



21st Century Delivery and Assessment of Training in the Food and Fibre Sector

A synopsis of, and reflections on, the Final Report.

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21st Century Delivery and Assessment Report: Approach and challenge identification

Aim

The 21st Century Delivery and Assessment project, led by Muka Tangata and Food and Fibre Centre of Vocational Excellence (CoVE), was commissioned to review delivery and assessment practices in vocational education and training (VET) across the New Zealand food and fibre sector. The aim was to assess the relevance and efficacy of current practices and to develop recommendations to support a relevant and flexible vocational education and training system fit for the 21st Century.

Research question

This project sought to answer the following research question:

What would a vocational education and training system that orientates the food and fibre sector to create responsive and competitive industries look like?

Vision

To build excellence in vocational education and training (VET) across the food and fibre sector in New Zealand by enabling the success of all ākongā and their communities, employers, industry, and the education sector.

Approach

To understand the current state (challenges and opportunities) of the delivery and assessment of training, a range of activities was undertaken to provide opportunities to listen to stakeholders and understand their experiences. The key stakeholder groups were learners, training providers, employers and industry, across a range of food and fibre sectors.

Data collection included:

- A national survey with 57 responses
- Participation in an industry wide forum with 90 participants
- A series of five regional stakeholder focus groups with 21 participants
- Two online focus groups with nine participants
- Eleven semi-structured interviews with industry subject matter experts to elicit further insights
- Key informant (including project stakeholders) interviews.

The understanding of the current challenges and opportunities was supported by desktop research, including a review of previous project reports and documents provided by Food and Fibre CoVE, Muka Tangata and NZQA.

Challenge themes

Stakeholders engaged in this project identified multiple challenges faced during delivery and assessment. These were distilled into five key themes, each of which was underpinned by a common theme of funding challenges, including the quantum of funding, limitations to the way it can be applied, and areas that currently receive little or no funding, for example, for recognition of prior learning (RPL), pastoral care and trainer support.

- ***The flexibility of the training ecosystem:*** Future training systems will need to have flexible programme structures and utilise a variety of delivery methods and assessment approaches, instead of relying solely on historical teaching methods. This adaptability will be crucial in meeting the ever-evolving needs of learners, employers, and industries.
Funding challenges: Training timing and timelines can be influenced by the funding requirements, which require courses to begin and end within certain timeframe.
- ***Quality programmes delivered well:*** When trainers are required to not only teach but also develop programmes, they might need assistance to transition away from less flexible approaches. Extra guidance will be necessary for trainers and tutors to address the growing demands of learners struggling with literacy and numeracy.
Funding challenges: Pastoral care was not seen as adequately funded and is an area that requires additional resource.
- ***Industry connection, voice, and role:*** Future training systems need to bridge the gap between industry needs and available training to ensure that learners acquire the skills required by employers. Consistent involvement should be enabled in the development and review of programmes, promoting a more cohesive connection between stakeholder groups.
Funding challenges: Training is often cut in market downturns. There was frustration around the limited scope of national funding or the ability for the funding from levy groups to be more widely applied across types of training.
- ***Application of recognition of prior learning (RPL):*** The RPL process could be streamlined to make it more accessible for learners and providers to manage. Data should be collected to determine the need for RPL, and to understand the value proposition for RPL beyond pre-enrolment.
Funding challenges: TEC funding cannot be used for RPL by the provider. The costs for the application need to be met by the learner or employer. Funds are not available to teach learners if more than 50% of the course is credited, which acts as a disincentive for training providers to approve RPL. The impact is learners can end up repeating what they have already learnt.
- ***The future of the food and fibre sector in New Zealand:*** The framework for delivery and assessment must be designed to be flexible and adaptable to effectively respond to the evolving training needs across the food and fibre sector. Current programmes

should be enhanced by enabling the efficient development of new training material that supports new skills sets like the use of digital tools.

Funding challenges: The funding of training programmes that meet emerging needs and support the integration of new skills will need to be considered.

