



## 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](mailto: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  Yes  No website or otherwise be made publicly available?
  - 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 number of RTOs delivering TAE qualifications should not be limited. The quality of the presenters and their track record for outcomes should be sufficient to determine who continues to offer this qualification and who falls by the wayside. However, having said that, if more rigour was imposed on the verification/validation processes, and greater quality assurance processes (as opposed to quality control) implemented throughout the RTO registration system, then fewer 'shonky' operators would be allowed to offer any form of government funded training in the first place.

Insofar as offering the qualifications to their own staff, again there should be no restriction on this. International experience is that the quality of the assessment of those undergoing training (heightened by the quality of standards against which such assessment is carried out), coupled with a rigorous verification process, will ensure that all outcomes are valid, reliable and transparent. However, this will not occur until the competency standards for assessment, the training of assessor trainers, and the way in which verification is carried out in Australia are improved. These are well below world-class.

Which leads to the concern about the quality of the TAE qualification. Of all of the qualifications across the national VET system these should be the most rigorous. It is, after all, assessors who are the key decision makers across the AQF. However, the original Training Package, and subsequent iterations, have never been developed from a functional analysis of what the best assessors do. As a result they lack rigour, do not describe best practice in assessment, and offer very little by way of guidance to VET assessors on how to conduct a competency-based assessment (as opposed to any other form) in a VET context.

It is my contention that the whole TAE package needs to be rewritten, this time commencing with a rigorous and forensic functional analysis to identify the skills and knowledge required of a competent assessor in a VET context.

Based on international experience, what will be found is that anybody in the workplace can be an assessor – there is no need for any training or education qualification because a competency-based assessment does NOT assess learning or education. It assesses on-the-job competence. Moreover, the possession of qualifications in these fields appears to be confusing so many people. To often we hear of people who confuse competency-based assessment with, for example, formative or summative type assessments. This also occurs in the TAE Training Package, and appears to be the main reason why so many find it hard to understand exactly how assessment in the VET context works.

Improving assessment is a simple, cost-effective and resource-efficient task. It does not require additional regulations or higher qualifications in education or training. All it will take is a revisit of the purpose of assessment in a VET context, and a proper analysis of the skills and knowledge required to achieve this purpose. And the creation of a Training Package which both supports the purpose of assessment in VET and the outcomes the government is trying to achieve through the national VET system.

## 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:

Assessment tools are a phenomenon introduced at a time when there were very few people who really understood what competency-based assessment was and how to conduct it. It was, at that time and quite often remains, confused with other forms of assessment, for example formative, summative, criterion-referenced etc. These types of assessment are critical during a program of training or learning, but in a competency-based VET environment they have no place. In fact they can quite often result in false negatives which impose further barriers to equitable access to qualifications and work opportunities.

For the past 25 years I have maintained a close study of VET systems here and overseas and I have never seen the concept of ‘assessment tool’ used anywhere else. In fact, I have never seen either its purpose or design satisfactorily explained anywhere in the Australian system. What I have seen are, again, tests and learning projects employed which, as stated above, are ideal in assessments conducted in education or learning environments, but not in a competency-based VET system, especially one which purports to be relevant to not only learning but also to employment, community growth and economic development. Moreover, a concern I hear constantly is that the imposition of such tests increase the barriers that some students feel when it comes to fair and open assessment of their competence.

In my honest opinion there should be no such concept applied – forced into – a competency-based assessment process.

### 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:**

There are several VET associations already in existence. Government funding might help enhance the reach of these organisations, however such organisations eschew the approach taken to VET in this country and instead have been formed in order that professionals and assessment practitioners can find common agreement on what constitutes quality in training and assessment in a VET context.

What would be of more benefit to practitioners is if a strategic plan was created for the national VET system, and policies and regulations established which enabled the purpose of VET to be achieved rather than continued changes to regulations and guidance offered practitioners.

#### 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:**

As noted above, there are already professional associations which cater to the needs of trainers and assessors. If any one body was given government imprimatur over all others this would only cause greater friction across the industry and result in many turning their backs on the system. The bullet points noted above already underpin the regulations under which RTOs must conduct their business, and to outsource these to another body would not only confuse practitioners but create resentment – especially if this body is to be seen as even less competent in supporting the achievement of the objectives of VET than those already charged with such responsibility.

#### 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:**

No response given previous comments.

## 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:**

The current approach to identifying competence through the application of ‘capability frameworks’ is simply a reversion to the way in which the national VET system was supposed to be created in the first place.

Capability frameworks are designed to identify the skills and knowledge, in context, found in the workplace. So too are Training Packages (although over the years these have gone right off the rails). It would serve the government far better if it were to ignore such trends and instead return to the purpose of the national VET system with an eye on paring back all of the extraneous ballast and getting each element of the system back on track.

Failure to do this will, as seen in Queensland and Victoria, result in yet another VET system in this country. It will not only result in massive and unwarranted expenditure, it will also impose more and more barriers to lifelong learning, community advancement, uptake of employment, and the achievement of individual, industry and economic objectives.

## 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 whole VET system is supposedly 'industry-led'. However, it has been my experience that industry is too often left out of the loop when it comes to identifying the skills and knowledge required of competent performance – including the competent performance of trainers and assessors. By this I mean individual industry members, SMEs, industry associations etc.

Too much of the national VET system is being created and led by those who themselves have little or no experience in the creation or management of such systems. Moreover, the VET agenda has shifted markedly from being aimed at achieving work and economic objectives to achieving learning or training objectives. These, as many know, are two different things.

