



Department of
Education
and Training

Troubleshooting guide

Assessment in VET

2nd Edition 2008

TITLE: Troubleshooting guide: Assessment in VET (2nd ed.)
SCIS NO. 1361621
ISBN 978 0 7307 4273 9

© Department of Education and Training 2008

Reproduction of this work in whole or part for educational purposes, within an educational institution and on condition that it is not offered for sale, is permitted by the Department of Education and Training.

This material is available on request in appropriate alternative formats including Braille, audio recording and computer disk.

Department of Education and Training
151 Royal Street
East Perth WA 6004

Further information please contact:

Telephone: +61 8 9264 4681

Facsimile: +61 8 9264 4688

Email: vet.reg@det.wa.edu.au

URL: <http://www.vetinfonet.det.wa.edu.au>

Purpose

Troubleshooting guide: Assessment in VET replaces the original *Troubleshooting Guide: Competency Based Assessment* (2005) which was developed by the WA Department of Education and Training to help RTOs to develop, implement and refine competency based assessment processes. It identifies a number of common challenges related to assessment that RTOs and assessors face in their daily training delivery and assessment practices, discusses the challenges and offers a range of strategies for RTOs to consider.

This document has been designed to accompany other Department publications on assessment.

Other products in this series include:

- *A guide to continuous improvement of assessment in VET* (2008)
- *Designing assessment tools for quality outcomes in VET* (2008)
- *Guidelines for assessing competence in VET* (2008)
- *Reasonable adjustment: A practical guide to reasonable adjustment in assessment of candidates with disability in VET* (2008)
- *Recognition of Prior Learning: An assessment resource for VET practitioners* (2008)

The information in this publication has not been referenced to specific AQTF 2007 Standards, however the information provided is based on current standards and reflects good practice.

RTOs may choose to use or adapt the suggested strategies or they may decide a completely different approach is required to meet the needs of their clients.

The information applies only to Training Package qualifications and the accredited courses with a vocational outcome.

All publications are available in hard copy and can be downloaded from vetinfonet.det.wa.edu.au

Contents

Purpose	1
1. Unpacking the unit of competency	3
1.1 Assessing the essential requirements	3
1.2 Assessing performance criteria.....	5
1.3 Pre-requisites and co-requisites	6
1.4 Customisation and contextualisation.....	7
1.5 Qualification levels	9
2. Managing the evidence gathering process	10
2.1 Gathering too much evidence	10
2.2 Knowledge versus performance	12
2.3 Using simulated assessment environments	13
2.4 Reasonable adjustment in assessment.....	15
2.5 Language and literacy requirements	17
2.6 Clustering units of competency	18
2.7 Third-party evidence gathering	19
2.8 Workplace evidence gathering.....	20
2.9 Online and distance assessment	21
2.10 Assessor panels	22
3. Using evidence to make good judgements	24
3.1 Gathering enough evidence	24
3.2 Judgement without marks	25
3.3 Making judgements using integrated assessment methods	27
3.4 Challenges to assessment decisions	29
4. Providing feedback and guidance to candidates	31
4.1 Information to candidates.....	31
5. Setting up and using Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) processes	33
5.1 Recognition Terminology.....	33
5.2 Quality Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) processes	35
5.3 Evidence for RPL.....	36
5.4 Inclusive RPL Practices	38
6. Validating assessment strategies	39
6.1 Assessing your assessment strategies.....	39
6.2 Industry input	41
7. Minimising documentation	42
7.1 Over documentation	42
References	43

1. Unpacking the unit of competency

'Unpacking' is a term commonly used to describe the process of using Training Packages or units of competency to locate and interpret the crucial information they contain. The systematic unpacking of a unit of competency enables trainers and assessors to identify the critical aspects of workplace competency that need to be built into their delivery and/or assessment strategies and plans. It also helps in the selection and development of delivery and assessment methods and tools, and the provision of accurate information to prospective clients.

This section explores five challenges that commonly arise from the complex task of **unpacking or interpreting a unit of competency**. Each challenge is discussed and strategies are suggested to assist trainers and assessors to address such challenges if they should arise.

1.1 Assessing the essential requirements

Challenge

Competency-based assessment relies on the establishment of well-defined standards against which an individual's competence can be assessed. Detailed specification of those standards is found within units of competency.

Unless a unit of competency is unpacked systematically and carefully, there is a danger that some of the mandatory requirements may be missed.

The challenge for trainers and assessors, therefore, is to ensure that all mandatory requirements are captured in their assessment materials and plans.

Discussion

Units of competency contain both mandatory requirements and advisory information. The concept of a standard in competency based training and assessment relies upon **all** assessors identifying the essential requirements of a unit of competency, so that they can be confident that a person's performance encompasses these essential requirements.

The components of a unit of competency that must be addressed are:

- the elements of competency and the related set of performance criteria
- any component of the Range Statement that **must** be included according to the specifications
- the Evidence Guide including:
 - critical aspects of evidence
 - required knowledge
 - required skills and attributes
 - any pre-requisite or co-requisite units
 - any other aspect of the Evidence Guide stipulated as mandatory (such as a range of assessment contexts, methods of assessment or assessment over time)
- key competencies/employability skills.

Listing these mandatory requirements is an important part of the analysis you need to undertake as you develop your assessment materials and plans, choose your assessment methods and design your tools.

Failing to systematically identify the mandatory requirements in this way will risk the credibility of your whole assessment and certification process and may jeopardise your compliance with the AQTF.

Strategies

- Look at the Evidence Guide first, as it will give you a good overview of what a person needs to be able to do in order to demonstrate competence.
- Highlight all the mandatory components on a copy of the unit of competency or your preferred planning tool, and then develop or review your assessment plans, methods and tools to ensure that you are gathering sufficient evidence for each mandatory aspect.
- Participate in moderation sessions within your organisation and with other RTOs to ensure that your interpretation of the mandatory requirements is consistent with other assessors in your industry. Look up www.vetinfonet.wa.edu.au to find out whether there are established moderation networks in your industry in Western Australia.

Remember

The judgement of competence can only be made when the assessor is confident that the required outcomes of the unit of competency have been achieved and that consistent performance has been demonstrated. Some Training Packages are less clear than others about what **must** be assessed.

1.2 Assessing performance criteria

Challenge

It is sometimes mistakenly believed that if a candidate is assessed as meeting each individual performance criteria for an element of competency, the candidate's performance is satisfactory in that element of competency. However, that is not the case because the element of competency is greater than the sum of its separate performance criteria. The same concept applies when there is satisfactory performance for each individual element. The unit of competency is greater than the sum of separate elements.

The challenge for assessors, therefore, is to assess whether the candidate can, as a minimum, **demonstrate the performance criteria in an integrated way**, and to the required performance level of an element of a unit of competency.

Discussion

You may wish to 'teach' each of the performance criteria in each element of a unit of competency separately, but your assessment should verify that the candidate has been able to integrate the set of performance criteria into a single performance/demonstration of the element of competency, which will contribute to your assessment of the overall unit of competency.

Strategies

- Select an assessment method or tool that is appropriate to the element/unit of competency you are assessing. You must be confident that you will be able to assess all performance criteria of the element/unit through that method or tool.
- Make sure the candidate knows what is expected and evidence gatherers know what they are looking for.
- Make sure that your records of evidence indicate achievement, or otherwise, of each element of competency, indicating which performance criteria were achieved. This will help you to pinpoint problem areas, and provide helpful guidance for the candidate if they need to be reassessed. It is suggested that feedback be given at element level or preferably at unit level.

Remember

The element of competency is the smallest 'bundle' of skills, attributes and knowledge needed for the performance of work tasks. The performance criteria work together to specify the standard of performance required for each element of competency. The candidate can only be judged to be competent for a complete unit of competency.

1.3 Pre-requisites and co-requisites

Challenge

Many Training Packages identify pre-requisite units of competency that must be assessed **before** other units are assessed, and co-requisite units, which need to be assessed **with** another unit/units. Pre-requisites and co-requisites mean that a person cannot be deemed competent in a particular unit of competency until they are competent in the pre-requisite or co-requisite unit/s.