Reflection: Approach and challenge identification

The landscape

This project was an ambitious undertaking, with the added complexity of being carried out as the (incomplete) changes brought about by the Review of Vocational Education (RoVE) were being unpicked by the current government. Regardless of the eventual shape that vocational education and training takes, the timespan and breadth of these change projects means that there is a backdrop of fluidity and uncertainty across the sector, and a sense of engagement fatigue from both those directly involved and other key stakeholders. The data collection for this project was carried out within a tight timeframe, against a backdrop of a VET sector in a state of flux, at a busy seasonal time for the food and fibre sector, and in the midst of consultation for other initiatives. This very real 'consultation fatigue' helps account for the relatively small sample sizes and for a sense that some of those who participated perhaps had a narrow focus on specific issues, rather than a more strategic focus on higher-level improvements to the delivery and assessment of food and fibre VET. Nonetheless, the challenges identified resonate with those identified by other Food and Fibre CoVE projects, and the 14 industry-specific Workforce Development Plans developed and maintained by Muka Tangata.

There are also significant changes underway to the educational 'products' that are the currency for VET. The development and availability of reviewed qualifications, skills standards, and micro-credentials (coupled with much-needed and requested changes to the regulatory and funding regimes to support their uptake and use) will potentially help provide building blocks to address some of the challenges identified.

Turning challenge into opportunity

The challenge themes can be arranged as a quite compelling narrative supporting the need for action. It is important to note that the levers for change sit at multiple levels; in particular, industry awareness and advocacy, the policy environment (for example, these themes were used as part of the Food and Fibre CoVE submission to the current consultation process), and within the educational aspects of the VET system itself.

Future proofing food and fibre VET...

- The food and fibre sector is rapidly changing
- Emerging sectors and technologies require integration of new skills
- This requires a delivery and assessment ecosystem that can quickly respond to change

Requires strong industry connection and input...

- Connection with industry is fundamental to understanding and front-footing future needs
- The relevance and currency of product development, delivery and assessment systems depends on strong industry connections
- The return on investment and value proposition of formal training needs to be evident to both employers and learners

Supported and enhanced by flexible and responsive product development, delivery and assessment systems...

- Qualifications and credentials that meet industry and learner needs (timely speed to market, transferable, stackable, multiple entry and exit points etc.)
- Timing, length and mode of programme delivery that 'flexes' to stakeholder needs
- Programme delivery models that take account of learner needs and provide appropriate learner support
- Fit for purpose assessment models that are innovative, mana-enhancing and utilise best practice (including RPL systems)

Resulting in quality programmes delivered well.

- Incorporating te ao Māori and cultural competency
- Quality learning experiences delivered by competent, engaged trainers and employers, and supported by mentors and community/whānau
- With strong pastoral care systems in place to support complex learner needs.

Other considerations

Understanding what is working well: Despite the distractions resulting from RoVE and the subsequent winding back of those changes, VET is alive and well in the food and fibre sector. While this research was designed to identify the challenges, it is important to note that learning, and the credentialing of that learning, occurs on a daily basis in workplaces and classrooms across the country. Of course, improvements can and should be made, but the system has many strengths and examples of good practice. For example, Primary ITO has for many years been a leader in providing literacy and numeracy support for its learners, mentoring services, and in assisting a range of neurodivergent learners. These initiatives are evidence-based, with the organisation having partnered with [Ako Aotearoa](#) to research and evaluate the impact of the interventions.

The importance of the difference between work-based and provider-based VET: While the issues and challenges identified by the research run across the entire food and fibre VET system, many of the solutions to these challenges will play out in different ways depending

on where the learner is sited, i.e. in a work-based or provider-based setting.¹ Work-based learners are first and foremost employees, whose primary relationship is with their employer. The employer, and the wider workplace context, 'provide' much of the training, ranging from formal training opportunities through to day-to-day 'this is how we do things' learning. Work-based provider staff are invited into that relationship; they are manuhiri/guests in the workplace, privileged to be given the opportunity to wrap some formal learning and credentialisation around the more expansive learning that occurs as part of the job. It has rightly been identified that learners should be able to move more flexibly between these different learning sites, and to have access to hybrid delivery models and approaches that meet that learner wherever they are, regardless of their employment status. The fundamental differences between work-based and provider-based VET, however, require a nuanced and thoughtful approach to develop the systemic changes required to address the challenges identified.

Recognition of Prior Learning - the big picture: One of these key systemic changes is the need to address New Zealand's current RPL system, described in an excellent article from Mitzi Austin (September 2024) as 'the nut we still need to crack'.² While changes could usefully be made at the margins of the current model, Austin argues for innovation: for the development of an effective, efficient, high-trust RPL model that recognises what people already know and can do, in relation to a determined set of outcomes, with subsequent training matched to the needs of learners and the enterprises that already or will soon employ them.

