

The Certificate IV in Training and Assessment: What are our VET teachers learning?

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Abstract

It is now more than five years since the 40104 Certificate IV in Training and Assessment (TAA) was introduced as the base qualification for teaching and assessment with registered Training Providers. As a result, large numbers of teachers and trainers from TAFE, private-, not-for-profit- and industry-RTOs and other people aspiring to work in these organisations have undertaken the qualification.

This paper reports on a research project which is currently being undertaken within the School of Education at Charles Sturt University to analyse a sample of 150 reflective essays written by VET practitioners. These essays reflect on how the authors undertook their Certificate IV in TAA, what they learnt as a result of the process and what they still felt they need to learn to become competent designers and deliverers of training package programs. The analysis uses NVivo software to compare and collate the participants' text and the presentation will discuss some of the problems encountered in the use of this software.

Introduction

Since 2005, Charles Sturt University has embedded the 40104 Certificate IV in Training and Assessment within its articulated set of courses, namely the Associate Degree in Vocational Education and Training, the Bachelor of Vocational Education and Training and the Graduate Diploma in Vocational Education and Training. Since 2006, it has had a mechanism which allows entrants to our courses who already hold, or are undertaking, the Certificate IV in TAA, to gain credit for their TAA qualification. This credit is conditional on their undertaking the CSU subject EEB321 *Reflective Practice in VET* (or earlier versions of this subject).

As its name suggests, this subject is concerned with the development , and enhancement, of our students' capacity to critically reflect on their vocational education and training practice against both theoretical concepts and measures of good practice. This task reflects our conviction that habits of critical reflection are essential to experiential learning and of making sense, and deriving meaning from, our everyday practice.

The first assessment task in this subject asks students to reflect on their experience of undertaking their Certificate IV in Training and Assessment through a Registered Training Organisation. Our students responses to this assessment task provided food for thought about the both the variety of ways in which our students qualified for their Certificate IV in TAA and the differing values which they ascribed to their experience.

This gave us the idea that a systematic interrogation and analysis of these reflective essays could yield information of considerable value to the VET community. The Certificate IV in TAA was introduced in order to ensure that all VET practitioners had the basic skills needed to design, deliver and assess quality Training Package programs to their students and client groups. As VET practitioners, we need to know to what extent this objective is being achieved.

We then set about to act on our convictions. A project design was developed and agreed upon and both an application for Faculty Research Funding and an Ethics application were prepared and submitted through the correct university channels. Notification that our applications had been successful was soon forthcoming.

This paper outlines the literature review which was conducted to ensure that our research was aligned to the appropriate writings about both the nature of VET practice under a Training Package regime and the role of the Certificate IV in TAA in developing the expertise of VET practitioners. The Certificate IV in TAA was introduced as an essential strategy in ensuring that VET teaching and training practitioners understood their roles and possessed the necessary capabilities to design, deliver and assess programs which meet their students needs and prepared them for the skill and knowledge requirements for specific roles within their chosen industry setting. It then goes on to describe the research design and the role that the software package NVivo will play in helping us to systematically analyse the collected data.

Finally, as this project is still in the data collecting phase, an anecdotal discussion on some of the data which led to this research is included.

Literature review

It is now more than four years since the Training and Assessment Training Package was endorsed and the process of ensuring that all VET practitioners involved in training and assessment acquired this qualification. The Certificate IV in TAA superseded the previous base qualification for VET practitioners, that is the BSZ 40198 Certificate IV in Assessment and Workplace Training. The rationale for the development of the new qualification is outlined in the following section.

The introduction of the 40104 Certificate IV in TAA

The TAA40104 Certificate IV in Training and Assessment was endorsed on the 23 November 2004 by the National Training Quality Council (NSW Vocational Education and Training Accreditation Board, 2008, p. 5). It provided an opportunity to upgrade qualifications in the training and assessment area.

