Assessment issues in VET: minimising the level of risk

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ISSUES PAPER

Publisher's Note

Prepared by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research on behalf of the Department of Innovation, Industry, Climate Change, Science, Research and Tertiary Education.

Submitted on 16 of November 2012.

About the research

Assessment issues in VET: minimising the level of risk

Sian Halliday-Wynes and Josie Misko NCVER

This report explores some of the key issues associated with assessment in vocational education and training (VET) and reflects on some possible solutions. The authors provide examples from three industry areas where concerns have been raised about the quality of provision and assessment, with some conclusions drawn on the issues raised, specifically relating to childcare and aged care services and the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment (TAE).

Key messages

- Large groups of existing workers in the childcare and aged care services industries have been required to attain or upgrade qualifications to keep abreast of regulatory changes. This has led to some apprehension among training providers and industry about the rigour and consistency of assessments, including the recognition of prior learning (RPL).

- Courses of short duration, coupled with insufficient training, are felt to increase the risk of poor skills acquisition and rigour in assessment, including for entry-level teachers and trainers.

- Inadequate mechanisms for selecting students with the appropriate attributes and motivations for working in the caring occupations (including aged care and childcare) are felt to reduce the quality of training and assessment.

- A lack of systemic validation and moderation processes within and between providers and training systems is reducing the level of confidence in the comparability and accuracy of assessments.

- The tendency on the part of assessors to develop and implement their own assessment tools and materials, as well as system imperatives for assessors to customise assessments to local contexts, may be factors contributing to a reduction in the comparability and accuracy of assessments. The regular use of independent assessors can help to minimise this risk.

- The Certificate IV in Training and Assessment may require more explicit content in relation to assessment if it is to provide teachers and trainers with the levels of underpinning knowledge and practice sufficient for undertaking quality assessments.

- The regular involvement of employers in assessments, including off-the-job assessments, needs to be encouraged.

Tom Karmel
Managing Director, NCVER

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Introduction

There is a lingering perception that graduates from vocational education and training (VET) do not always have the skills, knowledge and work-readiness that their qualifications claim they have. This has led to extended discussions in policy forums about the risks to the quality assessment and credibility of VET qualifications posed by a lack of consistency among providers in the volume, nature and duration of training associated with certain qualifications and the comparability and rigour of assessments. These risks are heightened by a competency-based training system that expects trainers and assessors operating in either institutional or workplace contexts to customise assessments to local and workplace situations and gives them the flexibility to develop and determine how and when they will go about assessing students. The need for all trainers and assessors to assess competency against the standards documented in national training packages seems not to have reduced this level of risk.

This report aims to explore issues of assessment in vocational education and training by examining current practice in certificate III, IV and diploma and above VET qualifications in the areas of training and assessment, children's services and aged care services. The importance of assessment lies in the need for the sector to ensure the credibility of its qualifications as well as the confidence of employers and stakeholders in the assessment processes. To draw out some of the debate occurring on assessment in the VET sector, we have adopted a relatively 'broad lens' approach and canvassed the views of a range of stakeholders, either through direct interview or literature review.

The selection of these qualifications as examples of current assessment practice has been made because they have been identified as posing particular risks. For example, qualifications in training and assessment have been chosen because they are the baseline qualification for VET trainers and assessors and are therefore critical to the preparation of trainers and assessors in workplace or institutional settings. Qualifications in children's services and aged care services enable workers to operate in highly regulated environments (often suffering skill shortages) and to care for vulnerable populations, namely, children and the elderly and frail. The latter groups of qualifications are aimed at qualifying large groups of existing workers already working in the field.

Background

The quality of assessment has been at the forefront of VET policy debates for governments, commentators and industry stakeholders. Recently the Council of Australian Governments (COAG; 2012) has declared one of its key reform targets to be to 'improve the confidence of employers and students in the quality of training courses, by developing and piloting independent validation of training provider assessments and implementing strategies which enable TAFEs to operate effectively in an environment of greater competition'. In fact, at the time of writing, there are a range of assessment moderation and validation pilots being conducted jointly by registered training organisations (RTOs) across Australia.

The system is geared to meet the needs of industry. Employers, through industry skills councils and their relationship with state training authorities and VET providers, have already had a major input into the development of VET programs. They are less involved at the delivery and assessment end of

the learning cycle. This translates into concerns about the quality, including the accuracy, of the assessments. Industry, for example, has indicated concerns over the quality and consistency of assessment, especially the lack of consistency between assessors conducting the assessments and the assessment tools and practices being used. Nevertheless, regular findings from employer surveys and consultations (National Quality Council 2008) that report employers to be generally satisfied with the quality of the skills training of VET graduates and the adequacy of these skills for what they require seem to suggest that this dissatisfaction is not unanimous.

Perceptions of what is meant by and what constitutes 'quality' in assessment have changed significantly in recent years, with key stakeholders holding differing opinions. Bringing clarity to the debate is important because assessment underpins the entire competency-based training system.

There is also a view that not all registered training organisations have the same capacity to assess competency, and that this can in part be alleviated by introducing common assessment tools and good moderation and validation practices across providers (National Quality Council 2008). Employers expect that the training system will provide qualifications with a recognised value in the market and assessment practices that reliably certify that graduates have the knowledge and skills to undertake the competencies specified in training packages. Quality is also important to providers (for their business and reputation), as they also have to be confident in accepting the value of whole or partly completed qualifications under the principles of mutual recognition.

Assessment is considered to be a complex and important part of delivering and certificating learning, yet most of the qualifications designed for VET teachers give relatively little attention to this aspect. In the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment (the forerunner to the Certificate IV in Training and Education [TAE]) the assessment units of competency are minimal, despite assessment being a crucial part. There are also concerns among VET practitioners about their depth of skills for developing and conducting quality assessments (Wheelahan & Moodie 2011). It would seem that the qualification may have been updated, but the issues still remain. Clayton (2009) has noted that 'increasing confidence in assessment' is vital but that it is also reliant on a quality candidate being trained by a quality trainer; that is, a trainer who has a thorough understanding of assessment practices. Trainers are generally left on their own to adapt and contextualise training to meet the varied needs of the students.

Under the Australian Quality Training Framework (2007) and the current Standards for NVR Registered Training Organisations, registered training organisations must ensure they have staff who possess both industry knowledge and assessment expertise. In practice, trainers and assessors are expected to make sure that this is the case. Most trainers interviewed for this study maintain direct links with their industry sector, with some also being currently employed in their area of specialisation. Others sit on industry-specific advisory councils. These activities are considered key components of their professional development and the maintenance of their professional and educational currency. Nevertheless, industry often complains that the system is not producing the skilled workers they want and not in the timeframes they require.

In developing and conducting assessments, it remains important for trainers and assessors to consider questions of the validity, sufficiency, currency and authenticity of the evidence they are using. These issues were formally spelled out in the 'Quality Assurance Guide for Assessment', produced by the former Australian National Training Authority as a resource for the development of assessment guides

in training packages (ANTA 2001).[1] There is also an expectation that assessments will be conducted in a 'fair and reasonable' manner and with rigour. In this regard trainers and assessors are expected to respond to students' particular needs and circumstances and to use methods and materials appropriate to the assessment task. In addition, assessments are made by a diverse range of assessors, who use highly contextualised performance-based tasks and rely on their professional judgment to make decisions (TVET Australia 2010). There are clearly challenges about the extent to which assessments tailored to the individual and to the local environment can be truly considered comparable across a range of contexts (for example, vocational education and training, other educational and industrial contexts).

Findings

The key issues associated with assessment in the qualifications under review mainly relate to managing the threat to the maintenance of consistency and accuracy in assessments. These threats are especially pertinent when large numbers of workers already working in the field require qualifications in quick timeframes. These risks include:

- trainers and assessors not having the depth of assessment skills and knowledge to conduct valid and reliable assessments

- providers not providing enough time for the repeated practice required for demonstration of competency and compromising rigour for quick completions

- students not having adequate access to work placements and adequate supervision in work placements, lacking the basic literacy and numeracy skills to assure success in training or assessment tasks, and not being adequately screened for their suitability for courses

- inadequate rigour applied to assessments, especially to recognition of prior learning (RPL) assessments

- lack of clarity about industry or employer role in assessments

- lack of regular and widespread systematic processes for the moderation and validation of assessments either within or between registered training organisations.

