

# VET Assessment: A student perspective

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## *Abstract*

*This paper provides insights into the perceptions and perspectives of vocational education students regarding the relevance and quality of the assessment processes they have experienced in the VET sector. It is based on a series of semi-structured interviews (Borg&Gall 1989) conducted over a two year period with 132 vocational learners. The focus of the interviews was on what the students were actually thinking and feeling about the assessment process as they experienced it. Purposive sampling was used, with the final sample generally representative of the Australian vocational education and training student population with respect to training provider, geographic location, gender, cultural background, age and industry sector. A thematic approach (Leedy 1997) was used to analyse the data, with the focus on the common 'themes' (sets of related issues, suggestions, perspectives) that emerged from an holistic analysis of the data. The reporting of the findings in the paper includes actual comments made by students. Key findings include: quality assessment processes are seen to be essential for giving industry credibility to the qualification; the nature and quality of the assessment process is closely linked to student self-perception as a learner; current assessment processes are frequently seen to focus on the quantity rather than the quality of the evidence collected; written tests and examinations are seen to significantly disadvantage learners with inadequate literacy skills, and generally are not believed to be a powerful way of validating the outcomes of learning; assessment standards and processes are seen to exhibit marked inconsistencies across providers for students undertaking the same programs of study or for adults seeking recognition of their prior learning; ungraded competency-based assessment processes are not perceived to provide a strong motivation to students to achieve excellence; and there are widespread concerns among students about the educational and industry-based credibility of some assessors.*

## **Introduction**

This study draws on four research studies to provide insights into the perspectives of students regarding VET assessment. Although two of the studies primarily focused on recognition of prior learning, the experiences of students of assessment subsequent to their commencing their VET program were investigated as well as their RPL assessment experience.

Over the last four years, the authors of this paper have undertaken a range of funded and unfunded research studies that have focused on the personal or 'lived' experiences of students in the vocational education and training sector in Australia. An important component of all of these studies has been the collection of student insights and perspectives regarding the nature, effectiveness and usefulness of the formal and informal assessment processes they have experienced. Using the technique of secondary data analysis (Smith 2008), this paper presents the major assessment themes and issues highlighted by students through the four studies, along with actual comments made by the students interviewed that relate to each of the themes and issues. In order to maintain confidentiality, student comments are only identified by gender, area of employment, and age.

### **The importance of the student perspective**

There are at least four reasons why student perspectives and insights should be directly included in the processes for developing policy and practice for VET assessment. First, as the direct recipients of vocational education and training, students are in a unique and powerful position to comment on the relevance and quality of the assessment processes and approaches. Learner feedback regarding the nature and quality of assessment is frequently sought by individual trainers and vocational lecturers at the end of a course for the purposes of improving individual programs and teaching strategies, but it is rarely sought with any rigour at the system level where 'broad brush' statistical information such as completion rates and employment outcomes generally are used to infer quality.

Second, the traditional notion of obtaining one set of skills or qualification(s) that will suffice for a lifetime of permanent employment, generally with the one employer, is no longer a sustainable model in a job market characterised as knowledge-based, flexible, customised, networked and global (Lunn 2004). In this environment, responsibility for learning for work increasingly must rest with the individual learner – not just the individual business or industry. In this context, it is reasonable to assert that the perspectives and insights of individuals about their vocational learning, including the assessment processes they experience, should be taken into account in the development of VET policy and processes.

Third, adult learning theory and research strongly suggests that adults have a "deep psychological need" to have direct input into the nature of the learning and assessment processes with which they engage (Knowles 1990:58). Similarly, Biggs (2003) argues that adults learn best when learning and assessment processes are tailored to suit the nature and experiences of the learner. It is reasonable to argue, therefore, that the needs, experiences, insights and perspectives of adult learners have a critical role to play in the design, development and implementation of quality VET assessment processes.

Fourth, adult learning theorists consistently argue that adult learners are more likely to respond to assessment processes that provide them with ‘internal’ rather than ‘external’ motivation (Laird 2007, Raelin 2008, Velez 2006). Internal motivators include self-esteem, recognition, better quality of life, increased job satisfaction, and the greater self-confidence that comes from achieving success (Knowles, 1990:63). Consequently, there would seem to be an imperative to ask vocational learners about their perspectives, experiences and insights of the assessment processes, and to actively listen to their answers.

