

Wholesale & Retail

LEADERSHIP CHAIR

Collaboration opens the window to a world of opportunities



A model for assessment centres
for the W&RSETA as AQP for QCTO
national occupational qualifications.
A SUMMARY

DEFINITIONS

Assessment Centre – A centre accredited by the QCTO for the purpose of conducting external integrated summative assessments for specified NQF registered occupational qualifications and part qualifications (QCTO, 2013a, 4)

AQP – Assessment Quality Partner – A body (in the case of W&RSETA qualifications, this is the W&RSETA) delegated by the QCTO to manage and coordinate the external integrated summative assessments for specified NQF registered occupational qualifications and part qualifications (QCTO, 2013a, 4)

Introduction

Wherever accredited learning takes place there is a need for assessment so that the quality and transfer of learning can be evaluated. Such assessment has long been associated with trades worldwide, and there are usually specific rules governing how assessment is handled. Often, in fact, there is national policy, which governs the process, with highly specific requirements for how things should be run.

A model for assessment, and assessment centres, needs to be flexible in order to meet industry's various needs. In addition, they also require: a standard operating procedure; industry consultation on its needs; assessment planning in order to minimise disruption of operations; and a formalised process by which roles are linked to standard operating procedures, against which measurement of the ability to perform competently can be made.

Assessment centres in South Africa, therefore, need to tick these boxes while taking national policy into account. In the case of trades, the situation is relatively simple, with the setting of trade tests being sufficient. However, in South Africa there needs to be an extension, or adaptation, of this process to include occupations as well.

As we set out on the search for an assessment centre model, in terms of the new Quality Council for Trades and Occupations (QCTO) concept of Occupational Qualifications, and related Assessment Specifications, it is necessary to ensure that the model selected is fit for purpose. Failure to meet this criterion is likely to make buy-in from industry problematic.

In most environments these days, there are new opportunities for using technology to improve and streamline processes. It is no different with the assessment of learning. In keeping with such advances, the new assessment model should embrace new methodologies, but also stay true to national policy, and to Assessment Specifications.

Factors that influence the establishment of assessment centres



Methodology

The **first** research project's aim was to come up with an assessment centre model able to serve the needs of the quality assurance body and industry and which would be appropriate for the first seven retail sector occupational qualifications developed by the W&RSETA for registration on the Occupational Qualifications Sub-Framework (OQSF).

The research method decided on was qualitative – literature reviews and secondary data analysis, small focus groups, semi-structured interviews and follow-up workshops to peer-review the findings were employed. Participating in the research were industry experts, quality assurance members and education providers.

Initially, the research included identifying models from international assessment centres and quality assurance bodies, to find models for presentation to the research focus groups.

The research identified and took into consideration two potential models:

Model A: private businesses that can be accredited to become assessment centres.

Model B: Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges to be used in combination or partnership with private institutions (including retailers' 'in-house' facilities) for national assessments.

Qualitative research then took place, using small focus groups of industry experts, education providers and quality assurance experts. This approach, using a limited range of expert participants, provided the majority of relevant high-level inputs.

The results of the research pointed unequivocally to Model B as being the best solution for the job at hand.

Because the research is of a qualitative nature, the source of reference data is highly relevant: public domain documentation; individual and organisational insights from semi-structured interviews and/or questionnaires; international liaison and literature reviews.

The aim of the **second** study was to critically evaluate the implementation requirements of the selected new assessment centre model for occupational qualification and part qualification training in South Africa (Model B).

Once again, the research methodology adopted was qualitative and included study of secondary data, namely South African and international policy documents on assessment. In addition to this, empirical research was carried out, referencing individual interviews, and regional focus group surveys.

A specially selected sample of 67 individuals, including business operators, training providers, quality assurance experts and W&RSETA staff, was assembled. A thematic identifier was used to analyse data, identifying common trends, which were then grouped by category. Questionnaires were analysed and classified according to the above categories and checks were implemented, cross-referencing and auditing data to ensure that the results produced were 100% accurate.

Implementation of a new assessment model is made complex by South Africa's large geographic spread, with availability of resources in rural and urban areas differing greatly.