The challenge for RTOs lies in early identification of any such relationships between units of competency, so that the necessary links between them can be factored into learning and assessment strategies including programming/timetabling, determining the resource requirements and the sequencing of learning and assessment activities, at the qualification level.

Discussion

Pre-requisites specify skills and knowledge that a candidate should have acquired prior to commencing assessment of the unit of competency. Pre-requisites can have a significant impact upon resource requirements because the candidate must have completed the prerequisite.

Co-requisites specify the skills and knowledge that should be delivered and assessed at the same time. These may in fact minimise the assessment load for both assessors and candidates, but may impact upon the programming/timetabling of courses.

To ignore or overlook these requirements is to:

- disadvantage the candidate
- invalidate the delivery and assessment of the unit of competency
- risk non-compliance with the AQTF.

Strategies

- As part of the planning/ development process prior to assessing a unit of competency, check whether the unit specifies any pre-requisites or co-requisites. This will ensure you have captured all the mandatory components (see Section 1.1). Factor these requirements into your learning and assessment strategy.
- If you have a candidate who believes they are ready to enrol in a unit of competency without first undertaking training in its pre-requisites, arrange for the candidate to be assessed against the pre-requisite unit/units of competency.
- Cluster co-requisite units of competency.

Remember

Pre-requisite or co-requisite requirements for units of competency must be adhered to, otherwise you invalidate the assessment of the Unit or Cluster.

1.4 Customisation and contextualisation

Challenge

Industry requires training and assessment practices to be flexible and relevant for individuals and to respond to the needs of local workplaces. At the same time, training and assessment practices need to conform to national standards and policies.

The challenge, therefore, for trainers/assessors is to mediate these two important requirements.

Discussion

Indicators of quality that all RTOs will be required to report on in 2008 include:

- learner satisfaction with the quality of training activities and the support available to them
- employer satisfaction with the overall quality of training and assessment practices
- completion rates.

Clearly, the extent to which RTOs are able to accommodate the particular/local needs of candidates, employers and workplaces will influence their satisfaction levels.

Three important ways RTOs can meet the needs of their local customers are by:

- 1) **customising** qualifications to meet their requirements
- 2) **contextualising** units of competency
- 3) **making reasonable adjustments** to learning and assessment strategies to accommodate the needs of individuals (refer to section 2.4 for a discussion of reasonable adjustment).

1. Customisation

Customisation relates to big-picture changes to the structure of a qualification. You can legitimately use customisation to meet a client's needs through:

- selecting a specific type of qualification and/or
- selecting elective units of competency for particular roles and/or
- clustering units of competency to suit enterprise and individual needs.

NOTE: It is not acceptable to modify the rules of a qualification by deleting core units of competency or requiring less than the prescribed number of electives. Likewise, it is not generally acceptable to mandate additional units of competency on top of those required for the qualification as set out in the Training Package rules. However, this may be done in some cases, if feedback is received from industry to suggest that this is required or if a state legislation requires additional units. What RTOs need to do in this case is tell candidates before they enroll that they are including extra units, explain what those extra units are and why they are being included, and then the client can make an informed choice. RTOs then need to make sure that they award appropriately, that is, in accordance with the Training Package rules, and that they issue additional Statements of Attainment for the additional units.

Strategies

- Engage workplace personnel in the development and monitoring of training and assessment methods and tools.
- To ensure that you provide sufficient flexibility to meet the needs of your clients, offer individual units of competency or a Skill Set and issue a Statement of Attainment instead of a full qualification.
- If Training Package units of competency or qualification structures do not address the need, you may offer an existing accredited course or seek to have a new qualification accredited through the Training and Accreditation Council (TAC).

2. Contextualisation

Contextualisation relates to changes in wording (but not meaning) within units of competency. When looking to contextualise a unit of competency you must not damage the integrity and meaning of the unit of competency. Ensure that you do not:

- delete or add any elements of competency or performance criteria
- ignore any other mandatory requirements (see section 1.1)
- rearrange any of the performance criteria (see section 1.2)
- add to the mandatory requirements such as required knowledge. (Please note that the underpinning knowledge is merely advisory whereas required knowledge is mandatory).

Care must be taken in the process of contextualisation to ensure that validity is not compromised and that the unit of competency is not restricted in its transferability and applicability (for example, by the excessive use of enterprise specific or client specific terminology).

Strategies

- For the purpose of contextualising the unit to meet the needs of an organisation, consider replacing terms with more commonly used enterprise terminology and adding to the Range Statement, the underpinning knowledge and skills, or other aspects of the Evidence Guide.

Remember

Customisation and contextualisation for individuals are valuable ways to ensure that your training, assessment and support services meet the needs of individuals and local businesses. Engaging them in the development of your training and assessment strategies will increase the relevance of your programs and generate confidence in the quality and integrity of nationally recognised training.

1.5 Qualification levels

Challenge

Units of competency within a Training Package can be linked to qualifications at different AQF levels. This can cause confusion for some assessors about the level at which their assessment should be targeted.

The challenge for RTOs is to ensure that the assessment of the unit of competency is undertaken at the appropriate level.

Discussion

Individual units of competency are not aligned to the AQF. Alignment occurs when a group of units of competency equate to the characteristics of an AQF qualification, as set out in the *AQF Implementation Handbook* (2007).

The key to the qualification level, therefore, is not in the individual unit, but in the selection and packaging of units for assessment purposes. For the candidate, however, once recognition of a single unit of competency has been achieved, it is carried forward as credit towards the achievement of a qualification at any level in which the unit appears.

When a unit of competency is part of a higher-level qualification, or when it is clustered with other units (see Section 2.6) of a different AQF level or with a very different generic/employability skills profile, it is important not to inflate the performance requirements of the unit.

Strategies

- Consult the Training Package Qualification Packaging Rules for advice on where the unit of competency first appears in the qualification structure and also for advice regarding importing units of competency from other Training Packages. NB: some Training Packages provide advice related to the span of application of a unit of competency across a number of qualification levels.
- The unit is assessed at the level at which it first appears in a Training Package qualification.

Remember

It is important that the unit retain the character of its original performance standard, regardless of the level of the qualification in which the unit is embedded.

2. Managing the evidence gathering process

Other critical decisions that need to be made by assessors include deciding what, and how much evidence will be collected, by whom, and for what purposes, taking into account the fact that assessment decisions must be based on information that complies with the rules of evidence: validity, sufficiency, currency and authenticity.

This section explores several challenges that can arise in the establishment and management of evidence-gathering processes.

2.1 Gathering too much evidence

Challenge

In responding to the challenge of meeting the assessment requirements of Training Package qualifications, assessors can sometimes fall into the trap of overassessment. This may take the form of gathering unnecessarily fine-grained evidence, rather than evidence that supports the integrated/ bigger picture of competency that units of competency seek to describe.

The challenge for RTOs is to collect **sufficient** evidence to enable a judgement to be made regarding a candidate's performance against the requirements of a unit of competency, without creating unmanageable, expensive processes for themselves or making unrealistic demands upon candidates.

Discussion

Section 1.1 discussed identifying and assessing the mandatory components of a unit of competency. Sometimes assessors are tempted to go beyond those requirements and find themselves assessing:

- each performance criterion separately (see section 1.2)
- the dimensions of competency as though they were unconnected
- key competencies/employability skills independently
- all, rather than the applicable, items in the Range Statement
- underpinning rather than required knowledge and skills (see section 1.1).

While each of these components provides significant information to assist with our understanding of the requirements of a unit of competency, it is not the case that each has to be independently assessed.

The **performance criteria** establish the standard of performance required for an element of competency (the smallest building block of competency) but they cannot be assessed as separate, unrelated items (see section 1.2).

The **dimensions of competency** help us to ensure that we are addressing all workplace aspects of competency, (ie task, task management, contingency management and job role/environment skills). However, it is not appropriate to assess dimensions of competency as disconnected entities.

Employability skills embedded in a unit of competency or described in the Employability Skills Summary should be assessed as an inherent part of the skills, knowledge and aptitudes required for effective workplace performance.

Items in the **Range Statement** identify the range of contexts and conditions that may apply to a unit of competency. Statements might include applicable legislation; equipment; locations; or the particular needs of clients. The evidence guide will indicate whether it is necessary to assess some or all of these. Many Range Statements include '**must**' statements, so it is important not to rely solely on the Evidence Guide.

