

NATIONAL VOCATIONAL EDUCATION
AND TRAINING RESEARCH PROGRAM

RESEARCH REPORT

Quality assessments: practice and perspectives

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NATIONAL CENTRE FOR VOCATIONAL
EDUCATION RESEARCH



Australian Government
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About the research

Quality assessments: practice and perspectives

Josie Misko, Sian Halliday-Wynes, John Stanwick and Sinan Gemici, NCVET

The quality and rigour of assessments in vocational education and training (VET) have been key concerns for VET policy-makers, industry stakeholders, employers, and teachers and trainers in recent years. The issue of quality in assessments has implications for the credibility of VET qualifications and the competence of the graduates who hold these qualifications. In this study the authors investigate this issue by looking at certificate III qualifications in aged care, electro-technology (electrical) and business. The authors also explore the knowledge and the practical application of assessment of practitioners. They identify some clear tensions relating to where practitioners put their efforts in ensuring quality assessments.

Key messages

- Regulatory frameworks drive quality assessments in electrical and aged care qualifications. They are less critical for general business qualifications.
- Practitioners understand the requirements for gathering sufficient evidence of practical skills and underpinning knowledge to establish competency against established performance criteria in training packages. Applying this in practice presents more of a challenge.
- Practitioners also express low confidence in making fair, reliable, consistent and valid judgments about performance, particularly about 'non-competent performance'.
- Practitioners are more concerned with implementing processes for ensuring the relevance, clarity and user-friendliness of their assessment instruments than they are with moderating the results of assessments. The general view is that the use of rigorous up-front validation approaches minimises the need for moderation. Also challenging is ensuring that their assessment tools keep pace with changing legislative frameworks and standards.
- External assessments conducted by regulatory authorities (or their equivalents) in electrical qualifications or external assessors in aged care or business qualifications standardise skill assessments. This helps to ensure comparability and consistency of performance to industry standards.
- Employers' time constraints and inadequate experience or expertise in specific units (especially those dealing with theoretical components) work against their increased involvement in assessment validation or in conducting assessments.
- The streamlining of recognition of prior learning processes is limited because providers want to guard against non-compliance judgments from regulators and auditors.
- Other than accelerating the progress of existing workers with considerable experience, there is little support for condensing the length of entry-level courses.

Rod Camm

Managing Director, NCVET

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Executive summary

In recent years the quality and rigour of assessments in vocational education and training (VET) have been key concerns for VET policy-makers, industry stakeholders, employers, and teachers and trainers. These concerns have often been fuelled by perceptions that some providers in the sector are taking short cuts to qualifications. This has raised issues about the credibility of VET qualifications and the competence of the graduates who hold these qualifications. Assessment experts and commentators have identified the main issues as the lack of:

- systematic and regular moderation and validation practices in training systems to ensure the consistency and validity of assessments
- knowledge among VET practitioners about the processes and techniques of assessment (Clayton 2009).

A recent small-scale study (Halliday-Wynes & Misko 2013) by researchers from the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) looked at the assessment approaches being used by private and public providers in three Australian states. The study focused on providers delivering qualifications in the aged care and childcare sectors, sectors where there has been a push to get large groups of workers to attain or upgrade their qualifications or specific units of competence to meet regulatory requirements. The study also investigated issues relating to the delivery of training and assessment qualifications. This research builds on the work already done by NCVER and others in this area and especially the considerable work recently done for the former National Quality Council (NQC) by the Centre for Work-based Education of Victoria University, Precision Consulting, and Bateman and Giles.

Research aims

The aim of this research is to better understand the extent to which quality (effective or rigorous) assessments are implemented in qualifications in the aged care, business services, electro-technology (mainly electrical) industry sectors, and in training and assessment. We investigate these issues in the states of South Australia, Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland. The following research questions guided the collection and analysis of information.

- What do practitioners understand about the need for quality assessments, including consistency and validity?
- To what extent do organisations practise external validation through the use of external assessors and industry stakeholders (especially employers)? Are there any issues for involving employers in assessments?
- How prevalent is the implementation of recognition of prior learning (RPL) assessments? To what extent are streamlined approaches to RPL being applied?
- What is the impact of course timeframes on qualifications? Is there any justification for condensing course durations?

Information was collected via in-person and telephone interviews with education and training practitioners¹ and students, as well as with government and industry advisors in one of the

¹ Including trainers and assessors and educational managers or their equivalents.

Independent Validation of Assessment projects² conducted by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG). Desktop analyses of websites were conducted to investigate training provider promotion of training and education courses, tuition fees and course durations. Analyses of national VET statistics were used to report on the uptake of recognition of prior learning, course durations and the level of student satisfaction with assessment experiences in VET courses. A mystery shopping exercise (where an interviewer calls institutions and asks for information about what is required to complete a qualification) is used to delve more deeply into issues of course duration.

Findings

- What do practitioners understand about the need for quality assessments, including consistency and validity?

Trainers and assessors generally understand the accepted key criteria for effective and quality assessments. However, there seems to be a variation in the extent to which moderation and validation practices are applied across providers. The terms 'validation' and 'moderation' still appear to present some confusion: some trainers and assessors identified as validation practices what are clearly approaches to moderation, and vice versa. A measure of uncertainty and confusion surrounds the term moderation, with trainers and assessors citing the regular review of assessment tools and the development and application of marking guides as key but up-front moderation techniques (as opposed to a process that ideally takes place after assessment). These are understood as ways to ensure consistency among assessors and clarity for students undertaking the assessments. Even when moderation is used as a post-assessment process for ensuring comparability between student results, it is rare for teachers and trainers to alter any assessment decisions. The only time this might occur is when trainers are uncertain about the performance of students. When post-assessment moderation does occur, it is normally for the purpose of modifying the assessment tools to ensure no issues arise on future occasions.

Providers are far more likely to claim they understand what is meant by the term validation and to give examples of both internal validation and external validation, the latter being the review of assessment tools and tests by other assessors, generally from other training providers, as well as by employers. The involvement of employers in validation processes is especially used in courses such as aged care, where students are involved in industry work placements. It is also common for employers to be involved in supervising work placements and providing feedback to registered training organisations (RTOs) on students' practical performance. Regular workplace visits to verify assessments are other ways by which training organisations maintain their linkages with industry practice, thereby validating or confirming the suitability of their assessments and their assessment tools.

Providers also differed according to their access to professional development activities. In the public system, providers often have access to professional development for their trainers and assessors. Trainers in private registered training organisations are more likely to be responsible for their own professional development. The sharing of information across providers is not uncommon, even though there is a view that the competitiveness of the Certificate III in Aged Care qualification tends to constrain full collaboration.

² In 2012 the Council of Australian Governments launched the national Independent Assessment Validation pilots (see page 13) to trial a process for the independent validation of graduate outcomes, including for the Certificate III in Aged Care qualification.

- To what extent do organisations practise external validation through the use of external assessors and industry stakeholders (especially employers)? Are there any issues for involving employers in assessments?

The prior or current practical workplace experience and knowledge of trainers and assessors who have worked in the industry, as well as students who are existing workers, help trainers and assessors in business courses to develop assessments that are customised to current industry practice. The Capstone Test provides an external validation of skills acquisition in electrical apprenticeships because it is set by an independent body. Some trainers hold the view that its integrity can be compromised if the test is conducted by the registered training organisation itself. In Victoria the external assessment for A-grade licensing is conducted by an external agency such as EPIC Industry Training Board, acting under the auspices of the regulatory authority that issues A-grade licences for electricians (Energy Safe Victoria). This external approach standardises the assessment of skills to ensure the comparability and consistency of performance to industry standards.

How easy is it to involve employers in the validation of assessments? It is clearly quite straightforward for some courses and difficult for others. The mandatory use of practical work placements in some courses requires registered training organisations to develop strong relationships with employers to ensure access to workplaces for placements for their students.³ For these courses, providers report that they have no issues in involving employers in assessment validation practices (if it does not mean intensive involvement). For electrical services programs, where students are in the workplace with workplace supervisors, it appears to be more difficult. In these instances providers generally believe that employers prefer to leave the process of assessment to the experts, claiming they do not have the time to spend on training documentation or validation. However, the need for employers to provide evidence of apprentice performance in e-profiles or hard-copy logbooks offers them an opportunity to be involved in the validation of on-the-job assessments. Time constraints and inadequate experience or lack of expertise in specific units also work against the increased involvement of employers in assessment validation or external assessments.

- How prevalent is the implementation of recognition of prior learning assessments? To what extent are streamlined approaches to RPL being applied?

There is little emphasis on the recognition of prior learning for entry-level certificate III programs across the three sectors, although there is evidence of higher usage in business programs and for electrical apprentices transferring from the defence forces (navy) who already possess extensive knowledge of and experience in communications. Apart from the obligatory formal offer of recognition that all providers made prior to enrolment, there was little encouragement for students to undertake RPL. At the same time practitioners reported that students are not always keen to participate in recognition assessments and that many want to start their courses from scratch. This is also confirmed by the students who provided information to this study. An investigation of commencements from 2010 matched to 2010 and 2011 completions in the Certificate III in Aged Care, the Certificate III in Business and the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment finds that almost 7% of students in aged care and business courses will undertake recognition of prior learning processes; four times this number (25%) of students will receive recognition for the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment.

³ All aged care providers in this study had work placement requirements, with some placements more substantial than others.

Providers varied in what they expected from the students who did request recognition of prior learning, with some providers implementing a streamlined approach, while others required extensive documentation to support students' claims. Less intensive approaches often relied on workplace observations, third-party reports and critical questioning techniques, while more complex processes required extensive mapping of units to the evidence required, as well as extensive documentation. Generally, the complex approach was used to meet the perceived prospective requirements of quality auditors.

- What is the impact of course timeframes on qualifications? Is there any justification for condensing course durations?

Course durations vary, depending on delivery methods and whether students are undertaking the course in full-time or part-time mode. In general, online and distance courses are allocated longer lead times for completions than are in-class or face-to-face courses. There seems to be little appetite for condensing the course length for entry-level courses, as it is commonly accepted that the acquisition of sufficient practical skills and knowledge to work in a new occupation takes time.

Key challenges for students and teachers

Students were generally satisfied with their assessment experiences and reported some frustrations over having insufficient time to absorb the information and to complete assignments. Some believed the course they were doing should be upgraded to a higher certificate level because of the work and responsibility involved. Others reported minor frustrations in relation to non-graded assessments and group assessments: their benefits or drawbacks. Data from the 2012 Students Outcomes Survey also indicated general satisfaction with assessment processes, with around 90% of all graduates of certificate IIIs in aged care, a range of business courses and electro-technology highly satisfied with the way they had been assessed in their courses. This includes knowing how they would be assessed, the fairness of assessments, the regularity of assessments and the assessment being a good test of what was taught. The level of satisfaction with the amount of feedback received on assessment attracted the lowest ratings (83% for the total group and around 78% for electrical, 86% for business and 87% for aged care).

The key assessment challenges that trainers and assessors perceived for themselves relate to arriving at fair, valid and consistent judgments and having confidence in their judgments about 'not competent' performance. They also feel challenged by the need to ensure that their assessment tools keep pace with changing legislative frameworks and standards.

Teachers believe that the personal attributes of students also affect their ability to deliver quality assessments. These include students' lack of commitment to learning and their inadequate knowledge of content (especially theory in electrical and business courses, and manual handling in aged care courses), poor language and literacy skills, and difficulties in demonstrating in assessments what they can do.

Introduction

In recent years the quality and rigour of assessments in vocational education and training have been key concerns of VET policy-makers, industry stakeholders, employers and teachers and trainers. These concerns have often been fuelled by perceptions that some providers in the sector are taking short cuts to qualifications. This has put into question the credibility of VET qualifications and the competence of graduates who hold these qualifications. Assessment experts and commentators have identified the main issues as: the lack of systematic and regular moderation and validation practices in training systems to ensure the consistency and validity of assessments; and the lack of knowledge among VET practitioners about the processes and techniques of assessment.

A recent small-scale study (Halliday-Wynes & Misko 2013) by researchers from NCVET looked at assessment approaches being used by private and public providers in three Australian states. The study focused on providers delivering qualifications in the aged care and childcare sectors, where there has been a push to get large groups of workers to acquire or upgrade qualifications or specific units of competence to meet regulatory requirements. The study also investigated issues relating to the delivery of training and assessment qualifications. The research found that there was some apprehension among training providers and industry about the rigour and consistency of assessments, including the recognition of prior learning.

This research aims to build on the findings of the earlier study by looking at the knowledge and assessment practices used by trainers and assessors from a much larger sample of public and private registered training organisations. Its objective is to better understand the extent to which quality assessments are implemented in qualifications in aged care, business services, electro-technology (mainly electrical) and training and assessment. Information was collected via in-person and telephone interviews with education and training practitioners⁴ and students and personnel involved in the national independent validation pilots. Desktop research approaches were used to investigate provider promotion of training and education courses and to conduct analyses of the uptake of recognition processes and course durations. A mystery shopping exercise was used to obtain more detailed information on the various lengths of courses in the aged care and training and education qualifications. Information from the Students Outcomes Survey was used to report on graduate satisfaction with different aspects of assessment experience.

We collected this information from public and private training providers in South Australia, Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland. The following research questions guided the collection and analysis of information.

