Reasons For Non-completion And Dissatisfaction Among Apprentices And Trainees: A Regional Case Study

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Abstract

Skills shortages have reinvigorated ongoing debate and concern about high attrition rates among Australian apprentices and trainees. Low apprentice and trainee wages have often been cited to explain this ongoing problem. This paper discusses the factors contributing to non-completion among apprentices and trainees in regional Victoria, and how the experiences of those apprentices and trainees who did not complete their training compare to those currently in-training. It asserts that unpleasant working conditions, poor quality training, a lack of support and low wages are contributing to both non-completion and a high degree of dissatisfaction among apprentices and trainees. Consequently, it argues an increase in the apprentice and trainee wage can only go part-way to improving training outcomes and experiences and attracting young people into the system.

Introduction

For the past decade Australia has witnessed some of the strongest sustained economic growth of any industrialised nation. Meeting the labour and skill needs for this robust economy is proving increasingly difficult. Skill shortages are widely perceived to be a major challenge for Australia's future prosperity.[1] A recent Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry Survey, for example, found that 79% of small, medium and large employers are concerned about their ability to recruit employees with appropriate skills (Human Resources 2004). According to recent Government figures, Australia faces a shortage of more than 200,000 skilled workers over the next five years and a deficit of 240,000 workers by 2016 (Rudd et al. 2007, p.4). Skill shortages are seen as contributing to higher costs for employers, the loss of investment to the nation and a major contribution to rising inflation and higher interest rates (Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), 2004). Outside the major metropolitan areas (i.e. regional

Australia), skill shortages are particularly acute, recently reported as historically high in The Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR)'s Skilled Vacancies Index (DEWR 2007, cited in Grigg & Da Silva 2008). The aging workforce, strong economic and employment growth, the failure of employers to invest in training, and the failure of State, Territory and Commonwealth Governments to meet training demand are common explanations for the nation's skills crisis (Richardson 2007; Department of Education, Science & Training (DEST) 2002). In addition there is recognition that growing attrition from training of apprentices and trainees is a significant contributor to skill shortages (DEST 2002, p.6; ACTU 2004, p.2) For regional areas, the migration of skilled workers and young people to metropolitan areas and the difficulty of attracting skilled employees magnify the problems (Canterford 2006; Miles, Marshall, Rolfe & Noonan, 2004).

Government efforts to meet the country's skill needs have focused on a range of measures including changes to the vocational education sector, increased financial support for training providers and employers providing training, and a skilled migration programme. At the forefront of government efforts to meet the challenges of the country's skill needs, however, have been measures aimed at strengthening the apprenticeship system, which has long served as the nation's backbone for training workers for a range of skilled occupations.

Privatisation and an overall decline in employer interest in providing training had contributed to a significant decline in apprenticeship numbers throughout the 1980s and 1990s (see Toner 1998, p.40-41). In the mid 1980s, traineeships, which provided short duration certified training in non-traditional training areas (e.g. retail and hospitality), were introduced. Initially these were designed to address youth unemployment and help provide early school leavers with basic entry level workforce skills. However, an extensive expansion in traineeship occupations and the removal of the mandatory off-the-job training requirement in the mid-1990s (Ray 2001, p.35) paved the way for rapid growth in traineeship numbers. After attaining government in 1996, the Howard-led Coalition sought to revive the fortunes of the apprenticeship system through a major overhaul of the training system, including increased privatisation and deregulation, and the establishment of 'New Apprenticeships' (combining apprenticeships and traineeships under the one title[2]), subsequently renamed Australian Apprenticeships . Rapidly implemented changes included: increased and expanded subsidies for employers (Cully, 2006, p.6); the introduction of User Choice legislation providing subsidies for Registered Training Organisations (RTOs), including private RTOs, and the expansion of training subsidies to include older employees, existing employees, part-time and school-based apprentices/ trainees. The New Apprenticeship system aimed to open up training arrangements and funding support to workers and employers outside the traditional trades' areas (Buchanan et al. 2001). These changes brought about a dramatic increase among those in-training: from 131,100 in training in 1994

(NCVER 2000, p.3) to an estimated 409,900 in March 2006 (NCVER 2007, p.3). While this has been a remarkable achievement, serious problems remain. Much of the up-take of New Apprenticeships occurred among what are sometimes perceived as low skills traineeships, often in retail and hospitality, where skill shortages are not a major concern (ACTU 2004, p.1; Toner, Croce, Pickersgill & Van Barneveld, 2001, p.38). In addition, low completion rates among trainees and apprentices continue to be a major problem and a contributing factor in the persistence of skill shortages (see Ray 2001, p.36; Harris, Simons, Symons & Clayton, 2001, p.10; Karmel & Virk 2006, p.19).

Completion rates for apprentices and trainees vary among industries and occupations, between states, urban and regional areas and are influenced by issues of definition and data collection and different methodological approaches to their calculation – for example apprentices and trainees are not consistently registered on commencement or completion of employment and data recording practices vary among States and Territories (for full discussion see Snell and Hart 2007b, p.19-25). National rates ranging from 24% to over 60% have been cited by various researchers over the previous two decades (see Smith 1998; Lamb et al. 1998; Grey et al. 1999; Ray et al. 2000; NCVER 2000; Victorian TAFE Association Inc. 2000; Toner et al. 2001; John 2003; Ball & John 2005, Bowman et al. 2005). Drawing upon data collected through in-depth interviews with over one hundred apprentices and trainees, this paper discusses the factors contributing to non-completion among apprentices and trainees in regional Victoria, and how the experiences of those who did not complete their training compare to those currently in-training. It aims to improve our understanding of why so many who start their training do not complete and to identify ways to improve the training experience of apprentices and trainees and achieve better outcomes from the training system.

