SKILLS FIRST AND COVID-19 – QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

The Department of Education and Training (the Department) has created this document to answer technical questions most frequently asked by training providers via SVTS in the COVID-19 category.

Together with the existing range of resources available on SVTS (such as Fact Sheets and Guidelines), we hope that it will help you in managing your obligations under the VET Funding Contract (the Contract) during this time.

Training Providers should also read Contract Notification CN 2020-05 for information about where the Department will apply flexibility to specific Contract requirements during this time.

REPORTING INTERRUPTED TRAINING: EXTENDING, DEFERRING, AND WITHDRAWING

How do I report when training has been interrupted but I believe it will resume in the future?

Training may be interrupted due to placements being cancelled or unavailable, individuals needing to self-isolate, trainers being unable to access a workplace, or staff and student illness.

This is how you should report interrupted training:

- For completed subjects, report all relevant Outcome ID National values that apply to a completed subject (i.e. codes 20, 30 etc).

- For subjects that have started and are still in progress (i.e. have activity start dates in the past and activity end dates in the future) continue to report Outcome ID National 70 (Continuing), Outcome ID 79 (waiting employer sign off) or Outcome ID 50 (RPL assessment started and no result yet available), as appropriate. This includes subjects where all the supervised training and assessment has finished, but the subject cannot be recorded as complete due to the cancellation or deferral of a practical placement.

- Do not report any subjects that have not or will not start.

- Report the Program Status Identifier value as 42 Withdrawn (Deferred).

Training activity end dates (subject level) should also be adjusted, where needed, to be either of:

- the new best estimate of when training for the subject will end; or

- a nominal date (generally the end of the next month) at which point you may need to extend it again.

Extending end dates may mean that payments are reapportioned to match the new duration. Shorter extensions will reduce how much of a payment is reapportioned.

In addition to this approach, the Department has developed an alternative and complementary reporting mechanism that allows you to **temporarily** 'suspend' individual subjects from the SVTS reapportioning payment logic so that extensions to the activity end dates of subjects do not trigger payments to be reapportioned each month (i.e. there's no immediate 'claw-back' of funds).

Published 17 April 2020   *This document is a guide only and subject to change*

This alternative approach might help you manage cash flow in the short term. However it is important to note that reapportioning of funds will occur when training resumes and an outcome is confirmed and reported.

For further advice on applying this reporting mechanism, please see the following guidance in the documents section of SVTS:

- Fact Sheet - COVID-19 Disrupted Training and Reapportioning.

How do I report when a student discontinues their training?

A student may want to discontinue their training. They may tell you this before or after a suspension in training delivery.

This is how you should report when a student discontinues their training:

- For completed subjects, report all relevant Outcome ID National values that apply to a completed subject (i.e. codes 20, 30 etc).
- For subjects still in progress with end dates in the future, report Outcome ID National value of 40 (Withdrawn) and update the end dates.
- Report the hours attended (the hours the student has already attended for the subject).
- Report the Program Status Identifier value as 40 (Withdrawn) or 41 (Withdrawn Apparent).

How do I report when training has been completed, but a mandatory placement is not completed?

You may face the situation where all training and the majority of assessment for a student has been completed, but an associated mandatory placement (not part of a subject) can't go ahead (for example, due to workplaces restricting access).

You should report as usual but change the Program Status Identifier value to 42 Withdrawn (Deferred). When the placement can be completed and the qualification issued, this can change to 20 (Completed).

Where can I find further information on reporting withdrawals or deferrals?

For more guidance about how to report when a student withdraws or defers, please read these fact sheets in the documents section of SVTS:

- Fact Sheet - Withdrawn Subject Enrolments (V1.1)
- Fact Sheet - Withdrawn (and Deferred) Program Enrolments (V1.1).

ELIGIBILITY WHEN A STUDENT DISCONTINUES

If a student discontinues their training, how does it affect their future *Skills First* eligibility?

You must remind all *Skills First* students who withdraw from a subject or program (whether or not they complete it) that this may impact their training options and eligibility for future government-subsidised training.

However, if a student is unable to continue their studies for any of the following reasons they will still be entitled to *Skills First* funding when they recommence, provided they continue to meet eligibility requirements:

- you no longer offer the qualification

- the qualification is being delivered in a different way (wholly or partly) that is unsuitable for their way of learning (for example, it moves to online delivery)

- they cannot complete a requirement to finish the qualification (for example, practical placements are not available at this time)

- changes to personal circumstances as a result of COVID-19 mean the student cannot continue training.

CHANGING DELIVERY MODE

Can I change our delivery mode to online?

Yes. However, you must realistically assess your own capability to continue to deliver high quality training in delivery modes you do not ordinarily use. You must ensure that:

- you have the relevant training infrastructure in place, such as online and video technologies, or simulated environments

- you have suitably trained staff available

- all continuing and new students have the necessary digital literacy and access to technology to participate in online learning.