- What do practitioners understand about the need for quality assessments, including consistency and validity?
- To what extent do organisations practise external validation through the use of external assessors and industry stakeholders (especially employers)? Are there any issues for involving employers in assessments?
- What is the uptake of recognition of prior learning assessments? To what extent are streamlined approaches to RPL being applied?

⁴ Including trainers and assessors and educational managers or their equivalents.

- How prevalent are condensed timeframes for the delivery of aged care and training and assessment qualifications? Is there any justification for condensing the length of courses?

Context

A range of National Quality Council publications dealing with the quality of assessment have identified various interventions that could be implemented to improve the quality of assessment in vocational education and training. The report *Investigation into industry expectations of vocational education and training assessment: final report* (National Quality Council 2008) provides information on what are considered to be the key elements of an ideal system of assessment. These are: training package development, including the prioritisation of critical units; training and ongoing professional development for assessors; validation and/or moderation; and a formal relationship between registered training organisations and enterprises (for current employees undertaking training).

In Australia substantial research and work in the area of assessment, via validation and moderation techniques, and its improvement has been undertaken by researchers from the Work-based Education Research Centre of Victoria University in conjunction with Bateman and Giles Pty Ltd. Their report (National Quality Council 2009a) provides the rationale for introducing a code for professional practice. It also emphasises the importance of providing assessors with the underpinning theoretical and technical knowledge to enable rigorous assessments, as well as guidance on how best to go about conducting moderation and validation exercises. A number of high-level principles for validation and moderation were developed around six elements. These principles are concerned with ensuring that the processes are transparent, representative, confidential, educative, equitable, and tolerable.⁵

Halliday-Wynes and Misko (2013) found that practitioners believed that courses of short duration, coupled with insufficient volume of training, also increased the risk of poor skills acquisition and rigour in assessment, including for entry-level teachers and trainers. Screening students for selection into courses in areas such as childcare and aged care, where personal attributes, including motivation and interest in working in caring occupations, were felt to be essential. The lack of student screening arrangements was perceived to compromise the quality of both training and assessment. A lack of systemic validation and moderation processes within and between providers and training systems was perceived to reduce the level of confidence in the comparability and accuracy of assessments. The regular involvement of employers in assessments, including off-the-job assessments, needed to be encouraged.

Critics of the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment and its forerunners not only question the qualification's suitability to adequately prepare teachers and trainers with the appropriate pedagogy but also its focus on assessment theory and practice at the certificate IV level. Clayton (2009) has noted the need to increase the confidence of the sector and its stakeholders in the quality of the assessment. However, she also believes that confidence in assessment is also reliant on 'a quality candidate being trained by a quality trainer'. In her opinion a quality trainer is one with a 'thorough understanding of assessment practices' and she believes that trainers who have undertaken only the certificate IV qualification in this area cannot be expected to have a thorough understanding of these assessment practices, because the training package for this qualification does not cover the issue of assessment in sufficient depth.

⁵ More specifically the code encourages the transparency of purposes and processes, the representativeness of samples used to validate or moderate assessment tools and judgments, confidentiality of information about individual learners, assessors and providers, the educative role of the validation and moderation processes, including its integration into the assessment process, the provision of constructive feedback, and tolerance for specified margins of error.

In 2012 the Council of Australian Governments (COAG; 2012) declared that one of its key reform targets was 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'. Under the National Partnership agreement, states and territories have agreed to develop and pilot models of independent industry validation of registered training organisation assessment practices. The aim is to help strengthen national standards through the development of national models of practice.

What do practitioners understand about quality in assessments?

Our aim in this study is to identify the knowledge that training practitioners (including trainers, assessors and educational managers) currently have about assessment practice and the way it is implemented in training organisations. We argue that, if practitioners have a good understanding of what constitutes an effective assessment, then such knowledge will help them to improve practice and thus ensure the credibility of qualifications.

Characteristics of effective or quality assessments

Our conversations with public and private sector providers in aged care, electro-technology (electrical) and business revealed that assessments were most commonly considered to be effective if they satisfied some key requirements (table 1). First, they needed to reflect the accepted principles of assessment practice; second, they had to meet the requirements of nationally recognised qualifications from industry training packages or accredited courses and government technical regulations (licences and registrations); third, they needed to demonstrate a candidate's competency in workplace or occupational job roles and work habits, including pride in workmanship and standards of acceptable behaviour and attitude. Effective assessments were also those that emphasised the long-term retention of knowledge and distinguished the performance of the individual from that of the group of which he or she was a member when undertaking an assessment.

Quality in assessment practice was viewed as assessment which demonstrates the key principles of validity and reliability, meaning that assessments measured what they were supposed to measure and that these results could be repeated for consistency and comparability. If assessments were to be effective, they would test both theoretical knowledge (underpinning knowledge) and practical skills. Theoretical knowledge was tested via written and or verbal tests, while practical skills were tested via demonstration in realistic and authentic settings, including in workplaces and practical skills laboratories or workshops.

Quality assessments required a variety of sources of evidence, as well as a sufficient amount of evidence. This evidence was also to be collected throughout the course or program and drawn from the results of formative, diagnostic and summative assessments to come to a final result. Quality assessments avoid the over-assessment of students.

Effective assessments were fair and equitable to students. Students were given adequate notification of when they were to be assessed, clear instructions to help them understand exactly what was expected of them and ample opportunity to show what they could do.

In covering all the relevant and essential components of competence in training packages, effective assessments gathered evidence from a range of contexts and matched the level of qualification being assessed. They also met the standards of regulatory frameworks, including the Australian Quality Training Framework and the National VET Regulator, and in the case of electrical qualifications met the standards imposed by the relevant regulatory agency.

Quality assessments helped candidates to demonstrate that they had attained a competent standard of practical workplace skill and knowledge, that is, they were work-ready. These assessments were conducted in authentic and safe settings and were matched to relevant trades and job roles.

Assessments which were effective also enabled individuals to display their individual competencies (including employability skills), and pride in workmanship, and whether or not they had attained a high standard of skill and knowledge.

Table 1 How practitioners describe a quality or effective assessment

Characteristic	No. of responses	% of responses
Meets principles of good assessment practice	68	47.2
Meets training package, regulatory and AQF requirements	43	30.0
Demonstrates work-related competencies which meet industry needs	27	18.8
Demonstrates knowledge and skills of individuals	6	4.2
	144	100.0

Source: Registered training organisation questionnaire for this study.

When practitioners are asked to consider the factors that must be in place for an effective assessment, some key requirements are identified (table 2). The most popular, identified by almost all participants, are the availability of reliable assessment tools and arrangements for the moderation and validation of assessments. These included the use of independent assessors, effective marking guides to aid consistency, and up-to-date and appropriate resources and equipment to demonstrate competent performance. This was followed by the quality of assessment settings and techniques, including the accurate matching of assessment tools to the level of qualification and the mapping of assessments to performance criteria in the relevant training packages. Assessments also needed to be conducted in authentic and safe settings.

The availability of sufficient evidence was another key factor and comprised evidence of underpinning knowledge and practical skill gained from multiple and varied sources, continuous or formative assessment arrangements and recognition of existing skills. Flexible, fair and equitable processes (including the application of reasonable adjustment processes, especially for language and literacy in aged care programs) were other features of the implementation of effective assessments. There was also a view that assessors should not be afraid to explore ethical issues.

Other less frequently identified factors were related to the clarity of assessment instructions and expectations, and the prior notification of students of the timing of assessments. It was also felt that when the feedback provided to candidates on prior assignments and tests was adequate and timely, it helped to improve subsequent learning. This learning could then be reflected in successful performance in subsequent assessments. Also important was the availability of adequate language, literacy or numeracy support to help candidates (with such issues) to demonstrate competent performance. The need for multiple sources of evidence to denote competence was commonly accepted by all trainers and assessors, although there was one suggestion for the development of a single instrument rather than multiple sources that could be used to identify competent performance across a range of contexts.

The expertise of trainers and assessors in occupational competencies and assessment also led to effective or quality assessments. These included the currency of assessors' industry and occupational knowledge and expertise, and time and cost efficiencies.

Table 2 Practitioner views of factors required for effective assessments

Characteristic	No. of responses	% of respondents ¹ (n = 41)
Arrangements for demonstrating validity and reliability	40	97.5
Appropriateness to qualification level and type	33	78.0
Availability of adequate, varied and multiple sources of evidence	30	73.1
Adequate preparation and ability of students	18	43.9
Expertise and efficiency of trainers and assessors	17	41.5

Note: 1 This column refers to the multiple responses provided by each of the 41 respondents in their interviews.
Source: Registered training organisation questionnaire for this study.

What practitioners say

Effective or quality assessments

Cover all elements of competence and work-based concepts. They match the cohort of students being assessed, in that they are adjusted to student backgrounds. The marking criteria matches [sic] the level of certificate being assessed. (Aged care, public provider)

Challenge students by making them analyse not recite. They are geared to make the student think even [though they might be] multiple choice tests. They represent systems for gathering data though more than one method of assessment, including theoretical exercises, practical exercises, and 3rd party exercises (including e-profiling), where the supervisor signs off on the student electronic logbook, which lists what the student has done during the week for the various tasks they need to do. (Electrical, public provider)

Assess what they are meant to be assessing and are flexible enough to demonstrate competencies in a number of ways, including observation, role play or whatever is effective for that particular qualification. (Business, private provider)

Meet training package requirements, display currency, validity, and consistency, are aligned to AQTF requirements, and try not to over-assess. (Business, public provider)

Characteristics of credible qualifications

Practitioners believe a variety of features define credible qualifications (table 3). First, they constitute evidence that holders have the capacity to apply the required standards of workplace competence, which have been gained through the practical application of skills in workplace settings. For some qualifications (especially aged care) they require compulsory placement. Second, they must be aligned to the requirements of the relevant training package and meet the associated performance criteria and, where they exist, the standards of regulatory frameworks (for example, electrical licensing). Credible qualifications are current and are obtained through the application of rigorous delivery and assessment practices. These include programs that are of sufficient duration and which encompass processes for ensuring the validity and reliability of assessment and its outcomes. Credible qualifications are awarded by registered training organisations that employ skilled trainers and assessors. They also reflect the knowledge, skills and personal attributes of students (including language skills, understanding of job role, broad-based competence, confidence, and appropriateness for the job role). Credible qualifications meet student and community needs and are relevant to the student's area of interest.

Table 3 Practitioner views of credible qualifications

Characteristics	No. of responses	% of respondents ¹ (n = 41)
A credible qualification:		
Is achieved via practical workplace training and experience that meets industry needs	21	51.2
Meets training package and regulatory requirements	19	46.3
Meets standards of rigorous and robust delivery and assessment practices (currency, meets students needs)	13	31.7
Is awarded by reputable RTOs with skilled trainers and assessors	13	31.7
Helps holders get a job, licence or move into further training	12	29.2
Is evidence of student knowledge and skill (including broad-based competence, understanding of job role, confidence and appropriateness for job role)	11	26.8
Other (meets student and community needs, relevant to area of interest)	4	9.7

Note: 1 This column refers to the multiple responses provided by each of the 41 respondents in their interviews.

Source: Registered training organisation questionnaire for this study.

Student perspectives

To get a sense of what students viewed as credible or useful qualifications we held focus groups and interviews with students from four providers.

Twenty-three students from Provider A (a TAFE [technical and further education] provider) participated in a focus group. These students were undertaking their training in a face-to-face classroom and were assessed via practical observations and written assessments. They had completed a small practical assessment (as they were in week five of their 18-week course) and had as yet to undertake any assessments of theory. Students were also expected to complete a flyer on one of the diseases which affected the aged. When students from Provider A were asked their opinion on what they believed constituted a useful, good, or credible qualification, they said that it was one that had been attained through comprehensive studies and led to a job. They were also of the view that it was a common perception in the community that getting the qualification through TAFE was best. A good qualification was one that was wanted by workplaces; for example, there is a requirement in aged care facilities for personal care workers to hold the Certificate III in Aged Care.

Two students from Provider B (a TAFE provider) offered their views on assessment. Both were using the certificate III as a pathway to the Diploma in Aged Care, hoping to move into a higher education degree program. They had completed their written assessments via the online application using 'Blackboard'. Their practical assessments, which included bed making, cleaning and using the hoist (lifter), were conducted in the skills laboratory in a three-hour session on a weekday morning. A catch-up or debrief was held in the afternoon. Students from this provider claimed that a good qualification was one that was awarded by a respected institution. They believed that their institution was well respected for the Certificate III in Aged Care, and they felt that they would graduate with a credible qualification; that is, one valued by current or prospective employers and the community in general.

A credible or good qualification in the view of students from Provider C (a private provider) was one that could be used as a stepping stone to another qualification. One student with an accounting background wanted to move from aged care into nursing, while one with a hospitality management background wanted to move from aged care to health management.

A group of four students from Provider D (a public dual-sector provider) undertaking business administration participated in the focus group. The program they were undertaking was being

delivered via blended delivery methods, which included face-to-face lectures, PowerPoint presentations, hard-copy workbook exercises and online training. Their assessments included assignments, short-answer tests and practical tasks (for example, completing an invoice). They were satisfied with the current approach to assessment but were divided on whether or not graded assessments were better than those delivering pass/fail results. Those who wanted to move into higher education preferred a graded result because they believed that this was a good preparation for university studies. The others preferred the current pass/fail system because 'in the end we will all get the same certificate'. These students were of the view that a good qualification was a qualification that was broad in subject content and relevant to what students wanted to do. Some were convinced that 'the more qualifications that you do the better your chances of employment', while others were aware of the pitfalls of being overqualified. One of the students thought that the ideal trajectory was to aim for higher education courses, especially at RMIT University. 'Everyone wants to go to RMIT', he said. However, most understood the advantages of gaining qualifications from institutions or specific programs with high reputations (regardless of the university aspired to). Nevertheless, there was also the view that in the long run 'it was all about you' and that 'to employers it does not matter where you do it [the qualification]'. A common view was that 'a qualification is only half or 60/40 of it [that is, getting a job]'.

