

Interpreting competencies in Australian vocational education and training: practices and issues



How vocational education and training (VET) practitioners understand and use competency standards is of fundamental importance to the quality and integrity of the Australian VET system. NCVER has commissioned a study that seeks to address this question by gaining insights from 30 VET practitioners.

The research found that VET practitioners have little faith in the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment and feel somewhat ill-equipped to interpret competency standards when developing curriculum. Furthermore, the unclear language and 'jargon' contained within the competencies make them hard to decipher.

The full paper is available on <http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/2696.html>

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- Description
- Summaries
- Publication
- Supporting documents

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The author points to a number of potential solutions, including more intensive initial training, followed up with activities such as assessment validation to help build expertise.

Summary

About the research

How vocational education and training (VET) practitioners understand and use competency standards is of fundamental importance to the quality and integrity of the Australian VET system, given that these standards are its very basis. This small study seeks to address this question by gaining insights from 30 VET practitioners about their use of competencies, by comparison with the way they are expected to use them, as expressed in the mandated entry-level qualification for practitioners — the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment.

This research was funded with a grant that provides an opportunity for early-career researchers, from disciplines such as economics and the social sciences, to undertake a modest research project in a topic relevant to NCVET's remit.

Key messages

- The interpretation of units of competency appears to be a highly sophisticated skill, yet the practitioners in this study did not appear to learn this critical skill adequately in their initial training. Many indicated that it took up to a year after completing their studies before they became confident in interpreting competencies when developing curriculum.
- Most experience with interpreting competencies was gained through practice, professional development and informal learning such as participation in assessment validation, rather than through initial training in the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment.
- The difficulty with interpreting competencies is largely due to the unclear language and 'jargon' associated with them. Recent initiatives to simplify the language of competencies and 'streamline' their structure may make the work of interpretation more straightforward for VET practitioners; however, this is not the entire solution.
- To ensure that VET practitioners are well equipped to undertake competency interpretation work sooner, the author suggests a number of initiatives to help build expertise, such as more intensive training initially, combined with participation in follow-up activities such as assessment validation.

Rod Camm

Managing Director, National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER)

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Executive summary

This research addresses the question of how Australian vocational education and training (VET) practitioners interpret units of competency ('competencies'). In Australian vocational education and training, the skills and knowledge deemed essential to perform in occupations covered by the VET system are identified by industry representatives and this content is recorded in competency standards. It is the job of VET practitioners (designers, trainers, teachers and assessors) to interpret these competencies and design and/or facilitate learning and assessment on the basis of this interpretation.

It is clear that the integrity of Australia's competency-based VET system depends in part on how practitioners perform the work of interpretation. However, to date there has been no research that specifically addresses the question of how practitioners do this. This qualitative project, based on interviews with 30 VET practitioners, was designed to contribute to our knowledge of this topic.

The core competencies of the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment — the entry-level qualification for VET practitioners — contain indications of how practitioners are supposed to engage with competencies. For example, they are expected to 'Read, analyse and interpret all parts of a unit [of competency] and/or accredited module to develop effective applications for the client' (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations 2012, p.283). The certificate IV competencies contain little additional guidance on what is involved in reading, analyzing and interpreting competencies, implying that the architects of the qualification believe that the process is straightforward. However, the theory of interpretation or 'hermeneutics' (for example, Schmidt 2006) suggests that the process of reading, analyzing and interpreting texts is highly complex. Furthermore, according to this theory, the complexity of the process is such that the connection between what an author intends and what a reader interprets will always be weak. What this theory suggests is that the stage of competency interpretation in the system of Australian vocational education and training is a vulnerable one, and that every care should be taken to ensure that practitioners are well equipped to undertake the hermeneutic part of their work.

The research presented here indicates that VET practitioners indeed experience difficulties interpreting competencies. Most participants reported that they found the language of

competencies difficult to decipher. They cited the prevalence of 'jargon' and unclear language, and complained that the competency texts are not well written. Most participants also described limited strategies of interpretation. While some reported that they built a picture of the whole competency through comprehension of all parts of the text, many described strategies based on understanding one or only a few components. The use of restricted interpretative strategies may be due to limited understanding of the purpose of individual components of competencies and how they relate to each other. Many participants were not clear about the role of different components, and some were unable to offer any explanation of particular components. This is of course only evidence of 'declarative knowledge' (abstract, formal knowledge), but it does suggest that practitioners may not possess thorough knowledge of the structure of competencies, which may lead to uncertainty about how particular kinds of information included in the texts contribute to the whole picture of the task or role addressed by the competency.

The research indicates that the difficulties VET practitioners have in interpreting competencies may be due to limitations in initial training and education, as well as few opportunities to engage in continuing training education focused on interpretation. Describing their certificate IV experiences, most participants recalled relatively brief periods devoted to developing the skills of interpretation and some described confusion when they were introduced to the process of interpreting competency standards. Most participants reported that they took longer periods — around a year — to feel confident in interpreting competencies. Only one said that this confidence was developed during the certificate IV program. The development of practitioners in other professions assumes that the acquisition of complex skills requires longer periods and appropriate models such as supervised practice to support learning. VET practitioners may need to be developed in similar ways, at least with regard to the skill of interpretation. The participants who did participate in professional development targeting interpretation said it was a valuable experience. In terms of informal learning, participants found that assessment validation sessions were a powerful way to learn about competencies.

These findings raise some issues for policy-makers and other stakeholders. An important issue is that practitioners may be graduating from the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment with conceptions of competencies and approaches to interpretation that promote inconsistent understanding and use of the texts. If this is the case, then greater emphasis may need to be placed on the development of knowledge and skills for interpreting competencies in the certificate IV.

Another issue concerns professional development in interpreting competencies. Practitioners may be unable to access continuing education that targets interpretation, whether because of resourcing constraints or because relevant professional development is simply not available. Given that participants in the research reported needing longer periods of time before they became confident in interpreting competencies, it may ultimately be unrealistic to expect that recent graduates from the certificate IV would be able to work effectively with the texts, regardless of what the competencies of that qualification state about how competently graduates will do that work.

A third issue concerns the language and structure of competencies. Practitioners may be experiencing more difficulty dealing with the language of the competencies than stakeholders realise. In addition, the structure of competencies (the different kinds of information contained in them and how these relate internally) may be counterintuitive to practitioners, potentially obscuring rather than facilitating the translation of the texts into learning and assessment designs. However, new guidelines for the development of training packages may serve to address some of the issues raised by the participants in this research.

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