Underpinning knowledge is just that: knowledge that underpins competence. This knowledge may be covered by entry requirements, by previous units of competency, or through the training program. Underpinning knowledge does not need to be assessed separately unless listed in the Critical Aspects of Evidence or shown as **required** knowledge. There are often statements that say that underpinning knowledge is required or must be demonstrated.

Strategies

- Refer to the Training Package Assessment Guidelines and the Evidence Guide for each unit of competency to ensure that all mandatory requirements are incorporated into your assessment tools (see section 1.1).
- Identify opportunities for performance to be assessed holistically, either at the element/unit/cluster of competency level. Undertaking integrated assessment provides you with more opportunities to demonstrate real work tasks and therefore demonstrate the dimensions of competency.
- Refer to the Range Statement to guide your assessment plans/ tools.
- Whilst all the information contained in the Underpinning Knowledge section of the unit of competency may be used to support your training delivery, it is the required knowledge that must be assessed.
- Develop an Evidence Matrix (a map which demonstrates that all requirements have been included in the assessment) for the unit/units of competency.

Remember

Deciding 'how much is enough' requires the professional judgement of an assessor. If you have been guided by the Evidence Guide of a unit of competency and the Training Package Assessment Guidelines, and are comfortable that a candidate can consistently apply their knowledge, skills and attitudes in a range of workplace contexts over time, you will have gathered **sufficient** evidence of competency.

2.2 Knowledge versus performance

Challenge

Competence refers to an individual's capacity to apply their knowledge, skills and aptitudes, ie to perform in the workplace – to an expected standard. New trainers and assessors are often more comfortable in teaching and assessing underpinning knowledge rather than making judgements about performance, which requires the application of knowledge.

The challenge for assessors is to recognise the difference between knowledge and its application and to design appropriate assessment tasks that enable judgements to be made about all aspects of competence.

Discussion

Competence is a combination of both 'know-how' (knowledge) and 'can-do' (performance). The 'know-how' component may be expressed in the Evidence Guide as 'underpinning knowledge', or more recently, as 'required knowledge'. 'Can-do' is expressed through the elements of competency (and their attendant performance criteria) and possibly through a list of 'required skills and attributes' in the Evidence Guide.

'Know-how' and 'can-do' are not surrogates for one another. For example, there is a wide gulf between knowing what is required to make a sales presentation and actually making a presentation. Assessing a candidate's knowledge is not the same as assessing the application of their skills, knowledge and attributes.

Strategies

- Consulting with industry representatives as you develop your assessment strategies/plans will help to eliminate any tendency to assess knowledge outside the context of its application in the workplace.
- Review your assessment plans to ensure that you are capturing sufficient evidence about all aspects of competence.
- Refer to the Training Package Assessment Guidelines and the Evidence Guide for the unit of competency to identify appropriate methods of assessment.

Remember

Competence focuses on the application of knowledge and skills to the standard of performance required in the workplace.

2.3 Using simulated assessment environments

In most cases, the most appropriate environment in which to gather evidence and assess competence is in the workplace. This is not always possible or appropriate and assessors then need to create/use a simulated environment.

Challenge

The challenge is for assessors to create/use realistic simulations that enable valid and reliable assessment to occur and to ensure that assessment decisions made on this basis are considered to be as credible as those made in the workplace.

Discussion

Most units of competency specify the workplace as the first preference for assessment. There may be instances, however, where it is impractical, or even impossible to carry out assessment in the workplace, particularly where issues of safety, environmental damage or cost are limiting factors.

Recognising these limitations, most units of competency indicate that assessment can take place in a simulated environment where candidates perform simulated work tasks.

Some recently developed Training Packages provide guidance on appropriate simulation techniques in the Assessment Guidelines. Situations where simulation would be an appropriate substitute for workplace demonstration include:

- where suitable employment or work placement is not available
- where the workplace does not use the competency involved
- where the assessment of the competency may be disruptive to the workplace
- where demonstration of the competency is dangerous to life, valuable equipment and/or resources
- where confidentiality or privacy must be maintained.

The key to realistic simulations can be found in the four dimensions of competency. To be effective, a simulation must allow for demonstration of:

- task skills (the skills needed to perform a work task)
- task management skills (the skills needed to manage all tasks in the unit of competency or cluster)
- contingency management skills (coping with things that go wrong)
- job/role environment skills (the social and cultural work environment).

Strategies

- Refer to the Training Package Assessment Guidelines for advice on how to make simulations more realistic. If the Training Package doesn't provide sufficient advice, contact the Industry Skills Council for further information. Contact details can be found at www.vetinfonet.det.wa.edu.au.
- Ensure that:
 - a range of up-to-date equipment is utilised
 - time pressures and deadlines are involved
 - difficult customers and colleagues are dealt with
 - occupational health and safety issues are identified and addressed
 - problems are identified and solved
 - competence is demonstrated in conditions that simulate a workplace.

Remember

The attributes of good simulations include incorporating the four dimensions of competency, and aiming to make the situation feel, rather than simply look, like a workplace. Simulations need to reflect the unpredictable, untidy, complex and sometimes frustrating world of real work.

2.4 Reasonable adjustment in assessment

Challenge

Reasonable adjustment is one of those terms that is often used, but not always fully understood. Reasonable adjustment in assessment requires the adoption of flexible and fair approaches to assessment in order to accommodate the diverse needs of candidates.

There are legislative requirements that the principle of Reasonable Adjustment be applied in the design of assessments. The assessment process should not prevent any person from demonstrating their competence, skill or knowledge because the design of the assessment failed to take account of their requirements.

The challenge for RTOs is to ensure that assessors adopt a client-centred approach to learning and assessment in which the principles of flexibility and fairness are applied with the same rigour as the principles of validity and reliability. Adjustments cannot include changes to the mandatory requirements of the unit of competency for the evidence gathering process, or making the competency decision.

Discussion

The Essential Standards for Registration require that RTOs maximise outcomes for candidates by ensuring their needs are met. In order to make appropriate and reasonable adjustments to your teaching and assessment practices, it is critical that you communicate with candidates in order to assess their needs and to determine whether the strategies you plan to adopt will meet their needs.

Strategies

- Refer to another guide in this suite of publications: *Reasonable adjustment – A practical guide to reasonable adjustment in assessment of candidates with disability in VET* (2008).
- When developing your learning and assessment strategy, consider how you would revise your proposed assessment methods/tools to cater for considerations that relate to:
 - age/gender
 - cultural beliefs, traditional practices, and religious observances
 - intellectual and/or physical disability
 - medical requirements of clients
 - language, literacy and numeracy skills.

- If you have a client that requires adjustments to be made to the assessment process to cater for special needs, you could consider some of the options identified in the Training and Assessment Training Package (2004):
 - provide personal support services, such as involving a reader, an interpreter, an attendant carer, a scribe, or a member of the community
 - use adaptive technology or special equipment to support the candidate
 - provide flexible assessment sessions to allow for fatigue or administering of medication
 - format assessment materials, such as Braille, first language, use of audiotape/videotape
 - make adjustments to the physical environment or venue.
- If you require more advice, contact the VET Access Branch of the Department of Education and Training.

Remember

Flexibility and fairness in assessment are requirements of the AQTF. They do not override the requirements for validity and reliability. All four principles of assessment need to work together to ensure that assessment practices are flexible enough to accommodate difference without compromising the validity and reliability of judgements about competence.

2.5 Language and literacy requirements

Challenge

Language and literacy skills influence the performance of almost all workplace tasks and underpin most employability skills. The ability to use technology, manage change, and communicate and work constructively with people requires a basic foundation of language and literacy skills.

The challenge for RTOs is to ensure that the language and literacy requirements embedded in units of competency are not overlooked **and** that they are assessed in ways that are consistent with the actual requirements of the unit/units of competency being assessed.

Discussion

We use language all the time. We express our thoughts, interpret our experiences and mediate our actions through language. It is not surprising, therefore, to find that we tend to depend heavily upon language to assess other people. Sometimes we make the mistake of asking oral or written questions that seek oral or written responses even when we are really interested in actions. There are many occasions where a candidate could demonstrate a competency but might not be able to put their actions into words.