What practitioners and students say

Credible qualifications

Show student abilities. The piece of paper says I have done the study, practical skills are required to back it up. (Aged care, private provider)

Indicate that Cert. IIIs are work-ready. Feedback from employers to say they want to hire students, and prior knowledge of RTOs can also be used as indicators of credibility. (Business, public provider)

Are designed, developed and assessed appropriately to meet desired outcomes. Nationally accredited qualifications or non-accredited qualifications need to meet the needs of the organisation. They test knowledge and skill in Units of Competency, and demonstrate the appropriate level of skills to enable employment. (Electrical, private provider)

From TAFE's perspective the qualification is grounded in work as well as theory. The applicant has a fairly good understanding of what the qualification allows them to do. It shows confidence and competence (including awareness of safety issues). It is flexible enough to meet needs of local employers. A credible qualification includes a Capstone component, which takes student through theory testing and variation of process. Licensing requires competency across the board. This means that employers need to provide all the competencies. (Electrical, public provider)

If you have the qualification and don't apply yourself you won't get the job. (Business student, public provider)

Characteristics of poor assessments

Practitioners were also asked to list some of the characteristics of assessments that did not meet the mark (table 4). Poor assessments lacked the key features that had already been identified as effective or of good quality. The most frequent set of traits (identified by almost four-fifths of practitioners) was related to poor assessment instruments and processes. These included tools that were poorly designed; lacked currency, in that they had not been updated; were not relevant to the qualification or industry in question; and were inappropriate for what was being assessed. Using a written essay instead of a practical test for the assessment of practical skills or failing to pitch questions to the right level of qualifications were both considered to reduce the quality of assessments.

Some practitioners had concerns about assessments that were too atomistic or task-oriented, believing that they did not provide a holistic view of student understanding. These views were balanced by those who believed that overly holistic assessments were too broad and did not really give a clear indication of the different skills required. Practitioners in electrical programs were

concerned about the quality of assessments when there was no direct match between assessment items and the unit of competency being assessed.

Poor assessments were related to the lack of expertise in the assessors themselves and were generally associated with a lack of the appropriate training that enabled assessors to conduct assessments; the currency of assessors' knowledge, including the knowledge of specific standards (in the case of electrical); and assessors being unprofessional in their practice. Assessments were compromised when trainers were perceived as uncaring and did not take account of the needs of different students, including giving them enough time to complete assessments, and being flexible enough about the volume and detail of information required, especially with regard to assessments of prior learning. Giving students too much time to complete their assessments might also be considered to compromise the quality of assessments in occupations like electrical, where work was costed according to the time taken to complete a job.

A lack of rigour, especially with regard to effective moderation and validation arrangements and a lack of sufficient evidence and documentation were considered to be other aspects of poor assessment. Another issue was ensuring that the assessments were pitched at the right level. Assessments were also compromised when materials were not validated or when assessors did not demonstrate consistency in their marking. (The latter was felt to result from a lack of a suitable marking rubric or guide.) The absence of sufficient and appropriate evidence and good records and documentation was felt to be evidence of poor practice. The lack of validation was believed to reduce the quality of assessments and there was also a concern that burdening employers (as independent or external assessors) with validation tasks did not make good sense.

Poor assessments were characterised by the lack of authentic, appropriate and safe testing environments or appropriate simulations. The lack of appropriate physical resources and equipment, essential practical components, and industry follow-up of classroom learning were also evidence of poor assessment practice.

Student factors were also held to have a negative effect on assessments. These included students' lacking the required skills and knowledge, and readiness and preparation, as well as inadequate language and literacy skills. For example, when students were not provided with the required language, literacy or numeracy support, their ability to demonstrate their knowledge and skill of the subject was affected. The lack of desired personal attributes and behaviours was also felt to reduce students' ability to pass assessments.

Table 4 Practitioner views on poor assessments

Characteristics of poor assessments	No. of responses	% of respondents¹ (n = 41)
Poorly designed assessment tools	39	95.1
Lack of rigour	24	58.5
Lack of expertise in assessors	23	56.1
Lack of authentic environment and physical resources	16	39.0
Lack of student readiness or ability	11	26.8
Other (time, effort and cost of assessment)	1	2.4

Note: 1 This column refers to the multiple responses provided by each of the 41 respondents in their interviews.

Source: Registered training organisation questionnaire for this study.

What practitioners say

Poor assessments

Occur when there are poorly designed assessment tools and practices, and poor communication between the various parties. In these cases assessors aren't assessing what they are supposed to be assessing, learners don't know or understand assessment questions, the bar for passing assessment is too high or too low (feedback from ITAB's [industry training advisory body] assessor network meeting says that some RTOs are setting the bar too high), a theory assessment [is done] when a practical assessment is required. (Aged care, private provider)

Come from implementing a non-standard approach when assessors are all doing it differently, poor documentation, unclear instructions to assessors, unclear expectations to students, most students are workplace employees, pushed through by employers. (Business, private provider)

Display failure to meet requirements for effective assessments, inadequate moderation of assessments may lead to inconsistent results for student cohorts. (Electrical, private provider)

Lack validation and moderation, and procedures that oversee the whole process. They happen when RTOs in other fields take easy way out and lower the pass mark bar. Leading questions, lack of follow-up practices in the workplace, inaccurate logbooks, poor practice where logbook wasn't used for assessment decision are all examples of poor assessment processes. (Electrical, public provider)

How do providers validate assessment?

Having explored what practitioners see as the key factors in quality assessments and credible qualifications, our interest was to understand how or if providers validated their assessment tools, approaches and results. We were also interested in finding out the extent to which organisations practise validation through the use of external assessors and industry stakeholders (especially employers) and whether or not there were any issues related to the involvement of employers in assessments. Although we collected evidence about all of these areas from the practitioners themselves, we also gathered information from employers and any other industry stakeholders.

How providers understand and implement validation and moderation processes

When practitioners were asked to describe how the terms 'validation' and 'moderation' were used in their institutions, 85% of them described the term validation in the commonly accepted way. Validation meant ensuring that the assessment tools measured what they were meant to measure and that what was meant to be measured fulfilled industry needs. There was less certainty and accuracy in the use of the term moderation. Although 56% of respondents were able to align the term moderation with consistency of marking among assessors, or comparability of results, there was a large group (44%) of respondents who were either unclear about what the term meant, confusing it with the term validation, or who were not able to provide a suitable answer. This suggests that, although practitioners are quite clear about validation, much more needs to be done to ensure that practitioners have a good understanding of the concept of moderation. A small group of respondents also reported that the terms were often used together. This could also account for the general confusion, especially with regard to moderation.

A small group of practitioners reported that they did not engage in any moderation activities but were intending to implement a process which would ensure consistency in the future (table 5). The remainder said they ensured consistency by focusing on the assessment tools and techniques, mostly before the assessments were conducted. They concentrated on ensuring that questions could be understood by students in the way they were intended and on developing marking guides to ensure consistency in marking. Once assessments had been done, there were those who used the assessment results to amend any questions for use on future occasions. Rarely were marks moderated upwards or downwards. When they were, it was not the result of formal moderation procedures but because trainers and assessors were not sure whether or not the student had provided an adequate or strong enough response to warrant a 'competent' result.

Table 5 Moderation practices implemented by providers

Moderation practices	No. of responses	% of respondents¹ (n = 41)
Developing tools and marking guides to achieve fairness and consistency	26	63.4
Traditional moderation practices undertaken internally and across campuses	25	60.9
Other (overlapping moderation and validation practice)	5	12.2
No moderation practice at present	6	14.6

Note: 1 This column refers to the multiple responses provided by each of the 41 respondents in their interviews.

Source: Registered training organisation questionnaire for this study.

Providers have varied approaches to validation (table 6). The most common is to have in place formal arrangements to discuss and examine assessments, including assessment validation days or events. Other validation practices include having staff from other disciplines or other colleges review assessment instruments, the mapping of assessment tools to relevant units of competency, and processes for continually reviewing and improving tools and practices. Getting feedback from industry stakeholders, including employers, is also used for general validation.

Table 6 Validation practices implemented by providers

Validation practices	No. of responses	% of respondents¹ (n = 41)
Regular and formal validation events	20	48.8
Validating instruments with internal and external trainers	16	39.0
Mapping tools to units of competency	15	36.6
Implementing processes for continuous improvement of tools and practice	15	36.6
Validating instruments with industry	14	34.1

Note: 1 This column refers to the multiple responses provided by each of the 41 respondents in their interviews.

Source: Registered training organisation questionnaire for this study.

Use of external validation practices

Almost two-thirds of the 41 practitioners interviewed for this study reported using some form of external validation. Some used external stakeholders on assessment panels or had assessments validated by internal assessors who were outside the discipline. Most of the providers had established some processes for obtaining industry feedback on what they were doing. It was also not uncommon for providers to share information about assessment practices, including validation. However, it was clear that some of this sharing was constrained by competition.

What practitioners say

Using employers for external validation

We don't use them systematically but have done so in the past. We use the development of a business plan as a major form of assessment and bring in an external business person to assess the plan. (Business, public provider)

We use contractors to deliver some training (including project management, warehousing and financial qualifications). Some of these have their own RTOs, so in a de-facto sense they are helping to externally validate assessments. (Business, private provider)

External assessments for licensing are conducted by the Office of Technical Regulator. Trade Recognition Australia conducts trade test assessments for overseas students). (Electrical, public provider)

We have an Industry Advisory Committee with whom we share assessments and ask for feedback. *Does it meet the standards? Are we assessing more than we should? Are there any gaps?* It meets twice a year. (Electrical, public provider)

We use other aged care service providers. They will come into the college. We have also sent students to them, asked for inputs on minimal benchmarks. We have close relationships with sites and if a student is not a good fit we will liaise with the site to confirm or validate whether or not the student is right for the industry. We have had an external assessor from one of the service providers to assess units in aged care and palliative care. There are also two assessors for [the] final assessment completed by students prior to going out on placement. We have sent assessment tools out to centres and have asked: *Here are some skills we think should be assessed in this way. Is there anything we have missed that you want in or clarified?* From such feedback we have included increased repetition in assessments, and developed standard operating procedures for each of the following tasks: moving the slide sheet, using the walking frame, and lifting devices. (Aged care, private provider)

Getting assistance from employers

It was rare for providers to obtain any direct assistance from employers for the validation of assessment tools, and just five of the providers represented reported that they did send on assessment tests to employers for validation. The majority said that they generally used industry networks, workplace visits and industry representation on reference groups or assessment panels to determine whether their training (including assessments) was meeting industry needs. It was also common for those programs with mandatory employment requirements (for example, apprenticeships and traineeships) to have employers sign off on the training plan – the plan that identifies the training to be delivered. In these cases employers were responsible for the on-the-job training and signing off on the profiling documentation (traditionally a logbook of activities for each apprentice or trainee). Employers were also involved in signing off on practical placements. In these cases providers made regular visits to their students.

What practitioners say

Getting assistance from employers in validating assessments

We will give an assessment for someone in the workplace to look at and get feedback. We also talk to employers providing our students with vocational placements. (Aged care, private provider)

We meet with industry employers every six months for them to explain any changes and expectations they require, and incorporate these into teaching. (Aged care, public provider)

We gather feedback as part of compliance requirements for ASQA [Australian Skills Quality Authority]. Each course is evaluated by employers and past students for satisfaction. Feedback is also part of the annual review and action plan. In some areas we link the diploma into the organisation's workforce development plan and choose units on this basis. (Business, public provider)

We get assistance from employers, but not to validate assessments. The Training Plan is signed by student, employer and the RTO. There is no agreement requested on assessment tools. The employer checks students' progress and signs the Training Plan when the student is competent. (Electrical, public provider)

It is difficult to get employer assistance on assessment for both theory and practical. It is easier to get assistance on the practical side than on the theory side (often employers are not good at this anyway). We meet with employers and apprentices once a year to look at the work they have done onsite. (Electrical, not-for-profit provider)

Of our respondents, 56% said it was easy to get employer involvement, with the remainder finding it quite difficult to get employers involved. There were those who would find it easy for certain tasks and difficult for others; for example, it was easier to get help from electrical contractors for practical assessments than for theory assessments. Those who found it easier were those who had in place strong networks and regular involvement with employers because of the programs they were running, especially if they required work placements or on-the-job training (as in the case of apprentices and trainees). It was especially easy for those who employed sessional trainers and assessors (who generally came from industry) and paid for their involvement in assessment. It was also easier to get involvement from some occupations than others, especially those who were involved in more out-of-hours work and who had the time to help in the validation of assessments.

