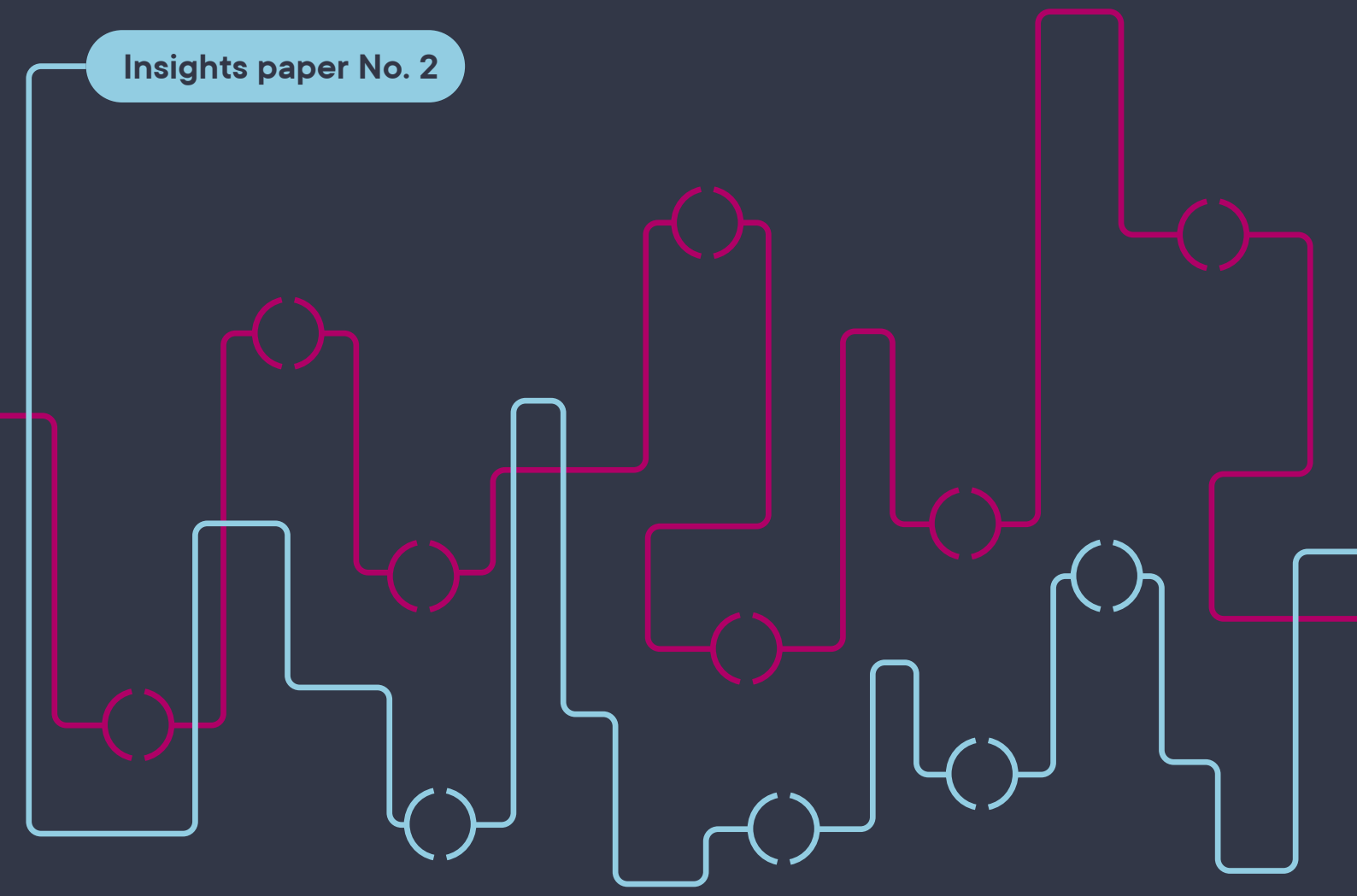
Australian Government
Australian Skills Quality Authority

ASQA

ASQA's strategic review of online learning

Insights paper No. 2



Student experiences

The Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA) is undertaking a strategic review of online learning in the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector. ASQA initiated the strategic review in 2020, prompted by the significant number of providers who shifted their delivery online in response to the circumstances created by the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

This insights paper shares findings from student focus groups held in early 2021 with VET and Education Services for Overseas Students (ESOS) students who experienced shifts to online in response to COVID-19.



This is the second insights paper as part of a series that will be periodically published throughout the strategic review. The first insights paper shared early findings from three popular 'feedback loop' webinars. Future papers will include a focus on the results and early findings of a detailed provider survey of online learning from February to March 2021.

In the lead up to finalising the strategic review in early 2022, we will host a webinar that focuses on review's learnings. We will also be seeking your input on actions and recommendations going forward that can support quality online learning in the VET sector.

