Trade Barriers: To Invest, Or Not To Invest, In A Trade As A Career

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Abstract

This paper highlights on-going concern in Australia about the contested terrain of skills shortages, particularly as they apply to traditional trades. The paper reports on a school-based study of student career choice that was undertaken for the federal government to inform its deliberations1. Drawing on the study, the paper examines key issues related to students' preparedness, and schools' readiness, to pursue school-based apprenticeships in traditional trades, reflecting the hope of attenuating the much touted gaps in labour supply and avoiding the social and fiscal effects of skills shortages, matters to which the nation has been alerted.

Introduction

Skilled workers are retiring and too few are replacing them … Surveys of employers by the Australian Chamber of Commerce show skills shortages have displaced tax gripes as their biggest issue, an event so rare as to be almost historic. (Colebatch, 15 February, 2005, The Age)

Skills shortages are now widespread and they are a drag on productivity and profitability. In the manufacturing sector alone AiGroup research indicates that there are between 18,000 and 21,000 positions for skilled people that currently remain unfilled. (Australian Industry Group, 2005, p.2)

The Department of Immigration is launching a worldwide hunt for 20,000 skilled migrants to fill job vacancies, in the biggest push of its kind since the 1960s. The Department of Immigration is organising a series of work expos in London, Berlin, Chennai and Amsterdam. (ABC News Online, 16 August, 2005)

Beginning in the late 1990s, arresting headlines like these have spread through political, media and academic accounts of the state of Australia's labour market, sometimes accompanied by plaintive stories of the nation's over-indulged romance with the Higher Education sector and its dispirited attention to traditional trades2. As interlocutors in a growing conversation about skills shortages over the recent past, a range of high profile commentators, as evidenced in this paper, have driven the Australian debate, sometimes in different directions.

By way of a background briefing, the following section offers a brief and necessarily selected history of the emergency of traditional trades as a focal point for public commentary, community concern and political intervention in Australia, contextualising the trigger points for the study – the basis of this paper – funded by the Australian Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST). The paper follows with an overview of the DEST-funded study focussing on theoretical and methodological issues considered in the design of the research. It then highlights three emergent themes associated with students' willingness to invest in a traditional trade as a career and the implications for those who have a vested-interest in guiding young people into suitable careers. The paper concludes by looking to the future.

Before proceeding, it is essential to acknowledge three important riders, associated with three necessarily limiting features to this paper. Firstly, it is necessary to recognise the contested field in which the politics surrounding skills shortages has been played out. Importantly, contestation over the magnitude of the skills shortage and, in particular, academic debate over its social constructedness are acknowledged as worthy of further investigation and as being firmly embedded in a rich body of literature (see for example, DEST, 2002; Grugulis, Warhurst & Keep, 2004; Lafer, 2004; Shah & Burke, 2005; Lowry & Liu 2006; Richardson, 2006). However, definitional distinctions between 'gaps' and 'shortages', and social and discursive constructions of skills shortages, distinguished and nuanced from a range of perspectives – economists', employers' and unionists', for instance – are not the focal point of this paper. Instead, the paper focuses on issues raised by participants in the Australian study as they relate to the uptake of traditional trades. This leads to a second rider centred on the politics of voice. Explicitly, the paper does not set out to accommodate the political voice of the authors in matters related to who might desire to take up trades as a career. Rather, it focuses on the multi-voiced responses of the participants in an empirical study specifically designed to foreground their voices, and in listening to them, to learn from what they say. Thirdly, there is a corpus of international literature on skill shortages and development (see for example, websites for World Skills International, World Skills Leaders Forum and the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training). As a necessarily limiting feature, it is the Australian context to which this paper is devoted.

Background

Starting in the 1990s, a looming skills shortage in the Australian workforce was forecast by Dr Kemp who, as then Minister for Education, Training and Youth Affairs, reassured the nation that his government and industry were 'working together to address skills shortages in traditional trades' (Kemp, 3 November, 1999). The storyline about skills shortages developed over the ensuing years and in 2002 Mr Abbott, as Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations, reaffirmed that there was a 'strong demand for trades skills' and that ongoing efforts to improve education and training would help strengthen the labour force (Abbott, 24 December, 2002). In 2003, having authorised a Senate Inquiry into national skills shortages, Dr Nelson, as Minister for Education, Science and Training, announced the Commonwealth's National Industry Skills Initiative (Nelson, 11 April, 2003), along with a traditional trades campaign (Nelson, 27 June, 2003), as he urged States and Territories to fortify Commonwealth efforts by ensuring adequate training places were available to meet industry needs, particularly in the traditional trades.

