

Trial of improved procedures for driver licence testing by occupational therapists

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Key Findings

- Trialling revealed that the requirements specified in a draft manual could not be satisfied in a test limited to 35 minutes duration.
- It was necessary to reduce the number of compulsory assessable driving tasks in a standard test route.
- The licence reassessment must allow time for assessment of client-specific tasks if required, in addition to the compulsory standard driving tasks.

Abstract

A draft manual for the Occupational Therapy Driving Test had previously been developed via a consultation process, setting out detailed specifications intended to improve the validity and reliability of the test and its consistency with other VicRoads licence tests. A trial was conducted to assess the feasibility, acceptability and effectiveness of the documented procedures and requirements. The trial involved (a) upgrading existing test routes to comply with the updated requirements, and (b) conducting licence tests using the updated procedures. Detailed written feedback was obtained from the occupational therapy driver assessors (OTs) who upgraded test routes and from the OTs who conducted the licence tests. Analysis of 156 feedback forms from 19 OTs revealed that the updated requirements resulted in a test that exceeded the preferred timeframe (35 minutes). The number of compulsory tasks required for all clients precluded sufficient time to conduct additional, client-specific tasks with those clients who needed them. This led the project team to reduce the number of compulsory tasks, relax some constraints regarding task locations, and reclassify two previously compulsory tasks as client-specific (optional) tasks. Extra guidance was added to the manual covering various procedural and assessment issues, and supplementary documentation was developed to assist OTs to comply with VicRoads requirements. The updated test is expected to provide a valid test of driving skills, while offering greater reliability than previous OT licence reassessment procedures.

Keywords

Driver licence testing, functionally impaired driver, occupational therapy driver assessment

Glossary

Local area test	A driver licence test that, if passed, results in a licence condition restricting driving to a specified geographic area (e.g. within 10 km of the driver's home)
Open area test	A driver licence test that, if passed, entitles the driver to a licence with no geographic restriction on driving
OT	Occupational therapist. In this paper, OT refers specifically to an occupational therapist with a postgraduate qualification in driver assessment.

Introduction

In line with national medical fitness to drive requirements (Austroads, 2016), VicRoads is responsible for assessing the driving competence not only of novice drivers applying for a first licence but also of current licence holders who have been referred for reassessment due to medical conditions, disability or observed unsafe driving.

Novice drivers applying for a first licence are assessed using the VicRoads Drive Test, which replaced the former test in 2008 following several years of rigorous, evidence-based development and trialling (Catchpole et al., 2008). The Drive Test implemented a new scoring protocol involving multiple assessment items for each assessable driving task. Standard test routes were developed for each VicRoads Customer Service Centre to ensure all licence applicants encounter a similar level of challenge during their test drive. Assessment criteria and test route requirements were documented in detail to help maximise the validity and reliability of the new test.

Reassessment of current licence holders with suspected or documented medical conditions is the responsibility of VicRoads Medical Review. In many cases, reassessment includes a practical driving test conducted on public roads to determine whether the driver is able to drive safely, legally and independently. For drivers with no major health issues, the on-road test is conducted by a VicRoads Driver Testing Officer.

If the driver has significant health issues, including cognitive, psychiatric or physical impairments, or if the driver may require aids or vehicle modifications, the licence reassessment is conducted on behalf of VicRoads by an OT who specialises in driver assessment. The reassessment comprises an assessment of the client's abilities, impairments and associated medical issues (conducted in the OT's office) and a practical driving test (conducted on public roads). The on-road component, known as the Occupational Therapy Driving Test (OTDT), is conducted over a fixed, predetermined test route if the client wishes to retain an unconditional ('open area') licence, or over an ad hoc route within a defined local area if a licence that limits driving to a local area is more appropriate for the client.

A driving instructor provides a dual-control vehicle for the test and accompanies the client and OT during the test drive. The instructor provides route instructions from the front passenger seat, where access to the dual controls also permits them to maintain safety during the drive. The OT directs the test, provides instructions and asks impairment related questions. Both the instructor and OT can offer feedback during certain sections of the test procedure (e.g. familiarisation drive) and can seek feedback or clarification from the client regarding performance during and/or at the conclusion of the test procedure.

