



Professional development framework for vocational skills of VET practitioners

A guide on how to maintain and enhance
the vocational skills of VET practitioners

1st Edition 2009



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Purpose

This framework provides the Western Australian Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector with guidance on how to maintain and enhance the vocational skills of VET practitioners.

The Framework has been prepared by the Western Australian Department of Education and Training against a backdrop of sector wide consultation and a review of relevant literature and practices elsewhere in Australia. It is designed to act as an accessible resource for those VET sector participants seeking inspiration and support for keeping the vocational skills of practitioners up to date.

The Framework provides a definition of vocational skills as they relate to VET practitioners and also:

- communicates key principles underpinning vocational skills professional development activities.
- describes learning strategies for vocational skills professional development.
- outlines the ideal management framework within which Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) should conduct vocational skills maintenance and enhancement.

This document has been designed to accompany other Department publications on assessment.

The other products in this series include:

- *Guidelines for assessing competence in VET* – 2nd edition (2008)
- *A guide to continuous improvement of assessment in VET* – 2nd Edition (2008)
- *Troubleshooting guide: Assessment in VET* – 2nd Edition (2008)
- *Recognition of Prior Learning: An assessment resource for VET practitioners* – 3rd Edition (2009)
- *Designing assessment tools for quality outcomes in VET* (2008)
- *Reasonable adjustment: A practical guide to reasonable adjustment in assessment of candidates with disability in VET* (2008)
- *Apprenticeships and traineeships – good practice guide for registered training organisations* – 1st Edition (2008)
- *Partnership arrangements between schools and registered training providers* – 1st edition (2009).

All publications are available in hard copy and can be downloaded from vetinfontet.det.wa.edu.au

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A definition of vocational skills

For the purposes of this framework, vocational skills as they relate to VET practitioners are defined as follows:

“The skills necessary to competently perform, to an industry acceptable standard, the functions of the occupation for which they train and/or assess learner competency. By skills is meant both the ability to undertake and complete a series of specified tasks (technical skills) and the personal attributes (employability skills) that enterprises and industry associate with a ‘work ready’ individual. Employability skills include those relating to communication, team work, problem-solving, initiative and enterprise, planning and organisation, self-management, learning and technology.”

This definition acknowledges three central features of the VET teaching and learning paradigm.

Firstly, it recognises that for VET practitioners to be effective, they must possess the competencies required by the occupation(s) for which they train and assess learners. This is a central principal of the VET experience.

Secondly, it recognises that the uniquely defining strength of VET is its ability to produce truly work ready individuals. VET practitioners teach learners not only how to perform a set of tasks (technical skills) but also the workplace behaviours, attitudes and personal characteristics required by today’s employers (employability skills¹).

Thirdly, the definition delineates between vocational skills, and teaching and learning skills. Teaching and learning skills are those skills required to effectively transfer and assess competencies and are the subject of other professional development frameworks and initiatives.

Introduction

Over the past decade, significant attention has been given to the importance of the professional development needs of VET practitioners in Western Australia and nationally. The development of this framework has occurred within the context of this broader push to strengthen the emphasis on professional development amongst VET practitioners. It is also a direct response to some of the 2006 findings of the Skills Formation Taskforce¹.

Although concerned with apprenticeship and traineeship training in Western Australia, the findings of the Skills Formation Taskforce hold relevance for all modes of VET delivery. In the report *Careers for life* the Taskforce found that “the results of the various research projects suggest there is room to improve the quality and currency of lecturers’ skills”. The Taskforce also recommended the implementation of strategies that ensure the currency of lecturers’ skills.

