PART 1 | Quality assurance: Validating effectiveness for adult educators and trainers

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Portfolio building assessment of adult tutors for distance learning.

Introduction

In the 21st century, adult education has gained new attention. In the European Commission's action plan on adult learning, "It is always a good time to learn" (2007), attention is drawn to the important role teachers and trainers play for the quality of the educational programmes.

In spite of the awareness and among researcher within the field of adult education, of the importance of qualifying the teachers within adult education, in the following years, competence development for adult educators continued to be more or less absent in the overall reforms and political strategies in most European countries and especially in Bulgaria.

The situation becomes more complex, because the recognition of non-formal and informal learning is still part of a larger debate about the knowledge society and lifelong learning. It is also part of political and inter-ministerial discussions at national and European level. There is no simple agreed definition. It includes a wide range of policies and practices in different settings, sectors and countries. It also touches social and institutional values, and challenges professional roles, functions, expertise and responsibilities. There are also problems including lack of awareness, lack of guidance and training, lack of funding, lack of provision, and some legal barriers as well.

Current developments and challenges in Bulgaria. The story of the SM - NBU

The adult education sector has undergone a serious transformation over the last number of years. More and more adults in Bulgaria are now taking part in lifelong learning, either in the workplace or on part-time courses, especially in the area of management. The range of programs/ courses offered by the SM-NBU has increased and the delivery methods are becoming more varied.

The personnel at the School of Management include a wide range of different actors with different work, occupational status and educational backgrounds, not only teachers and trainers. There are managers, course planners, counsellors, and administrative staff. Only a minority of adult educators are employed full-time. Others rely on free-lance work in the field of adult education, where employment is insecure, and for others adult education is just one part of their activities within a defined job.

New skills are required for planning the settings for new learning environments, for integration in the classroom of learning techniques based on ICT (e-learning, blended learning – the SM is using VLS "MOODLE"), and to guide adult learners in their personal learning process. These new requirements are more challenging because most courses

are given not by qualified adult educators but by tutors (experts in the area of general management and HRM) lacking experience with adult learners, or experts with no pedagogical background at all.

From a lifelong learning perspective the adult learners at the SM need support in analyzing their learning needs and finding appropriate offers. This includes setting up and updating information systems and data bases, and guiding learners throughout the learning process, counseling in the case of learning problems, evaluating learning achievements, validating individual competencies and the recognition of prior and experimental learning.

The support activities are very important and it involves technical, administrative and organizational support of adult learners, and such diverse activities as answering phone enquiries, administering course registration, and providing classroom equipment.

Crossing such situation, the SM enables subject experts to teach even when they do not have a background or qualification in teaching. An advantage of this flexibility is that interested and committed practitioners (experts) are drawn towards part-time teaching, sometimes in tandem with full-time work, often for the sense of fulfillment rather than for monetary gain. This flexibility also ensures that individuals, who might not wish to pursue a full time teaching career, can still share their expertise with learners.

However, the lack of a career structure or obvious career path has disadvantages in that most of the work is part-time. Little or no security is offered making it difficult to anticipate and plan work schedules. The lack of career structures also has implications for teaching standards and quality. As there is currently no requirement to have a specific teaching qualification, the onus is on tutors to direct their own professional development. In this context the SM started to require from its members to have a 'license to practice'. These awards not only acknowledge the achievement and abilities of an individual, but also confirm evidence of the candidate's compliance with requirements for continuing professional development. Tutors can take the initiative to demonstrate their commitment to their ongoing professional development by developing a teaching portfolio.

Such portfolios are also gaining widespread acceptance as a means of demonstrating skills and current competences. Tutors who aspire to being a reflective practitioner can use a professional portfolio as a way of reviewing what they are doing, why they are doing it, and analyzing what the benefits are for learners. The portfolio also provides a forum for self-evaluation, and for detailing how a tutor keeps current with developments in his/her area of expertise and in teaching methodologies.

Portfolio Definitions

Definitions for portfolios focus on different aspects. Hartman (1995) emphasizes learning aspects. They commit individuals to personal achievement (empowerment) and encourage them to develop realistic self-evaluative skills. Finally the portfolios illustrate the students' depth of knowledge and skills.

