RESEARCH REPORT

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Traditional trade apprenticeships: learnings from the field

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INFORMING + INFLUENCING
THE AUSTRALIAN VET SECTOR

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About the research

Traditional trade apprenticeships: learnings from the field

Josie Misko and Bridget Wibrow, NCVER

A companion to *Traditional trade apprenticeships: training activity, employer incentives and international practice* by Josie Misko, this report collates qualitative material from in-depth interviews and focus groups with employers, trainers, apprentices and relevant government officials describing what is effective, what is not, and what needs improvement in apprenticeship training.

Our research finds that the current combination of off- and on-the-job training is, on the whole, working effectively and should continue to play a key role in apprenticeship training for the traditional trades. Both forms of training are required if apprentices are to develop the technical skills, underpinning knowledge, attributes and behaviours required for their trades. Nevertheless, our research identified a number of challenges in ensuring that this combination continues to operate well. Recommendations for improvement were offered, of which many were similar or the same, while other issues were less common, although all aimed at ensuring that the system works effectively and efficiently for all involved.

Key messages

- There was strong support among employers, training providers, apprentices and apprenticeship regulators for maintaining the current elements of apprenticeship training for the traditional trades, these include a formal training contract and the combination of on- and off-the-job training. Where suggestions for improvement were made, they were more concerned with making slight adjustments to the current approaches rather than fundamental shifts.
- Apprentices sometimes felt challenged by the expectations of the workplace, managing their release for off-the-job training at appropriate times, understanding the complex theory components of their courses, and sustaining interpersonal interactions with superiors and co-workers.
- The appropriate scheduling of off-the-job training (especially block training), in consultation with employers, has the potential to ensure that employers can both fulfil their training contract obligations to release apprentices for training and keep apprentices engaged in productive work during busy periods. In terms of outdoor trades, the ability of the training provider to be flexible when scheduling off-the-job training at times when the weather is unsuitable is considered critical.
- In view of the increasing specialisations in some industries, it was recognised that it is becoming more difficult to align the learning the apprentice is undertaking off the job with tasks being done on the job. Where apprentices are exposed to substantial specialisation in the workplace, there is a view among some employers that training providers should focus on the skills not regularly practised in the workplace to allow the apprentice to spend more time learning the skills of the broader trade.
- Stakeholders felt that modernising training package content could assist with the removal of the units of competency that deal with the equipment, tools and technology no longer in use in the workplace.
- Collaborations between training providers and employers with access to modern technology were also considered to be useful in keeping apprentices up-to-date with current developments.
- Although an issue affecting only a few employers, national companies commented that, due to the differing training contract requirements applying in each jurisdiction, it was difficult to move their apprentices around the country.

- Training providers indicated that compliance with VET regulatory frameworks and standards at national and state and territory levels continues to place high administrative burdens on trainers and their managers, largely because they saw this compliance as additional to their core teaching and training responsibilities.
- Engaging the apprentice in concentrated periods of up-front training, followed by periods of workplace training, is an option suggested by some, although whether this should occur as part of the apprenticeship itself or prior to the apprenticeship commencing was not specified. Either way, there are likely to be implications for competency-based wage progression.

Simon Walker
Managing Director, NCVER

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Executive summary

By investigating the experience of those who participate directly in the Australian apprenticeship system, including employers, trainers, apprentices and officials from agencies that regulate apprenticeships, this report examines the operation of the system and its use by traditional trades apprentices.[1]

This is a companion volume to the publication *Traditional trade apprenticeships: training activity, employer incentives and international practices* (Misko 2020). Representing the first phase of a larger study on traditional apprenticeships, the earlier volume reported on commencements, rates of completion and attrition, and employer incentives for taking on apprentices for the years 2002 to 2018, as well as offering some insights for the Australian apprenticeship system gained from research on similar systems overseas. A third report, to supplement the findings of both publications, will analyse relevant data from the national 2019 Apprentice and Trainee Destination and Experiences Survey.[2]

The report for the second phase of this study collates material from in-depth interviews and focus groups with employers, trainers, apprentices and relevant government officials about what is effective in apprenticeship training, what is not, and what needs improvement, with three states selected to enable a closer scrutiny of the system: South Australia, Western Australia and Queensland. Apprentice carpenters and joiners, chefs and welders in South Australia participated in face-to-face focus groups, as did apprenticeship regulators from that state.

In investigating what is and is not working effectively for the key players in traditional apprenticeships, we find that a recurring theme emerges. There is general satisfaction with the concept of apprenticeships as entry-level pathways that assist school leavers to make the transition from adolescence to young adulthood, and subsequently to become a fully qualified tradesperson. Apprenticeships also provide existing workers (especially those with no prior qualifications) with opportunities for improving their work prospects in their trade and in the companies for which they work.

Engaging with apprenticeships, processes and regulations

Employers mainly engage with apprenticeships because of a strong motivation to give back to their industries and do this by providing opportunities for young people to acquire a trade; however, the cost-effectiveness of having apprentices in the workplace is also an important consideration. Trainers are motivated by a desire to pass on their skills and knowledge, while potential apprentices aspire to learn a trade in an occupational area that has interested them or for which they have shown special skills and aptitudes. All three groups report receiving rewards that are both psychological and social in nature, as well as those that relate to actual job and training outcomes.

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1 We define eight groups of traditional trades: building; electrotechnology and telecommunications; engineering; food trades; motor mechanic, repairer and vehicle builder trades; other traditional trades; precision trades; and skilled animal and horticultural workers.

2 This focuses on apprentices and trainees across the nation who completed, cancelled or withdrew from their contract of training in 2018. It aimed to collect information from over 6250 apprentices who completed their contracts and 6250 who cancelled or withdrew from their contracts of training.

Employers use many different approaches to recruiting apprentices, such as networks, advertisements and walk-ins by would-be apprentices. When it comes to selection, a passion for the trade, demonstrated by either hobbies or an awareness of the trade, is highly sought after. Individuals who can demonstrate signs of commitment, such as by belonging to a sporting club or undertaking part-time work, are also highly regarded. Employers also seek individuals with practical hands-on skills, mechanical aptitude and good literacy and numeracy skills. Trainers also suggest that completing pre-vocational training or 'try a trade' courses stand individuals in good stead compared with those who do not, as they have a greater understanding of the trade and the requirements of an apprenticeship. Employers often report that apprenticeships are most successful when they know the apprentice through their networks or have experience of how they perform in the workplace in work trials and work experience.

Generally speaking, most employers do not report difficulties when following procedures for signing up apprentices with training contracts, often relying on the services of the Australian Apprenticeship Support Network[3] (AASN) providers, whom they generally found to be very supportive. However, some difficulties are reported in finding relevant information when navigating Commonwealth Government websites. Employers suggested the establishment of a 'one stop shop' for dispensing apprenticeship information, also recommending that AASN representatives visit businesses to inform them of the incentives available to them and their obligations as employers. Incentives for training apprentices are felt to be adequate by some of the respondents in this study, but it was also noted that the value of the base or standard incentive has declined in real terms since 2012.

Trainers across the different trade areas feel over-burdened by the amount of paperwork required to ensure they meet all the requirements of the VET Quality Framework[4] (VQF). The majority of trainers feel that this takes them away from their core teaching roles.

Learning via off-the-job and on-the job training

Employers, training providers, apprentices and apprenticeship regulators[5] agree that a combination of on- and off-the job training is required for developing the trade skills and knowledge of apprentices. Nevertheless, despite the general agreement on the need to preserve this structure, a number of challenges were also identified:

- For *employers*, these challenges are generally associated with the availability and scheduling of off-the-job training at times when they find it difficult to release their apprentices (often during busy periods, when they stand to make most of their income). There is also debate about whether it is better for apprentices to attend block release or day release, and how much learning normally undertaken at the workplace should be done by the training provider.

3 <https://www.australianapprenticeships.gov.au/about-aasn>; <http://www.apprenticeshipsupport.com.au/Home>.

4 <https://www.asqa.gov.au/about/australias-vet-sector/vet-quality-framework>.

5 These apprenticeship regulators are government officers from the Department for Innovation and Skills in South Australia. Their role is to approve and register employers prior to their taking on an apprentice, as well as ensuring and monitoring the implementation of the training contract.

- The challenges for *apprentices* relate to a range of issues, such as stressful work environments, long work hours, low wages, and interpersonal issues (including with bosses), and the difficulties some experience with learning the theory and technical aspects of their trade.
- The main challenges for *training providers* relate to units in the training packages that require them to teach skills that are no longer used in the workplace and the repetitiveness of content in units within the same qualification. In addition, they are concerned about teaching aspects of technologies that are out of date compared with the workplace situation.
- The key challenge for *apprenticeship regulators* is ensuring that employers, apprentices and training providers understand their roles in the training contract; that employers recognise the requirement to be good role models and provide effective supervision; and that apprentices understand how to behave appropriately in the workplace, including the need to follow instructions and meet other employer expectations.

Keeping up with technological change

Keeping up with the advancing technologies in industry is largely viewed as the joint responsibility of the employer, training provider and apprentice.

The employer is more likely than the training provider to have access to the modern equipment and tools, thus providing the students with practical experience. However, trainers are also expected to maintain their industry currency and teach apprentices contemporary practices. For their part, apprentices are expected to ask questions or undertake their own learning. As far as trainers are concerned, the main approaches to keeping up with technological change in the workplace involve activities such as training seminars with manufacturers, suppliers and industry experts; membership of industry associations; professional development, such as attending workshops and reading newsletters; and completing online training modules, available from manufacturers.

Suggestions for improvement

Despite all study participants believing that the system needed no fundamental overhaul, they made a number of suggestions for its improvement, including:

- raising the standard and currency of the facilities and equipment available to training providers
- modernising the content of units of competency, by replacing outdated elements to match current practice
- sequencing training to avoid the duplication of content across units and requiring certain units to be completed before others are begun
- front-loading apprenticeships with theory in the first year, while focusing more on practical workplace training in subsequent years
- expanding training programs and options to include courses in conflict management and negotiation, and assertiveness training skills
- increasing the availability of dual-trade apprenticeships in industries where there are commonalities across occupations in the content and application of training

- reviewing the intervals at which employers are eligible for incentives to enable a fair share of incentive payments to all employers involved in the apprenticeship system
- raising the wages of apprentices
- removing the availability of loans for apprentices, mainly because employers believe that apprentices lack understanding of the difficulties of starting work with a debt that needs to be repaid
- increasing the promotion of trade pathways as credible career options and equal to other academic pathways
- reviewing regulatory requirements to reduce the compliance and regulatory burden for trainers and their managers
- simplifying the process of training package updates and increasing the involvement of training providers on industry reference committees or their equivalents
- raising the level of national consistency in apprenticeship training, by standardising training contract requirements as well as standardising resources for assessment and compliance across jurisdictions.

Introduction

This report examines the operation of the Australian apprenticeship system by investigating the experiences of the direct participants in the system, an approach enabling us to understand the system in more detail. To gain these insights, we conducted qualitative research involving employers, trainers and apprentices, as well as officials from South Australia, Western Australia and Queensland from agencies that regulate apprenticeships. This is a companion report to the NCVER publication *Traditional trade apprenticeships: training activity, employer incentives and international practice* (Misko 2020), which presented data on the Australian apprenticeship system, specifically on commencements, rates of completion and attrition, and employer incentives for taking on apprentices for the years 2002 and 2018. The earlier report also included some information relevant to Australia on apprenticeship systems overseas; namely, those of Germany, Switzerland, Austria, Luxembourg and Denmark.

The primary aims of this report were to use qualitative research to:

- explore the effectiveness of current approaches to apprenticeship selection and training with a view to understanding both the experienced benefits (including the social and psychological and extrinsic benefits) and the challenges, from the perspectives of training providers, apprentices, tradespersons, and employers (including group training companies)
- understand from trainers the key issues experienced in delivering apprenticeship training to ensure that it keeps abreast of evolving occupations and jobs, and advances in technology
- investigate the challenges employers (including group training companies, host employers and other enterprise employers) face in negotiating the apprenticeship system and taking up (or hosting) apprentices.

Thirty-three employers (including group training companies and direct employers) from South Australia, Western Australia and Queensland provided information for this study, with a random sample of employers stratified according to whether they were government employers, group training companies or private employers. Each of the companies had a long history of taking on apprentices. Just one company had been in the business of hiring apprentices for fewer than five years, with the majority having taken on apprentices for 18 years and over.

Sixteen training providers (including group training companies/organisations [GTOs]) from South Australia, Queensland and Western Australia participated in the study. They were randomly sampled from the national apprenticeship and traineeship database and supplemented by targeted public providers in the three states to ensure we were able to access a diversity of traditional trades. Those in South Australia were mainly consulted via face-to-face visits (although some were consulted via teleconference); those in other states were consulted via teleconference.

Face-to-face focus groups were held with apprentices in South Australia only, since their proximity to researchers meant that this approach was an effective and efficient use of resources. A total of 10 apprentices participated in the focus group for apprentice

carpenters and joiners; eight participated in the focus group for chefs; and five participated in the focus group for fabrication apprentices.

A face-to-face focus group was also held with six officials in South Australia from the Department for Innovation and Skills. These officers, who are responsible for regulation and contract management, oversee the registration of employers, ensuring their eligibility to take on apprentices. In this study we focus on the South Australian apprenticeship regulators because of their closer involvement with employers in the field, although brief interviews were also held with representatives from the government agencies dealing with the registration of training contracts in Western Australia and Queensland. Additional supplementary interviews were held with an industry body in Queensland and an Australian Apprenticeship Support Network provider in Western Australia.

In table 1 we set out the numbers of individuals and groups who provided information for the study.

Table 1 Consultation: individuals and focus groups

State	**Consultations**			
	Face-to-face visits and teleconferences		Focus groups	
	Training providers	*Employers*	*Apprentices*	*Government officials*
South Australia	6	20	3 focus groups (comprising 23 apprentices in all)	1 group
Queensland	5	7		1
Western Australia	5*	6		1
Total	**16**	**33**	**3**	**3**

Notes: One of the training provider interviews was conducted with an educator who was currently working on a heritage trade project in Western Australia.

