

Chapter 12

Securing Assessors' Professionalism: Meeting Assessor Requirements for the Purpose of Performing High-Quality (RPL) Assessments

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The idea that excellence at performing a complex task requires a critical minimum level of practice surfaces again and again in studies of expertise. In fact, researchers have settled on what they believe is the magic number for true expertise: ten thousand hours. (...) Practice isn't the thing you do once you're good. It's the thing you do that makes you good. (Gladwell 2009, pp. 43, 46)

12.1 Introduction

Practice definitely plays an important role in improving assessor skills, although less than the often quoted ten thousand hours are required to become a qualified and proficient assessor. This chapter addresses the question of how assessor professionalism can be secured feasibly and efficiently. In advancing the answer to this question, a three-step programme for assessor professionalisation and certification is described as developed through a programme offered by the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences/Hogeschool van Amsterdam (AUAS/HvA) RPL Centre. In providing this description, first, a brief overview of RPL in the Netherlands and at the AUAS/HvA is given to outline the context and necessity of securing assessor professionalism. Next, the notion of assessor competence is explored and reasons are advanced for introducing assessor certification. Following this discussion, the three-step programme is examined sequentially. Additionally, for those interested in implementing assessor certification, two tried and tested certification programmes are compared to make a more informed decision as to how this can be done. Special attention is paid to lessons learnt in developing and enacting these programmes. They are presented as essential preconditions that have to be met for securing

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high-quality RPL assessments, leaving aside the availability of qualified and professional assessors.

In all, the subject discussed here offers an insight for those who are concerned with the quality of assessments in general and with assessor professionalism in particular, such as assessors' trainers, RPL or assessment developers and advisers and quality assurance (policy) advisers and agencies. Similarly, the professionalisation programmes described apply to both RPL assessors and assessors who perform assessments in competence-based educational programmes. From such a point of view, this contribution is also potentially applicable to managers, examination boards and advisers in (higher) professional education.

For the readability of this chapter the grammatical masculine form is used to refer to both male and female persons.

12.2 Recognition of Prior Learning in the Netherlands

Over the past 10 years, the recognition and accreditation of prior learning (RPL/APL¹) has gained increasing attention in the Netherlands. The history of RPL in the Netherlands started in the 1990s, when the Dutch government and social partners realised that employees could no longer count on lifetime employment with one employer. The government and social partners, therefore, encouraged the broader concept of recognition and accreditation of prior learning. The concept was defined as 'the process of recognising the competences an individual has gained through formal, informal or non-formal learning in various settings. This definition implies that competences acquired by learning on-the-job, in society or in voluntary work are in principle comparable to the competences acquired in formal education' (Dutch Knowledge Centre for APL 2009, p. 1). Thus, individuals' work experience translated into learning outcomes may provide the basis for formal recognition or even directly result in a certificate or diploma. The ultimate objective was that RPL reports as such, by valuing acquired knowledge and skills through any form of learning, would in the long run be equivalent to diplomas and certificates issued by the formal education system.

In 2001 the Dutch Knowledge Centre for APL was established to collect and share knowledge and exemplary practices on the accreditation of prior learning in the Netherlands. To bring all practices together and to assure a basic quality of RPL procedures, a national quality assurance programme, the so-called RPL quality code, was introduced in 2006. The code is used to assess procedures, create more transparency and set a minimum standard for RPL procedures. It consists of five subcodes, one of which includes assessor quality. Providers that meet the requirements in the code are recorded in a national register for accredited APL procedures, and their assesseees gain tax benefits. In addition, between 2007 and 2012, the Dutch government funded national projects on RPL and lifelong learning for educational institutions to encourage the development and implementation of RPL and flexible educational degree programmes.

¹Both RPL and APL are used for the Dutch equivalent EVC: Erkennen van Verworven Competenties.

After all these years of RPL developments and the introduction of regulations and codes, RPL has definitely gained a position in Dutch lifelong learning policy. Generally speaking, RPL is conducted on the basis of two different kinds of assessment standards. One comprises using professional standards accredited by a particular professional domain in the labour market. When these standards are applied, RPL primarily becomes a tool for sustained employability. The aim here is for an RPL report, with valued knowledge and skills on the basis of such standard, to create opportunities for employees to change jobs during their longer working lives both within their own organisations and on the labour market. The second type of RPL standard comprises assessment against the learning outcomes of a particular formal degree programme. In this case, RPL is basically considered as a tool in lifelong learning for the reason that the acknowledged competences can be translated into exemptions for parts of the particular educational programme. In this way, degree programmes may be shortened and, ideally, customised, which makes (higher) professional education more accessible for working adults. Educational institutions in the Netherlands that perform RPL on this basis usually refer to it as intake assessment. This specific use of assessment aligns with the present government policy that aims at 50 % of the working population to be highly educated in order for the Netherlands to remain one of Europe's top 5 knowledge economies (Ministry of Economic Affairs 2013).

12.2.1 RPL at the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences

The Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences/Hogeschool van Amsterdam (AUAS/HvA) offers a total of 80 bachelor's and master's degree programmes divided over seven so-called schools for approximately 46,000 students with 3,500 employees. Since 2002 AUAS/HvA has had its own RPL Centre that carries out procedures for part-time bachelor's degree programmes for adult learners. Between 2006 and 2011, the centre was registered and accredited as an RPL provider. Over the years, the centre has extended its range of activities to developing and implementing assessments and enhancing assessor professionalism in bachelor's degree programmes. In this role, it was the first one to obtain the Hobéon² quality label for assessment centres in 2012. To meet the required quality standards, a number of criteria have to be met, one of which is the availability of excellent assessors. For that reason, over the years, the RPL Centre has trained, supervised and certified large numbers of assessors both from bachelor's degree programmes and from the professional field³ to improve their performance. Besides, a successful professionalisation and certification programme was developed on the basis of required assessors' competence as outlined in the next section.