¹ Skills Formation Taskforce, 2006, *Careers for life*

The importance of the vocational skill set of VET practitioners is explicitly recognised by the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF). Under the *AQTF Essential Standards for Registration*, providers applying for registration (or existing RTOs seeking re-registration) must ensure their trainers and assessors have the relevant vocational competencies at least to the level being delivered or assessed, and continue developing their vocational and training assessment competencies to support continuous improvements in the delivery of the RTO's services.²

The work of the Taskforce and other research efforts touching on the issue of VET practitioner skill sets all recognise that the pace of change in Australian industry demands continued efforts by practitioners to maintain the currency of their vocational skills. For VET practitioners however, this is more difficult than for many other occupations. Not only must they maintain and develop their teaching and learning skills, they must also stay abreast of the evolving competency and skill requirements of the occupational areas in which they teach and assess. Doing so can be challenging in cases where the practitioner is engaged in full-time training and assessment.

The framework was developed following a series of one on one consultation and focus groups involving public and private RTOs, employers and employee and industry associations along with a review of recent research and literature. These consultations aimed to uncover attitudes towards vocational skills professional development, customer expectations and models of best practice.

Attitudes to vocational skills professional development

Consultations with VET stakeholders revealed a universal acceptance of the importance of assisting and encouraging VET practitioners to maintain and enhance their vocational skills over time. RTOs also demonstrated a strong commitment to provide opportunities for VET practitioners to keep their vocational skills up to date. A number had comprehensive and structured professional and workforce strategies in place that, in part, focused on vocational skills professional development.

Most RTOs acknowledged however, that professional development for practitioners, and particularly that in the area of vocational skills, was difficult to organise. RTOs considered full-time VET practitioners to be the greatest challenge while part-time practitioners, particularly those who share their time between teaching and working in their subject area, were viewed as requiring the least effort when it came to maintaining the currency of vocational skills. RTOs tailor their professional development strategies accordingly, recognising that strategies for full-time practitioners needed to be different to those applied to practitioners who still work part-time in their subject area and thus are regularly exposed to the workplace in a professional capacity.

² Commonwealth of Australia, 2007, AQTF 2007, *Essential Standards for Registration*

Three levels of vocational skills professional development

Generally speaking, most research and literature in the area of professional development recognises three progressively formal levels of learning. A variant on this hierarchy is that proposed in 2007 in *The Recognition of Non-formal and Informal Learning in Australia*³. In this hierarchy all professional development aimed at maintaining and enhancing vocational skills can be classed into one of the three categories:

- Formal learning refers to learning that takes place through a structured program of instruction which is generally recognised by the attainment of a formal qualification or award (eg a certificate, diploma or degree).
- Non-formal learning refers to learning that takes place through a program of instruction but does not usually lead to the attainment of a formal qualification or award (eg in-house professional development programs conducted in the workplace).
- Informal learning refers to learning that results from daily work related, social, family, hobby or leisure activities (eg the acquisition of interpersonal skills developed through the experience of working as a sales representative).⁴

Each category also lends itself to different outcomes measures, levels of risk and ease of undertaking. For example, measuring outcomes under the first category is simple – by unit and/or qualification completion/attainment. In comparison, non-formal learning is likely to be moderately easy to measure in terms of outcomes while informal learning is likely to prove harder to measure in terms of outcomes. Differences between categories will also apply to risk (in terms of achievement) and ease of undertaking. Such differences are useful for determining those forms of vocational skills professional development that are best suited to circumstance and preferred outcomes.

³ Misko J, Beddie F and Smith L, NCVET 2007, *The Recognition of Non-formal and Informal Learning in Australia*.

⁴ *Country Background Report for the OECD activity on Recognition of Non-formal and Informal Learning*.

Best practice principles for vocational skills professional development

Five key principles have emerged as representing best practice when it comes to vocational skills professional development. RTOs and industry representatives raised these principles repeatedly during the process of consultation and there is considerable support for them within relevant literature. These five principles are proposed as the basis of the approach to vocational skills professional development activities.