Hartman also makes the point that portfolio assessment interacts and can be used to document and evaluate teaching effectiveness. Others, such as Forgette-Giroux (2000), place more emphasis on the structure, design and process of portfolio assessment, defining it as a cumulative and ongoing collection of entries that are selected and commented on, to assess the individual progress in the development of a competency.

A portfolio is simply a folder or file for keeping loose documents in some sort of order. Artists, architects and designers are already familiar with the concept. What is relatively new is the extension of the idea to other fields – like education, management, etc. So, the evidence tutors include in the portfolio can be used to demonstrate a number of aspects of their competence as specialists. In many ways a portfolio is a 'snapshot' of what tutors were doing at a particular stage in their career and, like a photograph, it rapidly acquires historic interest. Perhaps more importantly, though, a portfolio is a record of tutor's development. It shows his/her performance over a period and may reflect how tutor coped with problems and 'grew' in the job.

What is an e-portfolio?

The e-portfolio is an information management system that uses electronic media and services. The individual builds and maintains a digital repository of artefacts, which they can use to demonstrate competence and reflect on their experiential learning. Having access to their records, feedback and reflection tutors can achieve a greater understanding of their individual growth, experience and career planning.

The benefits of building a portfolio

As a record of achievement and development, a portfolio can be of continuing relevance and a source of pride to adult tutors. Compiling a portfolio has other benefits too.

•   The increased awareness of tutor's own competence and how it can be developed helps in career planning, participating in performance appraisal, and in identifying personal strengths and weaknesses.

•   Well-substantiated evidence of competence increases professional self-confidence.

•   The work involved in compiling a portfolio tends to raise tutors profile in the organization.

•   The discipline of reflecting upon what tutors are doing encourages a more thoughtful and reflective approach to their job in the long term.

There are also benefits to the organization. A heightened awareness within an organization of just what teaching competence exists, where the gaps are and how they can be filled, and how current competence can be used most effectively to meet organizational needs is an essential part of the healthy growth of the organization.

The purpose of the portfolio

The process of reflecting upon performance, capitalizing upon what worked best and planning to improve what did not work so well is, in itself, a major step towards developing competence. This process also need:

•   a standard against which to assess tutor's own performance

•   confidence that tutors development ties in with their organization's plans

•   some kind of recognition for the teaching competence they achieve which tutor can take with him throughout his career.

•   accreditation of prior experience and learning

The SM - NBU Initiative

In consultation with practicing tutors, experts in a wide range of organizations and investigating some of the best practices and projects run (especially in the area of management), SM drew up Standards for tutoring performance which goes a long way towards defining what adult tutors need to do to teach effectively.

Standards have been defined at a number of mandatory units of competence, corresponding broadly to major parts of the tutor's role and provide description of the performance the tutor is expected to achieve, together with a specification of the knowledge and understanding required:

Mandatory Units

Unit 1 – Defining the individual needs for learning

Unit 2 –Design of sessions for training and development

Unit 3 - Development of resources to support learning

Unit 4 – Establishing a climate facilitating learning

Unit 5- Support the training in groups by instruction and demonstration and using appropriate activities

Unit 6 – Evaluation of sessions for training and development

Unit 7 - Evaluation and development of the own practice and *some optional units*

Figure of some of the optional units

Unit – Facilitating the learning through mentoring and counseling

Unit – Monitoring and review the student progress

Unit – Managing relationships with colleagues

Unit – Facilitating the group learning, etc.

Vocational qualification or continuously improving tutors' performance

The understanding of SM is that:

- Training and qualifications of tutors should relate to their actual performance at work

- Tutors ought to be able to obtain recognition in the form of qualifications for what they can do

- Those qualifications should be transferable to and of recognized value in other jobs.

If one tutor can satisfactorily demonstrate competence against a specific standard, he/she receives a Vocational Qualification (VQ), which states precisely the competences gained. VQs can be credited towards other qualifications or can be used in their own right as evidence of competence.

In order to obtain VQ from SM-NBU, tutors have to produce an e-portfolio of evidence demonstrating their competence against the Standards.