²Hobéon is a national quality assurance agency with a wide expertise in the field of (higher) professional education.

³Per assessee, two assessors, one from the professional field and one from the bachelor's degree programme related to the particular standard in question, co-operate in performing an RPL procedure.

Although the training and professionalisation programme was primarily developed for RPL assessors performing RPL procedures at the RPL Centre, it is now widely used to train and support assessors carrying out competence-based assessments in bachelor's degree programmes both at the AUAS/HvA and at other institutions for higher professional education.

12.3 Assessors' Competence

In RPL procedures, portfolio assessment is the most commonly used. This form of assessment is 'generally accepted as a method for presenting evidence of the achieved level of knowledge, skills or competence in general (Barret 2003) and in evaluating competences acquired in informal or non-formal contexts in particular' (Firssova and Joosten-ten Brinke 2007, p. 1). It, therefore, fits well the RPL approach (Joosten-ten Brinke et al. 2008). Assessor tasks accompanying portfolio assessment include evaluating a portfolio (both individually and with a peer assessor), conducting a criterion-focused interview, determining an assessee's competence level, reaching a substantiated judgement, giving feedback and writing a report.

Performing these tasks requires specific abilities. In quality assurance programmes, criteria for assessor quality generally refer to independence and expertise. In this context, independence means that assessors do not have any other relationship with assessees than that of being their assessor at a particular moment in time. Furthermore, an independent assessor does not have any personal interest, whatsoever, in the outcome of the assessment. This criterion can fairly easily be met. However, when it comes to assessors' expertise, it is not so straightforward because assessors are often considered a weak link in assessment procedures (Van der Vleuten et al. 2010; Schoonman 2005; Hofstee 1999; Kane and Bernardin 1982). Expertise in relation to assessor quality refers to three different aspects, namely, basic qualifications, personal characteristics and assessor skills. Basic qualifications, first and foremost, relate to relevant degrees in formal education such as a bachelor's degree in the specific field of the assessment standard. In addition, wide and varied professional experience in and expertise on the domain of the assessment standard is necessary to have a good view of what an assessee may come across in day-to-day practice and what potential strategies there are for handling different practical situations (Straetmans et al. 2011). Moreover, assessors should be well aware of the latest developments in the professional field, and they should be able to look beyond the scope of their own work situation. In short, assessors should be acknowledged as professionals in their field of practice. When it comes to personal characteristics, assessors are required to be at least honest, sensitive, communicative and accurate. Besides, they are expected to be curious and sincerely interested in the development of others. It stands to reason that assessors are also assumed to have self-knowledge and are prepared to invest in their own professional development. The third category of qualifications can be referred to as assessor skills. Examples of these skills include being able to inspire trust and to create a proper atmosphere for assessees, being familiar with different questioning, interviewing and assessing techniques and being committed to providing feedback on

Table 12.1 Example of an assessor competence profile

Assessor competence profile

A. *Basic assessor qualifications*

- Has relevant and wide expertise in the domain of the assessment standard
- Works for a specific degree programme (in accordance with the assessment standard) and/or has experience with professional practice
- Has obtained a bachelor's or master's degree in higher professional education
- Communicates in an accessible and convincing manner, both verbally and in writing

B. *Personal characteristics*

- Is sensitive and empathises with the assessee
- Is aware of one's own frame of reference and knows how to handle it appropriately when carrying out tasks
- Is client oriented and genuinely interested in the professional development of others
- Works efficiently and accurately and fulfils agreements
- Is learning oriented and prepared to invest in oneself

C. *Assessor skills and behavioural indicators*

The assessor has the ability to assess substantively and professionally whether the assessee fulfils the required competences. Since the development and assessment of competence may be based on a wide range of practical situations, it is particularly important for assessors to show that they understand the 'world behind the indicators'. This requires the ability to relate a competence to various practical situations and behaviour

D. *Behavioural indicators*

- Creating an atmosphere which will fully do justice to the assessee
- Structuring the assessment interview
- Applying different questioning and interviewing techniques at the right time aimed at
 - Purposefully gauging the assessee's competence level
 - Maintaining control during the interview
- Relating experiences, method of work and proof the assessee presents to the relevant competence criteria
- Recognising products as usable proof
- Reaching a substantiated final judgement and conveying this in a convincing and constructive manner
- Recording the judgement in an accessible manner on the appropriate forms or in a report
- Giving development-focused feedback
- Handling objections to the final judgement adequately and in a customer-oriented manner

Source: Adapted from RPL Centre, Van Berkel (2011)

the match between learning outcomes and the assessment standard. For assessors to develop and apply these skills adequately and in a similar way, training is required (Van der Vleuten et al. 2010; Straetmans 2006).

Based on these assessor qualities, an assessor profile has been drawn up and presented in Table 12.1. The profile is in accordance with the European guidelines for validation of non-formal and informal learning (Cedefop 2009, pp. 67–68). It comprises the basic principles for selecting assessors on the basis of qualifications and personal characteristics, for designing tailor-made training programmes on the basis of skills and behavioural criteria and for assessor certification. In the next sections, it will also be shown that the profile includes the guidelines for assessor professionalisation.

