Assessment Troubleshooting – Strategies for sticky problems

In this document you will find descriptions of common problems that are faced by teachers in developing and conducting effective assessments, with some suggested strategies.

Here is your quick link to each of the problems described in this guide:

- Units appearing in different qualification levels
- Critical components of competency
- Flexible interpretation of competencies for different workplaces
- Avoiding the “over-assessment trap”
- Knowledge vs skills – getting the assessment balance right
- Using simulations to reflect workplace practice
- Third party evidence
- On-line and distance assessment
- Gathering sufficient evidence for an assessment decision
- Explaining assessment outcomes without marks
- Integrated assessment of multiple units
- Challenges and appeals against assessment decisions
- Gathering evidence for recognition
- Industry input into assessment development and validation
- What assessment documentation needs to be kept?
- Graded results

This document is based on “Troubleshooting Guide – Competency-based Assessment” (pdf – 1.5MB), Russell Docking for WA Dept of Education and Training, 2013

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| Qualification levels | The same unit may appear in many different qualifications, and some of these qualifications may be at different AQF levels. How do assessors ensure that the unit is not “inflated” to a higher level by the assessment strategy used? | • The unit level for many units will be reflected in the code. (BSBCU402 – the first number, 4, gives you the level). If not, it is a safe bet to say that the level of the unit is the level of the lowest qualification in which it first appears. At training.gov.au you can look up a unit and see a list of the qualifications containing that unit.  
  • The unit must retain the character (and level) of its origins, regardless of the course in which it is embedded. |
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| Critical components of competency           | Units of competency specify the requirements that must be met to achieve competency. How can assessors ensure their evidence gathering methods provide evidence for all mandatory requirements? | Assessment must address all mandatory components of a unit. This will depend on the format of the unit of competency:  
   - All elements (and performance criteria – but not PCs individually)  
   - For units in the new “streamlined” format: Performance Evidence and Knowledge Evidence  
   - For units in the older format: Required knowledge and skills  
   - Critical aspects of evidence                                                                                                                                                                                |
| Flexibility for different workplace contexts| Workplaces often have “their own standards”. How do assessors provide flexible assessment activities for a range of workplace contexts without compromising the standards set down in the units? | Use any of these strategies:  
   - Customisation of a qualification relates to the big-picture options for a qualification, including selection of elective competencies  
   - Contextualisation of a particular unit is about changing the wording but not the meaning of the units to clarify the unit requirements. This is an important strategy that applies to all assessment contexts.  
   - Reasonable adjustment – variations with assessment processes to accommodate individual circumstances without undermining the requirements. |
| Over-assessment                              | Assessors can fall into the trap of over-assessing to make sure that they will meet audit requirements, for example assessing every performance criterion separately. How can assessors collect sufficient evidence without overdoing it and making unreasonable demands on students? | • Refer to the Training Package Assessment Guidelines and the Evidence Guide for each unit of competency. Refer to the Range Statement to guide your strategies.  
   • Assess at element level or whole unit level – avoid the assessment of individual performance criteria.  
   • Include only **required knowledge and skills** in assessment – not all the extra content (which may be very useful) that you may have exposed the student to during training.  
   • Where the same (or very similar) content appears in more than one unit you can save yourself, and your students, extra work by assessing that content only once. Confer with your teaching colleagues to look for opportunities to cluster related units and assess them holistically, or at the very least, work out a way to share student evidence to complete the assessments without duplication.  
   • As a rule of thumb, you shouldn’t spend more than 10% of course delivery hours on assessment. |
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| Knowledge versus performance               | Competence is a combination of knowledge and skills. Many teachers are much more comfortable teaching and assessing underpinning knowledge than work performance. How can teachers tell the difference between knowledge and performance and design assessments that reflect work performance? | • Analyse the unit carefully to identify knowledge and skills items  
• As a general rule at lower AQF levels, observation of performance is used to assess required skills and questions (written or verbal) are used to assess required knowledge.  
• Consider how aspects of performance can demonstrate underpinning knowledge, particularly evidence of problem-solving skills. This can remove the requirement to assess these knowledge items individually |
| Using simulations to reflect workplaces     | In some cases, assessment can’t occur in a workplace – a simulated workplace is the next best option. How can assessors create realistic simulations that enable a valid and reliable assessment to occur? | • Refer the TP Assessment Guidelines – sometimes the TP will specify the requirements for the use of simulations  
• Ensure that the four dimensions of competence (in About Assessment > Resources) are covered in the simulation (task skills, task management skills, job role/environment skills, problem solving skills)  
• Ensure that:  
  o Up-to-date equipment and practices are used  
  o Time pressures and deadlines are considered  
  o Complications, equipment malfunctions, unexpected occurrences and difficult customers and colleagues are “built-in” to the simulations.  
  o WHS issues are considered  
  o Work-real problems are identified and solved |
| Third-party evidence                        | Third party evidence, particularly of workplace performance, is a useful tool to support assessment decisions. However, 3rd parties may not understand the requirements of units, or may not be as concerned about accuracy as an assessor. How can assessors ensure the validity and reliability of the evidence provided by workplace supervisors? | • Select the 3rd party carefully, where you can.  
• Prepare 3rd parties thoroughly.  
• Produce checklists and recording sheets using language relevant to the workplace (units of competency are written for VET professionals, and may not be easy to understand/interpret by 3rd parties)  
• Use strategies to verify the evidence where necessary – a few questions of the candidate may be sufficient  
• Remember, the 3rd party is not the assessor – you are! Ultimately, you, as the assessor, are responsible for ensuring the quality of the evidence gathering and the final judgement.  
• 3rd party evidence should be regarded as “complementary” evidence and not the sole source of evidence of a candidate’s performance. |