Previous Australian Research Into Attrition

Many of the studies into completion and non-completion amongst Australian apprentices and trainees concentrate on characteristics of non-completers and completers — such as age, sex, schooling, industry, location — through analysis of administrative data (Ball & John 2005; Ball 2005; Bender 2003; Ray et al. 2000). Ball and John's research, representative of the majority of administrative studies and working purely from statistical data, found that those groups less likely to complete an apprenticeship or traineeship were under 25, had left school before they completed year 12, were indigenous or had undertaken training at Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) level II or below. Trainees were less likely to complete than apprentices and there were marked differences between industries, with those in the food trade half as likely to achieve a successful completion as those in mechanical and fabrication engineering (Ball & John, 2005, p.6-7). Analysis of National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) data have shown that in general trades related apprentices and

trainees were twice as likely to complete as those in non-trades areas, and over 50% of the "non-trades non-completers were in the Clerical, sales and service workers … occupation group" (ANTA 2002, p.4). Ball and John (2005, p.7) also found a marked drop in completion rates over time: traditional apprentices who commenced in 1999 were 10% less likely to complete than those who commenced in 1995 — a trend which seems to have continued. Bender's 2003 study reported similar findings, in addition noting that "apprenticeships and traineeships undertaken in the government sector are about 12 percentage points more likely to result in a successful outcome than those in the private sector" (Bender 2003, p.6).

Statistics based research, however, has not provided a full understanding of the reasons why apprentices and trainees decide to cancel or withdraw from training. As both Lamb (2005, p.14) and Ray et al. (2000, p.11) contend, while the use of databases and administrative data can provide characteristics of those less likely to complete, to ascertain the full reasons for non-completion "requires surveys of the non-completers themselves … which attempt to establish factors behind decisions to abandon study" (Lamb 2005, p.14). There have emerged a few qualitative studies that use surveys, interviews and/or focus groups to address these issues (ANTA 2002; Callan 2000; Cully & Curtain 2001a; Grey et al. 1999; Harris & Simons 2005). In Cully and Curtain's (2001a) detailed national study of 797 non-completing 'new apprentices' and their employers (examining those who began training between 1994 and 1999) a major contributing factor — given by close to 50% — for leaving their training was being "treated as cheap labour". Linking with this, Grey et al. (1999, p.31) found low wages to be the main reason trainees left before completion; this is also the perception of many Vocational Education and Training (VET) stakeholders (Snell & Hart 2007b, p.37). Studies into skills shortages and low apprentice wages have also argued this is a significant factor in attrition (Bittman et al. 2007, p.3-4). Another highly rated 'contributing factor for leaving' — cited in Cully and Curtain by over 30% of trainees (and 23% of apprentices) was the perception they were not learning anything (2001a, p.24). This could indicate poor quality, or lack of, training and would seem to be supported by the finding that only 60% of the non-completers reported having "taken part in training of the kind that is supposed to be the bedrock of new apprenticeships" (Cully & Curtain 2001a, p.20) — more alarmingly 19% reported taking part in no training at all (viii; see also Schofield 1999, p.37, 2000, p.62; 2001). Callan (2000, p.24-25), investigating Queensland non-completers, found that lack of training or poor training on the job was cited by nearly 50% of trainees and nearly 60% of apprentices as a reason for not completing. In addition the departmental staff (Queensland Department of Employment, Training and Industrial Relations) he surveyed thought this was a major reason for non-completions and were "critical of the performance of RTOs, and the bosses of some small businesses who they believed used the schemes as a source of cheap labour rather than as a training vehicle" (Callan 2000, p.13; see also Schofield, 2000, p.31 & 57). In support Grey et al. (1999,

p.31) reported that insufficient training was cited by 45% of non-completers as being one of the top three important factors in their decision to leave (the other two being low wages (cited by 53%) and not getting on with their employer (cited by 44%). Cully and Curtain (2001a), Grey et al. (1999) and Ray et al. (2000) found, however "that it is aspects of the employment relationship, [such as dissatisfaction with the workplace and 'the boss'] rather than the training relationship, which have the greatest impact on completion" (ANTA 2002, p.6).

The research into the factors contributing to non-completions among apprentices and trainees, while not explicitly stated, makes certain assumptions about why some apprentices and trainees are more likely to complete than others. If we followed the arguments of this research to its logical conclusion for example, we would reach a position which suggests those who have completed or are likely to complete are having a better experience, both in terms of workplace relations and their training. The research presented in this article engages with this implicit argument and underlying assumptions about completers and non-completers. It builds upon the existing body of qualitative research by exploring the reasons for non-completion among apprentices and trainees and takes it one step further to also compare the experiences of those in-training with those who have decided to cancel or withdraw from training. As suggested by previous research one would reasonably expect that those in-training and likely to complete would report a more positive experience than non-completers, and that by comparing the experiences of these two different cohorts we can learn a considerable amount about why some apprentices and trainees complete and others do not. As the findings from this study suggest, the experiences of non-completers and of those in-training and likely to complete are not all that different and it may be a false assumption to think those that have completed or are likely to complete are necessarily having a fundamentally different experience.

Background To The Study

While much of the research and public concern about the high rate of non-completions found among apprentices and trainees has focused on State and National levels, little attention has been directed to the problem in non-metropolitan regional areas where skill shortages are the most severe. In 2006, a range of interested stake holders in the Gippsland region of Victoria, including local and state government representatives, trade unions, trainers, youth workers and educationalists, came together to discuss the problems they perceived were contributing to a large number of apprentices and trainees cancelling or withdrawing from training. As part of an effort to better understand the factors contributing to non-completion among apprentices and trainees in the region the authors began to investigate the factors which impact on apprentice/trainee decisions to withdraw from courses before they have gained their qualification;

to compare the different experiences of non-completers with those still in-training and to compare the experiences of apprentices with trainees. This article reports on some of the findings to emerge from this study.

The Gippsland region is a large, geographically and socially diverse regional area with a mixed economy located in South Eastern Australia. Almost a third of the region's population live in the Latrobe Valley where open-cut coal mining, electricity generation and other manufacturing industries are concentrated. In East and South Gippsland, where the population is relatively sparse and concentrated in small country towns along the main highways, agriculture, forestry and tourism serve as the primary industries (Crinall & Collis 2000). The region as a whole struggles with high unemployment, with all shires regularly reporting unemployment rates above the State average. Opportunities for young people post education are fairly limited with many opting to leave the region on completing their secondary education. Additionally year 12 retention rates are amongst the lowest in the State, as is the take-up of university places — 31% of year 12 completers, as compared to 47% for the State of Victoria as a whole. The take-up of apprenticeships/traineeships for Gippsland year 12 completers however, is nearly double the state average — 15% as compared to 8% (DEEDC 2007). Despite this higher than average uptake of training places, the ageing workforce is a serious concern in many industries (Shea Business Consulting 2007).

