

## Complexities and opportunities: A discussion paper on critical issues in teaching, learning and assessment in vocational education and training

Support document for *Quality is the key: Critical issues in teaching, learning and assessment in vocational education and training*

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# 1. Purpose, themes and foci

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## Purpose

The purpose of this discussion paper is to promote discussion in the vocational education and training (VET) sector about critical issues in teaching, learning and assessment.

## The argument in brief

The title of the discussion paper, 'Complexities and Opportunities', highlights two very different themes emerging in the contemporary VET sector:

- an increasing awareness of the complexities of teaching, learning and assessment in VET, in constantly changing demand-driven training environment
- a growing awareness that there are new opportunities for innovation in teaching, learning and assessment in VET, leading to the delivery of new or improved services.

The first theme about complexities is based on a raft of VET research, particularly generated in the last two years by the High Level Review of Training Packages project and the project on Enhancing the Capability of the VET Professional. Research from these projects demonstrates that major challenges still need to be resolved, such as implementing Training Packages in different settings, and effectively assisting different learner groups and different communities. There is a new awareness of the complexities involved with catering for learning styles and preferences, understanding different types of workplace experiences, and providing assessment services such as recognition of current competence.

The second theme about opportunities is based on evidence that VET practitioners are capable of being innovative and meeting challenges posed by these complexities, provided adequate support and systems are put in place. Concrete examples of good practice of practitioners effectively taking up opportunities are provided in recent ANTA reports such as *Building Industry Training Networks* (2004), *40 Ways of Shaping our Future* (2004) and *New Ways of Working in VET* (2005).

The twin themes of complexities and opportunities provide an organising framework for this discussion paper and will be referred to throughout.

## Companion document

The discussion paper is designed to be read in conjunction with the literature review entitled "Critical Issues. A draft literature review on critical issues in teaching, learning and assessment in vocational education and training, version 26 June 2005." Electronic copies of both the discussion paper and the literature review are available for downloading from <http://consortiumresearchprogram.net.au>

## Foci

In both the discussion paper and the literature review, the large topic of teaching, learning and assessment is broken down into a number of foci, as follows:

1. **Learner wants:** critical issues related to the wants of individual learners and industry clients, in terms of
  - teaching and learning experiences
  - services and support
  - and how can these can best be met.
2. **Practitioner skills:** critical issues related to the skills needed by VET practitioners
  - in the design of learning programs and resources
  - in the provision of assessment services to meet the needs of different client groups
  - and how these might be developed most effectively.
3. **Innovation implementation:** critical issues for VET providers related to developing and implementing innovative approaches to teaching, learning and assessment, including
  - critical success factors – individual, organisational and systemic – and barriers
  - and how models about good practice in innovation might be most effectively transmitted.

## Audiences

This discussion paper is designed for two audiences in the VET sector:

- participants in this research activity, including participants in focus groups and mini-conferences and others contacted by, or making contact with, the researchers
- any other interested personnel in the VET sector in Australia.

## Style

The style of the discussion paper is deliberately much less formal than the literature review, in order to promote professional conversations and to encourage readers to send informal feedback to the researchers.

## Sources

The two main sources for this discussion paper are:

- the literature review cited above
- the researchers' VET experiences and their knowledge of other reports and current developments in the sector.

## Terminology

The term 'critical issues' is used in this paper in the sense of significant or substantial or serious issues for VET practice. For brevity, the term 'teacher' is used in this document to describe all those VET practitioners who might be called teachers or trainers. Similarly, the word 'teaching' is used to cover all teaching and training situations.

## How to respond

Readers are invited to respond several ways.

First, you can send any reflections about this paper to the principal researcher John Mitchell at [johnm@jma.com.au](mailto:johnm@jma.com.au) by 15 October 2005. You are invited to address the questions at the end of Sections 2-5 and/or to comment on any other related topics.

Second, you can participate in the online forum on this discussion paper at <http://consortiumresearchprogram.net.au/forums/index.php#2>

Your responses may influence the processes within and outputs from this research activity.

## 2. What is the broad VET backdrop for teaching, learning and assessment?

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As the VET sector is demand-driven, core activities such as teaching, learning and assessment do not occur in a vacuum, but are affected by factors in the overall VET environment. These factors include industry shifts, enterprise training demands, technology changes and customer requirements. Before focusing in the remainder of this paper on the specific issues of teaching, learning and assessment, this section looks briefly at that backdrop.