Engaging with the apprenticeship system

A strong desire to give back to the community and to their particular industry motivated employers and trainers to engage with the apprenticeship system. Apprentices tended to be interested in furthering their job prospects in skill areas to which they were attracted and in the industries that had given them the opportunity to become employed. Few issues relating to adhering to regulatory and administrative processes were identified, although regulatory burden was cited as a common issue by trainers. Apprenticeship regulators were keen to provide advice to employers about how to successfully manage their training contracts.

Why and how employers, trainers and apprentices want to engage with apprenticeship training

Employers

It was clear that, although employers each had their own particular reasons for employing apprentices, they all believed that it was their responsibility to give back to their trades or industries by helping to train the next generation. For some, this desire to give back was accompanied by additional and, occasionally, more business-motivated reasons. These reasons were mostly concerned with a desire to 'grow their own'; that is, to develop their own talent pool, so that from the outset their tradespeople would be trained to suit their particular businesses. In addition to ensuring bespoke skills for their companies, employers also highlighted the need for future-proofing skills, ensuring that they had in place suitable succession strategies, both to replace retiring workers and develop the next generation of team leaders and managers. In some instances, employers viewed apprenticeships as a way to develop the apprentices' talents to benefit the business, in terms of having an extra pair of hands and improving the cost-effectiveness of business operations. Regulatory reasons, mainly driven by workplace, health and safety legislation, were cited as further reasons for taking on apprentices. For example, roof plumbing generally required two people to work together, while other trades (including electrical, fabrication and hairdressing) benefited from having an extra pair of hands to prepare for and complete important tasks.

Our employers also included group training organisations, local government councils and shires, and regional and community agencies, with their reasons for taking on apprentices largely connected to ensuring that the industry, the community and the region had the skills required and provided opportunities for young people to get a job. Group training organisations explained their motivation for taking on apprentices as their recognition of the need to make administration less onerous for host employers and for apprentices to be rotated among different enterprises. Some employers had continued to take on apprentices because of good past experiences.

Most employers reported few issues relating to completing regulatory processes or locating information on the processes involved in employing an apprentice. They generally relied on the services of their Australian Apprenticeship Support Network (AASN) representative to undertake the administrative arrangements related to signing up training contracts and providing the information required; most cited the very good services provided by these

agencies. The exceptions were rare: in one case the employer felt that the AASN representative had not taken appropriate care in matching the apprentice to the employer's needs, believing however that the mismatch had occurred because his business was not located in the metropolitan area.

Trainers

From discussions with trainers of apprentices in both public and private providers, it was clear that these trainers were passionate about their jobs and the role they play in developing the tradespeople for their industry. Most of the trainers came from a trade background themselves, having completed an apprenticeship earlier in their career and spent many years working as a qualified tradesperson in their particular industry area. A common motivating factor for becoming a trainer appeared to be that they wanted to pass on their skills to future generations of tradespeople and to keep the industry alive. Training apprentices was also seen as a natural progression in their career path for two main reasons: working in the trades can become more physically demanding with age, and becoming a trainer allows them to continue to work in the area; and, they had already had experience training apprentices in the workplace. One trainer moved into teaching after suffering an injury on a building site, which prevented him from continuing to work in the trade. He had wanted to be a teacher at school, so completing a Certificate IV in Training and Assessment and subsequently teaching apprentices in his trade area seemed like a natural progression (Wet trades trainer).

Linked to this, trainers experienced great satisfaction from seeing apprentices progress in their learning and skills and ultimately complete their apprenticeship. They found it very rewarding to see an apprentice become a qualified tradesperson and to observe the trajectory of their career, such as starting their own business. In a teaching sense, trainers also enjoyed accommodating different learning styles and 'seeing things click' for an apprentice. Other aspects of training apprentices that trainers most enjoyed included being able to share their skills and knowledge with the apprentice, for example, the various techniques the apprentice will experience in the workplace, and sharing the apprentice's passion for the industry and watching them grow as individuals over the course of the apprenticeship.

Naturally, the trainers found aspects of the training challenging, one major issue for them being those employers not doing the right thing by apprentices. Trainers gave examples of employers not releasing apprentices for their off-the-job training component, as well as employers who did not understand the importance of broader training and not exposing the apprentice to different parts of the trade. One trainer suggested that employers needed to be made more aware of their obligations, such as by the relevant government department, potentially at the time the training plan is signed (Horticulture trainer). Trainers also found that keeping apprentices engaged in training, especially when they were expected to repeat tasks more than once, was a challenging part of their role.

In the context of delivering apprenticeships, trainers across the different trade areas feel over-burdened by the amount of paperwork required by regulators to ensure that RTOs meet the relevant quality standards applying to their jurisdiction. Many trainers believe that this takes them away from their teaching roles. Some trainers also refer to inconsistent auditing practices they have experienced when audited by different auditors. The trainers

also believe that training is not viewed as profitable, which means there are limited funds to invest back into training and for updating equipment. The available facilities limit the number of students that providers can take on, while the cost of travelling to remote areas means that on occasions they are obliged to turn down potential apprentices. Suggestions to improve these issues include having a more consultative audit process to ensure that trainers know what needs to be prepared for the audit and increasing the remote and country allowance for trainers.

Apprenticeship regulators

South Australia, Queensland and Western Australia have separate regulatory frameworks for registering contracts of training. However, in Western Australia and Queensland the AASN providers and registered training organisations (RTOs) play a greater role in screening employers and ensuring, prior to their signing the contract, that they are eligible to take on apprentices. In South Australia, officers from the Department for Innovation and Skills undertake this initial screening and provide formal approval for employers to enter into a training contract. Further information about the basic approach in all three states to register apprenticeships and employers can be found in appendix A, while appendix B provides a more detailed description of the process in South Australia, as well as employer and training provider experiences with complying with regulatory frameworks.

The apprenticeship regulators assist employers across many industries, helping them as well as apprentices to understand their roles, responsibilities, rights and obligations under the training contract. When issues arise between employers and apprentices, apprenticeship regulators assist them to resolve the issues or arrive at an effective compromise: 'Knowing your advice has made a difference is a great source of satisfaction' (SA Department for Innovation and Skills, apprenticeship regulator).

The challenges identified by the apprenticeship regulators in South Australia mainly concerned disputes between employers and their apprentices, especially when issues of compliance with the regulations were involved. Such challenges were exacerbated when they were obliged to deal with parents and guardians, who, in advocating for their children, may not always understand the regulatory issues involved. Apprenticeship regulators also spoke of the challenge of clarifying for employers aspects that were not always clear under the legislation. Another challenge is to have a good understanding of the capacity of the employer to provide effective training.

Throughout the report, when we speak about the perspectives of apprenticeship regulators, unless otherwise stated, we are referring to apprenticeship regulators from the Department for Innovation and Skills in South Australia.

Apprentices

When apprentices reflected on the reason for their becoming an apprentice in their trade, the majority referred to their love for working with the materials, skills and the technologies used in their trades. Others had moved from occupations in different industries or from other study pathways (including university studies). Family connections in the trade were further reasons for taking up apprenticeships. Specific reasons why apprentices decided on their particular apprenticeship included:

- *Carpenters and joiners*: apprentice carpenters and joiners enjoyed working with their hands and with wood and with timber. Some had started out in another trade or industry sector (for example, chef, graphic designing and real estate) before moving into carpentry and joinery. One female (the only female in the group) had begun a university program but had decided she was more interested in the construction trade. Having mates or family in a trade or business was also another reason given for entering the construction trades.

  Apprentices in this trade were satisfied that they had made the right decision; they enjoyed their jobs and liked their bosses and their co-workers. Those who had changed pathways, trades or employers enjoyed doing something different and liked their new bosses by comparison with their former bosses. Individuals referred to the reality of the ups and downs in life, but they too had decided that it had been a good decision for them.

- *Fabricators*: these apprentices (most of whom were in their third and fourth years) gave a variety of reasons for entering an apprenticeship, with the majority claiming that they had been attracted by the job security and the opportunity for progression it offered. Those who had entered as mature-age apprentices had been given the opportunity to progress from their jobs.

  The majority also claimed that their decision had been right for them, as they were able to earn money, they had learnt good work habits, and they enjoyed doing the work. Others who were more circumspect about their satisfaction noted that, if they wanted to change their employer, there was too much paperwork to be completed and the process too complicated. Others noted that, even though much of what they learnt at trade school[6] did not relate to what they did at work, they believed that they might need the knowledge later in their careers.

- *Chefs*: these apprentices had mainly entered the apprenticeship because of their love for cooking, with some commenting that they had not been good students in secondary school, while others confirmed that they had wanted the qualification to further develop their careers. Having a parent who was a chef and being able to work for the family business was also another motivator.

  Similar to the fabricator apprentices, the majority of this group believed that the decision had been the right one at this stage of their lives, pleased that they would have a job at the end of the apprenticeship. They had learned a lot about themselves, and about the trade, and had met new people. They were also aware that they were in a trade that could affect 'people's lives' — if care was not taken with food hygiene.

  However, they were also under no illusions about the life of a chef: whether they were in their first or fourth years of their apprenticeship, they had already experienced the long hours and high pressure, as well as missing out on the social activities enjoyed by their friends and family: 'It has been a hard four years', said one apprentice. 'It's an ever-changing industry, always tough but good', said another.

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6 Many apprentices and employers referred to 'trade school' as the off-the-job training provider. We will use this term interchangeably with college and training provider to denote the provider of off-the-job training.

Recruiting and selecting apprentices

A host of different approaches were adopted by employers to both recruit and select apprentices. The great majority, however, prefer to 'know or see before [they] buy' and want apprentices who are willing to learn, interested in the trade, respectful and diligent. Employers in the more creative industries (chefs and hairdressers) said they wanted apprentices who were passionate about the trade. Apprentices commonly reported that they had obtained their apprenticeships via contacts in the industry and participation in work experience.

Employer practices

Family and friendship connections were a key means of identifying potential apprentices, helping employers to know the background of the candidate. Industry networks, local high schools, or pre-vocational or pre-apprenticeship programs and school-based apprenticeship programs were other recruitment streams. Walk-ins by would-be apprentices, favoured by some employers because it demonstrated initiative on the part of the applicant, was another source of applicants.

Very few employers (especially of direct-indentured apprentices) had any luck with advertising in newspapers or online and were often frustrated by the low calibre of many of those who applied through these media, including applicants who were obliged to obtain the requisite quota of job searches and applications to continue to receive social services payments. Employers were also frustrated by the high volumes of applications to be sorted to short-list applicants, followed by deliberations to determine, for further consideration, those who were really serious about joining the industry.

In relation to group training organisations (GTO), recruitment followed requests from host employers, or when the apprentice came to the GTO requesting a job. In addition, some GTOs posted vacancies on their websites. Other forms of recruitment by employers included via general promotions to schools or by attending career events hosted by schools or specific industries. The traditional approaches of calling for applications, short-listing and interviewing such candidates were used by larger companies. Some employers delegated all the recruitment to the AASN provider, supplying them with a position description and expecting them to advertise the position and run the application process. The employer would then undertake the short-listing and, together with the provider, conduct the interview.

No single major criterion was used by employers to select their apprentices. However, they often spoke of wanting to be aware of the candidate's prior experiences of work and social and sporting commitments, which included previous skills and the experience gained in part-time jobs or other forms of work, and, although not essential, the relevance or transferability of these skills to the present position. In terms of applicants with no work experience, employers reported that they would look at evidence of high motivation and interest in the trade, while for school leavers they would take account of the types of subjects they had undertaken at school, as well as how they had fared. Employers would

also look for signs of commitment and dedication to an obligation or responsibility, such as belonging to social clubs or sports clubs or being engaged in a part-time job.

Employers in some occupations (including electrical and roof plumbing) expressed a preference for taking on students who are a bit older than the normal school leaver, for their maturity and reliability. The older apprentice is perceived to have better concentration skills and be more receptive to taking directions, both of which skills are required to ensure safety in the workplace at all times. That said, some employers would prefer not to take on older individuals, especially those with 'attitude'.

In small communities, it is not unusual for employers (local councils, large companies and group training companies) to be acquainted with would-be apprentices or know of them and be aware of their standing in the local community or the extent of their commitment to their various obligations, for example, part-time jobs or sports teams. This kind of information is taken into account by employers when decisions are made about the suitability of the candidate for the job with their companies. Also important to some employers (especially large district councils) is to judge the potential of the would-be apprentices to fit in with the culture of the organisation.

Employers said they would base selections on how candidates had performed during work experience and work trials, along with positive recommendations from teachers and trainers. Others would select from their own workers, those who were interested in undertaking an apprenticeship. Feedback from the host employers who had provided the work experience or work trials was also heeded. Employers wanted to select those who had an interest in the trade and showed evidence of a good work ethic. In the case of hairdressers and chefs, employers used words like being 'passionate about the trade'. Having a good work ethic also meant coming to work on time and being respectful of other tradespersons and work colleagues and having the ability to take instructions and directions. It was important for all trades that would-be apprentices were willing to learn and to listen to the tradespeople who were supervising them. Although being drug-free was only specifically mentioned by one employer, the majority of employers were keen that safety requirements would be uppermost in the minds of apprentices.

For some trades (including carpentry and joinery, cabinet-making, electrical, air-conditioning and refrigeration, and engineering fabrication), employers highlighted the importance of practical hands-on skills and mechanical aptitudes to work in these trades, as well as the required literacy and/or numeracy skills. In some trades (including electrical, air-conditioning and refrigeration, and mechanical and fabrication, and plumbing trades) apprentices were required to submit to some aptitude testing (mostly in basic maths and physics areas). Being able to think for themselves and concentrate on critical tasks, plan ahead and stay safe were identified as key attributes for would-be electrical apprentices and those working in high-risk environments.