Driver assessments conducted by OTs have an established role within adult rehabilitation and as a component of driver licensing authority medical review licensing processes (Dickerson, Reisletter, Schold Davis & Monahan, 2011; Di Stefano, 2017). Research has identified existing

limitations in test standardisation, validity and reliability (e.g. Classen, Krasniuk, Alvarex & Danter, 2016; Di Stefano & Macdonald, 2010; Kay, Bundy, Clemson & Jolly, 2008) and informed the development of the OTDT procedures discussed here (Berndt, May & Darzins, 2015; Classen, et al., 2010; Di Stefano & Macdonald, 2003; Di Stefano & Macdonald, 2011; Schechtman, et al., 2010).

Updating the OTDT

Following the development and implementation of the VicRoads Drive Test, VicRoads reviewed the licence reassessments conducted by VicRoads staff and by OTs to identify changes needed to improve the validity and reliability of the reassessments and their consistency with the new Drive Test. A key finding was that a manual should be developed to provide clear guidelines to OTs concerning the driving tasks that should be included in a licence test route and the criteria used to assess driving performance. VicRoads therefore developed a draft manual for the OTDT (Catchpole & Di Stefano, 2012) that aimed to provide OTs with:

- detailed guidance on VicRoads criteria for assessing whether a person is able to drive safely, legally and independently and meets the requirements for a Victorian licence
- detailed specification of the type and number of driving tasks to be included in a licence test route
- additional information concerning testing procedures, including checklists used to record test routes and observations of driving performance.

Trialling the updated test

VicRoads commissioned a trial of the test procedures in the draft OTDT manual. The trial was conducted by a team of representatives of the Australian Road Research Board, VicRoads and Occupational Therapy Australia–Victoria Division (OTA). The trial aimed to:

- test the feasibility, effectiveness and acceptability of the procedures and requirements set out in the draft manual and associated documentation
- collect feedback from OTA representatives who modified open area test routes and OTs who conducted licence tests during the trial to guide revision of the draft manual and associated documentation.

The trial had three components.

Component C1: Open area tests conducted using the procedures specified in the draft manual, but using existing test routes that did not fully comply with the updated requirements in the manual.

Component C2: Local area tests conducted using the procedures in the manual, including the test route requirements.

Component C3: Open area tests meeting all requirements in the draft manual, including the preparation of the test route.

Stage 1: Upgrading open area test routes for use in the trial

C3 required the use of open area test routes that fully complied with the updated requirements in the draft manual. Fifteen open area test routes were upgraded to comply with the new requirements, comprising five routes in inner urban areas of Melbourne, five in outer urban Melbourne and five in regional cities.

Method

Three experienced OTs were engaged to upgrade existing open area test routes. The routes underwent iterative improvements involving multiple reviews. Errors and non-conformances that indicated difficulty in complying with requirements in the draft manual were discussed within the project team and issues were resolved by consensus.

Results

The OTs who upgraded the routes found the task very difficult and needed multiple rounds of review and comment on each route to help them achieve compliance with the requirements in the manual. It was not possible at most testing locations to devise routes that included the required number of instances of each driving task type specified in the manual, while still allowing a licence test to be completed within the required maximum 35 minute duration. Difficulties included the requirement for multiple instances of many task types, the tight specification of road environments in which each task must occur and the distance that must be driven between locations suited to various tasks.

Changes to requirements for open area test routes

Based on feedback received during route upgrades, some requirements in the draft manual were relaxed to allow the upgrades to be completed. The major changes were as follows:

- The maximum permitted duration of an open area licence test was increased to 40 minutes.
- For some task types (turns, lane changes etc.), the minimum number of instances in a test route was reduced. This reduced the minimum number of tasks in an open area test route from 57 to 44.
- For some driving tasks, speed zones requirements were relaxed (for example, a requirement that a task occur at a location with a 50 or 60 km/h speed limit was relaxed to also allow 40 km/h).
- Other road environment limitations (e.g. number of lanes) were relaxed for a small number of task types.