### Our summary of the environment

The quick scan below suggests that the environment for VET in the near future will be challenging and exciting, containing both complexities and opportunities.

*Is that how you see it?*

### Complexities

Some complex issues for the VET sector, both now and in the next few years, include:

- addressing skill shortages affected by multiple factors, some of which are not controllable, such as trends in the global economy
- understanding the training implications of the changing structures of both work and occupations
- analysing the changing structures of industry, including the convergence or shrinking of some old industries and the emergence of new ones
- keeping abreast of rapid technological developments and how they impact on business processes and consequent skill needs
- countering the impacts of imminent VET staff shortages
- developing new strategies for engaging more VET learners, such as mature-aged workers and youth
- training impacts within VET and industry of proposed changes to industrial relations legislation
- responding to the individual learner taking responsibility for training and enterprises who seek training that delivers a business benefit
- participating in an increasingly competitive arena for VET providers.

The final report on *Enhancing the Capability of the VET Professional* found consensus in the sector about the features of the environment in which VET professionals will be expected to work, in the future:

an environment characterised by increasing diversity in the client base; increasing sophistication in client expectations; change in products and expansion of options for training delivery; changes in employment, work roles, team structures and places of work; increasing competition and increasing demand; and globalisation of the training market. (Dickie, Eccles, FitzGerald and McDonald 2004, p.4)

## Opportunities

The volume of changes currently affecting the VET sector calls for far-reaching and energetic responses. One recent example of a positive response is provided in the June 2005 Queensland Government green paper “Queensland’s proposed responses to the challenges of skills for jobs and growth. Matching the supply of skills to rapidly changing demands: modern>educated>responsive”. Besides providing an analysis of challenges facing VET, the paper identifies a range of opportunities for VET to:

- tackle the urgent shortage of trades skills
- strengthen the skills base for the longer-term future
- make the VET system more responsive and flexible
- develop a new engagement with employers to tackle skill shortages
- satisfy the renewed interest by industry in employability skills
- meet the previously underestimated needs of associate professionals
- develop the skills of the ageing workforce
- increase labour force participation through new skilling strategies for the under-skilled.

The green paper is constructive and forward-looking, aiming to achieve ‘a better match between the supply of skills and the rapidly changing demands of society’ (p.3).

The green paper aligns with other recent national VET reports (see section 5) that emphasise opportunities and the almost limitless scope for innovation in teaching and learning functions at individual, group and organisational levels in VET.

## Balancing act

A major challenge for VET practitioners in the short term is to understand the complexities raised by the enormous changes occurring in the economy and the workplace, while at the same time responding positively to the opportunities arising from the new awareness, new partnerships and new strategies. The ideal is to balance the awareness of complexities with the constructive identification of opportunities.

This very brief scan of the VET environment provides the context for the following sections that focus specifically on teaching, learning and assessment.

## Your views

The discussion above was brief, so we invite you to add other points below. You are invited to email your responses to [johnm@jma.com.au](mailto:johnm@jma.com.au) or to join the online discussion at <http://consortiumresearchprogram.net.au/forums/index.php#2>

### What other factors?

*What other complexities do you see in the VET environment that might impact on teaching, learning and assessment?*

.....  
.....

*What other opportunities do you see in the VET environment that might impact on teaching, learning and assessment?*

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# 3. What do learners and clients want from VET?

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This section of the paper invites you to reflect on the following question:

*What do learners and industry clients want from VET – in terms of teaching and learning experiences, and services and support – and how can these best be met?*

The questions in the sub-headings below are subsidiary questions to this main question.

The ideas set out below are initial responses to the questions in the sub-headings, designed to open up discussion.

## What sorts of services do learners want from VET?

Research and observations tell us that:

- groups of learners, myriad enterprises, multiple industry associations and new combinations of VET clients now want to access customised training as a standard offering
- moving beyond customised programs, a common expectation will be the provision of personalised services.

Personalised service is a step on from broadly customising services for groups, suggests the UK's Minister for Education, 'The new frontier in business is not flexible specialisation but personal experience. We (in education) must not get left behind' (Miliband 2004, p.11).

The concept of personalised service is underpinned by the contemporary attitude of customers that services should be available at any time of the day:

In the Information Age, increasingly customers may want learning materials to be available in digital format, to be accessed electronically. Customers may want more self-service, by being able to 'personalise' the digital information and customers may want service right now and at any time over a 24 hour period. (Mitchell 2003, p.55)

As distinct from personalised service, the concept of 'personalised learning' is actively promoted in some quarters as a timely response to meet the specific needs of all students. The promotion of personalised learning stems from the belief that every student can benefit from individualised attention and support.