## **Methodology**

The data for this paper was derived from four separate research studies conducted by one or both of the authors within the last four years: a national study into participant insights and perspectives of the recognition of prior learning in VET (Smith & Clayton 2009); background research for the Australian Country Background Report for the OECD activity on recognition of non-formal and in-formal learning (Misko, Beddie & Smith 2007); and two private consultancies conducted for VET institutions. The research design for each of these studies included a series of semi-structured interviews (Borg & Gall 1989) in which students were asked to comment on their experiences and perceptions of a wide range of VET issues, including VET assessment. Interviews were generally of 45 minutes to an hour in duration, and wherever possible, were conducted face-to-face (interviews with some respondents in remote areas of Australia were conducted by telephone).

The four studies provided a purposive sample for this paper of 132 current or past vocational education students from a range of social, cultural and employment backgrounds, as well as from both public and private training providers. In order to provide ‘rich’ illustration of important findings, twelve of the people interviewed for the 2009 Smith & Clayton study were also offered the opportunity to work with the researchers to construct autobiographical case studies of their experiences as learners (Creswell 2005). Autobiographic case studies are based on the personal reflections of the respondents, are written in the respondents’ own words, and present the information they want to convey in the form in which they want to present it without any editing or suggestions from the researchers.

The data derived from student interviews in the four research studies was subjected to secondary data analysis (Smith 2008). Secondary data analysis generally refers to the analysis (or re-analysis) of existing data that were originally collected for another purpose. It differs from replication research in that no new data are collected. Analysis followed a thematic approach (Leedy 1997) in which the focus was on the common ‘themes’ (sets of related issues, suggestions, perspectives) that emerged from an holistic analysis of the data. The Leximancer V3.07 software program was the primary tool employed to analyse the information and to extract major themes, issues and ideas.

## **Student perspectives: why quality assessment is important**

The students interviewed in the studies identified four major reasons why they considered quality assessment to be important:

1. It is necessary in order to attain a formal qualification;
2. It ensures that they meet the competencies expected or desired by their employer;
3. It enhances their self-perception as learners; and
4. It can improve the quality of the learning experience.

Attaining a formal qualification was seen to be important because it assists in accessing and keeping relevant employment, gaining a promotion; and improving their 'status' among peers. In turn, quality assessment was seen to be necessary if the qualification attained was itself to be considered 'quality' by potential or current employers.

*"If you've got a certificate or diploma, employers see you as having the knowledge and skills they need to help their business. You're much better placed than someone without a qualification when you go for a job.."*  
(Female, electrical, 23 years)

*"If you want to get a promotion, you've got to have the qualifications. It also tells the boss that you are keen, that you're committed, that you want to improve yourself."*  
(Male, small business, 28 years)

*"If the assessment is crap, then people say the qualification is crap."*  
(Female, business, 48 years)

Many of the people interviewed were directly supported through their training by their employer. The perception was that the employer had identified competencies necessary for the growth or survival of the business, and that it was a reasonable expectation for employees to undertake training to meet those competencies – as long as it did not cost adult learners personally.

*"The boss is paying for this course. It's something she wanted me to do. The business is expanding next year, and we need people who can do the things needed for that expansion. I don't mind helping the business."*  
(Female, hairdresser, 32 years)

*"Our business is changing all the time. We have to, because our competitors are always coming out with new ideas, new products. We've got to change or we'll go out of business, which means that I will be out of a job. And if the business has to change, then it's pretty obvious that I have to learn new things, new ways of doing my job."*  
(Male, accounting, 43 years)

Self-perception is about how we see and value ourselves, and in turn, how we believe that the outside world sees and values us (Smith & Kling 2011). In turn, the literature on adult learning suggests that self perception is a major determinant of our motivation to learn as well as of our beliefs regarding our capacity to achieve our goals and ambitions (Knowles 1990, Smith & Clayton 2009, Whittaker et al. 2006). For the people interviewed in our studies, quality assessment is very important because it provides the link between the achievement of valued learning outcomes and their self-perception as a learner. The respondents consistently reported that successfully completing a piece of assessment changed the way they viewed themselves as learners because it was overt proof that they are capable of learning and achieving.