We conclude that there is a compelling case for strengthening the assessments in nationally recognised vocational education and training, especially in circumstances where the quality of assessments may be threatened by a rapid expansion in training delivery and/or registered training organisations. The revisiting of the fundamental principles and objectives for VET assessments in Australia, including a framework for quality in assessments, is timely. These would be supplemented with guidelines for encouraging industry involvement in assessments and explaining how to collect and judge evidence for the recognition of prior learning and identifying ways to supplement online assessments with other evidence. These guidelines might also help to establish some basic moderation and assessment principles and to build up a framework to support quality in assessments.

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[1] Valid evidence reflects real workplace tasks and is based on information gathered from industry experts about the type of evidence required to assess a competency. Sufficient evidence relates to assessors having enough evidence for assessors to be confident in their judgments. Working out the critical nature of the curriculum and the frequency of use of units of competency is one way to determine the extent to which assessors should focus on sufficiency. Currency relates to the currency of the evidence presented by the candidate. Assessors must determine the period of currency that is acceptable, keeping in mind that competence may comprise a mix of current and past evidence. Assessors must also ensure that evidence provided by the candidate is an authentic representation of the candidate's work. Although this can be challenging across the board, it is particularly challenging for online assessments.

Remainder of report

The following sections of the report describe the scope and methodology of the study and the findings on industry involvement in assessments; consistency and quality of assessments; and the role of moderation, validation and regulation. We end with some conclusions about the key issues that arise from the research and provide some reflection on ways in which these issues might be addressed.

Scope and methodology

This research comprises a small-scale investigation into the assessment and validation practices of a selection of registered training organisations delivering the qualifications under review in a bid to explore continuing issues in assessment and considers whether they align with accepted assessment and validation principles. It investigates assessment in the three nominated areas — training and assessment (TAE), aged care and children's services, however, many of the issues we consider here are generic and could apply to all occupations and industries. These three areas were chosen because they are considered to be high risk by the national regulator. The Australian Skills Quality Authority noted in June 2012 that all aged care qualifications needed to be treated as 'potentially high risk'.[2] Children's services qualifications are also similarly identified. In addition, the aged care and children's services sectors are expanding rapidly and demand for skilled people in these fields is high. The Certificate IV in TAE is an important area for investigation because it is the baseline qualification for VET practitioners without higher-level teaching qualifications, and there is continuing concern about the quality of training delivery across registered training organisations and the rigour of assessment.

The authors visited both public and private registered training organisations and employers across South Australia, Victoria, the Australian Capital Territory and Western Australia (see table 1). We spoke to trainers and assessors from four public and four private registered training organisations delivering the Certificate IV and Diploma in Training and Assessment; we also spoke to trainers and assessors from six public and five private registered training organisations delivering the Certificate III, IV and Diploma in both Children's Services and Aged Care Services. Six employers from the education, and children's and aged care services sectors were also interviewed.

Table 1 Provider and employer visits by state/territory and training package qualification

State and territory	South Australia	Victoria	ACT	Western Aust.
Cert. IV TAE	2	1	1	2
Diploma TAE	2	1	1	2
Cert. III/Diploma Children's Services	4	2	1	3
Cert. III/IV Aged Care Services	3	2	1	3

Certificate IV in Training and Education (TAE 40110): this is the minimum-level qualification that trainers and assessors in vocational education and training are required to hold. While many trainers hold degree-level teaching qualifications, the TAE allows practitioners with an industry or occupational background to deliver and assess vocational education and training. The 2008 report, *Investigation into industry expectations of vocational education and training assessment* (National Quality Council 2008), reported concerns with the quality and consistency of the assessments undertaken by registered training organisations delivering the TAA (the training package which preceded the TAE [TAA4104]) and noted issues for consideration. The report identified inadequacies in the assessment of the TAA as a major concern. This is because trainers and assessors who had been assessed as competent would be assessing subjects and qualifications throughout the whole VET system.

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[2] <www.asqa.gov.au/news/1374/working-to-improve-the-quality-of-aged-care-training.html>, viewed 31 July 2012.

The Certificate IV in TAE is an entry-level qualification and many of the trainers interviewed mentioned that there was little encouragement to proceed to the next level of qualification, the Diploma in Training and Assessment. As Clayton found in 2009, it seems there continues to be a lack of support for the 'professional learning of assessors'. In addition, Clayton (2009) noted that, in relation to the TAE's predecessor, the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment, research showed that 'there were considerable concerns about assessment approaches and assessment decision-making'.

Certificate III in Children's Services (CHC30708): the Certificate III in Children's Services covers the skill needs of a wide range of employers in the children services sector and includes eight separate, but related, occupational titles. As a result, the qualification has 11 core units and several dozen elective units, from which four must be chosen, depending on the learner's industry or occupational area. This qualification presents a number of assessment challenges because of the vulnerability of the clients who are the focus of the area. The most obvious is ensuring that the safety and welfare of children under supervision is protected by the rigorous application of the required standards. Maintaining the consistency and comparability of assessments, regardless of whether they are conducted in workplace or institutional settings, is important for all VET qualifications. Achieving comparable assessments for qualifications in children's services presents challenges, particularly for registered training organisations that cover more than one occupational area.

Diploma of Children's Services (Early childhood education and care) (CHC30708): the points made above for the certificate III also apply to the diploma, which is equally challenging from an assessment standpoint. It covers ten occupational titles and has 12 specified units in the entry requirements, 13 core units that must be completed, and learners must choose five elective units from an extensive list.

Certificate III in Aged Care (CHC30208): this qualification covers 18 occupational titles. Learners must complete ten core units and 40 elective units. The 40 elective units are grouped to cover workplace skills in the areas of client support, community care, medication, organisational support, supervision and training, community care, working with people with disabilities or mental health issues, and oral health. There is some overlap with units in children's services qualifications, although a common delivery and assessment arrangement across the two areas seems unlikely. The key issues that have been reported in the aged care area are doubts about the quality of assessments and whether employees implement the required standards in the workplace.

Certificate IV in Aged Care (CHC40108): this qualification covers ten occupational titles. Learners must have completed the six units specified in the entry requirements and complete a further ten core units and five elective units. The elective units are grouped to cover specific workplace skills. Other comments made for the Certificate III in Aged Care apply.

Assessment in practice: the role of industry

The integrity of Australia's system of nationally recognised vocational education and training is dependent not only the quality of teaching and learning provision but also on the quality of assessment. Quality competency-based assessments require the collection of sufficient relevant evidence of demonstrated performance and/or experience and accurate and consistent judgments of competence.

Assessment in vocational education and training has two basic elements: the collection of evidence of each learner's achievements; and the use of that evidence to make judgments about whether learners have met the competency standards as specified in the relevant national training package or modules and course curricula from state or provider accredited courses. The assessor's judgments may relate to a specific subject (unit of competency or module) or apply holistically to a complete qualification in instances where there is a high level of integration among the subjects (National Quality Council 2010). In either case, the quality of VET assessments begins at the subject level and any lack of quality there will flow through to qualifications.

Consistency of assessment remains a concern for industry and employers and has been raised in many forums and in recent reports by Skills Australia (now the Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency) and the Productivity Commission. The foremost risk is that qualifications may be awarded to learners who do not strictly meet all the required competency standards. While it is important that VET qualifications meet the needs of users, particularly employers and learners, it is equally important that the standards specified in national training packages are satisfied. At present, registered training organisations are required to conduct assessments 'in accordance with the principles of assessment and the rules of evidence'. Registered training organisations are required to systematically validate their assessments, and to be effective for quality assurance purposes, the validation needs to be done independently of the assessor. In many VET systems, especially those of Germany, Denmark and Austria, the assessments of competence are graded and this provides a diagnostic tool in quality assurance. In other systems the assessments and the validation of assessments are undertaken by an external body. There is little information on the extent to which moderation processes occur in such systems.