Assessments **must not** require candidates to have language and literacy skills beyond those intrinsically required by the elements/unit/units of competency being assessed.

Particular care needs to be taken when assessing students with limited English literacy, not to employ language-intensive assessment strategies that are not required by the unit of competency.

Strategies

- Review the unit of competency being delivered and assessed and ensure your learning and assessment strategy does not place inappropriate demands on candidates' language and literacy skills.
- Discuss the language and literacy requirements required on the job with a range of stakeholders, including employers and other RTOs/assessors through moderation sessions to gain a clear understanding of what the industry requirements are.
- When ensuring that candidates receive training, assessment and support services that meet their individual needs, consider whether you have sufficient expertise and resources to provide language and literacy support or whether you will need to engage specialist expertise or refer your candidate to external agencies for support.
- Make sure that prospective candidates are told what your organisation can and cannot do to provide support.
- When planning how you will assess the employability skills embedded in a Training Package qualification, remember that language and literacy are an important part of most employability skills and their facets.

Remember

Assessment tools and processes must not overlook language and literacy requirements; nor should they require candidates to have language and literacy skills beyond those intrinsically required by the unit of competency being assessed and the workplace.

2.6 Clustering units of competency

Challenge

Many assessors are aware that clustering units of competency is both an effective and efficient learning and assessment strategy.

The challenge is to ensure that the selection of units within a cluster interact in ways that reflect actual workplace functions or tasks.

Discussion

There are many advantages to be gained by clustering units of competency. These include:

- increasing the efficiency of delivery and assessment by teaching and assessing several units of competency together. This is particularly valuable where the units share a common application and/or share the same required knowledge
- reflecting the complexity of the workplace, where many competencies need to be applied simultaneously
- addressing the dimensions of competency, where individual units of competency don't reflect all four dimensions (see section 2.1)
- providing a basis for integrated/holistic evidence gathering
- catering for co-requisite units of competency (see section 1.3).

It is important when units are grouped, that all elements of competency are assessed and that the assessment plan shows how this is done. It is important, where possible to minimise the following risks:

- Clustering together units which do not share the same AQF level characteristics or a similar employability skills profile.
- Mixing together units of competency to form an element 'stew', where no unit is recognisable as a distinct entity. This may cause problems for some entry-level candidates.
- The creation of overly large clusters. One of the purposes of the unit approach was to create a set of reasonably small and readily attainable outcomes. Combining too many units may create very large and unwieldy assessment tasks.
- Invalid judgements. While holistic/integrated evidence gathering is very useful, judgements about evidence need to be based on the verification that each unit requirement has been demonstrated (see section 3.3).

Strategies

- Refer to the Training Package for advice on clustering units of competency. In some instances, this advice may be explicit and include clustering arrangements and co-requisite requirements.
- Consider any identified Skills Sets and whether they can be clustered for learning and assessment purposes.
- Discuss clustering options at moderation meetings, to gain consensus among trainers/assessors on the requirements of local industry.
- Undertake a mapping of the units of competency that will be included in the cluster, as some units may duplicate knowledge and skill requirements. This mapping document will also enable you to choose appropriate methods, construct meaningful assessment tools and demonstrate that you are capturing all the evidence requirements.

Remember

Make sure that your assessment plan demonstrates how all elements of competency have been addressed.

2.7 Third-party evidence gathering

Challenge

Assessors sometimes use third-party evidence gathering techniques to support their assessment decisions.

The main challenge for RTOs is to ensure that the evidence collected by others enables them to make assessments on the basis of evidence that meets the rules of evidence: validity, sufficiency, currency and authenticity.

Discussion

Assessment involves 1) gathering evidence and 2) making professional judgements about competence on the basis of that evidence. Third-party witnesses who are not trained assessors can be assigned to **gather** the evidence. These people, usually supervisors or co-workers, are often incorrectly referred to as third-party assessors rather than evidence gatherers.

Only **assessors**, however, who have the competences determined by the National Quality Council and who meet other requirements specified in the AQTF, can make assessment judgements.

The ability to utilise third-party evidence gatherers is a powerful aspect of competency-based assessment. It enables the assessor to extend the evidence-gathering process beyond the classroom and into workplaces and, in some cases, communities. It also involves considerable risk, if the evidence-gatherers do not fully understand what is expected of them or do not have the necessary skills or tools to be effective.

Strategies

- It is possible to minimise the risk by using the following common-sense strategies:
 - Select third-party evidence-gatherers wisely. You need to know that they are well placed to observe the candidate for extended periods of time and that they understand the aspects of competency that they will be observing. Check whether the Training Package Assessment Guidelines that govern your assessment activities specify any particular requirements for third party evidence gatherers.
 - Prepare them thoroughly. Make sure they have read the relevant assessment plan and any questions they may have are clarified.
 - Provide them with a comprehensive briefing on their specific part in the evidence gathering process.
 - Provide them with any relevant observation protocols, checklists or other tools. Ensure they understand how to use these tools.
 - Provide them with as much support as possible. For example, invite them to participate in relevant professional development activities.
 - Encourage accountability. Ensure that they are willing to sign their name to the evidence, to defend their record, and to participate in quality assurance monitoring.
 - Monitor their evidence gathering and recording practices by building in a way of checking the quality of their evidence very early in the evidence gathering process.

Remember

As the assessor, you make and are accountable for the judgement about whether or not the candidate is competent or not yet competent. To do this, you need to feel confident in the quality and quantity of the evidence gathered by others.

2.8 Workplace evidence gathering

Challenge

Most Training Package Assessment Guidelines specify the workplace as the preferred location for assessment.

The challenge for all assessors is to plan and conduct workplace-based assessments that minimise the disruption to employers and, at the same time enable the collection of valid, sufficient, current and authentic evidence of competency.

Discussion

The AQTF states that RTOs should, where appropriate, involve workplace personnel in aspects of the planning and delivery of training and assessment. In many ways, involving employers and others in this way will make them more open to using workplace settings for assessment, where it is possible to do so.

However, workplaces can be chaotic places to conduct assessments and can present a number of challenges, including the following:

- Workplace practices may not exactly reflect the requirements of the unit of competency.
- The seasonal nature of work means that not all competencies of interest are being used all the time (for example, harvesting, stocktaking and budget planning may occur at quite different times of the year).
- The unique structure of individual workplaces means that opportunities to demonstrate units of competency may not exist, (eg where work has been outsourced, equipment is inappropriate, or the range of clients is narrow).
- Workplaces may find assessment processes disruptive or threatening, or at the very least an unwelcome distraction.
- Workplaces may have limited value as a venue for assessing required knowledge.

Strategies

- Some challenges can be resolved through the use of off-the-job simulation (see section 2.3), additional work placements, job exchanges and by extending evidence-gathering processes to embrace different aspects of the work cycle (seasonal changes, for example).
- Strategies to engage businesses willingly in workplace assessment practices include:
 - making explicit the practical relationship between skills development, assessment and the enterprise's business strategy
 - suggesting that the evidence-gathering process could be extended and used to support other organisational practices such as the management of performance or the analysis of training needs.

Remember

You will need to work with employers and other workplace personnel to develop strategies to conduct quality workplace-based assessments. Keeping them fully informed will help to facilitate their engagement.

2.9 Online and distance assessment

Challenge

Online and distance learning and assessment is an attractive option for many candidates, especially those in regional and remote Western Australian locations.

The challenge for RTOs and assessors is to ensure that assessment occurring online or at a distance is conducted in accordance with the principles of assessment, ie validity, reliability, flexibility and fairness, and the rules of evidence, ie validity, sufficiency, currency and authenticity. Authenticity is one of the biggest challenges.

Discussion

Regardless of the mode of learning and assessment, all candidates should receive training, assessment and support services that meet their individual needs.

Assessors need to be confident that:

- the evidence provided online or from a distance reflects the performance of the candidate and not someone else
- they have obtained evidence of the application of knowledge and skills
- resources are available to observe the application of skills and knowledge in a range of contexts
- they can provide support to online or distance candidates so that they enjoy a level of preparation equal to candidates assessed in person.