*"It's amazing how much you really have done and learned in your life, but you'd never realise it thinking about it yourself. Doing my Certificate helped me to realise just how much I really had achieved. It made me feel so good and so confident about myself as a student".*  
(Female, hairdressing, 26 years)

*“Getting my Certificate, passing my exams and practical tests, it made me feel so good about myself. I felt so much more confident about what I could do.”*

*(Male, electrical, 35 years)*

Almost all of the students interviewed saw assessment as an important feedback mechanism to assist their learning and learning style. Formative assessment was strongly supported, although some concerns were raised about processes that did not keep checking that what has been learned and assessed is retained over time.

*“Doing regular assessments helps you to identify where your weaknesses are – to know what you have to spend more time on on learning or practising”.*

*(Male, construction, 22 years)*

*Regular assessments lets you know that you’re doing things right, that you’re not wasting your time doing something that’s wrong”.*

*(Female, hairdressing, 21 years)*

*I have a problem with doing one thing, testing it, and then moving on to something else. I forget things quickly, and if we don’t keep coming back to something just because I passed a test on it, I forget how to do it before I even finish the course.”*

*(Male, plumbing, 28 years)*

### **Student perspectives: the assessment of formal learning**

‘Formal learning’ is learning that takes place through a structured program of instruction and that is linked to the attainment of a formal qualification or award (Smith&Clayton 2009). The students interviewed in our studies identified four major sets of issues relating to the assessment of formal learning:

1. The adult learners we interviewed strongly believe that there is an excessive emphasis on summative assessment in their programs, and on the quantity rather than the quality of information collected for validating learning outcomes. As a result, they believe that insufficient time is often devoted to teaching and practical application because an inordinate amount of time is taken up with assessment. This was posited as the reason why, in the view of many of the students, training focusses on meeting the specific requirements of the assessment plan, which in turn is seen to limit the capacity for learners to develop a broader and more integrated understanding of their discipline area.

*“We seem to spend all our time doing assessments. The big problem is you usually haven’t been taught enough or had enough time to practice things to do well on the tests. It’d be a lot better if they spent more time teaching and less time assessing”.*

*(Female, hairdressing, 29 years)*

*“Everything we learn is directly linked to the assessment. If it’s not in his [the teacher’s] assessment plan, then we don’t do it. You can say ‘what about if I do this?’ and the reply will be ‘worry about that when you finish your Certificate – you don’t have to know anything about that for the test’”*

*(Male, carpentry, 26 years)*

2. The learners interviewed for our studies reported that written tests and examinations are still used extensively (in some discipline areas at least) for assessing underpinning knowledge and skills. The belief was that this significantly disadvantages students with literacy difficulties, particularly those in equity groups such as migrants, Indigenous Australians and people from low socio-economic backgrounds. Written tests are seen to be “an easy option for teachers”, with holistic judgments made from a range of assessment approaches providing much more valid information about learning outcomes and levels of achievement. The concern was also expressed that assumptions about an individual’s competence and achievements are often made by assessors on the basis of the language skills of the person being assessed.

*“I knew most of the stuff in the examination, but I didn’t do very well because I didn’t understand what was actually being asked. The way the questions were worded was very complex – very confusing when English is not your first language”*

*(Female, business, 32 years)*

*“I’ve never been good at reading and stuff like that. The exam was unfair. It was full of big words that I couldn’t understand. My boss tells me that I know all the stuff and am a great worker, but I failed the exam because I couldn’t understand the writing. It’s just not fair”.*

*(Male, automotive, 21 years)*

*“If you’re good at writing, the teachers think you’re intelligent, and if you’re bad at writing, the teachers think you’re stupid.”*

*(Male, electrical, 25 years)*

3. The adult learners interviewed for our studies expressed grave concerns about the consistency of assessments across training providers, and also across trainers within the same training organisation. Many of the students interviewed questioned why a system of moderation of assessments, as they experienced in the schooling system, was not a strong feature of the vocational education and training system.

*“Everyone knows that some places mark you easier than others, and that some places make it much harder to get through. What’s not fair is seeing some people getting through with the same Diploma as you, and you know that they don’t know half the stuff they should and that they are always stuffing up in the workplace”*

*(Female, business management, 24 years)*

*“As someone working in the area of quality assurance, I’m amazed at how little quality assurance there is across training providers in this country. There doesn’t seem to be any mechanism, or formal mechanism anyway, for ensuring that standards are roughly the same across providers. What really worries me is that I know lots of people who pick their training provider on the reputation for having really easy assessment, not on the basis of the quality of the training”*

*(Male, business management, 39 years)*

4. Most of the students interviewed for our studies were involved in courses that had non-graded competency-based assessment. The lack of grades generally was considered to be a major disincentive for students to strive for excellence. All of them had emerged from school systems in which grades were used to tell them not just whether they had achieved defined standards, but also how well they had achieved those standards. Much of their motivation to learn is reportedly driven by the notion of ‘how well’ they are doing – achieving at the highest possible standard is an aim that, in the view of those interviewed, grades are required to assess.

