issues impacting on the quality of assessment in vocational education & training in Queensland

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Acknowledgement

Special thanks goes to all of those people who so willingly and openly contributed in the interviews conducted during this study.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Purpose of the study

Specifically, this report has two main purposes:

1. To identify the major issues, practices and changes impacting on the quality of the assessment of training in Queensland; and
2. To recommend ways in which assessment practices and approaches may be improved.

A definition of assessment

Assessment generally is viewed as the process of appraising the current level of performance or achievement of an individual or group of individuals relative to a set of defined standards or performance criteria. The focus of assessment is on collecting, analysing, and reporting information about what the person in training can do and is capable of doing. An essential purpose of assessment is to make judgments about the quality of the outcomes from the process of training.

Criteria for determining the quality of assessment

For the purposes of this report, the ‘quality’ of the assessment processes used in VET in Queensland, whether at a system or individual assessor level, is judged by the extent to which the processes meet four primary criteria: validity - the extent to which the assessment measures, and is seen to measure, what it is intended to measure; consistency - the extent to which the assessment processes produce compatible outcomes for persons undertaking the same content and level of training irrespective of when, where or how the assessment occurs; usefulness - the extent to which the outcomes of the assessment process are of benefit to, and meet the needs of, the intended users of the assessment information; and cost effectiveness - the extent to which the assessment process is valid, consistent and useful without being overly expensive, either in time or money, to the assessor or system.

Research methodology

The research design used for this study involved four main steps: a review of relevant documentation; interviews with a random sample of 191 individuals directly involved with the assessment of training in Queensland; analysis of the information gained from the interviews and document review in order to identify the key issues; and presentation of the proposed issues to key practitioner groups for validation.
Major issues

Among the major issues raised by interviewees were:

1. **The capacity of employers to conduct assessment effectively**

   Considerable variability was both reported and observed in the capacity of employers to make valid judgments about whether the persons in training at their worksite had satisfactorily achieved prescribed competency outcomes. The major concern is not so much the capacity of employers to collect evidence but rather their capacity to *analyse and interpret* the evidence in order to arrive at a fair and valid assessment of the person in training.

2. **The level of commitment of employers to participate in assessment**

   There is a large number of employers across the state who participate in every possible way to ensure that quality training and assessment occurs at their workplace. There is, however, also a large and reportedly expanding number of employers who are becoming more and more resistant to participation in workplace assessment of persons in training.

3. **Variable expectations by employers of persons in training**

   A consistent concern expressed by trainers and Group Training Scheme officers is that many employers have unreasonable and/or unrealistic expectations of what is a reasonable level of performance for persons in training.

4. **Repeat assessments by Registered Training Organisations (RTOs)**

   Several cases were reported by trainees, apprentices, Group Training Schemes and RTOs of assessments that had already been undertaken or ‘signed off’ by employers being repeated by the RTO, allegedly because of a lack of confidence in the assessment that was undertaken by the employer.

5. **The expertise of RTOs and dedicated workplace assessors in assessment**

   There was a pervasive and deep concern among those interviewed regarding the level of relevant expertise in the actual processes of assessment of many of the people conducting the assessment of training in Queensland. Major contributing factors are seen to be:

   - “pre-service” training programs, both in the VET and university sectors, generally lack sufficient emphasis on the actual *process* of assessment;
   - many assessors are trying to apply “old” approaches to assessment (often based on what they experienced as an apprentice or student) to the “new” training environment;
   - inadequate and/or inappropriate professional development;
   - VET assessor training frequently is conducted by people who have no expertise in assessment beyond the level of the course they are conducting, or in some cases, by persons who are themselves still completing the program;
instructors do not actually have to hold a qualification in training or assessment, only to be enrolled in one. Persons ‘in training’ as trainers/assessors frequently conduct their instruction and assessment without any supervision;

the VET system does little to disseminate ‘good practice’ about how to assess;

there is no satisfactory ‘educational’ reference point in the system for assessors seeking ideas about how best to actually undertake particular assessments; and

there is no effective quality control mechanism to ensure the initial and on-going ‘educational’ standards of the individuals involved in training and/or assessment.

6. The commitment of trainers and assessors to conduct quality assessment

Most people interviewed cited several instances in which they had seen or been told about assessment processes that could at best be described as unprofessional and intentionally inadequate.

7. Empathy with and understanding of student learning and assessment difficulties

A significant proportion of trainers/assessors lack the ‘educational’ knowledge, expertise and strategies to effectively train and/or assess students who have inadequate language, literacy, numeracy and general learning skills, or poorly developed work-related competencies (such as effective interpersonal and problem-solving abilities) and personal qualities (such as confidence and self-esteem). Further, a very significant percentage of trainers/assessors are seen to lack the understanding, expertise and strategies necessary to cope effectively with the training and assessment of persons with a disability or those of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

8. An excessive emphasis on summative assessment

The view is that both the quality and quantity of the delivery of training is being significantly undermined by what is considered to be an excessive amount of time, effort and money being devoted by many trainers to summative assessment. Indeed, it was alleged - particularly by trainees and apprentices - that many trainers spend much more time assessing than they do on training.

9. Assessment of RPL

There is a widespread perception that the processes generally undertaken for recognition of prior learning (RPL) are excessively detailed (to the point of being pedantic), time-consuming and costly. Reportedly, current assessment processes frequently are a disincentive to persons to seek advanced standing through RPL, either because of their complexity (which, it is alleged, ‘frightens’ many people, particularly those with little self-confidence) or because the time, cost and effort involved make actually enrolling to undertake the training a more viable option. The pervasive belief is that RPL should be a service to persons who already have accumulated significant knowledge and expertise in their particular industry area, and therefore should focus on confirming rather than comprehensively testing that knowledge and expertise.
10. Assessment for Skills Recognition

Many persons applying for skills recognition are viewed as being highly skilled in their trade but lack the educational background and experience to cope with formal, highly structured testing processes. As a consequence, it is alleged that some extremely competent and effective workers may be excluded from maximizing their contribution to the workforce (and to their own career pathway) either because they ‘freeze up’ under assessment conditions or because they are ‘frightened off’ seeking an assessment at all.

11. “Grading” of competency-based assessment (CBA)

Of the 191 people formally interviewed for this report, only seven indicated that they supported a “non-graded” CBT system. The belief is, however, that the lack of “grades” or “performance levels” for those people who have been assessed as ‘competent’ provides little incentive for students to strive for excellence because there is no recognition of their attainment, and provides little incentive for trainers to strive for excellence because there is none of the ‘kudos’ and ‘personal satisfaction’ attached to knowing just how well their students have gone in comparison to others undertaking the same program. Further, a major reason for perceptions of ‘inconsistent assessment’ is the significant and visible difference in capacity and performance among people who have all - legitimately - been assessed as ‘competent’.

12. Training Packages

The pervasive view among the trainers interviewed was that Training Packages are, in fact, Assessment Packages in that their focus generally is not on how to structure and deliver training but rather on what, how and where to assess. The deep concern expressed was that these “Assessment Packages” are then used by many providers as ‘the syllabus’, such that they teach nothing more or less than what is needed to meet the assessment requirements in the Training Packages. Consequently, in the view of many, training is simply becoming the imparting of ‘just sufficient’ knowledge and skill to meet the assessment requirements of the Training Packages. Many providers also expressed the view that while the Training Packages are very detailed in terms of what to assess and what evidence to look for, they are often very limited in detail about how best to actually collect and evaluate assessment information.

13. DETIR audit process

Several people interviewed raised concerns about perceived limitations in the audit process being used by DETIR to monitor the quality of training and assessment. In particular, it was alleged that the audits have an excessive focus on satisfactory completion of paperwork and other physical evidence rather than on observational evaluation of the actual processes and practices used and the outcomes achieved.
14. Contribution of Industry Training Advisory Bodies (ITABs)

It is believed that ITABs can and should play a significant role in ensuring quality outcomes from training and in supporting effective assessment processes. The performance of ITABs in these roles, however, is considered to be highly variable, with the contribution of some ITABs in certain circumstances actually considered to be quite dysfunctional. In particular, some ITAB representatives were seen to pay scant regard to the needs and opinions of employers outside the South-East corner of the state.

15. Impact of language and literacy levels on assessment

Several people interviewed raised significant concerns about the impact of a student’s language and literacy level on assessment judgments. The extensive use of written tests/examinations for assessing underpinning knowledge and skills, for example, was seen to significantly disadvantage those with literacy difficulties, particularly those in equity groups.

16. Lack of funding for assessment

Most trainers/assessors expressed the view that there is insufficient funding to undertake assessment activities with the level of quality they would like. This view was particularly expressed by regional and rural trainers/assessors who complained about the costs associated with frequent travel to remote sites.

General observations about the assessment system

1. There is an excessive focus on summative assessment

Assessment does not, of itself, deliver a quality outcome. Essentially, assessment confirms whether a quality outcome, relative to defined assessment criteria, has been achieved and gives guidance to students and trainers as to where improvements need to be made.

The evidence suggests that many providers have significantly moved the emphasis - in time, effort and money - away from delivering quality training and onto assessment in the belief that this will somehow improve the quality of the training outcome.

The major driver of this escalating focus on assessment appears to be the Training Packages which explicitly highlight assessment issues, performance criteria and assessment evidence guides, but say very little about the learning processes required to take the student to the point of assessment. This conveys an implicit message that ‘assessment is all that really matters’ - a message that clearly is being heard by many trainers. Indeed, the assessment-related elements of the Training Packages have emerged as de facto syllabuses for many trainers whose training plans are explicitly directed at meeting the listed assessment requirements - no more and no less. Much of this problem, it appears, arises from the use of the
name ‘Training Package’, which implies a comprehensive set of materials for the delivery of training when in fact these ‘packages’, in simple terms, were primarily meant to convey industry standards, and performance indicators for assisting assessors to determine whether those standards have been met. In this sense, ‘Training Packages’ also were never meant to provide a comprehensive framework for the conducting of assessment. The problem, of course, is that complementary processes for providing trainers and assessors with the understanding and skills necessary to implement the packages effectively have not been an obvious component of the training system, at least to this time.

2. There is an emphasis on the quantity, rather than quality, of evidence collected for assessment

Quality assessment involves collecting sufficient evidence from a sufficient variety of sources in order to make a confident professional judgment regarding competence. It is common practice across Queensland, however, for trainers/assessors to collect as much evidence as possible before determining that a student has attained competency. In other words, it appears that the current emphasis generally is on the quantity, rather than the quality, of evidence collected.