The Certificate IV in TAE is an entry-level qualification and many of the trainers interviewed mentioned that there was little encouragement to proceed to the next level of qualification, the Diploma in Training and Assessment.

Most trainers and assessors who took part in this study claim that they approach assessment in a holistic manner and that it is not helpful to look at assessment as the sum of discrete parts. They prefer to consider the 'whole picture'. To do this the majority of trainers and assessors use a 'clustering' method of delivery and assessment, which helps to meet the skill needs of the employer. Clustering also includes effective strategies to involve the learner, helping the learner make sense of new knowledge and skills and promoting a thorough understanding of the subject matter, rather than their simply learning sets of facts and information to be reproduced when required. This approach also assists students to consider what is important, such as key concepts and principles, relationships

between ideas and relating new concepts to previous knowledge.[3] Many of the trainers who participated in this study stated that a student's competence should be broad-ranging and be reflective. They believed that it is vital for a student to clearly understand the context in which the training and assessing is taking place. It would seem that practitioners are naturally inclined towards formative assessment because it enables them to reflect on how student competency development is progressing throughout the course.

What is clear is that the assessment process starts before the student ever sees a classroom. Larger public providers usually hold orientation days, which help prepare students for the course and also provide an opportunity to consider the assessment tools and discuss the different forms that assessment can take. At this time the course handbook is distributed and students are told they can access 'counselling' in regard to the assessment tasks — many of the students find the concept of assessment quite daunting. Another provider asks students to take part in a 'skills audit' prior to enrolment and the lecturers then assess each student before formal classes begin: this is what the literature terms 'diagnostic' assessment. Within the Certificate IV in TAE, one of the popular models used is for students to film themselves as they deliver a training session. They must show themselves providing training to a couple of different groups and covering different topics. These films are then reviewed and assessed by trainers, with a selection later viewed as part of mid-year or year-end moderation. In some cases the students are also asked to provide generic training to their peer group and to participate in a 'joint learning experience'. This assessment, it is argued, helps the student to contextualise their presentation and think about the different audiences they may face. The model as a rule does not include employer feedback or input.

The role of workplace assessment

Workplace assessment is a vital part of the Australian VET system and there are various methods that providers use to assess their clients. In the case of aged care and children's services it is quite usual for trainers and assessors to share the assessment tools they intend to use with workplaces before the student starts their work placements. This helps to ensure that the assessment tools are current and suitable for the context. In many cases the workplace assessment is also supported by an online component, whereby students are required to keep an online journal during their placement. This journal helps students to reflect on their learning[4] and it can be readily accessed by trainers as required, providing extra opportunities for both formative and summative assessments. Some trainers use this information to give students additional coursework to supplement experiences and reflections and to address issues reported in their workplace journals. The quality of a student's workplace experience, it was claimed, is fundamental to achieving a successful outcome. Moreover, the requirement for students to demonstrate their knowledge and perform critical elements of the role means that the trainer and the workplace should be confident that the student would be deemed competent at assessment.

Many trainers and assessors, especially those working in aged care, felt that the traineeship (that is, a combination of classroom and on-the-job learning generally based on 12—18 months duration) was a good model for the development of workplace competence: the components of the course can be contextualised to the needs of the workplace; the care facility also has 'buy in' because the student is undertaking practical tasks while learning on the job; and assessment of the student by the employer

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[3] <www.vetinfonet.det.wa.edu.au/progdev/docs/t16%20clusteringcompetence_v7.pdf>, viewed 6 August 2012.

[4] Some of the larger TAFE institutes have a smart phone application which supports the journal.

and registered training organisation can be ongoing throughout the program. This thorough and ongoing assessment was considered to ensure both the validity and reliability of training and assessment.

While workplace learning and assessment is seen as the right approach for ensuring that the system produces qualified, work-ready graduates, registered training organisations reported that it can be difficult to find appropriate aged care facilities or childcare centres willing to support students with work placements. This is in part because they are not willing, or do not have the staff numbers, to accommodate one-to-one management to satisfy duty of care requirements. It is, for example, a legal requirement that students undertaking work placement in aged care and childcare facilities are never left alone with either an elderly resident or an infant. This regulation makes it more onerous for aged care facilities or childcare centres to take on students. There is a view among providers that facilities who agree to take on students may not always be conforming to such rules.

Students in aged care and children's services programs are assessed on a range of criteria, including on how they engage with the clients (children or elderly) and also with staff members and visitors. More often than not, the room leader (in childcare) or shift supervisor (usually a Registered Nurse in aged care) assesses the competency of the student over the duration of the placement, with this recorded in the student's workplace journal. Students undertaking work placements are also encouraged to think critically about what they experience and in some cases they do 'self-assess', especially when they are confronted by bad practice. Trainers did say that in such instances students would be removed from the facility and, even though it may be distressing, it is often a useful learning experience for a student to see what *not* to do in the workplace. Many trainers and assessors in aged care may also consider the opinions of their elderly residents, where appropriate, when making assessments of students.

The trainers are in direct contact with the student's workplace supervisor while they are on placement. This model also means that lecturers can have direct contact with students and give feedback throughout the placement. The preferred example of assessment in the workplace seems to be one in which the trainer visits the student on site at least twice during their placement, but some trainers (time permitting) visit weekly. During these visits trainers will discuss with the director of the facility the assessment of the student the workplace supervisor has made and often they too are invited to observe and comment on the practical assessment. The workplace assessment also aims to assess the 'work-readiness' of students.

In aged care, students are, or usually, 'buddied' with an experienced aged care worker. This is to meet industry and occupational, health and safety requirements. It can also be a way of collecting evidence of students' practical experience and some additional assessment. Practical assessment in aged care programs usually involves the student engaging with a client during a busy period of the day. While trainers attempt to make the visits 'random', most trainers often choose the early morning to witness students helping residents to shower and dress, or the evening to witness students helping residents with evening meals or preparing for bed. In this way the units of competency can be assessed in a cluster. Trainers report that this assessment can be quite costly in time, but it is necessary to ensure that the student is doing everything that the unit of competency requires.

Staff members who are responsible for students undertaking work placements in both aged care facilities and childcare centres are required to adequately supervise students but also to reflect on and assess their suitability for the job role. Most trainers and assessors reported that they do listen to the feedback from employers but felt that in the current system it is ultimately the trainer's decision to decide whether a person was competent. Some trainers did comment that, especially in aged care,

the employer would like to be in charge of the assessment, but overall the research uncovered a desire for employers generally to be more proactive in their approach to assessment. In a traineeship, where the employer is directly involved with the training, the employer is responsible for the sign-off of the qualifications.

In both aged care and childcare, the on-the-job assessments are a vital component of the course, for they enable the workplace supervisor to observe the applied knowledge of students and reflect on their work-readiness. It is also not unusual for the best students to be offered jobs at the facilities at which they undertake their work placements. This is often a good indicator of the student's ability and level of competence.

The role of employers in the design and application of assessment tools

There was a prevailing view among providers in this study that employer engagement with the qualification could be improved, especially for aged care or children's services qualifications. Although some employers in these fields are substantially involved, others are less so. Some employers claimed that assessment in the workplace was too time-consuming, while other providers reported that some employers (especially in the assessment of the TAE) encouraged a 'quick sign-off' of assessment to get the qualification completed as rapidly as possible and to minimise employee downtime. On the other hand, there were also employers who were more involved with assessment in the Certificate IV in TAE and felt the extra time the employee needed to obtain the qualification would benefit the employer directly.

All the registered training organisations the research team spoke to were in regular contact with their networks and asked employers to assess their materials and assessment tools at the end of each work placement block. One registered training organisation said that they had found that community-based support was growing within aged care, with some employers becoming more interested in assisting with assessment tools. This involvement was felt to give them greater 'buy in' in ensuring the credibility and relevance of the qualification and the quality of assessment outcomes.