What practitioners say

Help from employers in validating assessments

We have built good relationships and have trainers from industry, but getting employers involved can be difficult with more isolated industries. (Aged care, private provider)

We have constant contact with them [employers] but in regional areas it is difficult to get placements. We have tried to get input on assessments but employers are too busy. Some are happy to give verbal feedback, are reluctant to get involved because they don't want to formalise anything. (Aged care, public provider)

It is easier to get consultants, accountants, real estate personnel, and sports administrators to be involved. (Business, public provider)

For business subjects it is very difficult as there is no governing body. Business qualifications act more like a pathway. They are very broad ... more like tasters, and can be morphed into different things, certificate III, IV, diploma, advanced diploma, OHS administration, advanced customer service. Getting employer involvement is easier for finance and marketing. I use my marketing manager networks and get a good response quite quickly. I have a big network so I am always able to get a core group. (Business and marketing, public provider)

Industry relies on the college to look after things to do with assessments. They do not have the time. It is also not their core business. They believe that this is college's job. (Electrical, public provider)

Key issues in getting employer involvement

Practitioners who had found it difficult to gain employer involvement identified a list of key issues in doing so. The most frequent issue (reported by 45.4%) cited by respondents related to employers' lack of time to commit to being involved in validating assessments. The key issues reported by another third of respondents were related to employers' lack of knowledge of what was involved in the units of competency to be assessed, as well as their inability to understand the language used in the training packages and by the assessors or trainers themselves. Other issues relating to the difficulty of attracting employer involvement were the broad industry coverage of the qualification (generally business qualifications), the lack of a strong relationship between employers and providers, and the limited availability of work placements (especially in regional areas but also in specific sectors). Finding the right person to talk to was another barrier to gaining employer involvement in the validation of assessments.

What practitioners say

Getting employment involvement is difficult

Employers may be worried about the language used. There may be a well-written plan but if it has not addressed the performance criteria, the business may not know. (Business, public provider)

Business program area is too difficult, it is too broad. We are trying to get an industry reference group for Business Administration [but finding it slow going]. We experienced no issues in finding a reference group for Marketing. (Business and marketing, public provider)

Getting the time to commit is difficult for employers. Employers generally ask: *Why are you asking me?* They also don't know what they don't know. (Electrical, public provider)

Getting the right person to talk to. (Business, private provider)

Lack of time. Lack of concerns. If apprentices are going well employers won't get in touch, or give us compliments. However, if some concerns arise they will call us. Perhaps they may have an issue with the teacher not being organised, or if they leave early, or if apprentices can't do load calculation. (Electrical, public provider)

We find it difficult to infiltrate the big established care facilities because they are their own training provider and are not interested. Sometimes they are not very flexible. Independents are often easier to hook up with. (Aged care, public provider)

Lack of time for employers to complete what is required. Employers lack of knowledge about assessment process. (Aged care, public provider)

Time constraints, everyone is busy. Finding a common time for consultation. (Electrical, private provider)

Findings from other sources of validation

Findings from the assessment validation pilot for Certificate III in Aged Care (see appendix A), conducted in South Australia, found that over four-fifths of the 151 graduates responding to a survey about their training were very satisfied with the quality of the training they had received. Very few of the graduates had not completed a work placement during the course (Government of South Australia 2013b). The pilot also found that, although courses were generally well structured, they were considered not long enough to provide students with sufficient opportunities for learning, practising and reviewing what they had learnt. A close look at assessment processes and documents found that in most cases there was not enough detailed documentation of assessment strategies, resources and learner support, and little employer involvement in the validation of assessments. The major trouble spots for assessments in aged care training were related to condensed course durations, inadequate contextualisation to industry needs (often tied to lack of industry input), lack of mechanisms to ensure that assessors achieved consistency in their marking (for example, marking guides), and a lack of focus on healthy ageing competencies. Aged care workers themselves were found to be proficient in their performance in helping the residents with specific caring tasks (for example, toileting, bathing, dressing, eating, and other general life skill tasks). They had little knowledge of the Accreditation Standards and aged care services like Home and Community Care (HACC) services. There was also little knowledge of or focus on the concepts of health promotion or healthy ageing.

A recent strategic review of the certificate III and IV aged care qualifications conducted by the Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA; 2013) involving 20 registered training organisations (selected at random from different jurisdictions) and compliance audits of another 53 registered training organisations identified a range of non-compliances with their standards for assessment. Registered training organisations were found to lack well-documented training and assessment strategies and possessed few assessment materials that had been developed in consultation with industry. Concerns were also raised about the over-reliance on third-party reports, often represented by checklists of attributes and tasks, at the expense of the direct observation of skills by assessors. Also of concern was the use of online assessments for soft-skill competencies, which needed to be assessed in

practical workplace settings. Another issue concerned the practice of registered training organisations leaving the structuring of the work placement to employers, but without providing them with sufficient instructions of what the student was expected to cover. Registered training organisations were also found to rely on employers to sign off on a student's competency without assessors verifying the demonstrated skill or trainers visiting employers to discuss the performance of students with them. There was little integration between activities in the workplace and those in the classroom. The volume of learning was often found to be far less than that identified by the AQF guidelines. These shortcomings also reflect the lack of prescription in training packages and in quality standards.

The Office of the Technical Regulator (OTR) in South Australia provided information about the types of issues experienced by electricians in the field (see appendix B). These issues generally relate to 'awareness of safe work practices'. The annual report of the Office of the Technical Regulator for 2011–12 reported no prosecutions (although there were some instances of non-compliance during that year). The Regulator also issued 21 expiation notices for non-compliant electrical work. Most of these were related to electrical workers not completing the mandatory safety checks on electrical installations (South Australian Government 2013b). This would suggest that the assessment of occupational health and safety practices should continue to be a key component of the assessment of electrical apprentices.

What industry auditors and advisers say

Providers want to do the right thing, often they don't know how.

(Senior project officer, COAG Validation Project, aged care)

Facilities are excruciatingly sedentary for residents. This needs to change. We need to focus on early health promotion intervention strategies. The paradigm is not right. We need to follow a paradigm shift.

(Industry advisor, COAG Validation Project, aged care)

Apprentices need to develop practical skills. Doing simulations will not let you do this. Need a balance between field work and simulations.

(Auditor, gasfitters, plumbers and electrical contractors and trades)

Have providers streamlined their recognition of prior learning assessments?

To answer this question we first look at the data on the recognition of prior learning uptake for aged care and business services⁶ (table 7) and then we look at the information provided to us by providers. We find that uptake was low across the board for students undertaking the Certificate III in Aged Care and Certificate III in Business, although slightly higher for Business Services.

Table 7 Number and percentage of students who received RPL for qualifications, aged care and business¹

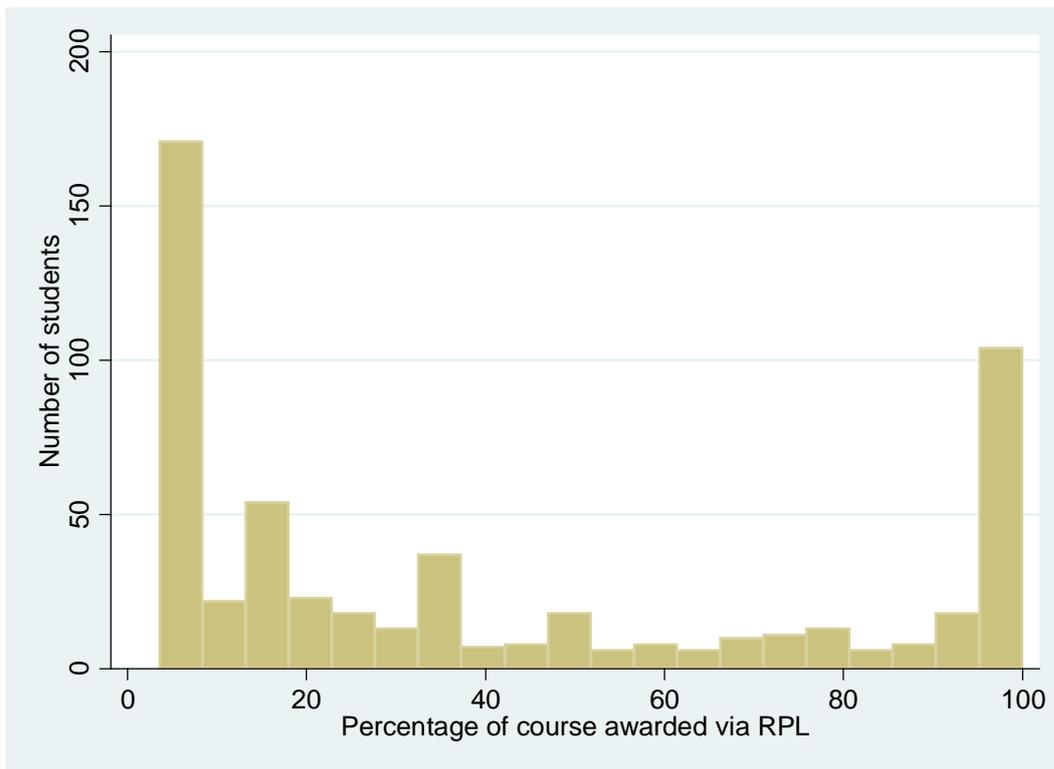
	Aged care		Business	
	No.	%	No.	%
Did not receive RPL	8 797	94.1	16 429	93.1
Received RPL	561	6.0	1 218	6.9
Total students	9 358	100.0	17 647	100.0

Notes: 1 2010 Commencements matched to 2010 and 2011 completions; totals may not sum to 100 due to rounding.
Source: National VET Provider Collection, unpublished data.

If we plot the distribution of the amount of recognition of prior learning received by students as part of their assessment we have a distribution with two major peaks (figure 1). The highest peak is for students who received only a small percentage of the course (say around 4% of the course, typified by a unit or its equivalent). The next highest peak is for students who received recognition for the total course. (For example, this may refer to students who may have a long history of working in the industry and will have all necessary first aid certificates and the like.) The median percentage of courses recognised for the total groups was 25%.

⁶ We do not look at national statistics on certificate III for electrical apprentices, as for many it is an entry-level qualification. However, we do report on our conversations with registered training organisations about how they go about awarding RPL.

Figure 1 Distribution of percentage of course gained through RPL for Certificate III in Aged Care students



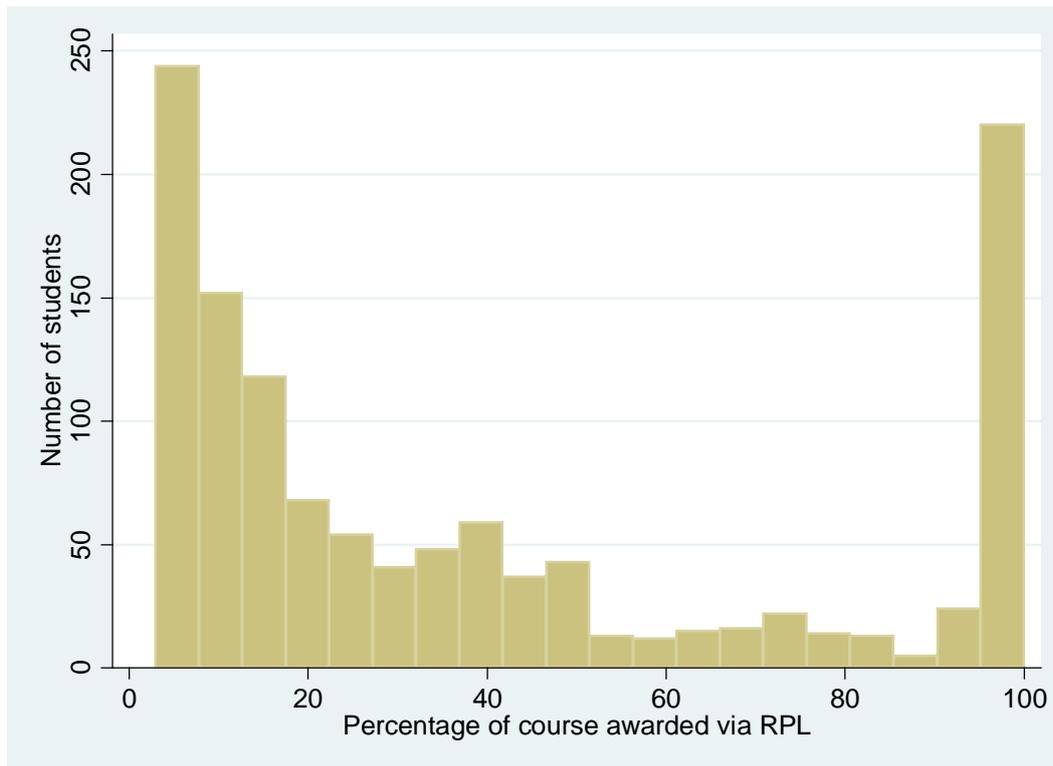
Source: National VET Provider Collection.

In business services students are receiving recognition for a greater percentage of their courses than are aged care students. This is reflected in the following multi-modal distribution (figure 2), which has a number of peaks. The highest peak refers to students who obtain recognition for around 3% of their course (may refer to a unit or parts of a unit); the next highest peak refers to students who gain recognition for 100% of their course. The median amount of recognition for business courses was 25%.

Conversations with trainers and assessors confirm such findings and indicate the low importance placed on recognition for certificate III levels across the three programs. Across the aged care, electrical, and business sectors, providers indicated that recognition of prior learning was more important at the higher-level qualifications and then only for students with substantial current or past experience.