Strategies

- Make use of new technologies where possible. Some candidates may be able to access webcams, or send images via video or mobile phone as evidence.
- Use third-party evidence-gatherers where possible to authenticate and validate the assessment (see section 2.7).
- Use a portfolio that requires evidence to be drawn from a wide range of training related experiences, work experiences, leisure, and home and community activities. This is a useful strategy that could be validated by a third party to satisfy questions related to currency and authenticity.
- Face-to-face observation. This can be achieved either through the assessor travelling to the candidate or the candidate attending an assessment venue. Such observations could be used to validate and authenticate evidence already accumulated through third-party observation, portfolios or new technology.
- Discuss evidence with the candidate to support judgements about its authenticity.
- Refer to the Training and Assessment Training Package units TAADEL405A (Coordinate and facilitate distance-based learning) and TAADEL501A (Facilitate e-learning) for other useful ideas.

Remember

Make sure you use a wide range of strategies when collecting your evidence for online and distance assessments.

2.10 Assessor panels

Using assessment teams or assessment panels can add value to an RTO's assessment strategies and practices.

The challenge for RTOs is to ensure that assessment panels are clear about their terms of reference and that assessment teams don't become unwieldy, expensive to maintain, or overwhelming for candidates.

Discussion

It is quite common for an assessment expert and a vocational expert to work as a team to make assessment judgements. The National Quality Council (NQC), responsible for determining the training and assessment competencies held by trainers and assessors, has determined that in certain prescribed circumstances persons may work together to conduct an assessment.

However, some industry areas also bring together teams of individuals who bring specialised expertise to the process of determining a candidate's competence. If vast expertise is recruited for this purpose, then the team can become quite large and the process can become quite unwieldy. A large assessment team, which includes industry representatives, employer representatives, regulators and administrators, will be expensive and in many cases unnecessary.

Some RTOs have also established formal assessment panels whose mandate is to provide high level administrative and policy advice to trainers, assessors and management teams in order to foster consistency and confidence in the assessment service of the RTO. Industry representatives, managers or assessment experts and assessors are appointed to monitor the area of assessment they are responsible for.

In considering the use of an assessment panel, it is important to first determine the ways in which the expertise of others will strengthen your assessment processes and make sure that any invitation you extend to others makes their role in the assessment process quite clear.

Some of the functions that an assessment panel might fulfil that can add credibility and instil confidence in the quality of assessment decisions include:

- reviewing assessment strategies
- reviewing assessment outcomes
- determining what constitutes reasonable adjustment
- providing advice on and signing off assessment strategies
- developing assessment exemplars
- overseeing professional development for assessors
- providing a network of mentors and coaches for assessors.

Strategies

- Contact local industry/ employer groups to discuss the role that they could undertake in providing expertise at the planning stage.
- Identify and clarify the roles that you want members of assessment panels or teams to undertake.
- Identify the skills that you require of the assessment team to meet the NQC and Training Package requirements for assessor competence.
- Where a team is used to undertake assessment, clearly explain to candidates the reason for each member's appointment to the team, and their specific role in the assessment process.

Remember

Using an assessment team or panel can add credibility, quality and confidence to the assessment process, but it may also add unnecessary costs to the assessment process, and may be daunting for the candidate if not properly planned and managed.

3. Using evidence to make good judgements

Two important steps in the assessment process include the gathering of evidence and the making of assessment judgements on the basis of that evidence.

This section explores four challenges associated with evidence gathering and making assessment decisions.

3.1 Gathering enough evidence

Challenge

In section 2.1 we discussed the challenge of overassessment.

In this section we discuss the challenge of collecting sufficient evidence over time in order to make an assessment judgement about the competency of a candidate.

Discussion

In earlier Training Packages, the amount of evidence needed for assessment purposes was not always clearly indicated. More recently developed/reviewed Training Packages are quite explicit about the amount of evidence required. Some indicate a specific number of assessments, while others refer to 'multiple assessments over a period of time and in a range of contexts', reflecting the reality of most workplaces.

Given that consistency is a critical element of workplace performance, it is important that assessment judgements should be based on evidence collected over a time span that matches the nature of the workplace tasks being assessed, in a range of situations and including occasions where contingency management is needed.

Except in cases where the number of assessments is specified, you need to make sure that:

- your observations have occurred over time in a range of contexts and a variety of situations
- your collection of evidence allows you to observe the candidate over sufficient time to demonstrate the handling of a range of contingencies
- your observations over time or in different contexts have provided corroborating evidence of the candidate's competence.

Strategies

- Read the Training Package Assessment Guidelines for advice related to the requirement of conducting assessments over time and in a range of contexts.
- Discuss strategies for collecting sufficient evidence with other RTOs and assessors at moderation forums.

Remember

You need sufficient evidence gathered from a range of contexts and from different points in time, to enable you to judge the candidate's competence. Competence means that the candidate can consistently perform the tasks from the unit of competency to the standard required in the workplace.

3.2 Judgement without marks

Challenge

Many of our clients do not understand competency-based training and assessment. This is partly due to the way that most assessments are reported, and partly because they are used to being assessed against the performance of other students, rather than against established criteria.

The challenge for RTOs is to feel confident when making assessment judgements against established competency standards and to be able to provide useful advice on this criterion-referenced assessment to candidates and employers.

Discussion

From infancy each of us has been assessed against norms. Our weight, our IQ, and our performance at school and in sport have all been judged by comparison with others. Competency-based approaches seek to redress this problem by establishing well-defined and fixed standards towards which individuals can strive and against which each can be assessed.

These standards are derived from real life, so they do represent a kind of norm, and when combined to form a qualification, they are graduated across a scale (the AQF) so that they represent a range of levels. Integral to competency-based learning is the fact that the standards are known by the candidate **before** they engage upon the learning and assessment pathway, and are not therefore dependent upon the performance of a particular cohort of learners or candidates.

From childhood each of us has been assessed by marks: numbers assigned to our performance and calculated to provide a total that can be compared to others to produce a rank or a normative score. It is a process so familiar to us that we are perplexed when it is challenged. *Consider the following table:*

Unit requirement (each marked out of 5)	Ann	Bill	Chris	Don	Evan	Fred
Requirement V	5	5	5	5	0	4
Requirement W	5	5	5	0	5	4
Requirement X	5	5	0	5	5	4
Requirement Y	5	0	5	5	5	4
Requirement Z	0	5	5	5	5	4
Unit Total (out of 25)	20	20	20	20	20	20

Each of these candidates earned the same total marks (80 per cent), but you can readily see that they are not the same. The conversion of performance into marks may be acceptable for a single requirement (5 is better than 4, which is better than 0), but we cannot add the marks without destroying important information and creating a less meaningful result. The loss of information might not only lead to an error of judgement. It also hides useful information for guidance and further assessment.

The same table, now in competency format, is far more useful.

Unit requirement (each marked out of 5)	Ann	Bill	Chris	Don	Evan	Fred
Requirement V	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗
Requirement W	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗
Requirement X	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✗
Requirement Y	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗
Requirement Z	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗

We would replace a '5' with a '✓' and anything less than a '5' with a '✗', and it would be clear that none of the candidates had achieved competence, that Fred has work to do to reach criterion on every unit requirement, and the others have just one requirement each to work on. Behind every '✗' would be evidence that revealed why the requirement had not been met, and that would provide the necessary guidance for further learning. We don't need numbers, norms or ranks, we just need real standards to which we can say yes '✓' or no '✗'.

Strategies

- Discuss the concept of competency-based training and assessment with your peers to gain a clearer understanding of the benefits of the system for your clients.
- Develop a brief handout for clients to explain competency-based training and assessment.

Remember

Competency-based approaches rely on the establishment of well-defined and fixed standards towards which individuals can strive and against which they can be assessed.

3.3 Making judgements using integrated assessment methods

Challenge

Many assessors use integrated assessment and collect evidence for a cluster of competency standards in a single assessment activity. It is also a requirement that employability skills are assessed with technical skills in an integrated manner. However, there can be some confusion over how judgements are made on this evidence.

The challenge for assessors is to ensure that their judgements are based on verifying that each mandatory requirement of the unit of competency has been demonstrated.