21st Century Delivery and Assessment Report: Recommendations

Design principles

There are many success stories in food and fibre vocational training across the sector, with processes and practices that are responsive and have been refined to meet learner and industry needs. The ten recommendations from this project are designed to build on this good work and are based upon best practice evidence and a set of future design principles. Designing with these principles at the forefront, rather than to a set of specific future skills, will enable a continuous re-alignment to best practice and the evolving needs of learners and industry. The principles are:

Purpose: The purpose is focused on learners and the food and fibre sector industries, and enabled by work- integrated and/or work-based learning opportunities to provide relevant experience and industry relevant skills.

¹ The [Muka Tangata Sector Insights dashboard](#) shows the breakdown of work-based and provider-based enrolments across the 14 food and fibre sub-sectors.

² <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/nut-we-still-need-crack-mitzi-austin-zobwc/?trackingId=bXUQc8qiT%2BmnqmtwV4EGzg%3D%3D>

Flexibility: Delivery and assessment modes apply flexible approaches to accommodate the diverse needs of learners and the food and fibre sector.

Inclusivity: Ensure the use of inclusive approaches that support vulnerable individuals and groups and enable the success of all parties.

Technology: Integrate relevant technology into food and fibre vocational education and adopt technological advances, including the integration of relevant digital tools and skills training.

Collaboration: Maintain collaboration between stakeholder groups and the food and fibre community to ensure delivery and assessment aligns with current and emerging needs including technologies and sector practices.

Sustainability: Create enduring and sustainable solutions, meeting emerging needs and ensuring the solutions are flexible and can be adjusted to meet future needs.

Evolution: Orientate towards lifelong learning, the integration of evolving practices and technology along with ongoing skills advancement across the sector.

The recommendations

The ten recommendations have been grouped into four areas:

1. Programme design and structure

- Supporting programme design and interpretation
 - Create a playbook with greater guidance on programme design
 - Increase the use of Māori centric learning models
 - Improve accessibility to expert programme designers
- Reduce the time to credentialise new qualifications
- Use existing industry skills standards to frame assessments
- Democratise programme ownership to allow wider use
- Centralise delivery of core content
- Promote the use of national standards for learning outcomes
- Expand timely access to necessary learning through the increased use of micro credentials.

2. Delivering learning

- Create a pilot plan to enhance the delivery of vocational education
 - Review the use and opportunity for technology in delivery
 - Review the use and opportunity for technology in assessments
 - Create assistance for tutors and trainers to enhance their ability to support learners facing literacy and numeracy difficulties
 - Highlight good pastoral care practices and funding requirements
 - Supporting tutors to create peer to peer learning opportunities

- Provide programmes to maximise and enable mentor support
- Create training and support for employers who deliver training and assessment
- Clarify the models used for roving assessors
- Establish communities of vocational education practice to support the continuous improvement of vocational teaching.

3. Industry connection

- Improve connection and clarify support services that are available
- Publish a work programme, rationalise projects and publish a summary of completed projects.

4. Recognition of prior learning

- Improving recognition of prior learning processes and support
 - Capture the numbers of RPL applications to understand level of use
 - Clarify RPL guidance for assessors
 - Support RPL applications and assessments by providing funding
 - Identify digital tools which can support assessors and learners with RPL applications.

Proposed next steps

Two pilot plans have been developed to test and evaluate the recommendations prior to implementation to identify potential challenges and assess feasibility, along with providing an opportunity to make any necessary adjustments prior to wider implementation. The proposed pilots are:

1. Enhance the delivery of vocational education

- a. Review the use and opportunity for technology in delivery and assessment. This aims to assess whether providing a playbook, and access to training courses and materials enhances the technology skills of trainers and assessors, promotes increased technology usage, and improves vocational education delivery and assessment for learners in the sector.
- b. Create training and support for employers who deliver training and assessment.

2. Improve RPL processes and support

- a. Review current guidance documents for assessors, promotion of their use and support to standardise processes and determining any improvements required to the guidance.
- b. Identify any digital tools which can support assessors and learners with RPL applications including pre-screening and tools to help assessors compare learning outcomes.