The Training Package was generally regarded by the Vocational Education and Training sector as an opportunity to lift the standard of qualification. Trainers and Assessors working in this sector previously completed a selection of the eight competencies offered in the BSZ40198. This qualification was typically marketed as a pathway in either training or assessment or both to potential employees of the VET sector.

Such approaches allowed for the BSZ to be delivered in very short periods of time. These timeframes were believed to have impacted on the quality of the BSZ qualification and the attitudes of those undertaking the training. Whilst the BSZ was designed and written as a workplace assessment and training qualification, its delivery often occurred in a classroom environment with the emphasis on classroom, rather than workplace learning and assessment and its relationship to the increasing number of Training Packages which were currently being endorsed and implemented was often not overt. Over time the BSZ qualification needed improvement thus the implementation of the TAA.

The need for a broader and professional qualification was driven by industry and the development, endorsement and introduction of the TAA through the auspices of the Australian National Training Authority was designed to address that need.

Relevant research

The relative youth of the Certificate IV in TAA qualification means that only limited research has occurred to date. There is a current NCVER project being conducted by Berwyn Clayton, Andrea Bateman, Dave Meyers and Robert Bluer entitled *Practitioner expectations and experiences with the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment (TAA04)*. This was commenced on 22 July 2008 and is expected to be completed by 30 September 2009. The purpose of this research is to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences and perceptions of representatives of the vocational education industry (as represented by teachers, trainers and RTO managers) about how the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment adds value to their skills in training and assessment. The CSU project is seen as being complementary to this project and the outcomes of the CSU research will be given to the NCVER researchers.

In 2007, the NSW Vocational Education and Training Accreditation Board (VETAB) reported on the outcomes of the NSW Vocational Education and Training Accreditation Board (VETAB) strategic audit of the TAA40104 Certificate IV in Training and Assessment in NSW. This document was compiled:

in response to a number of concerns raised by stakeholders in the vocational education and training (VET) sector. The audit aimed to assemble a broad picture of the issues faced by registered training organisations (RTOs) in the training and assessment area and what strategies they had developed to manage the implementation of the TAA40104 qualification. The audit involved a number of phases including: the completion and analysis of an online RTO survey; determination of an audit sample; conduct of site audits; and preparation of this report. The audit identified areas of good practice as well as issues that need to be addressed through the continuous improvement process, which is an integral part of the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF) 2007.

(NSW VETAB, 2007, p. 1)

The educational literature does contain a number of reports, articles and conference papers which report on research conducted on the relevance of the BSZ40198 Certificate IV in Assessment and Workplace Training to the needs of teachers and trainers within the VET community. These include work by Simons and Smith (2008, pp. 1, 37-38) in which the authors revisit their data to examine how the changes associated with the new qualification may affect our understanding of learners and learning.

Research by Bush and Smith (2004) explores some aspects of moves to a closer relationship between higher education and vocational education and training (VET) courses. Such relationships may involve credit transfer, formal articulation or embedding of VET qualifications within university qualifications. This research can be extrapolated to provide insights as to how these closer links can be made within a Certificate IV in TAA context. An evaluation of the BSZ 40198 Certificate IV in Assessment and Workplace Training (Hase & Saenger, 2003) provides useful findings which are applicable to the newer qualification. These include the need for VET practitioners to be able to use Training Packages flexibly and innovatively and the need to strengthen understanding in the VET community of different forms of workplace training and other forms of vocational education and training.

Research design and methodology

This research project is being undertaken by the Research in Vocational Education and Training (RIVET) group of Charles Sturt University. The project will be completed by the end of 2009 and aims to find out what impact the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment (TAA) has on practitioners in the vocational education and training (VET) sector.

The research team, consists of Dr Cathy Down, Ms Wendy De Luca , Mr Paul Galloway (all from CSU), Dr Jackie McManus from UNSW, and Professor Larry Smith from UNE. The project has provided the team with an opportunity to learn and use NVivo in a practical and useful application as well as giving us the opportunity to analyse data which is not readily available outside of CSU training environment.

