



EMPLOYER CONFIDENCE IN VOCATIONAL TRAINING ASSESSMENT

Recent experience by a number of member organisations in the hospitality sector relating to a Training Package initiative involving the currency of industry experience by assessors, has cast some doubt upon the veracity of competency based assessment and the role of industry in the assessment process.

ACCI member organisations are concerned about the quality and consistency of assessment by assessors in some Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) who are making judgements on whether competency has been achieved by learners based upon, in part, their own limited or long past experience in industry.

Last year, this issue was put before the National Quality Council (NQC) via the Service Skills Industry Skills Council seeking to incorporate three years experience into the context of assessment in the Assessment Guidelines for the Hospitality Training Package. The National Quality Council is a Committee of the Ministerial Council for Vocational and Technical Education (MCVTE), and oversees quality assurance and ensures national consistency in the application of the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF) standards for the audit and registration of training providers.

It has specific decision-making powers in relation to the endorsement of Training Packages and other aspects of the quality assurance under the National Skills Framework.¹

The request was denied based on two principles. Firstly, that a competency-based package cannot include anything that is time-based, and secondly, there is no current requirement in the AQTF 2007 for current competency of assessors – only Training and Assessment (TAA) Training Package assessment units plus vocational competence to the level they are testing

There are a number of possible strategies to consider in relation to industry's role in the assessment process that will strengthen training outcomes.

These include:

- Writing *Conditions for Assessment* within the Evidence Guide in units of competency;
- Relevant vocational competency by assessors through meaningful engagement with industry;
- Working together to conduct assessment;
- Workplace assessors; and
- Industry sign-off for competency.

Conditions of assessment

Interestingly, specific requirements for assessors do already exist in some Training Packages. Further, in compliance with the former Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST), Training Package Development Handbook September, 2007, there is guidance related to assessment matters within the section Evidence Guide. Within the Evidence Guide, provision exists to articulate Conditions of assessment. For example, in the Health Training Package HLT07, HLTAHW201A Work with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander clients, the following is stated;

Conditions of assessment: This unit includes skills and knowledge specific to Aboriginal and /or Torres Strait Islander culture Assessment must therefore be undertaken by a workplace assessor who has expertise in the unit of competency or has the current qualification being assessed and who is:

- *Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander him/herself or*
- *Accompanied and advised by an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person who is a recognised member of the community with experience in primary health care.*

It is acknowledged that in this case the Conditions of assessment do not relate to any time-based criteria.

1. <http://www.nqc.tvetaustralia.com.au/> 8 February, 2008

Relevant Vocational Competency by Assessors through Meaningful Engagement with Industry

In relation to the engagement of industry in the assessment process, the *Users' Guide to the Essential Standards for Registration (AQTF 2007)* specifies requirements for assessors. Standard 1, which relates to the RTO providing quality training and assessment across all of its operation, contains specific reference to assessors at Element 1.4, particularly relating to the need to have relevant vocational competencies at least to the level being delivered or assessed.

The key actions underpinning this Element state that the RTO establish and verify that assessors continue to develop their competence by supporting them in meaningful engagement with industry and relevant professional bodies. Further, in establishing and verifying that assessors are competent, RTOs must meet any additional competency requirements detailed in Training Packages or determined by regulatory or licensing bodies. In addition, assessors must be able to demonstrate vocational competencies at least to the level of those being assessed.

In regard to additional requirements for assessors, The Users' Guide states:

"Where there are legislated requirements for licensing purposes, industry regulators and registering bodies may agree to additional requirements for trainers and assessors."

Working Together to Conduct Assessment

Arguably, the competency based assessment process is one of the cornerstones of the national VET system. Assessment is the process of collecting evidence and making judgements on whether competency has been achieved. The purpose of assessment is to confirm that an individual can perform to the standard expected in the workplace, as expressed in the relevant endorsed industry or enterprise competency standard.

Key features of a quality assessment process, in part, include:

- Actively involving the workplace in the assessment process, and
- Involving the candidate, the assessor and the workplace

To this end, there is also provision in the Users' Guide for Working together to conduct assessment. The Users' Guide states that:

"If an assessor does not have the appropriate 'assessor competencies or demonstrated equivalent competencies' as well as relevant vocational competencies, they may work with someone who has relevant vocational competencies to conduct assessment."