The applicant's awareness of the amount of time to be spent in work and the type of work that required was another criterion used to select apprentices. For example, would-be chef apprentices needed to understand that they would have to work long hours, with substantial amounts of time standing up at benches, stoves and sinks; potential air-conditioning and refrigeration mechanics needed to be aware that they would be required to work in the summer months, while would-be hairdressing apprentices would need to recognise the requirement for empathy and understanding of clients and their individual needs. Knowing

that an applicant had held a part-time job was especially well regarded because it indicated that he or she was experienced in dealing with the structures and routines of a work day, perceived by some employers as a substantial change from the flexibility allowed to students in the last two years of secondary school.

Not all selection was based on the attitudes, aptitudes or motivation of the would-be apprentice and in some industries (especially the building trade) it was essential that apprentices had a car (and a driving licence) and cards (white card) to drive to and be eligible to work on building sites. Being able to drive a manual car was important for those who would need to drive service vehicles (which in the main tended to be manual rather than automatic) to customer premises.

The majority of employers preferred not to have people who would be checking their social media accounts or were on their phones while they were working. They wanted apprentices to turn up for work, do the training and become involved with the company.

With a few exceptions, employers reported that the various recruitment and selection strategies they had used had been successful. Those who had used the work experience and work trial options and family and friendship connections reported these as the best options for selecting apprentices, and those who had experienced issues with external advertising sites reported these as the least successful. There were also those who preferred the 'walk-in' approach because it showed that the individual had initiative and was interested in doing an apprenticeship or working in the trade.

What is telling, however, is that parental interest in guiding their child through the recruitment and selection process is still high, especially for school leavers. One GTO employer reported that at times parents also attended interviews, even with those applicants who were over the age of 18 years. When this was the case, the parents only attended certain parts of the interview and were asked to leave for the remainder. When applicants were under the age of 18 years, it was more difficult for the company to ask or make the parent leave the interview. More investigations would be required to understand what influence parental attendance at interviews has on selection outcomes.

Trainer considerations

The majority of trainers indicated that they were not directly involved in the recruitment or selection of apprentices: they tended to become involved once the apprentice had been engaged by an employer. However, they were able to provide some extra insights, based on their experiences from working in the field.

Trainers suggested that individuals who had already completed a pre-vocational course or some type of taster course were good candidates for an apprenticeship. These individuals already had a sense of the skills needed for a particular trade and had a better understanding of the requirements of the apprenticeship. In relation to this, a common theme in regional areas was that people from farming backgrounds make good apprentices. Many of these individuals are used to working a full day on the farm and already possess hand skills from using the tools in the workshop on the farm (Agriculture training provider; Diesel mechanic employer). Thus, being able to demonstrate an awareness of the trade and having some experience with tools works well in the selection of apprentices.

Furthermore, trainers believed that individuals who sought out the apprenticeships themselves, such as by approaching employers and showing initiative, are good candidates for selection as apprentices. On the other hand, an individual who appears to be undertaking an apprenticeship because no other work was available was viewed as working least well in the selection of apprentices.

As a general rule of thumb, training providers may conduct language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) testing to determine whether an individual requires any additional support to complete the off-the-job training component of their apprenticeship. An example is the Basic Key Skills Builder (BKSB) test, an online tool used to review an individual's literacy and numeracy skills contained in the Australian Core Skills Framework (ACSF). Other pre-selection tests, such as mechanical testing or aptitude testing, were seen more as the employer's responsibility.

If any learning difficulties are discovered, training providers offer these students basic LLN support, which can include one-on-one support, scribing or tutorials. Employers may also be able to access Disabled Australian Apprentice Wage Support (DAAWS) funding to provide the apprentice with extra help for the off-the-job training component of their apprenticeship.

Apprenticeship regulator views

Because of their experiences in monitoring apprenticeships and responding to issues in the workplace, apprenticeship regulators were also asked to identify the characteristics of good apprentices. In their view a good apprentice: turns up to work regularly and on time; follows instructions and completes tasks; attends trade school; does not steal from the enterprise; does not 'knock off' early; does not run their own business while apprenticed to the employer; is honest with the employer about future intentions; has had some prior experience in the trade; is motivated and interested in the trade; and 'looks like they want to be there'.

The practical experience of apprentices

Apprentices in this study had obtained their apprenticeships in different ways, with the most prevalent being via work experience, family, friendship and industry contacts or direct applications.

- *Carpenters and joiners*: these apprentices had obtained their apprenticeships in a variety of ways, including via family contacts or family businesses, sending in job applications in response to advertisements, contacting employers or participating in work experience and pre-vocational programs (at certificate I and II levels).
- *Chefs*: apprentices reported that they had obtained their apprenticeships mainly through work experience in a relevant establishment and through contacts provided by the training provider, while others reported making direct applications for a position. Some of those already working in the industry had been asked to undertake the apprenticeship.
- Fabricators: family and friendship contacts and requests by existing workers to bosses and vice versa were the main avenues followed by these apprentices to obtain their apprenticeships.

Rarely did any of these apprentices report having to sit for a formal written test, although some noted that they had taken a basic test for literacy and numeracy. The main ‘test’ for those who had undertaken work experience and work trials was whether they had performed effectively for the employer who had hired them.

Off-the-job training: benefits and challenges

Traditional trade apprentices in the Australian system are generally trained through a combination of off-the-job and on-the-job training.

It is on the job that apprentices develop the practical and technical skills of the trade, learn good work habits, including the importance of safe work practices, and how to get on with bosses and other tradespersons and co-workers. It is also on the job that apprentices need to deal with the time pressures associated with completing tasks to meet critical deadlines and communicate with customers. Apprentices also develop personally and socially by being engaged in work and on-the-job training.

Off-the job training helps them to gain the underpinning knowledge required for the execution of their trade, including learning and honing the necessary technical skills, and gaining an understanding of how and why tasks are done in a certain way, as well as acquiring knowledge of critical legislation and regulations. Off-the-job training ensures that apprentices learn the broad skills of their trades, especially in view of the increased specialisation of many workplaces. This component of their training allows them (within reason) time to complete practical and written tasks in a context free from the time pressures they face in the workplace.

The off-the-job component is provided by and often at a training provider venue, while the on-the-job component is provided by the employer (or workplace supervisor) in the workplace. Increasingly, more of the off-the-job training is being undertaken or assessed in the workplace.

We were interested to discover from employers, training providers and apprentices the main components of training delivered off the job, including the benefits and challenges associated with having apprentices attend off-the-job training.

Employer perspectives

We asked employers to reflect on how well the training provider prepared their apprentices for the practical work they were expected to do in the workplace. In the main, most reported that they had experienced no major issues with the basic preparation that apprentices received. However, they were quite realistic in their assessment that apprentice performance also depended on the extent to which he or she was committed to learning the skills presented to them during training. A further factor for consideration was the potential difficulty apprentices may experience in applying the skills learnt off the job to the workplace, especially if the workplace context is more specialised in terms of products and services. In view of this increased specialisation, it was felt important that apprentice off-site training cover all of the skills required for their trades.

The majority of employers generally prefer to have their apprentices on site as much as possible, but they believed that trades school (and off-site training) was an essential part of the apprenticeship. The issues identified were more related to scheduling time for off-the-job training, rather than the content or type of provision.

Benefits of off-the-job training

Employers agreed on the benefits provided by off-the-job training for both their businesses and the apprentices themselves because it covered:

- the broad-based technical skills and knowledge of their trade, irrespective of whether these formed a major part of the skills and knowledge required in their jobs at work
- the critical legislation, regulatory frameworks and standards that applied to the technical components of all trades and especially for the licensed trades such as electrical, plumbing and gas-fitting and parts of air-conditioning and refrigeration
- workplace and occupational safety; for example, roof-plumbing apprentices learnt about working on elevated platforms and scaffolding, while apprentice groundskeepers learnt about working with chemicals
- a range of electives that apprentices could take, for example, apprentices learning to be pastry chefs or regular chefs could take electives to learn about chocolate work, or cheesemaking
- the key technical skills of the trade; for example, hairdressing apprentices could learn about basic cutting and styling techniques and the underpinning knowledge, and the theory of colour and composition of hair. Carpenters and joiners learnt the basic maths and skills required for measuring materials and undertaking first and second fixes, and cabinet-making apprentices learnt how to make kitchens. Metal fabrication apprentices learnt about welding and working with sheet metal, while automotive apprentices learnt about engines and how to repair them
- computer applications for some trades, for example, computer-aided design (CAD) programs for relevant trades.

Across the trades, apprentices could learn these skills in a simulated environment, where the pressures of time were few and where, in the case of the outdoor trades, they were not exposed to bad weather, and, importantly, where apprentices could take their time to learn and hone skills and knowledge.

Scheduling of training at appropriate periods

Employers reported difficulties with training schedules (especially for block training) in instances when providers do not recognise that some trades have optimal times when apprentices need to be at work. For example, between August and March is not a good time for air-conditioning and refrigeration apprentices, because that is the time their employers experience their highest business demand (and also make the most money). The winter months may be the best time for apprentice carpenters and joiners to attend off-the-job training, given that many parts of the country experience winter rains. For the majority of trades, block training is best not undertaken during the months leading up to the Christmas period. If providers are not flexible enough in scheduling their blocks of training to align off-the-job training with suitable periods, then apprentices are forever in catch-up mode with the off-the-job training requirements.

Opinion is also divided over the format of off-the-job training, with some employers preferring one or two days release per week and others preferring block training. Those who prefer the day-release option consider that this option will see the off-the-job component completed more quickly. Furthermore, with this option, employers have the apprentice for

most of every week during the year, which enables them to plan their work schedules and achieve work targets, even at busy periods. Those who prefer block release do so because they recognise that apprentices are able to focus on their training in extended amounts of time, while employers, for their part, have not scheduled to have them on site at that time.

Ensuring effective training arrangements

Employers also commented on issues related to student engagement with the training provided at trade school, especially if they became bored when they were placed in a group containing apprentices who were slower in picking things up. However, this was felt to be more of an issue for those apprentices in firms where employers provided training rather than for apprentices from smaller businesses, where this was less prevalent (because they generally go to trade school to do their off-the-job training). Not all employers were happy with the self-paced learning approach to the off-the-job training offered by some providers, nor did they all believe in the fully-on-site approach. These employers believed that apprentices learn better in face-to-face classrooms, in an off-site context, with teachers explaining the things that must be learnt: 'If there is an expectation by the sector that apprentices do their off-the-job training at work, then it must [be understood] that there is no one at work training them' (Air-conditioning and refrigeration).

It is also difficult to align the learning the apprentice undertakes at trade school with the tasks that are being done on the job, but in view of the trade specialisations increasingly occurring, such an alignment will become both more difficult to organise and less likely to occur. In fact, some employers would rather the provider focused on the skills and competencies that the apprentice is not likely to be applying every day in their jobs rather than the tasks that he or she performs regularly in the workplace. In instances such as this the RTO that is prepared to be flexible in providing opportunities for on-site assessments and being nimble in taking advantage of bad weather to bring apprentices together for off-the-job training during the year has a business advantage over those RTOs who are less prepared to be flexible.

Nevertheless, there are also those who believe that training should be customised to the existing knowledge and skill of each apprentice, obviating the need for the apprentice to attend college as regularly. Others consider the currency of the training package to be disadvantageous, with suggestions that time be devoted to modernising the training package to suit current workplace practice. The currency of teachers' skills was also raised as an issue.

There were no employers who did not believe that apprenticeship training required a combination of off-the-job and on-the-job components. The costs associated with remaining compliant with various regulatory frameworks was also felt to be another challenge.

Trainer perspectives

Like employers, trainers considered that the most important thing that apprentices learnt at trade school was the theory behind the practice. Trainers were also able to help apprentices acquire a 'more thorough and deeper understanding' of the skills they were learning in the workplace. Additionally, they were able to expose apprentices to the full range of skills in a training package. Trainers surmised that it was difficult for employers to teach apprentices everything, so they saw their role as filling in the gaps and teaching the

apprentices new skills or different ways of completing tasks. Off-the-job training was also seen as providing a safe environment for an apprentice to learn: for an automotive trainer, the capacity to hone skills in the training provider's workshop rather than on a customer's vehicle in the workplace was felt to be of great benefit to the apprentice. The off-the-job training also provided apprentices with the opportunity to learn from their peers, such as how different workplaces operate.

On the other hand, trainers found some elements of an apprenticeship difficult to deliver, such as connecting the theory to the practice when apprentices were unable to access such experience directly in the workplace. Similarly, since some of the core units in many training packages are rarely used in the field, apprentices are potentially unable to get advice from their employers. Some trainers believed these units should be removed from the qualification, whereas others believed it would 'take the craft away from the trade' (Wet trades trainer). Trainers also had difficulties keeping apprentices engaged in units of competency that required a lot of reading, such as the unit relating to the Australian Standards, as well as difficulties in customising training to individual needs. Another concern for trainers was that the technology in their workshops was not as advanced as that in the workplace.

In the context of suggestions for improving off-the-job training, trainers proposed a number of changes to training packages. Examples include:

- better sequencing of units of competency so that certain units are completed before others are begun
- modernising specific elements in training packages by removing competencies no longer used in the trade, for example, electricians no long 'sharpen drill bits' (they buy new drill bits); however, such a unit of competency still exists
- decreasing the time allowed for making changes in training packages.

Streamlining and making more efficient the changes to qualifications was also raised during the interview with an AASN provider, who noted that more thought needed to go into this process.

Another common issue was about limited funding from government to enable the purchase of more up-to-date resources and equipment and sufficient. One example given was of the wastage of materials in practical classes for pipe work in plumbing and how private training organisations are struggling to pay the cost per student. Trainers also mentioned how their limited facilities affected the number of students they can teach: 'in theory they may be able to teach one hundred students online but in practical classes they can only give their attention to ten students' (Hairdressing trainer).

The training providers that service regional and remote areas suggested that the remote and country allowance needs to be increased as they have to refuse potential apprentices in remote areas because they cannot afford to go out and train them. As one horticultural trainer noted, 'we would like to travel more but can't afford to and it can lead to students not being able to do an apprenticeship' (Horticulture trainer in regional area).