*“I really can’t come to terms with this business of no grades. I mean, I work really hard and know that I know much more than my mate and can do things much better than him, yet the system tells us we’re both the same. I mean, that doesn’t give you much motivation to really drive yourself with your studies. It’s also very unfair when you go for a job because the boss thinks you’re both the same”*  
(Male, plumbing, 23 years)

*“We used to get grades at school, and it was good because you could see yourself improving, and you got a reward for working hard.”*  
(Male, business management, 21 years)

### **Student perspectives: the assessment of non-formal and informal learning**

‘Non-formal learning’ is “learning that takes place through a structured program of instruction but does not lead to the attainment of a formal qualification or award” (Smith & Clayton 2009,p.8). ‘Informal learning’ differs from non-formal learning in that it is “not intentionally accessed by the learner, and thus is neither structured nor institutionalized” (Smith & Clayton 2009,p.9). The OECD (2005) defines informal learning as the learning that results through experience of daily work-related, social, family, hobby or leisure activities.

Non-formal and informal learning generally is assessed through the formal process of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) which seeks to determine the extent to which an individual has achieved the required learning outcomes, competency outcomes, or standards for entry to, and/or partial or total completion of, a qualification (Misko et al. 2007, Smith & Clayton 2009). The students interviewed in our studies identified six major sets of issues relating to the assessment of non-formal and informal learning:

1. Assessment of non-formal and informal learning is strongly dependent on the literacy and communication skills of the candidate. Many of those interviewed indicated that they had significant difficulty reading, understanding and completing the documentation that accompanied RPL assessments. Further, they argued that a process that is so heavily dependent on understanding the documentation is more likely to measure literacy and communication skills rather than student learning.

*“I was totally bamboozled by the language. I had no idea what information I was being asked for, or how I was supposed to complete the forms”*  
(Female, business, 46 years)

*“They seem to think you have good English, even if you haven’t. I am a migrant. English is the third language spoken in my home. They must ask questions and things in a better way. Why all the big words that we do not know what they mean?”*

*(Female, hospitality, 37 years)*

*“The College isn’t knowing what my skill is. I have lot experience. I have done much. I have learned much. But their testing, I cannot understand what they ask, so how can I tell them what I know?”*

*(Male, construction, 51 years)*

2. It was the opinion of many of the adult learners we interviewed that their RPL assessment was not conducted in a rigorous and comprehensive manner, and that evidence was assessed in a very perfunctory way. They generally believed that the major reasons for this were that the staff conducting the assessment did not believe in the legitimacy of any learning acquired outside of formal education and training programs, and that VET Institutes did not consider RPL to be ‘cost-effective’.

*“The language and body language of the teachers when you talk to them about RPL is a real put down. They don’t seem to think it is something you should be doing”.*

*(Male, business, 29 years)*

*“The assessor said to me: ‘The reason we’re doing this is to see if you are as good as those who have done the proper course. The problem is that you haven’t really learnt properly, which will put you at a disadvantage’.”*

*(Male, management, 31 years)*

3. The evidence requirements for many RPL assessments are viewed by participants to be excessive. The issue is about balancing the quality dimension of having sufficient relevant evidence and the motivational dimension of minimizing bureaucracy for candidates.

*“Some examiners seem to want a semi-trailer full of documentation to confirm even the simplest competency. If you know your trade, you don’t need mountains of evidence. You just need the right evidence”.*

*(Female, hairdressing, 41 years)*

*“You can either do it or you can’t. Surely they can assess that quicker than they do. They seem to be more interested in collecting masses of written stuff to protect their backsides, rather than actually judging us as professionals, in the way professionals judge professionals”.*

*(Male, electrical, 56 years)*

4. Many of those interviewed expressed concern about the industry-credibility of the assessor in their discipline area, and thus about the assessor’s capacity to make appropriate and reliable judgments about the learning outcomes achieved.