There may be potential for industry to work directly with assessors who do not have relevant vocational competencies to conduct assessment. RTO approaches to industry for involvement in the assessment process is currently limited and there is scope for better engagement with industry groups to source the relevant expertise.

At the ACCI Education, Employment and Training (EET) Committee meeting conducted on 7 November 2007, the Committee recommended a set of assessment principles related to assessment in general and specifically relating to the role of industry in the assessment process.

These included:

- Workplace supervisors to be up-skilled and trained to contribute effectively to the assessment process; and
- Sign-off of competency by employer must be involved.

Workplace Assessors

At its December meeting the NQC:

- a. endorsed the Tourism, Hospitality and Events Training Package as originally presented but with the removal of any reference to three years of industry experience within the assessor requirements;
- b. referred the issue of amending the AQTF2007 Users' Guide to the Essential Standards for Registration that refers users to the relevant Training Package for the definition of vocational competence to the Quality Standing Committee and Training Packages Standing Committee for further consideration.

Perhaps it is now timely, in view of the decision by the NQC to reject the proposal for time-based criteria for assessors to think outside the box and develop industry-based initiatives pertaining to the above listed principles.

For example, businesses may consider up-skilling supervisors within their pool of employees to gain assessor qualifications so they might directly contribute to the assessment process. In this way, by working in conjunction with RTOs delivering training, assessment may be conducted on-the-job and in a more meaningful way that suits business requirements.

2. Training Package Assessment Materials Kit #1, p7 DETYA, 2001

In this way, the workplace assessor then decides whether the employee meets the standards required by the business, and that specified in the relevant Training Package. The fact that graduates from some RTOs were not meeting competency standards required by the business was at the nub of the issue tabled by ACCI member organisations in the hospitality sector.

Industry Sign-Off for Competency

Since assessment involves the candidate demonstrating their skills and knowledge through completing work tasks, being observed performing work tasks, and asking supervisors about candidates regularly performing at the required standards, an opportunity exists for industry to be more assertive in seeking endorsement and agreement related to collecting evidence and judgements about whether competency has been achieved. This can be achieved by seeking the cooperation of RTOs, both TAFE institutes and private RTOs, in a collaborative approach to the assessment process that involves, for example, industry sign-off for competency as part of the candidate's Assessment Plan.

There is a need for industry to consider further strategies relating assessment to business needs and industry approbation of judgement about whether competency has been achieved. The more that effective training practices can be integrated into business practices, then there is more likelihood of greater alignment of candidates meeting both the competency standards specified in the relevant Training Packages and the standards required by business.

The Importance of Audit

Logic says better qualified assessors should improve the assessment process, but there could be a deeper issue around delivery and content.

In terms of RTOs, the way of checking the quality of delivery will be through AQTF 2007 audits of RTOs. All RTOs must comply with national standards which ensure the consistent delivery of high quality training across Australia. In order to check this compliance, State and Territory Registering Authorities may conduct regular audits of an RTO's systems, processes and practises. Recent changes to the AQTF 2007 mean that audits have moved to an outcomes-based system. There has not been sufficient time to evaluate the new approach and much will depend on the audit process. The audit process will be critical to engendering employer confidence in assessment.

In addition, RTOs that provide training that actually deliver the required skills and use sound assessment techniques may be more expensive than those which try to do it on the cheap – putting them at a competitive disadvantage. The audit process needs to be able to discern whether or not quality training is being undertaken in this context.

Why is Assessment an Important Issue for Employers?

When a person is issued with a qualification and has been assessed as having those skills without really having them, then the employer ends up picking up the cost of the lack of quality by having to retrain the person in the workplace. This is one of the reasons why employers want sign off on competencies in the workplace rather than by the RTO. In that way, they can see for themselves that the skills have been demonstrated to industry standards.

In addition, where inappropriate delivery and assessment by a minority of RTOs result in qualifications being issued that do not match skills levels, it drives down standards in industry, and gives a bad name to the training industry and makes it more difficult for quality RTOs to achieve the confidence of business and enterprises.

Conclusion

The importance of assessment issues to employers is at the core of maintaining and improving quality standards within an industry. There is a potential role for industry to become more involved in the assessment process to circumvent some of these problems but there are also systemic changes which need to be publicly debated.

Regardless of which approach is ultimately agreed upon, industry needs to be at the front and centre of this debate.