One registered training organisation included employers in all aspects of assessment, including requesting employer input into the planning of assessment schedules and the design of assessment materials. Employers were also involved in the reviewing of assessment tools at the end of each unit of competency (if any issues had arisen) or when the course was completed. The registered training organisation felt that for aged care and childcare these relationships ensured that training was current and could be contextualised for the specific needs of the community. This particular training organisation also employed assessment coordinators to liaise with industry and validate units of competency. (Up to 20% of units were validated in this way.) An internal board of review had also been established.

All of the registered training organisations reported that they design and write their own training and assessment materials. The reason for this, it was claimed, is to meet the needs of the client groups they service and because customising the training and assessment tools themselves was a straightforward task. Most of the organisations said they shared the training and assessment tools with the workplaces that hosted the students. The training organisations wanted more workplace engagement and collaboration in the development of assessment tools, but they were aware that many workplaces do not have the time or the money to become actively involved in that aspect of assessment. Their preference is to assess on the practical elements of delivery. At the completion of a course, most registered training organisations reviewed all the training and assessment tools used and

made changes where appropriate. Collaboration between registered training organisations on campuses that deliver the same course is also widespread.

Across registered training organisations trainers and assessors are usually directly responsible for designing and writing the courses they teach and use a variety of collaborative activities (including social networking). Working groups are established to collate material for class-based assessment and online products to complement face-to-face delivery. Blogs are set up to answer queries or pass comment on anything training- and assessment-related. Trainers and assessors are in the community building relationships with aged care facilities and childcare centres for the purpose of getting industry input into the moderation of learning and assessment tasks. The aim here is to maintain consistency throughout the delivery of a qualification. Employers are also asked to reflect on standards and changing pedagogies.

Industry skills councils (ISCs) may develop non-endorsed resources, some of which might be focused on assessment, but it is the quality of these and the extent to which they have been trialled and validated that is important. Individuals are also free to develop, market and sell their own assessment tools and approaches.[5] There was no mention of registered training organisations using the assessment materials developed by industry skill councils or using other 'off the shelf' materials. Trainers and assessors claimed that they were more comfortable and felt they had more ownership when they were directly involved in the development and application of the learning and assessment materials they would use.

For the delivery of the Certificate IV in TAE some of the providers interviewed liked to employ trainers and assessors who had been through the qualification in its various forms since its introduction in the 1990s and who also 'train' in industry. Some providers also offer a TAE refresher for their trainers at the completion of every course. Providers which have set up assessment partnerships with other registered training organisations argue that their students benefit from being assessed by a broad pool of experienced assessors and moderators with a variety of expertise.

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[5] <www.cshisc.com.au/index.php?option=com_virtuemart&page=shop.browse&category_id=4&Itemid=48 for community services>, viewed 6 August 2012.

Consistency and quality in assessment

In 2008, the National Quality Council commissioned research to investigate industry's expectations of assessment in vocational education and training and found that employers were concerned about its quality and consistency. Consistency in assessment involves the achievement of comparable outcomes. For example, an assessment process would be considered to deliver consistent outcomes if assessors assessing candidates against the same unit of competency in different contexts made comparable assessment decisions. Nevertheless, there are ongoing concerns about the consistency of assessment standards across employers, industries, occupations, learner groups, registered training organisations and even within registered training organisations.

The issues surrounding assessment quality and consistency in learning or certification are well known (Skills Australia 2011; TVET Australia, 2010). Some of these issues relate directly to the duration of training, especially when very short courses mean reduced time for repeated practice of the skills acquired and the increased usage of recognition of prior learning. Other issues relate to the suitability of students selected for courses.

Course duration

Without exception, all the trainers, assessors and industry representatives who took part in this study commented that the duration of a course is important. Trainers and assessors argued that a course delivered in a shortened timeframe cannot deliver the rigour or depth of training and the *competency* required by industry or the client group. The emphasis on a fast-paced delivery was deemed to be flawed — industry may need qualified workers quickly but claimed that there is a greater need for a *competent* workforce.

There have been incidents where registered training organisations have advertised completely unrealistic timelines for qualifications; for example, offering a Certificate III in Aged Care or Children's Services as achievable in several weeks, when, in fact, it should take at least six months to complete to a competent standard. Another example was a registered training organisation advertising a certificate IV or diploma-level qualification over a week or even a weekend, when it would normally take a year. In such instances the quality of both the training delivery and assessment for these qualifications must be questioned.

The length of time proposed as ideal for successful and thorough completion of the Certificate III in Aged Care and Children's Services is six months, which includes the work placement. Many trainers and assessors do not satisfy themselves that a task performed once is 'competent' but like to assess and re-assess on what they consider to be critical elements. There was a view that a longer course allowed for repetition (rather than duplication) and that it was the repetition of tasks that led to students being competent and work-ready. 'The only way to be competent is to practise and perfect the critical elements and for us as trainers to see those critical elements performed consistently' was a common theme among trainers in this study. The practical assessment criteria are therefore vital to ensuring that students reach competency.

Employers and assessors who took part in this study felt there were some registered training organisations pushing for the length of a course to be shortened to allow them to increase their student numbers. In the area of childcare, centres agree with trainers and assessors that placement should be of a sufficient duration for the student to experience the full range of ages for which the course caters. Further, a placement of a decent length of time also allows the centre to determine the suitability of a student for the workplace.

'What we, and what industry wants, are reflective practitioners who think analytically and respond accordingly', stated one senior trainer.

Recognition of prior learning

The granting of recognition of prior learning occurs across all of the courses that are the focus of the study but more so in the TAE than for the others. This is often used as a rationale for the acceleration of courses. Table 2 provides a national snapshot of the reported number and percentage of students in these courses who received a recognition of prior learning outcome across the VET sector in 2010 and 2011.

Table 2   Proportion of total reported VET students with RPL in selected training packages, 2010—11

	Students with an RPL outcome		Total students		% of RPL	
	2010	2011	2010	2011	2010	2011
CHC40108 - Certificate IV in Aged Care	490	726	2 173	4 063	22.5	17.9
CHC30208 - Certificate III in Aged Care	601	840	15 489	22 040	3.9	3.8
CHC30708 - Certificate III in Children's Services	2 191	2 838	22 181	37 370	9.9	7.6
CHC50908 - Diploma of Children's Services (Early childhood education and care)	1 661	3 007	11 417	21 399	14.5	14.1
TAE40110 - Certificate IV in Training and Assessment	554	7 571	4 057	29 249	13.7	25.9

Source: NCVER, Students and courses (2012).

While recognition of prior learning was identified as being an accepted assessment process for the nominated qualifications, one childcare centre director stated that she would be unwilling to employ a person who had gained a qualification based purely on prior recognition. The director considered that people needed to gain an understanding of current practices, since knowledge acquired ten years or so ago had been superseded. She also felt that in many cases recognition was 'too easily given and needs to be earned just like any other qualification'. She argued that 'there should be more rigorous verification processes of assessment than the RPL' and the applicant should be required to demonstrate their skills, with this aspect of recognition of prior learning all too often overlooked.

The trainers and assessors interviewed were also cognisant of the importance of industry currency and stated that they would require students to demonstrate the competency of their skills and for these to be assessed accordingly. The registered training organisations who took part in this study all claimed to have stringent processes in place to ensure that recognition was only given where appropriate, but they were aware of instances of this not being the case.

The issues with obtaining and assessing recognition for the TAE qualification seem to be more complex than in the areas of aged care and childcare. Registered training organisations have a perception that recognition is given regularly and sometimes indiscriminately towards the TAE. Recognition of prior learning assessments are commonly sought and offered for TAE qualifications, with different registered training organisations using a variety of approaches. The common approach is to ask the

student to provide evidence of prior learning and/or experience and to present this evidence for assessment. Assessors will judge the nature and quality of the evidence against TAE units of competency to identify any deficiencies, which should be addressed through gap training.