In the future, VET customers may seek from personalisation what Engestrom (2004) calls 'co-configuration'. Co-configuration means that the customer becomes a real partner with the provider of the product or service.

A close partnership between service provider and customer is the direction being taken by other service industries such as banks, airlines and hotels, so the provision of personalised learning and co-configuration in VET could be seen as bringing VET in line with developments in these other service industries.

## What teaching and learning experiences do individual learners prefer?

Learners want teaching and learning experiences that lead to better outcomes and have the following characteristics:

- Relevant training. VET clients and customers increasingly want knowledge and skills that are marketable and relevant, either for organisations, or for individuals to secure greater employability and choice in work and lifestyle.
- 'Just for me' training. Increasingly, VET clients and customers want to develop these skills at times, in ways and at locations that suit them, not the VET provider.
- Contextualised learning. Industry and enterprise clients want training designed in ways that suit their settings and needs.
- Informal learning. With the use of technology and the speed of change, often formal training is deemed too slow or expensive. Informal workplace learning can and does fill some of this void and deserves recognition.

Innovative teaching takes account of individual learners' differences, responding to the contemporary push for all organisations, including educational ones, to be customer-centred. But catering for individual differences in VET is a major undertaking, given the vast range of learners and settings.

To cater for individual learners' differences, some Australian VET practitioners use frameworks such as the Learning Style Inventory developed by Kolb, with its categories of accommodating, diverging, assimilating and converging. Smith (2005) finds that VET teachers typically develop their own theories of learning style, either without reference to established theory, or on a basis of a theory they were aware of and that had appeal to them.

However, the value of using learning style inventories is being questioned. In their recent systematic review of the literature on learning styles in the UK, Coffield, Moseley, Hall and Ecclestone (2004) cast doubt on the validity of any theory of learning styles and question the value of pursuing a perfect tool for identifying learning styles. Like Smith, they suggest that teachers would be well advised to encourage learners to deliberately develop a number of different learning styles.

## What services and support do individual learners prefer?

Much recent research in Australian VET about learners' preferences for services and support has focused on two areas: learners from equity groups and learners that use online learning. For example, a number of preconditions are necessary if the goal of improved learning outcomes for students in an online environment is to be achieved. The preconditions include:

- taking into account differences in student backgrounds in every phase of the design and delivery of online materials and support
- catering for the differences in learning styles and preferences of students
- focusing on the communicative and interactive dimensions of the new environments
- not expecting technology to solve all the hard problems (Brennan, McFadden and Law 2001).

Moving beyond online learners, the following forms of support and guidance are considered to be essential to the success of student participation in any form of learning in VET:

- supportive instructional activities

- clear instructional materials
- opportunities to discuss problems or issues with teachers and peers
- availability of teacher support
- timely feedback
- practical examples
- enough time and willingness to practise skills and meet requirements (Misko 2000).

In short, learners prefer to access range of services and support systems, so that every learning program needs to provide many, if not all, of the forms of support noted above. For example, just offering face-to-face instruction or just offering online content is unsatisfactory for most learners.

## What teaching and learning experiences do industry clients prefer?

Recent research by Townsend, Waterhouse and Malloch (2005) suggests that employers place a high value on learning and capability and competence, irrespective of whether this leads to, or is reflected in, qualifications held.

Why and how enterprises use nationally recognised type of training is examined by Smith, Pickersgill, Smith and Rushbrook (2005). They find that an enterprise's decision to engage in recognised training is not made lightly and decisions are made afresh each time a new training need arises.

Many VET practitioners, used to the conventional classroom or workshop, are being challenged by the use of the workplace as a learning environment and the different ways learning can occur in the workplace. Learning in workplaces is different from learning in educational institutions – not just because of the buildings involved – as it is often group-based, not individual, practical not mental, and is situation-specific and not focused on generalised skills and principles (Tynjala, Valimaa and Sarja 2003).

To meet industry client preferences, VET providers currently employ a range of different delivery modes for workplace training:

- the use of in-class material
- self-paced material, sometimes computer-based and available from websites
- ‘chalk-and-talk’ classroom teaching
- intensive blocks or staggered attendance programs
- multiple offerings to allow for shift workers
- ‘tag-team teaching’ with a theory-based lecturer and practice-oriented business worker both delivering the same course (Callan and Ashworth 2004).