At the same time the whole process is very powerful and connected with the idea of continuously improving performance and life-long learning. By reflecting on what adult tutors do, they can identify what is successful and what is not, and adapt their strategies and behavior to improve their performance in the future.

This is very effective way of learning and has been captured by *David Kolb (*1975) in what he calls the *experiential learning cycle:*
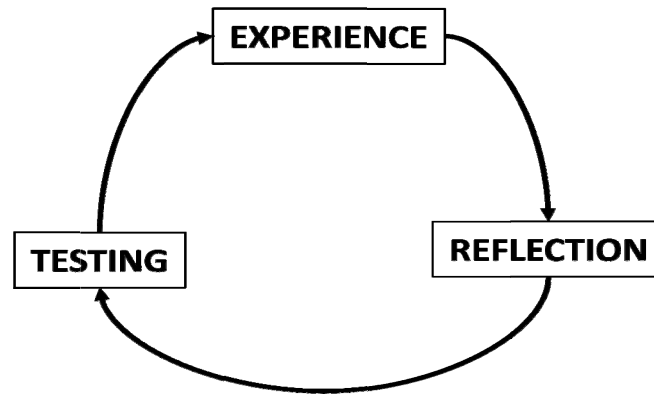
Figure 1:
The Experiential Learning Cycle

Preparing for a VQ provides the opportunity for structured reflection. It will help the adult tutors to understand their job better and what others expect from them. Furthermore this helps tutors to identify their training and development needs. On the occasions when some tutors (going through this process of portfolio building assessment/ accreditation) lack some competencies they can select the type of development activities provided by the SM and to enter in a program focused on development of adult tutors for SDL (Blended learning).

The structure of the Standards, developed by the SM - NBU

The Units of the Standard are broken down into elements of competence, which describe the detailed competences tutors ought to be able to demonstrate. Each element has associated performance criteria, which indicate the level of performance required.

Here is an example of a unit, one of its elements and the associated performance criteria:

Unit B: Design of sessions for learning, training and development

Element B2. - Design of sessions for learning, training and development

<u>*Performance criteria: The tutor must ensure that:*</u>

A. The aims and tasks of learning and development have to be clearly defined

B. The opportunities for learning needs satisfaction have to be clearly determined

C. The methods for evaluating the training sessions are clearly defined

D. The resources required for the accomplishment of learning and development are clearly defined and covered

E. The tutorials have to facilitate effectively the provision of equal opportunities

F. The tutorials have to include a broad range of techniques and activities

The tutors portfolio will need to contain evidence of their competence in each element of each unit and tutor should make sure that he/she covers all the performance criteria. If this poses real problems, the tutor will need to talk to his adviser about how he can generate acceptable evidence of his competence in the context of their job.

The standards for each element also provide:

- *Knowledge requirements* - what tutor need to know and understand to perform competently in each element

- *Evidence requirements* - to demonstrate competence in each element

- *Examples of evidence* - to give tutor guidance on the type of evidence that might be acceptable.

- *Guide for the assessors of each element*

<u>Figure for Unit B, Element B2</u>

Evidence for Knowledge requirements
- *Set of methods for learning, training and development*
- *Key factors influencing the implementation*
- *Resource insurance of the different methods*
- *Equal opportunities and anti-discrimination practice*

Performance evidence
- *Design of session for learning and development*

Guide for the assessors
- *The Candidate (Tutor) is required to present evidences for the design of at least 2 sessions for learning and development – for one particular student and for one group as a whole*

In addition, the standards for each unit identify the *personal competencies* that tutors are likely to display when they are performing competently.

Design issues

Epstein (undated), Danielson (1997), and Barrett; 2001) describes portfolio assessment as a process of different progressive stages:

1. Collection of artefacts and materials. This stage can also include a needs analysis or project proposal.

2. Selection -collected materials are reviewed and evaluated for inclusion in the portfolio. This can involve different evaluation methods including pre-set criteria and parameters, feedback and peer evaluation. In some cases this and the next stage is documented by including first drafts, feedback and a revised draft.

