

Finding Balance

How easy is it to
get your motorcycle licence?
How easy should it be?

WORDS Nick Dalziel

IMAGINE if you learned to drive a car the same way as you learn to ride a motorcycle. No scared parent beside you, no instructor with a set of their own pedals.

Some states require you to ride with a supervisor, following in another vehicle, but this isn't always practical or desirable for either the learner or the teacher.

Instead, riders often learn their craft at a racetrack, before being let out into the big bad world on their own with an L plate on the back of their new two-wheeler.

So imagine going to Eastern Creek for a couple of days and then heading out in a car on your own.

Sure, a closed-off track helps you learn to control a vehicle, but without other road users, intersections or traffic lights, it's hardly preparation for the road.

Most motorcyclists will already have a car licence and should be

used to dealing with road conditions, but to a lot of people it makes little sense to learn on a track.

Victoria is the first state to have addressed this with new rules for learner riders commencing in March. Under the new Graduated Licensing System (GLS) the learner's course involves an on-road component, in which riders are supervised and shown potential hazards in-situ, rather than in a classroom.

It's now harder to get your licence, but will it put people off buying a two-wheeler?

Robyn Seymour, Director of Vehicle and Road Use Policy at VicRoads, said the development of the new GLS came off the back of significant research into motorcycle safety. At the forefront was a desire to address common mishaps.

"We looked at the top five novice rider crashes that Victorian motorcyclists had and looked at how we could develop a training program



ROBYN SEYMOUR



MICHEAL MORAN

that might prepare novice riders," she told *Australian Automotive*.

Seymour says the GLS removes inconsistencies between training providers across the state: all providers must deliver exactly the same course over two days. Activities are pre-determined, and training circuits are all the same size.

"The program was very rigorously and deliberately developed to try and address those key risk areas."

Seymour said behaviour change theories were also important in developing the new course. VicRoads commissioned the University of New South Wales, which worked with a training provider to change the course. Systems from other Australian states and across the world were examined to evaluate best practise.

Also part of the new GLS is a compulsory 'check ride' which learners must attend before going for their licence. Seymour explains

that this is not an assessment, but rather a coaching session on road craft and safe riding behaviours. Riders are given feedback and suggestions, ahead of their test.

"The check ride is quite unique in getting a motorcyclist to touch base and see how they're going," Seymour said.

It's also crucial to passing the stricter licence test, according to training providers.

Micheal Moran is Victorian State Manager at Honda Australia Rider Training (HART). He said the new system makes it considerably harder to get a learner permit and licence.

"Motorcycling requires a high level of skill and understanding to do it well and properly," he told *Australian Automotive*.

"The outcome at the end of the day for the people who work their way through it, and pass all of the assessments, will see a better rider."

Moran said that where pass rates at HART were around 90 per cent for a learner permit, in the early days of the new system they are closer to 60 per cent.

"It's unfortunate that under the old system there was no requirement to go on the road. Depending on what provider you went to, you could just turn up and do the tests, and spend the sum total of 40 minutes on a motorcycle and you would have a licence," he said.

Pointing out just how much more difficult the new requirements are, Moran said learners who obtained their permit under the old system were more likely to fail their licence than pass, particularly if they did not complete the check ride.

"The check ride is not compulsory for those who did their learner permit under the old system, so they could just do the licence assessment. We're finding that for people who do that the failure rate is over 70 per cent," Moran said.

Moran said the check ride, which is optional for this group, is crucial to give riders the skills they need for the assessment, and indeed for riding safely on the road.

All in all, then, it's a lot more difficult to get a motorcycle licence in Victoria. But how hard should it be?

One important factor in improving safety for motorcyclists, and indeed any road user, is numbers.

Peter Baulch, Chairman of the Australian Motorcycle Council,

the peak body representing riders in Australia, says the more motorcyclists on the roads, the safer it is for everyone.

"Car drivers are not used to seeing motorcyclists," Baulch said.

Baulch noted the higher percentage of motorcyclists on roads in Europe and Asia did not cause a high fatality rate.

Supporting this is a study released in the UK which essentially found that in European countries where motorcycles made up a higher share of the vehicle parc, the fatality rate for motorcycles was far lower.

For example, in the UK, where four per cent of road users are motorcycles, the motorcyclist fatality rate was 2.91 per 10,000.

On the other hand, in Spain, where motorcycles made up 15 per cent of traffic, the fatality rate was 0.85 per 10,000.

It was suggested that riders become far more noticeable by drivers if there are more of them on the roads. In other words, a driver would be more cautious to watch for a rider if they had already seen 20 motorcycles in the past hour rather than if they had only seen two.