Another method is to use a 'mapping' exercise so that prior learning and experience are evaluated against the TAE units of competency. This is generally seen as a quicker approach, and can sometimes be completed by registered training organisations in a morning or a weekend. In the discussions with registered training organisations, it was found that the mapping approach is often preferred by teachers and trainers, presumably because it is quicker.

One training organisation offered teachers and trainers the opportunity to upgrade their TAA qualifications to the TAE (at no extra cost) through RPL, but this was on the basis that, if any gaps in knowledge were identified, the teachers would need to complete extra units of competency. However, rather than upgrade their qualification through this process, many preferred to simply pay a private provider for the upgrade rather than undertake additional study. Some of the upgrades to the new qualification were completed in a weekend, with one finalised in a single morning.

The trainers responsible for assisting staff to upgrade their qualification were of the opinion that the additional units of competency were beneficial. Overall, it was regarded as an opportunity to remain current but it was also a small but valuable exercise in 'being a student'. Moreover, trainers did not believe that recognition can be assessed adequately in a morning or weekend.

The exercise in recognition for the TAE, it was argued, should be rigorous and meet the required assessment principles, which would not be possible in such a short timeframe. The extent to which this is true more broadly is a question for further investigation. Ideally, trainers and assessors should perform tasks (that is, a training session) in front of the assessor to confirm that the candidate is actually competent, but often this process does not occur.

One of the sector's major concerns, particularly in relation to the Certificate IV in TAE, is that recognition is given without assessors being thorough in their assessment of the evidence provided. It was suggested by a few providers that full recognition should not be given at all and that there is always an opportunity to learn something new. Unfortunately, it would seem that, in the main, students accessing recognition of prior learning do not want to undertake any additional study.

It is thus important for candidates who seek recognition for some components of the qualification to be rigorously scrutinised before being accepted for assessment. It was the view of one assessor who is frequently approached to consider evidence presented for recognition that assessors should not be afraid to use the mantra 'further evidence required'. It was agreed that a 'perfunctory acceptance of prior knowledge' is not sufficient, nor is it acceptable, because even with assessments of prior learning students need to be aware of current and emerging practices.

Diverse approaches to training and assessment

Practitioners also had concerns about the quality of delivery and assessment when it is undertaken wholly in a workplace and without regular access to the facilities or support that registered training organisations offer. They felt that some students who only undertook workplace-based training missed out on the benefits of having a quiet space to do their written work or reading, and that this could lead to gaps in their knowledge and cognitive skills. Other trainers and assessors the research team spoke to also had less confidence about workplace assessments and suggest that these assessments are likely to be less rigorous because the workers who are being assessed are already doing the job,

and there may be tendency for employers to be less rigorous. Conversely, some practitioners saw the practical focus of workplace-based training as a benefit, because it enabled employers to focus on providing the skills required for their business, and the student to learn job-specific skills.

The consistency and comparability of assessments are further compromised because vocational education and training uses diverse assessment methodologies to determine competence. Where it is not possible or feasible for students to practise in the workplace due to safety constraints or access, students who attend larger registered training organisations are often involved in a simulated environment. The simulated environment is, it is claimed, useful for assessment — especially for the demonstration of units of competency in which it is not appropriate to use real people. This allows the student to practise on mannequins and with equipment, enabling them to feel safe about making mistakes. While some training organisations are using simulated environments, only one that participated in the study had a fully operational simulated aged care facility. Trainers and assessors used the space to assess students before they went into work placements. Students were not allowed to enter a workplace until they were deemed competent in the units of competency relating to manual handling, work health and safety, first aid and personal care. Additional practice was available if they were uncertain or wanted to perfect a technique, since it can be quite difficult to gain practical experience with the elderly and frail. Similar concerns would apply to 'virtual world' environments. Although the use of simulated work environments has benefits, some employers argued that this can never be as good as a real workplace; this issue is particularly relevant in children's and aged care services because possessing interpersonal skills for dealing with vulnerable clients is an essential component of quality services.

Online assessment is also used. While this can be convenient for learners and supports flexibility and distance learning, the counter-arguments include concerns relating to cheating, security of the assessment instrument, and whether it favours written knowledge over the demonstration of practical skills.

Opportunities for repeated practice

As already noted, a key issue that compromises the quality and consistency of assessments concerns the number of repetitions of a skill required to deem someone as competent in the skill.

Naturally there are cases when the student is deemed as not competent in either the written assignments or work placement assessments. In nearly all such cases students were asked to resubmit the course work or asked to perform the workplace task again. Most providers make provision for additional assessments (both written and practical) to be given to students who are below competency to ensure that they can perform tasks in different contexts and multiple times. This gives the student confidence in his or her ability, but also gives the trainer and assessor confidence in the final decision of whether the student has reached competency or not.

Trainers mentioned that, although there are some cases when students had been assessed as not competent, in the main, students were supported to pass. One teacher claimed that, when students did not meet the required standard in theory tests, it was often a 'fix' rather than a complete 're-do' that was expected when they were asked to resubmit tests. Trainers were confident that after a second unsuccessful attempt a student and the assessing team would have reached a decision, with the student either re-enrolling and repeating the entire course or changing courses. This seemed to be the general consensus in all three areas of investigation. But in the cases of aged care and children's services any setback like this can result in a delay in obtaining or completing the work placement. The

delays do not necessarily mean that the student would not successfully complete the summative assessments.

In all three areas, aged care, childcare and the TAE, if after a second attempt the student was still not deemed competent, some providers will bring in an independent third party assessor, but this is rare. All the registered training organisations who took part in this study stated that two attempts were more than adequate for making a final decision. If a student in either aged care or childcare fails a practical assessment, it is common practice for the trainer and assessor to ask for the task to be re-demonstrated on two different days. Most trainers log this in the 'evidence book' and also seek anecdotal evidence from the industry representative (aged care shift supervisor or room leader in childcare) about the student's overall performance to verify their performance and to add rigour to the overall assessment. The performance of a student in the workplace is vital to their successful completion and, according to the trainers, is the most important aspect of the course. There is a concern, however, over whether this in fact is sufficient to deem someone 'competent' or whether they are being merely 'nudged over the line'.

Where it is apparent that students are not competent, some providers were able to counsel them and help them to find a course that was more suitable. Most TAFE (technical and further education) institutes hold progress meetings with their students throughout the duration of the course, but most teachers stated they hoped that they would have observed the student to be struggling, uninterested or exhibiting behavioural issues before such an action had to be taken. Interestingly, all teachers commented that the first day of work placement was often a 'big watershed' and many students who were capable of understanding the theory decided the reality of the job was not for them.

There is an assumption that assessment procedures will be reviewed to ensure that the assessments themselves and the judgments of competence are of a high standard. However, it is widely accepted that there is little consistency in the assessment of units of competency between individual trainers and assessors. In addition, there seem to be no real guidelines for ensuring consistency of quality *outcomes*. 'Quality assurance focuses on whether the proper procedures are in place for an expected outcome whereas *quality control* focuses on whether the outcomes themselves are satisfactory' (Maxwell 2001).

Certainly, industry does seem to have concerns about the consistency of assessment practices, while trainers claim that the quality of the training 'is constantly manipulated by the fickle market'. Employers want trained workers quickly but then complain that the newly trained employees are not of a skill level they expect. One of the preferred models proposed by the peak bodies and mentioned by some of the providers interviewed is for trainers and assessors who currently deliver the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment to move towards the diploma-level qualification (Clayton 2009). This would ensure that the assessors had a more detailed understanding of the process of assessment, which would improve their understanding of the importance of consistency.

Issues with language and literacy

A recurring theme in our study was the lack of adequate literacy and numeracy, especially in the field of aged care, where English language proficiency is often very poor. Diagnostic and formative assessment can help a teacher to find out what students do and do not know, while others may be designed to promote students' learning (known as 'assessment for learning', advocated by Black & William 2012). But even before a student is assessed on knowledge or lack thereof, trainers can assess

(often immediately) the suitability of an enrolled or prospective student to undertake the course or work in the industry.