Following these changes, all 15 open area test route upgrades were successfully completed.

Stage 2: Licence reassessments using the upgraded test

All three trial components involved OTs conducting on-road licence tests with VicRoads clients who had been referred for licence reassessment. As is standard practice, the outcomes of all licence reassessments conducted during the trial were reported to VicRoads Medical Review and provided the basis for VicRoads licensing decisions.

Participants

A total of 19 volunteer OTs participated across the three components of the trial. All were experienced driver assessors who had previously received copies of the draft OTDT manual and were broadly familiar with its content. Most of the volunteer OTs participated in more than one trial component.

Procedure

Before conducting licence reassessments during the trial, the volunteer OTs were issued:

- a new copy of the draft manual
- a document listing several minor revisions to the manual
- a feedback questionnaire to be completed after each licence reassessment during the trial
- trial versions of upgraded forms for reporting reassessment results to VicRoads Medical Review
- VicRoads responses to queries received from OTs during consultation sessions discussing the content of the draft manual.

The feedback questionnaire to be completed by the volunteer OTs after each licence reassessment sought information on the type of test conducted (open area or local area), test administration procedures, assessment criteria, driving tasks, test route construction and test documentation, including suggestions for changes or improvements to any of these. Most questions were open or semi-open, allowing the volunteer OT to provide free-format text responses. The questionnaire was distributed in the form of an electronic document. Most volunteer OTs chose to print multiple paper copies of the questionnaire and complete a copy by hand after each test; a few OTs chose to complete the questionnaire in electronic form on a computer. Responses provided by OTs were classified and summarised by a team member for consideration and action by the project team.

Results

Across the three trial components, completed feedback questionnaires pertaining to a total of 156 licence tests were returned by participating OTs. A selection of the most important comments and issues is presented below.

Familiarisation drive

Each test includes a short familiarisation drive to allow the client to become familiar with the test vehicle before assessment begins. It was noted that if the test starts on a busy road (as sometimes happens for tests starting from a hospital or from the client's home) then the familiarisation drive will start in a challenging driving environment.

Test duration

Analysis of the collected responses revealed that 81% of open area tests completed in C1 and C3 took longer than the trial limit of 40 minutes. Most upgraded routes used in C3 were considered too long by the OTs who used them. OTs noted that if the standard route is excessively long, there is not enough time left in the session for extra tasks that may be required for some clients due to their individual health conditions or disabilities. Furthermore, an excessively long test could fatigue the client and impact driving performance.

The draft manual specified that the duration of a local area test, excluding introduction to the vehicle and the familiarisation drive, should be in the range 20–30 minutes. However, 83% of tests completed in C2 took longer than 30 minutes. Some OTs omitted driving tasks to avoid adding excessive time to the test.

Assessable driving tasks (open area tests)

The draft manual specified the types of driving task and the minimum number of instances of each type that must be included in an open area test route. To facilitate a gradual increase in task complexity ('grading'), it also specified that the first 10 minutes of each test route should be limited to low-demand driving tasks, with high-demand tasks permitted in the remainder of the route.

Some OTs considered that the emergency stop and three-point turn are not necessary in every test because similar skills are tested in other situations (e.g. when driving in a carpark with pedestrians present).

Assessable driving tasks (local area tests)

The manual also specified the driving task types that must be included in a local area test route. OT feedback revealed tension between the need to include the driving tasks specified in the manual and allowing clients to self-navigate on routes they drive regularly and are familiar with. Including the required driving tasks may mean departing greatly from clients' usual routes. OTs noted the difficulty of devising extra destinations and manoeuvres during the course of the test to ensure all required driving tasks are included. Additional preparation time is required before the test to identify the client's usual destinations, check the distance from the client's home and identify additional manoeuvres to be included in the test. Some OTs allowed the client to choose the entire test route, meaning that some required tasks would not have been assessed during the test. As with open area tests, OTs considered an emergency stop should not be required in all local area tests.