Principle 1 – Taking a holistic approach

Vocational skills professional development should be conducted within the context of a broader and planned program of performance development. Approaching the maintenance and enhancement of vocational skills as part of an overarching program of development provides the opportunity to apply the same processes and principles that underpin all professional development to those concerned specifically with vocational skills. Formal and regular performance assessments can identify competency gaps, informed goals can be set, outcomes can be measured, a variety of strategies can be considered and a relative emphasis on different areas of professional development can be customised to suit the needs of individual practitioners whilst also suiting the strategic aims of the organisation. In addition, embedding vocational skills professional development within the context of a formalised process of development will encourage higher levels of commitment to routine participation in professional development activities.

Principle 2 – Focusing on measurable outcomes

Professional development, including that concerned with vocational skills, should be outcomes driven. Professional development needs should be determined through a formal performance assessment and then required development outcomes can be set (in the form of measurable competency acquisition). Without a focus on measurable outcomes it is impossible to determine whether or not a program of professional development has delivered what is required by the individual practitioner. Measuring outcomes will allow RTOs to gradually build an understanding about the most successful development strategies.

Principle 3 – Providing flexibility and variety

A variety of vocational skills professional development strategies are available to RTOs and practitioners. Some will suit the preferences and interests of one individual but not another. It is important that vocational skills professional development be approached with this understanding in mind. As far as possible, RTOs should seek to make available to practitioners different strategies and learning pathways for achieving professional development outcomes. Doing so will create scope for greater engagement of all practitioners in the process of vocational skills professional development and will provide RTOs with an enhanced capacity to respond to different individual needs and circumstances.

Principle 4 – Recognising informal learning

Informal learning is probably the most common form of ongoing professional development but often the hardest to record and measure, consequently organisations often discount it. Individuals learn constantly, in and out of work, through experience, trial and error and exposure to the knowledge, skills and ideas of others. In the case of vocational skills, VET practitioners might learn vocational skills by working with colleagues who already possess these skills. Alternatively a VET practitioner who works part-time in education and part-time in the occupational area in which they teach (for example this is common in the nursing and information technology areas) is likely to be constantly learning, albeit informally, new skills in a workplace setting that directly inform their ability to teach in a VET setting. The informality of this type of learning makes it no less valuable than non-formal and formal learning approaches. Vocational skills professional development should acknowledge the value of informal learning and RTOs and practitioners should attempt to take account of it.

Principle 5 – Empowering individual practitioners

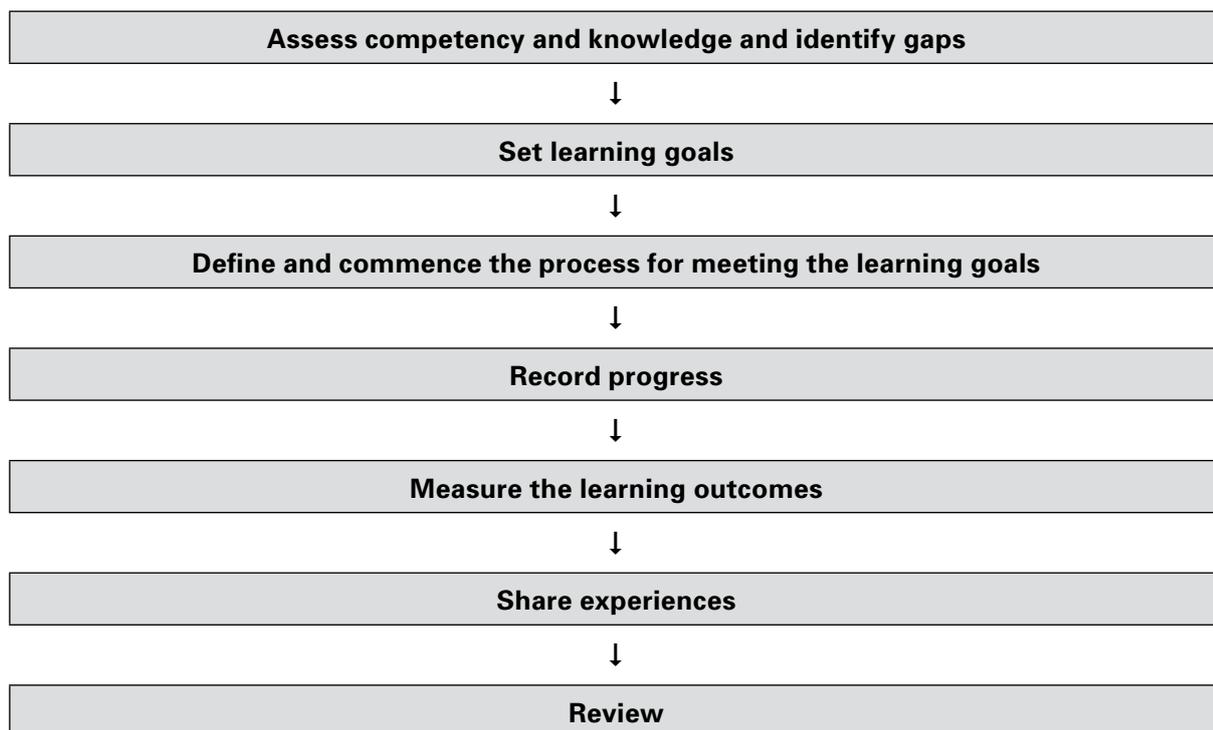
Professional development of any sort is most likely to be enthusiastically taken up by individuals if they play a role in shaping their development goals and the strategies used to achieve those goals. Practitioners will have different preferences for the maintenance and enhancement of their vocational skill set. Involving them in the process of developing and executing their program of professional development will allow them to shape it to suit their personal circumstances, creating a sense of ownership and, most importantly, strengthening practitioners' interest in and commitment to carrying out the plan.

