WORKING PAPER

ASSESSMENT PRACTICES
AT
DIPLOMA/ADVANCED DIPLOMA LEVEL
WITHIN TRAINING PACKAGES

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David Foreman, John Bone, Paul Davis
Research Project Funded through NREC

1. BACKGROUND

Recent experience has shown that competency-based assessments at AQF Levels 5 and 6 are considered as being "different" from those at AQF level 4 and below. However, the differences have only been described in general or vague terms. More importantly, several trainers and assessors have expressed concerns that some assessments at these levels may involve a significant element of assessor-subjectivity.

Industrial trainers and assessors have been observed experiencing difficulties in completing assessments at AQF Levels 5 and 6, especially workplace assessments or RPL/RCC processes. They have made comments that some competencies at these levels are more difficult to observe and conceptualise, and consequentially they have difficulty developing assessment processes. This project has developed from informal attempts to quantify what assessment skills and knowledge might be required.

2. THE RESEARCH

The research consists of:
- a literature review,
- a review of Training Packages containing diplomas and advanced diplomas,
- a survey of Registered Training Organisations and their assessors,
- focus groups to review and comment on the interim findings, and
- analysis and reporting of the research.

The literature review, the scan of Training Packages containing diploma and advanced diplomas, and the survey of RTOs is complete. This report describes the interim outcomes of the literature review and survey.

3. THE LITERATURE REVIEW

This review was conducted to assist in identifying potential issues in assessments at higher levels and to aid the development of survey design.

2.1 Themes or Issues in Literature

A survey of literature has revealed a number of themes or issues in considering assessment at higher levels, i.e. Diploma, Advanced Diploma and the professions. These are:

1. The competencies may have a more complex nature, often expressed in broad terms and the less routine nature of the work.
The competencies may be related to higher levels of key or generic competencies such as project management or problem solving.

2. The workplace outcomes may vary significantly across any group of candidates or practitioners, depending on the workplace context.

The competencies used need to be inferred and may come from a wider group of competencies, i.e. not all are applied in every workplace or situational context. Further, the range of workplaces and situations in any one area of practice may be diverse.

3. The underpinning knowledge and understanding in higher level competencies plays a crucial role.

Considerable attention has been given to how underpinning knowledge is associated with competency, and how it is applied by practitioners in the workplace.

4. Attitudes, ethics, values and attributes play a crucial role in higher level competencies.

Certain higher order competencies draw on the practitioner’s attitudes, ethics and similar attributes as part of performance.

5. Competency can be viewed as a series of levels with thresholds that identify the level of competence.

The different levels may relate to different qualification levels or to novice, experienced or expert practitioners.

6. The assessor needs the ability to make complex judgements.

The complexity of the competencies, the various contexts, the extent of underpinning knowledge and the inclusion of attitudes, ethics and values as described above make the assessment decision more complex.

7. There are important issues relating to the inference of competency by the assessor.

Inference of competency at higher levels is part of the complex role of the assessor. Inferring competence has been specifically addressed in research literature.

8. Quality assurance concepts and mechanisms are involved in assessment.

With the wide variation in contexts of performance, the greater level of complexity, and the need for flexibility and fairness, it can be more difficult to demonstrate validity and reliability in higher level assessments.

9. There is a need for articulation from vocational education and training to higher education

Up to 40% of VET diploma/advanced diploma level graduates in some disciplines proceed to university undergraduate or post graduate education. As well, the universities accepting these VET graduates state they comprise up to 40% of their intake to related programs. In addition, there are many university graduates who subsequently access VET courses. There are issues in articulating between the two sectors (i.e. the competency-based VET and higher education) with
appropriate credit transfer.

10. Self assessment and peer assessment are used at these higher levels

The potential use of self and peer assessment in higher level assessments is documented in literature, but few examples are quoted.

2.2 Implications for Assessments at Higher Levels

The research literature identifies a number of policy settings and assessment approaches that will improve the quality of assessment and assessment outcomes at higher levels of competency. These approaches can be grouped as:

- Policy and resource inputs
- Assessment planning
- Assessment methods

a) Policy and Resource Inputs

Docking (1998) and Bloch (1993) suggest three priorities when establishing policies and resources:

- specify standards clearly and with adequate precision
- ensure that the assessment process is valid (i.e. relevant to the standard)
- train assessors to interpret the standards consistently

The research literature (refer Eraut (1990), Hager and Gillis (1995), Booker (1995) and Hager (1999) indicates:

- The contexts, situations and organisational structures surrounding performance are complex and important to performance,
- Not all aspects of performance are likely to be seen in all contexts,
- The organisational environment may impact on the individual’s performance.

