

Skills Recognition for the Rural Sector – Coming to a Screen Near You

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Tocal College, as part of New South Wales Department of Primary Industries (DPI), provides training in agriculture and related disciplines across NSW and Australia. Tocal College delivers a wide range of full time, short course, and distance education courses, along with publications and study support materials. The rural and related industries in Australia operate in a complex environment and have many features which make training delivery unique and challenging. A particular challenge is servicing a clientele who are thinly dispersed over a very large part of Australia and providing relevant services to clients who have high levels of skills and knowledge acquired on the job through informal learning. As a consequence of these needs, external delivery of training and Skills Recognition (i.e., Recognition of Prior Learning [RPL]) have emerged as a key services delivered by the College. This paper will outline the development of the Tocal College Skills Recognition system from a paper-based to fully electronic system while maintaining a commitment to assessment by personal interview, client support, empowerment and respect, and active case management. The process of “going electronic” is evaluated from both the client and college perspective. The ePortfolio approach is proving to be a better way of delivering services, but it does still present some challenges to clients in regional and remote areas of Australia.

An Overview of Tocal College Education Programs

Tocal College was established by the Presbyterian Church at Paterson in the Hunter Valley of New South Wales in 1965 as a specialist vocational college, with a focus on training workers for farming and farm management. The College was taken over by the Department of Agriculture in 1970 and has been operated by that department and its successors to the present day. Over the years, the College’s range of activities has expanded dramatically from the initial focus on full-time residential training to include provision of training and other RTO services to all sectors of agriculture and land management, across NSW and nationally.

Tocal College now has two Campuses – C. B. Alexander Campus at Paterson and Murrumbidgee Rural Studies Centre situated at Yanco in the Riverina, including staff at four other country locations in NSW. The college now offers the following training products and services:

1. full-time residential training at Certificate II and Certificate IV level. These are courses aimed at training operational and supervisory level workers under the Australian Qualifications Framework (Australian Qualifications Framework Council, 2011),
2. Diploma of Agriculture and Diploma of Conservation and Land Management (Australian Qualifications Framework Council, 2011) by e-learning and Home Study,
3. traineeships delivered by Block Release at the Paterson campus and through flexible delivery state-wide,

4. short courses in a wide range of areas, delivered via the NSW DPI PROfarm program (see <http://www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/agriculture/profarm>),
5. publications (see <http://www.tocal.nsw.edu.au/publications>), and
6. tailored industry and community training courses addressing a wide range of requirements.

Adult and continuing education has grown to be the major function of the college, with over 450 full qualifications and Skills Sets awarded in 2012 (Tocal College, 2011).

In Australia, agriculture does not have a strong culture of formal training, and qualifications are not a barrier to entry. The rural sector in Australia has been well supported over the years by relatively well funded public sector research and advisory services, which have helped to improve the skills base in the industry and have driven productivity improvements (Bell & Bayley, 2011). This strategy of extension and advisory services for the rural sector has been successful in improving practice in the industry, but has resulted in little emphasis on formal training and credentials. As a result, Australia has one of the lowest levels in the developed world of farmers and farm workers holding post-secondary qualifications (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2002; National Centre for Vocational Education and Training, 2011). This does not necessarily mean that Australia’s farm workforce is less skilled than that of other nations (our efficiency and production records would indicate otherwise), but it does confirm that the skills and knowledge have been acquired through “non-formal” learning mechanisms that are not recognized as a Qualification.

In the 1990s, Australia adopted a standardized national training system that allowed the development of nationally recognized vocational Qualifications based on agreed competency standards, called Units of Competence, which are endorsed under nationally recognized Training Packages (Guthrie, 2009). The reform of the Australian training system also included a move away from traditional, “time served” models of training to assessment based on objective criteria. The adoption of this nationally consistent training system, with qualifications underpinned by Units of Competence, has been the basis for development of objective assessment systems and tools to allow Recognition of Prior Learning or Skills Recognition to be delivered to clients in the rural sector, thus enabling their workplace skills and knowledge to be formally recognized and accredited.