Baulch says it's a similar case in Vietnam. In a country where motorcycles outnumber cars 18 to one, and where safety gear often consists of a double-plug pair of thongs, the fatality rate is "lower than expected".



PETER BAULCH

Victoria now requires novice riders to pass an on-road assessment before they can get their L's. Students go out in groups of up to five with one instructor

That's not to say Baulch is in favour of Vietnamese-style licence assessment. He says AMC has advocated for advanced rider training for some time, and that the Council is "very happy" with the syllabus adopted.

"This has always been opposed by the authorities, traditionally on the basis that additional training will only increase their rider confidence and bravado, and there will be more accidents. But you wouldn't trust your brain to an untrained neurosurgeon," he said.

So having more motorcyclists on the road is a good thing for safety, but Baulch emphasises the need to have more competent motorcyclists.

Data has found a significant proportion, up to 84 per cent, of accidents between a car and a motorcycle were the fault of the car.

"That doesn't reduce the injuries for a motorcyclist, but it points to the need for other road users to be vigilant," Baulch said.

Baulch notes, however, that good training assists with road positioning, so that a rider is more prepared for drivers not seeing them.

However, it's important that people can afford the time and financial commitment needed to get their licence. With courses costing a few hundred dollars, plus the cost of a check ride and test, it's no mean feat.



Image source: VcRoads and HART

Readers may note a spike in Victorian motorcycle fatalities in 2016, of which unlicensed riders make up a significant proportion.

If a licence is too hard to get, then, could it lead to people riding unlicensed, or simply not bothering to give up the car for a two-wheeler?

Robyn Seymour from VicRoads makes an interesting point.

"One of the things that we know from the former system is that about one-quarter of those who gained their learner permit never went on to become a motorcycle licence holder," she said.

While there are a number of reasons for this, the lack of preparation under the old system, and the lack of confidence instilled to new riders, may leave some uneasy about riding solo. While the new system is harder, those who pass will likely be much better prepared for the road.

As with all changes, there are significant opportunities.

Stuart Strickland OAM, Executive Chairman of the Australian Motorcycle Dealers Association, says motorcycle dealers would do well to collaborate with a local provider.

"We're certainly encouraging motorcycle dealers to set up

a partnership with a training provider. It could mean a discount on a motorcycle or safety equipment," Strickland said.

"It's a great way to attract a customer when they are new to motorcycling, and build loyalty from the earliest time possible.

This is something which Don Brown is looking into. Brown, owner of Motorcycle Land Ballarat, in regional Victoria, says it's a very different world for new riders today, with busier roads and less opportunity to practice off-road.

"When I started we all rode in the bush before we got on the road. A lot of riders today come to us new and haven't ridden before," Brown said.

Monitoring is all part of the plan for VicRoads and the training providers like HART. VicRoads is providing ongoing support to providers to assist them delivering the new course, and will be evaluating feedback from providers and participants.

Brown says if the training can be shown to improve safety then it's a good thing.

"Even if it's going to be more expensive," he says, "if we can keep riders alive longer it's more important to us than money." ■

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STUART STRICKLAND

TOP 5 HITS

THE new Victorian Graduated Licensing System (GLS) for motorcyclists was designed on the basis of reducing the five most common crashes for inexperienced motorcyclists.

These are:

- Loss of control (single vehicle)
- Crash in the same direction (rear-ending the car in front)
- Side swipe (vehicle changing lanes into the side of a motorcycle)
- Intersections (vehicle pulling out into the path of a motorcycle)
- Head-on

Exercises on the range and in the classroom are designed to address the causes of these crashes, and ways to avoid them. While a good degree of collisions between motorcycles and cars are not the motorcyclist's fault, instructors at the course point out that being in the right is cold comfort if you're seriously injured.

The choice of motorcycle is also important, with safety features like ABS trickling down into LAMS bikes. Robyn Seymour from VicRoads says the body has developed a website to make it easier for inexperienced motorcyclists to choose safer motorcycles.

"If they are choosing bikes that have some of those important technologies like ABS, that will have a really big impact on the capacity, if something does go wrong, to avoid a crash," she said. ■

STATE OF AFFAIRS

OTHER states are closely monitoring the Victorian results. Calum Finlayson from HART in Queensland says it is encouraging to see governments looking at revising training programs to improve rider safety. However, Finlayson said behavioural training was as important as competency training.

"What keeps riders safe is their attitude," he said.

Currently, Queensland riders do not require any training to get their motorcycle L's, and must only pass a knowledge test. People must have held a car licence for over one year so that they have on-road experience before riding solo. Once Queensland learners have passed a skills assessment they can ride on their own. Until this time, they must ride with a supervisor. Most riders therefore opt to take part in a training course after they sit their

knowledge assessment.