Managing vocational skills professional development

During the process of consulting with RTOs and industry, it became clear that stakeholders generally delineated between management strategies and learning strategies for vocational skills professional development. Management strategies refer to those that shape and guide the process of vocational skills professional development while learning strategies encompass those designed to enable the acquisition of new competencies.

Management strategies used to support vocational skills professional development appeared to vary from one RTO to another. Some RTOs employ sophisticated and robust processes that measure competency gaps, set learning programs to fill these gaps and measure outcomes to determine the success or otherwise of the learning program. Others use a more informal approach. Most RTO and industry representatives were strongly in favour of a more formal approach to professional development, arguing that a robust process for managing vocational skills professional development is essential to maintaining confidence in the VET sector's ability to teach current workplace competencies.

The following management strategies are proposed as having equal application to all RTOs and VET practitioners as a base template for guiding and managing vocational skills professional development. Not only do they provide a simple process for managing vocational skills professional development but they also create a clear evidence base that RTOs can use as proof during audits conducted under the auspices of the AQTF. These strategies can be summed up in a simple flowchart.



Assess competency and knowledge and identify gaps

All professional development, irrespective of occupation, should ideally be driven by an understanding of the competencies and/or knowledge that an individual needs to acquire. Undertaking regular (perhaps once or twice a year) competency and knowledge gap assessments is one way of identifying the vocational skills that a practitioner needs to acquire in order to maintain a current skill base and knowledge of industry practice. The processes and tools for measuring these gaps will vary at each RTO but the strategy should remain the same – comparing current competencies and knowledge to those expected by industry at that point in time.

RTOs can use their relationship with industry and enterprises to assist with this gap assessment process through seeking advice from industry members about recent changes in skill requirements and practice that practitioners need to be aware of. Revised Training Packages and newly created learning resources can also be used to identify new industrial developments that practitioners will need to master to maintain currency of competency and knowledge. RTOs can use these and other strategies at their disposal to identify the ‘ideal’ competency and knowledge set for a particular vocational area at any given time and then use this benchmark to assess practitioners and identify gaps on an individual by individual basis.

Some practitioners may not need any professional development at the time of assessment due to a high level of skills currency and processes should include scope for acknowledging this.

The outcomes of the assessment should be formally recorded.