3. Reflection and Projection - this stage consists of reflecting on the «why» of which particular items should be included (rather than the «what» of the selection stage), the comparison of materials with others, evaluation criteria or performance indicators and the active interaction with instruction, tutors or peers in discussing meaning, concepts and good practice.

4. Connection of the portfolio to individual's needs and/or the outside world to add value such as employability and transferable skills and to enhance motivation by making the portfolio relevant to them. This may include a presentation to different audiences.

Many authors, such as Akar (2001); Cooper (1996); Drury and Tweedell (2000), also emphasize that individuals should be guided by clear criteria, parameters and performance indicators in what they are expected to do and how their work will be marked. These measures are also important in order to increase the inter-rater reliability of portfolio assessments.

'Pros' and 'cons' of portfolio assessments

In an education system that embraces life-long learning (Learning to Succeed - White Paper, June 1999) portfolios with their potential for the development of transferable skills and self-reflective, autonomous learners have to be a welcome alternative to the more rigid forms of assessment which do not always require the persons to indulge in higher order thinking. Nevertheless portfolio assessments come with a price. Their development, facilitation and evaluation often requires more time from the assessor (tutor) than conventional assessments and the collection and storing process can raise a number of logistical questions (Forgette-Giroux 2000).

Overall portfolios are seen as a positive form of assessment as they develop the person in a more holistic and integrative way. They enable individuals to become life-long learners by developing their transferable skills, self-reflection and autonomy. The possibility of individualising a portfolio and making it relevant and meaningful beyond the narrow scope of conventional assessments is a highly motivational factor for adult tutors. This strong intrinsic motivation encourages them to take ownership of their results and to produce work of a higher calibre than that achieved through traditional, often less-meaningful forms of assessment.

Building a portfolio - What is a good portfolio, and why are tutors at the SM doing it?

The portfolio tells a story about the growth of a tutor. It documents the processes of teaching and learning and creating, and obstacles encountered along the way, each containing the tutor's work from the beginning to the middle and end of his/her experience. A good portfolio:

• encourages the tutor to see the learner as an individual, with his or her own unique set of characteristics, needs, and strengths, and emphasizes the role of the tutor in improving learner achievement through evaluative feedback and self-reflection.

• helps tutors standardize and evaluate their skills, knowledge and understanding that learners aim to acquire, without limiting creativity in the learning situation

• helps tutors take more control of the work they do.

• enables the tutor to adapt teaching and learning approaches to engage with a wider range of learners and learning styles.

• involves tutors in the assessment process, thus giving them a more meaningful role in improving achievement.

• invites tutors to reflect upon their growth and performance.

Facilitating a tutor's portfolio

The process of facilitating successful portfolios can be broken into four steps (Figure1):

Collection

Although the first step, collection, is straightforward, it is not always an easy step to facilitate successfully. It simply requires tutors to collect and store all of their work. Many tutors — are not accustomed to documenting and saving all their work.
The SM developed guidelines on where and how to keep the work as it is collected. The key skill in this step is to get the candidates accustomed to collecting and documenting all stages of their work, and more importantly — their own perceptions.

Selection

In this step, tutors might go through the work they collected and select, for example: work they want to highlight for themselves; work they want to consider for accreditation; pieces they want to use for display or publication. This may be done by the tutor alone or with the advisor. Where tutors have a diverse set of work, such as drafts and re-worked pieces, tasks completed at different stages with less and less advisor support, and guidance notes, the portfolio will come to life.

Reflection

Reflection is perhaps the most important in the portfolio process. It is what distinguishes portfolios from mere collections. Tutors are asked to explain why they chose a particular item for inclusion in the portfolio, how it compares with other items, what particular skills and knowledge were used to produce it, and where he or she can improve as a tutor. This step is important because the tutor can observe more directly the quality of their own achievement and internalize more clearly where improvements are needed.