12.4 Professionalisation and Certification Programme for Assessors

The professionalisation and certification programme for assessors as designed by the RPL Centre of the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences was first introduced in 2002 and has been used in its present form since 2006. The following three steps can be distinguished in the programme: professional development, performance assessment and maintenance of the certificate. In the next three sections, each step will be described in more detail. Firstly, a few words need to be said on the necessity of certification as such. That professional development of assessors cannot be dispensed with is widely acknowledged in view of the complicated task of assessing competences (Straetmans 2006; Sluijsmans 2013). However, assessor certification, implying proven assessor competence as described in Sect. 12.4.2, is quite a different matter. Hence, a few reasons for having certification are now provided here. The first reason is that, even though they meet the basic qualifications and personal characteristics of the assessor profile, not all junior assessors have the ability to meet the behavioural indicators (Table 12.1). This conclusion implies that the validity and reliability of assessments may be at risk, which jeopardises assessee's abilities for their (prior) learning to be captured. An assessment for certification in which junior assessors must show the required skills and behaviour makes these deficiencies visible. In the Netherlands, further support for assessor certification is gained from the Dutch national quality code for RPL. This code includes six subcodes, one of which refers to expert and transparent assessor quality. Ever since its introduction, providers have been required to assure and prove this quality. Together with the other subcodes, this quality aims to assure more reliable and valid RPL assessments. Another motive for certification lies in recent Dutch educational history. In 2012, the Dutch Inspectorate of Education (2012) raised critical questions about exemptions on the basis of RPL outcomes in degree programmes in higher professional education. This has led to a much stricter quality assurance regime with regard to both higher professional education and RPL procedures in which transparency is a key criterion. Assessor quality is a crucial factor in assessing learning outcomes in both professional education and RPL, which is why this quality must be beyond doubt. Certification by means of an assessment on the basis of clear and uniform criteria with the assessor in the assessee's role is an instrument for realising this transparency.

12.4.1 Professional Development

Professional development appears in various forms. A basic training for the purpose of applying the assessment standard uniformly, carrying out the procedure in a uniform way and applying questioning, interviewing and assessing techniques adequately, has proved very useful as a start. An outline of such a programme of training is given in Sect. 12.4.1.1. Once assessors have completed the training successfully, they are given the opportunity to further develop their skills and knowledge along the lines described in Sect. 12.4.1.2.

12.4.1.1 Basic Training

For assessors the first step in developing assessor skills is participating in a basic training (Straetmans 2006) which focuses on gaining these skills as per the behavioural indicators of the assessor competence profile (Table 12.1). At the start of such preparation, novice assessors tend to ask questions like 'How do we fully do justice to assessee in the limited time of an assessment?' and 'Can we actually assess competences objectively?' These are legitimate questions in view of the assessor tasks described in Sect. 12.3. A closer examination of the definition of competence assessment further clarifies this. A commonly used definition is this: competence assessment is meant to assess whether an assessee is able to adequately perform particular professional tasks in a wide variety of contexts and situations (Van Berkel 2012). This definition covers indeterminate elements such as 'adequately', 'certain professional tasks' and 'a wide variety of contexts and situations', revealing the complexity of the assessor's task and signifying the need of a solid assessment standard in which these elements are transparently specified. Such a standard provides assessors with a uniform framework while it still leaves room for the wide variety of situations and contexts in which assessee acquire competences.

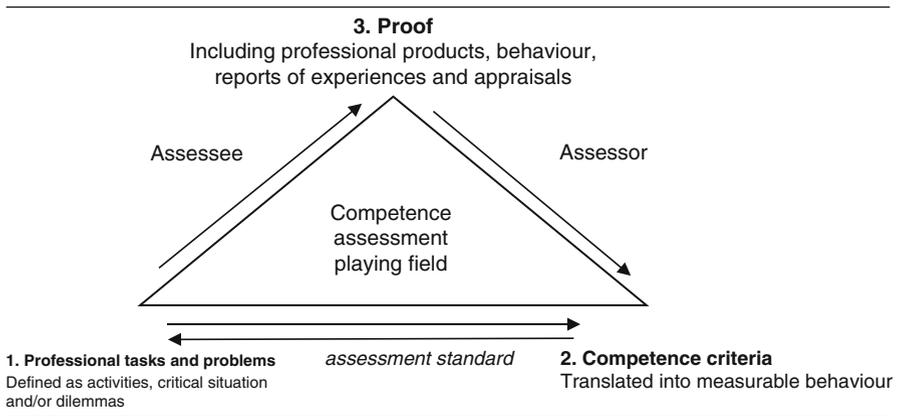
As standards are generally derived from competence profiles of educational programmes or from job or professional profiles (Sect. 12.2), it stands to reason that there are as many standards as there are profiles. Therefore, each training programme is tailor-made in that one specific assessment standard and an authentic portfolio in accordance with that standard are the central elements on which the training is designed. This explains why only those assessors who are acknowledged as professionals in the field of this specific standard can participate in the training. Moreover, the training includes three areas of skill development involving the ability to apply the assessment standard, the evaluation of a portfolio and the acquisition of assessor skills.