There are three major consequences of an excessive focus on quantity of assessment:

a) students are being subjected to far more assessment than generally is necessary to confirm the attainment of outcomes;
b) the cost of conducting assessment, both in terms of time and money, is much higher than is necessary; and
c) students receive less training and so are less likely to achieve quality outcomes.

3. The system is operating on the basis of a number of unsustainable assumptions

First, much of the current training agenda is based on the assumption that employers have the commitment and expertise to conduct quality workplace assessments. The evidence suggests that this assumption does not hold consistently across the state.

Second, the current training agenda is based on the assumption that trainers/assessors across the state have the commitment and expertise to conduct quality assessments. There is compelling evidence to suggest that this assumption can not be sustained. The situation is further exacerbated by the failure of the training system to identify and disseminate ‘good practice’ approaches to assessment in the ‘new’ training environment, such that many experienced and committed trainers/assessors are struggling in the attempt to match ‘old agenda’ institution-based approaches to assessment to the new flexible, workplace-based training environment.

Third, there is an assumption among many of those administering the current training agenda that the philosophy, policies and details of the system are known and understood by those people ‘in the field’ who are responsible for implementing the agenda. Again, the evidence suggests that this assumption can not be sustained in practice. Trainers/assessors are interpreting a range of agendas,
policies and procedures in what at times are quite fundamentally different ways, resulting in a significant impact on both the validity and consistency of assessment practices and outcomes across the state.

Fourth, the ‘logic’ of the system seems to be based on the fallacious and somewhat simplistic assumption that a rigorous process of assessment will ensure the quality of the outcomes from training. Quality training outcomes depend upon quality assessment practices and quality learning processes and quality learning environments (both work-based and institutional) and quality learning resources and quality employer/industry support and quality training policies and quality support systems/personnel/materials and quality instructor training/staff development and quality research information. The training system is unlikely to maximise the quality of outcomes for individuals, employers, industries or the country unless and until the critical importance of all of these factors is acknowledged and promoted.

4. There is a lack of quality educational support for trainers/assessors

The implementation strategies for the introduction, modification and refinement of training and assessment practices in Australia over the last decade have been expansive in information about what has to be done by trainers, assessors and employers to comply with system processes and objectives. There has, however, been a dearth of practical strategies, procedures and support structures for assisting quality implementation ‘where the rubber meets the ground’, at the point where the delivery and assessment of training occurs. In simple terms, trainers/assessors have not been given quality help in terms of how to deliver quality training and to undertake quality assessment. They have been told what to do, not how to do it.

Further, the issue of an “educational reference point” for the system, which was frequently raised during the interviews, would seem of critical importance in promoting quality training and assessment.

5. There has been a significant decline in the use of formative assessment processes by trainers

Formative assessment refers to constructive feedback given to the person in training while they are actually undergoing training so as to effect improvement. Formative assessment amends incorrect, inappropriate or inadequate performance before it has become entrenched into practice. It is, therefore, a crucial pillar of effective and efficient instruction, and a major catalyst for quality outcomes. Further, effective use of formative assessment significantly reduces the need for a comprehensive program of summative assessment because assessment information has been collected progressively during the training program. The evidence, however, suggests that formative assessment is no longer a dominant feature of the system, although a number of trainers are still using it and to great effect.
6. Assessment approaches frequently do not reflect the changed environment for training

Recent changes in training philosophies and policies have driven a much more flexible and responsive approach to the delivery of training, particularly with respect to location, timing and delivery modes. There appear to be relatively few examples, however, of assessment approaches and methods being developed to match the changed training environment. What appears to be happening in general is that trainers/assessors are ‘force fitting’ the way that they used to assess in the ‘old’ institution-centred training environment into the new highly-flexible work-based training environment. Only in a few locations did this study find trainers/assessors who took an holistic approach to assessment by using a comprehensive range of methods and approaches in order to arrive at the most appropriate and cost effective ‘assessment package’ for confirming competency for each person in training.

7. There are compelling arguments in support of the adoption at the system level of ‘graded’ competency-based assessment

It appears highly likely that the lack of some form of system-endorsed ‘grading’ for competency-based assessment is a major disincentive to students and instructors alike to strive for excellence in training. There also is no doubt that it is promoting the perception of inconsistent assessment practices in the minds of industry and the public because of the very obvious differences in performance among trainees and apprentices who have been given the same single assessment - ‘competent’.

There are compelling reasons for DETIR to investigate the introduction at the system level of a mechanism for assessing and moderating ‘performance levels’ for persons who can show that they have achieved competence in their program of training. First, ‘performance level’ assessment would improve both the validity and consistency of the assessments taking place because it would compel assessors to analyse learner performance with much greater care and scrutiny than is necessary in the current ‘two criteria’ system. Second, ‘performance levels’ would considerably improve the public perception of assessment validity and consistency by reporting on the obvious differences in knowledge and skill among persons who have been assessed as competent. Third, ‘performance levels’ would provide much more useful information to employers seeking to make valid decisions regarding employment and promotion. Fourth, ‘performance levels’ would provide much more useful information to the persons undertaking training about their performance level, and clearly would be a significant motivator for many to strive for excellence. Fifth, ‘performance levels’ - supported by an effective but not overly intrusive moderation system - would provide benchmarks that trainers/assessors could use to monitor and improve their own performance. Sixth, an increasing number of providers is doing it anyway, in very different ways with very different levels of quality control, and many employers and universities are using those ratings as a measure of the relative quality of candidates, which increasingly will disadvantage persons being assessed by assessors who are not ascribing ‘grades’ (that is, persons from RTOs whose best possible assessment is ‘competent’ are increasingly being compared with persons from RTOs who provide two or more ‘higher’ levels of attainment - for whom ‘competent’ is the lowest successful assessment outcome). Conceptually, competency-based training and assessment
appear to be strongly supported across the training system in Queensland. Nevertheless, most people interviewed were of the view that a system for “grading” *those persons who had already demonstrated competency* would significantly improve the outcomes of the concept without sacrificing its basic rationale.

**Conclusion**

The information and insights derived through this study strongly suggest that, while there is a great deal of assessment activity taking place in VET in Queensland, there is significant scope to improve the actual quality of that assessment in terms of validity, consistency, usefulness and cost-effectiveness. The reality is that while there is a significant number of trainers/assessors providing a quality assessment service to both industry and persons in training, there also is a significant number of trainers/assessors whose training and/or assessment practices (but not necessarily their efforts) are not supportive of a quality assessment system.
1. Purpose of the study

The last decade has seen pervasive and fundamental changes to the processes of training in Australia. The introduction of competency based training (CBT), for example, and the attendant drive for demonstration of competency in the workplace has moved the system from a time- and institution-based paradigm in which curriculum was primarily determined by providers, to an outcomes- and work-based paradigm in which the curriculum is primarily determined by industry\(^1\). Further, the introduction of a competitive training agenda, and in particular the almost full implementation of User Choice in Queensland from 1 January 1998, has driven much greater responsiveness by training providers with respect to the modes, locations, and times of training delivery\(^2\).

An essential purpose of assessment is to make judgments about the quality of the outcomes from the process of training. In this regard, the significant changes that have occurred in the nature of training suggest that significant changes should also have occurred in the nature of assessment. For example, under the old institution-based training environment, assessment largely focussed on institution-based written and practical tests that were scheduled for specific times during the year. Under the current training environment, a considerable amount of assessment is required to be conducted in the workplace in ways and at times that are negotiated with both the employer and the person in training.

Essentially, this exploratory study investigates how successful current assessment practices are in supporting the new training environment. Its focus is on providing insights into the nature and quality of the assessment processes and practices that currently characterise the training system in Queensland.

Specifically, this report has two main purposes:

1. To identify the major issues, practices and changes impacting on the quality of the assessment of training in Queensland; and
2. To recommend ways in which assessment practices and approaches may be improved.

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2. A definition of ‘assessment’

Assessment generally is viewed as the process of appraising the current level of performance or achievement of an individual or group of individuals relative to a set of defined standards or performance criteria.

The focus of assessment is on collecting, analysing, and reporting information about what the person in training can do and is capable of doing. Assessment, therefore, is not the same as testing, because testing is just one of the methods that can contribute to a valid assessment. Other methods include observations, employer feedback, and evaluation of prior work experience, live projects, student self-assessments, and student discussions.

Methods of assessment may be classified on the basis of where, when, how and by whom the assessment occurs. The major methods of assessment used in training include:

- **On-the-job assessment.** This refers to any assessment of performance in an actual workplace situation. Paul Hager suggests that there are four crucial features that “characterise the complexity and uniqueness of actual workplace performance” and that therefore distinguish on-the-job assessment: the physical surroundings of an actual workplace; the time demands of an actual workplace; the rewards and incentives of an actual workplace; and the assessment of performance as a part of a candidate’s job.

- **Off-the-job assessment.** This refers to any assessment of performance in a situation which, even though it may replicate or simulate an actual workplace, lacks some of the crucial features that characterise actual workplace conditions. It is critical to note that an off-the-job assessment can take place at the worksite. It is not *where* the assessment takes place that is critical, but rather the *conditions* under which the assessment is made.

- **Summative assessment.** This is assessment conducted at the completion of a program of training or unit of competency, and which focuses on whether the defined outcomes of training have been achieved. Michael Scriven argues that another defining characteristic of summative assessment is that it is primarily conducted for the benefit of some external audience or decision maker, rather than primarily for the benefit of the person or persons under training.

4. Hager, p.89.
5. Hager, p.90.
Formative assessment. This is assessment made during the program of training for the purpose of giving constructive feedback to the person in training so as to effect improvement. In this sense, formative assessment can be argued to be one of the crucial pillars of effective instruction. Formative assessment seeks to amend incorrect, inappropriate or inadequate performance before it has become entrenched into practice. Alternatively, formative assessment seeks to encourage the pursuit of excellence by reinforcing good performance as it is happening.

To paraphrase Bob Stake\(^7\), when the cook tastes the soup and gives feedback to the apprentice about how good it is and how it can be improved, that’s formative assessment; when the customer tastes the soup and decides how it compares with food at other restaurants, that’s summative assessment.