The Importance of Skills Recognition

Development of Skills Recognition services by Tocal College for industry arose in response to the situation in the rural sector, the skills of whose workforce have been acquired through mainly non-formal means. The philosophy driving the adult and continuing education functions of the college is founded on the premise that best way to deliver services to this sector is to start with a skills-recognition process or skills audit to recognize and accredit existing skills and knowledge and, at the same time, identify training needs. Subsequently, an individual program can be designed for the learner to address any skill or knowledge gaps. This stems from the underlying assumption that adults are not “empty vessels” (Freire, 1996) but come to the study process with a large and varied repertoire of skills and knowledge acquired through previous experience and study. A “one size fits all” approach to training delivery is an inappropriate and inefficient way of delivering outcomes.

At Tocal College, Skills Recognition has been integrated progressively into the culture of training delivery since 1996. Tocal College staff view Skills Recognition as the starting point for most adult education. The development of this culture, policies, and procedures has taken place while managing the inherent tension between employing flexible and achievable forms of evidence and meeting the needs of compliance, rules of evidence, and audit.

Applications of Skills Recognition

Workforce Development

Recognition programs have been delivered across all states of Australia for very diverse groups of candidates. In many cases, the college has worked with

industry peak bodies that represent the interests of a particular industry or sector, and with Agrifood Skills Australia. Some examples are:

1. Local Government Noxious Weeds Officers in NSW,
2. farm workers in all industry sectors (e.g., livestock, cropping, horticulture, and forestry),
3. biosecurity and regulatory staff in the public sector,
4. staff in Catchment Management Authorities,
5. indigenous community members in Western Australia and Northern Territory, and
6. wholesale and retail nursery operators.

Industry Accreditation Schemes

An innovative application of Skills Recognition has been the development of a number of Industry Accreditation programs. Some successful programs have included: AgCredited, Certified Cotton Best Management Practice Manager, Certified Irrigation Agronomist, Accreditation of Saleyard Operators, and Certificate IV in Workplace Training and Assessment.

1. AgCredited: a professional accreditation scheme for Australian Institute of Agricultural Science and Technology;
2. Certified Cotton Best Management Practice Manager: this accreditation will become standard for managers within the industry (Hickman & Dugdale, 2007; Hickman 2011);
3. Certified Irrigation Agronomist: delivered in association with Irrigation Australia to assess and accredits best practices in irrigation management (Irrigation Australia, 2011);
4. Accreditation of Saleyard Operators: Tocal College is assisting Australian Livestock Markets Association members to meet environmental, animal welfare, and workplace safety requirements and identify training needs of staff (Archer, 2011); and
5. Certificate IV in Workplace Training and Assessment: offered by both training and Skills Recognition to professionals throughout NSW. Skills Recognition for Certificate IV Business has also been used to complement career development programs within NSW DPI itself.

The Tocal Skills Recognition Model

Philosophy of Assessment

There are some underlying principles framing the Tocal Skills Recognition process (Bell, 2009):