The project seeks to investigate the experiences of a cohort of fairly recently appointed VET practitioners in undertaking their Certificate IV in Training and Assessment qualification. It

is based on a serendipitous sample of VET practitioners who have undertaken studies towards an Associate Degree in, Bachelor of, or Graduate Diploma of Vocational Education and Training at Charles Sturt University. Whilst these students come from all States and Territories in Australia and include those working within TAFE Institutes, private and not-for-profit registered training organisations, government bodies and industry enterprises, they could not be considered a balanced sample. They do, however, provide a sufficient sample (300+) to report on the different ways in which they are obtaining their Certificate IV in TAA qualifications, what they feel they have learnt from the experience and the areas in which they still need further learning and development.

Participants have provided their views and experiences in relation to the Cert IV TAA via the personal reflection component of a previously submitted piece of work (Assessment Item 1) written as part of the subjects EEB221 or EEB440. Participation is therefore limited to those students who have successfully completed either EEB221 or EEB440.

The expected outcomes will be threefold:

- high quality analysis of students' experience of gaining their Cert IV in TAA(40104) qualification,
- comparison between different pathways to this qualification including RPL, gap training, group learning, individual (distance) learning and combinations of these processes, and
- analysed data and the outcome of a relevant literature search to form the basis of high-quality journal articles.

Methodology

The objective of the research was to use reflective data in order to investigate how relatively inexperienced VET practitioners are developing their practice and expertise. Because the research questions are closely aligned to the assignment questions which elicited the data, the data collection has been relatively straightforward. The use of NVivo and internal double checking of assigned categorisations will enable a rigorous analysis and result in high quality research outcomes. The use of two researchers from outside of the University, who are both

knowledgeable about vocational education and training and are experienced researchers, with assist in providing sufficient objectivity to prevent contextual bias.

Two of the researchers in this project have already undertaken a five day training course on the use of NVivo in quantitative analysis. This has enabled the researchers to understand both the potential and limitations of NVivo to analyse text and to determine key themes which arise from that text. It also enables the researchers to link the use of SPSS in analysing demographic data, using descriptive statistics, with the emerging themes which arise from the NVivo analysis

In addition, this research project is intended to provide a “taster” for much more extensive research on the learning experiences of relatively inexperienced VET practitioners. As such it is seen as a precursor to a larger research project.

To date the project has commenced and a literature review has been completed. Data collection is currently being undertaken. Categorisation of data and analysis using NVivo is expected to be completed by mid- May 2009 and the formative and summative reporting is expected to be made by the end of June 2009. Preparation and submission of journal articles will occur throughout the rest of 2009.

Research questions

The qualitative analysis of the students’ reflective essays will essentially follow the methods and conventions of narrative analysis. The data will be interrogated around the three research question on which this project is based. That is:

1. How did you undertake your TAA40104 Certificate IV in Training and Assessment?
2. What did you learn by undertaking this qualification?
3. What do you still consider you need to learn in order to work effectively as a VET practitioner?

These are also the questions which framed the participants’ reflective essays. The coding for the analysis will be initially based on our current anecdotal “memory” from originally reading the students essays. This will be augmented as the data is processed and sorted. The following section looks at the anecdotal findings which have come from the assessment of the

students work during the two semesters of 2008. This will be compared with the content of earlier reflective essays during the data analysis using NVivo to ensure systemic and reliable analysis.

Anecdotal findings

How did you undertake your TAA40104 Certificate IV in Training and Assessment?

Students reported on having undertaken their Certificate IV in TAA in a variety of locations, modes and experiences. It appears that more students used the services of private RTOs in preference to undertaking their TAA qualification within a TAFE Institute/College or using not-for-profit or industry RTOs. This is a finding that will be tested during the analysis process. We also hope to see if this aspect of the data shows a trend over the period for which data has been collected.

A variety of modes were reported upon. These included:

- obtaining credit transfer for the BSZ40198 qualification
- obtaining the qualification by RPL only
- the use of group RPL processes
- traditional classroom delivery and assessment
- assessment through the presentation of evidence accompanied by distance gap training
- combinations of the above.