Therefore the competency standards, especially in the Range Statement and Evidence Guide, and Assessment Guidelines need to take into account these complexities and variations between organizations and work contexts.

b) Assessment Planning

At these higher levels of qualification it is important to plan assessment processes carefully. One area of crucial planning is to utilise the additional definition within the Range Statement and Evidence Guide to adequately cover the scope of performance.

Careful construction of the evidence guide is necessary to ensure the critical evidence expands the implicit requirements of the performance criteria and range of variables such as:

- level of autonomy of work,
- initiation and origination,
- decision making,
- problem-solving,
- creativity and similar generic skills,

that are critical to the competency standard (refer Booker, 1995, Billet et al, 1999).
Also important are
- any ethics and ethical frameworks, values and attitudes critical to performance
- a clear and detailed description of underpinning knowledge and skills is required, including indicators of the depth and breadth of underpinning knowledge
- consistency of performance and context of assessment need to reflect the wide range of workplace contexts typically experienced by those working at higher levels.

c) Assessment Methods

Holistic or integrated forms of assessment are described as preferred type(s) of assessment in policy documents. The application of this approach is discussed in Booker (1995), Hager (1995), Hager and Gillis (1995) and a number of other sources.

Some literature suggests primary assessment strategies are all indirect, i.e. work samples, workplace documents, third party reports and portfolio of evidence. Supplementary assessment strategies are also listed.

Overall the range of potential methods is the same as for lower level competencies, but the mapping of the components of competency, and the development of assessment instruments is more complex. (Hager and Gillis, 1995)

Formal mapping of the components of units of competency, which are the performance criteria, underpinning knowledge and understanding, and range of contexts, against the types of evidence to be gathered would seem to be essential to ensure validity of the assessment. (Booker, 1995, Hager et al, Dickson and Bloch, 1999)

3. OUTCOMES FROM THE SURVEYS

Two separate survey documents were used to gather information from Course Coordinators and assessors involved in assessment at AQF levels 5 and 6 using the Community Services, Tourism, Engineering, Finance, Agriculture, Telecommunications, and Extractive Industry Training Packages.

At RTO or Course Coordinator level data was collected on:
- RTO requirements for assessors in terms of qualifications and experience. This relates to the competencies that assessors bring to their role.
- RTO policy and procedural arrangements for managing assessment.
- RTO activities at diploma and advanced diploma levels.

At the assessor level data was collected on:
- assessment methods being used by assessors.
- experience of assessors who respond to the survey in assessment at diploma/advanced diploma levels.
- assessors' interpretation of the competency standards.
- level of professional judgement applied by assessors, this being a measure of use of ‘gut feel’ by assessors.
- level of use of Training Package assessment guidelines.
- degree to which assessments are customised for context.
- amount of time assessors spend exploring underpinning knowledge.
in comparison to Certificate IV assessments, the assessors’ views of the level of complexity, time taken, resources required and the skills and experience required to complete higher level assessments.

3.1 The survey responses

Survey questionnaires were sent to 201 RTOs. Although all the RTOs contacted were registered on the National Training Information System (NTIS) to deliver diplomas and advanced diplomas, less than half were actually delivering training at that level. Those with no assessment experience could not, therefore participate in the survey.

Comments made by RTO contacts suggest that many do not intend to utilise their registration in the foreseeable future. A smaller number of RTOs have prepared resources but have not delivered training for unknown reasons. It is estimated that 85 of the 201 RTOs contacted are actually delivering or have delivered training at these levels. Of those a number are only delivering individual units within a qualification.

Of the 85 active RTOs, responses were received from 24 RTOs and 31 assessors. This number of responses is sufficient only to draw indicative conclusions about RTO assessment practices.

The responses came from a good mix of providers, including TAFEs, universities and private providers. The TAFEs and universities have higher volume of mainly off-the-job enrolments, while private providers generally have a lower volume of enrolments.