Looking after the elderly is another highly responsible job where carers must deal with frail clients, many of whom are suffering from dementia and who may become confused and aggressive. The aged care workforce has a high percentage of mature women and a high proportion of people from non-English speaking backgrounds. As with admission into the Certificate III in Children's Services, the entry requirements are varied. They can range from being able to demonstrate developed English language, maths and communication skills, to the completion of a Year 12 certificate or equivalent or prior successful completion of a certificate II. All the providers who took part in this study had entry requirements for the courses under scrutiny; however, the entry requirements varied widely among providers.

Trainers and assessors maintain that for qualifications to be completed the student must have adequate language, literacy and numeracy skills, and a student must be assessed at the start of the course. Without exception, all of the registered training organisations consulted reported that many of their students across all three areas of interest needed assistance with language, literacy and numeracy skills, and this was not confined to non-English speaking migrants. It was felt that TAFE institutes are generally better placed than other registered training organisations to deal with this issue, due to their size and scope, and that they generally have the facilities to assist such students. However, it was widely acknowledged by the participants in this study that, in aged care especially, there are people who have successfully completed the certificate III qualification, despite their not having the required spoken and written English language competence.

The question must be asked about how these students were assessed as having reached the minimum standard and accepted into the courses in the first place. For international students, an English proficiency score is not always an accurate indication of a student's ability to understand written and spoken English.

Often educational agents arrange an assessment (typically International English Language Testing System) of the prospective student's English language capabilities in their home country, but registered training organisations consider that this process is often inadequate. The often-low standard of written and spoken English is a challenge for most providers, but they try to help students and do everything they can to make the course accessible.

In some cases, there is evidence of support being offered by private registered training organisations. For example, one medium-sized private organisation specifically employed English as a second language teachers (as well as subject experts) to enable them to offer support to students and industry trainers with low-level English skills. Another model involved a smaller private registered training organisation entering into a partnership with a group of other private providers, one of which offered courses designed to improve the language, literacy and numeracy skills of students. These models enable students who were assessed as needing extra help with language and numeracy skills to obtain competency. The issue of the language, literacy and numeracy of the trainers and assessors themselves was raised during this research.

Assessing student suitability for occupations

The suitability of prospective students for the qualifications in aged care and children's services has also been raised as a concern. Although there are examples in some registered training organisations of asking candidates to undertake an interview before they are formally admitted to the course, such

practices seem not to be widespread. Where such practices are evident, they are used as a formal way of assessing student motivations. For example, sometimes students may enrol in these courses to meet Centrelink obligations, rather than because they actually want to work in the industry. Experienced trainers believe that a selection interview can help them to ensure a student's suitability for a course. Trainers also report that many young and vulnerable students apply to undertake a children's service qualification because they want 'to cuddle babies'. Such students may experience difficulties passing the course if they don't also realise that the job is underpinned by substantial knowledge of child development and can be very demanding. Similarly, students who are admitted into courses without the requisite empathy for children (in the case of childcare) or seniors (in the case of aged care) may also experience difficulties. In such cases they may be able to pass a written assignment but not the practical workplace assessment, which requires them to display such empathy. Such issues could be minimised by appropriate selection mechanisms.

An example (which points to unintended consequences or contradictions in policy) is the requirement that candidates wishing to undertake training in the aged care and childcare sectors be subject to a police check and, in the case of childcare, a 'working with children' check. Despite these requirements, student-selection practices across registered training organisations are inconsistent. Some public institutions in some states have no choice but to take eligible students who meet the entry criteria. One large TAFE provider stated that trainers and assessors would like the police checks to be completed and submitted before candidates enrol for a course. Their reasoning was that there have been instances where students have completed the theory components of the course but failed the mandatory police check to undertake the work placement. Ideally, all registered training organisations would like the opportunity to interview all potential students who wish to enrol in childcare and aged care courses to assess their suitability before they are admitted.

The suitability of VET teacher preparation

The extent to which the Certificate IV in Training and Education prepares teachers for working in the VET sector has also been debated. In some quarters there seems to be a lack of understanding about the TAE. For example, one small private registered training organisation explained that the TAE is often seen as a 'gateway' into the general VET workforce rather than a qualification that needs a foundation of prior knowledge. For example, prospective candidates without any understanding of the VET context or without having an area of expertise in which they could train others had approached the registered training organisation to enrol in the Certificate IV in TAE. The principal of the same registered training organisation stated 'we turn away a lot more [people] than we take'.

The role of moderation, validation and auditing

The two terms 'validation' and 'moderation' were often used interchangeably (and sometimes incorrectly) by the practitioners in this study; there are a number of commonly accepted distinguishing features between the two processes. Validation generally refers to the process of ensuring that the type of evidence that is required actually represents relevant workplace tasks. The former National Quality Council (2009) identified moderation as:

> the process of bringing assessment judgements and standards into alignment. It is a process that ensures the same standards are applied to all assessment results within the same Unit(s) of Competency. It is an active process in the sense that adjustments to assessor judgements are made to overcome differences in the difficulty of the tool and/or the severity of judgements.

Moderation is more closely identified with the standardisation of assessment outcomes, while validation is more aligned with ensuring the tools themselves meet the requirements of the particular competency and the workplace context. Good practice then would indicate that registered training organisations should have in place assessment processes that can be constantly moderated, validated and reviewed to maintain consistency of delivery and quality assessment.

The *National Training Package Glossary*[6] notes that registered training organisations should have a systematic plan for the validation and moderation of assessments, which outlines:

- when assessment validation and/or moderation will occur

- which units of competency/modules will be the focus of the activity in proportion to the associated risk

- who will lead and participate in validation and/or moderation activities

- how the outcomes of these activities will be documented

- how lessons learnt from assessment validation and/or moderation will be acted upon.

Under the *Vocational Education and Training Regulator Act 2011*[7] the:

> registered training organisation (RTOs) must have in place arrangements for the collection and analysis of data for continuous improvement of their training and assessment practices. They are also required to establish training and assessment strategies in consultation with industry. These training and assessment strategies must meet the needs of relevant Training Packages or accredited courses. In addition staff, facilities, equipment and materials are also to meet the requirements of relevant Training Packages or accredited courses. These are also to meet the requirements identified in the RTO's assessment strategies, and to be developed through effective consultation with industry.

The extent to which these activities happen on a systematic basis is a key issue for assessment in VET.

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[6] <www.nssc.natese.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0003/71247/TrainingPackGlossary.pdf>, viewed 1 May 2013.
[7] <www.comlaw.gov.au/Details/F2013L00167/dd98c18e-4412-45c9-453adfc4b56d>, viewed 9 May 2013.

Moderation

Moderation 'refers to a particular process of quality control involving the monitoring and approval of assessment procedures and judgements to ensure there is consistency in the interpretation and application of performance standards' (Maxwell 2001). Typically, this involves a single person (a moderator) or a group of people (a moderation panel) looking at samples of evidence of student performance and determining whether they agree with the assessment judgements of the assessor' (Maxwell 2001).

Registered training organisations in the study demonstrated a variety of approaches to the moderation of assessment. Most providers across all three areas were aware of the need for ongoing moderation and stated that they maintained constant vigilance. The courses, it was reported, were moderated after delivery and reviewed again before the next cohort was enrolled. This is because each course is customised (to a certain extent) to meet the needs of both the client and industry. Typically, the registered training organisations that took part in this study used a model of internal moderation, whereby they would rely on their own staff to help moderate assessments. There could be as many as three trainers used to randomly check written assignments, and most providers stated that they tried to establish ongoing moderation processes, especially if students complained about the assignments being either too hard or too easy.

Moderation should be an important aspect of all VET assessments but it is especially important for units of competency that are identified as high risk. In this study, two private providers of Certificate IV in TAE qualifications came together to moderate each other's assessments and found that 'cross pollination' of assessment tools was beneficial to delivery.