History, problems and international background

HISTORY

The focus of occupationally-directed training in South Africa, previously unit standard based learning, has changed in preparation for catering to the needs of occupational profiles. This focus is about the skills needs of the occupational profile, as per industry requirements, rather than pre-defined minimum outcome requirements.

With this change it has become necessary to develop assessment centres, and an overarching assessment model, to cater to the new requirements.

PROBLEMS

A new assessment model that would be appropriate to the seven retail occupational qualifications that are, or are about to be, registered on the National Qualifications Framework is needed. This model should be flexible enough to meet the current and future needs of the sector, and ideally would be sufficiently flexible to be of benefit to other industries and sectors, that are going through similar developments.

With the introduction of a new assessment process there has arisen an urgent need for facilities that cater to the specific needs of this new assessment process. Unfortunately, few existing assessment facilities are able to fulfil this role.

The resulting model, allowing new focus on occupational profiles, will of course be very different to what currently exists. By definition there will be many more variables to take into account, including business-specific equipment and processes.

Perhaps the most serious challenge facing this process is the nature of South Africa's national footprint. Implementation of a new assessment model is made complex by South Africa's large geographic spread, with availability of resources in rural and urban areas differing greatly. This is further complicated by the huge variety of industries – each with its own different needs – many of which may not have the national capacity to offer the necessary experiential or workplace components of the assessment.

Another drawback is the lack of current best practice to act as a benchmark. The research, therefore, must rely on QCTO documentation, which is considered to be policy, but which is bound to change as the new model is developed. It needs to be understood, therefore, that this study reflects the original version of the model, while acknowledging that, should these policies, guidelines or documents change, the research findings would need to be reviewed in the light of such changes.

INTERNATIONAL BACKGROUND

The early stages of the research included identifying models from a sample of international assessment centres and quality assurance bodies, to find relevant options for presentation to a focus group.

The three most relevant models are shown below.

CITY AND GUILDS – UNITED KINGDOM

- A private institution in the UK offering vocational qualifications.
- The City and Guilds model is closely aligned to the requirements of the QCTO.
- Drawback: reliance on centres' willingness to register, and to commit to ongoing compliance with various requirements.
- Could, as a result, become exclusive.
- Considered the best option from a management and cost perspective.

BANGLADESH

Hybrid assessment centre model, which can be government or private.

Assessment centres should be:

- able to show capacity to deliver assessments.
- independent legal bodies.
- responsive to the demands of the learners.
- able to use national assessment instruments.

AUSTRALIAN QUALIFICATION TRAINING FRAMEWORK

- Combines numerous existing models into a new model.
- Sits somewhere between the previous South African assessment model, and the newly proposed QCTO formula.
- Assessment is required to be both reliable and appropriate to industry needs.
- Requires participation of all role-players in the assessment process.
- Circular framework – always returning to the efficacy of the assessment.

Summary of proposed model

This research puts forward an assessment centre model able to serve the needs of the quality assurance body, as well as those of industry. Most importantly, it is a model that will be appropriate for retail sector occupational qualifications.

Of the two models considered, Model B was judged to be the best fit for meeting South African requirements. The preferred model proposes the use of TVET colleges for most national assessments.