Connection

The last step, connection, is a direct result of the reflection process. Upon reflecting on their own achievement and identifying the skills and knowledge they applied in producing the items, tutors can answer the perennial question '*Why are we doing this?*' They can see how their work relates to the requirements of particular Units which could lead to successful accreditation.
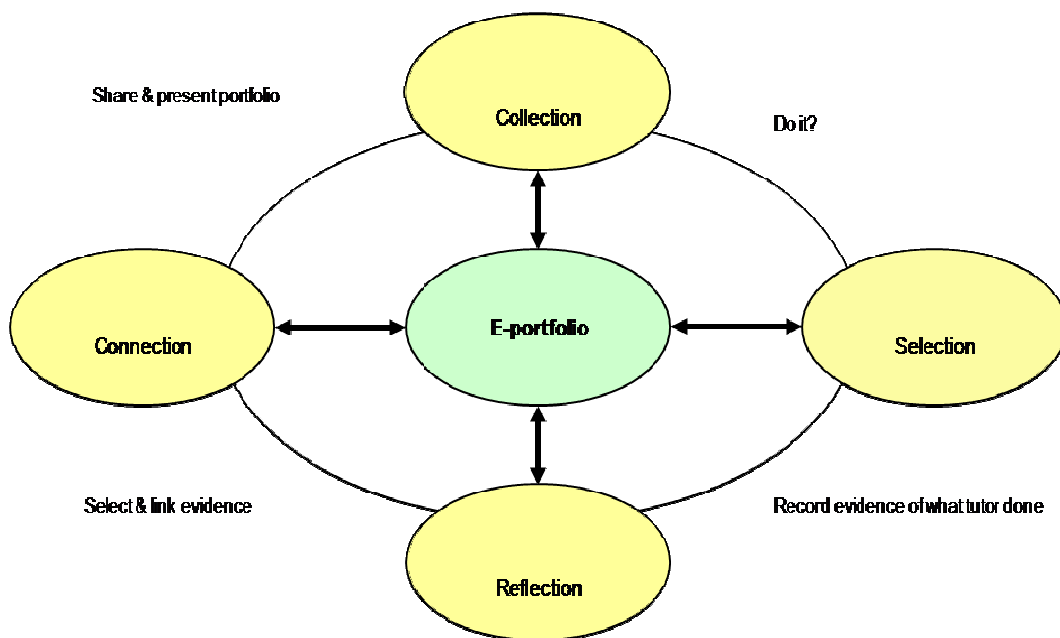
Figure 1
The process of facilitating successful portfolios

Managing a portfolio for accreditation

Tutors need to understand the role and importance of the portfolio and the requirements of the Units. From the full portfolio contents, it should be a relatively straightforward task to choose those activities that meet the Unit's Evidence Requirements. As soon as tutors think they might work towards accreditation (after the diagnostic session with an advisor), they should focus on building the portfolio to meet the Unit requirements.

- Tutors should be encouraged to use a wide range of contexts that are relevant to their own personal circumstances, and work and social experience.

