

What do you mean I have to validate?

Many RTOs have excellent policies and procedures on validation. However, often there is little or no action to implement the process.

There have been countless articles written and research conducted on the subject of validation in VET, but many RTOs still fail to understand the concept.

AS/NZS ISO 9001:2008 states: 'validation shall demonstrate the ability of processes to achieve planned results.' For RTOs, this means they must gather, interpret and evaluate tools against the unit of competency to ensure the validity, reliability, fairness, flexibility and effectiveness of their assessment methods, tools, procedures and decisions.

Although the latest version of the AQTF standards (under element 1.5) places a clearer emphasis on assessment validation the process should already be an integral part to maintaining a quality-focused educational business.

The intent of this article is to reinforce the importance of completing assessment validation, as well as offering a review of the process with some additional recommendations and tips.

Not just a 'tick the box' activity

Validation is a quality assurance / review process to be completed by a panel of professionals made up of trainers, assessors and RTO training managers as well as industry representatives and associated stakeholders. It provides for a holistic review of the assessment process; looking at assessment tools, methods, evidence requirements, the judgements made by assessors and the consistency of these assessments.

If the validation process is planned and actioned correctly, the outcome will clearly identify whether the assessment tools meet all components of the training package or accredited course. This will ensure only candidates who hold the

requisite skills and knowledge are certified as competent in their chosen vocation.

If the validation reveals a failure to meet the relevant requirements for a particular unit of competency, the RTO will need to further analyse the findings and recommendations, document the proposed improvement actions, assign someone to be responsible for these actions and provide a completion date. After this, a further review and close out can be completed.

The standards and guidelines

The Users Guide to the Essential Conditions and Standards for Continuing / Initial Registration states 'assessment must be systematically validated and improved'. It is recommended that validation is completed before, during and after assessment.

Tip 1: There are also state guidelines (e.g. VRQA Guidelines, et al) with compliance levels above and beyond AQTF. RTOs should make themselves familiar with the standards that apply to their particular State and/or Territory of operation.

Preliminary research – engaging with industry

The RTO needs to design the assessment processes, methods and tools to be used prior to placing a course on scope. In this pre-scope phase, the RTO should consult industry representatives to establish what they see as being the most important and pressing qualification requirements. Target groups may include respective industry skills councils, industry associations, and employee representative organisations.

A one or two-page questionnaire could be used to gather data (see sample questions below) and ensure that the RTO has the

necessary information to design appropriate processes, methods and tools for assessment.

Sample questions

- What in your view is a reliable approach to assessment?
- Is there a need for more suitably qualified people in this industry? If so, can you identify specific qualification requirements?
- What qualifications do you consider new entrants to your industry should have, but may be currently missing?
- Is there a high dropout rate for workers in this business sector? If yes, why do you believe this is so?
- Can you describe your ideal candidate for employment?
- What are the skills, knowledge and standard of performance required in your workplace?

Planning the validation

There is a proverb that says 'he who fails to plan, plans to fail'. It is particularly important that the RTO develops and implements a comprehensive action plan for validation throughout the year.

The validation plan should include details of validation facilitator, panel members (internal and external), peer reviewer, proposed meeting dates and times and the qualification/units for validation. This plan should be placed in a register and signed/dated by an appropriate manager.

(Note: Meetings of the validation panel may take between two and eight hours depending on complexity of qualification and tools developed.)

Tip 2: Many RTOs have excellent policies and procedures on validation. However, often there is little or no action to implement the process.



It is imperative that any validation process is not only documented, but it is actioned as well.

Conducting a professional development workshop

It is advisable to undertake a training needs analysis of your trainers/assessors to ascertain their level of understanding of the validation process and assessment tools. While this is covered in the TAA qualification, it is important to conduct regular reviews to identify gaps and promote knowledge retention.

If gaps in knowledge are uncovered then the RTO is advised to develop a short in-house workshop on validation.

Preparing for the validation session

Validation session preparation is all about communication, understanding and collaboration with stakeholders. Prior to the validation session, the RTO should provide the panel with an agenda including details of timelines and activities. It is advisable to provide pre-reading materials including:

- assessment tool details
- study outlines
- conditions of assessment.

It is also important to explain how the validation process will be conducted, with details of:

- validation activities
- units of competency to be validated
- copies of evidence guides
- rules of judgement
- exemplar responses
- complaints and appeals policy.

Providing this information in advance will ensure that the members of

the validation team are fully briefed and prepared for the exercise.

Tip 3: Allow at least two weeks for members to review the materials.

Tip 4: Trainers/assessors should be assigned an assessment activity. This will help determine the effectiveness of the assessment tool(s) prior to the validation session.

The validation session

It is a good idea to split the validation panel team members into two groups — one comprising of industry representatives and the other comprising of trainers/assessors. This approach allows the question bank used for external panel members to focus primarily on industry questions; while the questions for internal panel members can cover all areas.

Activity one

Review the unit of competency (training package) with respect to each assessment tool. Particular focus should be given to the following key elements:

- unit descriptor
- evidence guide
- performance criteria
- required skills and knowledge
- employability skills
- assessment methods.

Ask the validation panel to formally comment on whether the assessment tool(s) have fully covered the training package requirements.

Activity two

Discuss and record answers to the following questions (note: these are provided as a sample only and this list is not exhaustive).

1. Are instructions provided to assessors and candidates clear, unambiguous and consistent?
2. Is the level of difficulty of the activity appropriate to the competency being assessed?
3. Are the assessment activities based on the workplace and resemble realistic tasks/functions?
4. How does the assessment tool collect the evidence necessary to make the best judgements?
5. Where are the 'employability' skills and associated key competencies covered?
6. Has the range of situations and vocational settings to which the unit applies been met?
7. How does the assessment tool map to the methods of assessment?
8. Where are the essential skills and knowledge used in the assessment tool?
9. What evidence is required from the candidate and how is it gathered?
10. What are the administration, recording and reporting requirements?
11. Is the learning and assessment strategy consistent with the assessment tools?
12. How are assessment tools adjusted to meet the needs of all candidates?
13. Does the assessment tool measure and meet needs of industry?
14. Is the assessment tool appropriate for the target group?
15. Is the tool appropriate and justified to judge whether the candidate is deemed competent or not yet competent?
16. Are candidates provided full details regarding the assessment processes, procedures, assessment criteria, when feedback on assessment is provided and the complaints or appeal process for assessment decisions?
17. How have the language, literacy and numeracy needs of candidates been catered for?
18. What benchmarking process was completed with other RTOs?

Summary

Validation is a simple and yet very powerful process to enable RTOs to assess whether they are meeting the requirements of the respective training package or accredited course, the needs of the associated stakeholders, as well as statutory compliance requirements.

The outcome of a quality validation process will be to ensure that the RTO has the appropriate working tools to enable assessors to make appropriate judgements, thereby ensuring that only candidates with the specific skills and knowledge will be certified as competent for a particular training package.

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