On track
Assessment validation a collaborative process

NCVER Conference, Northpoint TAFE, Brisbane
July 2002-07-08

Penny Noble and Sue Roy
Vocational Education and Assessment Centre, TAFE NSW

Introduction

This paper is to share some reflections on a journey that the researchers and participants took as part of a recent action research project, Assessment Validation in RTOs. It will outline the collaborative methodology used, provide a summary of the project and its outcomes and highlight some issues that were raised about the boundaries of research and dissemination, the pros and cons of collaborative research partnerships and the imperative of the researchers to interpret the signals along the journey and avoid derailment.

The Vocational Education and Assessment Centre (VEAC) received ANTA funding to support moves towards consistency in VET. The six month project was administered by NSW Department of Education and Training and involved over 50 RTOs from across NSW. A Resource kit (On Track: Moving towards Assessment Validation) was refined during the project and is now being disseminated and used by other RTOs so the action research cycle is continuing.

Project context

Within the Australian Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector quality and consistency of competency based assessment has become a critical issue for Registered Training Organisations (RTOs). Assessments against Training Package standards are conducted in a wide range of different contexts and for the process of mutual recognition between RTOs to work effectively there needs to be widespread confidence in assessment decisions. Under mutual recognition each State and Territory has agreed to recognise Training Packages and accredited courses and RTOs are required to recognise the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) qualifications and statements of attainment issued by other RTOs.

To date, the focus of assuring assessment quality has concentrated on developing, clarifying and regularly reviewing competency standards and the registration and audit of training providers. The Australian VET sector has relied more on self-regulation in comparison to the system in some other countries such as the United Kingdom and New Zealand which are regulated centrally. The Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF) 2001 provides RTOs with a revised set of standards they must comply with to maintain their registration as training providers. AQTF Standard 9.2 focuses specifically on the requirement for RTOs to develop appropriate strategies to validate their assessment systems and processes. AQTF standard 9.2 states:

The RTO must validate its assessment strategies 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
- documenting any action taken to improve the quality and consistency of assessment
This requirement for all RTOs to be able to demonstrate a process for assessment validation of all qualifications listed as part of their scope of registration was a new addition to the revised AQTF and there are few models of good practice in this area for RTOs to draw on when developing such strategies. Research conducted as part of the Maximising Confidence in Assessment project (NCVER, 2001)\(^2\) indicates widespread support among experienced assessors across a range of industry areas for structured assessment validation strategies. Project respondents felt that assessor confidence would be significantly increased if assessors had opportunities to participate in assessment validation activities on a regular basis.

Given the shortage of material and specific case studies relating to assessment validation available for RTOs, this project aimed to support groups of NSW RTOs from different sectors in identifying and piloting assessment validation strategies relevant to their specific assessment context. The project documented their experience and materials were developed that other RTOs could adopt when establishing their own validation strategies.

**Research questions**

The initial question, what strategies are RTOs using to validate their assessment? was expanded to include:

- What are the issues involved for RTOs in selecting appropriate assessment validation strategies and implementing them?

- What are the benefits of external assessment validation and what are some of the issues involved in setting up external validation in specific industry areas?

Some of the areas explored in answering these questions included:

- the support required to implement assessment validation
- useful activities to increase the skills of “qualified “ assessors
- understanding of the terminology – validation vs. moderation
- engaging assessors who work in different contexts (curriculum model vs. evidence based assessment) in meaningful dialogue about specific assessments
- issues relating to mutual recognition
- validating the learning and assessment processes.

**Methodology overview**

Action research is described as:

>a form of collective self reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own social or educational practices as well as their understanding of these practices and the situations in which these practices are carried out. The participants can be any group sharing a concern, and it is a collaborative process. It involves those responsible for action in improving it, widening the collaborative group from those most

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\(^1\) AQTF Standards for RTOs- ANTA website: www.anta.gov.au

directly involved to as many as possible of those affected by the practices concerned. Action research typically arises from clarification of concerns.  

The concerns in this instance focussed on the need for all RTOs to be able to demonstrate an assessment validation process and the lack of existing models to draw on. The project was planned so that the researchers and representatives from a range of RTOs all grappling with this issue could act and observe individually or collectively and reflect together and in doing so improve their own practice. The model of “professional conversation” (Deveraux 1997) described by Maxwell (2001) was used as the vehicle for sharing information and working collaboratively in the various validation meetings that were used for both collecting, refining and disseminating information about the assessment process during the project.

The emphasis in both phases of the project was on practitioners as co-researchers. The project team recognised that there was not one definitive method of assessment validation appropriate for all pilot RTOs but rather RTOs were provided with background material and resources that could be adapted to their particular assessment context. The project team took on the role of lead assessors and encouraged facilitators to work collaboratively with the assessors and managers in their RTO to trial selected activities and explore what strategies would work best in their context. Reflection by both researchers/facilitators and participants in pilot activities helped the RTO determine the most appropriate assessment validation strategy to adopt.

Project snapshot

Participants: 55 NSW RTOs participated in the project.
Timeframe: October 2001 – March 2002

As the AQTF specifies that an RTO’s assessment validation strategy may be internal, involving a range staff from within the RTO, or external, involving other RTOs or stakeholders such as industry training advisory bodies (ITABs), the project piloted both internal and external validation activities.