- Tutors should be familiar with the requirements of the relevant Standard Units and, be able to generate evidence in order to meet the evidence requirements.
- Make sure the evidence can be found easily in the portfolio. It is important to have a portfolio which has evidence indexing or a method for tracking the evidence. If the tutor's evidence is incomplete, or cannot be located, or if there is inaccurate cross-referencing to the standards, there is a risk that an assessor will be unable to confirm his/her assessment decisions.
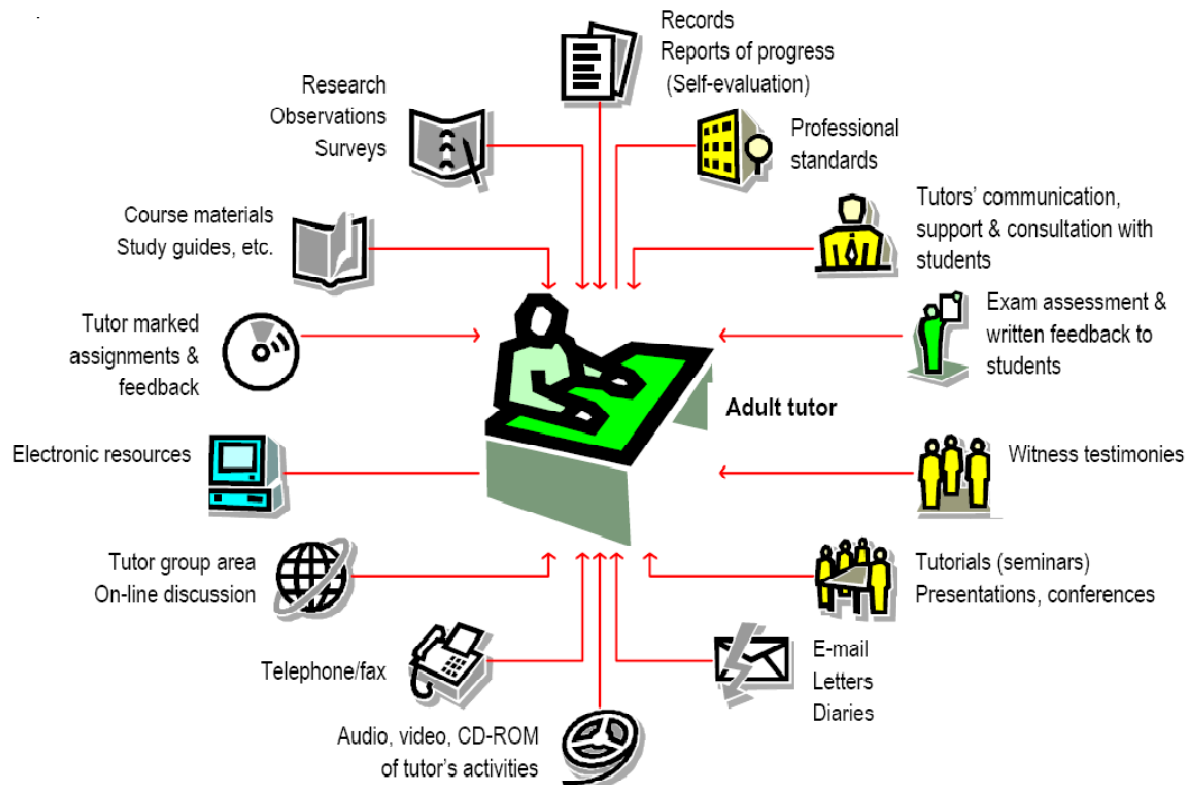

Figure2
Examples of evidence produced by the tutor

Developing evidence of competence

The portfolio must demonstrate an *all-round view of tutors competence* - that is, it must contain tutor's own accounts, documentary evidence of his/her work and independent corroboration of their competence from people involved in or affected by what tutors do. The evidence must be *acceptable.* Acceptable evidence is of two kinds - *natural* and *special evidence.*

Evidence is not always required in a specified format — it can come in many types and from a number of diverse sources. Evidence can be produced directly by the tutor and may also be supported by witness testimony to confirm the tutor's judgments. Examples of evidence produced by the tutor could include (Figure2):

- reports which may be based on, for example, survey, experiment, investigation
- e-mails, notes, letters, diary entries
- tutors' marked assignments
- course materials, electronic resources
- recorded discussion, interviews, presentations

- tutorials, consultation with students
- questionnaires and many other paper-based or audio/visual materials, etc.

Authenticity of evidence

It is the responsibility of the tutor to check that the evidence produced is authentic. The assessors may have observed the activity being undertaken by the tutor and be in no doubt that it was their work. If, however, the work was done at home, by using sources on the internet, or while out of the SM, the assessor may need to take steps to confirm that his/her tutors' evidence was produced by them. This is often referred to as 'authentication'. Authentication can be achieved by one or more of these methods: questioning, personal statements produced by tutors, witness testimony, electronic tools such as computer based programmes with security function, etc.

