Handout 1

Background

The registered training organisation (RTO) is ultimately responsible for ensuring quality training and assessment within their organisation and scope of registration. This goes well beyond the quality of training and assessment to include all aspects of the RTO's operations. RTOs need to evaluate information about performance and using such information to inform quality assurance of services and improve training and assessment is sound business and educational practice. The information used to evaluate RTO performance must be relevant to the operating characteristics and business objectives of the RTO and will vary from one RTO to another.

This handout provides guidance to RTOs on developing and maintaining a continuous improvement ethos and process consistent with Standard 2 clauses 2.1 and 2.2 of the *Standards for Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) 2015* (the Standards).

Standard 2: The operations of the RTO are quality assured.

2.1   The RTO ensures it complies with these Standards at all times, including where services are being delivered on its behalf. This applies to all operations of an RTO within its scope of registration.

2.2   The RTO systematically monitors the RTO's training and assessment strategies and practices to ensure ongoing compliance with Standard 1; and

The RTO systematically evaluates and uses the outcomes of the evaluations to **continually improve** the RTO's training and assessment strategies and practices. Evaluation information includes but is not limited to quality/performance indicator data collected under Clause 7.5, validation outcomes, client, trainer and assessor feedback and complaints and appeals. *[Emphasis added]*

The key messages of these clauses are that:

- RTO's have a responsibility for all aspects of its operations, even those conducted on its behalf;
- The RTO must continuously improve all of its operations;
- This continuous improvement is shaped through gathering data such as feedback from stakeholders; and
- This data must be analysed objectively to give direction to on-going change.

Improvement could be necessary because the RTO could do things better, or because standards external to the RTO have changed, such as industry standards, VET principles, or RTO standards themselves.

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Continuous improvement

An organisation can undertake giant leaps forward (or backward), or can move thoughtfully forward, building on experience as it expands. We could describe the former as **quantum change,** a revolution, or an abrupt improvement. Such a change leads to totally new processes and products, discards past experience and is stressful and challenging to all engaged in it.

The latter is **incremental change,** evolution, continuous improvement involving small steps, revised processes and products, building upon past experience and is less stressful and more respectful of those engaged in it.

Continuous improvement is less risky, more respectful of past experience, less cataclysmic, more robust, and more amenable to the existing team.

Triggers for continuous improvement

The need for improvement is informed by a discrepancy between the outcomes of the RTOs processes and products and the outcomes sought by the Standards, the community, industry, employers, learners and the RTO team itself.

It may be that the RTO is falling short of those expectations, or it may be that these expectations have changed.

These expectations may be enshrined in regulations, such as:
- the Standards for RTOs;
- industry standards as expressed in training packages and accredited courses;
- professional standards relating to quality training delivery; or
- political and community expectations.

An RTO committed to improvement needs to attend to those expectations through auditing compliance, facilitating industry engagement, gathering employer feedback and learner feedback, and monitoring its community impact.

Inputs to continuous improvement

Improvement is best when it is evidence-based, and like all evidence the data gathered needs to be relevant to expectations (valid), a reflection of the RTO's current practices, directly related to the RTO (authentic) and sufficient to justify the need for change. The data can come from a range of sources reflecting the range of interested parties, such as:

- Students: through day-to-day questionnaires and end of course surveys;
- Trainers and assessors: through in-house reviews of resources, RTO policies and procedures, and observation of student response;
- Complaints and appeals: indicating incorrect student expectations, errors of judgement, or ineffective codes of conduct;
- Employers: feedback from work placements (including traineeships and apprenticeships) and from graduates;

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- Assessment validation: reflecting upon both the design and delivery of assessment tools and judgment processes;
- Industry engagement: seeking reassurance about the relevance of RTO resources through the observation of industry practices and through industry feedback;
- Community feedback: from community engagement, press, and social media;
- Internal audits: providing evidence of compliance and advice for improvement;
- External audits; providing evidence of compliance and response to improvement; and
- VET Data Provision Requirements, such as completions data and surveys.

Some of these are mandated by the Standards, others are good practice, all will contribute to an RTO's awareness of the need to improve or provide reassurance that the RTO is functioning effectively to meet stakeholder needs and expectations.

Outputs from continuous improvement

Improvement means change. This change is driven by an understanding of desired outcomes and evidence of actual outcomes. These changes can be minor or far-reaching and may require the RTO to revise, rewrite or replace:

- RTO policies and procedures: Is the problem rooted in the way the RTO has set up its operations?
- Training strategies and content: Have the requirements of the training product been fully understood? Have they been expressed validly in the learning resources? Are they a faithful reflection of current industry practice?
- Assessment strategies and content: Have the requirements of the training product been fully understood? Have they been expressed validly in the assessment tools? Are they a faithful reflection of current industry practice?
- Marketing and RTO information: Has the RTO accurately described its services? Does the student have accessible information about the RTOs expectations and their rights and responsibilities?

They may also require the RTO to rethink how it manages and records:

- Industry engagement: Are the strategies used to engage with industry building effective working relationships that inform the RTO's strategies and resources?
- Certification: Has the RTO adequately explained the AQF levels to students and employers?
- RTO resources: Are in-house and community resources accessed and managed effectively?
- Trainers and assessors: How effective are the RTO's strategies for recruitment, performance management and professional development?
- Quality assurance: How effective are the RTO's strategies to monitor and improve its own outcomes?

