that aims to address the risks associated with poor assessment, but that applies strong principles of fairness and equity.

Adding to the compliance cost of ethical and well managed RTOs would be a concern; however, we would like to see more detail regarding such a scheme before making further comment.