Employer assessment. This is when a training provider negotiates with an employer to undertake some or all of the assessment processes for the trainer. Generally, this situation applies when all or a significant component of the training and assessment occurs at the workplace and, in particular, on-the-job.

Student self-assessment. This is assessment totally or primarily conducted by the person undertaking the training, generally to provide self-feedback on their progress. Student self-assessments usually take the form of self-marked short ‘revision tests’ at the completion of sections of learning. They are primarily used to test underpinning knowledge and skills, and are most common in self-paced learning materials and at the end of chapters or sections in textbooks or workbooks. Student self-assessments rarely contribute to final judgments about the attainment of competencies.

Recognition of prior learning. This is an assessment, made for the purpose of providing advance standing into a training program or against a qualification, of what a person knows and can do relative to the specified learning outcomes of the program (which includes the assessment of competencies against relevant competency standards). The rationale is that people should not have to “re-learn” knowledge or skills that they can reliably demonstrate that they already have acquired, whether it be through work, other study, or their life’s experiences.

Skills recognition. Recognition, in the form of a certificate issued by the State Training Council, of work or training previously performed or undertaken.

Holistic assessment. This is an assessment based on the assessor’s overall impression formed from multiple indicators of performance; in simple terms, a professional judgment made after taking a wide range of available evidence into account.

Because holistic assessment focuses on the performance of the overall task rather than on performance on the individual elements that make up the task, it is a very time-efficient approach.

\(^7\) Cited in Scriven, p.169.
While its detractors have criticised its “lack of rigour”, Professor Michael Scriven provides evidence to show that, providing the assessor is appropriately trained and experienced, holistic assessment is often significantly more accurate than more ‘controlled’ and ‘time-intensive’ approaches.

Assessment methods are not mutually exclusive; that is, an assessor may employ any combination of the methods, or may incorporate elements of all of them. For example, an assessment program can easily be constructed utilising both formative and summative assessments, conducted both on-the-job and off-the-job, and with the assessments being made at times by the trainer and at times by the employer.

8. Scriven, p.177.
3. **Criteria for determining the quality of assessment**

For the purposes of this report, the 'quality' of the assessment processes used in VET in Queensland, whether at a system or individual assessor level, are judged by the extent to which they meet four primary criteria:

1. **Validity** — the extent to which the assessment measures, and is seen to measure, what it is intended to measure. The issues here relate to the rigour, sufficiency, and relevance of the assessment processes. The assessor or assessors must ensure that they have collected sufficient information from a sufficient number of sources in a sufficiently rigorous manner in order to draw defensible conclusions about the performance of the person or persons under training. Further, the information collected, as well as the information analysed, must be relevant to the performance outcomes being assessed.

2. **Consistency** — the extent to which the assessment processes produce compatible outcomes for persons undertaking the same content and level of training irrespective of when, where or how the assessment occurs. In essence, this addresses the issue that a person assessed as being competent at, say, Level II in hospitality at Cairns should be able to be shown to have met the same standards as someone assessed as being competent at Level II in Hospitality at Toowoomba or Brisbane. It also addresses the issue of individual assessors being consistent across time and across locations in the way they make assessment judgments.

3. **Usefulness** — the extent to which the outcomes of the assessment process are of benefit to, and meet the needs of, the intended users of the assessment information. This introduces the notion of multiple audiences. Business, industry, individual employers, training organisations, other tertiary institutions, and the persons under training are all primary users of assessment information. A quality assessment process produces information that is of significant benefit to all, not just some, of these audiences.

4. **Cost effectiveness** — the extent to which the assessment process is valid, consistent and useful without being overly expensive to the assessor or system. The 'cost' of assessment needs to be judged not just in terms of money, but also in terms of time. The time taken for assessment generally is at the expense of time available for training. Consequently, it is important that an assessment system is not so rigorous and comprehensive that it negatively intrudes on the time needed for effective training.

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9. This term is used throughout the document instead of the more technical term 'reliability' because it more clearly conveys the concept under investigation.
4. Methodology

The research design used for this study involved four main steps:

1. **A review of relevant documentation**, including:
   - the National Assessment Principles endorsed by the Ministerial Council of the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) on 22 May 1998;
   - the Assessment Guidelines contained in the ANTA publication *Updated Guidelines for Training Package Developers*;
   - the *National Standards for Training Delivery* in the Australian Recognition Framework (ARF);
   - the *Human Resource Standard for the Vocational Education and Training System in Queensland*;
   - a random sample of training packages from across several industry areas;
   - system level policy and information documents;
   - various documentation developed at the provider/assessor level; and
   - published articles and papers by trainers and university academics.

2. **Interviews with a random sample of individuals directly involved with the assessment of training in Queensland** in order to gain their perceptions of the nature and quality of assessment occurring in the state, as well as ways in which the quality of VET assessment might be improved. Altogether, 191 interviews were conducted with:
   - 52 staff and administrators at 6 TAFE Queensland Institutes, including CAIL (the Centre for the Advancement of Innovative Learning at the Wide Bay Institute of TAFE);
   - the Senior Executive Officer (Equity) for TAFE Queensland;
   - 29 staff and administrators at 8 Private Training Providers;
   - 8 staff at 3 Group Training Schemes;
   - 5 staff at 3 New Apprenticeship Centres;
   - 18 employers or enterprise-based trainers;
   - 5 Industry Training Advisory Body (ITAB) representatives;
   - 3 school-based VET co-ordinators;
   - 2 staff at the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA);
   - 3 university academics;
   - 28 trainees in training and 9 trainees who had completed their qualification; and
   - 17 apprentices in training and 11 apprentices who had completed their qualification.

   Approximately half of those interviewed were in regional areas of Queensland. Almost all of the interviews occurred at sites where assessment was taking place.
3. Analysis of the information gained from the interviews and document review in order to **identify the key issues** relating to the nature and quality of assessment in VET in Queensland.

4. **Presentation of the proposed issues to key practitioners for validation.** First, the findings were workshopped at a breakfast meeting of the Workplace Assessors and Trainers Network attended by 52 people from TAFE Institutes, Private Training Providers, Group Training Companies, a New Apprenticeship Centre, universities, and job placement agencies. Second, because employers were not directly represented at the workshop meeting, those issues that directly related to employers were discussed with the senior training officer of a large employer association.

This validation process endorsed all of the issues identified as being legitimate and important.
5. **Major issues**

1. **The capacity of employers to conduct assessment effectively**

Considerable variability was both reported and observed in the capacity of employers to make valid judgments about whether the persons in training at their worksite had satisfactorily achieved prescribed competency outcomes. While many employers are seen to be highly capable and successful in making accurate assessments about the level and quality of skills and knowledge demonstrated by their trainees and apprentices, at least as many are seen to lack the 'technical' (or 'educational') knowledge and skills necessary to make consistent and defensible judgments about the achievement of training outcomes. The major concern is not so much the capacity of employers to collect evidence but rather their capacity to *analyse and interpret* the evidence in order to arrive at a fair and valid assessment of the person in training.

2. **The level of commitment of employers to participate in assessment**

There is a large number of employers across the state who participate in every possible way to ensure that quality training and assessment occurs at their workplace. There is, however, also a large and reportedly expanding number of employers who are becoming more and more resistant to participation in workplace assessment of persons in training. There appear to be five major reasons for this growing resistance by employers to participation in workplace assessment of training:

(a) In an increasingly competitive business environment, employers - and particularly those in small businesses that are fighting for survival - are finding that they simply cannot afford to donate the time required to participate fully or adequately in the assessment process. This situation also applies to the release of senior and/or experienced staff to assist with training and assessment tasks in the workplace. In simple terms, time spent on assessment of persons in training is increasingly interpreted as productive time lost to a struggling business.

(b) In an increasingly competitive business environment, employers - particularly in smaller businesses - reportedly are becoming increasingly reticent to make expensive equipment and materials available for the assessment of persons in training because of the potential cost and downtime that may be caused by damage or incorrect use.

(c) Many employers simply don’t believe in the current approach to training and assessment, and so do not enthusiastically assist its implementation. In particular, the lack of ‘grades’ or ‘performance measures’ for competency based assessment is seen by many employers to be propagating mediocrity and discouraging the pursuit of excellence by both trainers and those in training.
(d) Many employers believe that the workplace assessment requirements of Training Packages are an excessive and unreasonable burden in the context of a highly competitive and volatile business environment. In some cases, this perception has arisen after actually reviewing the relevant Training Package documentation, but in most cases it is related to the assessment requirements being conveyed by training providers and/or workplace assessors to employers. The issue of Training Packages is discussed in more detail later in this section. Nevertheless, there is a pervasive view that for whatever reason, very few employers are actually undertaking the full range of assessment tasks prescribed in the training agreements.

(e) Many employers do not have the equipment and/or expertise to meet all of the requirements of the training program, particularly in apprenticeships. This is a particular problem in smaller and rural businesses which do not always have the finances or level of demand for services to justify regular upgrading of equipment, and which do not always have the local demand for all of the aspects of a trade contained in the prescribed training program.

3. Variable expectations by employers of persons in training

A consistent concern expressed by trainers and Group Training Scheme officers is that many employers have unreasonable and/or unrealistic expectations of what is a reasonable level of performance for persons in training. It is alleged, for example, that employers frequently expect first year apprentices to demonstrate the same level of skill and confidence in undertaking prescribed tasks as that demonstrated by experienced tradespeople. Further, it is alleged that employers frequently fail to take into account the level of the training when assessing whether a person meets a particular performance measure; that is, they have unreasonably high expectations of persons training at lower levels of the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF).

4. Allegations of some employers opposing quality control

There is no question that the very great majority of employers in Queensland are highly ethical people who support training in every way possible within what they perceive to be the constraints of their business environment. Nevertheless, seven different instances were reported during the conduct of this study in which employers, when requested by a training provider to “tighten up” certain aspects of their contribution to workplace assessment, allegedly refused and told the training provider that if they pursued the matters any further, the employer would simply go - in line with the User Choice agenda - to another training provider. In a competitive training environment, the subsequent conflict for the training provider between ethical principles and monetary loss can be considerable. Clearly, this is an embryonic issue that needs to be addressed quickly within User Choice policy and procedures.
5. Repeat assessments by Registered Training Organisations (RTOs)

Several cases were reported by trainees, apprentices, Group Training Schemes and RTOs of assessments that had already been undertaken or ‘signed off’ by employers being repeated by the RTO, allegedly because of a lack of confidence in the assessment that was undertaken by the employer. In some cases, this lack of confidence clearly arose from actual worksite experiences, while in others it appeared to be derived more from a philosophical prejudice about the role and capacity of employers in training. The reality is, however, that whether the lack of confidence is real or perceived, it is leading to a number of RTOs significantly increasing the assessment load for trainees and apprentices. In some cases, it is also leading to ‘unofficial’ lists of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ employers.

