

Project to examine industry perceptions and expectations of VET assessment processes and outcomes

Introduction

1. Group Training Australia (GTA) is the national industry association for the network of group training organisations (GTOs) of which there are now over 150 recognised by State/ Territory Training Authorities. Over 40,000 apprentices and trainees are now employed through group training arrangements including:
 - a. 20% of all traditional apprentices
 - b. 30-45% of traditional apprentices in some industries in some States/Territories
 - c. 20% of all school-based apprentices and trainees
2. As the peak body representing employers of a significant number of the nation's apprentices and trainees we welcome the opportunity to make written comment on the above consultancy. We also look forward to further discussion with you about the issues raised in this paper.

Competency-based training

3. It is now 10 years or more since Australia moved, in theory at least, to a competency-based training system. In reality however most courses, particularly apprenticeships and traineeships which are employment-based and undertaken under contract of training, have remained effectively time-based. Training ministers have recently agreed, following undertakings given at COAG, to introduce competency-based completions for apprenticeships and traineeships. In addition to agreeing to this, some States like Queensland have also unilaterally reduced the nominal duration of a range of traditional apprenticeships by anything from 3-12 months.
4. Competency-based completions are the consequence of a competency-based training system. In theory it will enable apprentices and trainees to accelerate their training as quickly as competency can be demonstrated and complete earlier than the nominal duration of the training program. By the same token apprentices and trainees who cannot demonstrate competency within the nominal duration of their course may find that their contracts of training have to be extended in order to accommodate their assessment needs. The expectation however is that few if any should arrive at this point.

Competency vs proficiency/ productivity.

5. At the moment most employers are not actively engaged in the assessment process. Assessments of competency appear to be largely undertaken by RTOs who may or may not seek to ensure that competency is demonstrated in the workplace. Even if the assessment occurs in the workplace with input from a workplace supervisor, an assessment of the acquisition of skill and knowledge, and their application, does not necessarily take account of the proficiency of an apprentice or trainee and whether they can be said to have reached a standard that makes them employable. This standard may arguably be described as the industry standard.
6. There are many examples of what is meant by this. A classic example of the distinction that is being made here is the apprentice carpenter who is deemed competent to hang a door but cannot do so at a rate that an employer would expect of a qualified tradesman. Such proficiency, or competency, it is said can only come by serving sufficient time on the job and cannot be assessed without employer engagement in the assessment process.
7. Of course the nature of the skills required in different occupations is changing. Some skills involving hand and eye coordination, artisanship or even artistry that could only be acquired with time and practice on the job have become less important as technological

change has intervened. Like the paperless office however technology has not yet supplanted everything.

Some implications

8. While the commitment to competency-based completions as part of a competency-based training system is understandable, particularly at a time of chronic skill shortages when it is imperative to get skilled people into the workforce as quickly as possible, there are implications for the training system if employers are not meaningfully involved in the assessment of competency. What are some of these implications?

Quality of Training

There is concern that any assessment of competency made without the considered view of employers will only lead to inferior training outcomes. Furthermore, if competency-based assessment is used to allow apprentices and trainees to complete earlier than the nominal duration of their training contract, the quality of the graduates will be in question. There are some who have described this phenomenon as a form of 'dumbing down'. This must be avoided at all costs when the emphasis is on encouraging people to train to higher levels of the AQF than Certificate III.

Employer return on investment

The economics of the investment by employers in training for their apprentices and trainees has not to our knowledge been studied closely. In the case of traditional apprentices whose nominal course length is four years, employers commonly expect that their investment in the early unproductive years, when supervision and wastage are at their greatest, will be repaid in the latter years, particularly the fourth year when apprentices are at their most productive. Once employers come to understand that many of their apprentices are likely to be leaving early, some potentially very early, they may start to reconsider the value of investing in training and their propensity to hire may be affected accordingly. This subject may need closer examination.

Competency-based remuneration

With competency-based assessment comes the real prospect of a system of remuneration based on the acquisition of competency, rather than on time completed. How this is to be implemented is still uncertain especially when the industrial instruments generally do not make provision for it. We understand however that Queensland has made provision for competency-based remuneration along side the time based system in their industrial instruments, though to what extent it is being used we are uncertain. The issue that we particularly wish to flag here is that if employers lose confidence in the assessment system and are required to remunerate for competency that is questionable in their eyes, the system will again come into disrepute.

Vocational training in schools

One of the major educational reforms of the last decade has been the integration of vocational education and training into the school curriculum. This has enabled many students at comprehensive schools who either have little interest in, or aptitude for, university education, to find an alternative and usually more beneficial purpose in their schooling. There is evidence that these students are generally making a more effective transition from school to work as a consequence of these reforms. We are concerned however by reports that many students are completing Certificate II programs at school, essentially at the same time as they complete their senior secondary certificate, which are often not held in much regard by employers. The reason for this is that employers generally do not regard these graduates as truly competent because they have usually had little exposure to the workplace and competency is invariably assessed exclusively by RTOs. It is understandable that students would be dismayed by this outcome, the more so when employers decline to pay them commensurate with the qualification.

Conclusion

9. Our purpose here has obviously been to impress upon you the need to ensure that employers are actively engaged in the assessment process. Failure to do so will undermine confidence in the integrity of competency-based assessments. In doing so we recognise that one of the major problems with the system is the competing and seemingly irreconcilable interests of the parties who are asked to adjudicate: RTOs, employers, and apprentices and trainees. In the interests of economic well-being though a way must be found through this seeming impasse.

We would be pleased to discuss these thoughts further with you.

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