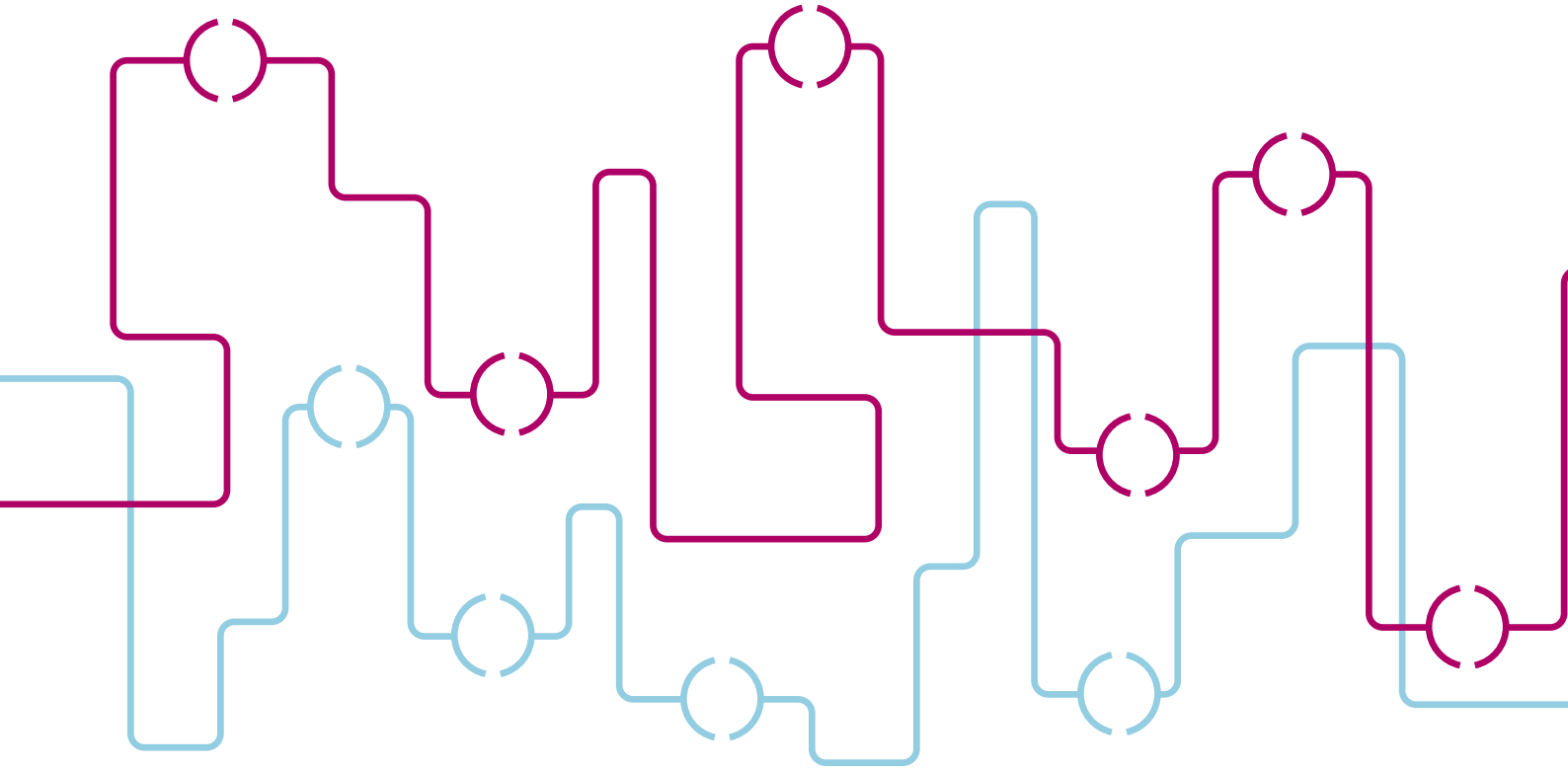
Insight: student experiences of the shift online

To engage with students on their experiences of the shift to online in response COVID-19, we enlisted consultancy EY Sweeney to undertake consultations with VET and ESOS students in early 2021. The focus of the research included considering the opportunities and challenges resulting from the transition to online learning. You can find the final report here.

The report's content captures a range of views and forms part of ASQA's engagement with the sector on online learning. Along with other data sources, the report is a rich resource that we will draw on to inform the findings of the strategic review of online learning in the VET sector.

The EY Sweeney research is based on a series of focus groups and interviews ('the consultations') held with 24 students on their learning journey experience during COVID-19. An online qualitative market research platform was used to engage with learners studying a VET or English language course transitioned online as a result of the pandemic. Some students had studied multiple courses and were able to discuss a range of experiences.