See the ASQA fact sheet on [Third Party Evidence](#) (Word doc – 786KB)
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| On-line and distance assessment  | Challenges with online and distance assessment relate to ensuring:  
  - establishing the identity of the candidate and the authenticity of the evidence  
  - gathering evidence of performance of task skills  
  How can assessors make sure that the assessment strategy satisfies the principles of assessment (valid, reliable, fair and flexible) and the evidence collected meets the rules of evidence (valid, sufficient, authentic and current)? | • Use 3rd parties to gather evidence to support the assessment  
  • Use evidence drawn from a range of training, work and personal experiences. These could be verified by 3rd parties.  
  • Look for opportunities using new technologies for students to record their activities and submit or upload for the assessor, such as ePortfolios, video clips, photos, point-of-view glasses.  
  • Direct contact between you and the student (such as face-face, phone, on-line sessions) can enable you to validate and authenticate evidence already accumulated. |
| Gathering enough evidence        | There is a danger that assessors can ask for too much evidence, or not enough. How can assessors be confident that they have sufficient evidence to make a professional judgement about the student’s competence? | • Training Packages are becoming more explicit about the amount of evidence required. The TP may specify “multiple assessments over a period of time and a range of contexts”. Read the Assessment Guidelines for your TP to see what direction is provided.  
  • Record the date and context of the evidence gathered and assessed for each assessment process, so that “multiple” demonstrations are documented.  
  • The rule of thumb is that you need sufficient evidence to enable you to make a confident professional judgement. If you can’t do this, you need more evidence! |
| Explaining assessment outcomes   | Many of our students and employers do not understand competency-based assessment (CBA), and expect to receive a mark as a result. How can assessors provide useful advice and explanations about the CBA system to students and employers? | • Competency based assessment relies on the establishment of well-defined standards.  
  • A percentage mark does not give an indication of the achievement of a student against the various requirements of the standard.  
  • Explain to students and employers that competent means meeting all requirements – maybe prepare a handout for all clients. |
| Making judgements using         | Integrated assessment of clusters of units is often very good practice, to ensure that assessment activities reflect work performance. How do assessors assess and report against the requirements of individual units from within the cluster? | • Use a range of methods and tools for the cluster of units  
  • Ensure that your assessment instruments provide sufficient detail for you to be able to record evidence for all requirements of each unit  
  • Map the assessment to the mandatory requirements of each unit |
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| Challenges to assessment      | Assessor want to get the assessment decision right and avoid complaints and grievances about the assessment. Appeals to assessment decisions need to be provided in any assessment system, but good practices could minimise the incidence of successful appeals. | • Ensure that the assessment process is transparent for all stakeholders, with good information provided to students. Then make sure that the process is followed.  
• Ensure that your assessment tools gather sufficient evidence for a clear judgement to be made. Remember you can always request further evidence from a student.  
• Document the assessment process and decision, and the grounds upon which you made the decision.  
• Ensure that the assessor has no undeclared conflict of interest in regard to the assessment – talk to your Head Teacher, and review the WSI Conflict of interest in assessment procedure (WSI Intranet).  
• Comply with the standards, and don’t allow “AQF drift” to slip in, that is, don’t use an assessment method that requires higher skills and knowledge than is required by the unit.  
• Validate your assessment process and tools, and make sure that your interpretation of the standards is in line with the AQF level, your colleagues and industry practices.  
• Remember – challenges to the assessment process or outcome are a great opportunity to review your assessments and make improvements. |