Discussion

The glossary of the Training and Assessment Training Package (TAA04) defines integrated assessment in precisely the same way as holistic assessment used to be defined:

***Integrated assessment** means an approach to assessment that covers the clustering of multiple units and/or elements from relevant competency standards. This approach focuses on the assessment of a 'whole of job' role or function that draws on a number of units and/or elements of competence. This assessment approach also integrates the assessment of the application of knowledge, technical skills, problem solving and demonstration of attitudes and ethics.*

There has been considerable enthusiasm for holistic or integrated assessment, expressed through some Training Package Assessment Guidelines and through other publications promoting effective assessment practices.

Integrated assessment usually involves:

- actual or simulated workplace tasks, especially tasks which require the integration of a range of competencies and associated underpinning knowledge
- the use of analytical skills to solve problems associated with the tasks
- a combination of theory and practice
- the clustering of multiple units of competency in one assessment activity (see section 2.6 for more on clustering).

One of the risks associated with integrated assessment is that assessment judgements may not be made correctly. While it is important to gather evidence holistically, it is not always as easy to make judgements about the evidence. We have to be certain that what we think we are seeing in an assessment is the same as what the evidence is telling us.

Assessment judgements based on holistic or integrated evidence need to be based upon the verification that each distinct unit requirement has been demonstrated. Failure to do this risks the requirements for validity, reliability, fairness and sufficiency. Other risks associated with integrated assessment are discussed in the section regarding clustering units of competency (see section 2.6).

Strategies

- Use a range of methods and tools to support integrated assessment.
- Ensure that your assessment tool checklists provide sufficient detail for you to be able to record evidence against all the mandatory requirements of each of the units of competency.
- Involve other people in the assessment process for areas that are particularly difficult to assess (see section 2.10).
- Map the assessment to the mandatory requirements in an evidence matrix. See *Guidelines for assessing competence in VET (2008)*.

Remember

Integrated evidence gathering is to be encouraged as it mirrors the actuality of workplace practices. However, we must be certain that our judgements are based on the actual evidence collected, and not what we think we are seeing during an assessment event.

3.4 Challenges to assessment decisions

Challenge

Many assessors are concerned about their liability in relation to assessing candidates. Most assessors also want to avoid complaints and grievances where possible.

The challenge for RTOs and assessors is to ensure that there are appropriate strategies in place to minimise any risk of challenges related to assessment decisions.

Discussion

Under a competency-based system, when we assess a person as competent, we are saying that we have justifiable grounds for saying that this person can demonstrate competence in the way specified in a unit/ units of competency. This means that we are accountable for our professional judgements.

An assessor's decision can be challenged on the basis that:

- the decision maker did not adequately address the standards outlined in the unit of competency
- the assessment was not conducted in accordance with the assessment plan provided to the candidate
- the assessor was influenced by bias or an improper purpose in reaching the decision
- the assessor failed to afford the candidate natural justice in the means and methods of assessment
- the decision failed to take into account relevant considerations or was otherwise unreasonable
- there was a conflict of interest between the assessor and the candidate.

A potential conflict of interest may arise when an assessor is required to undertake an assessment of colleagues, family and/or friends. A conflict or perceived conflict of interest should always be declared and managed by assessors. Not addressing a conflict or perceived conflict of interest may impact on the perceived validity, reliability and fairness of the assessment process. The Training and Assessment Training Package Code of Conduct states as one of its requirements that 'potential forms of conflict of interest in the assessment process and/or outcomes are identified, and appropriate referrals are made, if necessary'.

RTO's are responsible under the AQTF Standards for ensuring that processes are established to ensure that the assessment process is fair and that complaints and appeals are addressed efficiently and effectively.

There have already been legal cases where the assessor has been asked to justify their judgement of a candidate's competence. Clearly, there are implications for RTOs arising from this.

Strategies

Some strategies that RTOs may adopt to avoid the risk of being challenged include:

- ensuring that assessors meet the standards set by the National Quality Council or its successors
- ensuring that staff are supported to continue to develop their competency through professional development and engagement with industry and professional associations
- ensuring that you have established the necessary infrastructure and processes to conduct assessment, manage complaints, grievances and appeals and to obtain stakeholder input and feedback
- showing that you have established the necessary infrastructure and processes for continuous improvement.

Beyond these strategies, responsibility for judgements rests with the assessor. Acceptance of an assessment task by the assessor involves an implied warranty that he or she has the skill required to perform the assessment and an implied promise to exercise that skill.

Some further strategies that an assessor may adopt to avoid the risk of being challenged include:

- being fully aware of your responsibilities in relation to good administration and decision-making. This will reduce, as far as possible, the potential for competency assessments to be flawed, leading to grievances and complaints
- declaring any conflicts or perceived conflicts of interest prior to undertaking any assessment activity
- documenting/recording your assessment process and the basis upon which you make assessment judgements
- ensuring that you comply with the standards, as reflected in the relevant Training Package (including the requirements specified in the Assessment Guidelines) and any relevant legislation or guidelines that are industry specific
- being careful not to over-inflate the assessment requirements due to what you think should be assessed
- making sure that you are familiar with all relevant legislation governing your assessment activities – in particular occupational health and safety legislation and regulations including those related to the licensing of high risk work activities
- adhering to the Code of Conduct as outlined in the Training and Assessment Training Package.

Remember

Under a competency-based system, you are accountable for the assessment decisions you make. Good practice in your systems and processes, documentation, and ongoing development of your vocational and assessment competencies, are key to managing the risks associated with assessment.

4. Providing feedback and guidance to candidates

This section explores the challenge of providing information that enables candidates to maximise the outcomes of their training and/ or assessment.

4.1 Information to candidates

Challenge

The information, advice and support that candidates are able to access before, during and after their training and assessment is likely to be an important determinant of a candidate's level of satisfaction with the assessment process – a quality indicator for RTOs.

The challenge for trainers and assessors is to ensure that they provide candidates with the right amount of useful information and support at the right time.

Discussion

All candidates need to be provided with information, advice and support services before, during and after the assessment (including RPL) process.

Prior to enrolment the candidate needs clear information about course information, including content, vocational outcomes, having their prior learning recognised, support services provided by the RTO and any other related information that will assist the candidate to choose the RTO that is right for them.

Before assessment the candidate needs to know the 'what' the 'when' and the 'how' of assessment. The candidate also needs to know what assessment options (including RPL) are available to them.

During assessment the candidate needs to know what aspects of competency they are expected to demonstrate. The candidate also needs to know what tasks they must perform, what resources are available, and any time constraints or other conditions that apply.

After assessment, the candidate needs to know which aspects of competency were demonstrated, which were not, why they were not, and what actions could be taken to redress the deficit.

Strategies

- Ensure that all staff who have contact with candidates prior to enrolment are equipped with the knowledge, skills and attributes to direct candidates to appropriately informed or specialist staff within your organisation.
- At the commencement of the course, provide candidates with an overview of the units of competency that will be delivered and assessed and provide a reminder about the support services that they can access.
- Provide a copy of an assessment plan, which identifies what will be assessed, how it will be assessed, when it will be assessed and any other useful information for the candidate. It is important that this information is written in user-friendly, plain English.
- Provide the candidate/s with an opportunity to ask questions and clarify requirements, in accordance with the standards that would be expected in the workplace. Provide feedback to the candidate at the conclusion of the assessment activity. Ensure that your assessment tools are designed to facilitate feedback related to their demonstration of competence and/or areas where they need further development.

Remember

Competency-based assessment should be an inclusive process for all parties. Inclusiveness is best achieved when information is accurate and provided in an appropriate form; when communication about progress is timely; and when candidates are provided with support that helps them to achieve their particular learning goals.

5. Setting up and using Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) processes

This section explores four challenges associated with Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL).

5.1 Recognition Terminology

Recognition terms, such as Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), Recognition of Current Competency (RCC) and Credit Transfer are often used in ways that confuse even those who are working within the education and training system.

The challenge for assessors is to keep up to date with nationally agreed changes to recognition terminology.

Discussion

Skills Recognition is not mentioned in the AQTF. Instead the following terms are used.

Recognition of Prior Learning is a term that has been used in a number of different ways by practitioners, researchers and policy makers over the last decade. These differences have led to some confusion about what RPL is or does.