Apprenticeship regulator perspectives

According to apprenticeship regulators, the most important and useful skills that apprentices learnt during off-the-job training were:

- the fundamental practical skills and knowledge (including critical thinking) that applied to their trades
- ways of using machinery, equipment, tools, products and materials of their trades
- other ways of undertaking tasks and developing and applying the skills to which they are not being exposed in the workplace
- opportunities to speak to other apprentices and students.

When apprenticeship regulators reflected on how off-the-job training could be improved, they tended to comment on the need for training providers to have adequate and up-to-date resources and to employ quality trainers (especially trainers who would have high educational standards for students). With these conditions fulfilled, they believed the level of apprentice standards would be raised, along with confidence in the training provider's ability to provide this training.

In one regional area in South Australia apprentices are engaged in release programs two days per week, and this was felt to be quite disruptive to the workplace. Suggestions were made for regional apprentices to attend block training.

Apprentice perspectives

We asked apprentices to give their opinion on the easiest aspects of their off-the-job training, as well as the more difficult issues they encountered. The 'easiest' aspects were related to the stress-free environment experienced at college, while the most 'difficult' were generally associated with learning and understanding the theory related to their trade practice. Some, however, commented on the disparity between off-site learning and on-site practice.

- **Carpenters and joiners**: the 'easiest' and most enjoyable aspects of training at college was learning about why things were done a certain way. This information was given to them by lecturers, who were good at providing such explanations, mainly because they were perceived to have the qualifications and the verbal skills to do so. In contrast, their employers did not do much explaining or give reasons why a certain process is to be followed. 'It is their way or the highway', was a general refrain.

  Apprentices felt that the most useful things they had learnt at college included learning about the Building Code of Australia and what it meant for their work, and the importance of following the code to avoid problems in construction. For some, it was the theory underpinning their skills, especially as they undertook so much practical work on the job; for others, it was the practice they obtained in practical workshops.

  Apprentices reported that one of the 'difficult' issues they experienced was sitting in a classroom for long periods of time, especially since they more usually worked outside. However, most of the issues they raised were related to the difficulties they had with understanding the theory and responding to complex questions in written assignments. Some also referred to instances where the learning materials did not always provide the information that enabled them to answer such questions. These apprentices also spoke

of the tension between having to do things the 'TAFE way' and then returning to work and doing it the employer's way. Another difficulty was not using the skills learnt off the job in the workplace. Although apprentices agreed that these skills were useful in terms of their trade, they also wondered if they would use these in the long term in their workplaces.

- **Chefs**: for these apprentices the 'easiest' aspects of their off-the-job training was being able to work and learn in a stress-free environment. They had time to do 'stuff'; there was nobody urging to get things done; there were no customers to worry about; and they could take their time to do a good job. Learning new things, having more one-on-one learning with their lecturers (possible for some, because of the small classes they had been involved in) also meant that if things went wrong with a certain dish, the lecturer could help them to start afresh immediately; they would not lose too much time and they could continue on to complete it.

  The most useful things they had learnt were the basic skills in cookery, including soups, stocks and sauces (with modern twists), underpinning theory and general knowledge about the trade. Because they were in classes with other apprentices, they had found it useful to speak to other apprentices about their workplaces. Females who were employed in mainly male establishments found it useful to meet other female apprentices.

  The most 'difficult' aspects of the off-the-job component typically concerned the theory and technical knowledge required. They reported no issues with learning the basics, although they did encounter difficulties with the more complex aspects, such as the theory behind the use of certain equipment and specific dietary requirements. Some believed that this level of complexity was not required in the early stages of their training. Those who had experienced larger classes also highlighted what they perceived to be difficulties for the lecturers teaching large groups, which naturally would include students at different levels in their learning: 'If there are 20 students in a class the lecturer can't physically go around to each student. Unless we have more lecturers, it will be difficult for them to know how each student [in such large classes] is going' (Fourth-year apprentice). Some difficulties were related to differences between how the college taught things and how they were done in the workplace. 'We should learn both the old and the new ways of cooking. Following the classical French technique won't die out, but TAFE should also teach more up-to date practices'.

  When apprentices were asked if they had been supported to deal with these issues, they generally responded in the affirmative, and reported that lecturers made themselves available to answer questions, and that they also independently checked issues on the internet.

- **Fabricators**: these apprentices reported that the 'easiest' aspects of their off-the-job training was undertaking their practical hands-on learning in workshop classes. The most useful aspect of college attendance was acquiring the basic skills for their trade, including the basic maths that were required. The off-the-job learning also gave them time to build up problem-solving skills to apply to any technical problems in the workplace. At college they were treated like a student who was there to learn; in the workplace they were treated like a worker who needed to get a job done.

The most ‘difficult’ aspect of college was learning how to draw and to place objects in the correct positions in diagrams (even though they could recognise these objects in real life). At college they did not really learn how to make ‘whole’ things: they tended to learn about the various elements that comprised such things, but in small chunks at a time. This was in contrast to what they were expected to do in the workplace, which was to make an entire object. At college they learnt how to perfect a skill, but in the workplace the skill was sometimes not used, and the level of precision was not always required.

Another issue was related to the complex requirements for claiming recognition of current competencies. A very experienced apprentice, who had come into the apprenticeship after having spent a long time in the industry, reported having attempted to gain recognition for his current competency, but had found there were too many requirements to fulfil, and so had decided that it was easier in the long run to come to classes.

In reflecting on whether they had been given support to deal with such difficulties, apprentices reported that, at the outset, they were expected to work things out for themselves. If they did a good job, they were given a lot of positive reinforcement. For them this was a good way of proceeding when they started with the easier diagrams, but it became more difficult with the more complex diagrams. They acknowledged the high-level technical skills of their lecturer.

On-the-job training: benefits and challenges

We were also interested to find out from employers, training providers and apprentices their perceptions and experiences of apprentices' learning through their on-the-job training. Learning in the workplace instilled in apprentices the technical skills of their trade, important life skills and the social behaviours that were expected and were practised in the workplace. On-the-job training taught them to be a tradesperson.

Employer perspectives

Teaching apprentices how to be a competent tradesperson

When employers reflected on the most important areas they cover when teaching apprentices — of whatever trade — during their on-job training, they spoke of the need to teach them about:

- how to be safe, and how to protect themselves from the hazards of workplace and occupational injury, including bad weather

  Whether apprentices are walking on roof ladders (roof plumbing), wiring up electrical components (electrical jobs), fixing engines on large tractors in agricultural enterprises (diesel mechanics) or using sharp knives to cut up animal carcasses (butchers) or meat in restaurants (chefs), the priority is to do things in a safe way and always to stay safe.

  Where there is potential for food contamination (butchers, chefs and fabricators working with fridges and pipes in dairy farms or supermarkets), there is a need to combine hygiene skills with safety skills. 'It is not just the rhetoric of safety that is important, but the actual application of safe practices that is key' (Roof plumbing employer).

- the standards and other regulatory requirements that must be followed in the trade, including, for example, working in confined spaces, and at heights, and on elevated platforms, and training for required licences or tickets for driving trucks and forklifts

- the policies and procedures that apply to occupations and workplaces and which can be applied to similar workplaces: 'They can use this knowledge to work in any other meat centre too' (Manager, meat centre, major supermarket).

Employers believe that, along with these safety and regulatory procedures, it is on the job that all apprentices learn the practical skills for their trades, at the same time experiencing the conditions of being a tradesperson in their trades. On the job they learn:

- the key responsibilities of their specific roles

- the good work habits required, such as coming to work each day and turning up on time, being respectful of others, dressing appropriately, being reliable and responsible, and getting on with their bosses and co-workers: 'We teach our apprentices training to be groundsmen and arborists and the need to get on with members of their team and when there are differences the need to be able to put their differences aside to get things done' (Human resources manager, district council)

- life skills, such as working the required number of hours, cleaning up after their work, keeping their tool kits and work areas tidy, and dressing and grooming appropriately.

The employers also highlighted the importance of on-the-job training in introducing the apprentices to a more demanding environment. In some ways, the actual workplace — whether it be a factory, a hair salon, a restaurant, or external worksites, including commercial and domestic building sites, homes, offices, supermarkets, dairy farms, agricultural enterprises, or the grounds and parks of a shire or district — is perceived to have relatively more demanding expectations of apprentices than the simulated environment of the training provider. Here the apprentices have to learn to deal with time pressures when deadlines for orders or services must be met, and when the next co-worker is waiting on them to complete their work so the next tasks can begin.

In trades where apprentices accompany tradespersons into the homes and offices of clients or deal directly with clients, they will need to learn to interact with customers who are watching their every move (especially relevant for electrician and plumbing apprentices) and be sensitive to the personal needs of customers (in the case of hairdressing apprentices). All of these experiences will hopefully enable the apprentice to become better at dealing with people, solving problems, and undertaking jobs efficiently.

In relation to learning in a simulated environment versus on the job, the former is considered to give apprentices more time to learn and practise skills and is generally more lenient (within reason) about the wastage of products and materials; the real workplace on the other hand can be less forgiving, especially of wastage.

A gradual introduction to the skills of the trade

Employers generally do not throw apprentices in at the deep end and they speak about giving apprentices (especially commencing apprentices) a gradual introduction to the skills of the trade. For example:

- **Butchery apprentices** will start off learning knife skills on smaller cuts of meat and progress to cutting carcases. Once they are confident in using these knife skills, they are then introduced to other butchery skills.
- **Chef apprentices** are also gradually eased into their roles, but as time goes by they will be expected to manage multiple priorities and learn to do what the various supervising chefs expect of them (even if it is different from what they have learnt at trade school or from another chef in the same company).
- **Carpentry and joinery and electrical apprentices** and other apprentices whose jobs involve attendance at multiple worksites need good organisational skills. This means planning ahead, including knowing where the first and next jobs are for the day, and preparing the tools and equipment they will require for each of these jobs. They will also need to know ahead of time the tasks that need to be completed, as well as how to work safely and adhere to the standards for their particular industries.

All employers are committed to training their apprentices to learn the skills of their trades, but there are those who spoke setting high standards for themselves, as well as of their apprentices. These employers are sometimes not afraid to be firm in enforcing these expectations: ‘I train them to do things right. They must be able to put a car back together with nothing missing. I ask them to treat the car as if it were their own car’ (Employer, crash repairs).

Developing personal and social skills

According to employers, the workplace is not only a training ground for trades skills (although this is its key role), it is also a place where apprentices develop as a person, at an important developmental stage of their lives. Here they will learn to be more self-aware, confident and 'comfortable within their own skins', and, importantly, become resilient.

> We have younger kids between the ages of 16 and 20 at the most tumultuous periods of their lives. This is when they begin to work five days a week, have girlfriends, get engaged, get married, and or have babies. While all this is happening, we are trying to teach them a trade. We also have to teach them life skills and sometimes they have never been away from their mum. All this takes time. (Employer, air conditioning and refrigeration company)

In the workplace apprentices will learn to communicate with others, especially those older than themselves, and those from different walks of life. This will include building and managing their interpersonal relationships, including with clients.

One issue concerning the development of good relations with co-workers was not identified by many employers, although in our focus group with apprentices it was sometimes mentioned. This was the status of the apprentice in the work group. We heard from one workplace supervisor that, in his experience, some co-workers (including casual workers) would sometimes talk down to the apprentice. In his view there was a need for training providers to provide the apprentice with some assertiveness training, which would help them to deal with such situations. In addition, it would also be useful for apprentices to learn how to give instructions especially when they are buddied up with younger apprentices.

In larger enterprises, it is not unusual for employers to want apprentices to be exposed to other areas of the business and to arrange for succession planning:

> If at the end of their trades apprentices want to learn another area (for example, sales, management spare parts, precision agriculture, or satellite guidance), we will make it possible for them to train for these roles.
>
> (Employer, agricultural enterprise employing diesel mechanic apprentices)

Trainer perspectives

Trainers value on-the-job training just as much as off-the-job training. In the consultations trainers continually identified the five main areas considered by them to be crucial during apprentices' on-the-job training. These were:

- **Technical and practical skills**: seeing problems first hand in the workplace, for example, a vehicle coming in on a tow truck, and being able to apply their skills, knowledge and techniques to diagnose and offer a repair solution.
- **Safety skills**: being able to work in a safe manner on a work site. This is extremely important in some trade areas, such as electrical, where electrocution is a hazard. Safety can also include skills like reversing trailers and securely tying trailer loads.
- **Non-technical social and life skills**: for young apprentices coming from school the on-the-job training is important in teaching time management, punctuality and generally about being employed.

- **Customer service skills**: learning how to communicate with people in a professional manner, such as determining the needs of customers and fulfilling them.
- **Business skills**: being exposed to and gaining an understanding of how a business works and operates.

All of these skills relate to being able to put their skills into practice in a real-work scenario and learning how to be an employee and the responsibilities that come with it.

In terms of the skills that are difficult to learn through the on-the-job training, trainers highlighted how apprentices are limited by the experiences their employers are able to offer them: 'not every workshop sees everything so they can't experience it all' (Light vehicle automotive trainer). On a similar note, another trainer noted that apprentices tend to learn only how to work in one particular workplace, given that they learn their firm's specific processes and ways of doing things, and that it is hard for them to understand how their skills can be transferred to other workplaces.

According to trainers, conflict resolution is another difficult area for apprentices in the workplace. Some apprentices are not aware of their rights or find it awkward to raise issues with their supervisor and/or manager. They sometimes speak to their trainers about these issues, but trainers are not equipped to provide advice on industrial relations matters.

Suggestions by trainers to improve the on-the-job training component of apprenticeships are centred around improving employer awareness of their responsibilities. This includes understanding the difference between an apprentice and a worker, their obligations to send apprentices to training and to provide varied experiences for apprentices in the workplace. One approach to achieving this would be for trainers to visit employers more often and explain to them the reasons for teaching particular units (hairdressing). Additionally, the employers' resources assessment (ERA) was seen as a great starting point for understanding the competencies an employer can provide in a workplace, but it was suggested that having both onsite and offsite trainers could help to ensure the competencies are being covered in full. An example was given of a floor tiling company that in reality does not generally do jobs requiring tiling for stairs. In this case the apprentice may not achieve the full set of tiling competencies in the workplace. This will need to be covered by the training organisation (Wet trades trainer).

