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ABSTRACT

The question of whether apprenticeships and traineeships can survive in Australia's emerging social and economic environment was explored through a review of two bodies of research. The first consisted of recent reviews of the quality of traineeships in Queensland and Tasmania and apprenticeships in Victoria. The second was a study on the future of work that was being conducted by the Research Centre for Vocational Education and Training and Australian Centre for Industrial Relations Research and Training. The recent success of Australia's New Apprenticeship system was considered in the context of the structure, content, and skill requirements of the jobs currently being created. The following problems were identified as affecting the long-term survival of apprenticeships and traineeships: increasing detachment from a centralized industrial relations system and industrial awards; increasing reliance on skill opportunities provided by the content and structure of work in individual enterprises rather than within an industry; high levels of employer influence and declining levels of employer investment in training; increasing dependence on a regime of public subsidy and training regulation; uncertainty about how to deal the competing trends of on-skilling and de-skilling; and reluctance to admit that not all workplaces are or even aspire to be learning organizations. (Contains 12 references.) (MN)

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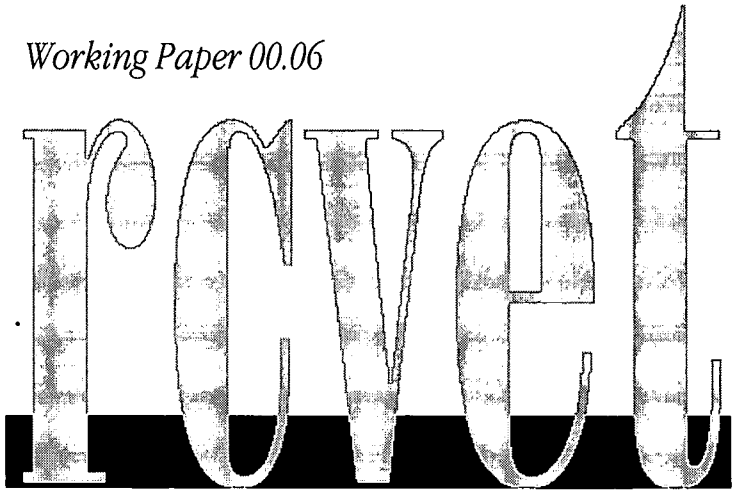
Working Paper 00.06



UTS RESEARCH CENTRE FOR VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING
A national key centre supported by the Australian National Training Authority

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Kaye Schofield

Paper prepared for the National Conference of the Centre for Economics of Education and Training on' Mobilising Resources for Lifelong Learning', Melbourne, 30 October 2000.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is an initial and hopefully useful attempt to link two quite distinct pieces of research. The first is the reviews of the quality of the traineeship in Queensland and Tasmania undertaken in 1999 and the review of apprenticeships and traineeships in Victoria in the first half of 2000. The second is work that the RCVET is currently undertaking in partnership with the Australian Centre for Industrial Relations Research and Training on the future of work for the NSW Board of Vocational Education and Training.

I want to stress that it is a highly speculative piece, intended not to report on research but to widen debate around apprenticeships and traineeships and to draw some focus back to the central relationship between VET and the labour market which has tended to be weakened over the past five years.

The recent review of Victoria's apprenticeship and traineeship system opened with this observation.

> As with almost every other facet of economic and social life, the apprenticeship and traineeship system, born and raised in the old economy, is struggling to come to terms with its form and place in the new global economy (Schofield 2000).

Behind this observation lie two key inferences. First, that the survival of apprenticeships and traineeships in the medium to longer-term is not guaranteed. Second, that the structure and content of work in the new economy may be substantially different from that of the old economy and that this will have important implications for the apprenticeship and traineeship system.

This paper is an initial attempt to unpack these two inferences through the question: can apprenticeships and traineeships survive in the emerging social and economic environment?

Before attempting to explore the question, we should first consider why we would even bother to ask the question. As the Ministerial Press Releases tell us, all the vital signs seem pretty good.