6. The expertise of RTOs and dedicated workplace assessors in assessment

There was a pervasive and deep concern among those interviewed regarding the level of relevant expertise in the actual processes of assessment of many of the people conducting the assessment of training in Queensland. Trainers and assessors generally are seen to possess the necessary level of ‘industry’ or ‘content’ knowledge, but many are seen to lack the ‘educational’ or ‘process’ knowledge required to perform quality assessments. As a consequence, much of the assessment taking place is seen to rely on the quantity rather than the quality of evidence collected, and an analytical review of the information collected relative to the task(s) being assessed reportedly does not occur in many instances. Further, it appears that much of the evidence of competency is largely collected by “observation-based checklists” - a ‘one size fits all’ approach - rather than through a range or combination of techniques selected to best suit the characteristics of the task, context and student(s) being assessed. The major factors contributing to a lack of assessment expertise among many trainers and assessors are seen to be:

a) “pre-service” training programs, both in the VET and university sectors, generally are considered to lack sufficient emphasis on the actual process of assessment. VET programs are seen to focus primarily on how to collect and present information, while university programs are seen to focus primarily on philosophical and theoretical models and approaches to assessment. Neither sector is seen to offer sufficient practical guidance in their programs on the range of assessment approaches available and the context(s) in which each is applicable, nor - and most importantly - on how to actually conduct each of the forms of assessment;

b) in a significantly changed and still rapidly changing training environment, it is alleged that many assessors are trying to apply “old” approaches to assessment (often based on what they experienced as an apprentice or student) to what is a “new” training paradigm. In this regard, there was considerable concern about the lack of quality “in-service” or professional development programs on assessment designed to acquaint experienced trainers and assessors with contemporary knowledge and skills about how best to undertake assessment in the current training environment in which flexible delivery and work-based learning are emphasised;
c) it was reported that VET assessor training frequently is conducted by people who have no expertise in assessment beyond the level of the course they are conducting, and so lack the capacity to significantly lever quality assessment into the system. In this regard, several instances were cited of people being trained in assessment by the graduates from the previous class. Indeed, the DETIR audit team identified instances in which parts of the Certificate IV in Assessment and Workplace Training were being taught by people who were still themselves completing the certificate;

d) RTOs generally do not require their instructors to actually hold a qualification in training or assessment, only to be enrolled in one. Several instances were reported of persons being employed to deliver training courses that started on the same day that they were enrolled for the first time in a module in the Certificate IV in Assessment and Workplace Training. It was alleged that many staff completed their contract obligations with the RTO, including the assessment of the training they delivered, without having completed even one module from the Certificate IV;

e) the VET system does little to disseminate ‘good practice’ about how to assess. Where information is disseminated, it is usually about new training agendas or reporting and accountability requirements or stories of successful training programs - in other words, material focussing on what to do, not how to do it;

f) assessors can contact ITABs or Industry Associations if they have content concerns, or DETIR if they have regulatory or reporting issues, but there seemingly is no satisfactory ‘educational’ reference point in the system for assessors seeking ideas about how best to actually undertake particular assessments. In this regard, the demise of the curriculum consortia in TAFE was lamented by both public and private providers because, in general, they were seen to have been staffed by people at the cutting edge, both in terms of content and process knowledge;

g) it was alleged by a substantial number of those interviewed that recognition of prior learning (RPL) is being significantly misused across the system with respect to assessments of ‘educational’ knowledge and skills in order to ensure that trainers/assessors are available when and where they are required by their organisations in the competitive training market. The following example, which is fairly typical of the type of allegations made, is provided to demonstrate the point: One assessor interviewed alleged that he had been given RPL for three modules in the Certificate IV in Assessment and Workplace Training - BSZ401A-Plan Assessment, BSZ402A-Conduct Assessment, and BSZ403A-Review Assessment - purely on the basis of having distributed and analysed a questionnaire at a Parents and Friends meeting about how available funds should be allocated; and

h) there is no “real” or “effective” quality control or registration mechanism to ensure the initial and on-going ‘educational’ standards of the individuals involved in training and/or assessment. Employers and Group Training Scheme representatives, in particular, pointed to the operation of industry-based professional associations (such as in engineering, accounting and management) which require both entrance standards and demonstrated on-
7. The commitment of trainers and assessors to conduct quality assessment

As a result of the interviews and direct observations made during this study, it is clear that there are a lot of competent trainers and dedicated assessors across Queensland who are making every reasonable effort to ensure the quality of the assessment that they conduct. Most people interviewed, however, also cited several instances in which they had seen or been told about assessment processes that could at best be described as unprofessional and intentionally inadequate. The most common allegations related to learners being credited with elements or whole units of competency without any assessment having been conducted whatsoever. In many cases, the location at which the ‘assessment’ occurred simply did not have the equipment needed to conduct the assessment task, while in others, the organisation conducting the assessment did not have assessors with sufficient (or allegedly in some cases, any) industry knowledge, skill and/or experience in the area or task being assessed - yet the assessments were still made, or at least recorded. Several trainers/assessors openly stated that they did not have the ‘time’ or ‘funding’ (particularly for return visits to remote sites) to undertake the full range of assessments, and so it was “reasonable and necessary to assume” that certain competency outcomes had been achieved if performance on other aspects of the task(s) was ‘satisfactory’.

8. Allegations of some assessments being changed on direction from management

Seven assessors from three different organisations (two private and one public) alleged that they had, on occasions, been ‘directed’ or ‘openly coerced’ by their manager/ ‘boss’/ Associate Director into changing assessments from ‘not yet competent’ to ‘competent’ for students who were “fairly close” to achieving the required standard. A further 19 of the people interviewed who are actually conducting assessments indicated that while no direct pressure was placed on them to ‘inflate’ results, they certainly operated in an environment which “encourages the assessor to always err, and to err quite liberally, in favour of the student”. The reason for this pressure appears to be the perception that training dollars (both Government and privately sourced) are more likely to flow to those organisations that have the best completion rates, and thus in a competitive environment, it is desirable to have better completion rates than one’s competitors.

The available evidence suggests that this issue is currently an emerging rather than a major problem. Nevertheless, unless rapidly addressed, it may quickly become a major factor undermining the validity, consistency and usefulness of the assessments made in VET.

9. Empathy with and understanding of student learning and assessment difficulties

There was widespread concern among those interviewed for this study regarding the capacity and readiness of a large percentage of ‘students’ to undertake
vocational training. Inadequate language, literacy numeracy and general learning skills, together with poorly developed work-related competencies (such as effective interpersonal and problem-solving abilities) and personal qualities (such as confidence and self-esteem) currently are seen to be the ‘norm’ rather than the exception among persons entering training - a view supported by a plethora of recent research. It was also the belief of those interviewed that a significant proportion of trainers/assessors lack the ‘educational’ knowledge, expertise and strategies to effectively train and/or assess students demonstrating some or all of these difficulties and disadvantages. Numerous cases were cited, for example, of written tests being used as the only instrument for assessing underpinning knowledge, even though it was known that many of the students being assessed would, for a variety of reasons, have significant difficulty reading the questions. Further, a very significant percentage of trainers/assessors are seen to lack the understanding, expertise and strategies necessary to cope effectively with the training and assessment of persons with a disability or those of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

10. An excessive emphasis on summative assessment

Considerable concern was expressed by the vast majority of those interviewed regarding what is seen to be an excessive level of emphasis being placed on summative assessment by many trainers in the current training environment. Indeed, it was alleged - particularly by trainees and apprentices - that many trainers spend much more time assessing than they do on training.

Essentially, the view is that both the quality and quantity of the delivery of training is being significantly undermined by what is considered to be an excessive amount of time, effort and money being devoted by many trainers to summative assessment. Further, there is a belief that while the purpose of summative assessment should be to confirm the quality of outcomes from the process of training, the process of training has in fact become focussed on meeting the specific requirements of the assessment plan. It is considered that this ‘teaching for the exam’ approach will limit both the breadth and depth of the training delivered.

11. Assessment of RPL

There is a widespread perception that the processes generally undertaken for recognition of prior learning (RPL) are excessively detailed (to the point of being pedantic), time-consuming and costly. The pervasive belief is that RPL should be a service to persons who already have accumulated significant knowledge and expertise in their particular industry area, and therefore should focus on confirming rather than comprehensively testing that knowledge and expertise.

Reportedly, current assessment processes frequently are a disincentive to persons to seek advanced standing through RPL, either because of their complexity (which, it is alleged, ‘frightens’ many people, particularly those with little self-confidence) or because the time, cost and effort involved make actually enrolling to undertake the training a more viable option.
There was widespread cynicism among those interviewed about the motives behind the current “RPL rigour”, with most suggesting that RPL had become yet another ‘training industry’ designed primarily to maximise profits for those undertaking the assessments. Many pointed to the plethora of simple but apparently effective RPL arrangements between schools and training providers as proof that the system can work very effectively without excessive complexity or cost.

12. Assessment for Skills Recognition

Some employers raised concerns about the assessment processes used in some cases for skills recognition. Essentially, the issue is that many persons applying for skills recognition are viewed as being highly skilled in their trade but lack the educational background and experience to cope with formal, highly structured testing processes. The term ‘exam fright’ was commonly used in this regard. The focus of the concerns is that some extremely competent and effective workers may be excluded from maximizing their contribution to the workforce (and to their own career pathway) either because they ‘freeze up’ under assessment conditions or because they are ‘frightened off’ seeking an assessment at all.

13. Self-testing in learning resources

Many of the providers and Group Training Scheme staff interviewed raised concerns about the inadequate “educational focus” of much of the learning resources supporting VET in Queensland. A great deal of the material is seen to be little more than annotated learning outcomes from the training packages; that is, masses of information that has not been structured or presented in a way that provides maximum assistance to the learners. In this regard, quite a number of respondents asked what had happened to the revision tests or review questions that students used to find in their training materials at the end of each “bite-sized chunk of information”. The use of review tests is seen to be a powerful formative assessment instrument that allows the person in training to be confident that material has been effectively learned before moving on to the next section of work.

