

What is working well in the VET sector?

Under the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF), all students are entitled to have their previous skills, experience and training recognised to enhance their progression into, and between, qualifications.

Individual registered training organisations (RTOs) may have different policies and procedures in place for assessing eligibility for recognition of prior learning (RPL), but the basis of the process should be the same, as outlined in the AQF.

The aim of RPL is to facilitate the progression of students through qualifications by giving credit for learning outcomes they have already achieved. These credit outcomes may allow for entry into a qualification or provide credit towards a qualification, which can reduce the time required for a student to achieve the qualification.

It is the responsibility of the RTO to ensure that, when making decisions on granting RPL, the integrity of qualification outcomes is maintained. When the RPL process is administered effectively, efficiently and appropriately, it is a key element in providing positive and mutually beneficial outcomes for students and industry.

The Australian Government's My Skills website continues to be improved and offers an increasing amount of useful information to help inform decision making by prospective students.

What are the key challenges in the VET sector?

Training quality in high risk industries

Educators working in children's education and care services are responsible for some of the most vulnerable members of our community – babies, toddlers and young children. Quality training enables educators to support the health, safety and wellbeing of these citizens and improve their educational and developmental outcomes. Educators may work alone in family day care settings with only limited or intermittent supervision. In these circumstances, employers and consumers rely heavily on the quality of a qualification to ensure that the worker is able to perform their role. Given that education and care qualification holders are employed within a highly regulated sector, training that fails to equip graduates to meet their legislated obligations also puts them at risk of being fined or prosecuted.

The variation in the quality of training and assessment in early childhood education and care qualifications, highlighted in ASQA's 2015-16 strategic review, raises questions about the ability of RTOs to interpret the Standards for RTOs and use the training package. The flexibility that is purposely built into the VET Quality Framework allows high quality RTOs to achieve quality outcomes, but may not offer sufficient support to many RTOs delivering training for the education and care sector.

Feedback from employers in the education and care sector indicates that the competency of VET sector graduates often falls short of employer expectations. Employers have made clear to ACECQA their preference for graduates from well-established, high quality RTOs, with graduates from lower quality RTOs often requiring significant additional training and support. Over the years, references have also been made to RTOs who many employers will not recruit graduates from. With many students enrolling at these RTOs in good faith, this is a very undesirable situation.

Due to their ongoing concerns, some of the larger employers in the education and care sector continue to operate their own RTO to ensure the necessary calibre of staff, regardless of whether their RTO makes a financial profit or loss.

Minimum course durations are currently set out as guidelines and are not consistently adhered to. The AQF volume of learning range for both certificate III and diploma level qualifications is 1-2 years (1200-2400 hours). ASQA's 2015-16 strategic review provided strong evidence that these guidelines are ineffective. The review found that over 70 per cent of the delivery of the certificate III in child care was occurring in programs of less than one year's duration and 20 per cent in programs of six months or less.

A subsequent strategic review by ASQA in 2016-17 examined issues relating to unduly short training across the VET sector. The findings from the review are summarised below:

- Regulation of course duration is complex and confusing
- Course duration can be insufficient to enable learners to gain the competencies specified in the training
- Sensible and proportionate change to the VET Quality Framework will enable effective regulation of course duration, provide industry with a lead role in addressing the risks of poor quality training by specifying their requirements, and empower industry and prospective learners with the information to more readily compare training providers and their offerings.

Fraudulent and improperly awarded qualifications

Regulators in the education and care sector are sometimes faced with individuals fraudulently claiming to hold qualifications. Fraudulent first aid and anaphylaxis management qualifications are particularly alarming given the harm that could result from individuals who are not adequately trained responding to medical emergencies involving babies, toddlers and young children.

Sometimes qualifications are fraudulent because the documentation has been doctored, while other times the qualification documentation itself is genuine (in that it has been awarded by an RTO), but it has been awarded improperly because no or insufficient training was provided.

The potential harm in the education and care sector of these scenarios is the same - an individual who is not competent to educate and care for children holds documentation suggesting that they are.

Training in rural and remote areas

There is a large body of research that shows high quality early childhood education and care leads to better health, education and employment outcomes later in life. A significant factor that affects the quality of an education and care service is the qualifications and training of the educators.

However, a major challenge in rural and remote areas is the lack of access to quality training and trainers. Compounding this issue is the difficulty students in rural and remote areas can have in meeting the assessment conditions of the early childhood education and care training package, for example undertaking work placements in regulated education and care services. These difficulties can result in students either not finishing their qualification or having to travel long distances at considerable expense.

What changes would you make to the VET sector?

Regulation

ACECQA supports regulatory and legislative changes that ensure RTOs meet minimum quality standards to operate and which enable the regulator to act quickly against RTOs that are failing to meet those standards.

High quality providers can be faced with unfair competition in the marketplace because of unrealistically short and inexpensive courses offered by low quality or non-compliant providers. The ability of the regulator to refuse registration/accreditation of RTOs that cannot demonstrate quality, and to investigate and deregister non-compliant and poor performing RTOs, would both remove poor quality RTOs from the sector and support high quality RTOs to gain a stronger market position.

In addition, more explicit requirements in the Standards for RTOs and training package may help RTOs who misunderstand the needs of the sector and would allow for more effective identification and regulation of non-compliant RTOs.

ACECQA would also strongly support efforts to align and enhance the work and functions of Industry Reference Committees and ASQA. Better alignment would ensure ASQA is able to adequately audit RTOs against delivery of the training package.

RPL, mandatory minimum course duration and work placements

There is ongoing concern about some qualifications being awarded with little to no genuine training or assessment taking place. ACECQA recommends that either the training package or the Standards for RTOs be amended to provide more specification around the appropriateness of RPL, including which type of evidence is suitable to demonstrate competency. For example, a learner with experience in an overseas work place may be able to attain RPL for some practical elements of a course, however would still need to demonstrate competency in units that require application of Australian laws, regulations and standards. In addition, ACECQA recommends setting mandatory minimum course durations linked to student skills and experience. For example, a new learner with no sector experience should not be able to achieve competency in less than a prescribed minimum timeframe.

We also recommend strengthening links between industry and RTOs. Industry has an important role in validating assessment, however, feedback from education and care providers indicates they are unclear on their role and responsibilities when accepting students for supervised work placements. Strengthening these links could also be a means of bridging the gap between industry expectations and graduate capabilities, and increasing employer confidence in the quality of graduates who hold VET qualifications in education and care.

How can VET help Australians prepare for the future workforce (as industry requirements and job patterns change)?

To ensure the health, safety and wellbeing of young children and increase their learning and development, educators need high level skills and need to be properly trained. Considering the known benefits to children and the increasing expectations being placed on educators, helping students to access high quality training should be a high priority and shared goal.

The National Quality Framework (NQF) is the national system for regulating education and care services, setting standards for quality and safety so that all children attending long day care, preschool or kindergarten are supported to have the best start in life.

The education and care sector is both large and diverse, with more than 7,000 education and care service providers approved to operate almost 16,000 services under the NQF.

More than one million children attend education and care services, making a highly qualified and sustainable educator workforce an imperative.

The Education and Care Services National Law and Regulations set out the ratio of qualified educators to children that must be employed, and the qualification levels they must hold. The majority of educators are required to hold or be actively working towards VET qualifications, such as the Certificate III and Diploma of Early Childhood Education and Care.

Qualifications are regulated because research shows formal early childhood qualifications are positively associated with higher quality education and care programs and interactions with children, leading to better outcomes for children and their families.