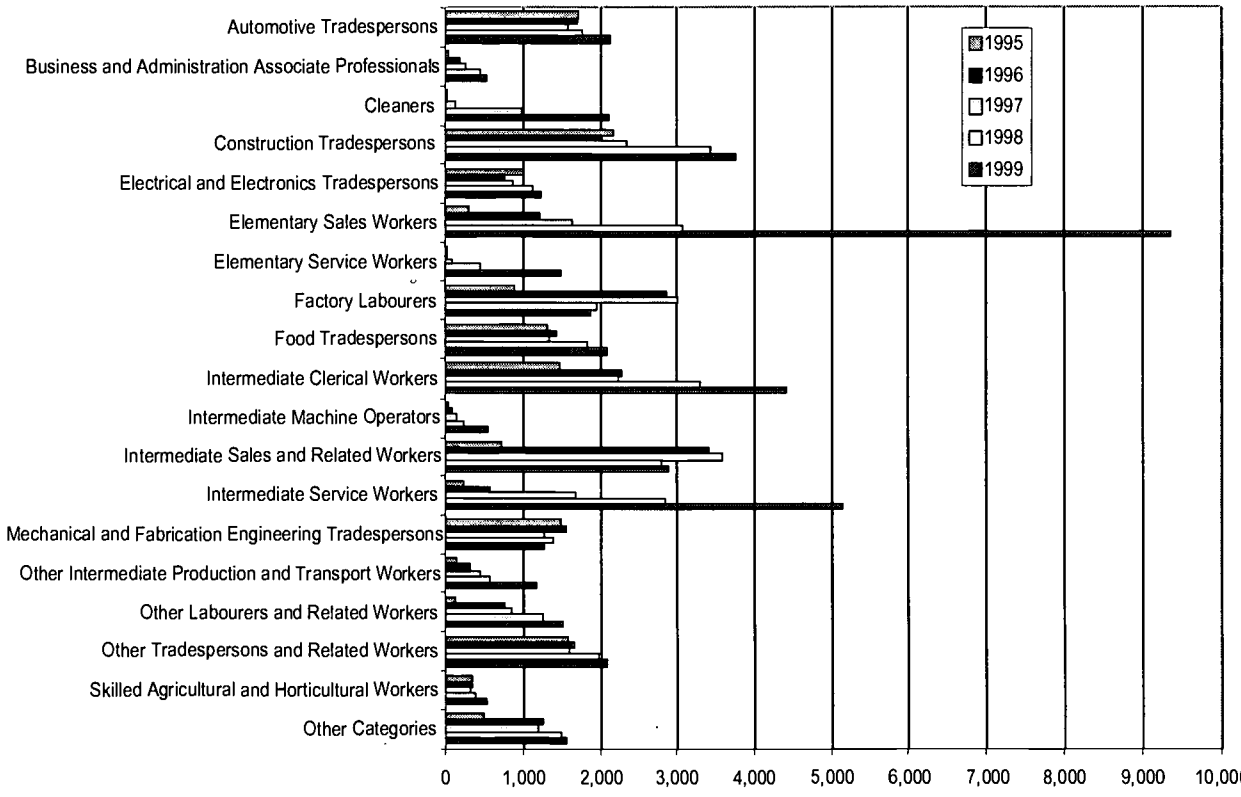
Acknowledgments: The author wishes to thank the Queensland Department of Employment, Training and Industrial Relations, the Tasmanian Office of Vocational Education and Training and the Victorian Office of Post Compulsory Education, Training and Employment for their permission to draw on material from these reviews (See Schofield 1999a, 1999b, 2000)

Apprenticeships and traineeships, under their thoroughly modern title of New Apprenticeships, have grown exponentially in recent years.

In Victoria, for example, between 1995 and 1999, apprentice commencements (excluding existing employees) increased by 20% to 11,859. In the same five year period, traineeship commencements rose 701% from a few thousand in 1995 to 33,963 in 1999, nearly three times the number of apprentice commencements. The story is similar in Queensland where, for the period 1995/96-1997/98, total traineeship commencements rose from around 5,000 to 25,000. In Tasmania, for the decade 1988-1998, total traineeship commencements increased 2,612% from 202 to 5,478. These statistics do not present a picture of a system struggling to survive.