*“It quickly became obvious that the assessor did not know anywhere near as much about aged care as I did, and clearly had spent very little time in a facility, at least in the last few years when so much has changed. How, then, could she be making valid assessments about my knowledge and skill”.*

*(Female, aged care, 41 years)*

*“The assessor was telling me I wasn’t doing things the right way, but I was. It’s the way we do things now in the trade – ask anyone actually*



*working out there and they'll tell you. The way he was wanting me to do things went out years ago. How can he have been chosen to assess my knowledge and skill levels?"*

*(Male, electrical, 32 years)*

5. Many of the adult learners interviewed for our study raised questions about the validity of assessing learning outcomes from a broad range of work-based experience via written tests and simulations.

*"It really seemed wrong to me. I was tested in an office at the College on things I do all day every day on the factory floor. How can a guy sitting behind a desk in an office say what I can and can't do when I'm working with the machinery in the factory?"*

*(Male, manufacturing, 44 years)*

*"The only things I had to do were a written test and a role play with the assessor in her office. How does that let me show my communication skills? It is all so artificial"*

*(Female, business communications, 47 years)*

6. Several of the learners interviewed spoke about the advantages of "reflecting on what I have learned" by discussing issues in a group situation facilitated by the assessor. The concept of assessing the outcomes of non-formal and informal learning through group processes is an idea essentially not addressed in the literature.

*"It was great to do the assessment in a group with other people, to have them challenge what you had to say or give it a different perspective. Listening to what they had to say also made me think about a lot of things I had done but probably wouldn't have remembered by myself."*

*(Female, information technology, 23 years)*

*"It's good to be able to talk about what you have done along with people who, you know, aren't threatening but who, like, understand what you're saying and what you're going through. It gives you a lot more confidence. You tell the assessor lots of stuff that you wouldn't if it was just the two of you"*

*(Female, business management, 24 years)*

## **Summary and conclusions**

Secondary data analysis involves the re-analysis of data originally collected for another purpose. This chapter reports the findings from a secondary data analysis of interview data from four recent studies conducted by the authors that, among other things, addressed learner insights and perspectives regarding the quality and usefulness of formal and non-formal VET assessment in Australia.

The major findings from the secondary data analysis were:

- Assessment is seen by adult learners to be a critical process for giving public and industry-based credibility to the qualification they have achieved or intend to pursue;

- The link between assessment and self-perception as a learner is highly valued by adults because self-perception reportedly is a major motivator for learning, and success in the assessment process is a major contributor to positive self-perception;
- There appears to be a strong concern among VET students that current processes for validating learning outcomes appear to focus on the quantity rather than the quality of the evidence collected;
- Extensive use of written tests and examinations is seen to significantly disadvantage learners with inadequate literacy skills, and is not believed to be an effective way of validating the outcomes of learning;
- There is a strong perception among students of inconsistent assessment standards and processes across providers for students undertaking the same programs of study or for adults seeking recognition of their prior learning;
- Ungraded competency-based assessment processes are not perceived to provide a strong motivation for students to pursue excellence;
- There are widespread concerns about the educational and industry-based credibility of some assessors, and thus about their capacity to make valid judgments about the attainment of learning outcomes; and
- Self-reflection, including reflection in group settings, is suggested by some learners to be a powerful process for identifying and validating learning outcomes.

These findings suggest some important areas for further research. First, the link between assessment, self-perception as a learner, and motivation to learn needs to be explored further, particularly in terms of how the link can be leveraged to promote the quality and nature of learning. Second, the capacity of written assessment instruments to assess competency outcomes for students with inadequate literacy skills (such as many recent migrant students) requires rigorous investigation. Third, the development of feasible models for the moderation of assessment, both within and across providers, would appear to be a priority. Finally, the role of self-reflection in group settings as a process for identifying and validating learning outcomes needs to be investigated.

Collecting, analysing and acting upon feedback from learners about the quality of assessment processes is a critically important but chronically undervalued process for the VET system in Australia. The reality is that the vocational education and training system serves business, industry and the economy *through* the learning undertaken by students – that is the critical process on which all else depends. Adult learners view the system from the ‘inside out’ while business and industry view it from the ‘outside in’. As a consequence, adult learners not only see issues from different and important perspectives but they will also identify issues and areas for improvement that will be hidden from other stakeholders. This is never more true than when validating the outcomes from vocational learning because assessment ultimately is the key public performance indicator of the VET system.. As G.K.Chesterton wrote: “One sees great things from the valley, only small things from the peak”.

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