

Considerations for online delivery opportunities within Australian VET

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Continued discussion around quality delivery of vocational education within online environments is important. While online delivery is not new for the sector (Griffin & Mihelic, 2019) many RTOs did experience a rapid transition to online provision during the pandemic (Hume & Griffin, 2021). As active researchers in this space, we've observed that many RTOs and educators are now seeking to move past *surviving* and toward *thriving* online. These projects have made us ask how to decide which units of competency, or parts of units of competency, can be taken online without compromising quality of delivery. In this article, we share some ideas about criteria that may help to analyse competencies with this goal in mind.

Much of what you'll read here was developed as part of a recent ASQA project including survey, report, and case studies (ASQA, 2023). With their permission, we're able to share some pertinent elements of that work, including a new conceptualisation of online delivery considerations. We frame this up with insights gleaned from various research projects conducted by each of the authors engaging with public and private providers over the past four years.

We stress at the outset that we can find no algorithm or fail-safe criteria for determining what qualifications or units of competency can or cannot be delivered online. A principle of the VET system is that industry sets the standards (reflected in units of competency) and providers develop strategies that enable their learners to develop and then demonstrate performance and knowledge that satisfy those standards (Hodge & Guthrie, 2019). Another principle is that VET is a competency-based system which is focused on outcomes, not inputs, and therefore providers have latitude to deliver training and assessment (at least in theory). Additionally, the claimed benefit of marketisation in VET is that innovation is encouraged rather than conformity to a single model of curriculum and teaching (Hodge & Guthrie, 2019). This means that different enactments of online learning and assessment will occur across the sector, and no one-size-fits-all model should be idealised.

However, there is no doubt that there are challenges to taking vocational education online. It stands to reason that hands-on units and qualifications would be difficult or impossible to deliver in a virtual way. Indeed, we have observed a belief among providers that certain units *cannot* be facilitated online. However, those same units are being successfully facilitated online by other providers. This indicates differing beliefs and knowledges about how to realise or leverage the potential of online delivery opportunities. This observation aligns with previous research which found the beliefs of VET educators about what teaching strategies are or are not important in online delivery was more influential on practice than the availability of online tools (Cox, 2020). That research also found that limitations of trainer knowledge of ways of enacting, and strategies to effectively deliver, online education was a notable, yet not surprising, influence on practice.

During our work for the ASQA project we also found that VET provider decisions around what can and cannot be delivered online are often informed by the requirements expressly documented in, or interpreted from, units of competency (as well as training packages and companion volume implementation guides). Identified constraints in those documents relate to the practice or demonstration of a competency which requires the learner to physically embody specific social situations, workplaces, or specialised equipment, resources, and environments. It is this *physical embodiment* which precludes those elements from being learned or assessed online. However, we propose that physical embodiment is not the only consideration in the decision to opt for online delivery. Based on our experience and observations working and researching in this space, we propose that there are primary and secondary considerations to navigate when conceptualising online VET delivery.

Let's start with three primary considerations (Figure 1) which we suggest represent how a qualification, unit of competency, or even an individual knowledge or performance criterion, can be conceptualised for online delivery.

Primary considerations

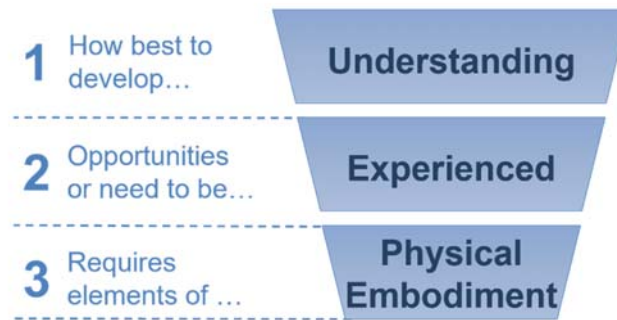


Figure 1 – Primary considerations for online delivery opportunities within vocational education

The first consideration is how best to develop learner **understanding** of the skill or knowledge being learned. Examples of content that can be utilised to develop learner understanding include reading information, hearing explanations, watching video or live stream demonstrations, seeing examples, reviewing scenarios, and considering applications – all of which can be readily enacted online.