Fully on-the-job training is viewed by many learners, enterprises and registered training organisations as providing flexibility for all concerned and financial incentives to employers. With appropriate support for learners, other benefits of workplace training include:

- learning that is customised
- learning that encompasses real work experiences
- learning that is relevant to the individual and the enterprise

- learning that can result in ongoing employment opportunities for the learners.

Learners in industry can benefit from aspects of both workplace learning and institution-based learning. Effective relationships between enterprises and VET institutions are often based on a partnership at the local level between teachers and workplace trainers.

## What services and support are wanted by individual learners in industry?

As VET providers pursue the goal of providing customised learning services for each enterprise, practitioners are becoming more aware of the specific preferences for services and support of individual learners within enterprises.

Giving learners greater responsibility for their learning through work, and providing the necessary support for them to do it well, requires teachers, line managers and external agencies to adjust the way they operate and the services they offer (Stephenson 2001).

Learning environments in enterprises increasingly will be a responsibility of line managers, who will also provide individual workers/learners with access to mentors. Important factors for enterprise learning environments are as follows:

- the organisation of work so that it encourages learning
- an open culture for sharing information and knowledge
- collaboration in teams and projects
- networks that are face-to-face or conducted through ICT (Svensson 2003).

Another way to provide support for learning in the workplace is to encourage the development of communities of practice among the learners. Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis. (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder 2002). While communities of practice can foster social learning within an organisation by creating non-hierarchical, trusting and informal contexts, communities of practice sometimes obstruct learning by organisations (Huysman 2004).

## Critical issues

Some critical issues identified above are.

- the increasing demand (and opportunities) for the customisation and personalisation of training services
- the need (and opportunities) for the VET practitioner to cater for a range of learning styles and preferences
- the need (and opportunities) to effectively provide services and support for different learner groups such as learners from equity groups and learners in the online learning environment
- the need (and opportunities) for VET practitioners to understand the many different ways learning can occur in workplaces, especially when the training only occurs on-the-job and often in an informal manner
- the need (and opportunities) to develop partnerships between external teachers and enterprise based managers and trainers, to address the needs of both the employer and the employee.

## Your views

The discussion above was not meant to be exhaustive, so we invite you to add other points below. You are invited to email your responses to [johnm@jma.com.au](mailto:johnm@jma.com.au) or to join the online discussion at <http://consortiumresearchprogram.net.au/forums/index.php#2>

In framing your responses, we invite you to consider both complexities and opportunities.

### Do you agree?

*Which of one these critical issues do you agree with most?*

.....  
.....

*Which of these critical issues would you word differently?*

.....  
.....

### Your other critical issues

*What are other critical issues, in terms of what individual learners want from VET teaching and learning?*

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*What other services and support do individual learners want from VET?*

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.....

*What can providers do if individual learners are not sure what they want from VET?*

.....  
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*What are other critical issues, in terms of what industry clients want from VET teaching and learning?*

.....  
.....

*What other services and support do industry clients want from VET?*

.....  
.....

*What are the advantages and disadvantages of providers deciding what VET clients want?*

.....

.....

## Further reading

If you would like to read more about the topics raised in this section, see section 1 of the companion document, the literature review ‘Critical Issues’ available from <http://consortiumresearchprogram.net.au>

## 4. What skills and resources are needed by VET practitioners?

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The previous section of this discussion paper considered what individuals and industry clients want from VET in terms of teaching, learning and assessment and highlighted increasing complexities and opportunities. This section considers the skills and resources needed by VET practitioners to meet these complexities and to take up these opportunities.

The section invites you to reflect on this question:

*What skills are needed by VET practitioners in the design of learning programs and resources and in the provision of assessment services to meet the needs of different client groups, and how might these be developed most effectively?*

The questions in the sub-headings below are subsidiary questions to this main question.

A number of ideas are set out below to encourage discussion.

### What new skills and resources are needed to implement Training Packages?

New skills and resources are needed in VET to implement competency-based Training Packages, particularly by teachers and trainers schooled in the previous paradigm of teacher-dominant, classroom-based instruction.

Some RTO staff are still confused about how to work with competency-based Training Packages, even though the Packages are the basic building blocks of the national training system. The current compliance framework of the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF) is a necessary but not sufficient means of ensuring good quality teaching, learning and assessment. What is needed is a capacity-building approach that emphasises quality, creativity, professional judgement and growth rather than simply compliance (Schofield and McDonald 2004).