Selection of participating RTOs

Analysis of data about the ratio of RTOs from each of the sub sectors within the NSW VET sector informed the range of RTOs to be involved in the project. RTOs including TAFE, the community, VET in schools and private sectors were represented and the selection process involved advertising widely for RTOs interested in the internal validation phase of the project. RTOs represented the full range of assessment contexts within the VET sector: rural and metropolitan, enterprises, small RTOs with narrow scope of registration and very large RTOs with very broad scope and geographic spread.

A selection panel including a member of the research team and members of the project’s reference group chose the RTOs to be included in the project based on data provided through a questionnaire to determine:

- why the RTO wanted to be involved
- their level of understanding about assessment validation and its value to the RTO
- which of the two pilot groups the RTO was interested in joining.

Selection of RTOs to participate in the external validation phase of the project was done collaboratively with the relevant NSW state ITAB. The three industry areas, Hospitality Operations, Frontline Management and Aged Care Work were selected for external validation as they were delivered in a wide

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4 Maxwell GS (2001) Moderation of Assessments in Vocational Education and Training, University of Queensland
range of contexts by a range of RTOs from different sectors and each had particular features which could provide challenges for consistency of assessment across sectors.

**Phase 1 - Internal Validation**

Pilot RTOs were allocated to one of two groups depending on whether they elected to pilot an assessment validation strategy that involved meetings of their assessors (group 2) or whether they selected another strategy more appropriate for their assessment context (group 1). Some of the strategies piloted by group 1 RTOs included establishing an assessment team or panel, appointing a lead assessor, benchmarking with another RTO or establishing a mentoring program for assessors. Many of the RTOs involved in the pilot selected a combination of different strategies.

The following diagrams provide a summary of project activities for the two groups undertaking internal validation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group 1</th>
<th>Group 2</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Validation using range of different strategies</strong></td>
<td><strong>Validation through meetings of assessors</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Initial contact by researchers. RTO facilitator provided with background reading and project resources</td>
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<tr>
<td>Structured interview with RTO facilitator and manager to determine RTOs assessment context and validation needs. Develop action plan</td>
<td>Facilitator workshop for all RTOs in group to provide information about validation, model possible validation activities and develop action plans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researchers provide assistance to RTO in trialling validation activities (included conducting workshops, information sessions, developing materials or providing advice)</td>
<td>Facilitators meet with RTO managers to finalise action plan</td>
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<tr>
<td>Facilitator and assessors in RTO trial validation strategies</td>
<td>Facilitators conduct assessment validation meetings in RTO using project materials. Project team provide ongoing assistance to pilot groups</td>
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<tr>
<td>Facilitators attend project feedback day to share and reflect on experiences</td>
<td>Researchers document pilot processes and finalise “On Track” project materials</td>
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Final version of “On Track” published and disseminated to all participants and widely in VET sector. Series of assessor network meetings - selected speakers from the project invited to provide feedback and identify implementation issues for other RTOs/assessors.

**Phase 2 - External validation**

The second phase of the project involved conducting in collaboration with the relevant ITAB a series of assessment validation meetings with representatives from different RTOs who were all assessing the same competencies within the same Training Package but often in different contexts. The three industry areas selected for these external validation meetings were:
- Tourism and Hospitality – Certificate in II Hospitality Operations
- Business Services - Frontline Management
- Community Services and Health – Certificate III in Aged Care Work.
The researchers convened the meetings and acted as facilitators of the three external validation groups but meeting content including which standards should be the focus of discussion and the rules for operating were decided on collaboratively by the group.

A number of RTOs who had been part of the pilot of internal validation activities joined one of the three industry groups in the external phase of the project. These RTOs were able to contribute effectively to the external group and draw on the experience they had previously gained.

### External validation phase

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Initial contact by researchers with:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• ITABs: (for nomination of 3 Industry areas, suggestions of RTOs to include and suggested qualifications to target)</td>
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<tr>
<td>• TAFE NSW Divisions (for suggestions of individual TAFE Colleges to include)</td>
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<tr>
<td>• RTO participants who were provided with background readings, project resources and outline of suggested dates</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Meeting one</th>
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<tr>
<td>Workshop for each (3) industry group to provide information about validation, set group limits, select unit of competency to validate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants source and contribute assessment items and materials for use for meeting two</td>
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<tr>
<th>Meeting two</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Researchers and participants - assessment validation activities</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participants source and contribute assessment items and materials for use for meeting three</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Meeting three</th>
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<tr>
<td>Discussion, activities as nominated by individual groups. Evaluation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dissemination of information by RTO participants (informal/ formal process) in own workplace. Facilitation of assessment validation meetings using project materials or dissemination of information to other assessors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research team incorporate project findings and feedback from participants into “On Track”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final version of “On Track” published and disseminated to all participants and widely in VET sector. Series of assessor network meetings - selected speakers from the project invited to provide feedback and identify implementation issues for other RTOs/ assessors.</td>
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### Gathering and analysis of the research data

Data collection occurred through structured interviews with participants, a questionnaire (RTO feedback report) and information collected through meetings with participants and assessment validation activities. Specific data was collected also by questionnaire about the relevance of the original project materials and how they had been modified or customised by RTOs. Feedback on the materials and suggestions for additional material was incorporated into the final “On Track” product.