Apprenticeship regulator perspectives

According to apprenticeship regulators, it is on the job that apprentices are perceived to best learn how to apply the practical skills of their trade and develop personally and socially. It is here they are given opportunities to develop self-confidence in their abilities, pride in what they do and produce, and learn to work and get on with other people. It is also here that they begin to earn a regular wage. For these reasons, it is important that apprentices have a good workplace supervisor or mentor to support them in their skill development and their social and personal development. Small companies can also use the apprenticeship system as a way to ensure they can keep up with new technologies and ways of working.

The most difficult things for apprentices to learn in the workplace were related to developing appropriate work habits and routines. Apprentices were perceived as finding it hard to take directions and being told what to do. When apprentices lack the level of

discipline to fit into the routines of a paid job, they were perceived to run the risk of getting into trouble, especially with traditional employers, who were perceived to have higher expectations of the need for apprentices to behave appropriately and be engaged in work. One of the issues that affected regional apprentices was the need to travel to the city for training.

Apprenticeship regulators also reported on some of the issues they have had to deal with in their work. These included ensuring that employers:

- pay the apprentice the wages and entitlements according to the relevant awards
- provide the apprentice with the appropriate amount and quality of supervision, even during their third or fourth years
- release the apprentice for off-the-job training and pay for the attendance
- inform the relevant government department of any changes or variations in the contract.

Apprentice perspectives

Apprentices were asked what they found to be the easiest, most difficult and most useful things they learn at work. Although there were some trade-specific differences, some common themes were identified.

- **Carpenters and joiners**: when apprentices spoke about the 'easiest' things they had learnt at the workplace, they responded that they had learnt never to just stand around but to look busy. This might mean sweeping the floor, stacking the off-cuts or other materials, and generally undertaking jobs before being asked. The most useful things they had learnt were the practical hands-on skills (including hammering nails) and techniques for solving problems. Although these skills were also learnt in off-the-job training, constant workplace practice made them more expert in applying the skills.

  For many, the most 'difficult' issues concerned a lack of explanation of why tasks were done a certain way (generally the boss's way). Some apprentices also felt a lot more pressure to do things quickly and get things right on the first attempt. Some also observed that if they 'stuffed up' at TAFE, at least they had the time and the materials to get it right. For the majority of apprentices this was not always the case in the workplace. When apprentices were asked if they had been supported to deal with such difficulties, some replied that it depended on the boss's mood at the time. Although some apprentices believed there was substantial pressure on them to do things correctly the first time, others reported workplace demands that were more relaxed.

- **Chefs:** for chef apprentices the 'easiest' aspects of on-the-job were learning how to use basic equipment and the tools of the trade; they also reported that what could be considered easy would depend on the individual apprentice and on the scale of the kitchen in which they worked, the extent to which chefs were prepared to share information with apprentices, and the status of the apprentice in the kitchen hierarchy. How easily or quickly apprentices learned the tasks expected of them also depended on the amount of time chef(s) had available to stop and spend time teaching them. In a large establishment the task of looking after the apprentice might be shared among a team; in these instances apprentices might be expected to help run a section of the kitchen. In a smaller establishment apprentices might be expected to be more heavily

involved in all areas. Looking forward to the end of the shift was referred to as being the easiest aspect of the job. This was said tongue-in-cheek, but it also reflected some of the high expectations of apprentices in modern kitchens.

These apprentices identified the most 'difficult' aspects to be the experience of entering and working in the high-pressure environment of what they commonly understood to be a demanding industry. Some spoke about how much work they had to do in their establishments. If they worked in a fast kitchen with a number of chefs on duty, then they would have to work hard, even if they were the only apprentice. Although apprentices also considered that in some establishments their peers may not be well treated, they also spoke fondly of their own chefs, especially those who gave them support in their learning: 'Our new head chef is good, and he says, do it [the task or dish] like they teach you in TAFE' (Second-year chef apprentice).

There was also a view expressed by some of these apprentices that industry needed to be a little 'tough' on apprentices because the aim was to make the apprentice stronger and to build character and resilience: 'Up to a certain point, apprentices need to have a backbone, but there needs to be a happy medium' (Third-year apprentice).

Apprentices also reported that those who were seen by their chefs to work hard (often they spoke of themselves in this light) tended to be well treated, while the others who were not so hard-working would be reprimanded. Being an apprentice in a family business was also reported as being difficult because there were higher expectations of them by family members.

When apprentices were asked if they had been supported to deal with some of these difficult issues, they referred to the general good treatment received from head chefs, with one apprentice recounting how one head chef had told a worker who had treated the apprentice badly to get out of the kitchen. Whether an apprentice worked with a good chef or a bad chef was perceived by apprentices to be the luck of the draw. Good chefs looked after and supported the apprentice; bad ones did not want to appear weak so may engage in aggressive behaviour. 'The hard life of the apprentice makes us understand why chefs leave the industry and apprentices don't finish' (Third-year apprentices).

- **Fabricators:** the 'easiest' and most useful aspects in the workplaces for these apprentices were developing basic technical skills like drilling, welding and measuring, and undertaking menial tasks such as mopping and cleaning up. Also deemed to be easy and useful were the social skills of getting on with people, servicing the needs of customers, and working in a team to get jobs done quicker.

  For some, the repetitiveness of their expected tasks and the need to do a good job, quickly 'and right now', were the most 'difficult' aspects, while for others who had experienced issues with getting on with their bosses it was these interpersonal issues that were the most difficult. In dealing with such issues, individuals reported support from their GTO officer or from new supervisors.

Keeping up with new technologies and innovative practices

Employers, trainers and apprentices were asked to indicate how they kept up with new technologies in the workplace and the classroom. Training providers also identified a range of innovative practices used in teaching and assessment.

How employers keep up with new technologies

When employers reflected on the most recent advances in technologies, the advances that have affected how work is done in their business and trades, the most common response across the board was the advent of automation and computerisation, with some sectors using more highly advanced technology (automated agricultural machinery, cameras to guide digging for plumbing) than others, and in some industries these advances are well established. In other areas they tend to relate to new materials and products, and newer models of machinery and equipment. A large number of the technical skills required of the tradespersons in the traditional trades were reported to have been modernised rather than superseded. Also prevalent were information technology systems that enabled records of work to be logged on line and in real time.

Other employers reported that changes in the regulatory frameworks applying to workplace health and safety have exerted the greatest impact on the way work is done rather than changes in the technologies themselves.

New products were reported to have given better results in a range of industries. Hairdressing has benefited from new colour-balancing products and techniques, crash repairs from infra-red paints, building from steel framing and precision cutting, arboriculture and horticulture from new chemicals, and maintenance of roads and parks from new forms of bitumen and greener products.

Although technological advances are perceived to have made some things easier for the trades, there is also a view that they have contributed to deskilling the tradesperson; for example, using a saw to cut a sheet of timber was considered to be a much more difficult skill than programming the machine to cut it to the desirable measurements. Using a manual meat grinder was perceived to be more difficult than pressing a button to switch on the most up-to-date and automated equipment. Losing some of these manual skills was considered an issue for trades.

Another impact of advanced technology on apprenticeship training related to the need for individuals to have maths, English and computer skills to be successful. If students wanting to enter apprenticeships do not possess these skills or knowledge, then it will become more difficult for enterprises in general and group training companies in particular (who tend to rely on calling for applications to fill a range of vacancies for apprenticeship programs) to employ apprentices in many of their programs.

How workplaces keep staff up with new technologies

The most common way for employers to ensure that their people keep up with new technologies was to learn about the latest advances, techniques and equipment from suppliers and manufacturers. Employers themselves or selected individuals attended trade shows, events or training conducted by manufacturers and suppliers, with companies that had national and international reach also sending senior personnel to their overseas or interstate branches. Those who participated in such events were then expected to share their learnings with others in the company. Online training was also provided by dealerships.

In some industries the manufacturing and supplier representatives and/or technicians visited companies at the workplace. This was especially important in hairdressing and crash repair industries, where staff would be presented with recently released products, and representatives would provide training in how to use or apply these products. For example, vendor representatives came on site to show crash repair businesses how to apply new primers and special additives and to explain manufacturer eco standards. Product representatives would also come to hair salons to present new colour products and to introduce staff to new cutting or styling techniques.

In any case, the extent to which employers wanted to buy all the most modern technologies, irrespective of whether they were absolutely necessary, depended on how much a business wanted to or could spend, before it was no longer cost-effective.

Employers also reported that they kept up to date via subscriptions to magazines and newspapers, internet searches, and visits to manufacturers' websites (important for finding out about the fault codes that applied to new models). Nobody was and could be expected to know everything about all of the new models that came onto the market.

Employers were generally of the view that, even though training providers also tried to maintain familiarity with the latest products and processes, they could not be expected to keep up with the broad scope of the different equipment used in the workplace, especially engineering workplaces, which could not be expected to be up to date with all the latest models of vehicles entering the market. They have to be generalists in their teaching: 'Training providers can only teach the basic theory and not the specifics of a model as there are too many brands that even industry cannot keep up with them. They should concentrate on the basic principles then research the specifics of models (Employer, air-conditioning and refrigeration).

Employers were especially aware that training providers would not be funded to have the latest state-of-the art equipment and machinery. For example, one meat centre had bought a very large and modern meat mincer from Germany, which could mince the meat in large volumes. The employer did not expect the provider to have this type of equipment and was also of the view that apprentices could learn from using the more traditional equipment. 'Anyone can operate the new technology', he said. 'It is good to learn how to operate the different machinery' (Employer, meat centre, major supermarket chain). Employers from sectors with the latest machinery suggested that the public provider should partner with big business and learn from centre of excellence approaches.

There were some exceptions, however, with some training providers having access to modern facilities and equipment, for example, state-of-the-art commercial kitchens for training chef apprentices, and virtual welding and 3D printing for apprentice fabricators.

When employers were asked to identify who should have responsibility for ensuring that apprentices acquire up-to-date information and skills, all of their responses indicated a key role for employers, with many suggesting a joint role for employers and training providers, while a small group divided this responsibility between employers, training providers and apprentices. Where apprentices identified themselves as sharing the responsibility for staying current, they saw their role as asking questions and undertaking online training. Group training companies spoke of the need to rotate apprentices between host employers to ensure they acquired up-to-date skills or used feedback from field officers about the latest advances. One GTO noted that responsibility should be shared between the regulator, the training provider and the host employer.

Those who placed the responsibility for maintaining currency with the provider suggested that it was up to the provider to employ up-to-date staff and keep them current. It was also up to the trade school to focus on teaching the broader skills of the trade, rather than merely skills the apprentices are likely to need in the workplace. Updating the training package was seen as necessary, especially since the training provider had to cover the things required by the training package.

Some employers indicated that maintaining currency was the responsibility of the employer and the manufacturers, particularly since there was so much variety in new products and processes, and, in many cases, apprentices could not use the new technology because they had to be licenced technicians to do so.

How trainers keep up with new technologies

Staying on top of technological advances in industry is important to trainers: if they are seen to be teaching out-of-date practices or are unaware of new advances, then employers will not trust them to train their apprentices. So how do they maintain their industry currency? Their main methods for maintaining industry currency can be grouped into two main themes: professional development and industry engagement. In relation to the former, trainers attend workshops, expos, seminars and field days, join professional associations, read magazines and newsletters and may spend some time conducting their own research. With regard to industry engagement, trainers may join industry associations, talk to people within industry or spend time working within the industry each year, a practice that varies from a couple of weeks a year to a couple of weeks a semester. In addition, a training provider may organise for manufacturers, suppliers or industry experts to visit campus to deliver training to discuss the latest technologies and practices with staff and students.

Generally, employers were believed to be more likely than training providers to have access to the latest tools and equipment of the trade. Apprentices employed through a GTO were sometimes rotated through host employers to ensure they were exposed to the latest technologies and practices. Furthermore, some manufacturers, such as the John Deere company, run their own training seminars, in which apprentices can be encouraged to participate. Other ways that apprentices could keep on top of technological changes included becoming members of industry bodies, watching examples of the latest techniques on YouTube (particularly for hairdressing) and hearing from other apprentices about the technologies used in their workplaces. Apprentices were also reported to be able to complete free additional courses conducted by industry bodies for existing workers.

An exception is agriculture, where the registered training organisation (RTO) was seen as ahead of the workplace in regard to technology. The particular training provider interviewed has a partnership with beef industry research and is able to show the research to the students before it enters the workplace. The training provider also has two enterprise-sized farms, where students can hone their skills.

How apprentices keep up with new technologies

Apart from changes in telecommunications, which meant more online logging of reports or tasks done in the workplace (using the My Profiling app), apprentices were of the view that the amount of technological change in workplaces also depended on the nature of the businesses in which they worked.

- **Carpenters and joiners**: using the 'My Profiling' app was one of the technological changes that had been utilised by these apprentices, but few spoke of major changes in the technologies available in their workplaces. They were of the view that the nature of the business dictated the extent of advanced technology used in the workplace, for example, subcontractors who worked on their own would do it all themselves, while larger companies would have more automation. Nevertheless, apart from products and materials, much of the technological change that had automated processes for larger firms had been in place for quite a few years.
- **Chefs:** a similar picture is painted by chef apprentices, and, apart from some changes in technology such as using apps to make online orders for supplies or for placing client menu orders with kitchens, little had changed, and most of the tasks are still being undertaken manually. In some establishments pen and paper orders were still taken.
- **Fabricators:** many of the technologies being used in fabrication had been in use for a long time.

Innovative practices in teaching and assessment

In addition to meeting the requirements of training packages, training providers have implemented or considered several innovative practices in the training of apprentices to help them achieve competency standards. Some of these practices supplement the training the apprentice receives, such as:

- **Light automotive**: a trainer mentioned how they purchase electronic kits to help their students to learn how to construct circuits as well as how to change functions and perform other tasks. This approach helps the students to gain a better understanding of electronics.
- **Horticulture**: whenever anything new is introduced in the industry, such as a new product, the apprentices are given a research project to investigate it.