You do not need to apply to the Department to change the way you deliver your programs. However, you must continue to meet your Contract obligations and deliver training in accordance with the relevant Training Package rules and accredited course documentation.

Please therefore ensure that you review the training and assessment requirements for each unit of competency that you seek to move to online or distance delivery. If the unit of competency specifically requires face-to-face or workplace training and assessment, and you can't do this, you will need to defer training and assessment until it is possible to do so. If face-to-face training is going ahead you must ensure that you follow social distancing measures in line with the latest advice from Australia's Chief Medical Officer and Victoria's Chief Health Officer.

The VET Development Centre continues to schedule webinars for the professional development of training providers and their staff, including learning more about online delivery.

Do I need to change the Training and Assessment Strategy (TAS) if I change the delivery mode?

The Contract requires training to be in accordance with the TAS, and for any variations from the TAS to be documented and justified in the student's Training Plan.

The Department will accept the advice of regulators in relation to their expectations of how to manage updates to TAS documentation in the current circumstances. In particular, ASQA has published advice as follows:

> "As required by the Standards for RTOs, an RTO must have documented training and assessment strategies. In the current situation, records of adaptations made for individuals (or individual classes) may be captured across multiple documents."

How do I confirm that my new TAS meets regulatory requirements?

If you are considering changes to training and are unsure if they are consistent with the requirements set out in the Training Package or the Standards for Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) 2015, it would be best to direct your question to your regulator (ASQA or VRQA).

ASQA, the Commonwealth Government and state governments are conscious there are challenges for some training and assessment, including work placements. ASQA has encouraged training providers affected by COVID-19 to read the FAQs on its website, contact their Info Line on 1300 701 801 or email enquiries@asqa.gov.au to discuss adaptive measures to manage these challenges.

Do I need to change the students' Training Plans if I change the delivery mode?

You do need to update Training Plans if changes occur during the course of training delivery, including changing delivery mode or assessment details.

In the current circumstances, you should focus on clearly communicating the changes to the students as soon as possible, and then formal documentation can be updated at a later date where necessary.

Requirements for Training Plans are different depending on whether or not the student is an apprentice or trainee.

For non-apprentice/trainee students

You must update Training Plans when changes occur as soon as reasonably practicable. You don't need to have them signed or reach mutual agreement with the student about the changes. Emailing or online messaging the student about a change is sufficient. You must keep a record of the communication as part of the suite of documents that comprise the Training Plan, or if you issue the Training Plan as single document you can update it at a later date.

For apprentices and trainees

You must discuss any changes to the Training Plan with both the employer and the apprentice/trainee (and the school in the case of SBATs) and document this communication. Changes to the Training Plan need to be mutually agreed and endorsed by all parties (employer, apprentice/trainee and training provider). An informal endorsement is acceptable, for example via an email exchange or by keeping a file note recording the outcome of a phone call. You must formally amend the Training Plan document, but this can be done at later date.

Do I need to update my Program Delivery Plan (PDP) if I change delivery mode?

No. PDPs are only a forecast of how you intend to deliver training, and the Department understands that this may change throughout the year to best accommodate students. You are not required to update PDPs when changes occur, including to delivery mode.

How do I report online or distance training?

Online or distance delivery should be reported as usual, however give special attention to the following data elements: Delivery Mode Identifier, Predominant Delivery Mode and Training Delivery Location.

For training partially or wholly conducted externally (for example, online):

- Training Delivery Location – you may need to change this to your coordinating office.

- Delivery Mode Identifier – it must be updated to contain Y as the middle character.

- Predominant Delivery Mode – it may need to be updated to the value 'E' if online or distance becomes the predominant method for supervised training or assessment across the subject.

Some of this information can be changed again if training returns to a classroom.

For more information on reporting please see the Victorian VET Student Statistical Collection Guidelines - 2020 v1.1, published in the documents section on SVTS.

How can I satisfy the requirements for Evidence of Participation (EOP) for online or distance learning?

You can use any of the points of EOP for online or distance learning, providing they meet the requirements specified in 11.5 (a)–(g) of Schedule 1 of the Contract. In particular, you are reminded that all records kept for the purpose of EOP must include the student name (or identification number), the unit of competency identifier, and the date (expressed in expressed in day/month/year format).

The following information is provided to clarify the Department's expectations of particular points of EOP in an online learning or distance learning context.

1. An endorsed attendance roll for an online class (Clause 11.5(c) of Schedule 1).

   - **It must be recognised as a tool for recording attendance as part of normal processes** – you should ensure that all *Skills First* Teachers understand how attendance at online classes is to be recorded, so it is done consistently and accurately. Where available, you can use automated methods of tracking attendance that are available within the learning platform that is used for delivering online classes. To show attendance, you will need to have evidence that each student logged into the online platform at the time the class was conducted and be able to show which unit/s of competency were being delivered.