The second consideration is what opportunities or need is there for the learning to be **experienced** by the learner. Example experiential opportunities that can be facilitated online include realistic simulations, role plays, active reflections, dilemma wrangling, problem-solving, and inquiry-led strategies.

The third and final primary consideration is whether the element requires any **physical embodiment** (as described above). That is, during learning and assessment, does the learner need to physically occupy a space which features specialised equipment,

resources, environments, or hands-on interaction with specific people or items?

These three primary considerations are often navigated sequentially because *understanding* underpins and prepares learners for *experienced* learning interventions, which in turn prepares learners for *physically embodied* learning opportunities. It is important to note that many units do not require any element of physical embodiment.

Importantly not all qualifications, units, or criteria require all three considerations, but we propose that they do all require the first consideration – understanding, and many benefit from the second consideration, experience.

Once those primary considerations have been navigated, providers tend to move onto the six secondary considerations (Figure 2) which are navigated for the learning design of a qualification, unit, or criterion, and for each element of learning content or teaching intervention being enacted.



Figure 2 – Secondary considerations for online delivery opportunities within vocational education

First of these is the **educator role**. Vocational practice has been found to reside on a spectrum from imparting information at one end to active facilitation at the other and can incorporate differing combinations (Cox, 2020).

The second consideration is the **learner role**. It too sits along a spectrum, this time from passive recipient (e.g. watching a learning content video, or reading a textbook) to active participant (e.g. engaging in a role play activity, or practicing a skill).

The third consideration is the **nature of the learning content or intervention**. This means considering in what format the learning is intended to be created, presented, and engaged with. The nature of content includes the purposeful selection and application of tools and resources.

The fourth consideration is **with whom** is the learner learning. That is, is the intention for the learner learning individually (even if within a class) or are they learning as part of an intentional collaborative group.

The fifth of six considerations is **where** is the learning occurring. Is the intention for the learner to experience this learning online and/or on campus and/or at a real or realistic workplace.

Finally, **when** is the learning occurring - synchronously or asynchronously. Synchronicity is not about when the teaching is delivered, but is about when the learning is experienced. Consider here whether the intention is for the learner to experience the learning in real-time, synchronously with the educator and other learners; or is the intention to experience the learning at a time of their choosing, asynchronously from the educator and other learners.

There is no single way of navigating through these six considerations, which may be enacted at macro and/or micro levels of learning design.

Critically, these considerations do not reflect a yes-or-no decision regarding online delivery of the qualification, unit, or part of a unit in question. Rather, the result can be *none*, *some*, or *all* of that component being delivered online. This is an essential

understanding because it removes the *can-cannot* decision and instils a *how-much?* approach.

A further consideration lies in clustering elements by delivery method compatibility. Clustering of units for delivery and assessment (Clayton et al., 2015) is an established practice that is described in many companion volumes (e.g. SkillsIQ, 2020). Here, rather than units being delivered as discreet learning experiences where students wholly complete, for example, four units before moving to the next four units, some providers we spoke to during our research reported *clustering* and *stretching* units. This means that providers adopt an approach where they merge similar and complementary learnings from different units for concurrent online learning (clustering) and allow some elements to remain incomplete until those physically embodied components can be properly completed (stretching). The concept of stretching means that incomplete units do not stall overall progress. Rather, for example, all of the training and assessment elements that require physical embodiment are held over for complementary enactment, while non-embodied types of learning and assessment continue online.

It is unclear at this time whether clustering practices have expanded because providers are innovating or because as they increase their level of online delivery their practice lends itself to clustering and stretching. Either way, clustering and stretching can offer even greater possibilities for online delivery, and constraints encountered due to requirements for physical embodiment can perhaps be more efficiently facilitated.

Early feedback from providers regarding the primary and secondary considerations we have identified for considering online delivery of qualifications, units, and criteria is positive. We look forward to additional feedback as more providers use this conceptualisation to guide how they analyse competencies to decide what can be delivered online. Importantly though, even if guided by these identified considerations, because of differences in available resources and educators, each provider will continue to uniquely perceive what *they* can or cannot teach and assess online.

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