Similarly, if we look at the range of industries now covered by the so-called New Apprenticeships, the picture looks very positive.

Exhibit XX: Apprentice and Trainee Commencements by Occupation, Victoria, 1995-1999



Notes: Excludes existing employees
Occupations are from the Australian Standard Classification of Occupations (ASCO), at the two-digit level. Source: Victorian Schofield 2000: Appendix 6, p.A-20

As the Victorian report notes, the most spectacular feature of the chart above is that those occupations which accounted for most commencements in 1999 often had very few commencements in 1995. In 1999 Elementary Sales Workers formed by far the largest category, with 9,357 commencements, or 20% of total commencements. In 1995 this occupation, where training is mainly retail and more recently call centre traineeships, accounted for only 295 commencements. The next most commencements in 1999 were among Intermediate Service Workers (mainly in hospitality and community services training) had only 236 commencements in 1995.

Training for Intermediate Clerical Workers, almost entirely in office administration traineeships, experienced 200% growth between 1995 and 1999 to retain its position as one of the leading apprenticeship and traineeship occupations.

The trades occupations dominated commencements in 1995, and they generally experienced growth over this period, although not at the rate of most traineeship occupations. The construction trades experienced 73% growth in commencements, but lost their position as the largest occupation, dropping to fourth behind the three traineeship occupations mentioned above. There was also growth in the food (58%), electrical and electronics (26%), automotive (23%), and 'other' (32%) trades. The exception was Mechanical and Fabrication Engineering Tradespersons (the old Metals Trades). Commencements in this occupation fell by 14% between 1995 and 1999, making it the only major category to record a fall in commencements over this period.

This growth and occupational diversification, combined with the opening up through the New Apprenticeship system of structured employment-based training opportunities for increasing numbers of older workers, a larger numerical growth in commencements for those under 25 than those over 25 and very high levels of satisfaction from both employers and from apprentices and trainees all are positive signs suggesting that the system is in a healthy state and its survival is not in jeopardy. Talk about dinosaurs seems more than a little premature.

However there are other vital signs that should be considered before arriving at a final diagnosis. The one that I want to consider here is the question of the structure and content of the jobs being created and the skills which underpin them and consequently, underpin the apprenticeship and traineeship system.

SYSTEMS AND INSTITUTIONS

At this point I wish to make one important diversion before returning to the question of the future of apprenticeships and traineeships. This diversion is to draw a distinction between viewing apprenticeships and traineeships as a system, and viewing them as an institution.

The reviews I undertook in Queensland, Tasmania and Victoria (Schofield 1990a, 1999b, 2000) were essentially concerned with matters of policy and management, although I also did place a progressively stronger emphasis on the quality of teaching and learning with each review.

Given the terms of reference of these reviews and their concern for quality, efficiency and effectiveness, I was reviewing apprenticeships and traineeships as an *organisational system* made up mainly of tasks, throughput, product, purpose and environment, costs and returns and, to a lesser extent, of relationships and competing interests.

There is a quite different value to be derived from thinking about apprenticeships and traineeships as an *institution*.

Here I am using the word *institution* in the sense that it has been conceptualised by the *Reshaping Australian Institutions Project* at the Australian National University. This project is proceeding from the proposition that institutions are *sets of regulatory norms that give rise to patterns of action, concrete social structures or organisations*.

The ANU project emphasises that institutions refer to a set of regulatory norms (not merely a single norm), and lead to a whole structure of relations rather than a single relation. Institutions are conceived as constituting the social infrastructure which orders the behaviour of relevant social actors (both individuals and groups) and organises the relations among them and have an impact on the distribution of authority and influence in society.

Apprenticeships and traineeships sit astride multiple institutions including public governance, the economy and gender, but there are two which are most directly relevant to the question of their longer-term survival: the institutions of the labour market and the institutions of education.