     You are also reminded that for electronic attendance rolls, support documentation is required to indicate the provider's processes involved in annotating, entering, updating and generating the rolls, as well as how to interpret the rolls.

   - **It must include the *Skills First* Teacher's signature** – this may be in the form of an electronic action equivalent to a signature. In the context of an online attendance roll, this may be done by showing evidence the *Skills First* teacher has to log-in to a secure administrative platform using a unique ID and password **(identity)** and having them complete a workflow step or 'tick box' process that shows they've confirmed who attended the class and that they have endorsed the information **(consent and reliability)**. Refer to the section of this document 'How can I have documents signed electronically' for more information.

2. 'Log-in and engagement with learning and/or assessment activity required for the unit of competency' (Clause 11.5(f) of Schedule 1):

   - You are reminded that a login record indicating the student received training materials alone is not sufficient – this point of EOP must show online engagement with learning/assessment activity. EOP must also indicate that you have checked with the student that they are continuing to engage across the unit of competency.

   - Examples of how this might be satisfied include a record or transcript of the student participating in an online discussion forum, a record of the student completing a self-paced activity within an online learning platform, emails or another record of communication between the student and their *Skills First* Teacher.

3. For 'flexible or distance modes of learning' - records that indicate the student has commenced working on the learning materials they've received and have engaged with learning and/or assessment activity at a unit of competency level (Clause 11.5(g) of Schedule 1).

   - One way this might be demonstrated is through *Skills First* teacher notes demonstrating a two-way communication and interaction via phone or email confirming the student is working on the learning materials. A *Skills First* teacher attempting to call a student and leaving a voicemail is not considered to be communication or engagement for the purposes of EOP. EOP also does not meet the requirements if it shows that the student has logged into an

online platform to download learning materials only, or that they've just indicated they have received paper-based learning materials.

Can a program be delivered 100% online?

The 2020 Online Delivery Restriction List (located in the documents section of SVTS), sets out a list of programs that the Department has determined are not appropriate to be delivered wholly (100%) online. This includes all programs delivered as Apprenticeships.

For students who have already commenced, where you have delivered some training or assessment in a delivery mode other than online, you will not be in breach of this requirement if you now move to 100% online delivery.

For new students enrolling in a program on the Online Delivery Restriction list or as an Apprentice, it may be appropriate to commence training in an online delivery mode, for example to deliver theory-based components of a program now, and to deliver face-to-face training at a later date. However, you must still ensure the program is not delivered wholly online.

In either case, you must ensure that any online delivery is consistent with training package requirements or course curriculum.

If you have questions about the delivery of a specific program, you should get in contact with us through SVTS.

Are there any other Contract-related resources about online delivery?

We've published several resources to help you understand Contract requirements to support quality online training delivery. The following were published on 10 February 2020 in the documents section of SVTS:

- 2020 Online Service Standards – describes items that must be included in your published online service standards, including a sample for illustrative purposes

- Fact sheet: quality in online learning – describes contractual requirements to promote quality in online learning

  2020 Online Delivery Restriction List – lists courses that cannot be delivered 100% online under *Skills First*.

ELECTRONIC SIGNATURES

How can I have documents signed electronically?

For most signature requirements under the Contract, the Department accepts an electronic action equivalent to a signature.

Please read the recently published 'Fact sheet: using electronic signatures' found in the documents section of SVTS for more information.

An electronic action equivalent to a signature must meet three main requirements:

- **Identity** - clearly identify the person undertaking the action.

- **Consent** - clearly indicate the person's agreement to the relevant information.

- **Reliability** - be 'as reliable as appropriate in light of all the circumstances' so that the Department can rely on the action as demonstrating the person's agreement at audit or review.

The fact sheet also includes a 'traffic light' of what the Department considers the most to least robust methods of obtaining electronic signatures and how they apply to Contract requirements.

If you don't have formal processes in place for collecting electronic signatures (such as electronic signature software), you can use a combination of methods in the 'orange' section of the traffic light. For example, it is preferable that a student signs a form using a formal process, such as an online form using an electronic signature program. However, under the COVID-19 circumstances, if you do not have these systems set up, the student could complete a form and return it to you via email provided you ensure:

- the email clearly identifies that the student is the person undertaking the action – for example, it is the email that you have on the student's file as their primary contact address, or it is a student email address you have assigned to them and they must log in to access it using a secure ID and password

- the student clearly indicates their agreement or endorsement, which could be by including standard text for them to acknowledge in a return email, or by asking them to sign the form using a graphical representation of their signature if they have a device that enables them to do so.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Where do I go for the latest updates?

The Department is regularly emailing the CEOs of all training providers with operational update about training delivery during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Please continue to refer to the Department's COVID-19 web page for the most up to date information.

What if this document doesn't answer my COVID-19 question?

Please continue to submit an enquiry via SVTS if you have further questions using the COVID-19 enquiry category.