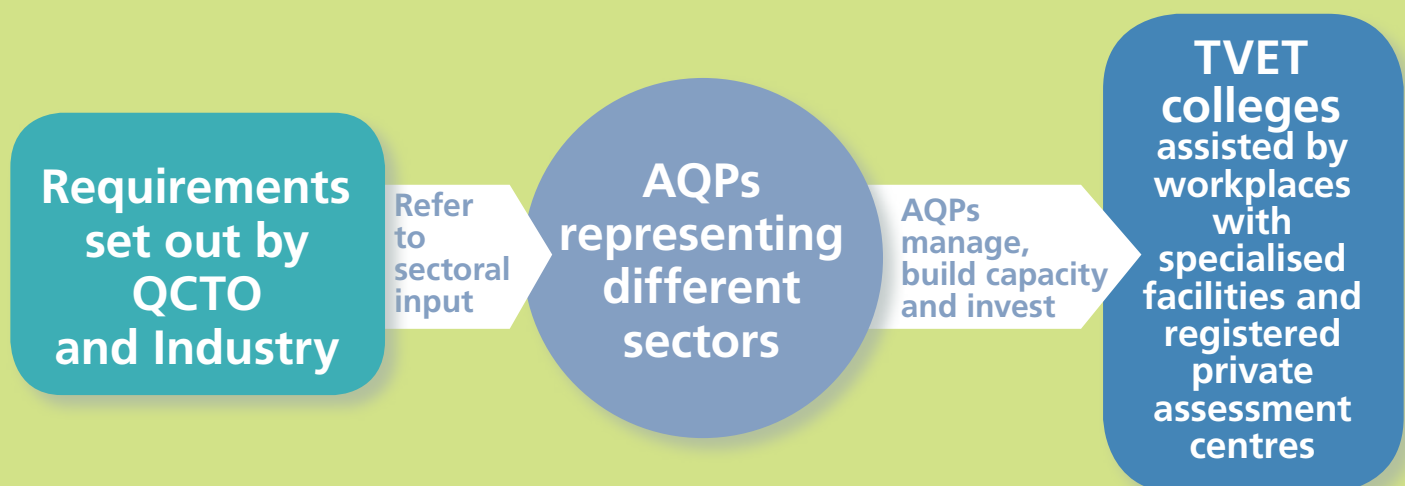
Similar to the Bangladeshi model outlined previously, Model B suggests a combination of public, private and workplace solutions to the assessment centre question. There is a definite need for multiple types of organisations to be enrolled as assessment centres in this scenario.

Among the advantages of the selected model is the lack of reliance on private and for-profit assessment, which would have the effect of reducing the cost of assessments. There would be little need for development of new resources as many TVET colleges would be able to utilise their existing facilities. There would also be an opportunity for the colleges to benefit financially from this relationship.

The problems presented by South Africa's large geographic footprint can also be addressed by the utilisation of TVET colleges, many of which have a widespread national presence. This would go a long way towards ensuring accessibility, and where there are no TVET colleges, private providers could be called on for support. Despite TVET colleges providing a solution on one level, an aspect not adequately addressed by the proposed model is the practical component of the assessment process. Catering to the practical side of assessment could require additional capacity building and investment by the AQP in the various TVET colleges' assessment centres.

A critical consideration in the wholesale and retail sector is that each business' point of sale (POS) system is different, and learners would be disadvantaged if they had to use alternative systems for assessment purposes. As a possible solution to this quandary, the model selected also allows for practical assessments, under consideration by the AQP, to be carried out in the workplace.

Resource sharing is seen as an important aspect in the development of a national assessment centre model. There are some concerns about the cost of building capacity to handle such a model, but if multiple AQPs could share costs and resources, this could go a long way to alleviating the load.