14. “Grading” of competency-based assessment (CBA)

When asked to identify their three major concerns about the quality of assessment in Queensland, over half the interviewees cited the non-grading of CBT as their first concern. Indeed, of the 191 people formally interviewed for this report, only seven indicated that they supported a “non-graded” CBT system. It is important to note that the vast majority of people were not opposed to competency-based training itself. The belief is, however, that the lack of “grades” or “performance levels” for those people who have been assessed as ‘competent’ provides little incentive for students to strive for excellence because there is no recognition of their attainment, and provides little incentive for trainers to strive for excellence because there is none of the ‘kudos’ and ‘personal satisfaction’ attached to knowing just how well their students have gone in comparison to others undertaking the same program. The overwhelming perception of those interviewed was that the combination of
competency-based training and assessment was promoting mediocrity in many areas of training by failing to motivate most of the “better performing students” to achieve excellence.

It also became quite evident during the interviews that a major reason for perceptions of ‘inconsistent assessment’ is the significant and visible difference in capacity and performance among people who have all - legitimately - been assessed as ‘competent’. That is, we now have the situation whereby a person who previously would have been given a “Distinction” and a person who previously would have been given a ‘Pass” are given the same outcome - ‘competent’. When the difference in performance between the two people becomes apparent, it is often attributed to “inconsistencies in assessment”.

15. Training Packages

The pervasive view among the trainers interviewed was that Training Packages are, in fact, Assessment Packages in that their focus generally is not on how to structure and deliver training but rather on what, how and where to assess. The deep concern expressed was that these “Assessment Packages” are then used by many providers as ‘the syllabus’, such that they teach nothing more or less than what is needed to meet the assessment requirements in the Training Packages. Consequently, in the view of many, training is simply becoming the imparting of ‘just sufficient’ knowledge and skill to meet the assessment requirements of the Training Packages. Many providers also expressed the view that while the Training Packages are very detailed in terms of what to assess and what evidence to look for, they are often very limited in detail about how best to actually collect and evaluate assessment information. Further, many providers and employers criticised the level of ‘jargon’ in training packages which, in the words of one employer, has “taken people right out of the equation in terms of understanding”.

Specialist equity staff also raised a number of concerns about the inadequacy of Training Packages in accommodating the needs of equity groups, in particular:

- interventions to support equity groups are not built into the packages (in her opinion, because of both a lack of knowledge about how to write them in and a lack of understanding about how to implement them);
- by focussing so heavily on outcomes, the Training Packages “almost encourage the ‘skipping’ of the pre-training necessary for equity groups to achieve the outcomes”; and
- the strong on-the-job assessment requirement of Training Packages fails to acknowledge the reality that a great many of the people in equity groups are not in employment (which is one of the reasons that they are targeted for assistance), and so are placed at even further disadvantage in trying to meet the assessment requirements.
16. Lack of a moderation system

Many of the trainers and system administrators interviewed during this study expressed the view that assessment quality, and in particular consistency, would not be achieved until some system of ‘moderation’ (as distinct from ‘audit’) was in place. Essentially, moderation provides a comprehensive system for publicly validating assessment processes and outcomes against agreed benchmark standards and practices in a way which identifies and corrects unacceptable decisions.

The belief is that a moderation system would not only set, propagate and check assessment standards but would also facilitate the sharing of ‘good practice’ approaches to assessment across the system. There was, however, a very strong view that a VET moderation system should not mirror “the detail and intrusiveness” of the system operating in secondary education which, it is believed, would be prohibitively costly and would significantly impede training flexibility.

There was also a deeply held opinion among those interviewed that any “grading” of competency-based training “could not and should not be introduced without some form of effective moderation system”.

17. DETIR audit process

Several people interviewed raised concerns about perceived limitations in the audit process being used by DETIR to monitor the quality of training and assessment. It was alleged that:

- the audits generally have an excessive focus on satisfactory completion of paperwork and other physical evidence rather than on observational evaluation of the actual processes and practices used and the outcomes achieved;
- many ‘generally substandard’ trainers/assessors are able to ‘pass’ audits because they have sufficient warning of the audit visit to “fake up” their paperwork, equipment and staffing. Many were of the view that “legitimate trainers/assessors who are providing a quality service all of the time require no more than the simple courtesy of a day or two’s warning of the arrival of the audit team”;
- the audits essentially focus on compliance by individual providers, and so do not have a sufficient impact on system level provision; and
- some DETIR officers involved in audit are not viewed by those ‘in the field’ as having a sufficiently proven record as effective trainers/assessors, and so the audits lack credibility with many trainers/assessors.

The scope of this study did not allow the legitimacy of these allegations to be confirmed or refuted. Nevertheless, there would seem to be considerable merit in the call by many of those interviewed to review the audit model in the context of an holistic system for monitoring and improving VET quality that includes some form of systemic moderation and a professional development strategy for trainers/assessors.
18. **ITAB support by DETIR officers**

Three of the Industry Training Advisory Body (ITAB) representatives interviewed praised the level of cooperation and efficiency of service that they receive from DETIR staff in fulfilling their training and assessment roles. Alternatively, two of the ITAB representatives were very critical of the “inflexible and bureaucratic approach” that they feel is often taken by DETIR staff, and which they alleged often results in significant but unnecessary time delays. The concerns raised generally appear to be issue specific, industry specific, and/or specific to particular DETIR staff. Nevertheless, given the important training and assessment role of ITABs, this is an issue that it would appear important for DETIR to pursue.

19. **Contribution of ITABs**

Many providers/assessors and employers openly praised the significant level of help provided to them by ITABs. Clearly, it is believed that ITABs can and should play a significant role in ensuring quality outcomes from training and in supporting effective assessment processes. The role of the ITAB in developing and promoting the holistic approach to assessment adopted for the construction industry, for example, was lauded by relevant trainers/assessors and employers.

A significant number of trainers/assessors and employers, however, criticised the “excessively directive and inflexible” intervention of certain ITABs in training and assessment processes. It was also alleged, particularly by employers and trainers/assessors outside of the Brisbane metropolitan area, that particular ITAB representatives were not prepared even to consider alternative ideas and were intent on imposing “big city views” on regional and remote areas of the state.

While much of the praise or concern regarding ITABs clearly emanates from the personalities involved, the wider issue of employers and trainers/assessors in regional and remote areas of Queensland feeling that their ideas are attributed lesser value than those of their Brisbane colleagues is a very real one, at least from the perspective of regional and remote area people.

20. **Impact of language and literacy levels on assessment**

Several people interviewed raised significant concerns about the impact of a student’s language and literacy level on assessment judgments.

The extensive use of written tests/examinations for assessing underpinning knowledge and skills was seen to significantly disadvantage those with literacy difficulties, particularly those in equity groups. It was argued that an holistic judgment made from a range of assessment approaches should be used whenever possible.
It was also argued that assumptions were often made by assessors on the basis of the language skills of the person being assessed: “confident, articulate students seem to know, non-articulate low confidence students are seen not to know”.

An interesting criticism by many RTOs and Group Training Schemes related to the “tremendous variation in instruments used and rigour applied” to the ‘front end’ assessment of literacy and numeracy, that conducted at the start of a training program.

21. Lack of funding for assessment

Most trainers/assessors expressed the view that there is insufficient funding to undertake assessment activities with the level of quality they would like. This view was particularly expressed by regional and rural trainers/assessors who complained about the costs associated with frequent travel to remote sites. Interestingly, most of those complaining indicated that they were unable to provide the level of training that they would like because of the money that they had to expend to fulfil their assessment obligations; that is, assessment frequently is quite overtly being attributed greater importance than the learning processes themselves. Nevertheless, a number of both private and public providers indicated that they were not prepared to divert funds for assessment from training and that they were having to ‘cross-subsidise’ the cost of assessment from other income sources.

Whether the level of funding is, in reality, sufficient to undertake quality assessment is somewhat problematic, given that - as is discussed on other occasions in this report - it can reasonably be argued that many trainers/assessors are often not using the most cost-effective assessment processes and/or are significantly overassessing (for example, eleven of the staff interviewed indicated that they often made at least 10 worksite visits - in one case 38 separate visits allegedly were made - in order to satisfactorily assess just one unit of competence for one trainee or apprentice).

22. Failure to assess and report adequately on ‘personal competencies’

A number of people interviewed, and particularly employers, raised concerns about the failure of the training system to address sufficiently generic employment-related competencies. While the Mayer Key Competencies were often mentioned, the focus was more on generic workplace knowledge and practices (“workplace culture”) such as: appropriate ways of interacting with fellow workers, supervisors and customers; resolving conflict in the workplace; managing one’s own time; appropriate forms of address; understanding the industrial relations environment; and maintaining a general ‘work ethic’ . There was a strong call for these aspects to be more overtly written into training packages or programs of training, and for more direct assessment and reporting of these skills and knowledge across the system.
6. Observations and discussion

This section presents some of the overriding themes that, on balance, appear to the researcher to lie across and behind the issues identified in the previous section of the report. The term ‘on balance’ is used because of the extreme variations in the nature and quality of practices that currently characterise the system. The themes essentially are derived from a detailed analysis of the data collected by interview, observation and literature review. It is inevitable, however, that they have also been informed by the general impressions of the system gained by the researcher during the study. Seven major themes have been identified:

1. There is an excessive focus on summative assessment

The achievement of quality outcomes from VET programs depends, above all else, upon the quality of the training, education, work and life experiences that students receive. Assessment does not, of itself, deliver a quality outcome. Essentially, assessment confirms whether a quality outcome, relative to defined assessment criteria, has been achieved and gives guidance to students and trainers as to where improvements need to be made.

The evidence suggests that many providers have significantly moved the emphasis - in time, effort and money - away from delivering quality training and onto assessment in the belief that this will somehow improve the quality of the training outcome. In other words, to cite Philip Gammage, we have a system that increasingly appears to be of the belief that “the best way to fatten the pig is to weigh it more often. Yet the more you weigh the pig, the less chance it has to get to the feedbox, and so the skinnier it will become”.