Set learning goals

Supported by a competency and knowledge gap assessment, RTOs and practitioners can work together to set a series of vocational skills professional development goals to be achieved over a set period of time. In effect, these goals could become an informal contract between the RTO and each individual VET practitioner, acting as an agreement between the two to work together to ensure goal achievement. Setting goals is critical when it comes to professional development because they create a clear and shared understanding of what is to be achieved and form the basis for assessing these achievements. An outcomes-based approach is also considered attractive because it makes clear what has to be achieved but leaves open how these achievements will be realised, maximising scope for customising professional development strategies on an individual VET practitioner basis.

The agreed goals should be formally recorded and become part of the broader, overarching performance development framework for individual VET practitioners.

Define and commence the process for meeting the learning goals

Working from an agreed understanding of the goals of individual VET practitioners, a process for achieving these goals can be designed. Ideally, the development of this process will pay attention to the five principles outlined earlier and draw on the process in the flowchart. The process and the strategies adopted should, as far as possible, reflect the circumstances and preferences of both the RTO and the individual VET practitioner. They should also be clearly aligned with and capable of delivering against the professional development goals agreed between the two.

The agreed process should be formally recorded and the document should act as an informal contract between the RTO and VET practitioner, clearly defining priorities, actions and responsibilities.

Record progress

Recording progress for vocational skills professional development is an important and ongoing responsibility of the RTO and practitioner. Doing so allows both the RTO and practitioner to periodically review progress against the agreed vocational skills professional development plan and make adjustments as necessary. It also creates useful evidentiary material that can be used as proof of efforts to enhance and maintain the currency of vocational skills amongst VET practitioners.

There are many ways in which progress can be recorded, ranging from a simple skills development diary to electronically based recording tools. RTOs should use the recording mechanism that best suits their internal capabilities and workflows. The important thing is for practitioners to regularly record progress.

Measure the learning outcomes

Outcomes arising from vocational skills professional development strategies should be assessed periodically to suit the RTO and the circumstances of the individual VET practitioner. Practitioners identified as having significant competency gaps may need more frequent outcomes assessments to ensure that the agreed outcomes will be met within the set timeframe.

Assessing outcomes should always occur in relation to the goals set earlier for individual practitioners. Doing so will clarify the extent to which goals have been met, allow identification of where further efforts are required (in the case of continued competency gaps) and allow RTOs and practitioners to retrospectively evaluate the relative effectiveness and efficiency of different development strategies.

Share experiences

As RTOs and practitioners gain more and more experience with different strategies, it is inevitable that some will stand out as more efficient or effective than others and it is likely that different RTOs will develop a preference for a different menu of strategies. Sharing experiences with other RTOs, through existing or future networks and forums, will benefit all RTOs and encourage an ongoing process of learning from the experience of others.

Review

It is important that the learning goals and progress towards achieving the learning goals are regularly reviewed to ensure the objectives and process are still appropriate. Goals and strategies will change according to both individual circumstances and the context of the practitioner's work. Therefore, the individual learning plan may need to be amended to reflect changed circumstances. Regardless of whether the goals and strategies require change, regular review ensures currency and keeps focus upon the objectives.

Learning strategies for vocational skills professional development

RTOs clearly utilise a variety of learning strategies to assist VET practitioners to maintain and enhance their vocational skills. While return to industry programs typically stood out as the preferred means of vocational skills professional development, most RTOs and industry representatives recognised that this was not always the easiest or most efficient strategy available. RTOs use a range of development strategies according to the needs and circumstances of individual VET practitioners.

The most commonly cited learning strategies used to assist practitioners are outlined below. The list is not exhaustive and there are no doubt others in use. However, the strategies presented below were those that RTOs and industry representatives considered the most effective and relied upon. Many of these emphasise 'closeness to industry' and this proves to be a recurring theme throughout much of the consultations with RTOs and industry about what constitutes a valuable approach to vocational skills professional development.