- Skills Recognition assessment is carried out using holistic assessment processes. Great emphasis is placed on collecting a wide range of evidence and looking at the big picture of a candidate's competence;
 - Skills Recognition is done for the candidate by college staff. Candidates are not expected to interpret units of competence and training packages and are guided through each step of the process. Tocal staff take the view that "we are the assessors; we know the qualification and units of competence; we know what competence looks like and we know what evidence we need to collect as proof of competence";
 - Workplace interview is the preferred mode of assessment. While some candidates do prepare and submit written cases, they constitute only a few percent of the total. An interview carried out in the candidate's workplace is the most effective as, in most cases, the bulk of the evidence of competence is located in the workplace. This ranges from documentation to physical examples of work completed to practical demonstrations. In the case of many farmers, their farm is their evidence;
 - Workplace interviews are always carried out by two assessors. These assessors may both be college staff members, or one may be a designated subject matter expert;
 - The candidate is "assumed competent until proven otherwise." Rather than starting with the assumption that the candidate must prove to the assessors that they are competent, Tocal assessors approach the assessment process with the view that their role is to assist and facilitate the candidates' demonstration of their competence. Through that process, assessors and candidates collect evidence of competence and identify any skills gaps. If gaps are identified, a plan is developed to address them by additional training, additional workplace experience, or a workplace project;
 - Evidence collected by the workplace assessors is collated and summarized into a case for validation and approval. For most assessments for full qualification, the completed skills recognition case is reviewed by two college staff members with appropriate experience and knowledge. In some cases, an external technical reviewer may also be used. Only when approved by the validators is the case then submitted to the College Principal for final approval. Thus, all Skills Recognition cases are reviewed and assessed by at least four qualified college staff or technical experts; and
 - The process complies with the National Principles and Operational Guidelines for Recognition of Prior Learning (Australian Qualifications Framework Council, 2007).
- The thinking of Tocal Skills Recognition staff and the development of the Tocal recognition model are informed and supported by a variety of research published over the last 25 years. Many of the staff responsible for the development of the skills recognition program "cut their teeth" as youth educators in the Tocal College youth education program from the mid 1980s to the mid 1990s. During this period, the full-time Certificate programs at Tocal College were delivered using an innovative Problem Based Learning approach that was very holistic in its approach to delivery of training and assessment (Bell & Ryall, 1997; Drinan, Archer, Brouwer, Moller, & Walsh, 1985). Ideas from thinkers such as Freire (1972) in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Knowles (1973, 1990) in his writings, and the body of research presented by Boud and Garrick (1999) and Boud and Felletti (1991) have underpinned and informed the development of skills recognition.
- There has been abundant recent research reviewing the successes and failures of Competency Based Training and assessment that has also assisted Tocal College staff in monitoring and developing Skills Recognition. Of particular interest is the work of Smith and Clayton (2009). They found that:
- Successful access to the recognition pathway appears to be linked significantly to the possession of adequate literacy and communication skills. The companion issue here is that documentation and processes associated with the recognition of prior learning continue to be excessively complex and difficult to understand. (Smith & Clayton, 2009, p. 6)
- This finding particularly confirms the value of the Tocal approach, in which "Skills Recognition is done for the candidate by college staff" who facilitate the process at all stages. Feedback from candidates after they complete a qualification or skill set through the Tocal Skills Recognition process consistently confirms that the process is simple and easy to understand.
- Embedded in this process is the reflective dimension of portfolio development, which is of great importance to the candidates' learning. The process of conducting the assessment interview and collecting supporting evidence from which the ePortfolio is constructed is essentially reflective for the candidate. Candidates often express surprise and satisfaction when the body of evidence for the Skills Recognition assessment is compiled, discovering that "I know a lot

more than I thought I did.” For many candidates, this is the first time they have formally reviewed and reflected on their life and work experience. While important, this is not the primary purpose of the Skills Recognition and ePortfolio development process.

Assessment Tools

Tocal College has developed assessment tools that interpret holistically the units of competence. These tools have evolved over the years, but the basic processes have not changed. The tools are designed to assist the candidate in preparing for the assessment interview and to guide the evidence collection process. The tools provide guidance for:

- a statement of relevant training,
- assessor observations and a record of dialogue at interview,
- third-party letters of support,
- a set of questions for the candidate to answer,
- suggestions for relevant items of documentary evidence, and
- a summary of life experience relating to the unit of competence.

These tools are supplied to the candidate prior to the workplace interview.

The Assessment Process

Figure 1 outlines the typical assessment process. While some cases are prepared in writing by candidates, the vast majority of Tocal College Skills Recognition cases follow this process.

Entering the Digital Realm

Skills Recognition has progressed over the past 16 years, from when the service was first introduced as a totally paper-based process to the current fully electronic process. This has been a gradual process as new technology has become available and viable to use in the field. Changes to the tools, processes, and procedures have also been driven by the increase in staff involved in skills recognition and the numbers of candidates being assessed. What started out as a simple system used by only one or two staff members assessing relatively small numbers of candidates has been changed dramatically with the increase in candidate numbers and subsequent growth of the staff team carrying out Skills Recognition. The stages of development are outlined in Table 1.