Out of a total population of 252,691 the region had 6,204 apprentices and trainees in-training in 2007. Just over half of these (51% compared to almost 61% for the State as a whole) were trainees, particularly in retail and to a lesser extent hospitality (Snell & Hart 2007b, p.13). The region has a vibrant apprenticeship and traineeship system that includes a number of publicly owned Technical and Further Education (TAFE) institutions, private Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) as well as Group Training Organisations (GTOs). While RTOs simply provide training, GTOs employ apprentices and trainees and place them with one or more host employers as well as, in some cases, delivering off the job training; for any of their apprentices/trainees, GTOs may take on both of these roles. Overall attrition rates in Gippsland are better than the State average, although there is considerable variation between industries and training types. While some industries such as construction and engineering perform much better than the state average; others like hospitality, perform poorly, with completion rates below 50%.

Study Methodology

Research focused on the four industry sectors of construction, engineering, hospitality and retail. These were chosen as representative of both apprentice experiences (construction and engineering) and trainee experiences (hospitality and retail) and all four industries are well represented in training figures for the region.

Three different types of apprentices and trainees were recruited for this study — those who did not complete their training, current apprentices and trainees, and some who had recently completed training — to better understand and compare the issues which impacted on their training experience. The recruitment process relied on a range of methods, including mail-outs enclosing a brief questionnaire and inviting recipients to be interviewed for the project, extensive advertising in local papers throughout the region, presentations and the distribution of flyers and posters to a wide range of local services such as employment services, youth services, schools, TAFEs, Local Learning Education Networks (LLENs), unions, registered training organisations, shopping centres and businesses. Others, particularly those still in-training, were recruited via employer and training organisations. Through these processes 105 interviewees, spread across the region and the four target industries, were interviewed for the study.

Interviews conducted either face to face or by telephone, were of approximately 20-40 minutes duration covering a range of both specific and semi structured questions. The initial specific questions were designed to outline the general characteristics of the interviewee such as age, gender, education level, training type and employer type. The semi-structured questions then established motivations and pathways into training, reasons for leaving training and future plans, as well as exploring interviewees' in-training experiences and perceptions of available support mechanisms.

Study Findings

Of the 105 interviewed, 71 or 67.6% were apprentices and 34 or 33.3% were trainees. Among those interviewed, 39 were non-completers, 26 were still in-training but voiced some significant issues and were identified as 'at-risk' of withdrawing — indeed the researchers are aware of a number who have withdrawn since being interviewed. A further 32 were also in-training but likely to complete (though within this group there was also quite a degree of dissatisfaction), and eight had recently completed their training. The participants were a relatively representative mix of the four target industries and the varying ages of those undertaking training in the region.

Issues identified by participants

While some participants cited only one reason for dissatisfaction with the system or leaving their training before completion (such as being laid off) for many there were multiple contributing factors. Up to three main reasons for not completing or dissatisfaction were identified for each of the 105 interviewees. Tables 1-3 below illustrate the number of responses for each category of interviewees.

Non-completers

For the 39 participants who did not complete their training, a range of reasons were identified for their non-completion (see Table 1 below). For this group there were 84 responses overall.

Table 1: Reasons for non-completion of apprenticeships and traineeships

Most important factors in apprentice/trainee non-completion.	**%**	***n***
Problems with the workplace	46	39
Problems with the training	17	14
Low wages	11	9
Laid off	7	6
Issues with travel	6	5
Fired	5	4
Incidental/personal reasons	5	4
It was only ever a temporary job	4	3
Total number of responses	100	84

As other studies show (e.g. Grey et al. 1999; Ray et al. 2000; Cully & Curtain, 2001a and 2001b) the major reason for not completing – cited in 46% of responses – concerned issues with the workplace. Out of these a third were about being 'treated as cheap labour' — Cully & Curtain similarly put these figures at 47% and 23% respectively (2001b, p.212). A further fifth were concerned about poor, unsafe or dangerous workplace practices and the rest of the responses in this category covered various problems with employers ranging from 'falling out with the boss', poor work conditions, bullying, hours being cut or unreasonably extended, or lack of appropriate on-the-job supervision — again Cully and Curtain (2001a) found these to be contributing factors of similar importance. A significant 17% of responses from those who did not complete concerned problems with their training; identifying it as poor, boring, or non-existent (this was especially prevalent amongst trainees). In addition a further 7% cited being laid off by their employer, usually due to lack of work. In 6% of responses, travel was named as a contributing factor to the decision to leave, though this was frequently linked by interviewees to low wages, i.e. "You've got to travel every day … pay petrol and… by the end of the week my bank account would be empty" (male, engineering apprentice, in-training, aged 22). As a contributing factor to their not staying in the system (rather than a direct

factor in their decision to leave), a significant number also spoke about a lack of support — sometimes this was directed at employers and group training field officers, but more often involved various institutional aspects of the system which they thought should be there to help them; such as Australian Apprenticeship Centres (AACs organisations funded by the Commonwealth Government whose role is to assist and support employers and apprentices/ trainees), Centrelink (the central Australian government social security agency), or other government authorities.

In training but at risk of not completing

Among those 58 interviewed who were still in-training at the time of the interview two distinct groups were identified. The first group (n=26) represented those who were in-training but considered at risk of not completing. Table 2 (below) briefly highlights some of the factors perceived by this group to threaten the completion of their training. This group gave 47 responses in total.

Table 2: Reasons for potential non-completion amongst those currently in-training but at-risk

Potential reasons likely to contribute to withdrawal from training	**%**	***n***
Problems with the workplace	34	16
Low wages	32	15
Problems with the training	17	8
Lack of support	11	5
It is a requirement of what is probably a temporary job	4	2
Wrong career choice	2	1
Total number of responses	100	47

Of the 34% of responses expressing significant problems with the workplace, three quarters were mostly concerned about employment conditions such as too many (often unpaid) or too few hours — this was especially an issue with those in hospitality. A smaller percentage referred to employers who did not pay wages regularly, treated them as cheap labour and/or bullied them, or they were being trained and employed by a GTO and having trouble getting a workplace placement. As would be expected, dissatisfaction with low apprentice/trainee wages — which had flow-on effects involving getting to trade school or job sites, and keeping up with their rent — was an issue raised in nearly a third of responses from those identified as 'at-risk'. Concerns over training, 17% of responses for this group, were about poor quality training or an inability of training organisations (especially in the private sector) to employ,

or keep on, suitable trainers. Again expressions of lack of support were around similar issues to those experienced by non-completers.