Refining and Applying the Assessment Standard

Mastering the assessment standard is one of the basic assessor skills, which makes it a very important element of the training programme. The variety with which standards themselves are elaborated is quite wide, and in many cases they do not prove to be workable in that they are either too detailed or too vague (Van Berkel 2012). As this lack of clarity represents a serious problem with competence assessments, the training programme pays special attention to making standards feasible by defining three elements that make them appropriate for use:

1. Typical professional tasks the assessee should be able to perform. These are defined as key tasks, activities, critical situations and problems or dilemmas.
2. Criteria that describe what competent performance entails, i.e. what adequate behaviour is expected.
3. Examples of proof that assessee may submit to demonstrate competent performance (Van Berkel and te Lintel 2007).

Table 12.2 Competence assessment playing field



Source: Van Berkel and Te Lintelo (2007)

These elements must be defined in a transparent way so as to prevent too detailed information or overlap (Baartman 2008, p. 36). When the elements are connected in a triangle, the competence assessment playing field – also called the assessor playing field – appears as shown in Table 12.2. For each element of the assessment standard, the skill is to systematically link up the three aspects with each other. It is important for assessors to stay within the assessment triangle, focusing on professional tasks, proof and criteria.

In order to apply the standard adequately, assessors should have a comprehensive understanding of these elements. Competence criteria, however, are generally open and generic as is shown in Table 12.3. They leave room for variation and complexity within the context, which is why they require professional interpretation. The same goes for the professional tasks, which can be developed in various situations and with different degrees of complexity, which makes the outcomes of competence development hard to compare. For these reasons, during the training, there emerge questions such as: ‘What activities are missing or redundant in a particular professional task?’, ‘How do we interpret “competence criterion x”?’ and ‘What behavioural indicators belong to it?’ In addressing these questions, assessors complement each other, based on their own professional expertise and experience. They also gain insight into each other’s professional field and the way in which competences are handled in this context. In this manner, the refined standard should become a joint ‘product’ and a mutual reference and assessment framework.

Evaluating a Portfolio

By focusing on an authentic portfolio during the training, assessors have the opportunity to determine collectively what they will accept as proof of a competence or

Table 12.3 Examples of competence criteria

Consider the professional task: conducting a consultation meeting
Examples of competence criteria for assessing competent behaviour when performing this task in day-to-day practice are: being inquisitive, being sensitive and being convincing

not and what additional information they would like to obtain in order to make a judgement (Van Berkel and te Lintelo 2007). Again, the assessment standard plays an important role in determining what information is missing. For discussing these issues in a structured way and for recording notes and findings at this stage in the assessment process, an evaluation form is available. Apart from providing structure, it also makes the final judgement more transparent.

Acquiring Assessor Skills

Instead of practising parts of an assessment interview and asking questions on parts of the portfolio, it has proven to be more effective to conduct an entire assessment interview and collect all the necessary information in the available time. This process comprises a simulation of an authentic assessment. After having studied the contents of the portfolio, an actor with experience of professional practice assumes the assessee's role. One pair of assessors at a time asks questions to obtain information on all competences in the portfolio. Meanwhile, the remaining assessors observe the interviews and give feedback using the behavioural indicators of the assessor competence profile. The actor will portray different types of assessees to assist in dealing with undesirable behaviour while maintaining control. After the interview, the pairs of assessors reach their final judgement about the assessee. All judgements are subsequently compared with each other and discussed with all assessors present. Where judgements differ, assessors explain what has led them to reach a certain judgement. In this way, they collectively add more content to the standard and make it more workable for their specific situation. It is interesting to note that in many cases assessors were surprised to find out that they had reached the same judgement independently of one another (Van Berkel and te Lintelo 2007). Assessors value the use of the assessment standard and an authentic portfolio during their training. This underlines the fact that practising interviewing and assessment techniques without knowing what exactly should be assessed is a rather meaningless exercise.

An overview of the elements in the training programme and the corresponding learning outcomes is shown in Table 12.4. Obviously, the training method described allows assessors to learn a great deal about applying the standard as well as practising interviewing and assessment skills. It also offers assessors the opportunity to experience that an entire interview can be conducted within the time set. However, as noted, when it comes to developing assessor skills, training only appears to be a first step.

Table 12.4 Elements of basic assessor training summarised with learning outcomes and indication of time investment

Activity	Explanation	Learning outcomes
<p>1. Applying the assessment standard and clarifying the assessor's role</p> <p>Materials include</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A model for competence assessment (the assessment triangle) comprising the competence assessment playing field - The assessment standard and instruments at issue - The assessor's competence profile consisting of basic qualifications, personal characteristics and assessor skills for quality assessor performance <p>Time investment: 4 h</p>	<p>Attention is paid to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Necessary elements for assessing competences ✓ Studying and refining the assessment standard at issue ✓ Explaining the assessor's competence profile 	<p>Assessors have a clear picture of their role and know how to apply the available assessment standard</p>
<p>2. Evaluating a portfolio</p> <p>Materials include</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - An authentic portfolio - A standardised report for assessing the portfolio and preparing the interview <p>Time investment: 4 h</p>	<p>Attention is paid to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Relating professional products in the portfolio to professional activities and competence criteria in the assessment standard ✓ A critical review of a portfolio with regard to its structure, contents and size 	<p>Assessors have a clear picture of</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What they need to find in a portfolio - Which information they additionally need to gather in the criterion-focused interview