Another innovative practice implemented by a training provider is the My Profiling App, which allows the apprentice to upload examples of the work completed by them elsewhere. Since it assists in maintaining a record of their practical experience, the training provider is able to monitor their progression through the qualification.

Pre-vocational and taster courses, including work trials, were introduced in some training providers to help potential apprentices learn about different trades before committing to an apprenticeship. One wet trades trainer mentioned how their organisation had developed their own pre-vocational program by completing a training needs analysis in each of their wet trade areas to determine the skills that would provide an advantage to somebody looking to start an apprenticeship. From this they developed the program: during the first week the students learn about the white card and practised using hand tools with the provider; in the second week they undertake work experience with employers they know are looking for apprentices. The same training provider also has a 'try a trade' day with school students, whereby students have the opportunity to try every wet trade area for one day. This program had proven to be very popular and successful — they always have more interest in the program than places available. The benefit of these programs is that students are able to make an informed decision about entering an apprenticeship.

Other examples of innovative practices established by training providers include:

- having case managers look after a group of companies and the apprentices within them
- maintaining flexibility in training such that apprentices can be brought in for off-the-job training and complete units when the weather is not suitable for outside work (carpentry trainer)
- introducing self-paced learning and an expanded classroom approach, whereby the classroom supports two trainers teaching a cluster of units. This approach allows the students to work at their own pace, ask for help and be assessed when ready. The learning management system has the capacity to be accessed 24 hours a day, so apprentices are able to undertake pre-learning at home and the summative test at college. Although not specifically asked about the suitability of self-paced learning, some employers did not support the use of self-paced learning methods for apprenticeship training.
- assembling an industry advisory group to give feedback to the training organisation on the training, as well as supporting the organisation to keep up to date with industry needs and standards. This information is passed on to the training organisation's executive team.

A number of trainers also mentioned some innovative practices under consideration but yet to be implemented. These included:

- requiring teaching staff to be multi-skilled to enable them to teach more than one trade. This is particularly important for units that are common to these trades.
- introducing rolling starts, so if an employer wants an apprentice to start immediately and work individually, this becomes possible.

Keeping training practices that work and improving those that do not

Employers overwhelmingly agreed that it was important to keep the current combination of off-the-job and on-the-job training for the skilling of apprentices. They were also committed to the concept of having apprentices trained in the broad-based skills of their trades. However, they were also keen to access training for their apprentices at times that did not clash with busy commercial periods.

In the main, employers were unable to identify aspects of the apprenticeship system they believed should be removed. Those few employers who did identify some elements for removal spoke of the need to get rid of bureaucratic red tape, including: the requirement for having an AASN provider complete the sign-up of the training contract (when they were of the view that they themselves were able to do it); and having to report the same training information to multiple regulatory agencies.

What employers want to keep

Employers identified the practices they were keen to maintain within the apprenticeship system.

A combination of off- and on-the-job training to support broad-based skills development

Employers believe that it is important to preserve practices that are seen to work well in the training of apprentices, while reviewing practices they perceive to disadvantage learners in the classroom. Keeping in mind that there is increased specialisation of activities in commercial enterprises (evident in some trades more than others), employers are supportive of provision that enables apprentices to experience and develop the broad range of technical skills and knowledge that pertains to the whole trade.

The great majority of employers in this study were of the view that learning both technical and knowledge skills should involve a combination of on- and off-the-job training, with some employers particularly emphasising the need for apprentices to go off site (to trade school) for the majority of their off-the-job training. The main reasons given were:

- Most workplaces are too busy with production tasks to ensure that the apprentice was also learning the theory component of their courses.
- Apprentices would be exposed to skills and knowledge not learnt in their employing company and could access specialist training and licences at trade school, including, for example, air-conditioning modules, and fork-lift licences.
- Some units of ‘competency’ are perceived to be best done in the classroom.
- It made sense, for some cases, to front-load the theory components, meaning that when apprentices moved into the workplace they already had some preliminary knowledge.
- It would impress on apprentices that there were two ways to perform a skill — the college way and the employer way.

- Apprentices could relay knowledge learnt to those employers that were less up to date with new ways of working.

Safety training was considered a key aspect and to be essential across the trades; it was especially identified as one of the successful elements that needed to be preserved in the building trades, as should the Capstone test for relevant trades: 'It sorts them out and they can be signed off even before four years are up. It provides an incentive for us to keep them [after they finish] (Employer, air-conditioning and refrigeration).

Training packages, if suitably modernised to keep up with the modern technology used in the workplace, were considered by some to be essential because they acted as an anchor for training.

Flexibility in scheduling off-site and on-site training and assessment

The willingness and flexibility of the training provider to schedule off-site training (especially block training) at times that did not coincide with busy periods (that is, in seasons when employers made most of their financial gains) was a special consideration for many employers. In large corporations in particular, it was important to employers that block training was not taken by all of their apprentices simultaneously. Some employers on the other hand preferred their apprentices to undertake block training: they could see that it had benefits in terms of an extended period of time that enabled the apprentice to focus on and complete required modules; it was also felt to be better for retention of knowledge.

- Training in blocks (at suitable times) meant that employers could highlight that week or weeks and make arrangements that took account of having one less person to share the tasks that needed to be done. This approach is less possible when apprentices have day-release arrangements. Nevertheless, there were employers who had no objections to the day-release concept, even suggesting a two-day-per-week release period, with a view to getting the off-the-job component completed more quickly.
- Although the great majority of employers believed in the importance of having apprentices attend off-site training, some were especially supportive of providers who delivered some of the training and assessment on site. This on-site approach was especially useful for enterprises or organisations providing apprenticeship training in regional areas.

Trust relationships between apprentices and mentors, and employers and government agencies

Having a trust relationship with a tradesperson or more senior co-worker at the workplace was felt to aid the apprentice both in work and in training. This tradesperson or co-worker could act as a role model or mentor and would be a 'go-to' person for apprentices wishing to discuss any work or personal issues. Such a role is often described by group training employers as being undertaken by their field officers, who generally develop close bonds with apprentices, especially if the apprentices do not have big brothers or fathers to offer them guidance.

- Some employers were particularly keen to preserve the role of the AASN providers, given their valuable assistance in taking care of all the bureaucratic red tape involved in signing up apprentices, while others who had been accustomed to completing the arrangements themselves wondered why the involvement of AASN providers was necessary. Other employers reported receiving good service from what they referred to

as the Apprenticeship Board. Mentors who were external to the workplace also played an important role in providing guidance to the employer about their responsibilities for training.

What apprentices want to keep

Apprentices generally wanted to keep the broad approach to the apprenticeship training system currently in operation; however, they did want some components improved.

Carpenters and joiners

These apprentices generally wanted to keep the on-the-job and off-the job combination of the current approach, but they also had some suggestions for its improvement. They were especially keen to keep the off-the-job training component because they felt it was a key way of ensuring they would learn the safe way to do things; this was felt to be especially relevant to workplaces where bosses might not be doing tasks the correct and safe way.

Some suggested requiring students to undertake a pre-vocational course to enable them to gain some knowledge of their trades before starting their apprenticeships. A suggestion was also made for restructuring the apprenticeship, such that a substantial part of the initial training was completed up-front; that is, before the apprentice entered the workplace. One suggestion was for this up-front training to run for a period of 12 months, followed by two years of workplace training, which made for three years of training. This contradicted the view of those employers who wanted to keep the current four-year term and those who wanted to increase it to six years but at the same time increase the complexity of the skills developed (for example, higher-level skills, and diagnostics in relevant trades).

Metropolitan apprentices generally preferred day release for off-the-job training, mainly because when they are at work for four days a week it is easy to keep up with their work on site. Rural apprentices, however, reported that block training was often the only suitable arrangement for them. Some apprentices also spoke about employers not releasing apprentices for off-the-job training regularly throughout the year. This then resulted in the apprentice having to push out the training to later dates. When this practice is continued for extended periods of time, it generally means that apprentices will be forced to devote large chunks of time to off-the-job training later on in the apprenticeship, resulting in the apprentice having to attend classes that potentially comprise first-year and third-year apprentices, which makes learning more complex because apprentices are at different stages of their development.

Chefs

Apart from some issues with the quality of the resources and better scheduling of different units of competency (for example, dealing with dietaries at the commencement of training) apprentice chefs believed the current arrangements worked well. They had found their lecturers to be helpful and to provide them with good mentorship during their training. Sometimes it was the workplace rather than the provider that was perceived not to be providing the learning support they wanted.

Fabricators

These apprentices preferred block training because of the time that could be concentrated on developing in-depth skills. Day-release training was generally considered inadequate because apprentices would not retain some of the skills practised on only one occasion.

What apprenticeship regulators want to keep

Apprenticeship regulators were keen to preserve the combination of off- and on-the-job training as the fundamental structure of traditional apprenticeships, underpinned by a strong regulatory framework, including continuing the pre-assessments of those employers taking on apprentices and monitoring the implementation of the training contract.

Nevertheless, apprenticeship regulators acknowledged that they needed to get the balance right between their role in regulating and their role in educating employers and apprentices. In their view it was the educative role that was important, because if apprentices have a good experience (including in dispute resolution), this can be used to further promote the benefits of the system. If, on the other hand, they have a bad experience, it will be difficult to attract more apprentices and possibly also affect the good reputation of the VET sector. The compliance route was felt to be an expensive option to take.

In terms of their operational activities, apprenticeship regulators believed that there was a need to:

- ensure employers and apprentices were aware of the existence of a regulatory body, which monitors the delivery of employment and training under a training contract and provides information and advice customised to individual circumstances
- provide industry-targeted inductions that can be used to educate employers and apprentices of their respective roles and responsibilities under the training contract.

Suggestions for improvement

Even though all of the study participants believed that the system needed no fundamental changes, they also made a range of suggestions for its improvement, some of which were common to all groups, while others appeared to conflict with the general view. That said, there were very few areas where these contradictions occurred. A more detailed description of the suggestions made by each group is provided in appendix C.

Suggestions for improvement included the following:

- **Reducing the compliance and reporting requirements**: these suggestions were often offered by training providers, especially as it was considered that trainer focus was diverted from their main purpose of preparing for and delivering training courses and conducting assessment.
- **Raising the level of national consistency in implementing apprenticeships***:* currently there are differences in the length and cost of apprenticeships across jurisdictions, as the nature of jurisdictional incentives vary. Additionally, large national employers who want to move their apprentices around to different sites to ensure they gain broader experience across the organisation and to send them to the training provider (including interstate) that best meets their needs have found that their abilities to do so are restricted.

- **Introducing dual-trade apprenticeships in some industries**: this was raised by employers who believed that this would enable more flexibility in trades (those with many common elements) for meeting the needs of employers and the current and future needs of the wider industry. Such apprenticeships would also expand the skills and knowledge and future prospects of the apprentice. Dual trades to be considered included electrical fitting and communications, electrotechnology (electrician), and air conditioning and refrigeration.
- **Improving the standard and currency of facilities and equipment available to training providers**: employers, training providers and the apprenticeship regulator all noted the variable quality and currency of the equipment available for training in TAFE institutes and other providers, emphasising that it was often outdated compared with that available in industry. While acknowledging the costs involved in the ongoing updating of equipment, one suggestion was for the development of an equipment standard, developed jointly with industry, to ensure that students had access to appropriate equipment in all training provider workshops.
- **Improving the sequencing and clustering of units of competency to avoid repetition of the same content across units**: we note, however, that training providers already possess the capacity to sequence and cluster units in their delivery and assessment.
- **Simplifying and shortening the process for making and endorsing updates to training packages** and increasing the involvement of training providers on industry reference committees (IRCs) or their equivalents.
- **Modernising the units of competency in certain areas to align with current workplace practice**.
- **Expanding training for apprentices in conflict management and negotiation**: training in these areas and in assertiveness training would assist apprentices to interact with supervisors and other co-workers.
- Front-loading apprenticeships with theory: this encompassed restructuring the apprenticeship program, whereby theory and foundation skills would be delivered by training providers in the first year, to be followed by workplace training in the following years. However, we note that there is nothing preventing employers from negotiating with their training provider over the times at which they want off-the-job training to occur. It was not clear whether this approach (suggested by only a small number of study participants) would be negotiated before or after the apprenticeship contract had been signed. Either way, the flow-on effects of such an approach to competency-based wage progression would also have to be considered.
- **Examining the low level of wage rates for apprentices**: all parties interviewed considered the wages for apprentices to be too low. However, employers were in a catch-22 situation because, although increasing the wages of apprentices was perceived to be a way to boost retention, doing so may make apprentices less attractive or too costly for employers to hire. A suggestion was made for addressing this issue: that governments expand the use of apprentice wage subsidies by applying a 75% wage subsidy for the first year, followed by 50% for the second year and 25% for the third year. This is similar to the Australian Apprentice Wage Subsidy currently being trialled in rural and regional areas from 2019.

- **Expanding eligibility for Commonwealth incentives under the Additional Incentive Skills Shortage (AISS) payment**: to claim this payment, employers must take on apprentices who qualify as being additional: 'that is, over and above the employer's usual apprentice intake.'[7] Targeting employers who have a history of consistently taking on apprentices in the past was suggested as a fairer way of distributing incentives.
- **Promoting trade pathways in school more effectively**: employers and training providers continually highlighted a need for better promotion of trades in the school system, as well as trade-specific pathways through secondary school.
- **Removing VET student loans**: some employers suggested that the VET student loans scheme should be eliminated, especially as they perceived that apprentices had no real comprehension of the difficulties of starting work with a debt that will need to be paid back.
- **Establishing training for employers to improve their regulatory knowledge and capacity prior to entering into a training contract**: this training could provide employers with guidance on how to provide effective and practical supervision and on-the-job training and assessment. It would emphasise the need for employers to lead by example and to create a safe environment, one that nurtures the development of on-job competency. Similar pre-vocational training could be given to apprentices to help them to develop an awareness and understanding of how to behave appropriately in the workplace, including the need to follow lawful instruction.
- **Reviewing incentive structures**: the aim here would be to reward employers who expend significant effort and resources into training an individual, only for an apprentice to abandon their employment through no fault of the employer.