In training and likely to complete

The second identifiable group (n=32) found among those in-training were those who were deemed likely to complete. In some cases, the apprentice/trainees found among this group were extremely satisfied with their training experience — this was most likely if they were employed on a large industrial site where there was peer support and optimum work and pay conditions, often underpinned by union agreements (mainly in construction and engineering). In other cases (over 31% of this group) interviewees were not particularly satisfied with certain aspects of their apprenticeship/traineeship but this dissatisfaction was unlikely to contribute to them leaving. There were often other motivating factors which kept them from withdrawing — sometimes it was a case of better support and/or better than average pay, the desire to remain employed, the desire to obtain a certificate which they believed would help them to secure future employment, or the lack of other viable opportunities in their area. Table 3 (below) highlights some of the issues raised by those apprentices/trainees in-training who were expected to complete, but were not very satisfied with their experience of the system. There were 30 responses identified within this group.

Table 3: Reasons for dissatisfaction with apprenticeship/traineeship amongst those currently in-training but likely to complete

Issues for concern raised by those in-training but likely to complete	**%**	***n***
Problems with the workplace	50	15
Problems with the training	20	6
Lack of support	20	6
Low wages	10	3
Total number of responses	100	30

Among those who were likely to complete but still had issues with their training experience, 50% of responses cited problems in the workplace. Half of the workplace problems identified related to bullying and abuse, usually by the employer, but sometimes by other workers; a quarter were about being treated as cheap labour; and another quarter concerned a lack of appropriate training supervision in the workplace. Twenty percent raised concerns with the training, principally what they saw as boring or lack of proper on-the-job training. A further 20% of responses expressed similar issues with lack of support to the other groups interviewed, while 10% cited low wages as a cause for serious concern.

Completers

The third group (n=8) interviewed constituted those who had recently completed their training. They represented the smallest percentage of those interviewed (7.6%). Like participants who were in-training, those who had completed their training represented two types — those who reported a positive experience (25%) and those who expressed some dissatisfaction (all trainees) with their apprenticeship/traineeship (75%). Of this 75%, two thirds had completed the training as a condition of their job and had issues with their pay and working conditions; such as lack of appropriate supervision, call-in at short notices, pressure to work extra shifts or not enough staff rostered on. The remaining third complained of 'boring and useless' training.

Thematic Discussion

As the previous section indicates similar issues were raised regardless of the contract status of the apprentices/trainees interviewed. In the interviews, participants who had dropped out of training were asked about their reasons for not completing and for those still in training or who had recently completed — if they had ever thought about dropping out. The comment from a first year apprentice: 'I think about leaving every day. Doesn't everyone?' (male, chef apprentice, aged 19) was fairly typical of the response from many of those currently in-training.

Because similar thematic experiences and concerns emerged among these different groups — non-completers, those in-training and those who had completed their training — the following analysis is based on these themes rather than on the different contract status of the participants.

Unpleasant working environment

In interviews with apprentices/trainees who had not completed their training, workplace problems was the single most common reason provided for their decision to withdraw from training. Workplace problems were also expressed as real issues for many of those interviewed who were still in-training — for some these problems were contributing to a situation where they were considering withdrawing. There were a range of problems spoken about. For some it was a case of boredom and feeling like they were wasting their time, either on-the-job or where they were receiving their training. For others it was a concern for their personal safety that was contributing to an unpleasant working environment. An electrical apprentice described working in a shed that leaked when it rained and having to stand in water while working with ungrounded electrical equipment. After the employer failed to fix the problems he left. A young hospitality trainee, who decided to withdraw from training due to safety concerns:

There is no security guard there at all. There have been fights break out, there have been windows smashed … there was a guy who walked in the back door (female, hospitality trainee, non-completer, aged 17).

For others the unpleasant working environment had more to do with their perception they were thought of and treated as an inferior group of workers. This was commonly expressed among apprentices in the construction industry:

> *I reckon a lot of people in the trade end up giving it up after the first six months … they think they are going to sort of beat it into you in a way like give you all the dodgy jobs and I know it is all part of it, but sometimes it turns them off* (male, construction apprentice, in-training, aged 23).

It was often the case that apprentices/trainees saw leaving as the only way to overcome the problems they were experiencing in the workplace. This was particularly true among the younger interviewees. A mature aged chef apprentice commented on the way younger trainees were treated in her workplace:

> *the girls that were … doing front of house training just left. You know they would be crying — they'd come out of the office crying because they were getting abused and they couldn't take it. … They say they leave on their own terms so … no one can come back on them [as] they are the ones that left, but you know they certainly made them go* (female, chef apprentice, non-completer, aged 49)

Bullying was a common theme for those apprentice/trainees who raised issues about an unpleasant working environment. Bullying occurred at two levels. For some interviewees, the bullying was coming from their employer or immediate supervisor. According to one retail trainee, for example, the bullying came from the owners of the company who she claimed frequently complained about her performance and her appearance. Ultimately, this situation led her to quit:

> *I sort of made my decision that I would leave because I would come home crying every night and it just wasn't a nice situation to be around. They were [just] bullies* (female, retail trainee, non-completer, aged 20).

Bullying from peers was the other level at which interviewees spoke about the problem. One female apprentice working in a male dominated industry described how she confronted continual sexual harassment from one of the senior male apprentices:

> *[He] threatened to kill me and also sexually harassed me in those last six months of my first year "you should be at home barefoot and pregnant, chained to the kitchen sink", the usual sort of rubbish … in one incident he was standing with the workshop foreman and a few of the other qualified mechanics and he yells out "You would be used to laying in the back of a panel van wouldn't you", … and not even the workshop foreman said anything … not even the service manager* (female, engineering apprentice, aged 23).

