Assessment in VET in Australia – Does research matter?

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The Australian context – Vocational education and assessment

The centrepiece of the vocational education and training (VET) system in Australia is a national qualifications framework. Qualifications are made up of industry standards set by industry organisations. These qualifications are set out in industry Training Packages. Assessment is competency based with an emphasis on demonstration of competence in authentic workplace settings. Training organisations or providers must assess against these standards to award qualifications. Training organisations (RTOs) are registered to provide VET training courses under national standards which are audited in each state.

The environment is one of competition between providers with over 1,100 RTOs in the state of NSW alone. As part of the National Training Framework providers are required to recognise the qualifications awarded by other providers (mutual recognition). Qualifications for assessors and trainers are set out in the Training Package for Assessment and Workplace Training.

Implementing a national system in Australia has never been easy. Australia comprises 6 states and 2 territories with their own administrative systems and it was only in 1995 that rail gauges were sufficiently compatible to be able to travel between all the states on a standard gauge track.

Recent research on assessment in VET in Australia

There has been a developing body of research on assessment in VET in the last 4 years in Australia. The range of projects documents a growing disquiet by assessors and policy makers about the state of assessment in Australia. Some of this work is reported here.

TAFE NSW (Technical and Further Education) as a public provider offers qualifications in most areas of vocational education across the state of NSW. More than 440,000 students are enrolled each year in 12 Institutes that comprise TAFE NSW. Students completing a qualification (and their potential employers) in central Sydney expect the same standard in their qualification as graduates in outlying country areas.

Research completed in 1999 by the Vocational Education and Assessment Centre (VEAC) for TAFE NSW investigated a range of influences on summative assessment practices in TAFE NSW. TAFE teachers and educational managers, industry organisations and professional associations were surveyed to investigate thinking and practices in assessment. The issues of greatest concern to teachers related to quality assurance and consistency in assessment, the reporting of results and the need for curriculum support. Some respondents saw the answer to be a more centralised assessment system for the organisation. However this solution to creating consistency did not fit with the concept of VET assessment as the collection of evidence from
authentic workplace environments. The organisation continued to investigate the issues which caused assessors to have this growing lack of confidence.

National research completed in 2001 (Booth et al) investigated strategies to improve confidence in assessment decision making for assessors. Assessors and training providers identified issues they believed had an impact on the confidence of assessors and others in the VET sector. These factors included the lack of consistency in assessment decisions and assessment practice, the demands of Training Packages, the lack of rigorous quality assurance processes, concerns about quality of training programs and the need for ongoing support for assessors.

In 2000 Smith investigated assessment practices in the state of Queensland. He found there is ‘significant scope to improve the quality of assessment in terms of validity, consistency, usefulness and cost effectiveness and that there are a significant number of trainers/assessors whose practices are not supportive of a quality assessment system’ (Smith 2000, xiii).

A national evaluation of consistency in competency based assessment commissioned by the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA, 2000) aimed to identify and analyse factors which may affect the consistency of assessment processes and outcomes, and identify strategies for maximising consistency. The review recommended strengthening the audit process for registered training providers, extending training for assessors and the introduction of an assessment review process for providers.

These national projects offered a range of recommendations for improvement focussed at all levels including attention to implementation of national standards, greater specificity in Training Package development and provision of higher level of support and training for assessors. The body of research supported the development of thinking and policy outcomes over this period. As Clayton concludes ‘The accumulated knowledge gained from the broad ranging studies undertaken in this period provided both policymakers and VET practitioners with the research based evidence necessary to inform revisions in both policy and practice’ (Clayton, 2002, conference address).

Most significantly, the research findings contributed to the revision of the existing Australian Recognition Framework to include auditable standards for assessment by RTOs and the adoption of the Australian Training Quality Framework (AQTF).

Additionally, ANT A commissioned the development of specific products to provide advice to assessors on quality evidence, moderation of assessment, the provision of quality assessment materials, resources for Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and materials to support initial training of assessors. However as Clayton also points out, the development of regulation and the provision of teaching resources is not sufficient to build consistency and quality. Ultimately assessors need access to professional development opportunities to support them in assessment.

The growing concern about quality and consistency in assessment
Before the introduction of competency based training in the early 1990s, providers placed greater reliance on centrally regulated examination systems under which assessment decisions were often made by centralised panels of ‘markers’. However assessment against competency standards involves collecting evidence and making judgements on whether competency has been achieved. The quality of such judgements will be influenced by factors such as the experience and skills of assessors and the clarity of competency standards themselves.

Over the past three years in Australia, the term ‘consistency in assessment’ has come to be used as shorthand for the assessment principles of validity and reliability.

Consistency does not however, equal quality. There has been some confusion between the pursuit of consistency of practice in VET and consistency of assessment outcomes. Consistency in practice (such as pricing models for purchasing training) can be achieved through some degree of regulation. Consistency of outcomes is achieved by ensuring assessment is valid, reliable, fair and flexible, that is assuring its quality. It is not necessarily achieved by the use of standardised (or consistent) processes for assessing, which could lead to inflexibility.

The TAFE Directors Association stated in a position paper (TDA, 2001) that ‘maintaining the value of Training Package qualifications and public confidence in those qualifications requires consistency in quality of assessment by all RTOs. This is more appropriately achieved through quality assurance processes rather than detailed specifications in Training Packages of the assessment procedures to be followed.’

For consistent outcomes assessors must assess what is set out in the standards and produce similar results as another assessor with candidates of equal competence at different times and places. Assessors must have a shared understanding of the standard, of the basis on which assessment decisions are made and of what constitutes sufficient evidence. But quality in assessment requires quality assurance of the whole assessment system.