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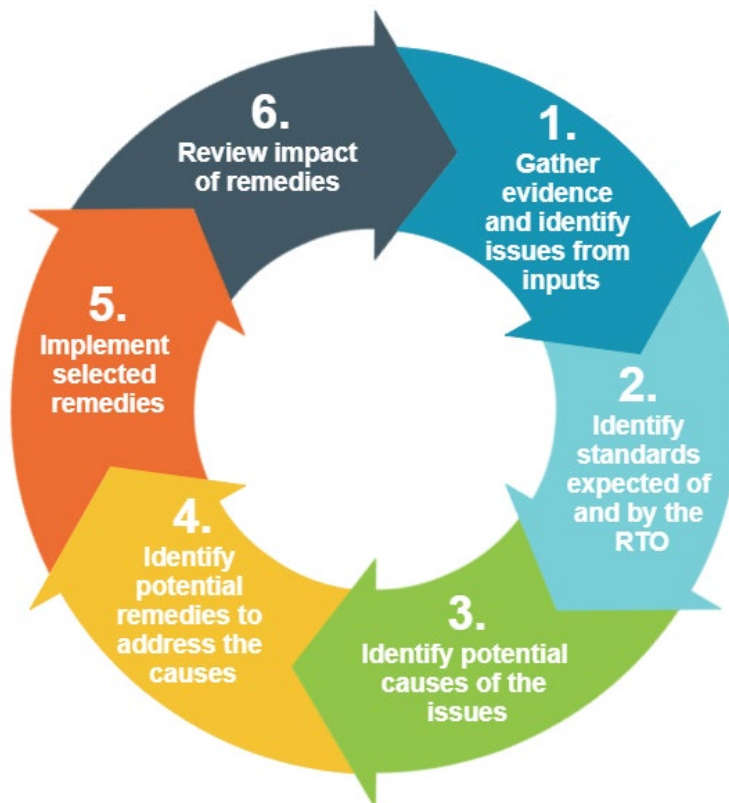Finally, the RTO might need to consider changes to how it delivers:

- Learner support: Can the RTO improve the strategies used to identify learner needs and to deliver appropriate support services?
- Training and assessment: Can the RTO improved the experience of being a learner and the opportunity to achieve?

These inputs and outputs are parts of a cycle of continuous improvement.

The continuous improvement cycle

The cycle begins and ends by identifying and monitoring the standards expected of and by the RTO.

The key steps are:

A cycle like this may appear to be remorseless, never ending and ultimately discouraging but as a learning organisation an RTO should be comfortable with this evidence-based examination of its own effectiveness.

It is part of a healthy RTO mind-set that is unafraid to test itself, learn better ways and reward itself for its achievements. There are two aspects to this mind-set; a willingness to engage in the processes of change, and a willingness to accept the culture of change. Each of these require continuous improvement to be an integral part of the day-to-day activities of RTO staff rather than an isolated, unwelcome and disruptive event.

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Integration with the day-to-day work of the RTO team member

As VET is evidence-based, **gathering data** about how well the RTO is achieving its objectives and responsibilities is a normal part of RTO work. There needs to be a process for **collating feedback** so that trends and shared issues can be identified, or for **identifying special cases** where issues are localised. Faced with a number of problems, an RTO needs to have strategies for **prioritising issues** to address the most urgent quickly. All RTO staff need to participate in **brainstorming solutions**, not just those with direct engagement with the problem. Once a strategy has been agreed upon an individuals must agree to **taking responsibility** for the rectification, for **monitoring progress**, and for **evaluating outcomes**.

It is ultimately a team effort, part of the job description of each RTO staff member and part of the ethos of the organisation.

Continuously improving continuous improvement

Accepting continuous improvement as a normal part of the RTO's activities is not without its challenges. Many would rather just muddle along without the 'threat' of ever-present observation. But the work of an RTO is profoundly important to the learner, employers, industry and the community, near enough is not good enough.

The parallels with learning are obvious. Like the learner the RTO;
- has goals and standards to achieve;
- must accept that there is always room to improve;
- needs to accept that it must be assessed;
- needs to be able to accept adverse feedback;
- must be able to respond constructively to that feedback; and
- must be willing to resubmit to the assessment process.

The RTO must be a **learning organisation** that has a commitment to change, a commitment to evidence-based action, a commitment to supporting the team in times of change, a commitment to professional development, and a commitment to continuous improvement.

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Continuous Improvement Case Study

1

Gather evidence and identify issues from inputs
Student feedback, employer feedback, trainer/assessor feedback, complaints, appeals, progression data, assessment validation, internal or external audit

Current and graduate students report that they do not have enough time to learn and are under too much pressure to meet assessment deadlines.

2

Identify standards expected of and by the RTO
Standards for RTOs, Training Package/unit requirements, workplace standards

- training and assessment strategies (SRTO 1.1)
- amount of training (SRTO 1.2)
- learner support (SRTO 1.7)
- assessment fairness (SRTO 1.8b)
- course information (SRTO 5.1)
- learner obligations (SRTO 5.2 e ii)

3

Identify potential causes of the issue
Policy, procedures, marketing

- Students may have unreasonable expectations about the time demands of the course
- Duplication of knowledge and skills across related units
- Multiple assessments with the same due dates
- Stresses within and outside the course

4

Identify potential remedies to address the causes
Revise policies and procedures, rewrite training materials, revise assessment tools

- reducing course intensity by clustering units of competency to avoid duplication
- up-front advice to potential students about the intensity of the course
- co-ordination of assessment deadlines across units
- support services for students experiencing elevated stress levels

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5 **Implement selected remedy**
Responsibility, timeline, resources

- Trainers and assessors: to implement clustering and assessment co-ordination. (Next delivery)
- Marketing to revise course brochure. (Next delivery)
- Student services to set up stress support program. (Immediate)

6 **Review impact of remedy – seek new evidence**
Student feedback, employer feedback, trainer/assessor feedback, complaints, appeals, progression data, assessment validation, internal or external audit

- Review the effectiveness of stress support program through student surveys
- Review student feedback during and after next delivery of the course

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