Client-specific driving tasks and test customisation

Due to wide variations in health conditions and disabilities, some clients need to be assessed on additional tasks that are not relevant to other clients. Feedback revealed that:

- Some OTs frequently add client-specific tasks to open area tests, whereas others do so rarely or never. One OT argued that client-specific tasks cannot be implemented in a manner that is fair to all clients.
- In most cases, the standard route was too long to allow time for client-specific tasks.
- Self-navigation was considered an important task for many clients, but is difficult to assess when using a standard route with detailed navigation instructions. One OT routinely requires all clients to self-navigate home from the finish of the test route, and another included an assessable self-navigation task in a lesson before the licence test.
- For clients who were not ready to commence the test or failed early in the test, the remainder of the session was used to provide feedback or driver rehabilitation.

Assessment criteria

The draft manual set out detailed criteria identifying a range of 'Fail Errors' (serious errors that lead automatically to test failure) and 'Performance Errors' (less serious errors that result in feedback after the test rather than failure and help to identify the client's rehabilitation needs). OT comments concerning these criteria included the following:

- The speed tolerances set out in the manual are too strict. Clients should not automatically fail for going more than 5 km/h over a speed limit.
- Clients who are anxious and driving an unfamiliar vehicle may forget to release the handbrake. This should not be considered a Fail Error.
- When performing the emergency stop task, clients probably do not meet the requirement stated in the manual to 'bring the vehicle to a complete stop quickly, as may be required in a genuine emergency'.

OTs also asked for clarification or additional guidance regarding a range of assessment issues.

Test procedures

The draft manual specified that tasks performed during the familiarisation drive are not assessable for the purposes of driver licensing. Feedback on driving performance may be given to the client during the familiarisation drive, but not during the licence test. However, some OTs queried this separation, with one arguing that errors committed during the familiarisation drive may be part of a pattern that reveals an underlying problem. Another asked whether a task that is performed satisfactorily during the familiarisation drive needs to be assessed again during the licence test. It was also argued that providing feedback during the test would allow assessment of the client's ability to learn and improve.

Changes to the test following the trial

In response to feedback received during the trial, numerous adjustments and improvements were made to all aspects of the test and associated documentation before the updated OTDT was implemented across Victoria. The most important of these are summarised below.

Test routes and driving tasks

The maximum time allowed for a standard open area test route, which had been increased to 40 minutes for the trial, was returned to 35 minutes. This change ensured that up to 10 minutes would be available in the standard one-hour session to administer additional, client-specific tasks for those clients who need them. To ensure this reduced time allocation could be achieved:

- Further reductions were made in the number of instances of some driving tasks required in a standard open area test route.
- Two of the most time-consuming tasks, the emergency stop and the three-point turn, were reclassified as client-specific tasks, to be included in the test only when warranted by the health condition or disability of the client.
- Restrictions on road environment factors (such as speed limits) were further relaxed for some tasks without compromising client safety. This reduced the likelihood of having to drive a long distance to reach a suitable road location for the relevant task.

Text was added to the test manual to clarify that every open area test route must include one or more intersections controlled by traffic signals; signals controlling access to a bridge or signals at a mid-block pedestrian crossing are not sufficient.

Assessment criteria

The criteria for compliance with speed limits listed in the draft manual were markedly stricter than those previously applied by OTs. This was of concern to some OTs, who considered that the change may increase the proportion of clients failing the test. In response to this concern, an explanation of the importance of strict compliance with speed limits for safe driving and for consistency with other VicRoads licence tests was added to the manual.

The OTs considered that failure to release the handbrake before moving off is often a result of the test situation (either nervousness about being tested or lack of familiarity with the test vehicle) and should not automatically result in test failure. A new provision was therefore documented allowing the driving instructor or OT to verbally remind the client to release the handbrake if necessary without recording a Fail Error.

The emergency stop task, when used, is conducted at a time and place decided by the driving instructor or OT, who takes responsibility for observing traffic behind the test vehicle and deciding whether it is safe to perform the

task. Observation was therefore removed from the list of assessment items applicable to the emergency stop task. Thus the only item to be assessed for this task is Vehicle Control.

