

Case Study: Realistic Working Environment at Edinburgh's Telford College

Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQs) are designed to be used in the workplace — candidates can learn and be assessed as they carry out their daily work. To encourage the uptake of SVQs, however, some standard-setting bodies have agreed that, where a centre has created an appropriate realistic working environment (RWE), it may be possible to assess students in that environment rather than in the workplace itself.

Edinburgh's Telford College has developed an RWE for its training kitchens and restaurant. This gives Food and Hospitality students the opportunity to experience real work conditions as they learn.

This case study describes how Tom MacGregor, Telford's Curriculum Manager for Food and Hospitality, and his colleagues designed and implemented their RWE. It also offers a commentary from us on the effectiveness of RWEs, and shows how you could find elements of the Telford experience useful if you're interested in setting up an RWE in this or any other vocational area.

We're very grateful to Tom MacGregor and his colleagues for their help in developing this case study.

The Realistic Working Environment

The college's training kitchens and restaurant, which have run for many years, provided practical experience for students doing food and hospitality courses. However, when the new SVQ standards and a new assessment strategy were developed, the college had to review its kitchen and restaurant processes to ensure that they would meet the new criteria for an RWE (as defined in Appendix B of the new assessment strategy).

At around the same time, the college moved to new premises. This provided an opportunity to design the kitchens and restaurants from scratch, with the standards of the various qualifications in mind. The resulting RWE can operate on a number of service levels — restaurant, café, snack bar and fast food outlet — to maximise the students' opportunities to acquire skills and competences.

Qualifications covered by the RWE

The qualifications covered by the RWE include:

- ◆ Food Preparation and Cooking – SVQ levels 1, 2 and 3
- ◆ Food Preparation Pathways
- ◆ Food and Drink Service – SVQ levels 1 and 2
- ◆ HNC/D Hospitality Management and HNC/D Events Management

Using the RWE

The kitchens and restaurant are used for:

- ◆ practical learning, demonstrations, practice and formative assessment
- ◆ summative assessment, remediation and re-assessment

The training kitchens

The college has developed its training kitchens so that SVQ, HN and other groups of students (including learning support students) can work together doing different activities in preparing and cooking different dishes, just as they would in a professional restaurant.

To make sure that the college's training kitchens would meet the conditions and requirements laid down in the standards for food preparation and cooking, Tom and his colleagues developed a wide range of recipes which:

- ◆ are at different levels of complexity
- ◆ meet the needs of the different levels of students
- ◆ suit the requirements of different qualification types

The recipes are designed to enable students to gain skills and experience through a range of tasks and formative assessment activities. They are clearly written and attractively presented, with instructions and advice appropriate for the level of competence required.

The kitchens are designated as Bistro (starters), Grill (main courses) and Pastry (sweets, desserts and breads), and in each kitchen there are tasks that link directly to activities defined in the Units. Each day the restaurant offers a range of starters, main courses and desserts from each level of the SVQ. There may be multiple choices, or a simpler menu depending on the students' requirements.

When HNC/D students are working in the RWE, they use recipes that are linked to the appropriate Unit specifications for their own course of study. The college calls these Chef's Specials. These menus are offered over and above the menu for the day.

Students are allocated work according to their own level of competence and the qualifications they are taking. So, for example, level 3 SVQ and HNC/D students prepare the complex items on the menus. Level 1 SVQ students are given activities that help them to develop essential kitchen skills.

The groups of students, who wear colour-coded hats to make them easily identifiable, rotate around the kitchens so all levels and all students, whatever their qualification route, have the opportunity to carry out different tasks in different kitchens on different days. No matter which kitchen they are working in, students can develop skills at the level of the qualification they are taking.

They then go on to be assessed in skills and knowledge that are directly related to their own qualifications. In this way, students are well prepared for assessment, but along the way have picked up a wider range of competences and knowledge by being exposed to this holistic approach to learning and assessment.

Because the restaurant is open every day, students who require greater support, or who need to be re-assessed, can have their learning needs catered for in the daily activities of the kitchen.

Each of the kitchens is overseen by a chef. The chef, who is the class teacher, works alongside the students, and observes, guides, supports and assesses them as they carry out their work.

Students put a copy of the recipes they use into their portfolios. These act as a record of work, and are signed off by the chef-assessor when the food has been prepared and cooked to meet the standards.

The Restaurant

Like the kitchens, the restaurant is run to a timetable with students who have mixed levels of experience and competence. All the food-service activities are geared toward the learning needs of the students. For example, a group of SVQ1 students will provide a 'counter service' serving snacks such as filled rolls, and beverages. SVQ2 students need more table service experience, so they have the opportunity to wait on tables. These two activities can be combined during lunch service. Then, at the dinner service, HNC/D students can also practise and be assessed in supervision activities.

The college restaurant serves college staff, and nearby businesses and the local community. It also caters for functions, and has several on its books at the moment — one for 200 diners. In this way students can experience the pressures of high-volume catering, with all diners having to be professionally served the same meal, prepared to the same standards, at the same time.