Four focus groups were established based on these broad characteristics: school leavers, mature age and/or career changers, learners from regional and remote regions, and international and English language students.



Insight: varied support needs for individual VET students

A key finding of the consultation was the experience and support needs of each VET student varied when transitioning to an online learning environment.

Learning styles are important to take account of regardless of whether the mode is fully online, blended (a mix of face-to-face course components and in-person engagement) or only face-to-face; nonetheless, the impact varies depending on a range of factors, including the mode of delivery. Early indications from this research suggest that online learning is different to in person, face-to-face study. Delivering quality VET online requires consideration and engagement with the mode of delivery. This can range from screen fatigue, to the need to remain skilled in a range of online tools and programs used for learning online.

Learning online – a shared journey

One of the early learnings of ASQA's 2021 online survey of providers jointly administered with the National Centre for Vocational Education and Research (NCVER)—the focus of our next insights paper—is there are two main obstacles for providers transitioning to online training and assessment:

- the online delivery method is not suitable for students
- the subject matter is unsuitable for students.

The student consultations reported on here included a common perception among students that not all trainers and assessors had a basic understanding of digital platforms or technical skills.

Other research of student experiences of the shift to online found that higher education providers in Australia also showed low engagement with more complex information technology tools other than Zoom or its equivalent (TEQSA 2020).

To ensure quality VET when delivering online, it is important to consider the capabilities of both students and trainers and assessors in the application of digital technologies, and for students' experiences of engaging in a virtual learning environment to support their learning journey.

Insight: digital literacy and integration of learning technology

The research report identifies a range of student learning styles and digital literacy capabilities that impact on each learners' journey through the VET system when undertaken partly online (blended learning) or fully (100%) online.

The research also identifies that both students and trainers & assessors have a broad spectrum of capabilities when engaging online. For example, while acknowledging the efforts of teachers and providers in adjusting to a rapidly changing situation in response to COVID-19, students commonly reported that not all teachers had a basic understanding of digital platforms or technological skills.

We are currently exploring how and to what extent ASQA can engage with these early insights, including through building shared understanding of how learning technology and innovation is integrated in VET settings.

As part of this, in August 2021 we commenced consultations with a subgroup of our Stakeholder Liaison Group (SLG) members on the early insights reported on in the insight papers series. We will continue to engage our stakeholders on the findings of the strategic review.

ASQA's Stakeholder Liaison Group (SLG)

Alongside our strategic review research, we do a lot of engagement with the sector, including through our Stakeholder Liaison Group. Through the SLG, ASQA engages and consults on its approach to regulatory engagement and education. SLG members help identify the guidance and materials that providers need to support their regulatory obligations and build capability for self-assurance. SLG members are selected on the basis of their experience and standing in the VET and ELICOS sectors, and their commitment to developing the broader VET sector. You can find out more about the members of our SLG here.

The opportunities and challenges of online learning

ASQA's consultations with students suggest that online learning is now central to many courses and there are some clear benefits such as flexibility and accessibility. Most students indicated that blended learning modes work well for them, allowing flexibility and autonomy in how, when and where they study.

While students identified many benefits to learning online, learning fully online is still considered a compromise by some. This is especially the case for those students that thrive in a face-to-face, social learning-based environment. It is also dependent on the content of the course.

Students suggested a number of improvements for providers delivering online. They acknowledged that providers had to change quickly to the COVID-19 pandemic and the public health directions such as stay at home restrictions and as other social distancing measures came into effect.

They reported a range of approaches providers took to manage the initial shift to online. This included:

- pausing to take time to determine how to move forward with learning
- quickly pivoting to online
- and adapting systems and approaches.

The extent to which these approaches were implemented, and their impact, depended in part on which state or territory delivery was in and what restrictions were in place.

Students reported that what they needed during COVID-19 — whether providers paused, pivoted or adapted — was continuous communication and support. The desire for clear and direct ongoing communication was important even if the provider was unsure of the ways in which they would handle their response to the pandemic.

Examples were given of how good communication can be employed. This included regular one-on-one check-ins with students, such as an individual monthly phone call.

Another suggestion made was increased monitoring of student progress through attendance and assessments to identify those who may be having difficulty and engaging with them to offer extra support.

Some students commented on a lack of connection to peers and teachers in an online setting. Those who had regular check-ins with their teachers reported greater motivation and engagement.

Supporting online learning along the student journey

The improvements students suggested can be mapped to key phases of the student journey. The student journey refers to the way in which providers can make sure that their practices deliver a quality experience for every student at each stage of their 'journey' through the VET system.

The areas identified in the EY Sweeney research can be considered in relation to key phases of the student journey. For example, students sought **better and consistent communication**, **more opportunities for social interaction** and **more fun and/or practical activities** when learning online. These link to the support and progression phase of the student journey (primarily clause 1.7 in the *Standards for RTOs 2015*) overlap with other aspects of the student journey, such as the training and assessment phase (primarily standards/clauses 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.8, 1.13-1.18 and 1.20 of the *Standards for RTOs 2015*).