As can be seen in Table 1, the Tocal College application is a tool used by college staff to do skills recognition for the candidate. This approach is entirely

consistent with the philosophy and practice of Skills Recognition, as implemented by the College since the commencement of the service. It aligns with Butler’s (2006) definition of an ePortfolio as “essentially an electronic version of a paper-based portfolio, created in a computer environment, and incorporating not just text but graphic, audio, and video material as well” (p. 10). This definition of ePortfolios is consistent with the Tocal College application, whose main function is to replace paper-based systems. The Tocal system of utilizing ePortfolios neither depends on nor encourages candidate portfolio development. However, if candidates with sufficient interest and Information Technology (IT) skills choose to prepare and present their own portfolios, the college will accommodate their choice and use these portfolios in the assessment process. To do otherwise would be viewed as inefficient use of time and resources by both the candidate and college staff.

The ePortfolio compiled by Tocal College staff for each candidate is still regarded as the property of the candidate. While it is used internally for the assessment process, a copy is supplied to the candidate on completion of their qualification or skill set. This is currently supplied to graduates on compact disc (CD) when they receive their Transcript or Statement of Attainment. This is the most practical means of doing this as the file size is usually in excess of 25 megabytes, which makes electronic distribution unviable for rural and regional clients. It is our hope that graduates will be able to utilize the ePortfolio created for them by Tocal College staff in the advancement of their careers by using it as tool to demonstrate to potential employers the details of their skills and knowledge in a much more detailed manner than could an academic transcript. In this way, the ePortfolio can act as a “diploma supplement” (Bologna Process and Strategic Challenges, 2009).

The decision to introduce e-Skills Recognition (e-SR) was driven fundamentally by the availability of suitable tools. Tools need to be readily available, easy to use, reliable, and affordable. The enhancement of Adobe Acrobat’s functionality with the introduction of version X Pro marked the point at which Tocal staff felt that it was viable to convert to an ePortfolio.

The other important tool that meets the requirement listed above is the iPad. iPad has been adopted as the preferred tool for photographing and recording evidence during the interview. The advantage of an iPad over a digital camera is the availability of applications for captioning and identifying evidence at the time of collection. This is a great advantage in ensuring that all documents and images are correctly identified and correlated to the appropriate unit of competence.