The national AVETMISS (V.6) definition for **Recognition of Prior Learning** (RPL), which was agreed to nationally and applied in January 2007, states that:

RPL involves the assessment of previously unrecognised skills and knowledge an individual has achieved outside the formal education and training system. RPL is an assessment process that assesses the individual's non-formal and informal learning to determine the extent to which that individual has achieved the required learning outcomes or competency standards.

Recognition of Current Competency (RCC) is a term that in the past has been used interchangeably with the term Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). However, since 1 January 2007, a new nationally agreed definition has been in use in the VET sector.

Recognition of current competency (RCC) applies if a client has previously successfully completed the requirements for a unit of competency or module and is now required (eg by a licensing authority) to be reassessed to ensure that the competence is being maintained. In this case no extra skill or competencies are nationally recognised. An unsuccessful RCC assessment does not invalidate the previous competent assessment outcome. (National AVETMISS (V.6) definition)

Credit Transfer is another recognition term that is sometimes confused with RPL. However, there is an essential difference. RPL is an assessment of individual competencies, while credit transfer assesses a course/units/modules against another to determine the extent to which there is a match.

Credit transfer, as defined in the terminology guide for the *AQTF 2007 Essential Standards for Registration*,

.....assesses the requirements of an initial course or subject that the individual is using to claim access to, or the award of credit in, the destination course. The assessment is used to determine the extent to which the achievement of the previous qualification is equivalent to the required learning outcomes, competency outcomes, or standards in another qualification. This may include credit transfer based on formal learning that is outside the AQF framework.

Strategies

- Refer to the *AQF National Principles and Operational Guidelines for Recognition of Prior Learning and Recognition of Prior Learning – An assessment resource for VET practitioners* (2008). Available on www.vetinfonet.det.wa.edu.au.

Remember

RPL is a true competency-based assessment process that must comply with AQTF Standards.

5.2 Quality Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) processes

Challenge

RPL is an assessment only pathway that provides for the formal recognition of the skills and knowledge a person has regardless of how or where these skills may have been obtained. Superficial RPL assessment processes seriously threaten the credibility of VET qualifications.

The challenge for RTOs is to develop policies and procedures that ensure the process is conducted and viewed as a quality and rigorous assessment process.

Discussion

The inclusion of RPL under the guidelines for general assessment in AQTF standards emphasises the fact that RPL assessments must be treated in the same manner as all other forms of assessment. There can be no difference between the standard of assessment conducted as part of RPL, and assessment conducted as part of a training program.

As is the case for all assessments, an assessor judging evidence gathered for an RPL assessment must ensure that the evidence is valid, sufficient, current and authentic.

Strategies

- Ensure that you have a process for RPL. Refer to the AQF National Principles and Operational Guidelines for Recognition of Prior Learning which are in *Australian Qualifications Framework Implementation Handbook Fourth Edition 2007* and the *Recognition of Prior Learning – An assessment resource for VET practitioners* (2008). Available in hard copy and on www.vetinfonet.det.wa.edu.au
- Provide all clients with information about RPL.
- Discuss your RPL process with other assessors and/or RTOs to identify opportunities for continuous improvement. This may be undertaken through moderation activities
- Consider the strategies outlined in sections 5.3 and 5.4 of this publication.

Remember

RPL may enable a candidate to bypass or short cut training, but it does not allow them to bypass or short cut assessment. The Assessment Guidelines of all Training Packages make this point very clearly.

5.3 Evidence for RPL

Challenge

The challenge for RTOs is to apply appropriate assessment methodologies and tools when recognising prior learning and to develop clear guidelines and advice for applicants to facilitate the collection of evidence for the units of competency for which recognition is sought.

Discussion

RPL needs to be based upon the mandatory requirements of the units of competency for which recognition is being sought (see section 1.1). The assessment methods that are employed by the RTO need to be fit for purpose. In the past, the predominant method for RPL has been to instruct the candidate to collect a portfolio of evidence to be presented for assessment. In many cases, however, this method was found to be isolating, excessively demanding, and not always a reliable indicator of competence. It is now widely considered that a portfolio of documents and other artefacts, on its own, is unlikely to be an appropriate methodology in many cases.

The 2006-2007 TAFE WA Trade Skills Recognition Project developed a task-based process for RPL that promotes holistic, task-based assessment, and which focuses upon relating assessment activities to actual job tasks (for a full description of this model, see *Recognition of Prior Learning: An assessment resource for VET practitioners*, 2008). The intention of this model is to streamline and simplify recognition processes for prospective candidates.

Integral to a task-based approach to RPL is the collection of initial evidence via self-assessment, and an assessor interview where the candidate is invited to give a verbal demonstration of their knowledge in relation to certain key questions or topic areas. This would then ideally be followed by direct observation of tasks performed in either an actual or simulated workplace, with the observed tasks mapped directly to the critical aspects of evidence from the unit(s) of competency.

However, portfolios or individual pieces of documentary evidence can be used to provide supporting evidence at the self-assessment or interview stage to help determine if the candidate can be 'excused' the training and is ready to be formally assessed. Also, documentary evidence may be provided to complement the demonstration and observation of tasks in an actual or simulated workplace environment.

Strategies

- Remember that you are required to provide the same level of information and support to candidates seeking recognition of their prior learning, as you do to students undertaking a training program leading to an assessment of competence.
- The collection of evidence via assessor interview and direct observation of tasks provides a more effective, accurate and interactive form of assessment than methods that rely largely upon historic, paper-based evidence.
- A portfolio of evidence may be used as supporting, supplementary evidence to reinforce the competencies displayed either in the interview or task observation processes. They should not, on their own, be considered as evidence of competence.

Remember

There is no one RPL assessment process that is suitable for all qualifications and all situations, and a task-based model provides a more flexible and dynamic approach for the assessment and recognition of prior learning than one based primarily upon documentary and knowledge-based evidence. An RTO that has a quality RPL process will also benefit, not least by retaining a reputation as an organisation that only recognises those who have demonstrated that they are competent.

5.4 Inclusive RPL Practices

Challenge

RPL, like any other assessment, must be conducted according to the principles of assessment and meet the requirements of the rules of evidence. The challenge for RTOs is to ensure that their RPL process is rigorous without being unmanageable or resource-intensive, and that it is flexible enough to accommodate the diverse pathways by which individuals may have developed and applied their skills and knowledge.

Discussion

To make a fair judgement, evidence needs to be gathered from a range of contexts over a period of time. Some RTOs find it simpler to require RPL candidates to complete the same assessments as those undertaken by students enrolled in a course. The decision to require RPL candidates to complete all course-based assessments, however, may be an expensive burden on the RTO.

Additionally, the fact that the RPL candidates enjoy none of the support networks that are part and parcel of training delivery means that they may need special assistance and support while undertaking those assessments.

In the past, many RTOs have favoured the use of portfolios of paper-based evidence as the focus of their RPL processes. While there is value in a portfolio of evidence, as an assessment tool it also has its limitations, as discussed in section 5.3 above. Such methods are now considered too static and inflexible to be useful indicators of competence, and furthermore fail to meet the criteria of inclusiveness,

For some candidates, the expectation of providing a largely documentary-based archive of evidence of competency might constitute an insurmountable barrier to having their skills recognised. For instance, a skilled refugee migrant from a war-torn region might not be able to provide such a compilation of documentary evidence, whereas structured interviews or direct observation in an actual or simulated workplace environment would provide them with an opportunity to demonstrate their competence in a practical context.

Strategies

- RPL processes need to be flexible enough to accommodate the needs of candidates from a diverse range of experiential and cultural backgrounds. It is for this reason that excessive reliance on the documentary or portfolio approach should be discouraged.
- Putting in place RPL processes based upon the task-based model outlined in 5.3 will ensure that your assessment process are sufficiently flexible and inclusive while remaining rigorous and based upon quality evidence.
- See *Recognition of Prior Learning: An assessment resource for VET practitioners* (2008).

Remember

Your RPL process needs to be as rigorous as your other assessment processes and should involve gathering a range of evidence. It should also be flexible enough to accommodate the diversity of pathways by which people arrive at competency.

6. Validating assessment strategies

This section explores two challenges around **validating assessments** and recommends strategies to address them.