In some cases it was common for existing workers to receive recognition for occupational health and safety and first aid. In the community services and health sector recognition was not a significant part of certificate III aged care programs, especially as these programs often attracted migrants with little applicable experience. In the case of aged care workers who were currently working in the sector, the situation was felt to be different. Here some institutions were prepared to grant recognition for first aid and relevant work experience. Amongst study participants, recognition was not given for students taking courses in enrolled nursing in areas such as medical dispensing and other practical activities, perhaps reflecting a higher level of risk.

Figure 2 Distribution of percentage of course gained through RPL for Certificate III in Business



Source: National VET Provider Collection.

Recognition of prior learning was not a significant part of programs for entry-level electrical trades apprentices. An exception was often made for ex-navy candidates with considerable and substantial experience in the communications sector. These are generally successful candidates for recognition of prior learning. RPL was often requested from overseas migrants hoping to work in the electrical industry. They were generally referred on to organisations like Trades Recognition Australia or VETASSESS (Vocational Education Training Assessment Services). Unless candidates came from countries that had similar electrical standards to those of Australia (including United Kingdom, New Zealand, Ireland or South Africa), it was difficult for candidates from other countries to have their prior experience formally recognised.

In business programs, where RPL was considered to be a more important component, especially for higher-level qualifications, this did not translate into a significantly higher student uptake. Even at Masters of Business Administration (MBA) levels, where RPL is encouraged for units like occupational health and safety, customer services, sales leadership and teamwork, there were low levels of uptake. This was reported as being due to many mature-aged students wanting to do their programs from 'scratch'. In addition, the lack of a direct matching between the relevant content and the required units of competency often precluded people from gaining recognition. In business programs, for example, requests for recognition in contract law would not be given to those who had only worked in the area of family law. Practising accountants would not be awarded recognition for taxation topics if they had no relevant taxation experience. One registered training organisation claimed that the substantial time, effort and cost of conducting recognition of prior learning assessments for higher qualifications was not warranted.

Have providers streamlined their recognition processes?

Despite the low student uptake of recognition of prior learning options and the low priority placed on it by providers (especially at certificate III levels), all providers had systematic processes in place to inform students of their rights to request recognition. All registered training organisations offered RPL to students on or prior to enrolment, either via websites and or through information kits and guidelines. The active encouragement of RPL was reported only for those registered training organisations who had this as a key objective in their business strategies.

There is clearly a greater apprehension of risk in relation to recognition of prior learning. RPL assessments were mainly conducted by trainers and assessors, or lead assessors. In about a third of cases these were conducted by department heads and program coordinators. About a third of the providers also reported that they used specialist RPL teams or trainers who had undergone specific training in the area.

To find out whether providers had implemented a streamlined approach to the recognition of prior learning, as encouraged by the Council of Australian Governments in 2008, providers were asked to estimate how long it would take them to conduct an assessment for recognition. Getting answers proved problematic since some providers had not undertaken enough recognition assessments to enable them to comment, while other providers qualified their answers according to the amount of RPL that had been requested and the amount of evidence required. RPL assessments were reported as either taking minimal time to complete or taking a great deal of time to complete. Quick assessments were completed when there was little or no validated experience to take into account, which meant that no recognition was awarded. Those that took a long time for both assessors and students involved many units of competency. Assessors would create a matrix recording the units of competency for which recognition was being sought; these were aligned with the possible sources of acceptable evidence. Students would then need to address each of the elements and source the various pieces of evidence to support their claims of experience and knowledge. Such a process could be quite time-consuming if the evidence had to be located from interstate or overseas, or if there were difficulties in getting third-party reports from former employers. Once the evidence had been collected and organised into suitable electronic or hardcopy portfolios of evidence, students would present these for assessment. Assessors would then spend time aligning the evidence presented with relevant performance criteria, interviewing students to test their knowledge (in professional conversations) or observing their practical workplace performance.

The majority of providers had decided to stay with the practice of a comprehensive evidence-based assessment for recognition. Just a few providers had opted for a more streamlined approach, whereby students did not have to undertake substantial amounts of work to identify, collect and organise the hard-copy or electronic evidence required, and where assessors did not spend large amounts of time going through thick portfolios of evidence and conducting in-depth interviews with students to arrive at a judgment. In these instances assessors would either visit students in their workplaces to observe a practical performance or have students (who were not in employment) perform a specific task (for example, apply a macro to a spreadsheet) or use question-and-answer techniques to assess a student's understanding of critical pieces of knowledge. Business programs are more likely to report the use of challenge tests, interviews and workplace observations for verifying knowledge and skill.

The average duration of RPL assessments ranged from ten to 15 minutes (for assessments where the candidate did not have enough evidence to warrant recognition of prior learning) to many weeks. Low-risk units were reported to take less time.

There is little evidence from this study that the streamlining of RPL approaches is widespread among providers. Part of the issue is that providers are keen to avoid compromising their reputations by less than rigorous approaches to assessments of prior learning. Another reason is that they do not want to fall foul of auditors from the Australian Skills Quality Authority or the Australian Quality Training Framework. Nevertheless, providers were concerned about the amount of time and effort (and associated costs) required for both for RPL candidates and teachers and or assessors. In view of this, the training option was felt to be an easier option for students.

Practices which work best for recognition of prior learning

Recognition practices tend to follow similar arrangements across programs and providers. Students are generally given up-front information about recognition procedures. (In some places there are formal kits.) An interview is scheduled for discussing a candidate's request for recognition. At this interview the trainer/assessor/RPL specialist collects preliminary information about a student's background and experience to determine whether the student might be eligible for recognition. If it looks as if RPL may be appropriate for some areas and not for others, the candidate is encouraged to undertake the class for those units for which recognition may not be awarded. For those units of competency which have a chance of attracting recognition, the candidate is asked to assemble the evidence to support the application.

Some providers will first undertake a formalised mapping exercise, aligning the unit of competency to the types of evidence required. The candidate is then asked to collect the evidence to support his or her application. When the assessor receives the evidence provided by the student, he or she will undertake a direct matching of evidence to the relevant units of competency. The information provided is then verified by checking for written third-party reports to confirm and verify the extent, nature and level of the experience described. They may also contact the third party (often the employer) to discuss the information proffered as evidence of relevant and adequate experience. The assessor may also use another student interview (also known as professional conversations) to follow up and delve more deeply into the evidence of the student's knowledge and prior application of relevant competencies. Some providers, especially those who have opted for a more streamlined approach, may also visit candidates in the workplace to observe the performance of practical skills and have discussions with candidates and their employers or supervisors and work colleagues. For those who are not working, providers may opt to assess candidates via a challenge test. When the assessor is satisfied that the evidence is a true and accurate representation of candidate's skill and knowledge, a judgment is made.

Some providers will take a risk-management approach to the verification of evidence. Some will insist on certain practical units of competence being repeated or undertaken (for example, medical dispensing and occupational health and safety), while others accept evidence of actual experience in the workplace. Where mature-aged electrical apprentices are coming from another trade, they will generally be able to gain recognition for first aid and occupational health and safety certificates.

It is common for assessors in regulated occupations (like electrical) to require a unit-by-unit assessment. In other occupations a more holistic approach is applied. Although the unit-by-unit approach, coupled with the presentation of three pieces of evidence for each element, is considered too pedantic, assessors justify this insistence on multiple sources by citing the need to meet auditor requirements.

In aged care programs, which are often undertaken by people with literacy and language difficulties (including both migrants and non-migrants), providers generally undertake a literacy and language assessment on enrolment. For existing workers, the vocational training practitioner and the language, literacy and numeracy specialist work together to help the student move through the gap training identified by the RPL assessment.

The knowledge and skill of assessors conducting RPL assessments, and their ability to communicate requirements to students, is crucial to a valid recognition assessment process. Assessors need to be able to map out the elements of the units of competency and identify the types of evidence that can be used for assessing each of the performance criteria. In interviews and professional conversations with students, assessors need to ask the appropriate questions for identifying the critical elements. Both of these tasks are not straightforward and if not done well can be sources of assessor inconsistency, even before the assessment is conducted.

Assessors also differ in the amount of confidence they have in the veracity of third-party reports or from candidates in their assessment interviews. Those who lack sufficient confidence in these sources of evidence generally believe that the best indicator of RPL is the observation of practical performance in the workplace.

Student perspectives

All of the 23 students undertaking the Certificate III in Aged Care (Provider A focus group) were aware of recognition of prior learning and how it operated. They generally confirmed their understanding that the granting of recognition was dependent on other courses they had undertaken and their experience. Nevertheless, none of the students had requested RPL. One student who had a diploma of health science and massage therapy did not request recognition, nor was she encouraged to do so. Regardless, she held the view that it was good to do the whole course since it was a very useful refresher for some areas.

Similarly, both students from Provider B knew about recognition of prior learning and how it worked. Nevertheless, neither of them had requested RPL, again, because they wanted to complete the whole course. (Anyway, they had no previous experience or qualifications that could be mapped against the Certificate III in Aged Care.) The group of students from Provider D replicated the other groups, with the exception of one student who had requested and was able to get RPL in 'sustainability' and 'customer service' units.

What practitioners say

Practices which work best for RPL

Following guidelines, collecting evidence, verifying evidence, contacting previous employers.

(Aged care, private provider)

Using third party report, student self-assessment as a starting point, professional conversations, practical sighting, physiology and gap skills.

(Aged care, public provider)

Using logbooks, unit to unit mapping, processing about 300 units for RPL this summer.

(Aged care, public provider)

Portfolio, meeting needs of participants, people need to understand upfront so initial interview is important, being available for questions, be very clear in what is required and familiar.

(Business, private provider)

Documenting evidence and demonstration (for typing speed), interview, third party confirmation – employer, interview at beginning, tools, client submits, assessor review and determines, final interview for clarification and oral/professional discussions.

(Business, public provider)

RPL interview, phone call, email, picture, videos, written work, references, very difficult for RPL for Cert. III, if go from old TP [training plan] to new TP but if subjects do not align with new names, usually require gap training.

(Electrical, public provider)

Getting in third party evidence and then decide who will test them on this evidence, ask them verbally. For overseas qualifications we let VETASSESS do it or Training Recognition Australia for overseas qualifications. We will do it if need to, it is time consuming. Because some countries don't have same practices to Australia we can't do a proper process so we don't do it.

(Electrical, public provider)

Using workplace assessment. We ask: *Tell me what you do*, we use observations (e.g. insert a formula into a spreadsheet), we have 3rd party verification, and look at training certificates and samples of work. We don't ask them to collect folders of evidence. We call people they've worked with. We will go to the workplace for existing workers; if candidates are not working we get them to do challenge test.

(Business, public provider)

What is the impact of course duration on qualifications?

To answer this question we needed to know the actual length of different courses, concentrating on the Certificate III in Aged Care and the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment. We undertook an analysis of data on start and end dates for courses from the National VET Provider Collection for 2010 commencements and matched these with data on completions for 2010 and 2011.

To gain a clearer understanding of what registered training organisations are promoting as course durations, we undertook a web-based exercise of postings on 50 registered training organisation websites (table 8). To begin with we looked at two qualifications typically criticised for being delivered in shorter than acceptable timeframes. These were the Certificate III in Aged Care and the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment; we looked at 25 registered training organisations delivering each qualification.

From the provider websites we recorded the duration and cost of the course. We also checked whether the registered training organisation had the qualification on scope. We followed this up with a 'mystery shopping' exercise to collect additional information on delivery mode, the shortest amount of time it would take someone with no prior experience to complete the course (in days and hours per day), the subjects (units) to be completed, and, in the case of aged care, the length of mandatory work placements, (table 8).

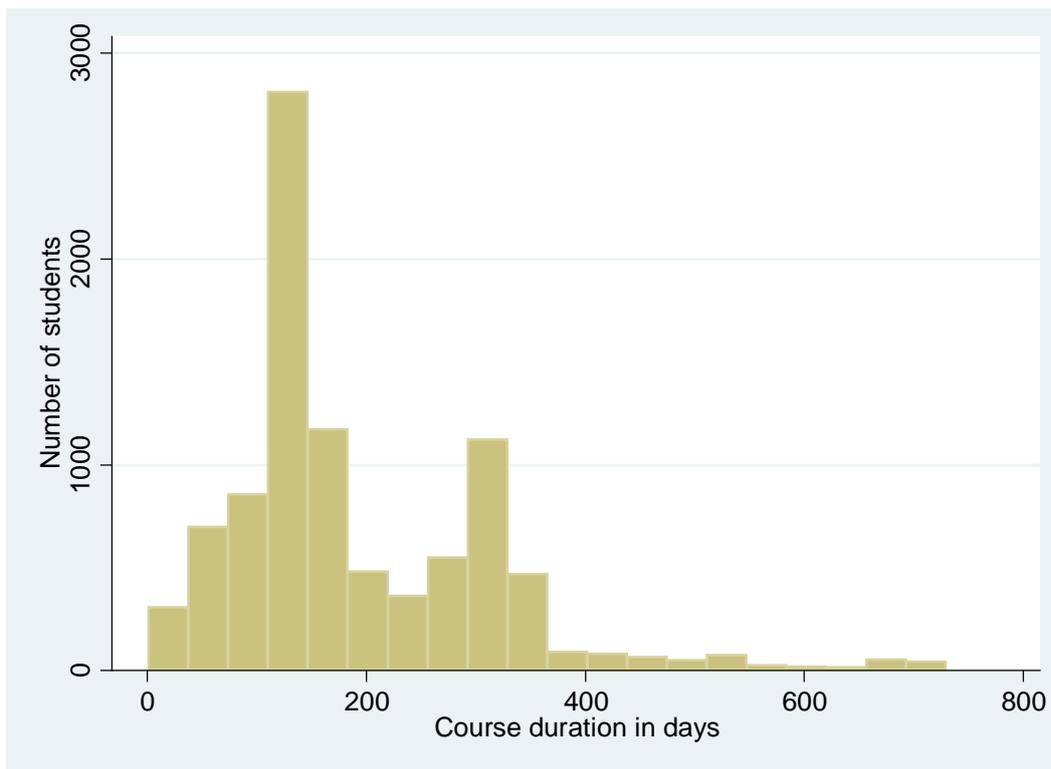
Certificate III in Aged Care

For the Certificate III in Aged Care we found that the mean duration for commencements was 192 days or 27 weeks, while the median duration was 147 days (figure 3).