Figure 1
Total Skills Recognition Process

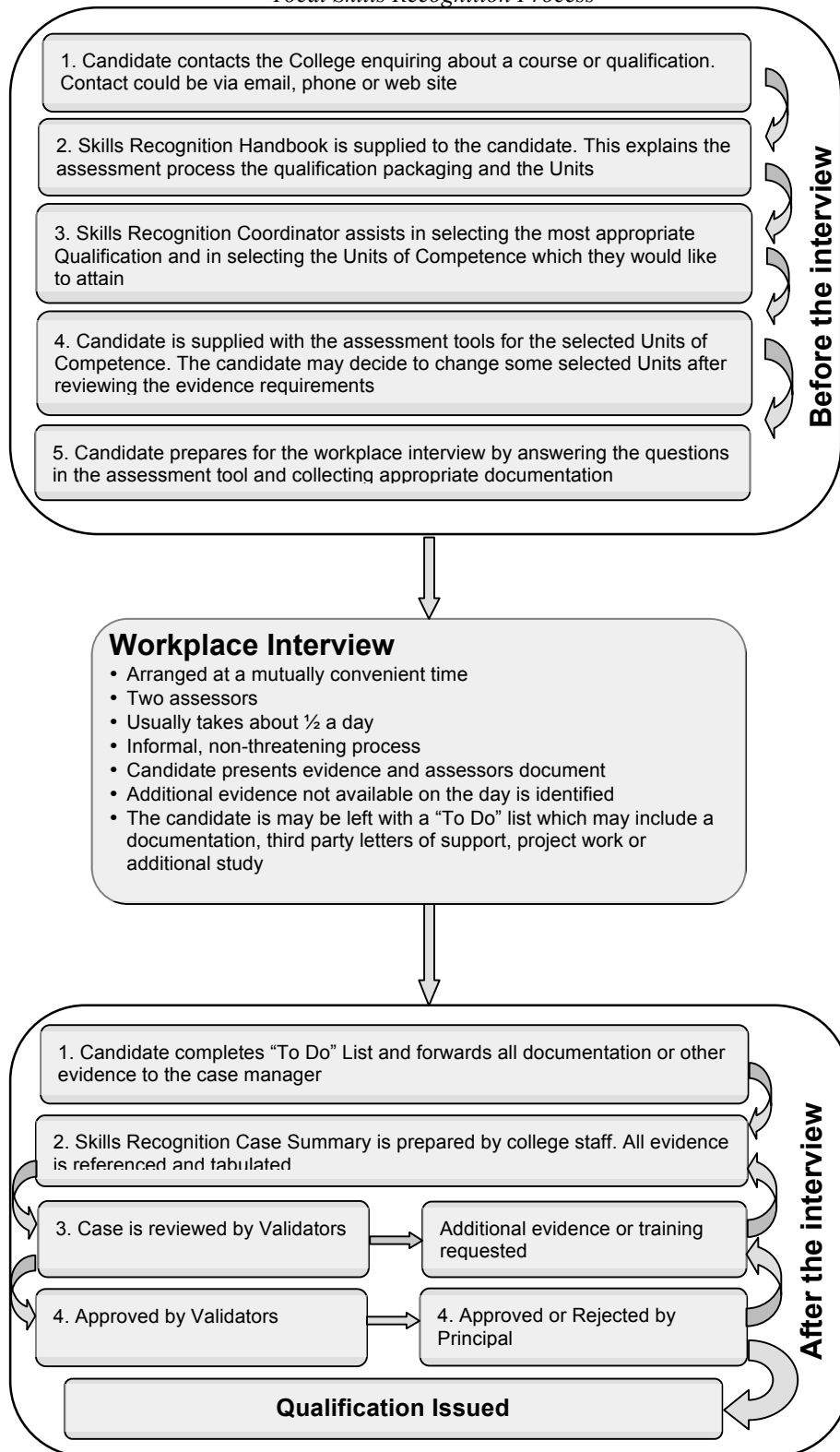


Table 1
The Evolution of the Tocal Skills Recognition Process

Period	Assessment tools used	Technology
1990s. Starting to do small numbers of recognition cases	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No tailored tools. Interpreting the Unit outline and using this to guide the candidate during assessment Evidence often copied at the college and then returned to the candidate Little guidance and support for the candidate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hand written notes Photocopier – if available in the interview venue Photo. Limited use of digital camera. Most candidates had very poor or unavailable email and web services Faxing documentation
1999 – 2003. Significant increase in demand for recognition services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adoption of the ASSESS format assessment tool (see <i>Appendix 1</i>) Development of Skills Recognition handbook. Case processing less formalized 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some improvement in rural and regional web access Electronic communications – email
2003 – 2006. Rapid growth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Implementation of new Conservation And Land Management (RTD02) Rural Production (RTE03) and Amenity Horticulture (RTF03) Training Packages ASSESS Sheets rewritten. Tools developed for new qualifications Development of standardized forms Development of policies and procedures Review and approval process standardized 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Handbook available for download from web site Portable photocopier More email used to communicate with candidates Digital camera
2006 – 2009. System development. Integration of second campus.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Further refinement of tools and forms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Digital camera gradually replacing portable photocopier Use of laptop to record notes during workplace interviews
2009 – 2011. Further growth in demand for recognition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Further formalization and refinement of processes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Digital camera used for all evidence recording during workplace interviews.
2012. e-assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Implementation of AHC10 Training Package Rewriting of ASSESS Sheet and conversion to new TOCAL format Conversion of TOCAL Sheets to Editable PDF Forms for candidate completion using Acrobat Reader All forms converted to Editable PDF format 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> PDF Portfolio adopted as the standard for preparation and processing of Skills Recognition Cases Adobe Acrobat X used to prepare Adobe Portfolio iPad used for photographing and documenting all workplace evidence. iPad App “A+ Signature” is being used to label and document evidence. Laptop used to record notes during workplace interviews. More document development taking place during the interview process Moodle – assessment tools available to candidates on Tocal College Moodle site used by college staff to manage forms and documents Manual/paper based system for preparation – distribution –review – approval of skills recognition cases discontinued and replaced with PDF Portfolio distribution System for archiving PDF Portfolios developed Candidates supplied with a copy of their PDF Portfolio on completion

Acrobat X Pro has been adopted as the platform used by all staff carrying out e-SR and was introduced in a pilot, with two of the most experienced skills recognition practitioners carrying out a trial to test and refine the processes. This has now been in use by College staff since March 2012 and has proved to be a success, albeit with some revisions and refinement along the way.