The institutions of the labour market

If we look at the institutions of the labour market we can identify some of the norms on which VET has operated for so long. The continuation of full-time ongoing waged work, the existence of the male breadwinner, industrial conciliation and arbitration, the award system, collective bargaining, work organisation and structure, the content of work, work productivity, working time, the quality of working life and industrial fairness are just some of these.

These norms form the foundation upon which we have built our training system and have particular relevance for the most explicitly employment-based part of it that we know as apprenticeships and traineeships.

We can also see that these are all norms under challenge. Time does not permit a detailed discussion of all the ways that so many of our traditional assumptions are being challenged nor how they are impacting directly and indirectly on

apprenticeships and traineeships. But let us look briefly at just a few which we need to factor in to our thinking about the long-term survival of apprenticeships and traineeships.

One of most important challenges has been the decline of standard work, that is, of permanent full-time jobs. Around 50% of the workforce is now employed in non-standard jobs, with an associated high growth in precarious forms of employment (Buchanan & Watson 2000, Marginson 2000). Labour demand is being rapidly reconfigured. For example, in the metal and engineering sector, non-standard forms of work accounted for less than one worker in ten in the late 1980s. Today, around one quarter of that sector's workforce is engaged on either casual, labour hire or contractor basis (ACIRRT 1999)

Along with these changes has been a profound restructuring of wages and levels of wage inequality have continued to increase (Buchanan & Watson 2000).

Flexibility has become a key concept in any discussion about the labour market. As Buchanan and Watson (2000) have observed: 'Flexibility' now ranks equally with (if not greater than) fairness in industrial relations and wages policy. However, for the most part it provides flexibility only for the employer (Marginson 2000). Probably the greatest impact of this new 'flexibility' has been evident in apprenticeships and traineeships where language such as 'just in time and just for you' or 'anywhere, anytime' is increasingly apparent.

Yet, curiously, we remain ambivalent about the value of part-time apprenticeships and traineeships, holding on to the view that they only have real meaning in the context of full-time and preferably permanent work. We still believe and act as if standard work remains the norm.

The Victorian review included a survey in which apprentices and trainees were asked to nominate the reasons for their involvement in apprenticeships and traineeships. When asked the main reason for becoming involved, 59% of the apprentice respondents cited 'to start a career in the industry' as the main reason whereas this was the driver for only 21% of trainee respondents.

This finding is important in at least two respects. Overall, it may reflect the diminishing aspiration of 'career' amongst apprentices and trainees. In terms of the differences between apprentices and trainees that it reveals, it may reflect differences between the employment relationship. Alternatively, it may reflect differences between the structure of work in the manufacturing sector that employs most apprentices and the structure of work in the services sector that employs most trainees.

A final point in this very superficial look at some labour market issues is about the decentralisation of the industrial relations system. Much of the VET infrastructure was originally built on the assumption of collective industrial agreements - that key decisions about VET would be made at a national level through a process of negotiation between the industrial parties. With the decentralisation of the industrial relations system since the early 1990s, and

declining union membership and influence, the power and authority of individual employers and employer bodies has been on the rise within VET generally and, most obviously, in the apprenticeship and traineeship system. This is a problem of legitimacy of apprenticeships and traineeships. Historically, their legitimacy has derived from the perception that they are a mutually beneficial skills formation institution where the mutuality has been negotiated between the industrial parties. As their content and structure is more commonly 'negotiated' between individual employers and individual apprentices/trainees, they are coming to be seen as an instrument dominated by one party alone and their legitimacy is called into question.

It is increasingly hard for VET to know just what might be appropriate responses to these labour market developments. The training reform program we are still pursuing in VET was originally designed to structurally link industrial relations and training, and had at its very core reform of the institution of apprenticeship. Yet we have watched over the last five years as public policy debate about VET has been systematically disengaged from analysis of and developments in industrial relations. Without insights from and analysis of industrial relations, read in its broad sense[1], the VET view of the institutions of the labour market will always be incomplete.