As concern intensified during the following year, Dr Nelson broadcast 'a new approach to tackling skills shortages in trades' involving a 'National Skills Shortages Strategy' that would 'address skills shortages in critical industries throughout Australia'. Amongst a host of initiatives aimed at structural change and training reform, Nelson promoted 'a 'one-stop shop' web based site for students, parents and industry on skill shortage careers', a renewed focus on standards for career advisers and services, an 'adopt a school' program to connect industries with schools, and a series of roundtable talks with young apprentices to identify their concerns (Nelson, 6 April, 2004). Adopting a significantly new tack, in 2005 the Minister for Vocational and Technical Education, Gary Hardgrave, announced that the government would invest '$351 million over the next five years from 2004-05 to 2008-09 to assist more young Australians into traditional trades through establishment of twenty four Australian Technical Colleges' (Hardgrave, 10 May, 2005). The foreword to the Australian Technical Colleges DEST discussion paper, co-signed by the Minister for Education, Science and Training and the Minister for Vocational and Technical Education, claimed that:

> *For too long, much of the careers advice provided to young Australians has equated success with going to university over other pathways. The Australian Government is committed to building a nation in which a high quality technical education is as prized as a university degree. The establishment of 24 Australian Technical Colleges for years 11 and 12 students will further strengthen Australia's vocational education and training system and promote pride and excellence in the acquisition of trade skills. (DEST, 2005, p.1)*

According to a Ministerial media release, the Australian Technical Colleges were being established to 'provide young Australians with the opportunity to commence their training in a traditional trade through a School-Based New Apprenticeship while at the same time completing academic subjects leading to a Year 12 certificate' (Hardgrave, 2005). With steady progress made over the year, in 2006 the Australian Technical Colleges (Flexibility in Achieving Australia's Skills Needs) Amendment Bill was tabled in the Senate with its proposal to bring forward funding to accelerate the rate of development of the Colleges, specifically funded to tackle the skills shortages in traditional trades. With the Opposition disputing only where blame should be laid for the nation's skills shortages, the Bill received bi-partisan support allowing funding to flow more quickly to the Colleges. As another initiative within this same time period, the Federal government committed a further $143.2 million from 2005-06 to 2008-09 to establish an Australian Network of Industry Careers Advisers – renamed Career Advice Australia in 2006 – to develop a career and transition support network for young Australians from 13 to 19 years, taking particular note of the needs of industry (DEST, 2006).

While there have been considerable variations in claims about the magnitude of the skills shortage, its root cause and solutions (See for instance, ACTU, 2004; DEST, 2003; Hendy, 2005; Mitchell & Quirk, 2005; Toner, 2002, 2003, 2005), the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry has assured, through its Executive officer, that 'there is not a 'skills crisis' but there are very big challenges facing the Australian economy today' (Hendy, 2005, p.4). What is apparent in balancing the discussion is that 'Australia, in common with many other countries, has experienced an uneven rate of trade skills formation over time' (Worland & Doughney, 2002) corroborating skill shortages, not as pandemic, but as sometimes located in specialisations within occupations, and within particular geographical locations (DEST, 2002). To assist in mobilising a workforce, the Australian Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR) publishes an annual report indentifying, inter alia, industry profiles, skills in demand, jobs with very good prospects, and overviews by State and Territory of labour market opportunities (see DEWR, 2006).

Whether it be described as a 'crisis' or as 'big challenges' for the economy, the emergence of a skills shortage has continued to evoke concern amongst a range of stakeholders of varying political persuasions about how the nation will best meet its labour needs, providing an on-going focus of concern for industry (for example, Australia Industry Group, 2006) and the Council of Australian Governments (COAG, 2005; COAG, 2006). Apologists for different positions in other respects nevertheless agree that there are economic and human costs to the nation of not meeting labour demands. In straight economic terms, Toner (2005) explained:

> *Skills shortages are of concern because they constrain output and investment, lead to wage cost inflation and lower the rate of product and process innovation across the economy. (Toner, 2005, p.1)*

With a stronger focus on community and the youth experience, the Dusseldorp Skills Forum elaborated another commonly held understanding about consequences associated with national skills shortages:

> *The development and renewal of skills in manufacturing, construction, automotive, engineering and other sectors are crucial to our long-term success as an innovative, creative and competitive economy. A strong skills culture is integral to shaping the design and technology of future work, and in providing opportunities for decent work, especially for young people (DSF, 2003, p.1).*

In brief, while future strategic directions and solutions remain a contested terrain, there is general agreement about the damaging consequences to the nation of skills shortages and there is a growing consensus about the importance of succession planning in generating a pool of traditional trades workers.

The Study

Given an intensified political and community focus over the past years, and the government's high-level investment in providing a skilled labour supply into the future, the federal government had a clear interest in garnering varying perspectives on these issues from secondary school students, parents, school Career Advisers, and from Principals and their Deputies who, together in their leadership roles, helped set curriculum parameters within schools. To this end DEST funded a multifaceted research study of influences on school students' education and career decisions, paying particular attention to the desirability of training and apprenticeship options available to students at school (Alloway, Dalley, Patterson, Walker & Lenoy, 2004). The original study provided a rich data bank of contemporary perspectives on these issues and a fertile source from which other publications have flowed (Walker et al, 2005; Dalley-Trim et al, in press). Drawing from the original data source, this paper isolates issues related to students' preparedness to invest in a trade as a future career, parents' eagerness to encourage their children to do so, staffs' inclination to guide students into traditional trade fields, and schools' overall readiness to respond to labour force demands by supporting school-based apprenticeships in traditional trades.