When her employer failed to address the problem she took the matter up with the State Office of Training and Tertiary Education (OTTE) field officer who investigated the case. Shortly after, however, she was fired from the job and was unable to finish her training.

The father of a young plumbing apprentice who withdrew because of abuse from his peers, spoke in detail about the bullying his son confronted from other apprentices while attending off-the-job training:

> *we had issues there with the bullying … it got to the point where he was pushed while using a rotating tool and pushed down into a pit and then had faeces pushed into his face ... there was little discipline and often no supervision … the staff didn't seem to care and certainly weren't addressing it at all* (father of male, plumbing apprentice, non-completer, aged 16).

For some of the interviewees it was not just a case of bullying or of the working environment being unpleasant, they perceived that their employer was actually deceiving them and/or abusing them in some way. A fairly common complaint was about not being properly paid by their employer. One apprentice described losing wages and credit towards her training:

> *I started my apprenticeship in October and I started receiving apprenticeship wages but they didn't sign my papers until January fifth the following year and they didn't back track and put those three months trial period onto my apprenticeship* (female, engineering apprentice, in-training, aged 23).

A construction apprentice, who was seriously considering leaving training when interviewed, told how he never knew when he would be paid for work performed:

> *he says we get paid every second Friday but then it would be like a month and a half down the track … So we are working for a full month and a half and no pay* (male, construction apprentice, in-training, aged 24).

One apprentice attributed the failure of her employer to pay her in accordance with award rates and legal requirements as the main reason for her not completing her apprenticeship:

> *… I was made to work on my days off and not paid penalty rates. She wouldn't pay me for my overtime, … I approached her and asked if I could be given pay slips a couple of times and the whole time that I was employed there I didn't get a single pay slip* (female, chef apprentice, non-completer, aged 17).

Others complained about having to work long hours without breaks. Most of these complaints came from apprentices/trainees working in the hospitality industry. A hospitality trainee complained that her health suffered because of the long hours and consecutive days of working she was expected to perform:

> *we used to work sometimes eleven days in a row without a break. There weren't any lunch breaks, so I really wasn't surprised I got run down … I wouldn't ever bother finishing it* (female, hospitality trainee, non-completer, aged 18).

One of the female apprentices interviewed told of being discriminated against by her host employer because she was a woman working in a traditionally male trade:

> *I found out later … they said the reason why I was sent back was because I was a girl and the boss had a problem with it. He basically said … because she is a female send her back it is not a female's job* (Female, engineering apprentice, in-training, aged 20).

Others complained that they felt like they were being used by employers simply to get government bonuses. Some complained about group training companies taking on more apprentices than they could find placements for with host employers and some attributed this to the group training companies seeking to attract government subsidies:

the big boss is in there talking to them and they were … saying 'Why did you take on so many apprentices if you knew you can't get a placement for us?' and he pretty much just said to them 'well look we did it so we would get the government grant' and that's about it (male, engineering apprentice, in-training, aged 19).

Quality of Training

In interviews with apprentices/trainees who did not complete, problems they experienced with the training was the second most common explanation as to why they decided to withdraw from training. A hospitality trainee, for example, when asked about her training experience said "there were no words to describe it because no training ever happened. … I found it incredibly boring and so I ended up quitting" (female, hospitality trainee, non-completer, aged 19).

A number of those in-training who were interviewed also had a considerable amount to say about the quality of the training they were receiving. Several complained of training quality problems and for some of them these problems were serious enough for them to consider withdrawing. Concerns about the quality of training centred around two major issues: the quality of the trainers, and the lack of — or 'tick and flick' — training.

The quality of trainers

Apprentices and trainees spoke about the quality of both on and off-the-job trainers. A common complaint about on-the-job training was the lack of qualified staff to provide training for them. These complaints were largely restricted to those doing their apprenticeship/traineeship in small workplaces. It was not uncommon to hear of second or third year apprentices being the ones responsible to provide training to first year apprentices. An engineering apprentice, who decided to leave his apprenticeship due to the lack of qualified on-the-job trainers, told of his experience:

> *There was no foreman, there was no tradies either, there was two contractors and basically four apprentices. … personally I just thought it was just, you know, cheap labour hire … There was no tradesmen there, … the fourth year said that there hasn't been a fully qualified tradesmen in the time he has been there* (male, engineering apprentice, non-completer, aged 18).

A construction apprentice, who also withdrew from training, told of a very similar experience:

> *the guy that was teaching me [on the job] left … and I got sent out by myself and had to teach myself as well as another apprentice at the same time* (male, construction apprentice, non-completer, aged 20).

Comments about the lack of qualified on-the-job trainers, however, were expressed most frequently among those working in the hospitality industry. In one incident a young chef apprentice described being the most qualified staff member in the restaurant where she was employed:

> *we were just left there, when my understanding was that I would have thought that since I wasn't qualified that I should have a qualified person with me — that never happened … I trained people you know in my first, second year* (female, chef apprentice, non-completer, aged 19).

When it came to interviewees' perceptions and experiences with the quality of trainers off-the-job there were notably different views expressed between those doing their training at TAFE and those doing their training with a private provider. When interviewees raised comment about TAFE trainers they rarely raised issues about the skills, knowledge or capacities of the trainers. Most expressed receiving positive experiences:

> *The plumbing instructor [at TAFE] is actually qualified to teach and he … gets the module and he reads it with us … and then when it comes to the practical exercise he will actually say this is how you do it and blah blah and then he will let us go and do it, so he actually teaches us something* (male, plumbing apprentice, in-training, aged 19).

Some raised concern about a perceived skill shortage in the TAFE sector with claims that many qualified TAFE teachers were leaving the teaching profession to go back into the trade to earn more money:

> *A specific problem we have is that the instro teacher at TAFE left to go back on the tools and that left them with basically no instro teacher and so they were bringing in people and trying to sort of cover it but it just didn't happen* (male, electrical apprentice, in-training, aged 21).

When it came to comments made by apprentices/trainees receiving their training from a private provider the views were much more scathing about the quality of the teaching staff:

> *… two years I have been there so far and it has just been farcical and the main instructor that we did have was so busy with administrative tasks he never had time to actually instruct and then everyone they have had since him has just been a joke … they are poor teachers … They are not really qualified to be a teacher. They are not really concerned about whether the kids do anything … I don't know it just seems a waste of time to me.*(male, construction apprentice, in-training, aged 22).