A recent report documented VET practitioners effectively demonstrating creativity and professional judgment in implementing Training Packages, leading to the enhancement of teaching, learning and assessment in the sector. Examples of creativity include the following:

- implementing a qualification not previously offered in a local region
- embedding sustainability principles in the delivery of Training Packages
- integrating employability skills in training
- establishing a simulated working production company for the delivery and assessment of a Training Package (Mitchell, McKenna, Perry and Bald 2005).

Similar teams of VET practitioners around Australia also demonstrated creativity in analysing assessment issues, in developing new approaches to the recognition of prior learning and in designing new assessment instruments (Mitchell, McKenna, Dau and Perry 2004).

A fresh challenge for VET practitioners is to work with generic skills in ways that will empower their learners. To foster generic skill building in enterprise workplaces, VET practitioners need to be more flexible, take the initiative and undertake a range of different tasks, particularly as there is a stronger emphasis in workplaces on both information and social skills (Gibb and Curtin 2004).

## What new skills and resources are needed to use ICT?

New skills and resources are needed for VET practitioners to take advantage of the options created by new digital technologies, such as broadband transmission and mobile telephony. The increasing capacity of digital technology to deliver large amounts of visual and text based information to consumers at-home and on-demand will raise the expectations of learners for these technologies to be incorporated into learning programs.

Some commentators suggest that information and communications technology (ICT) will transform the context in which teacher-student engagement takes place. ICT developments will lead to collaborative and more independent learning among students. Learning will be more self-paced and personalised. New forms of assessment will be made possible as automated record keeping enables the effective and efficient use of continuous, self, group and peer assessment.

The increased use of ICT presents many challenges for VET providers:

- obtaining the changing human resources required, including specialist staff such as courseware designers, call centre, multimedia, animation and technical staff in addition to teachers and trainers
- integrating ICT within their organisations by VET providers
- developing networked partnerships with community centres, libraries and museums
- arranging local and regional multimedia resource centres to maximise access and support for learning outside of institutions
- providing help desks and centralised call centres to provide student support
- collaborating with other VET providers, particularly small to medium size RTOs, in order to cover the substantial costs involved in developing and maintaining ICT infrastructure and to alleviate the predicted shortage of qualified staff.

Opportunities raised by the use of ICT in VET include teaching strategies emphasising learning processes rather than learning outcomes and social learning rather than individual learning. Additionally, ICT-based learning creates opportunities for developing social and self-management skills and other meta-cognitive abilities (Barajas 2003).

## What new skills and resources are needed for workplace learning?

New skills and resources are needed to meet the challenges of teaching, learning and assessing in each and every workplace. One awkward challenge is that workplaces are sometimes contested domains, manifested in relationships between workers and management, within and between work teams, in the division of labour and among affiliated groups in the workplace. There are also divisions premised on gender, age, affiliation and ethnicity. This contestation can result in the inequitable distribution of opportunities for learning (Billett 2001).

The conceptual knowledge and skill base needed by work-base learning advisers includes:

- educational consulting and supervision skills, including negotiating learning and fostering forms of support for worker-learners

- an understanding of the culture and politics of workplaces
- helping learners with the identification of appropriate communities of practice
- helping others to judge workers' learning achievements and to document learning outcomes
- assisting others to plan and monitor and promote learning how to learn (Boud 2003).

Viewing learning as a process enables 'productive learning'. In the workplace, productive learning encourages VET practitioners to focus on the construction of learning, of learners, and of the environments in which they operate. This view of workplace learning has implications for VET practice, requiring practitioners to be responsive to the three factors of learning, individual learners and contexts (Hager 2003).

## What new skills and resources are required for assessment services?

Currently there is considerable reflection on the complexities of the assessment process in VET, around issues such as recognition of current competence and grading. Part of this reflection is focused on the range of skills and approaches needed by assessors to provide effective assessment services. These skills and approaches include the following:

- assessors need to develop their reflective and analytical skills in reviewing their practice
- assessors need to conduct a participatory process between assessor and candidate where the student is integrally involved in designing an effective means of providing the required evidence
- assessors need to give learners a clear understanding of the standards and what is required
- assessors need to develop the capacity to articulate these standards and evidence requirements in well documented assessment tools
- assessors need to involve candidates in decision making and feedback on the assessment process
- assessors need to involve students in the process of deciding what methods of assessment are used.