The process of portfolio assessment at the SM – NBU - Purposes of assessment

There are two main purposes of assessment used in SM (Figure3)
- To recognize and accredit (certificate) tutor achievement
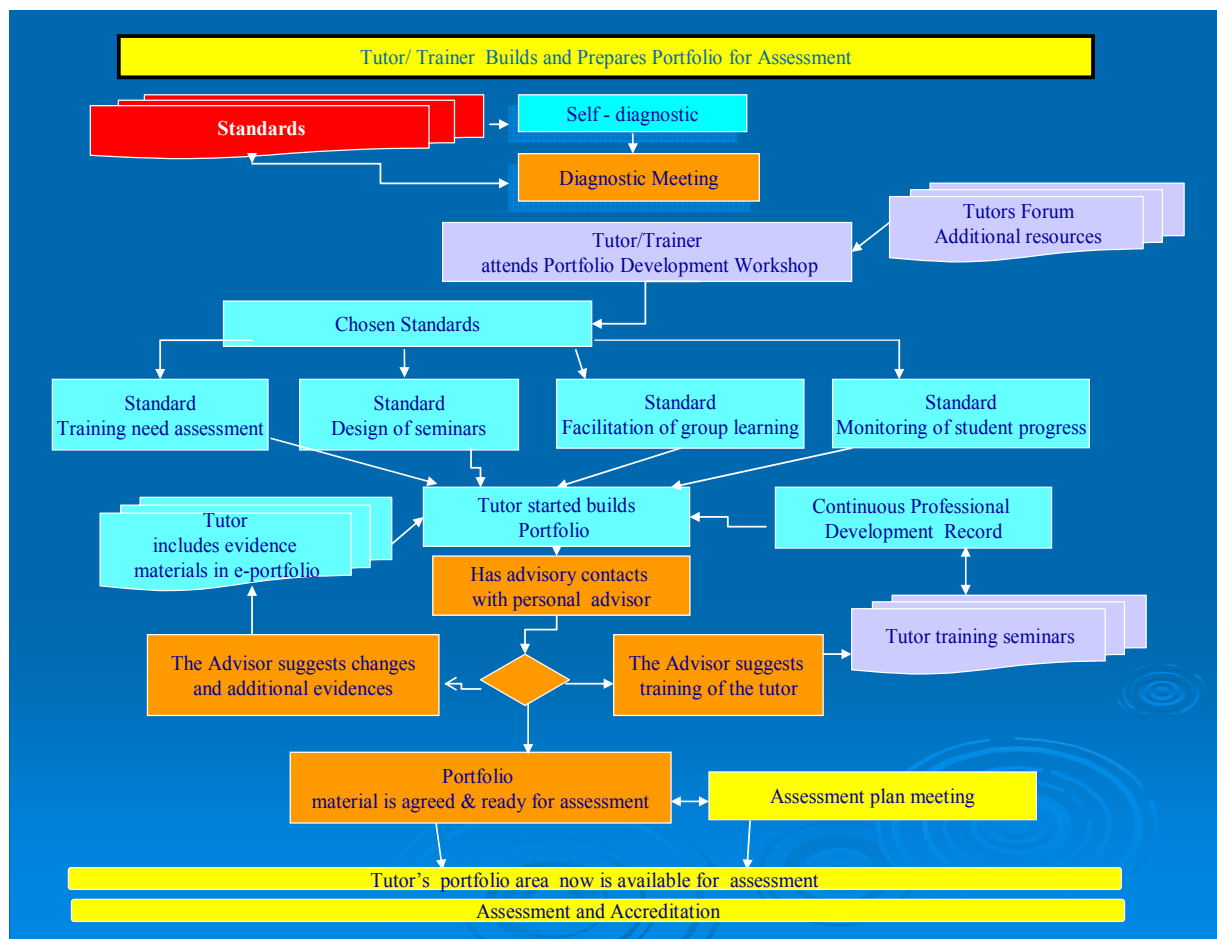- To support and manage tutors' process of development and learning

Figure3
Purposes of assessment used in SM

Principles of assessment

All the evidence produced is internally assessed, i.e. the assessor is responsible for assessing tutor's work in line with the quality assurance procedures at SM-NBU. The assessor should map the Unit requirements against work produced through activities which they have negotiated with the tutor.