A retail trainee receiving their training from a private provider stated:

> *The people who are going around purporting to be trainers don't know anything about the thing they are doing, … they didn't seem to know anything about the business…. absolutely nothing* (male, retail trainee, non-completer, aged 50).

Among those doing their training with private providers it was commonly perceived that a high turnover of teaching staff was contributing to a decline in training quality.

Lack of training

For some apprentices/trainees the problem went much deeper than the quality of the teaching staff. Some felt they did not or were not receiving any substantive training. Their stories described what has been referred to as tick and flick training (Snell & Hart 2007a: 506-7). These comments were made exclusively by those receiving their training from private providers:

> *We could write down any answer in the [training] books. They would mark off anything as correct. The schooling was shocking* (male, electrical apprentice, in-training, aged 23).

The largest number of complaints about 'tick and flick' training came from those doing retail traineeships involving fully on-the-job training. It was expressed by both young and mature aged retail trainees:

> *They gave them these books and they would come around maybe once every three months and tick, tick, tick, pass that, here is the next module, tick, tick, tick, pass that with no scrutiny at all* (male, retail trainee, non-completer, aged 50).

Another retail trainee, who did complete her training, told how her trainer's failure to take training seriously impacted upon her own and the attitude of other trainees in her workplace towards the whole training process:

> *A lot of them were just … I am just going to answer whatever I want and tick whatever boxes I need to tick and then I get my certificate from them, so there was no kind of passion to really commit themselves to this traineeship. All the trainers cared [about] was just the fact that they were filled out* (female, retail trainee, completer, aged 25).

Apprenticeship/traineeship Wages

The recent study commissioned by Group Training Australia, which represents more than 150 training organisations throughout Australia, has supported the view that low wages are a major contributing factor to non-completion in the VET sector. The study found that most apprentices live below the poverty line and that such conditions contributed to many deciding to withdraw from training (Bittman et al., 2007). Similar research findings were uncovered in this study, particularly in relation to those working in the construction and hospitality industries.

For several of those who did not complete their training it was solely the poor wages that prevented them. A single mum who always wanted to be a carpenter:

> *I could not survive on the apprenticeship wage, I couldn't, and that is what stopped me. I would be gung ho, I would be there tomorrow if they could give me the wage that I am on now* (female, construction apprentice, non-completer, aged 38).

A chef apprentice told a similar story:

> *The dishwasher at my work gets paid more than me and I work longer hours as well, they take home the same amount of money as I do and they start three and a half hours later, so I resigned* (male, chef apprentice, non-completer, age 20).

For the interviewees who were still in-training, low wages were often spoken of as one of the reasons they were considering withdrawing from training:

> *I am not earning enough so I am leaving soon* (male, chef apprentice, in training, aged 22).

Or:

> *At the end of the week you are going oh will I buy milk and bread or will I put petrol in my car?* (female, chef apprentice, in-training, aged 19).

Many of those in the hospitality industry relied on over-time pay to supplement their income. The low wages, long hours and often poor working conditions have created a culture where chef apprentices frequently leave one place and move to another one in the hopes of securing a better employment situation.

A third year engineering apprentice recalls the difficulties of living on the first year apprenticeship wage:

> *you have to travel every day and you know you have to pay petrol and all that sort of stuff… I was earning $220 a week, had to pay $90 a week rent and I had to buy food, electricity, petrol … by the end of the week … my bank account would be empty* (male, engineering apprentice, in-training, aged 22)

One of the findings of the Bitmann et al. (2007) study was that because apprentice/trainee wages were so low many apprentices/trainees were forced to rely on alternative sources of income to make ends meet. This research highlighted how many apprentices/ trainees had to rely on their parents and family members for income support.

Other apprentices/trainees looked to part-time work as an alternative source of income. In the case of one of those interviewed the additional work contributed to a breakdown in their health:

> *Wages were so bad I worked a part time job my first and second year, I actually ended up getting physically ill from working two jobs because I wasn't sleeping enough and was stressed out with it all and ended up having to resign from that job. … first and second year were both pretty tough on the wages and then*

> *the third year living away from home allowance is $11 a week and with rent being, $100 plus …* (male, construction apprentice, in-training, aged 21).

Allowances and government grants to address some of the financial hardship that apprentices have to deal with were typically seen as inadequate. While they were grateful to have the assistance, it was often stated that the financial support was not enough, especially during the first year when the wages were at their lowest:

> *They give you the $500 grant but by the time you have got to pay the school fees you have already spent it anyway* (male, chef apprentice, in-training, aged 19).

It is worth noting that not all of those interviewed complained about the wages they were receiving. The level of satisfaction among apprentices and trainees receiving a higher than average training wage was notable. Apprentices working for larger companies with union representation and collective agreements rarely complained about their pay or conditions, they widely recognised that they were in a privileged position compared to many other apprentices and had little or no intention of leaving training.

Cheap labour

Generally apprentices and trainees recognised why they were receiving lower wages than qualified workers and accepted this as fair. As they received more training, acquired more skills and moved into the second and third years of their training they knew they would be receiving better wages. When they took exception to this financial arrangement was when they felt they were not receiving appropriate training and employers, representing both private enterprises and group training companies, were not upholding their obligations. In this situation apprentices and trainees often felt used as 'cheap labour'. Many interviewees saw the desire to acquire a cheap labour force as a major motivational factor for many employers putting on apprentices/trainees. This view was particularly expressed amongst first year construction apprentices:

> *my first year experience I went into a machine workshop and basically all they used me for was labour — cheap labour, because I am cheap to hire they just put me on an automated lathe or whatever, just having me pressing buttons for 8 months straight* (male, construction apprentice, in-training, aged 18).

Another construction apprentice told of a similar experience:

> *when you first start off you end up doing the crap jobs and if you have got a bad employer that is just the luck of the draw. But everything is crap in the first year, your pay is crap, so you end up stressed out, oh I can't deal with this. The first year is the hardest* (Male, construction apprentice, in-training, aged 19).