Summary of the management system

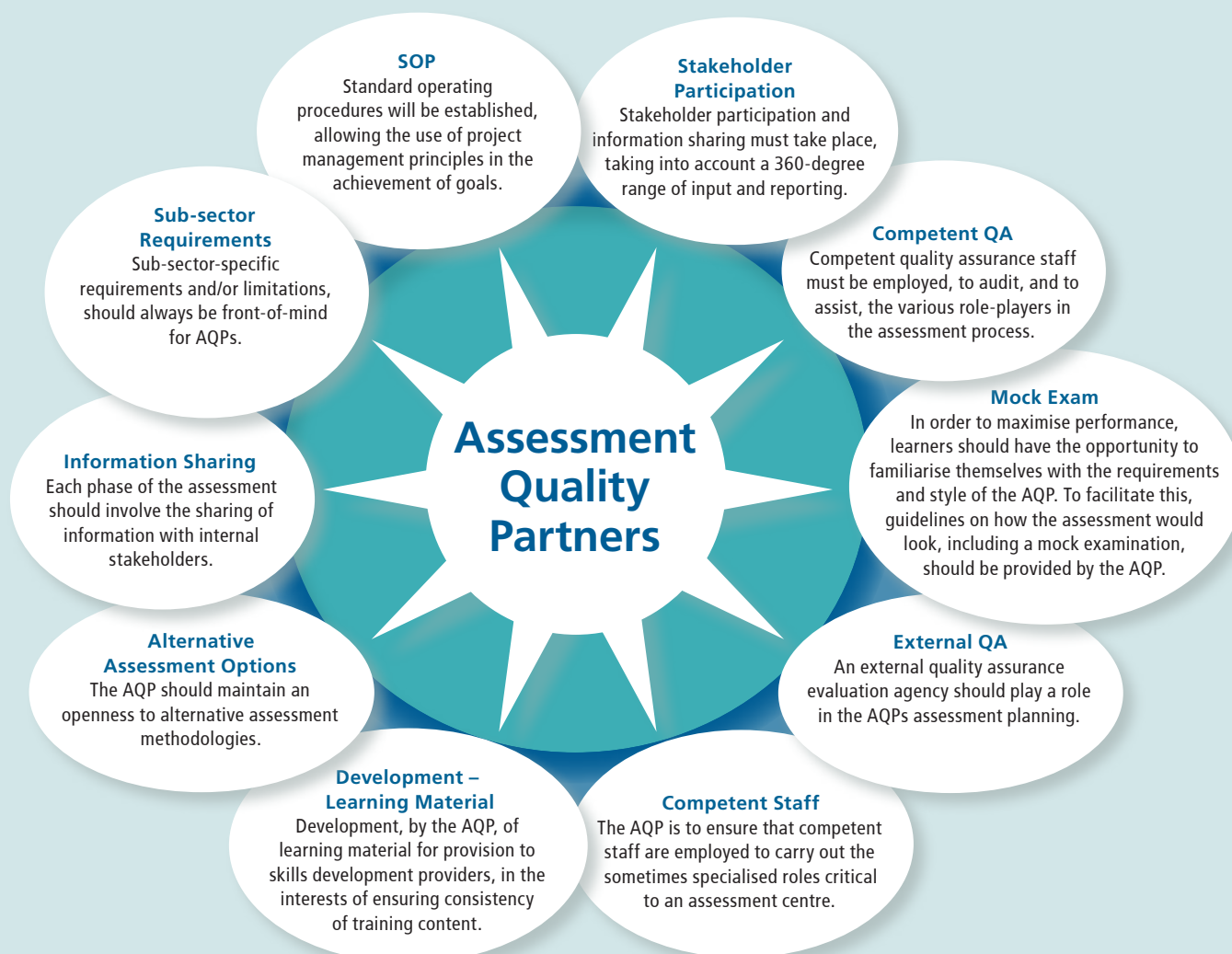
The fact that there is no pilot implementation against which to benchmark the process of setting up, operating and maintaining the AQP has been a significant challenge, and the parameters of the proposed management system should be viewed in light of this fact.

Central to the new framework are Assessment Quality Partners (AQPs). The AQPs will be responsible for the management of the assessment process nationally, and will therefore need to develop assessment tools, at the same time as managing the logistics involved in a national external integrated summative assessment scenario.

The consideration of ensuring a fit-for-purpose model that is non-sector led, and which is not exclusive, becomes a serious challenge. In implementation, these criteria will be difficult to manage from a cost perspective.

There is a set of principles and values held by the QCTO, which the AQP will be required to meet. In addition, there are very specific timelines provided by the QCTO in the implementation model for the AQP, which may be difficult to attain.

Requirements for AQPs



IMPLEMENTATION OF MODEL & MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

To assist the AQP in implementing the proposed assessment model, consideration must be given to the accreditation of training providers, choice of assessment methods and tools and monitoring and evaluation of assessment centres, to ensure the maintenance of necessary levels of integrity and quality.

TRAINING PROVIDER ACCREDITATION

Criteria considered by W&RSETA respondents as critical for the accreditation of training providers for the seven retail occupational qualifications:



Subject Matter Experts and Skills Development Providers

Evidence of: industry specific knowledge; previous experience in the role; understanding of how to facilitate training of the subject.



Venue and Equipment

Evidence of an appropriate venue and equipment for learning.



QCTO Knowledge

Evidence of: QCTO system knowledge; how each component of learning aids learner development.