The students' reflections on their learning experiences also covered a wide range. Whilst many students reflected favourably on traditional classroom delivery and assessment experiences, the composition of the class group was often the subject of critical comments. These were generally related to wide differences in student ontology and their experience of working and teaching/training within VET. Other critical comments were directed towards the expertise of the trainer (both positive and negative), trainer expectations and students feelings of inclusion and exclusion from group processes.

Those students who gained their Certificate IV qualification through individual RPL processes appeared to be the most critical and least satisfied of the respondents. Many were appreciative of the experience but then reported that they hadn't learnt much or, worse still anything. Some of these recognised the potential of a RPL process to be a learning experience and expressed regret that this had not actually been the case.

On the other hand, those who gained their Certificate IV in TAA as a result of group RPL processes tended to be very positive about the experience. In general, they commented on the group interaction and support which helped them to identify past experiences as meeting performance outcomes and criteria and in finding appropriate evidence. This group also acknowledged that the process of working as a group to enable the whole group to reach a common goal was, in itself, a rich learning experience related to their VET practice. Discussing the different ways in which group members met the same performance criteria was often reported on as giving the participants a much deeper understanding of the process of evaluating evidence.

What did you learn by undertaking this qualification?

The responses to this question were many and various. Some of this has already been reported on in the previous section. However, there were a disappointingly large number of participants who reported in the negative. This is worrying insofar as it either indicates that the Certificate IV in TAA is not living up to the expectations which the VET system has of it or that the program followed by these participants did not result in an enriching experience.

It is expected that the systematic analysis will shed some light on what students undertaking the Certificate IV in TAA are actually learning. This learning may be that dictated by the TAA Training package specifications, it may be part of the hidden curriculum of becoming part of a specific vocational community or it may be the process of making sense and meaning from personal experience. Whilst the Training Package specifies the bounded learning which is expected, any learning process will result in new discoveries or understandings which may lie outside of the specified curriculum.

Many of those who had undertaken their training in facilitated groups commented on the value of the facilitator as a role model. While much of this was complimentary of the

facilitator, some reported that they hoped they would never teach/train by doing as their facilitator had. It is to be hoped that the systematic analysis will shed light on the value to learners of strong role models.

In the same vein, some learners reported that they had learnt from their fellow participants within a group situation. Other reported finding themselves being informally mentored. In both these situations, this was reported on as being a valued source of learning and professional development.

What do you still consider you need to learn in order to work effectively as a VET practitioner?

The responses to this question are clearly very important: both to the participants themselves and to those of us involved in developing professional development experience for VET practitioners. It is expected, therefore, that the systematic narrative analysis of the participants' reflective essays will yield useful information both at the policy and practitioner level.

One issue which was raised was the ability of the participants to use Training Packages in innovative and flexible ways in order to design and deliver customised and contextualised programs to meet specific enterprise and industry training needs. Some of the research participants, particularly those from NSW, remarked that the emphasis had been more on working from existing programs and using existing resources. The ability of these practitioners to make Training Packages to 'sing and dance' (Down, 2002, p. 8) needs to be part of their on-going development.

Most of the participant reflections indicated that they were fully aware that the Certificate IV in TAA was a basic entry level qualification and that, as a VET practitioner, they would be involved in ongoing experiential learning throughout their VET careers. It is, however, hoped that the analysis of the data will provide specific answers to this question which will benefit those responsible for professional development policy and planning.

Conclusion

This paper has started to narrate our current research project. It has described the context of the investigation, its rationale, the backdrop of relevant literature, and the design and methodology of the research. It has also included an anecdotal discussion of the data which will be rigorously analysed and some indication of the benefits that are expected to come from the research.

The data is being collected and the researchers have undertaken training in the use of NVivo software . We are now looking forward to the analysis phase and the determination of outcomes which will bring benefit to the vocational education and training community.

References

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