The major driver of this escalating focus on assessment appears to be the Training Packages which explicitly highlight assessment issues, performance criteria and assessment evidence guides, but say very little about the learning processes required to take the student to the point of assessment. This conveys an implicit message that ‘assessment is all that really matters’ - a message that clearly is being heard by many trainers. Indeed, the assessment requirements of the Training Packages have emerged as de facto syllabuses for many trainers whose training plans are explicitly directed at meeting the listed assessment requirements - no more and no less.

Another driver of the escalating focus on assessment is the literal interpretation by many providers of some of the rather simplistic messages that have accompanied the introduction of much of the current VET agenda, and in particular, the often quoted statement that “the emphasis has been taken off training and put onto outcomes”. What the current training agenda does is set clear objectives for training that relate to the tasks and behaviours required of effective employees in the workplace. To do this, it has moved decisions regarding such factors as the content, location and timing of training away from institution-based trainers to persons in industry. It would be drawing a long bow to suggest that current training
policies actually suggest that quality learning processes are not important. Indeed, as discussed above, quality outcomes cannot be achieved without quality training, both on-the-job and off-the-job. Yet many trainers clearly believe that the current policy agenda overtly downplays the value of quality learning processes, and as a consequence, have moved the locus of their activities to assessment which they equate with ‘outcomes’.

2. There is an emphasis on the quantity, rather than quality, of evidence collected for assessment

Quality assessment involves collecting sufficient evidence from a sufficient variety of sources in order to make a confident professional judgment regarding competence. It is common practice across Queensland, however, for trainers/assessors to collect as much evidence as possible before determining that a student has attained competency. In other words, it appears that the current emphasis generally is on the quantity, rather than the quality, of evidence collected.

One possible reason for this might be that many trainers/assessors lack confidence in their ability to make and defend professional judgments regarding competence, perhaps in part because they are overwhelmed by the complexity and rapidity of the changes in the training agenda, and so seek ‘safety’ in a plethora of evidence. Another reason may lie in the allegations that DETIR audits place an excessive emphasis on the satisfactory completion of paperwork as the major measure of quality processes and outcomes, and so explicitly encourage the accumulation of as much written assessment evidence as possible. Whatever the reason(s), there are three major consequences of an excessive focus on quantity of assessment:

a) students are being subjected to far more assessment than generally is necessary to confirm the attainment of outcomes;

b) the cost of conducting assessment, both in terms of time and money, is much higher than is necessary; and

c) students receive less training and so are less likely to achieve quality outcomes.

3. The system is operating on the basis of a number of unsustainable assumptions

First, much of the current training agenda is based on the assumption that employers have the commitment and expertise to conduct quality workplace assessments. The evidence suggests that this assumption does not hold consistently across the state. There are a great many employers who are highly committed to training, and who have the time and expertise to conduct quality assessments. There also are a great many employers who do not meet some, or any, of these criteria. As a consequence, there is wide variation in the quality, and in particular consistency, of assessment across the state.

Second, the current training agenda is based on the assumption that trainers/assessors across the state have the commitment and expertise to conduct
There is compelling evidence to suggest that this assumption cannot be sustained. There is little doubt that while there are many highly effective trainers/assessors in Queensland, a significant number do not have a sufficient level of relevant expertise in the actual processes of assessment. The situation is further exacerbated by the failure of the training system to identify and disseminate ‘good practice’ approaches to assessment in the ‘new’ training environment, such that many experienced and committed trainers/assessors are struggling in the attempt to match ‘old agenda’ institution-based approaches to assessment to the new flexible, workplace-based training environment.

Third, there is an assumption among many of those administering the current training agenda that the philosophy, policies and details of the system are known and understood by those people ‘in the field’ who are responsible for implementing the agenda. Again, the evidence suggests that this assumption cannot be sustained in practice. Trainers/assessors are interpreting a range of agendas, policies and procedures in what at times are quite fundamentally different ways, resulting in a significant impact on both the validity and consistency of assessment practices and outcomes across the state.

Fourth, the ‘logic’ of the system seems to be based on the fallacious and somewhat simplistic assumption that a rigorous process of assessment will ensure the quality of the outcomes from training. One employer described this logic as the “and then a miracle occurs approach”. The reality is that quality training outcomes depend upon quality learning processes and quality learning environments (both work-based and institutional) and quality learning resources and quality employer/industry support and quality assessment practices and quality training policies and quality support systems/personnel/materials and quality instructor training/staff development and quality research information. The training system is unlikely to maximise the quality of outcomes for individuals, employers, industries or the country unless and until the critical importance of all of these factors is acknowledged and promoted.

4. There is a lack of quality educational support for trainers/assessors

The implementation strategies for the introduction, modification and refinement of training and assessment practices in Australia over the last decade have been expansive in information about what has to be done by trainers, assessors and employers to comply with system processes and objectives. There has, however, been a dearth of practical strategies, procedures and support structures for assisting quality implementation ‘where the rubber meets the ground’, at the point where the delivery and assessment of training occurs. In simple terms, trainers/assessors have not been given quality help in terms of how to deliver quality training and undertake quality assessment. They have been told what to do, not how to do it.

As clearly identified by those interviewed for this study, a review of VET pre-service and in-service programs reveals that they primarily focus on how to collect and report information rather than on the actual analytical processes of assessment. Alternatively, university programs are seen to focus primarily on philosophical and theoretical models rather than on practical approaches to assessment.
The issue of an “educational reference point” for the system, which was frequently raised during the interviews, would seem of critical importance in promoting quality training and assessment. The ‘reference point’, however, might not necessarily be a person or unit statically located in a Brisbane office. It may be more effective to develop an holistic approach to system support in which general staff development, the provision of ‘educational’ assistance, and ‘auditing’ the quality of training and assessment are incorporated into a unified process for system improvement involving appropriately trained and experienced people who frequently move around the state’s training and assessment sites.

5. There has been a significant decline in the use of formative assessment processes by trainers

As discussed in Section 2, formative assessment refers to constructive feedback given to the person in training while they are actually undergoing training so as to effect improvement. Formative assessment amends incorrect, inappropriate or inadequate performance before it has become entrenched into practice. It is, therefore, a crucial pillar of effective and efficient instruction, and a major catalyst for quality outcomes. Further, effective use of formative assessment significantly reduces the need for a comprehensive program of summative assessment because assessment information has been collected progressively during the training program.

The evidence, however, suggests that formative assessment is no longer a dominant feature of the system, although a number of trainers are still using it and to great effect. The reality ‘in the field’ is that funding for delivery of training programs frequently is not considered to be sufficient to give a priority to the provision of formative assessment. Ironically, those using it effectively point out that the extra cost associated with formative assessment essentially is offset by the significant savings associated with not having to conduct as comprehensive a program of summative assessment.

6. Assessment approaches frequently do not reflect the changed environment for training

Recent changes in training philosophies and policies have driven a much more flexible and responsive approach to the delivery of training, particularly with respect to location, timing and delivery modes. There appear to be relatively few examples, however, of assessment approaches and methods being developed to match the changed training environment. What appears to be happening in general is that trainers/assessors are ‘force fitting’ the way that they used to assess in the ‘old’ institution-centred training environment into the new highly-flexible work-based training environment. Only in a few locations did this study find trainers/assessors who took an holistic approach to assessment by using a comprehensive range of methods and approaches in order to arrive at the most appropriate and cost effective ‘assessment package’ for confirming competency for each person in training.
7. There are compelling arguments in support of the adoption at the system level of ‘graded’ competency-based assessment.

Conceptually, competency-based training and assessment appear to be strongly supported across the training system in Queensland. Nevertheless, most people interviewed were of the view that a system for “grading” those persons who had already demonstrated competency would significantly improve the outcomes of the concept without sacrificing its basic rationale.

It appears highly likely that the lack of some form of system-endorsed ‘grading’ for competency-based assessment is a major disincentive to students and instructors alike to strive for excellence in training. There also is no doubt that it is promoting the perception of inconsistent assessment practices in the minds of industry and the public because of the very obvious differences in performance among trainees and apprentices who have been given the same single assessment - ‘competent’.

The issue of “grading” the outcomes of competency-based training cannot be considered without some effective notion of moderation to ensure the consistency and validity of the assessments. Further, in a competitive training environment with no moderation, the number of students being given the highest performance levels clearly would become a marketing tool, which quickly would lead to a new set of issues to do with the validity and consistency of assessment.

It should be noted that a number of RTOs in Queensland are already providing “grades” to students along with their other certification. In some cases, the “grade” achieved under CBT is part of an articulation agreement with a university; that is, entry from the training course to the university depends on the grade achieved in the CBT program. TAFE Queensland also is trialing the use of ‘grades’ for competency-based assessment. The “grades” being used by different trainers/assessors have been derived by different methodologies and are often reported in quite different ways. There is, therefore, an urgent need for a system response to the issue in order to avoid the propagation of a piecemeal and highly inconsistent assessment regime in Queensland.

The use of the term “grade” in connection with competency-based assessment is yet another hangover from the ‘old’ training environment which derived and reported assessment outcomes in percentages and then, depending on whether a particular percentage had been achieved, translated the percentage into a ‘pass’, ‘credit’, or ‘distinction’. In the context of the new training environment, it can therefore legitimately be argued that the use of the term ‘grade’ is conceptually flawed because it generally implies a percentage, which in turn implies assessment of progress towards, rather than actual achievement of, a competency, which in turn is contrary to the philosophy underpinning competency-based training. In educational jargon, ‘grades’ are associated with ‘norm-referenced’ systems (that is, ones in which performance is measured in comparison to other students) while the new training environment requires a ‘criterion-referenced’ assessment system (that is, one in which training outcomes are assessed against predetermined performance criteria in the form of industry standards). Consequently, it may be more appropriate to refer to the use of “performance levels” rather than grades.
because the term “performance” puts the focus on outcomes and the capacity of the trainee or apprentice to actually apply his/her knowledge and skills in relation to real tasks.

Those interviewed for this study were strongly of the view that any assessment of ‘performance levels’ should only occur after competency has been achieved by the student, although the evidence on which those judgments would be made could and probably should be collected throughout the training program. In other words, no ‘grading’ or ‘performance levels’ should be given for persons in training who have not been assessed as competent.