<p>3. Acquiring assessor skills by performing a complete assessment</p>	<p>Attention is paid to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ The skills required and defined in the behavioural indicators (assessor profile) ✓ Preparing the assessment interview by discussing the portfolio in pairs ✓ Carrying out the assessment interview ✓ Giving feedback to colleague assessors ✓ Constructing a well-founded judgement on the basis of competence criteria in the assessment standard ✓ Giving feedback to the assessee ✓ Handling undesirable assessee behaviour 	<p>Assessors have a range of techniques at their disposal to perform assessments and know how and when to use them properly to get the best out of the assessee</p>
<p>Materials include</p>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - An authentic portfolio 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A standardised report for recording the assessment findings and judgement 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - An actor performing the role of assessee 		
<p>Time investment: 8 h</p>		

12.4.1.2 Continuing Professional Development

Continuing professional development (CPD) aims at ensuring that the skills and knowledge assessors have acquired in the basic training remain current and are constantly updated. For the systematic maintenance, improvement and broadening of assessor skills, the CPD part of the programme facilitates assessors in at least four ways. First of all they are offered the opportunity to gain experience by performing authentic assessments in practice according to the behavioural indicators in the profile (Table 12.1). Preferably, they do so in pairs of novice and certified assessors. This enables novice assessors to copy the art of assessing by learning ‘by example and good observation’ in the real-world context (Ruijters et al. 2004, p. 16). This approach has appeared to be very effective, which can be explained by the theory that 70 % of learning is experiential and 20 % comes from working with others (Cross 2007). Simons and Ruijters (2004, p. 209) add that ‘a learning professional is elaborating on his or her work-competencies by learning from and in practice’. It is also argued that such learning meets the competence development of staff better than learning on courses (Illeris 2011).

Another substantial part of assessor development consists of frequently sharing assessment experiences and discussing critical situations and dilemmas with peer assessors in order to refine the collective interpretation of the standard. Evaluation meetings and peer reviews are a means to support assessors in finding a balance between the open criteria in the assessment standard and their personal judgements while aiming at intersubjectivity.

Thirdly, a learning context of ‘experimentation’ (Ruijters et al. 2004) is created by organising workshops and role plays on specific questioning and interviewing techniques periodically. Here, assessors have the freedom to experiment, ask questions, receive feedback and reflect on their performance under the supervision of an expert assessor or trainer. Common assessor errors are also subject of the workshops. These errors include failing to apply interviewing techniques fully and adequately by not using a technique appropriately and not applying the right technique at the right moment and failing to construct an underpinned judgement. Assessors also find it hard to give constructive and development-focused feedback (Van Berkel 2011).

A fourth effective approach to enhancing assessor skills is feedback on the job, i.e. while performing an assessment. This method, which is increasingly acknowledged as assessment *for* learning (Earl 2003; Dochy et al. 2007), is particularly useful for assessors to get a clear picture of their personal qualities, skills and pitfalls or learning points. Feedback is given on the behavioural indicators in the assessor competence profile (Table 12.1). An independent and expert assessor observes an individual assessor and provides feedback, which shows the level the assessor has reached regarding the indicators in the profile and at the same time makes it clear which of these indicators need further development.

12.4.2 Performance Assessment for Certification

After having developed sufficient proficiency in performing assessments as per the behavioural criteria in the assessor profile, assessors move on to the next step in the certification programme, which is a performance assessment. An independent and expert assessor (and trainer) observes and assesses an assessor on the job while conducting an authentic assessment interview. The expert writes a report in which he relates his observations and findings to the standard as described in the behavioural indicators in Table 12.1. Only if the assessee meets all these indicators to a satisfying degree, will he be granted a certificate and thus become a certified assessor. Expert assessors must be authorities in the field of assessment and development (Straetmans 2006). Their qualifications need some closer examination here. It will be obvious that the two basic criteria of independence and expertise, as explained in Sect. 12.3, apply to expert assessors as well. When it comes to expertise, these experts at the very least meet the behavioural indicators of the assessor standard themselves. Moreover, basic qualifications for experts include a wide and varied experience either with training assessors or in the professional practice of assessment and development. In addition, the personal characteristics listed in the assessor profile also apply to expert assessors. Naturally, certified assessors can develop into expert assessors.

It should be noted that the performance assessment is carried out with only one expert assessor, which makes the final judgement rather vulnerable as the behavioural indicators are open and hence multi-interpretable. Therefore, the standard has been more refined in that the criteria of behaviour have been added to the indicators. For example, Table 12.5 shows how the indicator of 'applying different questioning and interviewing techniques at the right time' has been broken down into criteria. These criteria give focus to both the assessors when developing their assessor skills and the experts when assessing them during a performance assessment. However, they are in no way meant to be used as a checklist to make assessors' behaviour tangible.

Expert assessors are expected to apply their professional expertise effectively to reach a holistic judgement, i.e. one in which the significance of the parts can only be understood in terms of their contribution to the significance as a whole. The bottom line question is 'Do they consider the assessor capable of performing high-quality assessments?' Apart from refining the standard for certification as shown in Table 12.5, meetings are arranged for expert assessors to compare their judgements, exchange experiences and discuss critical situations in order to collectively determine what assessor behaviour is indispensable within the framework of the standard for certification. These meetings, which are held twice yearly, further contribute to intersubjective judgements. In spite of these measures, assessors may still object to the final judgement and ask for a second opinion. For this reason, a sound recording of each assessment interview is available and can be used for this purpose.