A new framework needs to be created, one which aims to support the skills needs of industry through the identification of relevant and appropriate competence among those seeking work or seeking to enhance their career. Training and education is only one way in which such competence may be achieved – only one. There are many more (experience, job rotation, mentoring etc.), but these are constantly ignored. But not by employers. In fact, most employers will choose experience over qualifications any day. The number of highly qualified unemployed people in this country proves this.

The whole VET system needs a revamp.

Now, to the question of gaining industry confidence in assessment. This is a very simple question to answer: The standards against which assessment is carried out must reflect industry needs. Right now they only reflect the needs of a qualification and, as stated above, such qualifications do not always reflect the needs of industry. So, aim the standards at industry rather than qualifications. Simple.

## 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:

Industry validates every single assessment already. We hear it every day, employers bemoaning the fact that the people they employ may be qualified but do not possess the skills and knowledge required in the workplace. It is industry which is telling us that the national VET system is not working, and they know this because they must assess and evaluate those who are the product of this system. And they are finding the system to be lacking in many ways.

But, it is not the quality of assessment which is lacking but the quality of the standards against which the assessments are carried out. If these do not reflect industry needs, and the evidence shows that they do not, then of course industry is not going to have any confidence in the qualifications that people have.

Moreover, what is the purpose of validation? Nobody has yet articulated that. If the aim is to assure (rather than control) the quality of assessments then another approach is needed. Not one which checks to make sure that assessors are ticking the right boxes (eg, do you have an assessment tool?), but that high quality assessment processes are being followed.

Personally I would get rid of the word 'validation'. Validation is simply the act of 'validating' that something is as it claims to be. For example, validating an assessment is nothing more than 'validating' that what occurred was an assessment. Verification, on the other hand, aims to ensure the reliability of assessments – all assessments, each and every time. The purpose of verification is to ensure that the quality of an assessment is continually achieved or is to the desired standard.

All assessors are taught certain processes and, theoretically, because such processes are based around the competence applied by the best assessors here and around the world, it would be safe to assume that if they were continually followed then assessment outcomes would mirror those achieved by the best assessors around the world. It is this theory which underpinned the national guidelines to assessment (written by me) at the time competency-based assessment was introduced into this country.

The trouble is, such processes are not at the moment of a high quality. Imposing control measures on assessments does not, nor ever will, replace these processes. Nor would they provide a level of quality which assessors would be capable of achieving whilst carrying out an assessment. Making sure that the right boxes are ticked during an audit does nothing to enhance the quality outcomes of an assessment, as much as the regulators would wish it could.

Having said that, supervisors, managers, whole industries and their clients conduct such assessments every day. Competency-based assessment is nothing more than an assessment of evidence used to demonstrate the competence of an individual, work group or organisation to achieve business or strategic objectives. And such evidence is offered every day, and assessed every day.

It would therefore be no imposition on supervisors or managers to assist in the assessment processes simply by doing their job. But, again this would require a rethink on the way in which VET is conducted in this country. And I am not convinced that there is sufficient experience within the sector to understand either the purpose of doing this or ways in which it might be achieved.

## 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:

Validation – for want of a better word – should be independent, although in a large organisation there may be in-house or internal validators who can assure the quality of all assessments carried out there.

In my opinion RTOs should not be issuing qualifications. This should be the responsibility of either the government (through, for example, VET Board of Studies) or an authorised qualifications provider such as TAFE. As such, validation – or in this context verification - should be carried out by whomever provides the qualification, if that is the purpose of validating/verifying assessments. This way the standard of a qualification would be maintained, just as the standard of HSC or university degrees are maintained, and continually assured through support and guidance given by the qualifications provider to assessors.

## 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:**

Such guidance should be contained Training Packages.

Re terminology, among the VET network there is very clear understanding of these terms. It appears that the only time confusion arises is in the development of Training Packages by non VET experienced authors.

## 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:**

The Rules of Evidence, when properly understood and applied (which is most of the time) are sufficient when it comes to assessing evidence. It is not the basic framework of assessment which is at fault but the Training Packages which confuse simple education and training assessment processes with those required of a rigorous competency-based assessment in the context of a national VET system.

As mentioned elsewhere, it would be an extraordinarily simple process to improve the quality of assessments. However, adding more rules and regulations will not only make the quality of assessments more difficult to achieve, it would impose unnecessary barriers to assessment for those who can least afford it (eg, unemployed, low income students or those seeking assessment in order to return to the workplace).

The regulatory framework is already over-loaded and, should the recommendation that the current system be pared back of all extraneous and burdensome elements, these could be relaxed and many of them removed.

## 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:**

If there is one area which requires greater regulation it is in the development of Training Packages, and more importantly the way in which the standards which underpin these are developed.

If, as a starting point, greater regulations were imposed on the haphazard way in which standards are identified, analysed and written, then it can be assured that the whole system would improve exponentially. And if this starting point was focussed on the standards underpinning the TAE qualification then all others would very quickly fall into place.

Because the standards which underpin the TAE are so poorly developed and written, it is almost impossible to identify best practice in competency-based training and assessment. And as people who perform these two functions will, at some point, be required to evaluate the quality of the standards incorporated into other Training Packages, they too will begin to improve if the standards for trainers and assessors were improved.

It all comes back to the quality of the standards against which trainers in a VET system (as opposed to those who conduct training and education in other fields) are themselves trained and assessed. And right from the very start, in the mid 1990s, this has never been done well. As a result bad habits have continued to multiply and today we have the result.

In my opinion it is time that regulations stop being imposed at the outer edges of the VET system and more control is taken over what occurs at the centre.

### 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:**

No comment.