Training Plan

Evidence of planning as to how the provider will impart knowledge and skills to meet final assessment requirements.



Competency Assessment

A competency-based assessment, demonstrating relevant subject matter expertise, as well as an understanding of the responsibilities of a training provider.



OHS and Licensing

Evidence of compliance with occupational health and safety regulations, as well as any other licensing or regulatory requirements.



National Footprint

The training provider should have a national footprint or network, to ensure consistency in learning practices.

ASSESSMENT METHODS AND TOOLS

An assessment centre's choice of methods and tools is critical to achieving the goal of valid, authentic, reliable and current assessments. The assessments should furthermore be compliant with the quality criteria of the South African Qualifications Authority.

According to the Occupational Qualifications Development Facilitator Manual, the four most common assessment models are:

- Written assessment
- Evaluation of practical tasks
- Evaluation of a project and/or assignment
- Evaluation of on-the-job performance

Under the previous system of unit standard based learning, providers were permitted to choose their own assessment method, and design their assessment instruments to suit that choice. Understandably, this system gave rise to issues of consistency, which led to the development of a new approach to assessment.

The new approach is known as the external integrated summative assessment, and "The AQP will use the external assessment specifications document as a guide to develop nationally standardised assessment instruments, to ensure the validity, consistency, quality and credibility of the actual external summative assessment" (QCTO, 2014, p. 96).

MONITORING AND EVALUATION OF ASSESSMENT CENTRES

Assessment integrity is validated through a monitoring and evaluation process which provides data specific to the assessment, as well as relevant to the validation of the assessment centre. It will be impossible for an assessment to be ratified if quality assurance is not at agreed upon levels.

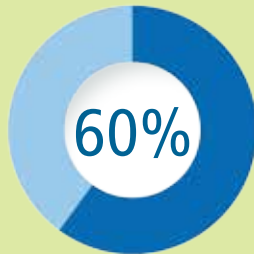
There is currently no indication of the type of activities that will be covered under the monitoring and evaluation process. It is therefore very difficult to postulate a framework and guidelines for monitoring.

Unannounced visits to the assessment centre, as is practiced by the City and Guilds, could go a long way towards evaluating the assessment centres' performance. Collection of data relevant to the assessments would also be crucial in establishing trends.

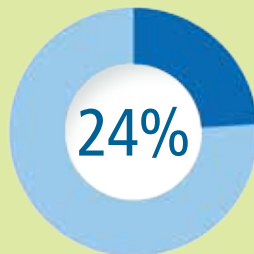
Monitoring, evaluation and certification are crucial elements of the assessment process, and the integrity of the assessment rests on them. Endorsement of the assessment cannot take place without an evaluation process that meets agreed upon criteria.

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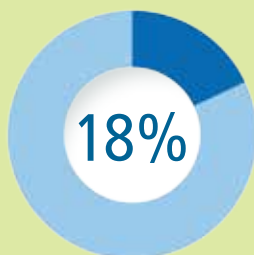
Understandably, this system gave rise to issues of consistency, which led to the development of a new approach to assessment.

INPUT FROM RESPONDENTS

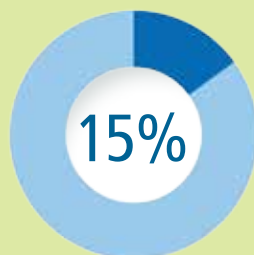
60% – this model is more practical, implementation-wise



23% – it is a more flexible model



18% – it will allow for greater availability of assessment venues



14% – in-house venues could utilise their own technology and systems, creating a more comfortable learning environment for their staff

**ADVANTAGES/BENEFITS**

Model B was chosen by the research group as the better of the assessment centre models for implementation in the South African wholesale and retail sector.

Furthermore, avoiding reliance on private and for-profit assessment centres only, would be likely to keep overall costs down.

TVET colleges could offer the use of their existing resources, possibly even benefiting financially from the arrangement.

The high incidence of TVET colleges, with their large national footprint, would ensure ease of accessibility and consistency of assessment practice. In situations where no TVET college is available, private providers could be recruited to take up the slack.