New South Wales has a system which sees riders attend a pre-learner course with skills assessment on a range, held over two 3.5-hour sessions. After passing this, people then have to go to the RTA/RMS to sit a knowledge test before they can obtain a learner licence. A pre-provisional course, done before learners go for their licence, sees riders assessed on the road. Paul Donald, Manager HART NSW, praised the new Victorian system and was keen to see outcomes for safety. Donald suggested governments look to subsidise courses for riders who may have obtained their licence a while ago and are returning to riding. This group, he suggested, may not have been subject to rigorous training in the past and may have forgotten good skills and habits. ■

While the changes will make it more costly for prospective riders to get their learner's permit and licence, most parties agree they will go a long way to reducing fatalities. Dealers are being advised to collaborate with training schools



GETTING MY L'S

I RODE along the Hume Highway at close to top speed, and I didn't have a licence. A day and a half earlier I had never even ridden a motorcycle.

This isn't the start of a courtroom confession; it's all part of getting a learner's permit in Victoria.

Implemented earlier this year for aspiring Victorian motorcyclists, the new Graduated Licensing System sees an on-road component added to the now stricter learner's test.

The fact that learner riders are out on their own in the world, unlike learner drivers, means there isn't someone to point them in the right direction if things get complicated.

Couple this with the increased vulnerability of motorcyclists and the greater concentration and skill required to stay safe and upright, and it makes sense that any testing for L's should be more rigorous.

The course certainly is harder. I was the only one of the four participants in the Honda Australia Rider Training (HART) course to obtain my permit.

The others, who failed their range assessment and on-road assessment, would have to come back for another day's training and testing.

Having ridden with these people, and knowing what it's like on busy Melbourne roads, I was glad they failed.

In the course were two teenagers, both of whom had only driven around 15 hours in a car on their L's.

Both were looking for a way of getting around without having to drive 120 supervised hours in a car, either because they didn't want to inconvenience mum and dad, or because they didn't appreciate the nagging parent in the passenger seat. My instructor told me after the course was completed that all the other participants would have passed under the old system, which is concerning given their lack of experience and skill. Two of the others failed their range assessment, meaning they could not come on the road assessment. This was due to a number of safety-related errors at low speed, such as stalling, poor motorcycle control or incorrect technique.

One of the teenagers scraped through his range assessment and was allowed to come on the road with the instructor and I.

In order to get to the suburban streets where we were to be assessed, we had to ride along an 80km/h dual carriageway.

This was the difficult part. On the range we had only been in second gear, and had not ridden above 30km/h. Now we were expected to pull out and get up to 80km/h, which takes a while on a 125cc motorcycle. I never expected to use full throttle on a licence test!

The other participant stalled at the first set of lights, and struggled to set off again. Not great when cars and trucks are flying past at 80km/h, and certainly a worry for the instructor and I, who needed to keep ourselves out of danger. When he stalled at a suburban roundabout, that was it.

We hadn't yet made it to the assessment but the instructor asked that this participant park up his bike and ride as a pillion while I completed my test.

There can be up to five taking an on-road assessment at any given time, and instructors certainly don't want to be shepherding unsafe riders on busy roads.



I had the skills to ride on quiet roads and gradually build up to heavy traffic

Micheal Moran from HART says if riders are unsafe enough on the roads that the instructor loses confidence, head office can come and pick them and their bike up from the side of the road.

I asked Moran if his instructors found it difficult taking up to five inexperienced riders, who may have never driven or ridden on a road before, out on the bitumen.

He notes that if riders are lacking in skill, they're unlikely to make it to this stage of the assessment, as they must pass their range test first.

"The feedback is that it's actually easier to take a group of learners out on the road than what it sometimes is to take one person for a licence assessment (who did their L's under the old system)," he said.

As for the jump in speeds, Moran says that while the new ranges are smaller than the old ones which HART operated, other providers did not have the room to add new ranges, and a smaller range means people get more attempts to practice a particular skill.

He says providers across the state are looking into test routes, as many training schools have learners pulling out onto a 100km/h road in order to ride to the test course.

From my experience, I would suggest this is one area that needs revisiting. Even if providers use more powerful motorcycles which are more capable of getting to higher speeds, the jump from 30km/h to 80 is a big one, even for someone who has proven themselves competent on the range.

On the other hand, it's better to ride at a higher speed for the first time with an instructor nearby, than on your own. Having never ridden before, I felt like I had been given the skills to ride on quiet roads and gradually build up to heavier traffic. I learnt a lot from the course, including road craft and positioning, which may not have been the case for many riders who sat their L's before March this year. ■



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