The institutions of education

I'll only deal in passing with the institutions of education here, as we are far more familiar with VET debates within this framework than within a broad labour market framework.

If we look at apprenticeships and traineeships as one of the institutions of education, we can see the assumptions, practices, structures and organisations on which they have historically been based. The most visible of these are the traditional roles of government and the market in shaping and funding apprenticeships and traineeships (and VET more broadly). While apprenticeships and traineeships have always had a strong market dimension, government regulation and subsidy has tended historically to be justified on the basis of a contribution to industry training rather than to individual enterprise training.

Other key assumptions have been about the roles of public, private and community providers, the roles of schools, RTOs, and universities, the role of educational institutions and workplaces in vocational learning, the integrated nature of learning (reflected in the work processes and job content of VET professionals) and the norms associated with educational equity.

These are all under challenge on many fronts: from the introduction of a competitive training market including User Choice, from the wider wave of public sector reform, from a changing industrial relations environment, and from

[1] A broad understanding of industrial relations is taken here to mean one "...which is concerned with the wider aspects of the employment relationship", (see Lansbury & Picketsgill 2000: 2)

a shift in the priority assigned to workplaces vis a vis educational institutions as a site and source of learning.

This last development has major implications for apprenticeships and traineeships. It reflects what Chappell has called the privileging of the workplace.

> ...the workplace, rather than the educational institution, has been positioned as the most authentic site of learning for work. The work sites of post-industrial economies now compete with educational institutions of the State as the privileged sites of learning (Gee & Lankshear 1996:6). Furthermore, in much post-compulsory education, employment rather than education becomes the gateway (and barrier) to learning opportunities, personal development, career progression and educational credentialing (Chappell 1999).

In this context, traditional distinctions between on and off the job training and theory and practice, which are bedrock concepts for apprenticeships and, by association, of traineeships, are not certain to continue.
A further important development, made more possible by the Internet, has been the unbundling of teaching and learning into component parts: curriculum design, content development, learner support, learning delivery, assessment and credentialing. There are already indications that so-called 'flexible learning in the workplace' for apprentices and trainees, especially trainees, is being structured in this way, with different people with different working conditions undertaking the different tasks.

So we are now in the position where the norms which have traditionally shaped behaviours and relationships in apprenticeships and traineeships are being re-configured and their final forms remains unclear. Thus we are uncertain about where apprenticeships and traineeships might be headed.

'SKILL' IN THE NEW ECONOMY

Having made a somewhat lengthy diversion to suggest that it is more helpful to our long term thinking about apprenticeships and traineeships to regard them as an institution spanning two key sets of institutions – the labour market and education – I would like to return to the question of the long-term survival prospects of the institution of apprenticeships and traineeship.

Apprenticeships and traineeships have historically occupied a unique and highly valued place in Australia's overall skill formation system. They are criss-crossed by complex and inter-connecting relationships between employers, unions, employees, training providers and governments and operate at the intersection between market forces and government regulation. As an institution with long and deep traditions, it has influenced the behaviours of all these parties and over the years has been the site of many contests over power and authority.

The survival of 'apprenticeships and traineeships' as a name is not in question. It would require a more than courageous government to withdraw its support for them, particularly after the spectacular growth of recent years and the continuing

commitment to the ideal if not the facts of apprenticeships amongst the industrial parties and in the wider community. The pulling power of apprenticeships remains a significant influence on expectations about and the status of traineeships and while ever traineeships are coupled with apprenticeships, their futures are linked.

But their long-term survival in other than name only will depend on a complex interplay of factors. In this new, relentlessly 'flexible' environment where apprenticeships are no longer the single route into certain occupations and the associated wage classification, and where the industrial distinctions between apprenticeships and traineeships are being deliberately blurred, some of these factors will inevitably be more important than others.

I don't think the survival of apprenticeships and traineeships as an institution will depend on the quality of the system management, on the rigour of auditing, on the quality of the training provided, on the level of public subsidy, or even on community perceptions of their value. Rather, I think their survival is likely to depend on the extent to which they actually develop genuine skills needed by employers to remain or become competitive and, at the same time are valued as genuine skill pathways by apprentices, trainees and their union representatives. On present indications, neither of these pre-conditions can be guaranteed.