Students also encouraged providers to **further enhance the digital literacy and skills of trainers and assessors** delivering online — the training and assessment phase of the student journey.

Key phases of the student journey

Key phases of the student journey	Examples of provider practice and behaviour	Primary standards/ clauses in the *Standards for RTOs 2015*	Primary standards/ clauses in the *National Code 2018*	Primary standards/ clauses in the *ELICOS Standards 2018*
Marketing and recruitment	The training provider's marketing practices provide accurate and factual information to allow prospective students to make informed decisions.	4.1	1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.4	-
Enrolment	The training provider ensures students have the existing skills, knowledge and experience required to successfully undertake the course.	5.1, 5.2, 5.3, 7.3	2.1, 2.2, 3.1, 3.3, 3.4, 8.5	P1.2, P3.1
Support and progression	The training provider assesses student needs and provides appropriate support and services to enable student progression	1.7	5.2, 6.1, 6.2, 6.3, 6.4, 6.5, 6.6, 6.9, 8.1, 8.3, 8.4, 8.6, 8.7, 8.9	P6.9, P7.2
Training and assessment	Trainers assigned to deliver training are qualified. The training provider has sufficient and appropriate resources for training and assessment. The amount of training and mode of delivery is consistent with requirements.	1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.8, 1.13 to 1.18. 1.20	11.1, 11.2, 8.18, 8.19, 8.20, 8.21	P1.1, P4.1, P5.1, P5.2, P6.4, P6.7, P6.8, P7.3
Completion	Only students assessed as meeting course or training package requirements are issued with certification.	3.1		P4.2
Other requirements				
Regulatory compliance and governance	The training provider has appropriate compliance and governance processes in place such as holding public liability insurance, managing its third parties and agents. The training provider meets additional obligations if delivering to under-18s.	2.3, 2.4, 8.2	2.4, 2.5, 3.6, 4.4, 4.5, 4.6, 5.4, 5.5, 5.6, 5.7, 6.7, 7.2, 7.3, 7.4, 7.5, 7.6, 7.7	P2.1

The key phases of the student journey can be viewed on ASQA's website here.

The *Standards for RTOs 2015*

The *Standards for Registered Training Organisations 2015* form part of the VET Quality Framework, a system which ensures the integrity of nationally recognised qualifications. In times of change the Standards provide clarity on the expectations of organisations registered as training providers (RTO's).

ASQA has issued guidance which focuses on the student experience, and the practices of RTOs. The guide aims to help RTOs make sure their practices deliver a quality experience for every student at each stage of their 'journey' through the VET system.

With the move to online learning it is important for providers to self-assess how their practices as well as their systems and processes can best support learning outcomes and high-quality student experiences at each stage of the student journey.

To assist providers to understand their obligations under the *Standards for RTOs 2015* to deliver a quality experience for every student at each stage of their journey, ASQA has developed a 'Users' guide' which you can view here.

Further resources to support online learning

To hear a panellist from the strategic review's 'Online Learning: Beyond PDFs and zoom' webinar explain one approach to identifying the types of issues that providers may want to consider in the transition to online modes of delivery, click here.

As part of our Spotlight on Providers series, you can hear from Linda Manning of Karen Sheldon Training on getting to know your student cohort to support them through assessment here. You can also hear from Serryn O'Regan of Evolve College about the importance of a student first approach to assessment design and delivery in online learning in conversation here.

The Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training (ADCET) has independently undertaken research on how students with a disability have coped with the new online teaching regime and have identified a range of ideas to consider here. ADCET has developed webinars in response to those issues which include ideas for creating inclusive online learning environments that can be found here.

The Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency's (TEQSA) *Online learning good practice* is a collection of resources brought together to assist the sector's rapid transition to online learning during COVID-19. TEQSA's suggested resources are designed to help with enhancing the online experience for students and can be found here.

For further practical ideas, you could look at the detailed resources for delivering online learning developed by Singapore's Institute for Adult Learning here (noting all the content has not been expressly endorsed by ASQA).

Look out for the next insights paper

We will continue to share findings through the series, with a commitment to building understanding and support for continuous improvement in online learning.

Keep your eyes peeled for the next paper, updating you on insights from the 2021 provider survey of online learning, jointly administered with the National Centre for Vocational Education Research.

We will be hosting a feedback loop webinar on 2 December 2021 'Moving and staying online'. This session will be an opportunity for you learn more about the strategic review and to ask direct questions of our panel of experts on the topics we are exploring.

If you would like to be updated about the webinar or ask the panel a question in advance, please contact the team at StrategicReviews@asqa.gov.au.