The perception that employers were more interested in acquiring a cheap labour force than providing training was also particularly strong among trainees in the retail and hospitality industries.

Some felt that their employers considered them as a cheap disposable workforce that was treated fundamentally differently from the company's other employees. One retail trainee said this was reflected in the recruitment practices of the company she worked for:

> *when they were hiring [non-trainees] they would look at your appearance and the way you presented yourself and things like that. It didn't really matter with the retail traineeships, they were just there to do … a job that anybody could do and … it was very clear to those … that weren't on the traineeship that they would be gone in a year* (female, retail trainee, non-completer, aged 22).

A couple of the trainees interviewed spoke about being an existing employee before being 'asked' by their employer about doing a traineeship. They generally viewed this as an attempt by their employer to lower their wages.

Lack of support

In interviews with apprentices and trainees the researchers asked specific questions about the support they received and responses described a lack of support at a range of different levels.

A number remarked on the lack of information and support from schools for anyone who did not have university as their primary ambition. They often felt their schools sought to discourage them from doing an apprenticeship by downgrading them:

> *I was in a public school and there was no real interest in anyone who didn't want to go to Uni. I did my VCE in year 11 but by year 12 they wanted to know what my preferences were for Uni and I told them I am not going and they just didn't understand it at all. … the teachers sort of seemed to lose interest in you* (male, electrical apprentice, in-training, aged 20).

This lack of support from schools regarding apprenticeships was also discussed by Misko et al. (2007), who mentioned that "[s]tudents in focus groups (especially Year 12 students) … reported that teachers rarely spoke to them about apprenticeships and were most concerned with students' university preparation … 25.3% reported that teachers had said that it was not a good idea [to do an apprenticeship]".

Other interviewees spoke about the level of support they received from their AAC. A few talked of positive experiences:

> *They have come to see me when I am at work. They have often rang as well but I haven't been there because I am at school. They have been good and they asked me 'Are you coping okay? Are you enjoying it still?* (female, floristry trainee, in-training, aged 17).

At the other end of the spectrum, a number of both non-completers and those in-training felt they had received little or no assistance from their AAC following the initial signup:

> *The AAC have not been helpful whatsoever. I found them since I was first hired to be absolutely useless. They are supposed to keep in contact with you, but I never heard anything from them until I rang them* (female, retail nurseryman apprentice, non-completer, aged 21).

And: *not until I actually signed up for the next one did I ever see them again* (female, retail trainee, in-training, aged 22).

The AAC was often a place where apprentices/trainees turned to for advice and support when they began to experience difficulties, either personally or with their employers or training providers. It was commonly expressed that the AAC had not delivered the support they were expecting to receive. In many cases, however, it was also clear that most apprentices/trainees interviewed did not have a clear understanding of what the AACs role was beyond the sign-up stage, as indeed was also the case with both the AACs and Government authorities contacted during the course of this project, many of whom gave contradictory information about the extent of the AAC support role.

The story of a chef apprentice who sought advice from the AAC when they were experiencing difficulties with their employer highlighted some of the reasons apprentices/trainees were confused to the role of the AAC:

> *At the Apprenticeship Centre they told me that once they sign people up they have nothing to do with the apprentice. I asked who is supposed to be there for help and support and he said "It's all changed. The government pays us to sign an apprentice up and that's it". I found him to be really rude, not knowledgeable at all, so much so that I put in a complaint about him* (female, chef apprentice, non-completer, aged 19).

Apprentices employed by group training companies often looked to their group training field officers as their first port of call when seeking assistance and advice. Some of those interviewed spoke positively about the assistance they had received from their field officers. In some cases, group training field officers were identified as playing a pro-active role in getting them alternative placements with host employers when they were unhappy with their current employer.

Other apprentices felt that their group training field officers had not been providing the level of assistance they had expected. Many complained that they had not seen their field officer for a considerable length of time:

> *Supposedly if you have any problems you are meant to be able to ring your field officer and he turns up but I haven't seen him in about 18 months. I don't even know who it is any more* (male, construction apprentice, in-training, aged 24).

A couple of interviewees speculated as to why it appeared to them field officers were not fulfilling the role that they thought was needed:

> *I reckon that it is not all the field officers fault … they are getting stressed out with looking after so many apprentices and getting to a point where they see you in the street and they think … better say a word to this bloke and get another one marked off you know. It is not like they are actually asking you anything it is like they are just knocking you off the list* (male, engineering apprentice, in-training, aged 22).

Feelings of being left 'on their own' and not sure where they should go to seek advice and assistance was a serious matter for many of those interviewed. In the case of non-completers it is possible that had better support and assistance been available to them they may have persisted with training. For those still in-training if and when an event arises, such as a problem with an employer or training organisation, their feeling of being left on their own with no one to help them work through it is placing them at considerable risk of dropping out.

It was not solely to official channels (e.g. the AAC, field officers, OTTE etc.) that apprentices/trainees looked for support. Some interviewees mentioned the important supportive role unions had performed for them while others spoke of various mentors, family members, peers and friends who had helped them throughout their training. There were also a few cases where apprentices/trainees expressed that they had a lot of respect for their employers because they did provide support for apprentices and trainees when it was needed.

Conclusion

Addressing skill shortages continues to be a major challenge for Australia with far reaching implications for the country's future economic prosperity. Improving completion rates among apprentices and trainees will help meet these challenges. The findings from this research are generally consistent with other research into non-completion among apprentices/trainees (e.g. Grey et al. 1999; Ray et al. 2000; Cully & Curtain 2001a; 2001b). While it was often a case of multiple contributing factors that led to an apprentice/trainee's decision to not complete their training; problems within the workplace, poor quality training, and low wages were the most common explanations provided for

not completing. Unlike previous studies, this research sought to compare the experiences of non-completers with those in-training and to a lesser degree those that had completed. It was generally expected that those participants interviewed who were in-training or had completed their training would tell of very different experiences than those who had decided to leave their training. This was not the case. Unpleasant working conditions, low wages, poor quality training and a lack of support were common complaints among those in-training.