While using this method gives an indication of the amount of time taken to complete a course, it does not provide any information on the expectations of registered training organisations for course durations.

The costs of courses were also of interest. Gathering information on fees was not always straightforward because they were not always on the website, or a number of steps to access the information were required. We concentrated on tuition fees only, finding that these were subject to a number of different eligibility requirements. For example, in Victoria those who already hold a certificate III in any other area are generally not eligible for a government-funded place. Those with a concession card will also have different tuition fees. Another set of fees apply for international students. In view of this we selected the scenario of a local student undertaking the qualification as a fee-for-service course, without any RPL.

Figure 3 Elapsed days between course commencement and qualification awarded for students gaining Certificate III Aged Care qualifications¹



Note: 1 2010 Commencements matched to 2010 and 2011 completions.
 Source: National VET Provider Collection.

The number of days and hours of this course varied across all 25 RTOs. The shortest course was four weeks full-time (9.00 am–3.00 pm); the longest was six months (at 24 hours per week). Both courses were face-to-face courses, with the first course requiring 80 hours of work placements (that is, two 40-hour weeks); the second one was a full-time week (that is, 40 hours). All registered training organisations reported a mandatory work placement but there was little uniformity in the number of weeks required. Students were expected to undertake a full shift, mainly a daytime shift. Evening shifts were seldom required. Courses that were delivered either fully online or using a mixture of online, face-to-face and distance methods were often expected to be completed during a set number of months (generally up to 12 or 18 months). Furthermore, it was also not unusual for courses to have different durations, depending upon the different delivery methods.

Just over a third of the courses were delivered in class (face-to-face delivery methods). Almost a half offered online-only programs, with the remainder offering a blend of in-class and online training or a mix of delivery methods, including distance learning. Every delivery method was accompanied by practical work placements.

The median cost of a course was around \$1950.00. The shaded areas in table 8 refer to those registered training organisations that were part of the mystery shopping exercise. That said, there were also occasions when other registered training organisations were contacted for information about fees and work placements.

Table 8 Characteristics of delivery, duration and cost of Certificate III in Aged Care by registered training organisation

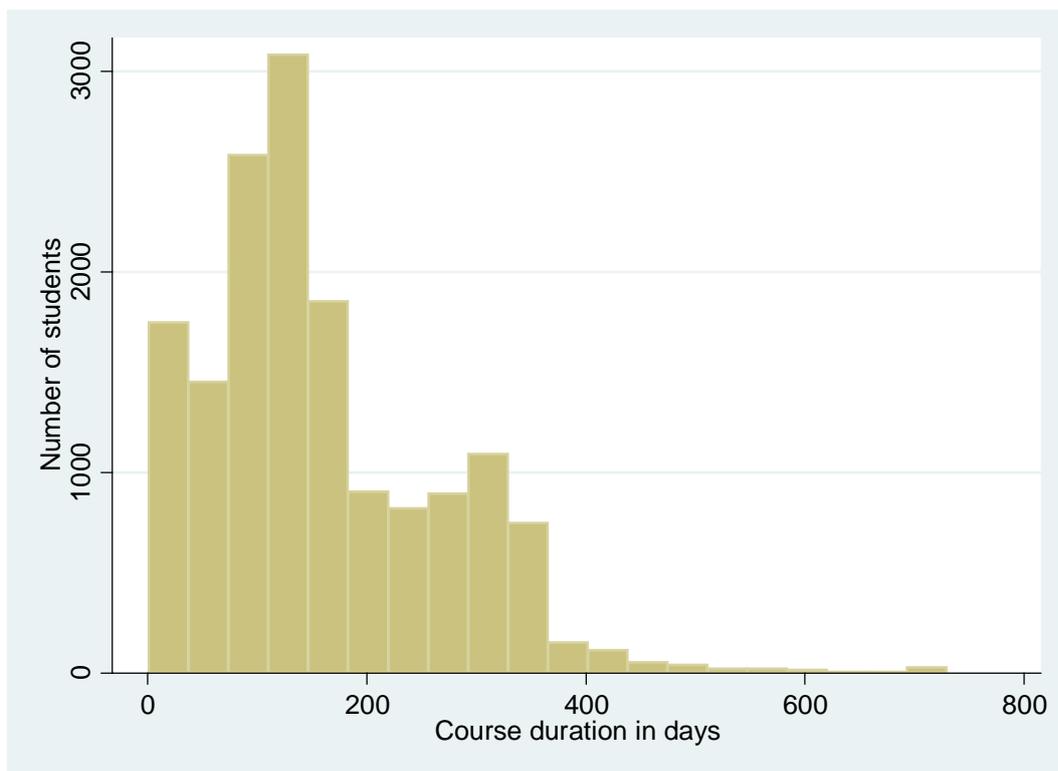
RTO	Delivery	Duration if starting course from scratch	Work placement hours required	Cost (\$)	In-scope training.gov.au
1	In-class, online	26 weeks in class, up to 12 months if online	50–80 hours	2 000	yes
2	In-class	12 weeks (48 days)	80 hours	6 250	yes
3	In-class, distance	22 weeks	2 weeks	1 000	yes
4	In-class, self-paced	10 weeks (2 days per week, with 1 day per week self-directed)	40 hours, full-time day shifts	1 600	yes
5	In-class, some self-learning	Fast-track intensive (9 weeks, 4 days per week), extended delivery 10 weeks (2 days per week)	5 weeks	7 390	
6	In-class, mixed mode	12 weeks	80 hours	1 900	yes
7	In-class	22 weeks (20 hours per week)	4 weeks	4 725	yes
8	In-class	10 weeks	3 weeks	2 000	yes
9	In-class and online (international students)	8 to 17 weeks for local students, up to 39 weeks for international students	160 hours (negotiate shift placement)	1 500	yes
10	In-class	4 weeks, full-time (9.00 am–3.00 pm), Monday–Friday	2 weeks full-time	1 990	yes
11	Face-to-face on-campus, online	3 full days per week for 2.5 months; online: between 1 month and 12 months	4 weeks (160 hours) day shift full-time	2 800	yes
12	Online	up to 12 months	80 hours during working day or night shift	1 490	yes
13	Online	up to 18 months		2 490	yes
14	Mixed	6–8 months	4 weeks (150 hours)	1 950	yes
15	In-class	20 weeks (1 day per week, 9.00 am–4.00 pm)	1 day per week	2 425	yes
16	Online, distance, blended, in-class	Up to 12 months	120 hours	1 800	yes
17	In-class	1 day per week, 16 weeks; 2 evenings for 32 weeks, 1 Saturday per week for 16 classes (approx. 530 hours)	2 weeks for 40 hours per week, day shift	1 950	yes
18	In-class on campus	9.00 am–4.30 pm, 16 days (1 day per week for 16 weeks; 2 days per week for 11 weeks)	3 weeks, full-time work, 40 hours per week)	3 300	yes
19	In-class	13 weeks	154 hours	5 229	yes
20	Online, distance	self-paced, up to 12 months, (10 hours per week)	100 hours	1 850	yes
21	In-class, flexible, distance	5 weeks	4 weeks	1 800	yes
22	In-class, full-time, external	one semester full-time or equivalent part-time	100 hours	1 800	yes
23	In-class	6 months, intensive 2 days per week (1 semester)	100 hours, full-time	1 500	yes
24	In-class, distance, self-paced	5 weeks full-time	76–160 hours	1 850	yes
25	In class	6 months full-time (24 hours per week); part-time: 1 year (6 hours per week)	40 hours	2 385	yes

Source: Provider websites and results of mystery shopping.

Certificate IV in Training and Assessment

The mean course duration for the Certificate IV Training and Assessment qualifications (from the Training and Education and Training and Assessment training packages) was 160 days, while the median duration was 133 days (figure 4). The distribution is multimodal, reflecting the course durations for different providers and the time taken by students to complete the course.

Figure 4 Distribution of course durations for Certificate IV Training and Assessment qualification



Source: National VET Provider Collection, unpublished data.

Recognition of prior learning was four times higher for the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment than it was for the certificates in aged care and business (table 9).

Table 9 RPL received by students in Certificate IV in Training and Assessment¹

Recognition of prior learning	No.	%
Did not receive RPL	11 750	75.0
Did receive RPL	3 915	25.0
	15 665	100.0

Note: 1 2010 commencements matched to 2010 and 2011 completions.

Source: National VET Provider Collection, unpublished data.

The shortest course was five days full-time; the longest course was 12 weeks full-time. The median cost of tuition fees was \$1895.00. Almost half of the courses were delivered face to face (in class); around a third by a mixture of methods, including face to face, online and distance; and a quarter were delivered solely via online methods. Typically, courses delivered solely online or by distance mode were to be completed within 12 months. The shaded areas represent those providers who were part of the mystery shopping exercise. Information for the remainder was taken from the websites of these providers (table 10).

Table 10 Characteristics of delivery and duration of Certificate IV in Training and Assessment by registered training organisation

RTO	Delivery method	Duration if starting from scratch	Advertised or reported cost	In-scope training. com.au
1	Online, self-paced	up to 12 months	\$1880, 10% discount if pay up-front in full	yes
2	In-class & online	16 weeks in-class; 12 weeks online	\$1950 in-class/ \$1200 online	yes
3	In-class & online	5 days in-class: 8.00 am–4.00 pm; online: self-paced	\$1250 in-class/ \$915 online	yes
4	In-class	10 weeks full-time (1 day per week, 9.00 am–4.00 pm); 18 weeks part-time (1 evening per week, 5.15 pm–8.30 pm)	\$1200	yes
5	In-class	7 days (business days, 8.30 am–4.00 pm)	\$1650	yes
6	Online	11 weeks	\$1450	yes
7	In-class & online, distance, blended	5 days intensive 8.00 am–5.00 pm or 8 days spread over 8 weeks in class; 16 weeks online	\$1697 in-class/ \$1297 online	yes
8	In-class (recommended), distance	Part 1 (five units), 5 full days; Part II, 5 full days each 8.30 am–4.30 pm (including weekends); or distance at own pace	\$2995 in-class, distance	yes
9	In-class	10 days	\$3000	yes
10	In-class & online	5 days, 8.30 am–5.00 pm, Monday–Friday plus 2 evenings, 5.30 pm–9.00 pm	\$1500 in-class/ \$1200 online	yes
11	In-class	10 days	\$2000	yes
12	In-class	12 weeks full-time; 23 weeks part-time	\$1890	yes
13	In-class	14 days spread over 14 weeks	\$500	yes
14	In-class, workshops, workplace practice and review	3 months part-time (22 days, 6.00 pm–9.00 pm); 12 days full-time (10.00 am–5.00 pm)	\$1900	yes
15	Distance	Self-paced anytime	\$1960	yes
16	In-class, distance, RPL	9.00 am–5.00 pm for 5 days; or 7 evenings, 5.00 pm–9.00 pm; or distance for 12 months	\$1599 in class, distance \$999,	yes
17	Online	up to 6 months online	no information	yes
18	Online	4 weeks per unit, 4–6 hours per week	\$2340	yes
19	In-class, face-to-face	8 days: Monday–Friday, 8.30 am–4.30 pm	\$1665	yes
20	In-class	8 days, 8.30 am–5.00 pm for four weeks (2 days per week); or 8 weeks (1 day per week); or 7 weeks (2 evenings per week, 5.30 pm–9.00 pm)	\$1650	yes
21	In-class & online	3 months in-class; 4 months online; 7 days intensive	\$1700 in-class/ \$800 online	yes
22	Mixed	6–12 months part-time	\$3500	yes
23	Online	up to 12 months online access	\$600	not found
24	In-class	12 days of training: 1 day per week (including Saturday), 9.30 am–4.30 pm	\$2630	yes
25	In-class	3 months (1 four-day workshop per month, 8.00 am–4.00 pm)	\$1800	yes

Source: Provider websites and results of mystery shopping exercise.

Pros and cons of short-duration courses

Courses of short duration may be those which have been determined to be less than the commonly accepted nominal hours or are accelerated to recognise existing knowledge and skills. We asked our providers what they thought of short-duration courses.⁷ They were of the view that such courses were not sufficiently long to provide students with repeated practice (in practical workplaces or appropriate simulations), which reduced students' ability to learn and absorb underpinning

⁷ Providers who participated in the main interviews about assessment practices.

knowledge. When students gained qualifications without having sufficient depth and breadth of learning and practice, this also compromised the value of the qualification. There were some exceptions, one such being the case of existing workers who had substantial amounts of experience in related skills. For example, in electrical programs it was felt that accelerated delivery was suitable for students who had come from the navy (where they had acquired relevant qualifications and experience) and were looking to get their electrical qualifications and licence.