Test procedures

New material was added to the test manual to provide additional guidance on a range of issues, including:

- whether the client is ready to attempt the on-road test
- communication with clients with special needs (such as hearing impairment)
- the role of interpreters (who accompany some clients who have poor English proficiency)
- how the OT and instructor should deal with advanced driver assistance systems that may be present in the test vehicle, such as cruise control, reversing camera or assisted parking
- the requirements that must be satisfied for a licence test to be regarded as complete (and hence able to lead to a Pass outcome) if some parts of the planned route were omitted (for example due to unforeseen roadworks).

Documentation

Apart from the changes and improvements made to the test manual, several additional documents were developed to assist OTs and driving instructors to conduct the OTDT according to the procedures required by VicRoads. These included:

- Information for driving instructors: an explanation of the OTDT and the role of the driving instructor in the test for instructors who may be unfamiliar with the test.
- OT and driving instructor communication form: a structured format for the OT to record client training needs and for the driving instructor to report lesson outcomes to the OT.
- Summary of requirements for open area test routes: a four-page summary of key points from the manual concerning the number and type of driving tasks required in an open area route and the road environment (speed limit, number of lanes etc.) required for each (intended as an aid to an OT who is preparing an open area test route).
- Open area test route compliance tool: a one-page checklist of requirements for open area test routes that can be used to review the compliance of a newly-completed or newly-upgraded route.

Implementation of the updated test

Training OTs to deliver the test

VicRoads organised a full-day training seminar to disseminate the revised OTDT documentation and procedures to OTs who conduct licence tests in Victoria. The seminar also provided opportunities for OTs to ask questions about any aspect of the test on which they were not clear.

The seminar was attended by 69 OTs from across Victoria, the largest ever face-to-face gathering of OTs who conduct licence tests in Victoria. Attendees had the opportunity to sign up for additional support for OTDT implementation.

To cater for OTs who were unable to attend the seminar and for newly-trained OTs in the future, VicRoads produced a self-directed learning package that contains all of the training materials, including the seminar presentations.

Development of compliant open area test routes

As a result of the changes made to open area test route requirements following the trial, the 15 routes developed for use in the trial were no longer fully compliant. VicRoads therefore commissioned OTA to revise these routes again to ensure compliance with the final route requirements. The upgraded routes will be available for use by other OTs who have a need to conduct an open area test in any of those 15 localities.

All Victorian OTs who conduct licence reassessments were asked to upgrade their standard open area test routes to comply with the requirements set out in the final OTDT manual. To assist them with this task, VicRoads commissioned OTA to support OTs working on route upgrades with help from the three experienced OTs who upgraded the routes used in the trial.

Discussion

Validity

The OTDT assesses whether a VicRoads client is able to drive safely, legally and independently. A Victorian licence holder is entitled to drive on public roads throughout Australia, ranging from busy shopping strips to high-speed freeways to unsealed bush tracks. It is desirable for the test to include a wide variety of driving tasks to assess driving performance in a wide range of environments. However, the financial costs of the OTDT – payments for the services of the OT and the driving instructor – are often paid by the client being tested. It is important that these costs are not so high that drivers who have been referred for licence reassessment cannot afford to attempt the test. It is also desirable for as many clients as possible to be tested near where they live, rather than being required to travel a long distance to another part of Victoria to be tested in a road environment (such as a freeway) that may not be available near their home.

To address these competing requirements, the OTDT manual sets out minimum requirements for road features that must be available to permit the development of a valid open area test route. An open area test route must include roundabouts, intersections controlled by traffic lights, multi-lane roads (with lane lines marked on the road) and roads with a speed limit of at least 60 km/h (at least 80 km/h preferred). Localities in which one or more of these features are unavailable are not suitable for open area licence testing. Clients living in these areas can travel to a larger town or

city to attempt an open area licence test, or can undertake a local area test close to home. Clients who pass a local area test will have a condition added to their licence limiting them to driving in the local area in which they were tested.