The college ensures that those who are about to cook and serve a meal are provided with a meal themselves. Every day therefore, before lunch service begins there is a lunch where the staff and students eat a meal prepared and served by one of the groups of students. This not only reflects what happens in restaurants up and down the country, but also allows staff and students an opportunity to reflect on the morning's preparation and cooking and discuss the forthcoming lunch service. A similar meal is served before the dinner service begins.

An integrated approach

The RWE has given rise to a range of interesting integrated activities. For example:

- ◆ By ensuring that the standards from the SVQs and other qualifications are embedded into the work planned for the kitchens and restaurant, the college enables all students to learn in a really practical way. Students who are following SVQ, HNC/D, supported learners, or school link programmes can all take advantage of the RWE.
- ◆ To meet the demands of their courses, HNC/D students can practise their planning and supervising skills using the RWE. They have access to the recipe database and can use it to:
 - plan and cost menus for other students to produce
 - supervise the event and carry out the monitoring and reporting functions on which they will be assessed
- ◆ Because day-release or work-based students work regularly in kitchens in their workplaces, they come into the college mostly for theory work and assessment. But if the workplace has not allowed them to demonstrate a particular skill, they can join the kitchen routine and either work on the daily menus or undertake special activities by means of a Chef's Special.
- ◆ The SVQ in Food Preparation and the SVQ in Food Service at levels 1 and 2 have some Units in common, so it is possible for students to undertake both SVQs — the delivery and assessment of these units are integrated.

Overall, the new kitchens and restaurant can:

- ◆ accommodate different levels of learners working together
- ◆ facilitate the delivery and assessment of different qualifications at the same time
- ◆ integrate day-release students into the work of the kitchens
- ◆ integrate schools and other Pathways provision into the work of the kitchens and restaurant
- ◆ integrate the work of HNC/D students working on Hospitality Management programmes
- ◆ offer 'taster' days for applicants who are unsure of what the course entails
- ◆ integrate the delivery and assessment of two SVQs (preparing and serving) at the same time

Creating and managing an effective RWE

Tom MacGregor says that setting up the RWE required:

- ◆ preparation time to plan a comprehensive database of recipes/menus that can be used for a range of different purposes: formative assessment, summative assessment, top-up remediation and re-assessment
- ◆ investment in equipment
- ◆ the development of a work ethos in which there is a clear sense of purpose and a professional atmosphere
- ◆ a team approach to tasks (where this is appropriate)
- ◆ time to review what works and what does not
- ◆ assessors and internal verifiers to work together

Tom says that the time spent on developing the recipes and menus and linking them to the different qualifications was well worth it. Once it was done, assessors and internal verifiers were free to concentrate on developing the skills that learners need for preparing, cooking and serving food. Of course, the recipes have to be reviewed and updated from time to time, but this is the case in any professional kitchen.

The advantage for the candidates is that they are working with others who have a range of competences. What was formerly a training kitchen has become a proper work environment, with all the stresses, strains and working practices of a real working restaurant. This helps to engender a professional approach from the start.

SQA's commentary

SQA's starting point is making sure that the requirements of the assessment strategy for any qualification are met – whether these are to do with RWE or any other aspect of assessment. In setting up its RWE, Telford worked with the external verifier to ensure that it met the requirements specified in the assessment strategy.

The case study shows that setting up an RWE has definite advantages, not only for students as they go through the learning process, but also for the quality of assessment.

Something that stands out as an example of good practice in the Telford case is that, while the RWE gives SVQ learners the opportunity to experience a realistic

workplace, it also allows other learners to enhance the quality of their learning experience and assessment. They can experience the atmosphere of a fast-paced professional kitchen and learn valuable skills in team working and task and people management.

The Telford experience shows that having comprehensive banks of materials to support all learners at all stages and in all qualifications is an essential prerequisite for delivery and assessment. Having these materials readily available and properly classified facilitates assessment, and ensures that the RWE can maximise opportunities for each individual.

The RWE was originally designed for SVQ students, but using it for other groups of learners as well helps those learners by making their learning realistic — giving them direct experience of work in the industry.

In the RWE, the assessor has to monitor a range of students tackling tasks at several different levels. This can pose real challenges for the effective management of assessment — and teaching and learning. This means it is important to ensure that the systems are sufficiently robust to support the quality and rigour of assessment and internal verification. And, of course, the documentation used to support assessment in such a busy practical learning environment needs to be:

- ◆ simple to use
- ◆ clearly expressed
- ◆ targeted specifically on the activities carried out in the RWE

Having good supporting documentation in place will ensure that achievement can be recorded and feedback can be given in the context of the workplace.

The RWE facilitates the integration of assessment. Taking a more holistic approach to the activities in the kitchen and the restaurant is good practice as it enables learners to complete a task using a range of different skills.

Finally, the practical nature of the RWE can be an attractive and welcome option for students who have become disengaged from employment, education and training.