Generally, few advantages were identified for short-duration courses in aged care, as many of the courses do not support any condensed timeframes. However, it was acknowledged that some students could finish competencies more quickly than others and that for these students there should be some restructuring of the course to enable their accelerated completion. This did not mean that the course needed to be condensed; rather, that more flexible methods needed to be applied to enable them to progress quickly through the learning. On the other hand, the advantage for shorter-duration business courses was that it helped students who wanted to articulate into degree courses. One provider reported that where a Diploma in Business had originally taken two years to complete, the course had now been reduced to between 12 and 18 months, mainly because a student who wanted to articulate into a university degree would only get advanced standing for 12 months of the course. In this case it made sense to reduce the original duration of the course.

What practitioners say

The pros and cons of short-duration courses

Short duration courses are okay for long-term existing workers. If they are good students they should be fast-tracked.
(Aged care, private provider)

Short duration courses get students out in the market place more quickly. Our advanced diploma can be delivered in one term. Another term is available to do assignments and complete assessments. A disadvantage could be that it might be too short to absorb all the material. Industry might have a negative perception of such courses.
(Business, public provider)

Condensed training works with people with previous experience. Those who come out of the navy have 95% of knowledge [in communications] so they can get significant RPL in knowledge and experience.
(Electrical, public provider)

Our course originally took 10 weeks. Found this to be no good. Now it is 17 weeks for 27 hours a week. Students with language, literacy and numeracy deficiencies will get one week of support before the class, and the remainder is made up of 12 weeks face-to-face teaching and 3 weeks placement.
(Aged care, public provider)

Our course takes 9–10 weeks with 6 hours (for 4 days or 5 days) in the classroom. There are 100–120 hours of vocational placement. The ideal length would be 12 weeks but this depends on the students. A 3–4 week vocational placement would also be ideal. Classroom training could be for six weeks for students with life skills. For young people they need a lot longer, maybe 6 months. Can't generalise about what is the ideal time but 1–2 years is too long.
(Aged care, private provider)

In a short course you would only be touching on key points and employers would not be happy.
(Aged care, public provider)

Shorter course needs to be more digestible but also valid and reliable. With a shorter course there is still room to meet expectations.
(Business, public provider)

What are the assessment challenges for practitioners and students

Practitioners were asked to identify the key assessment challenges for themselves and for their students. This represented a different focus from the question that had asked them to identify the characteristics of poor assessments (table 4). The challenges they identified were often associated with their own particular deficiencies in knowledge, skill and application, while those they identified for students (which they believed to affect their own practice) generally revolved around students' lack of knowledge and their readiness for assessment, as well as inadequate assessment processes.

Challenges for practitioners

Practitioners identified a wide variety of challenges in developing and implementing assessments, including those related to students' deficiencies (table 11). A substantial challenge (identified by over four-fifths of respondents) was the achievement of fair, valid and reliable or consistent judgments of student performance as well as of prior learning and experience. This included pitching the assessment to the right level and ensuring sufficient, varied and relevant sources of evidence (including for RPL). Currency of assessment knowledge and confidence in making judgments, especially about non-competent performance, were common issues of concern. Other reservations included the difficulty of achieving consistency among assessors for the same qualifications and the lack of depth that can result from holistic assessment techniques, whereby some important and specific components of knowledge and skill may be omitted.

Just under half of the practitioners believed that students' attributes, skills and behaviours made their own assessment practice more difficult. These included student deficiencies in ability, and in language, literacy and numeracy skills, as well as their understanding of subject content and what was expected of them in assessments. A lack of motivation, readiness and interest and a failure to demonstrate the appropriate key attributes, including employability skills, were also identified. Students failing to submit assignments on time, not being sufficiently expansive in their responses to questions and issues, and cheating in assessments were other issues that assessors believed had an impact on the quality of assessments.

The third most frequently reported group of challenges (reported by just over half of respondents) concerned the development, customisation and implementation of assessment tools and resources, including the construction of suitable marking guides. Practitioners found it challenging to keep up with training package changes and versions and to stay abreast of government legislation, regulations and standards (for electrical). Also problematic was aligning assessment requirements with the different elements of units of competency. The ability to identify critical pieces of evidence and use effective questioning techniques to probe for and make judgments of students' depth of knowledge and understanding were also clear areas of concern.

Less frequently identified were the time that it took to conduct the assessments and the associated marking of papers (in the case of written assessments), and providing students with timely feedback.

Table 11 Challenges for practitioners

Challenges	No. of responses	% of respondents ¹ (n = 38)
Arriving at judgments that are fair, valid, and consistent (including for RPL and workplace assessments)	30	80.0
Dealing with student deficiencies in skills, knowledge and behaviour	18	47.3
Developing, customising and implementing assessment tools and techniques to suit the changing requirements of training packages and other regulatory frameworks	20	52.6
Keeping up with assessment knowledge, marking workloads and employer relationships	6	15.8

Note: 1 Refers to the multiple responses given by respondents in their interviews.

Source: Registered training organisation questionnaire for this study.

What practitioners say

Assessment challenges

Achieving consistency in the practical assessments (e.g. manual handling) is a challenge. On Mondays we have theory classes and on Tuesdays and Wednesday we have practical classes. We need to make sure that both trainers are assessing exactly the same way. We also need to make sure they can assess students from non-English-speaking backgrounds (by contextualising assessments to their needs) but in doing so we need to make sure they get the same result. (Aged care, private provider)

Getting work submitted on time. This often requires follow-up contact to remind students. Ensuring that over-assessment does not occur but that validity and sufficiency is reached. We have a mix of students so the challenge is in how to assess them equitably and fairly. (Business, public provider)

Moderation is challenging. Where you have 6 professionals you may have 7 [different] opinions. To achieve good moderation is quite hard. We try to reach a consensus but we can argue about having 'local requirements' (like those for miners) contextualised. We argue about methodology as well as rule books. (Electrical, public provider)

Theory is easy to mark, practical is most challenging. Sometimes students complete a practical but they may have issues in understanding. They can't find the fault properly. Here it is difficult to make judgments of competency. They need to finish on time. In some cases they may be given extra time because of lecturer empathy and compassion, but electricians are paid by the hour so students need to learn to finish in the time given. (Electrical, public provider)

Ensuring RPL currency and making sure that assessments align with wiring requirements and Australian Standards and training package. If there is an amendment we need to reflect this in assessment. The time it takes to collect enough evidence to satisfy assessment criteria for RPL and to do RPL correctly. Another challenge is the adequate training and expertise to conduct assessments. (Electrical, public provider)

Almost 60% of respondents had either received information, guidelines or kits on assessment practice and or participated in related professional development programs, workshops and forums. Such events were either run internally by their own institutions or externally by government training departments and other agencies. Newsletters and websites (including the websites of industry skills councils) also kept them up to date with recent trends or requirements. Topics included recognition of prior learning, validation and moderation, compliance requirements and governance and risk. However, this means that a substantial proportion of assessors (that is, 40%) undertook their own self-directed training to keep up with Australian Skills Quality Authority and other government updates.

Challenges for students

Practitioners were also asked for their perceptions on what challenged students (table 12). Responses tended to be associated with four key themes: personal situations, motivations and behaviour; subject matter, knowledge and related skills; assessment process issues; and language, literacy and numeracy skills.

Over half of the respondents identified challenges relating to students' personal situations, motivations and behaviour. This included their motivation to persist with their studies, low attention spans and lack of interest in excelling in the subject. Others referred to the difficulties experienced by those students who had returned to learning after long absences and found it hard to apply themselves and who lacked confidence or had a fear of assessments.

A similar proportion of assessors had found that students' challenges were related to inadequate knowledge of the relevant subject matter and deficiencies in practical skills (including manual handling for aged care workers; business concepts and financials for those in business; and technical standards and rules for electrical). Theoretical concepts were experienced to be a challenge for students across all areas.

Around two-fifths of respondents identified challenges for students that were related to assessment processes (for example, the assessments' perceived lack of relevance to the workplace, time constraints, unclear instructions and over-assessment). Inadequate preparation by the students themselves, a lack of meaningful and timely feedback on prior assessments, difficulties in gathering and having verified evidence for RPL assessments, and an inability to perform well in practical observations of skill were also cited.

Literacy, language and numeracy issues were the fourth set of assessment challenges assessors identified for students. A key challenge for electrical apprentices was mathematical calculation; for aged care students it was facility with language and literacy (especially writing).

Table 12 Challenges identified by practitioners for students

Challenges for students	No. of responses	% of respondents (n = 37)¹
Deficiencies in personal attributes, attitudes, background and behaviours	22	59.4
Inadequate subject content knowledge and skill	21	56.7
Poor assessment practice	16	43.2
Poor language, literacy and numeracy skills	14	37.8

Note: 1 Refers to multiple responses provided by respondents in their interviews.

Source: Registered training organisation questionnaire for this study.

Challenges for students

Students complete a survey every two years and say that adequate feedback is the challenge. When they do get feedback it is found to be too late and in the meanwhile they would have had to do another assessment, and would not have been able to build on their learning. For students undertaking Certificate III some will struggle with numbers, and financials. Certificate IV students don't put enough information in their answers and will provide minimal information rather than as much as they can. Not enough detail could be due to over-confidence or not enough confidence. Some people waffle rather than give substance especially those with university qualifications. They sound good but have said nothing. (Business, public provider)

Challenges for students are being able to undertake the learning itself. The majority of students are coming back to study after a period of time. They find it challenging to do finance and budgeting units, often because they don't have the financial background to understand these. (Business, public provider)

Students have problems with high end theory (e.g. *What is electricity and how does it work*), other fundamental principles, and mathematical equations. They are also challenged by the scientific units, E002 is specific to electrical programs, and G002 is more general and applies to refrigeration. (Electrical, public provider)

They have trouble with mathematics, Unit G002 (has a lot of maths in it) and AC theory. (Electrical, not-for-profit provider)

Challenges are about whether they can they finish in time, ability to calculate the load, trouble shooting, AC DC circuits and finding faults. If they have not done the right calculations then [they] will not be able to find the fault. If doing Telecom units on Renewable Energy the challenge is whether they can do the data cabling. (Electrical, public provider)

For those who have lower computer literacy, then meeting the technology requirements of external delivery can be challenging (including scanning, email documents, using software programs, following instructions and ensuring that they have answered or done all the assessment requirements as required). Lack of literacy and numeracy skills, and lack of employability skills are other challenges. The ability to use technology helps. (Business, private provider)

Classroom students tend not to have any difficulties. E-learning students are challenged by the lack of motivation to stick at it. Challenges of motivation also have to do with students who are doing the course because they have to do it because of Centre-link requirements. (Business, private provider)

Students are quite scared of assessments. Mature-aged students are often scared of getting what they know onto paper (they have experienced low school expectations). Other challenges are trick questions, literacy and numeracy issues for 50-year-olds, completion requirements, financial stress, lack of time if working in another job, childcare if single parents or one partner is working away, and transport difficulties. (Aged care, public provider)

The challenge is about being observed actually doing a task. (Aged care, private provider)

Students from non-English-speaking backgrounds have issues with language, literacy and numeracy, and can have problems understanding wording in assessments. Too many assessments are also a challenge for students. Keeping up with their studies (about 4 hours a week study outside classroom is required) is challenging, as is meeting the high 90% pass marks bar (required by auditors). (Aged care, public provider)

Getting the third party report completed (because of time constraints) from employer and buddies (students usually buddy up with someone). Buddies might not have time so third party reports they provide may be quite short. (Aged care, private provider)

Listening to the students

The annual Student Outcomes Survey (SOS) conducted by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research gathers information on the level of satisfaction that VET graduates have with their VET courses. Five of the questions deal with satisfaction with assessment experiences.

Between 83% and 90% of all graduate respondents were satisfied with their various assessment experiences, with 90% of all graduates reporting that they were satisfied across the board (table 13). A similar satisfaction level was reported for graduates of Certificate III in Aged Care and a range of Certificate III in Business programs. In the main, students knew how they were to be assessed prior to the assessment taking place. They considered the assessment to be a fair test of their skills and a good test of what they had been taught. In addition, they reported being assessed at regular intervals throughout their courses and receiving useful feedback on their assessments. Electrical apprentices

responding to the survey indicated less satisfaction with the usefulness of the feedback they received on their assessments than either aged care or business graduate respondents. Business graduate respondents to the survey posted the highest overall satisfaction level (table 13).

Table 13 Level of satisfaction with assessment processes reported by graduate respondents in the Students Outcomes Survey 2012

Item	Total ⁽¹⁾	Certificate III Aged Care	Certificate III Business ⁽²⁾	Certificate III Electrical ⁽³⁾
I knew how I was going to be assessed	89.3	89.4	83.4	89.7
The way I was assessed was a fair test of my skills	90.5	90.8	97.4	87.7
I was assessed at appropriate intervals	90.4	90.1	96.4	90.1
I received useful feedback on my assessment	83.4	87.3	85.6	77.7
The assessment was a good test of what I was taught	88.6	91.1	91.3	80.8
Overall satisfaction on assessment	90.2	91.0	97.4	88.5

Notes: (1) All graduates.