What are the Advantages and Disadvantages?

Table 2 describes advantages and disadvantages of ePortfolio for Tocal College and the candidate. The introduction of ePortfolios has opened up new

possibilities for candidates in the process of preparing for the assessment interview. Candidates are asked to answer a set of questions (see Appendix and Tocal, 2012). These answers are recorded in a PDF form document and emailed back to the College for review prior to the interview. Candidates are also encouraged to send any documentary or photographic evidence they may have available in an electronic format. Collection and review of some evidence prior to the workplace interview does, in many cases, speed up the interview process and gives candidates a much better idea of what is expected from them to meet the requirement of the qualification.

Table 2
Advantages and Disadvantages of the Introduction of ePortfolio

	For Tocal College	For the Candidate
Advantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ability to utilize a wider range of media for evidence collection: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Video ○ Audio • Greater efficiency in collection and collation of Skills Recognition evidence • Significant staff time saving in preparation of Skills Recognition cases. Some paper based processes have been eliminated • More efficient distribution of ePortfolio for review and approval • Ease of movement of documentation between campuses for review and validation • More efficient information management • Better access to archived material: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ searchable for college staff ○ available for Audit • Improve version control for forms • Easier intercampus coordination • Electronic data storage will eliminate problems associated with storage of physical skills recognition 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assessment tools available in electronic format • Can be accessed and worked on at any time • Electronic evidence collection and management during the workplace interview is virtually the same for the candidate as the paper based process • Candidate will receive a copy of their completed PDF Portfolio for their own use
Disadvantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Significant investment in new technology and software • Increased time for workplace interview in some cases. • Risk of data loss • Staff development cost in adopting new technology and systems • Bandwidth limitation for web access in some areas 	--

The interview process remains essentially unchanged when using the electronic evidence collection system. The assessment interview, which is a structured conversation between the assessors and the candidate, usually takes about half a day. The approach adopted by Tocal College has been and remains relaxed and informal, and every effort is made to ensure that the candidate is at ease with the process. This process has been described as Competency Conversation or Conversational Interviewing (Dodwell, 2009). Candidates are encouraged to become participants in the process of building a picture of their competence by “telling their story” and identifying items of supporting evidence that can be collected and recorded using electronic files, images, video, and audio. Evidence is collected and collated using the tools described above, and a record of the interview is prepared by one of the assessment team continually throughout the interview process.

After the interview is completed, the candidate will usually be left with a “to-do” list of items of evidence that have been jointly identified and agreed upon during the interview. The main items of evidence that usually must be collected after the interview are references and third-party testimonials supporting the candidate's claims of competence. College staff usually prepare a template for these testimonials that is sent to the candidate, who in turn sends it for signing to the person providing the testimonial, by whom the letter is finally returned to the College. This process is now done entirely electronically, and the documents are included in the ePortfolio.

Conclusion

For Tocal College, the adoption of e-Skills Recognition using ePortfolios has been an evolutionary process, driven by practicality and efficiency. Tocal has not been an early adopter of online and ePortfolio technology but has invested in new technology and systems only when they are mature, reliable, and stable. Adoption of online systems has also been delayed because of poor broadband access for many of the regional and remote locations the College's clients. We are reminded of this limitation even at the Paterson campus, which has very poor mobile phone reception. New systems of work and technology have been adopted only when they offer a clear advantage for both the college and the candidate.