6.1 Assessing your assessment strategies

Challenge

While most of us are comfortable with assessing our candidates, we are often less comfortable with assessing our assessments. How do you know if your assessment strategies are any good? What can you do when two assessors differ in their judgement of the same evidence?

The challenge for assessors is to participate in validation and moderation processes to continuously improve assessment practices and processes.

Discussion

It is no accident that assessment is the dominant issue in the AQTF and in Training Packages. This preoccupation with assessment reflects the reality that without quality assessment there can be no credible certification. We cannot, therefore, take our assessment judgements for granted. We must be prepared to put them to the test.

The AQTF, with its strong focus on continuous improvement, requires that assessment materials are systematically reviewed and improved. You can validate your assessment strategies by:

- reviewing – looking at your assessment processes, evidence-gathering tools, evidence records and judgements to ensure that they comply with the principles of good assessment (valid, reliable, flexible and fair) and the rules of evidence (valid, sufficient, current and authentic)
- comparing – comparing assessment processes, evidence gathering tools, evidence records and judgements made by different assessors for the same units of competency
- evaluating – seeking reactions to your assessment processes, evidence-gathering tools, evidence records and judgements from key stakeholders including industry and candidates.

These processes encompass assessment moderation, and go well beyond it. They also go beyond merely 'eyeballing' the assessment documentation to assert that it looks right.

With assessment, the acid test is that different assessors independently come to the same judgement about the same candidate on the same unit of competency, regardless of their means of gathering evidence.

When assessors differ in their judgement we need to identify the source of the disagreement. Unclear and ambiguous competency standards are a common source of variation. Moderation sessions established to achieve consensus can reduce differences such as these.

Collaborating with other qualified assessors is a key aspect of validating assessment strategies. However, other stakeholders need to be involved as well, particularly in evaluation. Stakeholders who should be consulted include the candidates, third-party evidence-gatherers (see section 2.7), vocational experts, employers and industry representatives (see section 6.2).

It is quite possible that the validation of assessment may identify that the assessment strategy does not need change, as it meets all requirements. What is important is that the review has verified the integrity of the assessment and provided evidence of ongoing continuous improvement.

Strategies

- Participate in established moderation networks – check www.vetinfonet.det.wa.edu.au to identify if there are networks established in Western Australia in your industry.
- Read the publication *A guide to continuous improvement of assessment in VET* (2008), to get a clearer understanding of what is required in validating assessment strategies, including moderation advice.

Remember

Quality assessment is the lynchpin of the VET system and you need to have in place a number of strategies to validate your assessment processes.

While assessor networks can do much to disseminate shared understandings, ultimately Training Package developers need to be advised of areas of ambiguity and of shared interpretations in order to improve the unit in the next version. Contact the Industry Skills Council to provide feedback on the Training Package.

6.2 Industry input

Challenge

Under the AQTF, RTOs are required to develop assessment strategies in consultation with enterprises and industry. However, RTOs are also required to ensure that they follow the requirements of Training Packages, which have been developed with a national focus. Sometimes local industry requirements differ from the requirements of a Training Package, leaving RTOs in a difficult position.

The challenge for RTOs is to ensure that both requirements are met. Assessment judgements must be made against the national Training Package standards.

Discussion

The AQTF encourages RTOs to consult with industry. RTOs are required to collect and analyse stakeholder and client feedback and satisfaction data on the services they provide and to develop assessment strategies 'in consultation with enterprises/industry'. When using the workplace for assessment, it is a requirement that the RTO negotiates the assessment strategy with the employer.

These requirements for consultation are important, as it is crucial that assessments meet workplace and regulatory requirements. The potential problem inherent in these consultations is that they may result in inappropriate and invalid changes in assessment standards. There have been a number of examples where a local industry group has sought to impose additional criteria for qualification, to amend a unit of competency by deleting a locally irrelevant element, or even to delete an entire unit of competency from the core of a qualification.

The standards laid down by the Training Package are not negotiable. They represent industry's voice, expressed through an extensive national consultation and design process. Once endorsed, these standards provide the basis for national consistency and national recognition and assessment must be conducted against these standards.

Strategies

- Use the option of customisation and contextualisation (see section 1.4) to reflect local industry needs. Using this strategy, the adjustments will not challenge the standards, but allow the local needs to be addressed directly.
- If the Training Package doesn't reflect your client needs, you should provide feedback and input into the next revision of the Training Package. You may also encourage local industry/enterprises to participate in this activity. Information regarding the status of Training Package reviews may be found at www.vetinfonet.det.wa.edu.au

Remember

Consultation with industry is about seeking advice, not direction. The RTO is answerable only to their candidate, the Training Package, the AQF and the AQTF.

7. Minimising documentation

This section explores a key challenge of the competency-based system **documentation** and suggests some strategies for managing the level of paperwork.

7.1 Over documentation

Challenge

A frequent observation of RTO staff and auditors is the increased burden of documentation associated with the advent of competency based training and assessment and the introduction of the AQTF.

The challenge for trainers/assessors is to develop processes for managing the documentation required to support quality training and assessment and at the same time satisfy the requirements of the AQTF.

Discussion

One reason for over-documentation is a desire to reduce the risk of non-compliance with AQTF standards.

Competency based assessment is a replacement for previous forms of assessment, not an addition to it. There have been examples of assessors maintaining their old assessment systems and tools and adding new systems and tools to meet unit requirements, thus doubling their assessment load. In most cases the old assessment resources fail to contribute to the ultimate judgement of competency and could either be dropped or used as self-assessment tools by learners. The remaining competency based components are often less arduous than the system they replace, particularly if a number of strategies to improve efficiency are adopted.

It is also worth remembering that the focus of AQTF 2007 is on the quality of services and outcomes rather than inputs and procedures. It also has a strong focus on continuous improvement. Providing additional documentation does not necessarily demonstrate either compliance or a continuous improvement process. It is more important and more effective to develop good processes, including good assessment validation processes (see sections 6.1 and 6.2), and to then develop relevant and useful paperwork, which reflects and supports these processes.

Strategies

- Clustering units of competency so that evidence-gathering processes (see section 2.6) can be shared will assist to minimise the documentation load of assessment.
- It may be possible for assessors for unrelated units delivered at the same time to share assessment opportunities. For example, a theatre production can provide an opportunity to assess carpenters, electricians, graphic artists, front-of-house staff, and candidates involved in accounting and project planning, as well as directors, actors, musicians and stage managers.
- The development of multi-use documentation, such as a single competency blueprint that is used by candidates, evidence-gatherers and assessors, can also reduce the multiplicity of documentation.

Remember

Working to improve your processes and continuing to develop and refine them is more important than simply providing more and more documentation of your current processes.

References

ANTA 2005, *Learner Guide TAAASS403A Develop assessment tools*

AQF 2007, *National Principles and Operational Guidelines for Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)*. Available: <http://www.aqf.edu.au/rpl.htm>

AQTF 2007, *Essential Standards for Registration*. Commonwealth of Australia 2007. Available: <http://www.training.com.au/portal/site/public/menuitem.7f6d0b4ce2611bea3771b51017a62dbc>

Booth, R et al NCVER 2002, *Maximising Confidence in Assessment Decision-Making: Resource Kit For Assessors*

Bowles, Marcus 2003, *Selecting Assessment Tools*

Department of Education, Science and Training, September 2007, *Training Package Development Handbook*

Department of Education, Science and Training, 2001, *Training Package Assessment Materials Kit (Guides 1-10)*

Department of Education, Science and Training, DEST 2006, *Employability Skills: From Framework to Practice: An Introductory Guide for Trainers and Assessors*. Available at www.training.com.au/documents

Department of Education and Training, 2008, *A guide to continuous improvement of assessment in VET*

Department of Education and Training, 2008, *Recognition of Prior Learning: An assessment resource for VET practitioners*

McKenna, S and Mitchell, J DEST 2006, *RPL Done Well in VET*

VETASSESS 2000, Information Sheet No. 3: *Designing Assessment Resources*



Department of
Education
and Training

Department of Education and Training
151 Royal Street, East Perth WA 6004
T (08) 9264 4681
www.vetinfonet.det.wa.edu.au