3.2 Course Coordinator survey

While few organisations have special policy and procedures for higher level assessments, many have implemented special assessment arrangements as seen below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assessment Arrangements</th>
<th>No answer</th>
<th>For all</th>
<th>For some</th>
<th>For none</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Special instructions for assessors at diploma/advanced diploma levels</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment tools ready for use</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific quality assurance approaches for diploma/advanced diploma levels</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use assessment panels rather than single assessor</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There are differences in the types of assessment being conducted by RTOs shown by the statistics:

- Over 70% of the respondents conducted less than 100 assessment events at higher levels in the past year.
- 20% of the respondents reported that more than 50% of their assessment events were based on RPL/RCC; the remaining 80% reported less than 20% being RPL/RCC.
- 20% of the respondents mainly conduct their assessments in collaboration with industry
(i.e. more than 80% of events), and about 70% mainly assess independently of industry
(i.e. less that 20% of events)

The course coordinators were asked about their policy on assessor qualifications and experience for
higher level assessments;

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Qualifications or experience</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assessment qualifications</td>
<td>65% of RTOs require a Certificate IV in Assessment and Workplace Training, or at least the assessment units from Certificate IV. 25% request higher teacher/training qualifications.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment experience</td>
<td>Most RTOs require some additional assessment experience, 30% state that inexperienced assessor is required to work under supervision.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industry qualifications</td>
<td>75% of RTOs specified at least the same level, one level higher or a requirement for a degree.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industry experience</td>
<td>65% of RTOs have a requirement for 2 or more years of industry experience.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

25% of the respondents said that their expansion is restricted due to the shortage of qualified assessors.

In other comments, a number reported on various difficulties with establishing assessment processes or
with conducting assessments at higher levels.

3.3 Assessors survey

There were 31 responses to the assessors’ survey. The majority of those responding had substantial
experience with 55% completing more than 50 assessments at higher levels. (Total experience in
assessment at all levels was not asked).

The assessors were asked to nominate their five most frequently used assessment methods from a list of
11 options or "other, please describe." The most frequent methods recorded were:

- projects,
- observation of work activities,
- longer written responses and
- reviews of candidates work, eg reports, calculations.

There is an apparent emphasis on performance in these methods, which is an expected outcome.

3.4 Interpretation of Competency Standards

Prior research indicated that interpretation of competency standards is seen as an issue in higher level
assessments. The assessors were asked if they considered there was ambiguity in the standards they
were using:

- 90% stated that there was some ambiguity in the standards, with 35% indicating that the
  ambiguity was substantial (i.e. affecting more than 10% of the competencies)
- The performance criteria and evidence guide were the prime sources of ambiguity.
- The assessors reported on the level of professional judgement they used in assessment
with 85% indicating that this was more than 10% of the assessment and 43% indicating more than 20% of the assessment.

These results together indicate that there are potential validity and reliability problems in assessments at diploma and advanced diploma levels.

### 3.5 Other assessment characteristics

When asked about customisation of assessment events,
- 20% of assessors do not adjust their assessments at all and another
- 63% adjust up to 30% of their assessments.

The assessment guidelines provided in the Training Packages are used often by 50% of assessors responding. About 21% do not use them at all.

There is considerable variation in the proportion of assessment time being spent on exploring underpinning knowledge, with
- 27% of assessors spending less than 20%.
- 40% spending between 20% and 40% of the assessment time on underpinning knowledge.

### 3.6 Comparison with Certificate IV assessments

The assessors who worked at Certificate IV and higher levels were asked to compare the higher level assessments with the Certificate IV.
- 65% said that the higher level assessments were significantly more complex,
- 96% said the assessments at higher level take more time,
- 64% said more skills and experience was required, and
- 72% said more resources were required.

### 4. AREAS FOR FURTHER ANALYSIS

The research team has not completed its analysis of the survey returns. It is anticipated that more useful information will come from further analysis. A series of focus groups is planned and these will be completed over the next few weeks. The data from these focus groups together with further information form interviews with key individuals from ITABS, industry, research centres and training organisations will be added to that already gathered from the literature review and survey.

The final report(s) on this research are expected to be completed in August 2001.
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