Validity of assessment

Each assessment should be designed in such a way that it provides tutors with an opportunity to produce the evidence that shows they have the knowledge and skills to satisfy the requirements of the Standards. An assessment is *valid* when it:

- is appropriate to purpose
- allows the production of evidence of tutors' performance which can be measured against standards defined
- allows tutors to produce sufficient evidence of all the skills and knowledge required to satisfy standards
- facilitates the making of reliable assessment decisions by all assessors for all tutors
- is accessible to all tutors who are potentially able to achieve it

Practicability

For assessments to be practicable (i.e. capable of being carried out both efficiently and cost effectively) there has to be adequate resources and time. Examples of this are:

- in the context of oral assessments or interviews, balancing the need for assessment reliability with considerations of staff and tutor time and potential stress
- in the context of assessing practical skills, bearing in mind any resource implications
- an assessment system with the flexibility to meet the needs of all tutors

Reliability

To be reliable, assessment decisions on tutor's performance must be consistent across all tutors and all assessors undertaking the same assessment task. Assessment decisions are reliable when they are:

- taken on the basis of clearly-defined performance criteria
- consistent across all assessors applying the assessment in different situations, contexts and with different tutors
- consistent over time

The assessment cycle

The Assessment process follows the typical "PDCA" quality cycle. PDCA stands for:

Applied to Assessment the PDCA cycle means for the assessor to:

- Plan the assessment (Plan)
- Gather and record evidence (Do)
- Check performance against the unit standard. (Check)
- Make and record the assessment decision (Action)

- Plan future assessment activities (Plan)

Plan the assessment

This involves a pre-assessment meeting with the Tutor (Candidate) and the groundwork the assessors have to do before they can conduct an assessment. The assessor and his/her Candidate need to study the unit standards and ensure that they both know exactly what is going to be assessed.

Is the Tutor ready?

The Tutor (Candidate) should ensure they have obtained assessment readiness before requesting an assessment be undertaken. I.e. the Candidate believes on reasonable grounds that the required standards have been reached both in understanding the theory behind the process and in being able to demonstrate they can undertake the practical tasks involved as required. Together the assessor and the Candidate decide:

- What evidence is required to show competence in the unit standard.
- How much evidence is required.
- How much can be observed while the Tutor is carrying out his normal duties.
- How often assessment will occur.

On the basis of this the assessor and the tutor sign an "agreement" on the assessment procedure.

Gather and record evidence

Then the assessor gather evidence of the tutor's competence as agreed to in the pre-assessment meeting. Examples of this could be:

- Record of work signed off.
- Questions from the guides satisfactorily answered.
- Other questions satisfactorily answered.
- Observation over a period of time, etc.

Check performance against the Standards

When the assessors have gathered all the required evidence, they conclude the assessment by confirming that the assessment has been completed. After that they complete the documentation and come back to tutors with feedback on performance. The assessor will be weighing up their performance against the standards as set in the Assessment Manual. It's very important for the assessor to consider all the evidence when making his/her judgement.

Make and record the assessment decision

After concluding the assessment, the assessor completes the documentation, checks the evidence gathered and make his assessment decision of COMPETENT (C) or NOT YET COMPETENT (NYC). If the assessors decide they have not been provided with sufficient evidence to be able to make a decision, they need to explain to the tutor what extra evidence they require to be confident of competence and arrange an opportunity for further evidence to be presented.

After conducting the assessment, the assessor should record the date and outcome of the assessment (along with any key points about the assessment activity) for consideration by the Verifier in SM – NBU. On the basis of the successful e-portfolio

assessment the Tutor (Candidate) receives accreditation for their hard work. Thus, the PDCA Cycle is completed.

Conclusion

The purpose of an e-portfolio assessment at the SM – NBU is to find out whether a tutor can do a task to the required standard or not. Applying this to the situation at hand, assessment is about gathering evidence to prove a tutor has met the specified performance criteria of the unit standard. In doing so, it enables the adult tutors to receive formal recognition for their performance against the criteria and gain credits leading to Professional Qualification.

The benefits can be summarized as follows:

- Recognition and development of competences
- Enhanced experience through: personalization of provision; ownership of process and continuity of support
- Enhanced assessment experience through: selection of own evidence; rapid feedback; and security and efficiency
- Capture of achievement process for reflection, review, self-evaluation and assessment
- Monitoring of progress and appropriate feedback/response
- Regular opportunities for planning, review and guidance
- Management of own outcomes and growth

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