Due to the practical nature of many of the occupations in question, a public/private partnership between a TVET college and the workplace could prove ideal. Assessments could take place in the learner's working environment, thus coming as close as possible to 'live' assessment.

Considering that assessments are likely to require the presence of task-specific items, such as point of sale systems, service stations and dispatch areas, a partnership of this nature would be highly advantageous.

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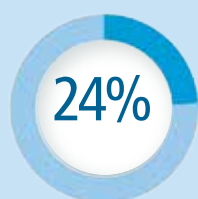
IMPLEMENTATION DIFFICULTIES

Of course, no model is without its drawbacks and in this case, POS systems is one of the culprits. Retail environments characteristically do not all use the same POS system. So which system would be used for assessment purposes? Utilising a generic POS system across the board, would require extra cost and time for learners to be trained in its workings.

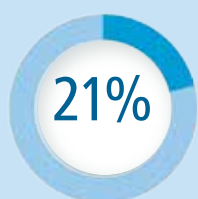


This is not the only way in which the model fails to adequately address the practical aspects of the assessment process – significant capacity building and investment of resources by the AQP in TVET colleges is likely to be required before they are fully functioning assessment centres.

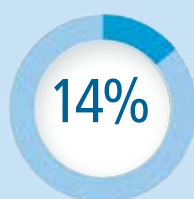
MISGIVINGS FROM RESPONDENTS



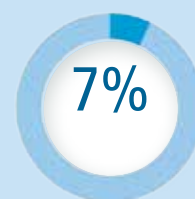
24% – in-house assessment centres should not assess their own learners



21% – the model would be more costly, and would require greater AQP involvement



14% – concern that standards would be compromised



7% – unclear how assessment design would cater to the many different kinds of workplace-specific equipment.

Conclusion

The development process around the establishment of a new assessment centre model, needs to bear in mind that whatever solution is selected, it must be scalable up to a national level.

In order to function successfully, with a national footprint, the model needs to prove itself as feasible, cost-effective and smoothly functioning. The ultimate goal, of course, is the provision of a clean and accurate assessment for occupational learners.

The financial viability of the new system is of paramount importance, with costs and resource planning heavily influenced by the nature of the model chosen. With the utilisation of existing resources, such as TVET colleges, significant additional investment may be required, whereas choosing the path of private sector participation is likely to result in assessment centre entities which foot the bill themselves.

The type of research summarised above is key to the successful development of a feasible national assessment model. It is a fact, however, that educational management issues have not been central to the above process, and further research focusing on this aspect is recommended.

Critical to the successful implementation of the recommended model is greater engagement with the quality assurance body and industry role-players. With this in place, hopefully a model that works for all stakeholders will be the result, and will serve as inspiration for other AQPs.

THE W&R SECTOR

W&R is the fourth largest contributor to GDP and the 30 000 tax-registered retail enterprises employ about 20% of the total economically active workforce according to Stats SA.

The recent update of the W&R Sector Education and Training Authority Sector Skills Plan: 2011-2016 says data shows that about 86% of registered enterprises in this sector are small and micro enterprises, 9.5% medium size and 4.5% large companies. Only 66% of operational retail traders are formally registered and contributing to the fiscus, suggesting there are over 100 000 informal (unregistered) traders in the sector accounting for 10% of national retail turnover.

The main employment increase has been in the informal /SMME sub-sector.

Wholesale&Retail **LEADERSHIP CHAIR**

Cape Peninsula University of Technology, Cape Town

THE WRLC

The Wholesale and Retail Leadership Chair (WRLC) at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT) was established in 2013, based on an initiative by the Wholesale & Retail Sector Education and Training Authority (W&RSETA) to contribute towards sector research and professional qualifications development at Higher Education levels.

A national survey report entitled Priority Research Needs of the South African Wholesale and Retail Sector marked the first step taken by the WRLC towards the creation of a basis for relevant research in this dynamic business sector.

The WRLC has now completed many research projects in the sector and reports on these studies are available at <http://wrlc.org.za/research-2-2/completed-research/>



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*These reports are available at http://wrlc.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/2014_08A-Assessment-centre-model-report.pdf
and http://wrlc.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/2014_08B-AQP-system-procedures-report.pdf*

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