Next steps

The third and final report will explore in more detail the experience of apprentices with the apprenticeship system by means of an analysis of data from the 2019 Apprenticeship Destination and Experiences Survey. The report will also integrate some of the information received from participants in this study relating to expectations, rewards and cultural norms.

7 <https://www.australianapprenticeships.gov.au/aus-employer-incentives>.

References

Joyce, S 2019, *Strengthening skills: expert review of Australia's vocational education and training system*, Joyce review, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Canberra.

Appendix A: Approving, registering and monitoring apprenticeships

South Australia

In South Australia employers who want to take on apprentices must be registered. Section 48 of the *Training and Skills Development (T&SD) Act (2008)* requires a registered employer to obtain approval from the South Australian Department for Innovation and Skills (DIS) to enter into a contract of training.

Known as consultants and referred to in this report as 'apprenticeship regulators', authorised officers from the department have responsibility for ensuring that only employers who are eligible to do so can employ apprentices. In making these determinations, apprenticeship regulators must take account of:

- any guidelines developed by the Commission[8]
- the place of employment of the apprentice/trainee
- the equipment and methods to be used in the training of the apprentice/trainee
- the persons who are to supervise the work of the apprentice/trainee;
- the ratio between the number of apprentices/trainees who are a party to a training contract with the employer and the number of persons who are to supervise their work
- any other matter that is, in the opinion of the Commission, relevant to the registration; whether the employer (and any associate) is a fit and proper person to be so registered, or to have the registration renewed or varied.

Authorised officers from DIS may:

- question any person about the delivery or provision of education or training or the employment of an apprentice/trainee
- require the production of any record or document required to be kept under the Act and inspect and examine the record or document and take copies or extracts of the record or document, take any record or document, seize and remove anything that may constitute evidence of an offence against the T&SD Act and take photographs, films or video recordings
- enter and inspect premises in which education or training is provided or in which an apprentice/trainee is employed (Section 57, T&SD Act).

8 Training and Skills Commission of South Australia, established under part 2 of the T&SD Act (2008).

Registering the employer: practical considerations

When apprenticeship regulators receive the applications, they seek more information and supporting evidence in order to assess employer suitability to take on an apprentice. This can include information on ABN details, photos of the workplace site (forwarded by the employer), work site address details, and details relating to the nominated workplace supervisor (including qualifications and experience, and for certain trades copies of any licences that are required). Information about the type of work to be undertaken and other supporting evidence (including copies of certificates of compliance in the case of electrical companies) are used by the consultant to gain an understanding of the scope of work that will be available to the apprentice for on-the-job training. For example, if an electrical company mainly specialises in solar panels and does not conduct other general electrical work, then registration may be more difficult to obtain.

Apprenticeship regulators were also of the view that having in place processes and practices to enable good management of the training contract made for a successful arrangement. This could be helped by employers having regular interactions with the department to discuss the progress of the apprenticeship. On the flipside, when there is a lack of systematic processes for implementing the contract (sometimes experienced with small businesses), then things tend to occur in a more haphazard way. When this happens, employers risk not providing effective supervision for their apprentices or sufficient and required training, which then places the smooth operation of the training contract at risk. This could be avoided by employers better understanding their responsibilities and seeking support prior to engaging an apprentice. Apprenticeship regulators can assist employers with this.

Apprenticeship regulators also reported a range of warning signals that alerted them to possible issues with the successful operation of the training contract, including:

- knowledge about the previous history of the employer with apprenticeships (for example, multiple terminations of apprentices, no completion outcomes and signing up apprentices in the wrong trades)
- employer complaints about the low literacy and numeracy skills of apprentices
- apprentices struggling with trade school and not having the skills required in the workplace.

Queensland

In Queensland responsibility for assessing the suitability of employers and monitoring the progress of apprenticeships has been delegated to supervising RTOs (SRTOs), with the relevant department undertaking monitoring visits to employers when issues have been identified by the SRTO or there are industry-wide issues that require special attention. Under the *Further Education and Training Act 2014*[9], section 17 outlines the requirements for the registration of a training contract.

Section 17(5)(f) requires a training organisation to undertake an assessment (Employer Resource Assessment — ERA) of the employer to ensure they have the capacity to provide

9 <https://www.legislation.qld.gov.au/view/html/inforce/current/sl-2014-0103>.

the range of work, facilities and supervision required under a training plan. As the SRTO is the technical expert in the field of the apprenticeship or traineeship, the department relies on the SRTO to conduct an assessment and document this.

Where any issues arise, SRTOs contact the department and work through the issue where it relates to appropriately qualified supervisors. Where an employer may not be able to provide the full range of work, the Act allows them to temporarily transfer (section 24) to another employer for up to 12 months. Under the Act there is a requirement for the employer to provide supervision, facilities and training (section 56). Here we reproduce some of the responsibilities for SRTOs, taken from the fact sheet[10] on the employer resource assessment process.

> Apprenticeships and traineeships are pathways to obtain a qualification or statement of attainment by completing employment-based training under a registered training contract. It is essential the employment arrangements, including facilities, range of work and supervision, support an apprenticeship or traineeship outcome. It is important the SRTO is able to identify the range of work an employer of an apprentice or trainee can provide to support the training and assessment required for an apprenticeship or traineeship.
>
> When the SRTO identifies an employer cannot provide the full range of work, the SRTO will work with the employer to negotiate arrangements to ensure the apprentice or trainee has adequate training and assessment supporting the apprenticeship or traineeship pathway for the range of work the employer cannot provide.

Responsibilities of the SRTO

A registered training organisation who accepts the nomination to become an SRTO under the *Further Education and Training Act 2014* (the Act) undertakes to prepare a training plan and assess the employer's capacity to provide the range of work, facilities and supervision required under the training plan. The training plan is an approved form under the Act, and amongst the SRTO's responsibilities are the following:

- to ensure the apprentice or trainee and employer understand the relationship between work tasks to be performed and the units of competency to be achieved
- to identify any units of competency which are required for the qualification that cannot be achieved in the workplace
- to determine how training will occur and how these units will be assessed by the SRTO. In the training plan the SRTO must state whether the workplace has the work, resources and facilities required for the apprentice or trainee to undertake the workplace training, and if the answer to any of these areas is 'no', the alternative arrangements related to the identified gaps must be listed in the ERA.

In addition to the requirement that an SRTO assess an employer's capacity to provide the range of work, facilities and supervision required under the training plan, the SRTO has an ongoing role in ensuring that training is delivered to the apprentice or trainee.

The *Further Education and Training Regulation 2014* requires the SRTO to give the apprentice or trainee the appropriate training record within 14 days, after all parties have

10 <https://desbt.qld.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0016/8008/is49.pdf>.

signed the training plan, and that the apprentice or trainee must produce the training record for updating by the employer or SRTO at intervals of not more than three months. This process will assist in ensuring that training and assessment are occurring in accordance with the training plan.

The Act requires an SRTO to notify the department if an apprentice or trainee is not making the progress required under their training plan. The Act requires a training plan be negotiated, signed and provided for each individual apprentice or trainee, and as such requires an assessment of the employer's resources at the same time for each apprentice or trainee. When there is more than one apprentice or trainee in a workplace in the same qualification, it is recognised that it is not always practical to produce a separate hard-copy ERA for each apprentice or trainee.

Western Australia

In Western Australia the government department responsible for registering training contracts also conducts checks on employer eligibility to take on apprentices and uses the services of the AASN providers to approve employer eligibility to take on apprentices prior to the training contract being signed. During the life of the contract the department also relies on feedback provided by AASNs. The conditions listed in the Western Australian Apprenticeship and Traineeship Policy (2019)[11] are also followed to identify any key issues encountered by apprentices and trainees.

AASN providers in WA are contracted by the Australian Government to provide support services for employers and apprentices/trainees, including helping to complete the documentation required to lodge a training contract. The policy states that the 'AASN provider outlines the employer and apprentice/trainee obligations and responsibilities, can assist with choosing the appropriate qualification and a suitable RTO, and advises on Australian Government incentives. The training contract needs to be lodged with the department's Apprenticeship Office within 21 days of the apprentice/trainee commencing employment. The AASN provider typically lodges the training contract on behalf of the employer.

In regard to registering training contracts, the Apprenticeship Office assesses training contracts prior to registration to ensure that all legislative requirements are met and that a quality training arrangement is being put in place. The Apprenticeship Office applies a risk-based approach to registration and may identify some training contracts that need further assessment. Aspects of the training contract that the Apprenticeship Office will check may include the:

- eligibility of the person wishing to undertake the apprenticeship/traineeship (see 6.2.1)
- alignment between the qualification and the intended occupation (see 6.2.3.1)
- employer capacity to train (6.2.3.1).

11 <https://www.dtwd.wa.gov.au/sites/default/files/uploads/dtwd-apprenticeship-traineeship-policy-july2019.pdf>

With regard to the intended occupation during the training contract, the quality of an employment-based training arrangement depends on alignment and reinforcement between the on- and off-the-job training. For this reason, the qualification chosen should align and be complementary with the work role to be carried out during the training contact. The Apprenticeship Office will register training contracts where the qualification aligns with the work role to be performed by the apprentice/trainee during the training contract'[12]

12<https://www.dtwd.wa.gov.au/sites/default/files/uploads/dtwd-apprenticeship-traineeship-policy-july2019.pdf, p9

Appendix B: Following regulatory processes and financial incentives

In South Australia, Queensland and Western Australia, similar regulatory frameworks for registering contracts of training apply, but in Western Australia and Queensland there is a greater role for Australian Apprenticeship Support Network providers and RTOs in assessing and ensuring that employers are eligible to take on apprentices prior to signing the contract. In appendix A we described the basic approach in all three states. Here we focus on the approach taken in South Australia.

Registering an employer to take on apprentices

When employers in South Australia want to take on an apprentice, they must be registered to do so. The Department for Innovation and Skills performs this duty under delegation from the South Australian Training and Skills Commission. In an effort to speed up the approval of employers to enter into training contracts and consequently the uptake of apprenticeships in South Australia, the practice of apprenticeship regulators making physical visits to employers before approving them to enter into a training contract has been reduced. Although it is still possible for apprenticeship regulators to make an in-person visit to employers in cases which pose a high risk for compliance or when a major issue arises, the majority of their interactions with employers are conducted via email and by telephone. Photos and other visual information about facilities are also used.

Today, employers will complete an online application for registration and send it to the department. Most of the in-person visits and explanations prior to being granted approval are undertaken by the Australian Apprenticeship Support Network providers.

It has been observed that some employers did not have a clear understanding of their obligations under the training contract. This was demonstrated by issues raised in complaints, including:

- paying the apprentice wages and entitlements according to the relevant awards
- providing the apprentice with the appropriate amount of and quality of supervision, even during their third or fourth years
- releasing the apprentice to attend off-the-job training and paying for the attendance
- informing the department of any changes or variations in the contract.

When there is a rift or breakdown in the employer—apprenticeship relationship, the required course of action is for resolution in house. As the regulator, the Department for Innovation and Skills has a role to play in these situations, but the employer or the apprentice may not know what to do, or who to call.

Following administrative regulatory processes by employers and training providers

Employers reported that they relied on the services of their AASN representative to

undertake the administrative arrangements related to signing training contracts and providing the information required by employers, and most cited the very good services they were given by these agencies. The exceptions were rare: in one case an employer felt that the AASN representative had not taken appropriate care in matching the apprentice to the employer's needs and believed that because his business was in the metropolitan area the mismatch had occurred. Some employers also identified difficulties with navigating the government website.

Because of the good services provided, employers spoke of very few difficulties with completing these processes: 'it is very straightforward because the broker [the AASN provider] does it all' was a regular explanation. Many employers had been taking on apprentices for some time and reported that, along with their own administrative processes and the services of the AASN provider, it was relatively straightforward to hire apprentices and to establish the training contract. However, a small number of other issues were identified by individuals: these were more concerned with the actual forms that are required to be completed by apprentices and by employers rather than with the contract itself. For example, issues sometimes occur when apprentices have to complete application forms to access grants or components of grants, and employers, who have to sign off on these, lack the requisite information to do so.

Employers also spoke about the burden for apprentices to complete forms related to their trade support loan (if they have one) every six months. Another issue related to government email not being opened by apprentices either because apprentices had changed their email addresses (not an uncommon occurrence) or they had not checked their email.

When asked how such processes could be made easier for them, employers often spoke of the importance of AASNs visiting businesses to explain the incentives that were available for employers and to inform them of their obligations under the training contract. Group training companies urged employers to become host employers, which would mean they would not have to worry about such processes because the group training company could manage the apprenticeship, would know about the entitlements, and apprentices would get mentoring anyway. Having all the materials in the same place would also make it much easier for employers and apprentices to navigate the websites.

Training providers in South Australia and Queensland, and training providers in Western Australia with international students, and operating across jurisdictions, are required to comply with the ASQA VET Quality Framework.[13] Other training providers in Western Australia are required to comply with the Australian Qualification Training Framework standards, which generally cover similar things to the ASQA VET Quality Framework. In all states they also need to comply with the regulatory frameworks that apply specifically to apprentices.

In the context of delivering apprenticeships, training providers felt at times overwhelmed and burdened by the amount of information and paperwork required to meet all these regulations, with many indicating that these obligations took valuable time away from their

13 The VQF includes: standards for Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) 2015; Fit and Proper Person Requirements; Financial Viability Risk Assessment Requirements; Data Provision Requirements, and the Australian Qualifications Framework.

teaching role. Meeting these requirements was seen as particularly onerous for small training providers, where the trainers had to undertake administrative tasks as well. As one trainer from a small provider said: 'the level of information you need to provide is too much and it is hard to stay on top of documentation for audits' (Horticultural trainer). Auditing was also seen as being inconsistent across years, possibly due to a change in auditors (Hairdressing, automotive and engineering trades). Training providers also reported that the cost involved in meeting the compliance requirements was huge. It was suggested by one trainer that the whole process needed to be more consultative and involve more site visits with trainers from a targeted area (Horticultural trainer).