Finally, a few points should not go unmentioned about this programme. The assessors are continuously working on their assessor skills and expertise and do so

Table 12.5 A behavioural indicator broken down into criteria for the purpose of assessing the assessor

Behavioural indicator: applying different questioning and interviewing techniques at the right time	
Criteria of behaviour	An assessor
	Listens actively
	Applies appropriate interviewing techniques such as STAR(R)T ^a to generate information as regards displayed professional behaviour and underlying thought and decision-making processes
	Explores the scope of competences through transfer questions and questions about the opposite
	Maintains control during the interview by applying the technique of ‘listening – summarising – probing’
	Applies the technique of meta-communication at the level of contents and relationship, if necessary
	Communicates effectively by adapting one’s use of language to the assessee’s level
Result: An in-depth interview in which the required information for competence assessment is collected	

^aThe letters in STAR(R)T represent the words situation, task, activities and approach, result, reflection and transfer

mainly through performing assessments in RPL processes and in degree programmes. This requires no extra time investment, which makes improving assessor skills cost-effective. Also, when an assessor is assessed for certification, this happens as a random assessment process. This demonstrates that assessors are expected to deal with all different types of assessees and get the best out of each assessment and for every assessee, which is what assessor professionalism is all about.

12.4.3 Maintenance of the Certificate

Assessor certification is based on assessor skills and proficiency, which makes it necessary to maintain the certificate. It is assessors’ responsibility to prove the maintenance of their skills. Although there are various possibilities for maintenance, having one’s hands tied by too many tests and regulations is not one of them. Gaining more experience with performing assessments appears to be a far more practical and efficient way. In the certification programme discussed here, additional guidelines for maintenance are given as suggestions for continuing and enhancing professional development. Examples of these guidelines are listed in Table 12.6 (Van Berkel et al. 2008). They leave certified assessors with room for their own choices, learning preferences and method of working when fulfilling the maintenance requirements.

A closer examination of the sample guidelines shows that the activities include basic elements of a professional learning community (Birenbaum et al. 2011;

Table 12.6 Examples of guidelines for maintenance (*Source: Van Berkel et al. 2008*)

Working as a professional in the field of assessment and development or as an assessor in degree programmes
Performing a minimum number of assessments on a yearly basis
Asking feedback on the assessor standard from peer assessors (on the job)
Providing feedback on the assessment standard to junior assessors (on the job)
Organising assessor meetings for sharing experiences and discussing critical situations
Practising interviewing techniques with junior assessors (in workshops)
Contributing to the improvement of assessment instruments and standards
Attending expert meetings, conferences and seminars on assessment-related topics

Sluijsmans 2013) where certified assessors reflect on their practice. There is also an interesting role for them in enhancing the professional development of novice and less experienced assessors by giving them feedback on their assessment performance. Besides, the expertise of certified assessors is priceless as regards the fine-tuning of assessment policy, including standards and instruments. In brief, a wide variety of assessor activities related to the improvement of competence assessments is relevant for the purpose of maintenance.

For assessors to report on and prove their maintenance activities over a period of time, a standardised form is available. Naturally, a portfolio is an effective instrument for collecting items of proof such as reports of feedback given to novice assessors, programmes of workshops, meetings or seminars one has participated in, etc. In practice, however, a list of accomplished activities suffices, and additional information and proof will only be requested if the list fails to convince. Of course, such a procedure is built on a certain degree of trust, which may be abused. However, it saves the monitoring authority from examining an increasing number of portfolios over the years, which is a very time-consuming and expensive activity. It should be noticed here that so far there is neither a register of certified assessors nor a set of formalised guidelines for continuing education and training in the Netherlands. Therefore, the guidelines as mentioned above suffice for the time being. However, a national register with accompanying rules for certification and continuing education is expected to be in use before long, due to stricter governmental policies in view of assessments in general and RPL assessments in particular in response to the call for a more transparent assessment quality as outlined in Sect. 12.4.

Finally, two minor issues related to the maintenance of certification need pointing out. The first concerns the question who fulfils the role of the monitoring authority. In the current programme, this is the RPL Centre. Monitoring maintenance is complementary to its tasks of providing a basic training for assessors and organising and supervising the further development of assessor skills, and, for that reason, it fits in logically. In this context, the RPL Centre has set itself the task of arranging special assessor meetings for the maintenance of the certificate, which are similar to the activities for assessors' CPD as outlined in Sect. 12.4.1.2. The second issue involves the validity of the certificate. In the present programme, the certificate is valid for an indefinite period of time provided that assessors meet the maintenance requirements as described above.

12.5 Certification and Quality Assurance

Having discussed the three-step professionalisation and certification programme in the previous sections, it is now time to go into the role of the authority that provides the certificates and assures the quality of the certification programme. The AUAS/HvA RPL Centre has found a reliable partner in the Amsterdam Centre for Continuing Education.⁴ The centre is regionally known for its programmes and activities for teachers at all levels of education. For this reason, it adds value to the assessor certificate (external validation). A closer examination of the tasks that are assigned to this authority will make apparent the qualifications for selection. Three quality assurance tasks can be distinguished:

1. Assuring that the experts who assess the performance assessment meet the expert criteria as outlined in Sect. 12.4.2
2. Visiting performance assessments at random to find out whether they are carried out in accordance with the procedure agreed on
3. Checking experts' assessment reports regarding completeness and the underpinning of the judgement.