In the three reviews of apprenticeships and traineeships I was consistently presented with competing views from employers, unions and apprentices and trainees themselves about what was actually happening in terms of the skills of individual apprenticeships and traineeships. I have been trying to make sense of these competing views. How could they differ so widely, even within a single state?

John Shields, in his detailed historical analysis of the revival of apprenticeship in the early 20th century NSW, suggests that the existing literature offers three main hypotheses about survival (Shields 1995). To characterise these at the most crude of levels, they are:

- The on-skillling hypothesis. This assumes that the survival of apprenticeships is accounted for by the ongoing need of employers for skill, defined in terms of manual competency, task range and discretionary content. That is, given the technical nature of work itself, employers will continue to need genuine skill.

- The de-skilling hypothesis. Derived from the highly influential work of Braverman (1974), this suggests that craft skill is progressively degraded by task sub-division, technological change and scientific management as employers systematically act to exploit junior labour for fragmented and low-skilled work and reduce their dependency on skilled labour.

- The re-skilling hypothesis. Here, apprenticeships are seen as largely devoid of genuine skill content but are socially constructed, mainly by craft unions and by males, to legitimate an arbitrary and socially constructed division

between skilled and unskilled labour so as to limit members of an occupations and exclude certain groups from those occupations. A form of this argument has underpinned many feminist accounts of why much of the work done historically by women has not been regarded as skilled and consequently not designated an apprenticeship.

While confined to a particular historical experience of craft skill, these three hypotheses are helpful springboards to thinking about the survival prospects of apprenticeships and traineeships in the new economy.

I believe that, at present, much of the VET debate about apprenticeships and traineeships assumes the on-skilling hypothesis. It assumes that work in the new economy is inevitably more complex; that to be globally competitive employers will need higher and higher levels of skills and thus the ongoing demand for skill assures a future for apprenticeships and traineeships. Many of the arguments put to the reviews by employer associations argued this way, especially in relation to the more recent traineeship entrants such as retail, cleaning, call centres, hospitality and community services. There were also more radical variants of this hypothesis, clustered around the idea that apprenticeships and traineeships are a key institution for up-skilling the workforce. At the same time, consultations with individual employers and the focus groups with apprentices and trainees, although representing a very small sample, suggested other quite different possibilities.

The ACIRRT-RCVET project on the future of work, led by John Buchanan, is highlighting the limitations of the high skills/high wages vision so persistently espoused by governments and training providers alike as justification for the exponential growth in traineeships in particular and for lifelong learning generally. The shift to a high-skill economy is simply not occurring. Much of the job creation is occurring in low skill areas and the much-desired flexibility is being achieved not through skill formation but through the rise of non-standard work.

This research-in-progress is also finding that notwithstanding employer claims of skills shortages, a large number of qualified workers are employed in positions requiring no formal qualifications while, at the same time, many employees with no formal qualifications are employed in high skill jobs. If this is indeed the case, it undercuts the relevance of apprenticeships and traineeships as a key instrument of skill formation and also calls into doubt many of the claims about lifelong learning and its importance to the emerging 'knowledge' economy.

The de-skilling thesis was a theme pursued by some unions, many public training providers and some apprentices and trainees, who argued that the content of traineeships was low-level and effectively 'dumbing down' the workforce, and that many jobs with the title did not warrant extensive training. Some also argued that this deskilling trend was evident in some apprenticeships, particularly in engineering.

There are also some indicators to support the re-skilling hypothesis, albeit in a very weak form. The idea that occupations such as cleaning, security, call centre operators or check-out operators could be regarded as genuinely skilled is greeted with considerable scepticism by a small number of the traditional craft unions, by employers of manufacturing apprentices, and, interestingly, by quite a few TAFE teachers who seem to be more favourably disposed to traditional apprenticeships and to the more established traineeships such as business and office administration on the grounds that these are 'genuinely skilled' occupations.