| decisions                     |                                                                                                                                                                                                             |                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| Evidence for Recognition      | Does the following sound familiar? Unknown student: “It’s easier to just do the unit than to try to get the evidence required for RPL!” How do assessors get the methodologies right to facilitate the evidence collection process for recognition? | • Assessors have to provide high level of information and support to recognition candidates (just like for students being assessed following training delivery).  
• Evidence can be generated during the assessment process, by a structured competency conversation (an interview) and direct observation of skills – this is better evidence than methods that rely on historic, paper-based evidence.  
• Documentary evidence may be used as supporting, supplementary evidence displayed in the interview or demonstration. It should not be the primary evidence.  
• Remember: RPL may allow students to bypass training, but it does not allow them to bypass assessment! |
<p>|                               | See the reading on Recognition                                                                                                                                                                            |                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |</p>
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| Industry Input in assessment development and validation | The Standards for RTOs (2015) require RTOs to engage enterprises and industry in the development and validation of assessment strategies. It can be difficult to develop efficient strategies for engaging industry. A challenge can arise when the national standards seem to differ from the local enterprise requirements. | • Assessors can customise and contextualise delivery and assessment to reflect local enterprise needs. But you can’t change the standards!  
• Remember, engagement is about receiving advice, not direction.  
• If the Training Package doesn’t reflect client needs, provide feedback to the Industry Skills Council responsible for developing the TP. Read more in *Industry Engagement about Assessment* (in About Assessment > Resources). |
| Documentation of assessments             | What documentation needs to be produced and how much has to be kept in relation to assessments? | • More documentation does not necessarily demonstrate compliance with the Standards for RTOs.  
• Evidence of how and why the assessment decision was made needs to be recorded and kept, in addition to the evidence itself. ASQA has provided a general direction sheet on [Retention requirements for completed student assessment items](#). (pdf - 333KB)  
• See WSI guidelines: [Record keeping Guidelines for teaching sections](#) (WSI Intranet – Word doc) and use the forms and procedures provided. |
| Graded results                           | While many units delivered in TAFE have been set up so that student results show a graded outcome (Competent, Competent with Credit, Competent with Distinction), there is no guidance in Training Packages about how this should be done. The traditional method of assigning marks as a percentage does not sit comfortably within a competency-based system.  
How then should assessors determine graded results for students for units where this is required?  
You can read more information in *Graded Outcomes in Assessment* (in About Assessment > Resources). | Whether a unit will be graded or not is decided by TAFE NSW centrally during the implementation of a new/revised training package. When a decision has been made to grade a particular unit, this applies in all circumstances of delivery across TAFE NSW. Individual teachers or Institutes cannot make a decision whether or not a unit will be graded.  
Strategies:  
• A graded outcome is only to be considered once a candidate has demonstrated competence.  
• Decisions about a graded result should be made based on clear criteria specifying the requirements for each grade.  
• Consider developing a rubric for the unit – this is a table that specifies the level of performance for different grades against each element in a competency.  
• The criteria used for grading must be made clear to all candidates.  
• Validation processes must be undertaken to ensure the validity and reliability of graded outcomes. |