To build their confidence, assessors value opportunities for professional exchange with other assessors through a structured assessment validation process which they feel provides a viable means of achieving quality and consistency (Clayton, Blom, Bateman and Carden 2004a).

Effective recognition of prior learning (RPL) processes are complex and require extensive infrastructure and a significant commitment to the process from all stakeholders (Blom, Clayton, Bateman, Bedggood and Hughes 2004). A key skill needed is to be able to make credible industry-supported judgments (Smith 2004).

Given the poor understanding of assessment principles that is common across RTOs, initial and ongoing professional development in graded assessment techniques and methodologies ought to be provided for new and existing trainers or assessors (Williams and Bateman 2003).

Assessment relies on expert judgement and a sophisticated understanding of both the content and practices of the area being assessed. Effective assessment also relies on the assessor's understanding of assessment processes and the communication of assessment outcomes (Bateman 2004).

The demands of contemporary work have increased the pressure for assessment practice to be flexible and comprehensive and this further increases the need for a well-educated workforce of assessment practitioners and a substantially-improved system of documentation and guidance. To enhance the professional growth of assessors consideration could be given to:

- ways of developing a stronger sense of professional identity
- providing better professional guidance to teachers and assessors at a pedagogical level
- encouraging robust national dialogue around alternative pedagogies and assessment practices
- participating in professional dialogue
- undertaking moderation activities to promote a common understanding of the standards, evidence requirements and assessment practices (Schofield and McDonald 2004; Stowell 2000).

To address the VET practitioners' need for assistance in assessing generic competencies, the following is required:

- better information to support assessment decision-making
- extensive understanding of generic skills
- professional development to support their own skills, knowledge and attitudes (Clayton et al. 2003).

In considering professional development for assessment as well as teaching and learning, CURVE and University of Ballarat (2003) acknowledge the diverse needs of VET practitioners and recommend a range of products be developed, covering such topic areas as working with Training Packages, catering for individual learner differences, learning theory, teaching skills, supporting generic skills development, language and literacy, implementing flexible approaches, workbased learning, design and modification of resources.

## Critical issues

Some critical issues, in relation to the skills needed by VET practitioners in the design of learning programs and resources, that emerge from the discussion above are:

- many VET practitioners need enhanced skills in implementing Training Packages, despite their availability in the sector, in some cases for six to seven years
- VET practitioners need skills to take advantage of the new digital technologies that become available each year
- VET practitioners need skills and resources to provide effective support for learning that occurs in the workplace.

Critical issues identified in this section are, in relation to the skills needed to provide assessment services, include:

- VET practitioners determining what ought to be the focus of the assessment process, such as a focus on outcome or process.
- VET practitioners determining how best to provide services for the recognition of current competence
- VET practitioners determining whether to grade performance
- VET practitioners determining how to provide support for assessors.

Critical issues, in relation to how might practitioners develop these new skills, are:

- VET practitioners will need to use a variety of different ways to develop these skills
- workbased learning is a proven, useful approach and can involve coaching, mentoring and networking and participating in communities of practice.

## Your views

The discussion above was not meant to be comprehensive, so we invite you to add other points below. You are invited to email your responses to [johnm@jma.com.au](mailto:johnm@jma.com.au) or to join the online discussion at <http://consortiumresearchprogram.net.au/forums/index.php#2>

In framing your responses, we invite you to consider both complexities and opportunities.

### Do you agree?

*Which of one these critical issues do you agree with most?*

.....  
 .....

*Which of these would you word differently?*

.....  
 .....

### Your other critical issues

*What are other critical issues for you, in terms of the skills needed by VET practitioners in the design of learning programs and resources?*

.....  
 .....

*What are other critical issues for you, in relation to the skills needed to provide assessment services?*

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*What are other critical issues for you, in relation to how practitioners might develop these new skills?*

.....  
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## Further reading

If you would like to read more about the topics raised in this section, see section 2 of the companion document, the literature review 'Critical Issues' available from <http://consortiumresearchprogram.net.au>

# 5. How can innovative approaches be transmitted in VET?

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The previous sections of the paper highlighted some teaching, learning and assessment services wanted from VET clients and the skills and resources needed to deliver these services.

This section of the discussion paper invites you to reflect on the following question:

*What are the critical success factors – individual, organisational and systemic – for VET providers in developing and implementing innovative approaches to teaching, learning and assessment, and how might models about good practice be most effectively transmitted?*

## What are the critical success factors for individual practitioners in developing and implementing innovative approaches?