Tocal College now has in place significant online services, which are available from the college web site and the associated Moodle site. However, broadband access has been and will continue to be a limiting factor for delivery of online services to rural Australia. While the National Broadband Network will benefit many rural towns and communities, residents on outlying

farms will still be dependent on wireless using mobile phone networks or, where there is no mobile coverage, satellite technology. This has significantly slower speed and is both less reliable and more expensive than the services enjoyed by the majority of Australians who live in urban areas.

Tocal College will continue to innovate in this evolutionary manner. The college services a generally conservative sector and is concerned first and foremost with practicality.

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JULIE WHITE has worked in the education sector for 15 years. More recently, she has been involved in adult education in agriculture and natural resource management. Julie currently works in adult education with a focus on monitoring and evaluation and e-learning at Tocal College based in Paterson, New South Wales. For the past three years she has been overseeing the development and delivery of online courses for the College and the management of student and staff interaction with the online delivery platform.

Appendix
Example ASSESS Sheet

RTE5807A: Manage staff (Cotton BMP Manager)

This unit covers the selection, induction and management of staff members to ensure effective personal and professional behavior, includes termination of employment where necessary.

<p>A ANSWERS</p>	<p><i>Can you answer questions such as these?</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What industrial awards apply to workers in your enterprise? 2. What employer and employee needs, responsibilities and rights are determined at the outset? 3. What steps would you take to recruit, select and induct a new staff member? 4. How do you ensure that staff are performing satisfactorily? 5. How would you deal with a staff member whose performance was unsatisfactory (for example, always late, repeatedly making mistakes, uncooperative)? 6. What is the procedure for terminating the employment of a staff member whose performance has been unsatisfactory? 7. What methods do you use to encourage communications with staff? 8. How are staff rewarded for their contributions to the efficiency of the business? 9. How do you determine the appropriate number of employee for your operation? 10. Why is it important to resolve disputes and conflicts quickly and according to accepted practice? 11. Why is it important to make all personnel aware of OHS risks and safe work practices and their obligations to organizational policy in carrying out their duties? <p><i>Your assessor will use the above questions to initiate discussion during your assessment interview. Your responses will help confirm that you have the required breadth and depth of knowledge related to this unit.</i></p>
<p>S SHOW</p>	<p><i>Can you show or demonstrate this particular unit to the assessor? At the time of your workplace visit the assessor may want you to...</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrate interaction with staff. This could be staff induction, training, performance reviews, termination or planning / information sessions. • Identify and describe tasks and the range of conditions under which performance will occur. • Discuss the importance of legislation, codes and national standards when preparing person specifications. • Overview the processes of designing, clarifying, establishing and implementing terms of engagement, induction programs, worker communication, performance management strategies and termination of employment processes. • Discuss strategies involved in identifying gaps in staff skills and knowledge and implementing on and off the job training to offset these. • Demonstrate processes for recording and administrative procedures. • Outline the importance of industrial relations, industrial awards and enterprise agreements. • Identify, assess and control OHS risks and hazards.

<p>S SAMPLES</p>	<p><i>Can you provide samples of your work in this unit? At the time of your workplace visit please provide samples for the assessor such as:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staffing policy guidelines. • Recruitment advertisements. • Positions descriptions. • Induction checklists. • Training plans. • OHS policies and procedures. • Records of staff meetings • Employment contracts. • Performance reviews.
<p>E EXPERIENCE</p>	<p><i>What is your experience in this unit?</i> Experience in managing staff is essential. Please prepare a dot point summary of relevant related activities in which you have been involved. The list must include details of any work or study related to managing staff.</p>
<p>S SUPPORT</p>	<p><i>Can you get support from others to help verify your competency?</i> It will be important for your assessor to discuss and confirm your experience related to this unit with an appropriate observer. Your assessor will specifically refer to the performance criteria stipulated in this unit of competency.</p>
<p>S STUDIES</p>	<p><i>Have you done any formal or informal training in this unit?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If you have undertaken relevant studies, the subject outlines and copies of your results should be made available. (e.g., TAFE subjects, Ag College units) • Your personal profile should list key seminars, workshops, conferences and other informal study activities that have assisted you to acquire this competency. Relevant programs would include those related to managing staff.