A fourth task, different in its kind, is providing the certificate.

These tasks show that a quality assurance authority must meet the requirements of independence and expertise in the field of competence assessments to perform them adequately. Independence in this case may well be interpreted as 'at some distance from the assessee'. As to the expertise of this quality assurance authority, an excellent reputation is to be recommended in the field of continuing education for a specific target group, such as teachers. Being a qualified assessor can after all be considered a specific teacher role.

12.6 Certification Programmes Compared

In this section, the professionalisation and certification programme described above will be compared to other certification programmes that have been developed in the Netherlands recently. The Amsterdam assessor professionalisation and certification programme was set up in 2002 and achieved its present form in 2006. The programme was the first of its kind, and it is still unique in that it includes a performance assessment. Choosing this type of assessment seemed obvious, as it fits the purpose of the programme, namely, assessing assessors' behaviour. It is, therefore, in accordance with the so-called principle of congruence. Over the last six years, educational institutions and quality assurance agencies in the Netherlands have developed additional certification programmes, which, without exception, include portfolio assessments. In these programmes, assessors collect proof of their assessor

⁴The centre is called 'Centrum voor Nascholing Amsterdam (CNA)'.

qualities in a portfolio. This proof consists of sample assessment reports, a self-evaluation of the assessor standard, feedback obtained from and given to peer assessors, etc. Having accomplished all this, assessors conduct a criterion-focused interview with two expert assessors. In these programmes, the principle of congruence is met by having assessors perform a portfolio assessment from the point of view of the assessee.

All certification programmes require a basic training and CPD (Sects. 12.4.1.1 and 12.4.1.2) in order to prepare for the assessment that leads to certification. The main difference between the programmes is the type of assessment, which is either a performance assessment or a portfolio assessment. In Table 12.7, these assessments for certification are compared together with related aspects such as the number of expert assessors involved, time investment and validity of the certificate. Additionally, (dis)advantages of both types of assessment for certification are discussed. The comparison may help those considering introducing such a programme to make an appropriate and deliberate choice. Also, there might be a need to develop a new programme by combining elements of the programmes compared here.

A few conclusions can be drawn from this comparison in terms of (dis)advantages. When it comes to advantages of performance assessments, it is obvious that no extra efforts or preparation is needed from assessors. For this reason, these assessments are far less time-consuming than portfolio assessments for which proof must be collected and portfolios composed. In addition, only one expert assessor is involved in performance assessments as opposed to two in portfolio assessments, which limits costs for performance assessments. Furthermore, it is important to note that performance assessments require assessors to get the best out of any assessee, as they are 'real-life' assessments. Portfolio assessments, however, offer assessors the opportunity to show their best practices in a portfolio and criterion-focused interview.

An advantage of portfolio assessments over performance assessments is that assessors get a clear picture of themselves as professionals. Part of the proof in their portfolios includes feedback obtained from peer assessors and a reflection on the assessor's role in relation to the assessor's profile (Table 12.1). In the criterion-focused interview, this process serves as input for expert assessors to discuss the assessor's professional qualities and points of development in depth. Nevertheless, one specific disadvantage of portfolio assessments must also be mentioned here. It has to do with proof such as films and recordings of assessment interviews in assessors' portfolios. This kind of proof often appears to be inadequate for evaluation purposes in that, for instance, only part of an assessment interview is recorded or problems with sound or picture quality and appliances arise. It goes without saying that this complicates the expert assessors' task considerably.

To sum up, performance assessments are less time-consuming and more cost-effective than portfolio assessments. Moreover, they mirror the purpose of assessing assessors' behaviour in accordance with the principle of congruence. Portfolio assessments, however, are an excellent tool to make assessors aware of their own professionalism. And as assessors need to be learning oriented and prepared to invest in themselves (Table 12.1), this is a perfect start of their continuing development.

Table 12.7 Two assessor certification programmes compared

Assessment for certification	Performance assessments	Portfolio assessment
<i>Subject of assessment</i>	Assessor behaviour in one specific context which is selected at random	Examples of and reflection on assessor behaviour in various contexts
<i>Form of assessment</i>	On-the-job observation	Portfolio evaluation with a criterion-focused interview
<i>Necessary documents supplied by assessor</i>	Assessor's file including <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – A curriculum vitae – Feedback report by expert assessor – Assessor's points of development derived from assessor standard – Evaluation form completed by assessor – Manager's letter of permission for doing the performance assessment 	Assessor's portfolio including <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – A survey of assessments performed – A curriculum vitae – A self-evaluation on the assessor standard – Recordings of criterion-focused interviews – Feedback report by peer assessor – Feedback report to peer assessor – Assessment reports – Assessor's points of development derived from assessor standard
<i>Number of expert assessors involved</i>	1 ^a Please note: a sound recording is available for second opinion, if applicable	2
<i>Time investment expert assessors</i>	3 h (one expert involved)	8 h, i.e. 4 h for two experts each
<i>Time investment assessor</i>	Participating in professional development activities as described in Sects. 12.4.1.1 and 12.4.1.2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Participating in professional development activities described in Sects. 12.4.1.1 and 12.4.1.2 – Compiling a portfolio (about 20 h) – Conducting a criterion-focused interview (1 h)
<i>Validity certificate</i>	For an indefinite period of time, provided that the guidelines for maintenance are yearly met	Usually for a period of 3 years, followed by another portfolio assessment

^aIt stands to reason that a performance assessment can also be performed by two expert assessors. However, this implies an increase in costs

12.7 Lessons Learnt: Preconditions

As argued earlier in this chapter, performing competence assessments is far from easy. That is why the assessor professionalisation and certification programme was set up in the first place. Although assessor quality is a critical element in high-quality assessments, it does not guarantee the demanded assessment quality level as such. Additional factors affect assessors' performances. They include preconditions for quality assessments (Van Berkel 2012). Together these preconditions represent the lessons learnt from improving and enhancing assessor professionalism for over a decade, and they will be briefly touched upon in this Section.