Workplace training demands arising from the industry-led national training system are bringing about new and intensified professional, technical and educational roles for VET practitioners, especially at the frontline, and particularly for teachers, workplace trainers and assessors, workplace mentors and supervisors. Hence there is an increasing need for individual practitioners to be innovative.

Some of the critical success factors affecting the innovative approaches by individual practitioners include the following:

- innovation can be significantly enhanced by a deep knowledge of learners, learning styles, teaching strategies and learning sites and contexts
- innovation also can be significantly enhanced by a deep understanding of assessment
- innovation is assisted when VET practitioners consciously adopt new roles such as those of learning manager, facilitator, mediator, broker or strategist
- innovative practice is assisted when practitioners draw on some or all of four areas of their professional expertise, such as their vocational skills, their adult learning and teaching skills; their VET sector specific skills; and their generic personal skills
- innovation can occur when practitioners use a variety of teaching and learning strategies: for instance, when they skew teacher-centred methods towards student control; when they support self-directed learning; when they facilitate activity-based and problem-based learning; and when they enable students to develop future-oriented capabilities (Mitchell, Clayton, Hedberg and Paine 2003).

Individuals commonly are members of work groups or teams, so innovation also can be stimulated by deliberate, intentional activities, such as conducting group discussions between VET practitioners and others to generate new ideas and to encourage research and reflection

## What are the critical success factors for VET organisations in developing and implementing innovative approaches?

Within RTOs, innovation in VET teaching and learning can be fostered by a strategic response by the organisation's senior management to internal or external pressures. It can also be supported by the development of a corporate culture that is agile and flexible and encourages diverse thinking, individual initiative and the development of new ideas. Externally, the RTO's management can also foster innovation by forming external networks and alliances.

A number of practical, relatively cost-effective strategies that VET organisations might adopt to increase their levels of innovation include:

- encouraging staff to attend conferences and workshops
- bringing in outside experts
- providing seed funding for new projects
- promoting partnerships that allow the organisation to develop its skills and knowledge
- using cross-functional teams to resolve whole-of-enterprise issues
- encouraging communities of practice
- implementing recognition programs
- encouraging innovative ideas from students (Callan 2004).

Other principles about innovation within organisations include the following:

- innovation is often the result of the interplay of individuals, groups and organisations with particular situations including imperatives, problems and issues that cause enough irritation to require new ideas and practices to fix
- innovation can be facilitated or hindered by a range of organisational factors such as the organisation's structure, culture, planning strategies and communication systems
- innovation can be supported by certain styles of leadership
- innovation can be assisted by judicious management interventions or initiatives
- innovation can be facilitated by change agents at any level of an organisation (Mitchell et al. 2003).

## What are the critical success factors for VET systems in developing and implementing innovative approaches?

Because of the complexities involved in actually achieving innovation in teaching and learning in widely different VET localities, the actual processes of innovation require practitioners to draw on extensive professional judgment, experience and wisdom. The following points bear out the complexities of innovation:

- innovation can't be forced upon VET practitioners, so skill and wisdom is needed to nurture innovation
- innovation can be affected by local, contextual factors such as the nature of the teachers' work groups, work leaders and managers, the nature of the workplace, the nature of the enterprise client or the nature of the local community or region
- innovation can occur despite the lack of ideal support or pre-conditions or documented market demand (Mitchell et al 2003).

Accepting the above complexities of innovation, suggested systemic initiatives that could stimulate innovation in VET include:

- Resource materials – explore the feasibility of developing a National Assessment Bank, and consider options for better coordination of multiple existing resource repositories
- Professional growth – consider ways of developing a stronger sense of professional identity; build the capacity of training managers; provide better professional guidance to teachers and assessors at a pedagogical level; encourage robust national dialogue around alternative pedagogies and assessment practices in a Training Package environment; and consider how the Australian Flexible Learning Framework could further contribute to enhancing teaching and assessment
- Assessment – trial innovative approaches to sharing of successful approaches among practitioners, and explore ways in which more support can be given to encourage individual industries to strengthen assessor networks ( Schofield and McDonald 2004)

The following activities – as part of a systemic, national approach – could enhance VET practitioners’ capacity for innovation:

- Identifying skills for key roles by drawing on research to develop a set of broad capabilities for key roles - such as novice, expert and master teacher/trainer, industry professional, manager and leader, and support staff - and guidance about how they might be used by professionals, practitioners, providers and industry.
- Exploring professional associations, including options for optimising the support and guidance for VET practitioners of the sort that are usually offered by a professional association (Dickie et al. 2004).