The facilitation of validation meetings was a crucial role for the researchers but having two researchers engaged in the project allowed for one person to be in the role of participant or observer and record significant information during project meetings.
Some key project outcomes

- Core group of 55 VET sector assessors gained "hands on" experience in facilitating assessment validation meetings or activities.
  Feedback from these assessors included responses such as: "program beneficial and impacted enormously on the way I think about assessment generally" and "excellent activities involved and gave participants the opportunity to share thoughts and ideas." Project participants and researchers learnt from each other throughout the process and enriched the research.

- A broadening of knowledge across the NSW VET sector about assessment validation. Over 550 VET sector assessors have attended information sessions or workshops about assessment validation and the new AQTF requirements and many of these assessors have gone on to work with colleagues on specific assessment validation activities. Project participants became disseminators of the research and in many cases have continued the action research cycle by undertaking a similar process in their own RTO.

- Examples of which validation activities worked best for different types of RTOs.
  How RTOs included in the project dealt with issues such as geographic isolation, lack of resources, part-time teachers etc. were identified through the project. A set of materials can be accessed and used by other RTOs or groups of assessors establishing an assessment validation strategy. This information is addressing the immediate need of RTOs grappling with how best to address the AQTF requirements relating to assessment.

- Three industry assessor networks established for external assessment validation. Information about the issues involved in establishing and maintaining such networks is available to others. Over 95% of the participants in external validation groups nominated that they would be interested in continuing their involvement in such activities but resource issues preclude ongoing activities. Ongoing resourcing of such networks in NSW has become more difficult with the withdrawal of funding to state ITABs.

Researchers reflections (and avoidance of derailments)

Collaboration Vs confidentiality
During the project researchers and RTO participants worked collaboratively and shared information. Because of the open training market some of this information cannot be shared more widely. Particular groups established ground rules about use and dissemination of material used in meetings. As researchers we needed to respect confidentiality but still be able to provide enough information about the process to benefit other RTOs.

Assessors as experts
When assessors are provided with opportunities to interact with each other as part of a validation process they have increased confidence in their professional judgement and can provide support to each other. With the current devolved approach to assessment within the Australian vocational education sector many assessors have very few opportunities to work professionally with each other. We found that we could not assume that assessors with Certificate IV in Assessment and Workplace Training all had a common understanding about assessment or a shared set of skills. Assessors involved in the project had varying levels of skill and expertise but the process provided them with an opportunity to learn from each other.

Meetings, meetings, meetings
The majority of pilot groups participating in the project included at least one face to face meeting of assessors so that there was shared understanding of the process and a climate of trust was developed.
Even if the RTO established a benchmarking process, an assessment panel or another validation strategy rather than meetings of assessors it was still important to convene an initial meeting to agree on the process. Once assessors had contact, established a set of rules for operating and understood why the process was necessary it was easier to use other forms of technology to continue to “meet” more cost effectively.

**Systems approach**

It is important that the RTOs assessment validation strategy is supported and resourced by management and that it forms part of the organisation’s overall quality system. Many of the other AQTF standards relating to quality delivery and assessment can be met by establishing an assessment validation strategy. Participating RTOs who embedded the process into their organisation’s systems were able to extend the process more broadly into other sections of their RTO.

**External assessment validation – a positive process but whose responsibility is it?**

Whether an external validation process is established for a group of RTOs within an industry or geographic area or is established for organisations with a shared affiliation eg a group of similar community based RTOs, the process needs to be driven by someone and it is a laborious process to initiate. There were benefits gained from the professional exchange that occurred through external validation but the questions of how to fund, initiate and maintain such groups need to be addressed. For small RTOs external validation is a vital quality process.

**Facilitators are integral to the process**

One of the challenges of both phases of the project was identifying suitable RTO facilitators. RTOs were encouraged to select a facilitator who was a practising assessor but who could act as a catalyst for change within other areas within the RTO. Representatives needed to be skilled facilitators as assessment validation activities are often perceived as threatening by assessors. Facilitators need to develop a climate of trust among assessors so that meaningful dialogue about particular assessment activities can take place. Facilitators also need to be adequately resourced and supported by the RTO management.

**Can assessment validation ensure consistency or does it just feel good?**

This project has only scratched the surface in terms of ensuring assessment consistency. Many of the RTOs involved in the project have gone on to extend the process more widely in their RTO and others are at a junction point trying to determine which direction to go in next. The major learning of participants was the nexus between quality and compliance. Meeting the AQTF requirements for assessment validation is an immediate issue but many RTO’s realised the potential of ongoing assessment validation in ensuring the quality of their organisation’s assessment system.

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i. AQTF Standards for RTOs- ANTA website: www.anta.gov.au


v. Maxwell GS (2001) Moderation of Assessments in Vocational Education and Training, University of Queensland (commissioned by the Queensland Department of Employment and Training)