To gauge the suitability of the open area route requirements for use across Victoria, the trial included the development of open area routes at five locations in inner urban Melbourne, five locations in outer urban Melbourne and five large regional cities. After revision of the route requirements following the trial, complying open area routes were successfully developed at all trial locations. As yet, there is no confirmation of how many other regional cities and towns will meet all of the requirements for OTDT open area testing.

Reliability

A key requirement both of VicRoads and of clients who undergo licence reassessment is that the OTDT should have high reliability: when a client is tested, the outcome should be determined by the client's ability to drive safely, legally and independently; as far as practicable, the outcome should not be influenced by extraneous factors, such as where in Victoria the client lives, or whether they are assessed by an OT who works in a hospital or an OT in private practice. VicRoads has therefore established statewide standards for the driving tasks that should be included in a licence reassessment and standard criteria for assessing the client's performance of those tasks.

Maintaining high reliability is more challenging in the case of the OTDT than in the testing of probationary licence applicants. In the entry-level test, all clients are assumed to be fairly similar, not subject to individual special needs, and thus it is appropriate to deliver, as far as possible, the same test to every client. OTDT clients, however, often have significant health conditions or disabilities that need to be taken into account when assessing their driving performance. For example, a client with the use of only one hand may need to use adaptive equipment such as a spinner knob on the steering wheel; testing of such a client may need to put extra emphasis on assessment of vehicle control when negotiating roundabouts and performing low-speed manoeuvres such as three-point turns. The OTDT includes a core set of standard driving tasks that must be assessed for all clients, but also allows for the inclusion of client-specific driving tasks to cater for individual clients who need additional assessment.

The OTDT is delivered by a large group of assessors, some of whom work for hospitals or area health services, whilst others work in private practice and have limited opportunities to meet or discuss assessment issues with other OT driver assessors. The professional association (OTA) has a large driving special interest group that meets quarterly and provides a forum for practice, research and other issues to be discussed. In addition, VicRoads organises seminars for OTs, usually held twice a year. While many OTs attend these seminars, others find the travel and time required make attendance impractical. Thus OTs delivering the OTDT have varying levels of contact with each other

and with VicRoads. It is therefore critical that the statewide standards established by VicRoads and documented in the OTDT manual be disseminated and promoted as thoroughly and effectively as possible to all OTs conducting driver assessments in Victoria. It will also be important for VicRoads to offer refresher training to help OTs continue to adhere to VicRoads standards as time passes following the implementation of the updated OTDT.

Evaluation

Once the implementation of the updated OTDT has been completed and any initial problems have been addressed, it would be valuable to evaluate the test to assess whether it is achieving its objectives and whether any fine-tuning is required to allow the test to function more effectively or more efficiently.

Conclusions

Feedback from OTs who conducted licence tests during the trial revealed that the requirements for an open area test set out in the draft manual could not be satisfied in a test that could be routinely completed in 35 or even 40 minutes. It was therefore necessary to reduce the minimum number of assessable tasks to be included in a test route and to relax some of the environmental constraints, such as speed limits, applying to the locations where tasks are conducted. OT feedback also highlighted the importance of limiting the time allocated to standard driving tasks to ensure time is available to conduct additional, client-specific tasks when necessary. The emergency stop and three-point turn tasks were found not to be acceptable as compulsory tasks for all clients, and were therefore reclassified as client-specific tasks, to be conducted when appropriate to the needs of the individual client.

It was necessary to add material to the test manual to provide additional guidance on compliance with speed limits, dealing with advanced driver assistance in vehicles, criteria for a test to be considered complete and numerous other issues. It was also necessary to develop additional documentation to assist OTs and driving instructors to conduct the OTDT according to VicRoads procedures.

The upgraded OTDT is expected to provide a valid test of the driving skills required to drive safely, legally and independently, and to achieve a higher level of reliability than the previous test. An evaluation will be needed to confirm that these expectations are being met and to identify any fine-tuning that may be required.

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