## What are the critical barriers in VET to developing and implementing innovative approaches?

Barriers to implementing innovative practices in VET organisations include lack of funding, lack of clear policy guidelines at systemic level, lack of structures and processes within organisations, lack of experience of practitioners in innovation, staff working conditions, staff resistance, student opposition and an inability to convert creative ideas into innovative services that can be implemented.

The VET sector also needs to be serious about building and funding innovative learning cultures and promoting innovation as a core capability within their enterprises. And failure-tolerant leaders of VET organisations need to be even more creative in how they continue to support and reward their leading innovators and educational entrepreneurs (Callan 2004).

Innovation in teaching and learning can be impeded by countless factors, such as

- managers ignoring client pressures for innovative delivery
- managers overlooking the social capital of staff or discounting the value of the staff knowledge of industry and
- staff networking with members of the industry (Mitchell et al. 2003).

Implementing innovation is made all the more complex because of VET's role as an instrument of social and industrial policy and change and the challenges it faces in meeting national, state and territory, regional goals and the needs of particular industries, industry sectors and local employers and the balancing of all of these factors.

## What are effective ways to transmit models of good practice?

Making practitioner information more readily available can support VET professionals to position their own thinking and practice closer to contemporary changes in VET professional practice. Some specific ways to transmit models of good practice are to access communities of practice and networks that involve VET practitioners and other stakeholders.

Other practical strategies for disseminating information about good practice identified include:

- connect appropriate researchers with practitioners in the field
- ensure that organisational rewards, incentives and structure support action research and continuous enhancement in innovation
- adopt a variety of non-traditional staff development strategies, including staff exchanges
- identify key people with dissemination and utilisation skills in the workplaces of each participating organisation
- use electronic learning networks (Scott 1999).

## A final word on complexities and opportunities

Fostering, implementing and sustaining innovation in teaching, learning and assessment involves many complex issues. But the opportunities are substantial, potentially leading to the enhancement of teaching practice and improved outcomes for students, enterprises and industry. For VET to thrive, this tension between complexity and opportunity needs to be embraced. The complexities deserve to be addressed continuously, just as the opportunities deserve to be pursued relentlessly.

## Critical issues

Some critical success factors in developing and implementing innovative approaches to teaching, learning and assessment in VET are as follows:

- For individual VET practitioners, critical success factors include adopting new work roles such as learning manager, facilitator, mediator, broker or strategist.
- For VET organisations, critical success factors include developing a culture that is agile and flexible and encourages diverse thinking and individual initiative.
- For the VET system, critical success factors affecting innovation include developing more teaching and learning resources, facilitating practitioners' development, changes to policy, and the promotion of creativity rather than a primary focus on compliance.

The critical barriers to the implementation of innovative approaches include:

- lack of funding
- lack of clear policy guidelines at systemic level
- lack of structures and processes within organisations
- lack of experience of practitioners in innovation.

Models of good practice in innovation might be transmitted by:

- tapping into networks

- offering staff incentives for continuous innovation
- fostering people with dissemination skills.

## Your views

The discussion above was brief, so we invite you to add other points below. You are invited to email your responses to [johnm@jma.com.au](mailto:johnm@jma.com.au) or to join the online discussion at <http://consortiumresearchprogram.net.au/forums/index.php#2>

In framing your responses, we invite you to consider both complexities and opportunities.

### Do you agree?

*Which of one these critical issues do you agree with most?*

.....  
 .....

*Which of these would you word differently?*

.....  
 .....

### Your other critical issues

*In terms of developing and implementing innovative approaches to teaching, learning and assessment in VET...*

*...what are other critical success factors for you, for individual VET practitioners?*

.....  
 .....

*...what are other critical success factors for you,, for VET organisations?*

.....  
 .....

*...what are other critical success factors for you, for the VET system?*

.....  
 .....

*...what are other barriers to developing and implementing innovative approaches to teaching, learning and assessment in VET?*

.....  
 .....

*...what are other ways that models of good practice in innovation might be transmitted in VET?*

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## Further reading

If you would like to read more about the topics raised in this section, see section 3 of the companion document, the literature review 'Critical Issues' available from <http://consortiumresearchprogram.net.au>

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