Trainers also raised issues about the requirements for updating training package with some wanting more involvement in training package revisions to 'ensure they have a training package that suits what apprentices [should be] learning' (Light vehicle automotive trainer). Additionally, revisions to training packages that might require more or different practical tasks to be completed at trade school could be compromised by funding restrictions which limit the provider's ability to purchase new equipment.

Accessing government employer incentives

Employers all made use of federal and state government incentives, with those in the building industry also receiving financial support from industry-specific funds. Although these incentives and extra support were generally felt to be adequate, some employers believed that, even though they had not decided to hire an apprentice because of the government incentives, incentives were 'nice to have'. There were others who were satisfied with the incentives but noted that, of course, they 'could always do with a bit more'.

Some employers also commented that incentive amounts had not changed in real terms for some time and that, if they were higher, they could be used to reduce hosting-out rates by group training organisations or to address issues relating to 'the wages for apprentices [being] too low'. One employer, who has been religiously taking on apprentices for the past 20 years or so was very disappointed that the 'additional incentive skill shortage payments', recently announced by the Commonwealth Government were not made available to employers with a long history of hiring apprentices (including trades experiencing skills shortages). In her view the government should be rewarding these long-standing employers of apprentices, rather than ignoring their efforts.

Suggestions were made (by apprenticeship regulators) for reviewing the intervals at which employers were eligible for government incentives to ensure fairness for all the employers who have expended effort in getting the apprentice to complete their trades. This is especially relevant in cases where apprentices decided to leave the apprenticeship with one employer and recommence with another employer.

Financial profitability of training organisations

In regard to the financial profitability of training organisations, a common theme expressed by the trainers interviewed was that because there is no profit in training, it also means there are limited funds to purchase sufficient materials and equipment. In this regard one example provided related to the wastage of materials in practical classes for pipe work in

plumbing and how private training organisations are struggling to pay the cost per student for such materials.

Trainers also mentioned that their facilities limited the number of students they could teach in practical classes: ‘in theory classes trainers may be able to teach one hundred students if these are delivered online; in practical classes they can only give their attention to ten students’ (Hairdressing trainer). Training providers who service regional and remote areas suggested that the government increase the remote and country allowance provided as potential apprentices in remote areas had to be turned down because providers cannot afford to go out there and train them. As a horticultural trainer said, ‘we would like to travel more but can’t afford to and it can lead to students not being able to do an apprenticeship’.

Appendix C: Detailed suggestions for improvement

Employers

- **Scheduling of training**: there were differences in opinion about how best to schedule the training, with some employers preferring day-release training and others block training. Issues with access to training at suitable periods were more common, especially when classes could not start because they needed to fit in with provider holiday periods. Reducing opportunities for training (also block training) was especially an issue when the provider was unable to fill a course with a suitable number of students, which meant that the training could not start immediately. Such a situation is further exacerbated when the training is for trades for which the demand is not high (for example, jewellery and locksmith trades), and where it is available from only one provider. In cases where there is only one provider who delivers the trade training (for example, glass and glazing in South Australia) and there are insufficient students to fill a class, then the provider may decide not to deliver that training. The issue of the travel time required to attend off-the-job training, which often started at 8.00 am, was also raised. Where the provider waits to get a sufficient number of apprentices to make up a class or when holiday periods get in the way of block training, apprentices cannot start their apprenticeship training on commencement. This results in the apprentice getting behind with his or her training and being constantly in catch-up mode.

  Having apprentices undertake most of their training at the workplace was considered by some employers to be a very ineffective training arrangement. This was mainly because there were some things that could best be learnt off site rather than at the workplace. This view contrasted with that of other employers, who believed that training providers should come into the workplace to assess a majority of the training. There were also suggestions for training to be provided on site, so the apprentice spends less time off site (building and construction trades). The one-year up-front training course (for hairdressing) was also considered to be ineffective, especially as it was difficult to become expert in one year of off-the-job training.

- **Customising the training and support to the needs of the apprentice**: some employers wanted the training provider to focus on skills not exercised regularly in the apprentice's workplace (especially in building and construction trades). Many of these employers wanted to improve the scheduling of times and periods for off-the-job training to coincide with non-busy seasons for employers (especially in the building and construction trades and air-conditioning and refrigeration trade). Providing apprentice access to mentors who could offer them ongoing support for skills and personal development was also suggested.

- **Improving the content, delivery and assessment of training**: some dissatisfaction was expressed by some employers with some of the content of the training itself, the way it was delivered, and the equipment used in RTO workshops. For example, off-the-job training at some RTOs was perceived not to keep pace with the changes occurring in the workplace. The content in some training packages was also felt not to be dynamic or modernised enough to keep up with industry and occupational changes. Individual employers expressed some resistance to self-paced learning delivery, especially as

apprentices were perceived to be better served by face-to-face and more direct methods of teaching. These forms of teaching were also preferred because apprentices on occasions lacked the required level of literacy and numeracy skills. The provision of training in areas such as conflict management and negotiation, assertiveness training and supervisory skills was also suggested.

- **Restructuring the duration of the contract**: a suggestion (by some, including an apprentice) was also made for restructuring the apprenticeship model to include a period of initial up-front training (12 months) as part of the apprenticeship, followed by two years of workplace training. No comment was made about the consequences of such an arrangement for industrial relations issues connected to competency-based wages progression. In any case, most employers wanted to keep the current four-year term. A suggestion was also made for a six-year apprenticeship to allow apprentices to increase the complexity of the skills that were already developed to a higher level (for example, higher-level engineering skills, and diagnostics in relevant trades).
- **Introducing dual-trade apprenticeships**: another suggestion was for the introduction of dual-trade apprenticeships, mainly because of difficulties in finding qualifications which best met industry needs. For example, a rail company employer would have liked to employ tradespeople who had done a dual-trade apprenticeship in electrical fitting and communications, as both qualifications covered much of the same content in the first year. This employer could see that there was an increasing convergence in these areas in their industry. Suggestions were also made for dual-trade apprenticeships in air-conditioning and refrigeration and electrical trades.
- **Collaborating with industry**: an innovative suggestion which takes account of how new techniques and products and materials are introduced and embedded into workplace practice was provided by one employer. This involved collaborating with manufacturers by giving manufacturer representatives and technicians (who regularly visited workplaces to introduce and train staff in techniques for applying new products and materials) a formal role in the training and assessment of competency in the crash repairs industry. This included giving apprentices opportunities to obtain certificates for competency in applying and using the different products and techniques as well, for example, in gap welding, gluing resins, fibre glassing, aluminium welding and metal shrinking. The rep and the employer could then together sign the apprentices off for relevant units where such skills were required.

  Other forms of RTO collaboration with industry included RTOs keeping workplace supervisors informed of how to train and work with the apprentice to enable the apprentice to be engaged in the development of trade skills that are not merely menial skills (like sweeping the floor). The partnering of RTOs and workplaces to access state-of-the-art and necessary equipment and technology was also suggested. Such partnerships would involve the college delivering the theory off site, and, in cases where the college did not have the required equipment, assessments to be conducted on equipment available at the workplace.

  Additionally, it was suggested by an employer that there needs to be a consistent standard across training organisations for the equipment in their workshops, as it varies considerably at the moment, with some apprentices training with new equipment and others with outdated equipment. Industry should help to set what this standard is and could also potentially donate equipment.

- **Ensuring a nationally consistent approach to apprenticeships**: a large employer with apprentices located across the country indicated that they would like to be able to move apprentices around to different locations, which would enable the apprentices to gain different experiences; however, the way apprenticeships are structured means that this is not possible, since in many jurisdictions they are required to cancel the contract and start again, which is felt to be of no benefit to the apprentice. Also, if there's a really good training provider for a particular course, they would like the capacity to send all their apprentices to this provider, irrespective of their location; at the moment this is difficult to do. A truly nationally consistent approach to the practical implementation of apprenticeships has the potential to overcome these hurdles.
- **Increasing apprenticeship promotion in schools:** promoting the benefits and opportunities available from apprenticeships to teachers and students in school and increasing opportunities for industry taster programs were also suggested.
- **Improving funding and financing strategies**: issues relating to the funding and financing of training were also raised by a small group of employers and suggestions were made for addressing long-term planning and forecasting to suit the low and highs of the building industry and for getting more accurate intelligence on skills shortage areas. Individual employers identified the need for addressing national inconsistencies in the application of funding (especially to employers who employed apprentices nationwide) and increasing the amount of incentives available to employers so that they could deal with the increased costs of hiring apprentices, including those wanting to be host employers.

  Issues related to VET student loans were raised by a couple of employers because they felt that such loans disadvantaged apprentices, firstly, because some apprentices may not properly understand that in practice a loan needed to be paid back, and, secondly, because it put apprentices into debt even before they started to work for full wages.
- **Increasing wage rates for apprentices**: apprentice wages were considered to be too low and insufficient for an apprentice to live on, even though a low wage made them attractive to employers: 'Wage rates for apprentices are still too low. This affects the take-up rate. Employers are in a catch-22 situation; they want low cost wages, but morally know is not fair for apprentices. Low wage rates will stop individuals from taking up apprenticeships' (Employer, air-conditioning and refrigeration).
- **Requiring employers and apprentices to complete up-front prerequisite training modules prior to entering a training contract**: suggested by apprenticeship regulators in South Australia, such modules would provide employers with guidance on how to provide effective practical supervision and on-the-job training and assessment. The training would emphasise the need for them to lead by example, as well as to show patience and perseverance and allow enough opportunities for skill repetition. Employers could also benefit from some management-training workshops. They would also develop in apprentices an awareness and understanding of how to behave appropriately in the workplace, including the need to follow directions and other employer expectations.

- **Reviewing the intervals at which employers were eligible for government incentives**: also suggested by apprenticeship regulators, these reviews would ensure that incentives treat the employers that have expended effort in getting the apprentice to complete their trades fairly. This is especially relevant in cases where apprentices decided to leave the apprenticeship with one employer and recommence with another employer.

Training providers

A concern raised by trainers was the lack of national consistency with the implementation of the apprenticeship system across the jurisdictions. As an example, it was mentioned that New South Wales has three-year apprenticeships in some trades and that the tuition fees for some are covered. This presents issues around fairness for apprentices: why should the same qualification take less time and cost less in one jurisdiction than it does in others? Furthermore, one trainer mentioned that reducing the timeframe to develop skills (that is, from four to three years) is undesirable because it would mean that apprentices need to fit more skills and development, specifically, learning new technologies and practices, into less time (hairdressing, automotive and engineering training manager).

Trainers consistently mentioned the need for higher-level progression pathways following on from apprenticeships. One example was that, by completing an electrical trade, an individual could move into the first year of an engineering degree. Another was providing the opportunity to undertake a dual-trade apprenticeship, whereby an individual could undertake two apprenticeships at the same time in instances where they had a substantial amount of commonality. The duration of the dual-trade apprenticeships may need to be increased by 12 months. Having regular meetings or conversations with employers was also felt to improve the scheduling of the off-the-job training at times that suits employers.

Although the general view was that training packages provided a necessary framework for training, trainers also made a range of suggestions for how these packages could be improved. One trainer proposed the idea for the better sequencing of units to allow some units to be completed before others are begun, ensuring that the content and the training have a better flow. This particular trainer had found that the same information is often covered in multiple units and that some students switch off because of the repetition (Light automotive trainer). Trainers also suggested that units could be clustered to improve the flow of the training. Another suggestion was for assessment tools to be sent out at the same time as training package changes to ensure that all training organisations are using the same assessment materials. A similar suggestion was made for compliance materials: that they be sent out at the same time as training package updates. This will create consistency across registered training organisations nationally.

Wage rates for apprentices were also reported as areas for improvement. Increasing the pay for apprentices was seen as a way to boost retention, as currently they earn very little money (Horticultural trainer). Another idea was to enhance the wage subsidies provided by the government to make hiring apprentices more affordable for employers. One trainer suggested a 75% wage subsidy for the first year, followed by 50% for the second year and 25% for the third year as a possible financing solution (Wet trades trainer).

When training providers were asked for further suggestions on how to improve apprenticeships, they referred to the need for the better integration of training for the trades into the course offerings in secondary schools. This includes introducing trade-

specific pathways (not only for VET in Schools or school-based apprenticeship programmes) and covering more hand skills/tool usage at school. Apprenticeships as a post-school pathway also needed to be seen as on par with university and promoted equally. Additionally, it was suggested that the mathematics ability of students needed to be improved and that schools could do more in this area.

Apprentices

Although apprentices identified few major aspects of the system as a whole that they considered should be removed or changed, as a group they spoke about their frustrations with low wage rates and the better scheduling of content, and the issues associated with ensuring that employers released apprentices for training.

- **Carpenters and joiners**: apprentices in these trades were quite concerned about the level of their pay rates and believed that it was the government's role to monitor and track the pay rates of apprentices to make sure that young people were not underpaid. There were also suggestions for better communication between the training provider and the employer so that the employer was aware that he could not continually keep apprentices at the workplace when they needed to attend day release or block training.
- **Chefs:** the common areas where apprentice chefs wanted to see change were generally related to the stage at which certain modules were taught during the course. There was a general view that modules like 'dietaries' needed to be dealt with in initial training modules, especially as dealing with these issues was becoming a normal part of everyday work. They suggested that the course could deal with soups, stocks and sauces, to be immediately followed by dietaries. Other suggestions were for updating the workbooks and making a booklet available on each of the different sections so that apprentices could refer to these when required.
- **Fabricators:** apprentice fabricators, especially those who had almost completed their training, were frustrated with low pay rates, generally because they did the same work as fully qualified tradespeople. Individuals wanted recognition of current competencies to be made easier and signed off on the job and increased opportunities to be rotated to different companies.

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