Workplace-based delivery and assessment

For many RTOs and industry representatives, workplace-based training delivery and assessment are considered an ideal mechanism for training learners while also maintaining and expanding the vocational skills of VET practitioners.

Workplace-based delivery simply encapsulates the delivery of training in a live workplace, whether or not the course of training in question is employment-based. The idea underpinning workplace-based delivery is that learners are provided the opportunity to acquire competencies in a real work environment, exposing them to current technologies and workplace practices.

For VET practitioners, the delivery of training in a live workplace provides them with equal opportunity to use technology perhaps not available within the RTO and to maintain and expand their knowledge of current occupational skill requirements and work practices.

Many of the RTOs consulted were particularly enthusiastic about the future role that workplace-based delivery and assessment could play in assisting practitioners to maintain and expand their vocational skills. In many cases, workplace-based delivery and assessment are seen as a viable alternative to return to industry initiatives which, although theoretically of great value, were viewed as logistically very difficult to organise on a regular basis.

Bringing industry into the RTO

Finding and exploiting opportunities to bring industry participants into RTOs to teach both students and VET practitioners is also considered a valuable strategy for assisting with vocational skills professional development. This is generally organised in one of two ways. In some cases, RTOs organise for individuals working in a particular occupational field to conduct workshops with practitioners to update them on technological, industry practice and competency developments. This provides an opportunity for knowledge acquisition and debate and provides a guide and stimulus for practitioners to build on the initial understanding developed during the workshop.

Alternatively, RTOs can organise for individuals to participate in training sessions, providing an opportunity for both students and the practitioner to learn first-hand about developments in industry.

RTOs also use mixed VET practitioner and industry working groups to provide a regular forum for practitioners to continually stay informed about industrial and occupational developments. These sorts of forums were viewed very positively as an easy and yet effective way to maintain a continual uptake of new knowledge by VET practitioners.

Participation in vocational skilling networks for practitioners

VET practitioners can also learn from other VET practitioners. There was considerable support for practitioners participating in professional development networks that aim to share knowledge and provide practitioners with the opportunity to learn from each other. Such networks already exist but could be expanded voluntarily by RTOs that see the value in focusing specifically on vocational skills development initiatives.

Two way mentoring

Many RTOs saw the continual influx of new staff, straight from industry, as a valuable way of contributing to the currency of the vocational skills and knowledge base. These practitioners bring with them an up to date knowledge of industry practices and competency requirements and are ideally placed to mentor other practitioners who have been working in VET for some time. Practitioners new to the VET sector can also benefit from mentoring by those with more experience in the sector. Scope exists for RTOs to match newly arrived practitioners with experienced teaching and assessment staff under a reciprocal mentoring arrangement – one teaches the other about current industry practice while learning from the other about the teaching and assessment of learners in a VET setting.

Return to industry

RTOs and industry generally consider the short-term placement of VET practitioners in enterprises in their area of vocational expertise as an effective strategy for keeping their vocational skills up to date. Return to industry provides an opportunity for practitioners to practice their vocational skills and learn new skills. These placements are not necessarily lengthy, often lasting only several weeks or occurring on a casual basis over a longer period of time.

Logistically, many found it a challenge in practice. Releasing full-time staff when there is no capacity to backfill their position was frequently cited as a major barrier to using return to industry as a learning strategy. This is particularly problematic in regional areas and delivery areas where staff is typically in shortage. Other issues of concern included debate about who should pay the wages of practitioners while they are participating in a return to industry placement, difficulty finding employers willing to take on practitioners seeking a placement and concerns about measuring the success of such initiatives.

A greater emphasis on workplace based delivery and assessment was often seen as a practical alternative to return to industry initiatives with equivalent benefits.

Formal and informal learning

VET practitioners can also continue to develop their vocational skills by undertaking formal (accredited) and informal (non-accredited) courses of education and training. The extent to which RTOs support individual VET practitioners in the undertaking of further study will likely depend upon the extent to which that study addresses agreed needs at either the individual or RTO level.



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