A workable and transparent assessment standard is by far the most essential precondition for high-quality assessments. The triangle as outlined in Sect. 12.4.1.1 provides assessors with a reference and interpretation framework. Assessors consider it an indispensable instrument for evaluating portfolios and for preparing and conducting criterion-focused interviews. Deviating from the standard or departing from the assessor's playing field is a very common pitfall assessors need to be aware of as it results in information that is irrelevant for the judgement. Another precondition for assessors to perform their task appropriately involves well-structured portfolios that are limited in size. Assessors might become irritated by an information overload that they cannot ignore. A certain degree of frustration is also caused when the relation between particular proof and the required competences is not clear. The lack of structure causes assessors to bypass the contents of the portfolio. It is therefore highly recommended to provide a clear framework for portfolios including requirements for structure, to set a limit to the items of proof for each competence and to give some examples of acceptable proof as pointers. A third precondition refers to a uniform and workable assessment procedure. For this purpose, a transparent and complete manual is required in which the tasks and responsibilities of all those involved are clearly described. Terminology should be consistent and instructions unambiguous. Assessment instruments such as forms for evaluating a portfolio, preparing the interview and recording the judgement should be available. Moreover, there is the factor of time. Frequently, assessors find themselves faced with the dilemma of performing assessments in far too little time. In order to grant them sufficient time and to have an indication of the time required, it is worthwhile to calculate the average time investment for an assessment on the basis of the tasks assessors perform. A task overview is given at the top of Sect. 12.3.

Carrying out a professionalisation and certification programme as described in this chapter would be meaningless if the preconditions outlined above are not fully met. Furthermore, it should be kept in mind that even if novice assessors meet the basic qualifications and personal characteristics required to take part in the programme, it will be no guarantee for all of them to become certified assessors. Some of them prove to be better at supervising than at assessing. Others are not prepared to really invest in improving their assessor skills. For certification to become feasible, the individual assessor's ambition and determination must prevail.

12.8 Conclusion

In this chapter, the importance of qualified assessors for carrying out high-quality (RPL) assessments has been emphasised along the lines of a professionalisation and certification programme developed by the RPL Centre of the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences/Hogeschool van Amsterdam. In this programme, much emphasis is placed on basic qualifications and personal characteristics for assessor selection purposes. However, experience has shown that not all novice assessors will develop into certified assessors. The three-step programme discussed appears to contribute to securing enhanced assessor quality. In this programme, special attention is paid to basic training, continuing professional development and a performance assessment for assessor certification. Another important success factor is the presence of an independent, well-qualified and reputable authority for providing the certificate and assuring quality as it validates not only the procedure but also the certificate. Those who consider introducing a professionalisation and certification programme may benefit from the comparison made between the various aspects of existing programmes. In addition, the lessons learnt from performing and refining the Amsterdam programme over the past decade show that, apart from assessor quality, a number of preconditions must be met to assure high-quality assessments. These preconditions include a workable standard, well-structured portfolios that are limited in size, clear and transparent information on the assessment procedure and instruments and also sufficient time for assessors to carry out assessments. It is important to bear these lessons in mind, before embarking on a programme to enhance assessor professionalism.

12.9 Further Study

Once the practices of assessors' professional development programmes are more commonly used and more advanced, practitioners and scholars may critically compare the existing programmes in more detail. Some suggestions for further study are put forward here.

Ruijters et al. (2004), Ruijters (2006) studied the learning behaviour of professionals in the workplace and found that adults have different learning preferences dependent on professional tasks and contexts. She developed a 'language of learning' in which she distinguishes five learning preferences: copying the art, participation, acquisition, experimentation and discovery (Ruijters et al. 2004, pp. 16–18; Ruijters 2006, pp. 185–268). It may be assumed that professionalisation programmes will be more effective if individual assessors' learning preferences are taken into account. Developing such a programme is a challenge in itself. A critical analysis of the outcomes of such a programme in terms of assessors' learning, development and performance may contribute to refine the currently available programmes.

Positive effects of assessment *for learning* have been proved in studies related to classroom assessments and educational contexts (Shepard 2000; Earl 2003; Dochy et al. 2007). An issue for further research involves the extent to which these benefits of assessment *for learning* translate into the CPD activities of adult learners such as assessors in professional practice.

A number of studies on professional development programmes have been carried out in the educational context in view of teachers' performance. They have 'indicated that teachers' beliefs about their own level of competence and their sense of self-efficacy⁵ affect their practice and students' performance' (Hendriks et al. 2010, p. 28). It may be worthwhile to explore if these findings apply to teachers in the assessor's role as well. In other words, does assessors' sense of self-efficacy influence assessment practices and enhance assessee's motivation and performance?

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⁵Self-efficacy is defined here as 'a future-oriented belief about the level of competence a person expects he or she will display in a given situation' (Bandura 1997).

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