Those that described the most positive experiences tended to be those either employed by large companies who received their training from TAFE or those employed by group training companies, doing their training at TAFE and who had been successfully placed with a range of good host employers. Those employed and being trained by group training companies and those receiving their training from a private RTO were generally found to be less satisfied. Apprentices in the engineering occupations were found to be more satisfied than apprentices in the construction and hospitality industries. This largely reflects the fact that the majority of these engineering apprentices were employed by large organisations, often under union collective agreements with support provisions for apprentices, and doing their training at TAFE. When comparing apprentices and trainees, trainees expressed a far greater level of dissatisfaction in terms of employment conditions, support and training experience. These findings are largely consistent with completion rates that could be calculated across these variables. Completion rates, for example, were found to be higher among apprentices than trainees and higher among engineering apprentices than construction and hospitality apprentices.

Drawing direct correlations between completion rates and training experience, however, can be highly problematic. Negative experiences expressed among those in-training did not necessarily put them at risk of not completing. Often there were other motivational factors (e.g. being employed, obtaining a qualification, etc.) which were likely to keep them in-training. While some apprentices might think about leaving not all of them do leave training despite experiencing significant difficulties and/or dissatisfaction. While governments, training organisations and other VET stakeholders should work to achieve higher completion rates it must not be assumed that high completion rates necessarily equate to positive experiences for apprentices/trainees. While apprentice/trainee completion rates were found to be higher in Gippsland than the State average[3], this does not necessarily suggest that the situation is better in the region or that Gippsland's apprentices/trainees are more satisfied with their training experience. The slightly higher than average completion rates may reflect a better training system and a more positive training experience or it may reflect the fact that there are fewer opportunities and thus apprentices/trainees in regional areas tend to 'stick with it' simply because there is a more limited range of alternative employment for them.

If apprentices/trainees are thinking about leaving, and the findings of this

research suggest many of them are, strong support is needed to prevent them from withdrawing. Making ends meet on apprentices/trainee wages was a major challenge for those interviewed. Many of those who had withdrawn from training complained that they could not afford student fees, costs associated with transportation, accommodation and living expenses. Some had to rely on alternative sources of income, such as an additional part-time job or financial support from their parents, to meet their financial obligations. Low wages (cited by 16% overall), however, were not the only, or indeed the most common, reason provided by apprentices/trainees for deciding to leave their training or feeling dissatisfied. Working in an unpleasant working environment and receiving poor quality training were more frequently expressed as greater problems for apprentices/trainees. One of the most worrying findings to come out of this research is that many of those who were likely to complete their training or had already completed their training expressed a view that the quality of their training had been so poor that they were questioning the value of the certificates they would/ had achieved. If quality standards have declined so substantially, the qualifications obtained by apprentices/trainees may no longer serve as a useful barometer of someone's skill level. This finding calls into question the whole training system. Often the personal experiences of the apprentices/trainees interviewed led them to become very cynical about their employer's commitment to training and the training system. This cynicism no doubt contributes to some apprentices/trainees not taking training seriously but it may also have the more lasting effect of discouraging them and others known to them from commencing other apprentices/traineeship in the future. If the training system wants to attract quality applicants and truly address skill shortages it will need to tackle some of the core issues which are contributing to non-completion, unsatisfactory experiences and the level of cynicism that currently plague the system.

State and Commonwealth Governments must demonstrate a stronger commitment to monitoring employment conditions and training quality to ensure RTOs and employers are meeting their obligations. Field officers associated with State Training Authorities are primarily given this responsibility but are typically under resourced. In Gippsland, two OTTE Field Officers are responsible for over 6,000 apprentices and trainees in-training. This immense caseload places major constraints upon what they can achieve. Improvements in the resourcing and the number of Field Officers will go some way in improving monitoring capacities.

Support mechanisms must also be substantially strengthened if completion rates and training experiences and outcomes are to be improved. Interviewees expressed great disappointment in not having greater support at a range of levels. They spoke of not receiving support from their teachers and schools when they decided they would not be applying for university but would be pursuing an apprenticeship/traineeship. They told of receiving little follow-up

support from their AAC and how they often felt let down by the various support structures when they were experiencing personal difficulties or difficulties with their employer. Some interviewees also expressed feeling confused about who was responsible for providing support and frustrated with not being able to access assistance. Some of this confusion and frustration appears to have come from those whose role is to provide advice and support to apprentices/trainees. Had support been there when these problems emerged some of them might have remained in training. While Governments have a major role to play in providing this support, particularly through State Training Authorities and AACs, there is also an important role for non-government actors. Mentoring schemes are a proven means to provide needed support (Cully & Curtain 2001a, p.35-36) and can involve a range of VET stakeholders (employer associations, unions, youth workers, employment agencies, Job Pathway Programs, etc.). The Rudd Labor Government's proposal to trial a mentoring program that seeks to engage recently retired professionals and trades people in mentoring young apprentices and trainees is an important initiative.

The Australian apprenticeship system in its current guise has operated for over a decade. This research, like other studies (Hall, Buchanan & Considine 2002), indicates that the training system is not delivering the desired outcomes for many apprentices/trainees, employers or tax-payers. While improved regulation, monitoring and support mechanisms may go some way to improve the situation it does not address some of the fundamental problems within the training system, such as the proliferation of training places in non-traditional trades where skill needs are not in short supply while many traditional trades continue to suffer from acute skill shortages. Given the Rudd Government's election proclamation to carry out an Education Revolution it may be the opportune time for policy makers to pursue a fundamental redirection of Australia's vocational training system in order to better meet the nation's skill challenge.

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(Endnotes)

[1] In the public discourse, 'skill shortage' rather than 'labour shortage' has served as the focal point of discussions even though 'labour shortage' is often the more appropriate descriptor of the problem. For a full discussion of the difficulties of defining and measuring the "slippery concepts" (Richardson, 2007: 7) of 'skill' and 'skill shortage' see Richardson, 2007; Shah and Burke, 2005).

[2] The distinction between apprenticeships and traineeships has blurred increasingly since New Apprenticeships were introduced, however, NCVER define 'traditional apprentices' as trades or related occupational workers at AQF level III or above with a duration of more than 2 years full-time. All other New Apprenticeships are traineeships.

[3] This is consistent with other research (such as Ball and John 2005: 14-16) which found that completion rates were higher in regional areas.