Reflections on next steps: Actioning the recommendations

Refining the recommendations

An important outcome of the 'sense-making' phase of a project is to ensure that any recommendations are 'do-able' and to identify who should own each recommendation. This is not to say that the recommendations should not be challenging and provide stretch actions for those involved, but they need to take account of the broader context, and of the resources available to those who are charged with implementing them. The project's current recommendations have been sensibly structured into easy wins, priorities, and those that require strategic collaboration, and the pilot projects suggested have merit; however, the breadth and tone of the recommendations as a whole may be rather overwhelming for some of those players identified as having a role in implementation.

Food and Fibre CoVE intends to refine the project recommendations, using them as a basis to consider future projects, which they will be responsible for delivering. Early indications are that the focus areas will be:

- The development and uptake of micro-credentials
- Various aspects of enhancing VET delivery, e.g.:
 - Assistance for educators to support learners with literacy and numeracy needs
 - Good pastoral care practices and funding requirements
 - Peer-to-peer learning opportunities
 - Maximising and enabling mentor support
 - Support for employers who provide training and assessment
 - Establishing communities of vocational education practice
- Roving assessor models
- Improving recognition of prior learning processes and support.

Fit with other Food and Fibre CoVE projects

There are several complementary areas between the 21st Century Delivery and Assessment project and other Food and Fibre CoVE projects:

- The [Vocational Excellence Framework](#) was considered as part of the 21st Century Delivery and Assessment project and some of the rubrics have been modified.
- Enhancing the delivery of VET
 - Technology
 - [Investing in Emerging Technologies: Gamification, VR and AI Research project and pilots](#)
 - Digital Assessment project (proposed)
 - Learner support
 - [Appreciating and Supporting Neurodiversity in VET](#)

- Pastoral care
 - [Retaining our People – Food and Fibre Retention Pilots](#)
 - [Food and Fibre Degree-Level Apprenticeship Framework](#)
- Mentoring
 - [Aquaculture NZ Mentoring Programme.](#)

Two projects that were undertaken concurrently with the 21st Century Delivery and Assessment project will also support future initiatives resulting from this work. The [A New Approach to Learner Pathways: Skills Framework](#) project and the ongoing [Skills Framework Implementation](#) work are particularly relevant for thinking about flexible and responsive qualifications and credentials, and the transferability of skills. The [Learner Voices in the Primary Industries: Insights into what learners think about their qualifications](#) (Alkema, 2024) report provides a sound starting point for understanding learner perspectives about the relevancy and flexibility of the qualifications they are undertaking.

Conclusion

The 21st Century Delivery and Assessment project is an ambitious and timely project, as the food and fibre sector grapples with both meeting current workforce needs and front-footing future trends and demands. The project has clearly identified many of the challenges that currently impede the ability of those within the VET system to best serve industry, employers, and learners, and has provided a range of recommendations designed to remove barriers and enhance a robust and future-focused food and fibre VET system. Some of these recommendations can be implemented quickly, while others simply require a refocusing and strengthening of current BAU activities across the system. Other recommendations have a high level of dependency on external factors and agencies, where advocacy and influencing are the main levers, and across all of the recommendations is an environment of uncertainty as the latest round of VET consultation takes place. Nonetheless, regardless of the eventual shape of the new system, the project illuminates four key themes which need to influence and be reflected in a high-functioning food and fibre VET ecosystem:

- A strong voice for industry, with clear channels for industry to take the lead in current and future skill needs analysis, qualification and programme development, and in advising on the most appropriate delivery model and mode.
- More collaboration and sharing of resources, and good practice ideas and models.
- A deeper understanding and recognition of learner needs and demographics, and a wide and deep range of support options, that meet the learner where they are: educationally, geographically and culturally.
- A facilitative, respectful and appropriately-funded system for the recognition of prior learning and existing skills.

A key aim of a research project is to address the research question, in this case:

- What would a vocational education and training system that orientates the food and fibre sector to create responsive and competitive industries look like?

By returning to the opportunity narrative identified earlier, it is possible to develop an overarching statement that addresses the research question and provides a framework to refine the actions that will be derived from the recommendations.

In order to create responsive and competitive food and fibre industries that are future focused, the food and fibre VET system requires strong industry connections and input, which underpins flexible and responsive product development, and delivery and assessment systems, that result in quality programmes delivered well.