(2) In-the-scope business studies included for this table are: Certificate III in Business (Legal Administration), Certificate III in Business (Medical Administration), Certificate III in Music Industry (Music Business), Certificate III in Music Business, Certificate III in Business Administration (Education), Certificate III in Micro Business Operations, Certificate III in Business Administration (Legal).

(3) In-the-scope electrical studies for this table are: Certificate III In Electro-technology Electrician, Certificate III in Electro-technology Systems Electrician.

Source: Students Outcomes Survey 2012.

We also spoke to students from the various programs via focus groups or interviews. The aim was to explore their experiences of assessment. They were first asked to identify the mode of delivery and assessment used for their programs. They were then asked to evaluate their experiences.

Certificate III in Aged Care

Students from Provider A said they were generally satisfied with the assessment process they had experienced thus far. However, they believed there was insufficient time to absorb the information and complete the assignments. They found the course to be a great deal of work and very involved, especially the additional components to certificate III requirements. They also believed that they could cope with the work if they had more time to study (including at home). Students felt that the course should be of a higher level than a certificate III because there was much more work and responsibility required.

Provider B students were also generally satisfied with the assessment process and the training. There was just one subject in which they felt they required additional support. The duration of the program they were undertaking was 17 weeks. They believed that this length of time was sufficient for the certificate III and pointed out that one of them was attempting to complete two certificate III qualifications during the 17-week period. One of the key challenges for students was English, especially if they were from a non-English-speaking background.

Provider C students undertaking a fast-track blended-delivery program in the Certificate III in Aged Care reported that the course duration for their program was 18 weeks (for one day per week). So far they had experienced a variety of assessments and were generally satisfied with the approaches that had been used. These included group and individual presentations, video presentations, case studies, a 30-minute short-answer test and a set of practical assessments. These students considered group

assessments to be the most difficult. This was due to the difficulty of coordinating tasks for a group of people with different levels of abilities, including difficulties with English communication.

When students undertaking the Certificate III in Business Administration were asked what was most difficult about assessment, they highlighted some minor frustrations. In the main they were of the view that the assessments were not particularly difficult. 'If you apply yourself, it's like everything else. You have to put in the effort to do the work and hand it in to the required deadlines.' Remembering definitions and key terms was identified as a minor challenge.

Conclusions

Our findings suggest that regulatory considerations and requirements are the key drivers of quality assessments across electrical and aged care qualifications. They are less critical for business qualifications, which are broader in their scope.

Practitioners have a general understanding that assessments need to be valid and rigorous. That is, they need to be able to gather sufficient evidence of candidates' practical performance of relevant workplace tasks and their knowledge of industry or occupational job roles. The importance of the accurate mapping of assessments to the performance criteria of the relevant units of competency in training packages, and to the right level of the qualification, is also generally understood. Practitioners report the importance of having well-designed assessment tools, those that provide clear instructions, meet candidates' needs for reasonable adjustment and are relevant to the qualification being assessed. They also speak about the need for assessments to be conducted in authentic and appropriate settings. Quality assessments in their view not only require skilled and trained assessors; they also require students who are ready to be assessed, have had advanced notice of the assessment, and have the ability and knowledge to do what is expected of them. As this study did not observe trainers and assessors conducting assessments, it is difficult to comment on the extent to which this knowledge was translated into effective practice.

Validation is seen as being more important than moderation. Moderation is still not fully understood or practised in the way that is commonly accepted by assessment experts and commentators. Many practitioners claim that the two concepts are not clearly differentiated, although their reported practices point to the great importance placed on validation. There may be a number of reasons for this. Trainers and assessors are mostly concerned that students can demonstrate they have acquired the knowledge that has been imparted and can give an accurate or correct representation of this knowledge in written or practical tasks. Attaining a successful outcome (that is, a pass) signifies for both the assessor and the student that they have been able to meet their objectives. These events however are more connected to concepts of validation than moderation. It seems that trainers and assessors are more intent on implementing front-end pre-emptive approaches to ensuring reliability and consistency than post-assessment moderation measures.

Although the standards for initial and continuing registration point to the need for registered training organisations to demonstrate that they have established processes for ensuring the reliability of assessments, there is no mandatory requirement for them to implement moderation techniques. However, the standards require training organisations to have arrangements in place for the external validation of assessments. The National Partnership Agreement on Skills Reform between the Commonwealth and the states and territories (Council of Australian Governments 2012) also refers to jurisdictions implementing projects in which the external validation of assessments is trialled and (subject to outcomes) subsequently implemented as a national model (Council of Australian Governments 2012, p.22). Although there has been a tendency by practitioners to use the two terms (validation and moderation) interchangeably, assessment experts and commentators working in conjunction with the Workplace Education Research Centre of Victoria University have developed some detailed resources that explicitly refer to the importance of incorporating moderation approaches into the assessment strategies of registered training organisations. The aim of these is to enable training organisations to meet the standards relating to reliability in assessment (National Quality Council 2009a, 2009b; TVET 2010).

Trainers and assessors understand the wisdom of gaining employer feedback to ensure that their classroom practices are those required by industry. They also understand the difficulties of getting employers to devote time to the validation of assessment tools. Where practitioners already have good networks with employers, getting this involvement seems to be less difficult.

The uptake of recognition of prior learning is still relatively low, especially for certificate III programs, although it is more commonly requested for higher-level programs. Where RPL does occur, it generally demands considerable time and effort on the part of assessors and students. Although COAG's aim is the streamlining of the recognition of prior learning by providers, the practice is not widespread for qualifications in this study. This is not to say that it is not occurring, but it is still common for providers to spend substantial amounts of time ensuring that they accurately map evidence to elements of competence, with the concomitant expectation that students will provide the appropriate amount of evidence. A key driver of this behaviour is the objective of fulfilling auditor expectations. Another key driver is the need for institutions to protect their brand.

The results of the independent assessment validation pilot have highlighted the need to provide a higher level of prescription or direction to registered training organisations delivering the aged care qualifications, especially in terms of course duration and the content and quality of training and assessment. Such an approach could be considered for other qualifications where the quality of assessment has been of concern.

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Appendix A

Lessons from independent assessment validation pilots and quality reviews of aged care qualifications

The aim of the Assessment Validation Project (conducted as part of the national COAG Independent Assessment Validation pilot) was to trial a process to independently validate graduate outcomes from the Certificate III in Aged Care. The validation process had a number of stages. First, industry stakeholders were involved in the development of a graduate specification instrument, which listed the key attributes and competencies that should be demonstrated by graduates. Industry advisers were then recruited to help state training authority personnel to make site visits to training providers. A group of 12 graduates were also involved in a workplace assessment conducted by industry advisers. In addition, a telephone survey of 151 graduates from 12 training providers was undertaken to assess their employment status and satisfaction with training. The survey found that of the 151 graduates of the Certificate III in Aged Care almost half were currently working in aged care and almost a quarter of these were already employed in the sector before they started the training course. The remainder of the graduates were still seeking jobs in aged care. Over four-fifths of the graduates were very satisfied with the quality of the training they had received. Very few of the graduates had not completed a work placement during their course (South Australian Government 2013b).

The pilot found courses to be generally well structured but not long enough to provide students with sufficient opportunities for learning, practising and reviewing what they had learnt. Providers were also found to be using printed commercial materials that often were not specifically contextualised to local needs, while there was also a heavy reliance on written short-answer questions. A close look at assessment processes and documents found that, in most cases, there was insufficient detailed documentation of assessment strategies, resources and learner support. There was also little employer involvement in the formal validation of assessments. In addition, students were often sent on work placements without specific instructions about what was expected of them. In some cases trainers and assessors were found not to be signing off on logbooks or engaging in thorough discussions with the workplace supervisors about the performance of students. The major trouble spots for assessment in aged care training were related to condensed course durations, inadequate contextualisation to industry needs (often tied to lack of industry input), a lack of mechanisms to ensure that assessors achieved consistency in their marking (for example, marking guides), and little or no focus on healthy ageing competencies.

The aged care workers themselves were found to be proficient in their performance of key tasks, which involved helping residents with specific caring tasks (for example, toileting, bathing, dressing, eating and other general life skill tasks). However, they had little knowledge of the Accreditation Standards and aged care services like Home and Community Care services. There was also little knowledge of the concepts of health promotion or healthy ageing. The Community Services Training Package tended to concentrate on the medical model approach to care, which is more often than not focused on the current physical wellbeing and health of the resident, rather than on the prevention of further decline. Clear and quantifiable measures that can be used to assess the extent to which workers adopt a health-promotion approach are also required.

Six key areas for the improvement were agreed with industry. Training and assessment in aged care should ensure that:

- Students were sufficiently exposed to current practices and contexts (including knowledge of the Aged Care Accreditation Standards, different care levels (residential high and low care, community care) and the principles and practices of healthy ageing.
- Course durations were sufficient to enable students to develop the required skills and knowledge to industry standards. (Course durations should be a minimum of nine weeks full-time, exclusive of the work placement, which should be of 120 hours duration.)
- Trainers and assessors should possess the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment, a vocational qualification at the same level or above as the one being delivered and current experience of aged care (in a facility as a personal carer or nurse), with aged care facility experience, knowledge of the Aged Care Accreditation Standards, and the application of healthy ageing practices and principles.
- There is a range of current industry equipment used in assessments (including recommended types of equipment and skills laboratories that replicate the workplace).
- Training programs had adequate teacher–student ratios and adequate repetition of practical skills by students.
- Quality-assured work placements are provided, in which the role of the registered training organisation, the student and workplace supervisor are defined and clear instructions are provided about the format of the placement. Regular contact should be maintained with the student. In relation to assessment, the evidence should be reviewed and verified against the criteria for competency.
- Rigorous assessment methods and tools (including assessor instructions, marking guides, and documentation of evidence of industry engagement) should be used.

A range of miscellaneous issues dealing with human resources issues were also identified (including career planning, industry orientation, professional development, workplace exposure, and role descriptions for all students, workplaces and registered training organisations).

What industry auditors and advisers say

Providers want to do the right thing, often they don't know how.

(Senior project officer, COAG Validation Project, aged care)

Facilities are excruciatingly sedentary for residents. This needs to change. We need to focus on early health promotion intervention strategies. The paradigm is not right. We need to follow a paradigm shift.

(Industry advisor for COAG Validation Project, aged care)

Apprentices need to develop practical skills. Doing simulations will not let you do this. Need a balance between field work and simulations.

(Auditor, gasfitters, plumbers and electrical contractors and trades)

Appendix B

Lessons from regulators and auditors

Electro-technology

The Office of the Technical Regulator (OTR) in South Australia conducts compliance audits against the Electricity Act, Gas Act and Water Industry Act. As such, it conducts compliance audits of electricians and electrical contractors. Under the Electrical Act and the Australian Standard, electricians must undertake mandatory testing and checking of their work. This involves a visual audit and an electrical test on any wiring that has been installed.

The Office of the Technical Regulator finds that, although apprentices may be able to apply the correct processes while they working with supervisors, who are driving the completion of the task, one of the key competencies that seems to cause issues for them when they enter the field as licensed electricians is 'awareness of safe work practices'. When auditors find individuals to be non-compliant, the general approach is to 'educate rather than expiate'. This means giving them time to retrain to improve. Sometimes there may be a misunderstanding of the requirements, which can be cleared up.

The annual report of the Office of the Technical Regulator reported no prosecutions during 2011–12 (although there were some non-compliances that might result in future prosecutions). The Regulator also issued 21 expiation notices for non-compliant electrical work. Most of these were related to electrical workers not completing the mandatory safety checks on electrical installations (South Australian Government 2013a).

The Office of the Technical Regulator is sometimes asked to take the role of an industry advisor on the auditing of training for the VET sector. Some of the key issues experienced with assessment of apprentices relate to the variability of the Capstone Test processes, because the registered training organisations conduct this at their own premises, and the test varies from training organisation to training organisation. Other issues relate to the currency of student workbooks, untidy housekeeping in workshops, the quality and quantity of equipment available for practice, and an adequate balance of simulations and field work to ensure that students work in realistic settings.

Aged care

A strategic review of the Certificate III and IV Aged Care qualifications conducted by the Australian Skills Quality Authority (2013) involved 20 registered training organisations selected at random from different jurisdictions and audited specifically as part of the review and 53 training organisations undergoing re-registration compliance audits. The findings uncovered a range of non-compliances with the assessment practices. Registered training organisations were found to lack well-documented training and assessment strategies and had few assessment materials that had been developed in consultation with industry. Concerns were also raised about the over-reliance on third-party reports, often represented by checklists of attributes and tasks, at the expense of the direct observation of skills by assessors. Also of concern was the use of online assessments for soft-skill competencies, which needed to be assessed in practical workplace settings. Another issue concerned the practice of training organisations leaving the structuring of the work placement to employers, but without providing them with adequate instructions of what the student was expected to cover. Training

organisations were also found to rely on employers signing off on a student's competency without assessors verifying the demonstrated skill or trainers visiting employers to discuss the performance of students with them. There was little integration between activities in the workplace and those in the classroom. The volume of learning was often found to be far less than that identified by the AQF guidelines. These shortcomings also reflect the lack of prescription in training packages and in quality standards. Registered training organisations were provided with opportunities to rectify their non-compliances, and 86.8% of the 53 audited training organisations were judged as compliant once rectification audits had been completed. Around 20% still remained non-compliant.

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