The only people interviewed during this study who were significantly opposed to the provision of ‘grades’ or ‘performance levels’ for CBT were a couple of employers who were fearful that the assessments could be linked to differential wage claims. These fears generally appeared to be linked to the notion that trainees/apprentices with higher ‘grades’ would have more or different skills from those at lower levels. A notion that might have arisen from the attempts in some overseas countries to ‘grade’ CBT by having better performing students undertake extra modules or units of competence. The suggestions for ‘grading’ or ‘performance levels’ currently being promoted in Queensland do not relate to the attainment of additional skills or competencies, but rather to the differing capacity of individuals to perform the same skills or competencies. ‘Performance levels’ undoubtedly will affect employer decisions about who to employ or who to promote, but it is difficult to see how they could be linked to wage claims — the ‘grades’ ascribed under the ‘old’ training system weren’t, the Grade Point Averages provided by universities aren’t, and the tertiary entrance scores and subject achievement levels provided to high school students aren’t.
7. Conclusions

The information and insights derived through this exploratory study strongly suggest that, while there is a great deal of assessment activity taking place in VET in Queensland, there is significant scope to improve the actual quality of that assessment in terms of validity, consistency, usefulness and cost-effectiveness. The reality is that while there is a significant number of trainers/assessors providing a quality assessment service to both industry and persons in training, there also is a significant number of trainers/assessors whose training and/or assessment practices (but not necessarily their efforts) are not supportive of a quality assessment system.

The dysfunctions occurring in VET assessment generally appear to be related to inappropriate or inadequate implementation policies and practices rather than to the general thrust of the training agenda. There is widespread support (with the noted exception of some rural small business owners and some long-standing institution-based trainers) for greater flexibility and responsiveness in training and assessment, for a focus on the quality of outcomes, for the direct involvement of industry in training and assessment processes, and for the application of underpinning knowledge and skills through actual workplace practice and experience.

The last decade has seen the emergence of a new and significantly refocused paradigm for training, but this has not been accompanied by a new paradigm for assessment. While assessment is now occurring in a much greater variety of locations and at much more client-responsive times, the actual processes being used for assessment generally have not changed. Indeed, there is strong evidence to suggest that in the case of many trainers/assessors, the actual range of processes being used has decreased, with many relying almost entirely on checklists and written tests. In simple terms, the system generally has attempted to fit existing assessment methods to the ‘new’ training environment, rather than taking a “paradigm zero” approach which starts with the characteristics of the new training environment and develops the most appropriate and cost-effective ways of confirming the attainment of outcomes in that environment.

One of the most worrying characteristics of the current assessment system is the actual amount of assessment taking place. Quality assessment involves the collection and analysis of a sufficient quantity of evidence from a sufficient variety of sources in order to make a confident professional judgment regarding competence. Increasingly, however, trainers/assessors appear to be relinquishing their professional judgment in favour of simply collecting the maximum amount of evidence that they can, usually from just one or two assessment perspectives. The result frequently is that the persons in training are being subjected to much more assessment than is necessary to confirm the attainment of outcomes; the cost of conducting assessment, both in terms of time and money, is much higher than is necessary; assessment time is significantly intruding into training time; and the assessments made probably are no more valid, and indeed (as Scriven’s research showed) may often be less valid, than those made using more holistic and less time and cost-intensive approaches.
The role of Training Packages in contributing to an environment of over-assessment appears to be very significant. Training Packages generally place a major emphasis (including the physical space allocated within the document) on the range of evidence that can be used to confirm the attainment of each unit of competence. The evidence is that the long lists in the evidence guides frequently are being used by trainers/assessors as checklists with ‘competence’ being simplistically assessed on the basis of “the number of ticks”. In other words, the emphasis in assessment increasingly is being placed on the elements that contribute to the task, rather than on the capacity to actually perform the task itself.

The excessive emphasis on assessment by many trainers/assessors is a symptom of a more fundamental issue - the increasingly overt separation, in policy and practice, of training and assessment in the current VET environment. Activities such as skills recognition and recognition of prior learning clearly are assessment only processes. In general, however, conducting assessment in isolation of, or only at the completion of, the training process deprives assessment of its most powerful element - the capacity to inform the nature and direction of training (individually and systemically) while it is happening. Progressive (or ‘formative’) assessment is extremely cost-effective and learning-effective because it provides frequent feedback on the effectiveness of training, allowing minor problems to be addressed before they have become entrenched as bad practice on the part of the learner. It is unfortunate that debate has centred around whether the emphasis should be on training or assessment, when the appropriate question should be how best to integrate the two processes so as to ensure the highest quality outcomes for both industry and the persons in training.

Another fundamental issue for the VET system relates to the complexity and client cost that has been built around systems for assessing advanced standing. The training agenda clearly, and most would argue quite rightly, suggests that people should not have to ‘redo’ training for what they can show that they already can do or know, irrespective of how or where those skills and knowledge were acquired. Further, the capacity to easily acquire advanced standing presents an enormous incentive to people to enter or continue with training through formal programs. Recognition processes, however, have generally become so complex, costly and time consuming that they actually act as a disincentive for many people to seek advanced standing. Further, many persons applying for recognition of their skills and knowledge and who are viewed as being highly skilled in their trade simply lack the educational background and experience to cope with formal, highly structured testing processes. In other words, the implementation processes are acting contrary to the policy agenda. The fundamental reason for this appears to be that many trainers/assessors tend to focus on the rigour of the assessment rather than the purpose of the assessment, and thus seek to comprehensively test rather than to confirm the candidate’s knowledge and skills. Again, the issue also arises of the willingness of trainers/assessors in the current environment to exercise professional judgments for which they might be held accountable; that is, comprehensive testing is “safer” than more holistic approaches to the assessment of existing knowledge and skills.
At the nub of most of the issues impacting on the quality of assessment in VET in Queensland is a pervasive concern regarding the level of professional competence of many of the individuals undertaking the training and assessment.

Professor Victor Callan\textsuperscript{10}, for example, found in his extensive March 2000 survey of non-completing apprentices and trainees in Queensland that “the majority of apprentices/trainees did not believe that they had access to good trainers, or staff who understood their training needs” and that ‘poor quality training’ was cited as one of the dominant reasons for trainees and apprentices not completing their program of training. Further, Callan found that 27\% of his 542 respondents reported that they did not have a training plan, and that only 39.2\% of those who did have a training plan reported that it was followed by the training staff. It is reasonable to contend, therefore, that there has been insufficient and/or inappropriate emphasis in implementation policies and processes on the initial qualifications (both content and training/assessment), professional development and on-going performance of those individuals not just organisations who are to undertake training and assessment activities in Queensland. It is also reasonable to contend that current mechanisms for ‘ensuring’ the quality of trainers/assessors are inadequate or largely ineffective. A review of the two major standards for training delivery (including assessment) -the National Standards for Training Delivery in the Australian Recognition Framework (ARF) and the Human Resource Standard for the Vocational Education and Training System in Queensland suggests that both are lacking in the specificity and prescription necessary to ensure quality; that is, they are actually guides rather than standards. Consequently, to quote one Group Training Scheme Manager, the documents are “like a piece of Swiss cheese: seemingly substantial but in reality so full of holes that providers can largely do what they want.” The National Standards for Training Delivery in the Australian Recognition Framework (ARF), for example, continuously use the word “appropriate” to define the qualifications, skill and experience of delivery personnel, but do not define what is appropriate, other than to suggest it needs to be understood in the context of each Training Package. (An interesting ‘Catch 22’ emerges here, because many Training Packages, often allegedly as a result of considerable pressure from provider groups, essentially refer back to the ARF for trainer/assessor standards!) While the Human Resource Standard for the Vocational Education and Training System in Queensland is a much more comprehensive document, it also lacks sufficient prescription, generally ascribing responsibility for determining what is “appropriate” and whether personnel meet requirements to the providers who “must be prepared to substantiate this with documented evidence during a quality review”. Ethical behaviour of providers aside, the gross assumption being made by this standard is that all registered providers have the content and educational expertise to make acceptably valid and reliable decisions about what is “appropriate” -an assumption which the information collected by this and a number of other recent studies suggests cannot be sustained.

In simple terms, providers who themselves do not have sufficient professional knowledge, skills and expertise cannot make valid and reliable decisions about whether others satisfactorily meet the intent of the Human Resource Standard.

Similar concerns exist with respect to the capacity of employers to support training delivery and assessment, even though much of the current training ethos depends on the validity of this assumption. Callan’s survey, for example, identified that only 40% of non-completing apprentices and trainees thought that their boss was a good trainer, only 35% indicated that their boss gave them regular feedback, only 27% said that their boss signed off their record book at the right times, and only 33% of apprentices thought that their boss gave them the time to practice the new skills that they were expected to learn.

Fifty-nine percent (59%) of apprentices who failed to complete their program of training indicated that the poor quality of training at work was a major contributing factor to their decision. The reality is that quality instruction, particularly in an environment in which trainees and apprentices increasingly are entering training with significant learning difficulties, requires far more than the simple transmission of knowledge. It requires a comprehensive understanding of the range of variables that effect how, where and when people of different ages and backgrounds learn best, and a comprehensive range of flexible strategies for facilitating and assessing that learning. The evidence suggests that a great many ‘trained’ trainers/assessors do not possess those professional skills at a satisfactory level, so it is unreasonable to assume that employers, who in general have had far less professional training in instruction and assessment, would have the capacity to deliver quality training, or can acquire the capacity after an instructional program of just a few hours duration. The current training agenda arose, in part, from the legitimate realisation that institution-based trainers generally did not have sufficient industry content or context knowledge and skills to deliver quality outcomes. The current training agenda must now be reviewed in light of the converse; that is, that employers generally do not have sufficient learning facilitation and assessment skills to deliver quality outcomes. Quality outcomes, therefore, should rely on a genuine team approach, not just cooperation and task division, between employers and professional trainers/assessors.

The notion of having assessments of fully on-the-job training at AQF Level 3 and above “validated” by external auditors was proposed in Recommendation 22 of the Schofield report into the quality of traineeships in Queensland11. This proposition was presented to all of those interviewed for this study who were involved in training and/or assessment at Level 3 or above, and was almost universally rejected, primarily because it was seen to sidestep the fundamental issue of the professional capacity of trainers/assessors and employers. Essentially, Schofield’s recommendation is seen to provide a way of coping with the symptom without actually addressing the root cause of the problem.