One provider reported that all written work was checked and moderated by a 'lead assessor' and then independently by two members of the executive team, who were both industry experts and qualified assessors. Although this was felt to be labour-intensive it helped to maintain a consistent standard of assessment: firstly, because the assessment was ongoing within the parameters of the course; and, secondly, students were given prompt feedback and opportunities for resubmits. For this particular registered training organisation, one in ten assessments of every delivered program was moderated after assessment. This process entails a '360 degree' investigation into the appropriateness of the classroom-based component and the experience of the workplace for both the student and host employer, coupled with the influence of the course on the student's practice and vice versa. Every assessment tool was examined and its suitability for the next course considered. Moreover, this provider had entered into an 'assessment and moderation' partnership with a nearby provider. Both parties felt that collaborating with a 'critical friend' helped to maintain and improve standards.

External moderation between registered training organisations can also work quite effectively. An example of this was a partnership between a number of providers, all of whom specialised in different areas and industries. The training organisations all assessed and moderated across the partnership and felt that their system gave the assessors more confidence and rigour. They also employed external industry experts to assess on technical aspects if they felt that a student needed additional support to attain a unit of competency. Providers with multiple campuses often cross-marked and randomly assessed a percentage of work in an attempt to maintain a consistent standard.

There are certainly trainers and assessors who seek moderation, but this is usually because an issue has arisen with a particular student. Although some trainers routinely mark assignments with colleagues to obtain a second impartial opinion, the majority of trainers and assessors who were interviewed in the sample, do not (unless they feel a second opinion is required).

There was a view that the TAE qualification was too broad in its intent and was attempting to accommodate a variety of client groups from different backgrounds and industry sectors. In the opinion of one trainer and assessor, the Certificate IV in TAE did not place enough emphasis on assessment and therefore didn't prepare trainers and assessors adequately for conducting assessments. Moderation as a form of quality control was then felt to be a way of confirming the quality of the assessments as well as justifying the worth of the course. Collaborating with other trainers and assessors in such activities was also felt to provide an extra layer of support for the trainer.

Using a panel of industry experts convened for each subject area (aged care, childcare, training and assessment) to undertake moderation might also be an effective solution. For example, providers under such a system would be required to submit work samples that have been judged to be either borderline pass or clearly above the borderline. The panel would review these work samples by having at least two experts review them independently to decide whether the original judgments (borderline pass or clearly above the borderline) should be upheld. The purpose of this panel exercise is to provide feedback to registered training organisations about the quality of their assessments by comparison with other registered training organisations and against described standards. Registered training organisations either have their assessments confirmed or they are advised they are too lenient or too severe. Moreover, this would encourage trainers and assessors to remain current in their respective areas.

The current system outlined in the VET Quality Framework[8] involves an up-front specification of the standards and assessment guidelines in national training packages, but there is little to ensure that these standards are applied consistently and accurately across providers and contexts. The quality of assessment is greatly improved when there are two or more assessors who can cooperate in interpreting the standards and who can validate each other's assessments through cross-checking. With smaller registered training organisations or campuses in remote or regional areas this possibility is less likely to be available.

Validation

Where moderation is concerned with the standardisation of assessment outcomes, validation is more related to ensuring that the tools themselves meet the requirements of the particular competency and the workplace context. According to the *National Training Package Glossary*, validation is:

> a quality review process. It involves checking that the assessment tool has produced valid, reliable, sufficient, current and authentic evidence to enable reasonable judgements to be made as to whether the requirements of the relevant aspects of the Training Package or accredited course had been met. It includes reviewing and making recommendations for future improvements to the assessment tool, process and/or outcomes.[9]

Australia's VET sector — governments, industry and industry skills councils, and providers — has made a considerable investment in developing competency standards, assessment guidelines, and a wide range of materials to support assessors. With some notable exceptions, such as the *Capstone Test*, which electricians must pass to be licensed, the assessment resources that are developed focus on the 'front-end': they appear not to make adequate provision for validation or moderation of the final assessments.

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[8] <www.asqa.gov.au/about-asqa/national-vet-regulation/vet-quality-framework.html>.
[9] <www.nssc.natese.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0003/71247/TrainingPackGlossary.pdf>, viewed 1 may 2013.

Some providers meet at the end of every course to reflect on what had worked and what could be improved. They also asked directors (childcare) for comment on the assessment tools to make sure they reflected industry needs. One registered training organisation held a bi-annual breakfast where industry stakeholders were invited to comment on the standard of students who had graduated as well as to offer suggestions on what could be improved in the program. Others organise assessor 'practice days', where assessors are asked to demonstrate their *own* competency in the subject to an independent third party (usually someone from outside their own registered training organisation and preferably from industry). This activity proved to be quite popular as it helped trainers and assessors to become aware of the gaps in their knowledge that need to be refreshed or revisited. In addition, it is usual for trainers to belong to various industry associations to keep them abreast of industry changes and to undertake relief work in their area of expertise, with the aim of maintaining currency and remaining up to date with assessment tasks. Activities such as assessing themselves against the assessment criteria given to students were other examples of how trainers and assessors refreshed their knowledge of the various elements of assessment and the evidence required. Trainers also saw value in being involved in the traineeship model because they could assess their own practice.

Many of the employers who took part in this study were concerned that some students who do not meet industry-specified standards for a subject are nevertheless being assessed as 'competent' by registered training organisations. Such judgments are felt to reflect badly on the integrity of the whole qualification issued to these students.

Having all the assessments 'co-assessed' with an industry expert is one approach to assuring quality outcomes, even though this could be quite resource-intensive. For example, some training organisations delivering qualifications in children's services are already applying this model. Practical assessments in a childcare setting take into account observations by the workplace supervisor or room leader (representing the industry experts) as well as by a trainer or assessor (representing the registered training organisation). This approach works because the trained assessor can focus on the units of competency being assessed and the 'competency conversation questions' that need to be asked, while the industry expert (the supervisor or room or group leader) can concentrate on the technical aspects. In this way they work together to make sure that the final assessment decisions are both valid and reliable.

The Community Health Services Industry Skills Council (CHSISC), for example, sees itself as having a critical role in developing assessment materials as part of training packages, but it is widely recognised that registered training organisations, both public and private, choose to contextualise assessment tools for their own clientele. This suggests that there is often a 'disconnect' between what the industry is trying to achieve and the practice of providers. It also leads to duplication of effort. Increasing regular assessment collaborations between industry skills councils and assessors in the field can help to reduce some of this duplication.

There are cases where assessors report undertaking some validation exercises, although these are not widespread. They tend to occur for the assessment of students whose results have been judged as borderline or not competent. For example, they may be judged to be competent in their practical assessment but marginal in their written assessment. In these cases, trainers and assessors typically request the opinion of an independent third party, claiming that the cross-checking of student performance in assessments helps to maintain both the consistency and validity of assessments.

Regulation

The legislation that supports the Australian Skills Quality Authority's role, the *National Vocational Education and Training Regulator Act 2011*, requires registered training organisations to be assessed against a suite of standards that are part of the VET Quality Framework.

Training and assessment should be delivered by competent trainers and assessors with current industry knowledge and who must 'have the necessary training and assessment competencies as determined by the National Skills Standards Councils or its successors' and 'have the relevant vocational competencies at least to the level being delivered or assessed' and 'can demonstrate current industry skills directly relevant to the training/assessment being undertaken'. It is also expected that trainers and assessors 'continue to develop their vocational education and training (VET) knowledge and skills as well as their industry currency and trainer/assessor competence'.[10] Trainers and assessors are expected to offer and undertake recognition of prior learning assessments.

If we want to ensure that the assessments being conducted return consistent and valid judgments it is essential that audits occur 'in conjunction with a 'person deemed by industry to have the knowledge and industry experience to make a judgement' (National Quality Council 2008, p.21).

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[10] <www.comlaw.gov.au/Details/F2013L00167/dd98c18e-4412-45c9-9bf9-453adfc4b56d>.