**Developments to improve quality - AQTF**

In the face of mounting evidence from research and growing concern over quality in VET, the Australian Quality Training Framework was introduced in 2002. This framework expanded on the previous standards of the Australian Recognition Framework. Its aim is to ensure quality in VET. All RTOs will be audited against the twelve standards in order to stay in business. The framework is modelled on the International Standards Organisation approach with an emphasis on self auditing.

These standards include requirements for RTOs to:

- have documented systems for quality training and assessment
- conduct an internal audit at least annually
- have documented agreements with other organisations when they provide training or assessment in partnership
- use trainers and assessors with specified competencies
• follow explicit requirements for quality assurance in assessment
• have a recognition of prior learning process in place and offer to recognise the prior learning of all learners on enrolment
• follow specific requirements for developing, validating and implementing learning and assessment strategies

The development of moderation or validation of assessment

The AQTF specifically requires providers to validate assessment by

' reviewing, comparing and evaluating the assessment processes, tools and evidence contributing to judgements made by a range of assessors against the same competency standards, at least annually' (ANTA, 2001, Standard 9.2)

The approach developed for quality assurance in Australia is not a highly regulated model such as the United Kingdom system for National Vocational Qualifications. The UK dual layer of monitoring includes internal and external verification. Internally appointed verifiers have responsibility to ensure that assessors and their practice meet both the Awarding body’s criteria and national standards and external verifiers determine whether the quality of both assessment and verification meets national standards.

In Australia, the requirement to validate assessment has not featured in any previous requirements for training providers. The term ‘validation’ has been widely debated in this country. A range of terms have been used in the past. The term ‘moderation’ has been used to compare assessment judgements but implies some statistical application to achieve norm referenced scores and suggests the possibility of changing scores after this process. The term ‘validation’ has been used more broadly in the AQTF and so has come to be used most commonly since the introduction of the AQTF. Validation may include developing and comparing assessment exemplars, benchmarking of tools, sampling of assessment decisions. The significant factor is that this process contributes to the RTO’s overall quality management system and involves assessors making comparisons before, during and after the judgement.

However in the spirit of the AQTF this validation process does not necessarily require assessors to come to agreement and change their practice – there is an assumption that this will occur during the process of comparing assessment but no requirement that it does. This approach to the process needs to be further tested to see how useful it is for assessors in contributing to improving quality overall.

In 2001 –2 the Vocational Education and Assessment Centre (VEAC) conducted a pilot study with assessors to establish validation processes between providers. Industries selected were tourism and hospitality, business services and community services and health (Roy and Noble, 2001). Participants were wary at first to share information with potential competitors but found the experience extremely rewarding and an excellent environment to clarify the Training Package industry standards and improve their own methods and tools for assessment.

The process however is costly. While RTOs have to demonstrate that they have undertaken validation activities internally, validation between RTOs is voluntary.
Further investigation and support is needed to develop external validation to its full extent as a mechanism to improve quality and consistency in assessment in Australia.

**Assessment in the online context**

A current area of great interest for VET provision is the potential of the online environment. However competency based assessment presents challenges online. Research by VEAC (Booth et al, 2003) suggests that assessment online is mainly being used for formative assessment (short answer quizzes etc) and also for submission of essays and other written assessment. There could be much wider use of the online environment for simulations of the workplace environment, emphasis on collection of portfolios of evidence and the assessment of interaction eg through online chat, bulletin boards. Learner centred assessment approaches which include peer and self assessment create further opportunities for the development and assessment of higher order skills and attributes.

There is an attraction in using the online environment to establish item banks of calibrated assessment items. However caution is needed to ensure that these tests are valid, ie that they assess what is expressed in the industry standard in an authentic environment. The assessor may find it easier and cheaper to set an online assessment that asks for an essay on wound management than an assessment which observes and questions the first aid worker in action. But will this be a valid assessment of the competency?

**So does research matter? Where to from here?**

Recent history shows the developments in assessment policy and practice in Australia have been informed very significantly by research. This trend needs to continue as further issues in assessment are explored.

RTOs are now into their second year of working to meet the new AQTF standards. There is considerable debate amongst RTOs as to the minimum requirements needed to demonstrate compliance with the standards. The research has been done and resources developed to assist assessors. However there still remains a need for extensive evaluation to determine how effective a self regulated approach is in improving providers’ commitment to quality and assessors’ understanding of the competency based assessment process.

Research is needed into the effectiveness of the AQTF. The compliance mentality that has been developing amongst providers needs testing to evaluate whether quality and consistency are being enhanced through this regulatory means.

Specific issues of concern regarding assessment for assessors and providers are:

- How can evidence collected from the workplace be graded to provide graded results?
- In the developing online learning context, how can valid online assessment be conducted where competence must be demonstrated in authentic environments?
- How can providers gain confidence in the judgement made by others and recognise the qualifications awarded by other providers?
- How far does the process of assessment validation need to go and how much will this process improve assessment quality?
- What further training do assessors require to ensure quality in assessment? (The training standards and qualifications for assessors are currently being reviewed).

There is also renewed interest in research on the pedagogy of VET and how assessment forms part of this pedagogy. Hopefully this will counter the recent trend to place too much emphasis on assessment as an end in itself rather than its place as part of learning.

The type of research that will explore these issues and support specific developments in assessment is action research that is practitioner based where the findings are easily utilised by assessors themselves in a professional development capacity.

References


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