Substantial empirical work is needed to come to any defensible conclusion about the competing trends of on-skilling, de-skilling and re-skilling in the Australian apprenticeship and traineeship institution. All three factors seem to be occurring simultaneously but differentially, depending most particularly on the nature of an industry's skill requirements in the new economy and the competitive strategy chosen by individual employers within the industry.

While VET has a well-developed inclination for and stance towards on-skilling and up-skilling in and beyond apprenticeships and traineeships, it does not have a worked out position in relation to de-skilling or re-skilling. There is a tendency to conceptually designate certain forms of training as 'labour market programs' rather than 'skill formation programs', on the basis of some unstated norms. We will have to decide sooner or later how we should respond to the fact that, in the new economy, not all jobs will be high-skill jobs and reflect on what should be an appropriate balance between high skill training and low skill training within apprenticeships and traineeships. This will be of increasing importance as public policy has relinquished to the private sphere much of the decision-making about the profile of skill formation through apprenticeships and traineeships.

One helpful insight identified through the ACIRRT-RCVET work has been the work of Crouch et al (1999) who divide industry sectors into three groups: traditional sectors such as agriculture and personal services with the lowest educational profile, industrial sectors such as manufacturing and distribution, and post-industrial sectors with greater opportunities for skilled labour. The survival of apprenticeships and traineeships, if we believe they should survive, requires us to acknowledge and begin to address the complex and often competing skill trends that these sectors encompass.

Linked to this point is the definition of 'skill'. It is quite clear from the reviews of apprenticeships and traineeships and also from the ACIRRT-RCVET research that the concept of 'skill' is being redefined in ways which challenge our most dearly held assumptions about the value of apprenticeships and traineeships as a core institution for skills formation.

For better and for worse, apprenticeships have historically formed the benchmark for our understanding of skill.

> A skilled man (sic) has served an apprenticeship, a semi-skilled operator has had some training, an unskilled job is one which any person can do immediately. (Singleton 1978)

In recent years, this benchmark has been eroded and 'skill' has come to acquire multiple meanings. No longer is 'skill' understood in simple terms of manual competency, task range and discretionary content. It is alternatively used, especially by employers, to refer to craft/trade skills, technical skills, core/ foundation skills, key competencies, generic skills, soft skills, underpinning skills, literacy and numeracy skills, communication skills and most recently lifelong learning skills.

Payne (2000) has cautioned that

> ...skill often translates as punctuality, reliability, speed and submissiveness.

And, at its extreme,

> In some parts of the low value-added, cost-conscious mass service sector, the smile is the defining 21st century skill

The expansion of the concept of 'skill' beyond underlying levels of general educational competence and the technical skills required for particular types of jobs to include behavioural traits (especially the ability to show initiative and to work successfully within the confines of clearly structured control arrangements dominated by employers) and personality traits and characteristics is quite apparent in employer discussion of what they expect from traineeships and is a highly worrying trend with significant equity implications.

CONCLUSION

What might we reasonably conclude from the matters raised here?

The good news is that for over almost two centuries, apprenticeships have made a substantial contribution to the formation of skills in Australia and have provided us with both an industrial and a conceptual benchmark for 'genuine skill'. Over that period they have been through many near-death experiences, only to rise phoenix-like in a new and revitalised form through negotiated settlements between employers (who recognised the need for genuine skills) and unions (which recognised the benefits this would bring to their members) and the support of governments genuinely worried about skill shortages, trade and unemployment.

Increasingly detached from a centralised industrial relations system and industrial awards, increasingly reliant on skill opportunities provided by the content and structure of work in individual enterprises rather than within an industry, characterised by high levels of employer influence and declining levels of employer investment in training generally, increasingly dependent on a regime of public subsidy and training regulation, unsure about how to deal with the competing trends of on-skilling and de-skilling, and reluctant to admit that

not all workplaces are or even aspire to be learning organisations, their ability to reinvent themselves for these new times is highly circumscribed.

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