A fundamental problem with Schofield’s recommendation is that it is based on the assumption that the “external” auditors are capable of conducting quality assessment. “External” auditing may give the appearance of legitimacy to the system, but it provides no real guarantees that it will in any way improve the actual quality of assessment.

11 Schofield, K. (1999). Independent Investigation into the Quality of Traineeships in Queensland. DETIR.
The fallacy in the counter argument presented by respondents to this study is that it ignores the reality that, irrespective of the level of professional commitment, a great many trainers/assessors and employers simply do not at this time have the professional and/or industry competencies to conduct quality assessment.

The consistent message from the research, worldwide, into successful assessment practice is that the achievement of assessment quality requires an integrated package of initiatives: relevant and practice-oriented pre-service and professional development training; a combination of both progressive (‘formative’) and summative assessment; a genuine ‘team’ effort between professional trainers and appropriate industry/employer representatives; on-going research into, and dissemination of, best practice; clearly defined standards for both initial and on-going ‘registration’ as a trainer (as distinct from a training organisation); and an effective system of moderation and audit. Unless all of these components are addressed in an integrated fashion, quality of assessment is unlikely to be achieved.

One area in which the use of ‘external’ assessors would appear to be of critical importance is in the recognition of existing competencies for persons seeking assessor and trainer qualifications. Simply put, there are persuasive arguments for prohibiting, in general, training and/or assessment organisations from determining RPL arrangements for training and/or assessment qualifications for their own staff. The obvious potential conflict of interest associated with organisations accrediting their own staff to train and/or assess has been obvious for some time, but apparently has been outweighed by arguments to do with cost and persuasive but fallacious assertions that RTOs would have no option other than to conduct quality assessments because their public credibility in a competitive environment would be on the line. The evidence, not only from this study but also from Departmental audits, is that highly inadequate, inappropriate and incredibly rapid processes by RTOs (both public and private) for the assessment of advanced standing for their own staff into trainer and/or assessor qualifications occurs at an unacceptably high level across the system. Further, there is a pervasive perception - at least among those interviewed for this study - that many RTOs will indulge in ‘whatever ‘corner-cutting’ and ‘fudging’ is necessary with training/assessor qualifications in order to get someone ‘on-deck’ in time to win a training contract’. If this is true, then the quality of both training and assessment is being undermined for financial reasons. If it is not true, then certainly the perception that quality training and assessment is occurring is being undermined by the belief that it is, or at best ‘probably might be’, happening.

Finally, there are compelling reasons for DETIR to investigate the introduction at the system level of a mechanism for assessing and moderating ‘performance levels’ for persons who can show that they have achieved competence in their program of training. First, ‘performance level’ assessment would improve both the validity and consistency of the assessments taking place because it would compel assessors to analyse learner performance with much greater care and scrutiny than is necessary in the current ‘two criteria’ system. Second, ‘performance levels’ would considerably improve the public perception of assessment validity and consistency by reporting on the obvious differences in knowledge and skill among persons who have been assessed as competent. Third, ‘performance levels’ would provide much more useful information to employers seeking to make valid
decisions regarding employment and promotion. Fourth, ‘performance levels’ would provide much more useful information to the persons undertaking training about their performance level, and clearly would be a significant motivator for many to strive for excellence. Fifth, ‘performance levels’ - supported by an effective but not overly intrusive moderation system - would provide benchmarks that trainers/assessors could use to monitor and improve their own performance. Sixth, an increasing number of providers is doing it anyway, in very different ways with very different levels of quality control, and many employers and universities are using those ratings as a measure of the relative quality of candidates, which increasingly will disadvantage persons being assessed by assessors who are not ascribing ‘grades’ (that is, persons from RTOs whose best possible assessment is ‘competent’ are increasingly being compared with persons from RTOs who provide two or more ‘higher’ levels of attainment - for whom ‘competent’ is the lowest successful assessment outcome).
8. Recommendations

While this study has revealed a great many instances of very good and effective assessment practices occurring in VET in Queensland, it also has revealed a range of pervasive problems that appear to be having a negative impact on the overall quality of assessment across the system. Undoubtedly, many of those problems are fed by a lack of commitment to quality training and assessment by some of those directly involved in implementing the system. Just as certainly, many of the problems exist because many of those genuinely attempting to implement the system lack the necessary levels of knowledge, understanding and skill to deliver quality training and assessment in a complex and rapidly changing training environment. It is also reasonable to assert that implementation policies, procedures and supporting information have caused significant difficulties for those trying to implement the system because they generally have focussed more on what is to happen rather than on how it might be implemented ‘at the coal face’.

In this context, the following recommendations are presented for consideration as an integrated package for levering significant improvements in the validity, consistency, usefulness and cost-effectiveness of assessment in VET in Queensland:

**Recommendation 1:**

That DETIR requests a review of the *National Standards for Training Delivery* in the Australian Recognition Framework (ARF) in order to define more precisely the standards required for trainers and assessors in terms of facilitation and assessment competencies.

**Recommendation 2:**

That VETEC reviews its *Human Resource Standard for the Vocational Education and Training System in Queensland* so that it defines more precisely the standards required for trainers and assessors in terms of facilitation and assessment competencies.

2.1 That VETEC more clearly defines the concept of ‘team’ as used in the Standard to ensure that it implies people supporting each other to provide a quality training/assessment ‘package’ rather than people working independently on parts of the overall task.

2.2 That VETEC requires any person who is training/assessing but does not currently meet the Human Resource Standard (that is, they have been employed on condition that they enrol in a relevant trainer/assessor training program) to be *supervised* (in the same way that any other ‘trainee’ or ‘apprentice’ would be supervised on-the-job) by a properly qualified trainer/assessor until facilitation and/or assessment competency has been met.
2.3 That VETEC requires evidence of regular professional development in both the relevant content area and in instruction/assessment knowledge and practices in order for persons to continue to meet the Human Resource Standard (that is, those who completed their trainer/assessor qualification some time ago must be able to show that they have made a reasonable effort to stay up-to-date).

Recommendation 3:

That DETIR requires training plans to clearly identify a plan for progressive ('formative') assessment such that the person in training receives regular feedback on their performance and progress while they are training.

Recommendation 4:

That DETIR requires that any assessment of advanced standing for the purpose of assisting a person to meet, in whole or part, the minimum Human Resource Standards for a course that the person is to facilitate/assess, be conducted by an assessor clearly independent of the organisation employing, or seeking to employ, the person.

Recommendation 5:

That DETIR investigates the introduction at a system level of a process for assessing, reporting and moderating ‘performance levels’ for persons in training who have achieved competence.

5.1 That Industry Training Advisory Bodies be directly involved in the development and implementation of the moderation system to support the introduction of ‘performance levels’ for competency-based training.

Recommendation 6:

That DETIR develop and introduce a moderation system for publicly validating assessment processes and outcomes against agreed benchmark standards and practices.

6.1 That the moderation system should be as simple and non-intrusive in operation as possible yet sufficiently rigorous and comprehensive in its processes to allow valid public reporting.

6.2 That the moderation process should be designed so as to facilitate the sharing of ‘good practice’ approaches to assessment across the system.
Recommendation 7:

That DETIR commissions the development and piloting of a more simple and client-focussed approach to the recognition of prior learning (RPL) and skills recognition.

Recommendation 8:

That DETIR seeks to influence the future development and review of Training Packages such that they:

- reflect a more integrated approach to training and assessment, and a more appropriate balance between the two;
- promote a more holistic approach to assessment, and overtly discourage a 'checklist' mentality;
- promote the use of progressive, not just summative, assessment;
- clearly define the minimum content, instructional and assessment standards required of trainers/assessors/employers in order to effectively deliver the package; and
- provide clear suggestions regarding the actual processes that might be used to undertake the assessment requirements of the package.

Recommendation 9:

That DETIR commissions research, or organises a research forum of appropriately qualified and experienced practitioners and academics, with a view to identifying and describing a range of ‘good practice’ instructional and assessment strategies and processes for the ‘new’ training environment.

9.1 That the outcomes of the research be disseminated to all those involved in the delivery of training and assessment in Queensland, and be supported by a series of staff development forums.

9.2 That the research include a specific focus on ‘good practice’ strategies and processes for the training and assessment of persons in rural and remote areas of Queensland, and in equity groups.

Recommendation 10:

That DETIR seeks to influence the content and delivery of trainer/assessor pre-service and in-service programs delivered through the VET system and universities to include a much greater focus on providing a range of detailed strategies and approaches for actually undertaking training and/or assessment activities in the significantly changed and continuously changing training environment.
10.1 That DETIR seeks to ensure that the pre-service and in-service programs provide an understanding of the range of learning difficulties trainees and apprentices might possess, and strategies and techniques for addressing those difficulties within ‘mainstream’ training and assessment.

Recommendation 11:

That DETIR establishes a ‘professional practices unit’, focussing on instructional and assessment techniques and standards, that would be mobile and that would be responsible for:

- ensuring the dissemination of ‘best practice’ information and examples;
- the provision of systemic staff development forums and other activities;
- working, on a cost recovery basis, with providers identified by DETIR or VETEC as requiring professional support (for example, as result of a quality audit); and
- providing a reference point for trainers/ providers/ employers/ ITABs requiring assistance with a particular ‘education-based’ training or assessment issue.

11.1 That the unit be staffed by persons who have, and would be seen to have, high credibility in terms of their instructional and/or assessment expertise.

Recommendation 12:

That DETIR seeks to influence persons developing learning materials to support Training Packages to incorporate the latest research-identified ‘best practice’ design approaches, including the provision of student feedback through ‘review’ tests and exercises.

Recommendation 13:

That DETIR reviews the current nature and level of involvement of employers in training and assessment activities, with a view to promoting a much greater ‘team’ involvement with RTOs and ITABs, and focussing their assessment requirements at the level of the tasks required to be performed in the workplace rather than on assessing and reporting the full gamut of supporting evidence.

Recommendation 14:

That DETIR takes strong, rapid and visible action against those trainers/assessors who after appropriate counselling and professional development support do not or cannot meet the standards required to deliver quality VET outcomes in training and/or assessment.
Recommendation 15:

That DETIR reviews the current nature, operation, staffing and impact of its audit teams.

15.1 That future audit processes include a significant focus on observational evaluation of the actual training and assessment processes and practices used and the outcomes achieved.

15.2 That the audit team be staffed by persons with a proven effective background in training and assessment.