Conclusions

This study finds that there is a level of apprehension about the quality and validity of assessments in the three industry sectors under review: childcare, aged care and training and assessment. This is further exacerbated when large groups of existing workers (who may not always have the necessary literacy and language skills) are expected to upgrade their qualifications to meet regulatory requirements. The risk to the integrity of assessments is also heightened when students are admitted to courses without the personal motivation or attributes required to work in such industries, when they find it difficult to obtain adequate work placements that provide them with individualised supervision, and when they do not have enough opportunities to practise the required skills and knowledge.

Assessment is a relatively complex component of delivering and certifying learning, and yet many of the trainer qualifications give relatively little attention to this aspect. There are also questions about the adequacy of the one-size-fits-all entry-level qualification for VET trainers and assessors (like the TAA or TAE). This study finds that this qualification may not provide trainers and assessors with the required underpinning knowledge and practice they need for designing and documenting high-quality and consistent assessment processes and the appropriate assessment tools and evidence-gathering techniques. This qualification is also not providing adequate training and experience to facilitate the analysis and formulation of judgments from the evidence collected, including for recognition of prior learning. Encouraging the uptake of TAE diploma qualifications, where these assessment skills and knowledge are examined in more depth, would help to deepen assessor competencies. Providing regular assessment workshops (at times that can be easily accessed by practitioners) would offer another means of increasing assessor competencies.

The large apparent variations across small and large providers in the duration and volume of training expected for the completion of the Certificate IV in TAE as well as for qualifications in childcare and aged care represent a further issue. This variation (especially in the duration of training) may also increase concerns about the ability of students to repeatedly practise the skills required to demonstrate to assessors that they have the competencies required to deliver training and assessment for the VET sector. We have not examined this issue in depth in this study and raise it here as a subject for more focused investigation.

There is considerable use of recognition of prior learning in accelerated programs, which is often used as a rationale for shortening their duration. It may also be one reason for providers promoting courses (especially for the TAE) that can be completed in a week or even a weekend. Providers in this study expressed apprehension about such programs and the lack of rigour applied to the recognition assessments associated with them. Raising the standard of the recognition of prior learning by ensuring that assessors and providers are 'pre-qualified' by the industry; that is, they have recognised prior experience and standing, could be a useful if somewhat controversial model to consider.

Other issues relate to the general absence of systematic processes for the moderation and validation of assessments, despite the assessment guidelines for training packages emphasising the requirement for training organisations to have systematic plans in place. Although providers try to obtain consistency of judgments by implementing some moderation activities within institutions (and in some cases between institutions) and do their best to reflect current industry practice in assessment tools and tasks, the regular and systematic moderation and validation of assessments across qualifications is not widespread. This is a significant issue with the potential to compromise the consistency of

assessments, especially as assessors are using a wide range of tools, methods and environments for judging competency. They can also be affected by the quality of the assessment materials and tools available to them. While there are numerous examples of good practice and these should be encouraged, they may not be well known by all teachers and trainers. Encouraging providers to establish systematic collaboration between assessors, both within the organisation and externally, may assist in addressing this issue. Alternatively, assessment 'road shows' organised by industry skills councils, peak industry bodies or associations, or government quality assurance agencies could also be considered. Such events would give practitioners the opportunity to share sample assessment tasks with others and to participate in moderation and validation exercises relating to some predetermined assessments.

There also appears to be some confusion when it comes to the extent of involvement in assessments expected of and by employers. The system is keen to listen to 'what industry wants' and registered training organisations are especially open to employer feedback on workplace performance and the validation of assessments. They seem to be a little less keen on relinquishing control of the assessments to employers. There are also the fundamental questions of whether a summative assessment is best made by the trainer and whether in an industry-led VET system the employer should have greater involvement in assessing competence and work-readiness.

Significant regulatory changes or other industry imperatives that require large numbers of practitioners to upgrade their qualifications threaten the validity and consistency of assessments. This is because providers may compromise rigour in assessments to ensure course completions. In these cases greater confidence in assessment could be achieved if industry either specifically contributed to standardised assessment materials and products or validated these in regular industry-provider forums. A systematic process for the validation and moderation of assessment tasks should become an accepted practice for different qualifications within individual providers or across groups of providers. Greater employer involvement in the assessment process, especially through tripartite assessment models (involving the employer, assessor and teacher), could mitigate the widespread apprehension of risk in these industries. Having the assessment occur in the particular work situation and involving the workplace supervisor could also overcome the difficulties that assessors sometimes face in customising assessments to the student's workplace environment.

The customisation of assessment tasks to enterprise needs also contributes to difficulties in achieving consistency between assessors and assessment tasks. If the system is to have confidence in the reliability and validity of assessment, then assessment tools and processes should be validated by industry representatives and audited for quality assurance. Practices that promote quality-assured assessments may not be known by all teachers or assessors of a given subject. Ideally, auditors should be adequately trained to understand the quality assessment processes and also have discipline-specific expertise. There may also be a place for roving (or contract) training assessors in the mix. This model is being used extensively in New Zealand and, to a degree, in some industries in Australia (especially mining). Such a model involves independent and usually contracted assessors with relevant training and industry or discipline experience conducting assessments in a range of contexts and locations. Alternatively, a national approach that comprised registered training organisations working individually or in consortia with the Australian Skills Quality Authority's auditors might also be considered. Such an approach would bring together the processes of continuous improvement, quality assurance and quality control.

There seems to be duplication of effort between industry skills councils and practitioners in the development of assessment materials, with many practitioners preferring to develop their own

assessment materials. This is the case even when there are examples of industry skills councils developing such materials as a service to their sectors. It is not clear whether this is because practitioners are not aware of their materials, or because they prefer their own. Increasing regular assessment collaborations between skills councils and assessors could reduce some of this duplication of effort and help to ensure the consistent application of industry standards across the registered training organisations servicing the sector.

Some issues relating to student selection for these courses also need to be considered. This includes taking into account the poor literacy and numeracy skills of workers (including, but not only, people from non-English speaking backgrounds and international students) in these sectors. Although providers try their best to support these learners, working hard to get them to understand what is required, this in itself may compromise the validity of the assessment as well as the credibility of the qualifications. In sectors that do not have a highly qualified workforce (like the aged care and childcare sectors), there is also the issue of the literacy and numeracy skills of the workplace trainers and assessors themselves. The availability of 'pre-assessments' as well as screening for suitability, enables the trainer and student to uncover what knowledge is already known in a specific topic or unit. Processes such as these can help in gaining an understanding of whether the student has special needs or has the motivation to undertake and complete the training. This provides a form of 'safety net' at the initial assessment stage, because issues relating to student 'fit' for the training or areas where they might have difficulty are identified.

The separation of the written and practical elements of the units of competency for assessment by different assessors might also help to improve independence and rigour. This model is currently applied by registered training organisations aiming for additional rigour in practical assessments: they contract independent assessors to conduct workplace assessments.

Assessment needs to be driven by the need for quality improvement: firstly, to address changes and improvements in our understanding of the assessment processes themselves; and, secondly, to respond to industry and student expectations for valid and consistent assessment decisions. To this end, there is a strong case for strengthening assessment by revisiting some fundamental principles. These include underscoring the need for trainers and assessors to have a good grounding in assessment theory and practice, tools and techniques and providing regular professional development to ensure that these skills and knowledge are maintained. Also crucial is the involvement of industry stakeholders in the validation of assessment tools and the implementation of regular and systematic processes for the moderation of assessments. Also useful would be the development of guidelines covering: how best to get industry involvement in assessment; ways to collect and judge evidence for the recognition of prior learning; and how to supplement online assessments with other evidence. In particular, careful consideration should be given to models of assessment that support qualified and skilled assessors who move across providers. This would enable a degree of independence and probity, which could strengthen confidence in the system.

This study recognises the need to strengthen assessments in nationally recognised vocational education and training, especially in areas of skills shortages, where there is an increase in the quantum of training and where there is a proliferation of training providers wanting to deliver certain qualifications. Issues identified in this study may be partially ameliorated through the strengthening of moderation and validation practices and by supporting assessment by teachers and trainers skilled in assessment techniques.

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