As a point of clarification related to the specificity of the Australian context, apprenticeships have generally applied to 'older established trade areas such as fitting and machining, carpentry or hairdressing' while traineeships have

been a 'more recent phenomenon' most commonly identified within 'non-trade areas such as retail, hospitality and business services' (Smith & Wilson, 2004). Apprenticeships have also been generally associated with longer periods of training (Smith & Wilson). Under Australia's apprenticeship reforms of the 1990s, traineeships and apprenticeships were blended together in a New Apprenticeship scheme, and rebadged in 2006 as Australian Apprenticeships.

Theoretical perspective & methodology

As described in detail in the original study, the research adopted a qualitative, interpretative inquiry approach to investigate school students' willingness to pursue a traditional trade as a career. The theoretical approach embedded in the research reflected Flick's (1998) concern that '[r]apid social change and the resulting diversification of life worlds are increasingly confronting social researchers with new social contexts and perspectives' (p.2). In the context of this study, the new social contexts and perspectives were apparent in the unprecedented level of skills shortages within the workforce and the insufficient flow of a succession cohort of apprentices that could have prevented the 'big challenges' experienced by the Australian economy. Acknowledging the reality of social change and the diversification of life worlds, the study operated on the premise that social, cultural and generational gaps may exists between policy makers – that is, those with a vested interest in understanding and predicting labour markets – and school students who may contemplate a trade as a career, and their parents and professional educators who encourage and advise them. Given this context, this study began by opening out a multi-voiced project drawing on 'inductive strategies instead of starting from theories and testing them' and accepting that knowledge and practice would be 'studied as local knowledge and practice' (Flick 1998, p.2).

In operationalising the study, qualitative data were collected by a team of experienced researchers drawing on the conventions of focus group interviews. Focus group methodology was chosen because, as argued by Madriz (2000), the group situation potentially reduces 'the influence of the interviewer on the research subjects by tilting the balance of power toward the group. Because focus groups emphasize the collective, rather than the individual, they foster free expression of ideas, encouraging the members of the group to speak up (Denzin, 1986; Frey & Fontana, 1993)'. (Madriz, 2000, p. 838). To this end, focus group interviews were conducted with Years 10 and 12 students, drawn from 9 schools, from across 3 Australian states, namely, Queensland, New South Wales and Western Australia. Because of the trenchant gender divide in the uptake of traditional trades in Australia favouring males, and the different stories that young women and men might tell about their investment in traditional trades as careers, focus groups were conducted separately for male and female students in each school. Of the 340 students who participated in the study from

across the country, 165 were male and 175 were female.

Furthermore, because of budgetary and time constraints, 8 of the schools were located in metropolitan areas and only one school was located in rural New South Wales offering a limited geographical comparator for students' contemplated futures as influenced by the metropolitan-rural dimensionality of space. In consultation with state education departments, the metropolitan schools were selected to represent upper, middle and lower socio-economic areas within the region. State education departments routinely categorise schools according to the socio-economic catchment areas from which they draw their clientele by employing indices of socio-economic disadvantage or decile ranks of school populations. As a point of reference Table 1 shows the distribution of school sites by socio-economic status and metropolitan/rural division and the number of students captured through the focus group interviews within each category.

Table 1: Number of school sites and students x SES and geographical location

	Number of School Sites	**Number of students**
Urban lower SES	3	104
Urban middle SES	3	90
Urban upper SES	2	86
Rural	1	60
Total	9	340

As well as interviewing students, the budget allowed for focus groups to be conducted with parents in NSW only. In total, 62 parents representing the different demographic groups participated in focus group discussions, a notable feat given the level of demands on parent time and apparent resistance to activity of this kind where there can be no promise of immediate benefits to their children and the long-term pay-offs may be viewed as too remote a trade-off for their time.

In addition, interviews were conducted, sometimes individually and sometimes in pairs, with 13 career advisers or equivalent staff, and with 13 principals and deputy principals.

Interview protocols, supporting semi-structured interviews, were designed to establish a pattern of questioning amongst the team of researchers, keeping interviewers, focus groups and interviewees on track while also allowing flexibility to pursue participants' interests and unanticipated lines of inquiry. Questions ranged across a number of topics but those related to careers in

trades focussed on whether students would consider a trade as a career, what they knew about traditional trades as career options, and what they saw as advantages or disadvantages of choosing a trade as a career.

While the study was conducted within the context of interpretative, qualitative inquiry, and the voices of participants were reflected through interview and focus group discussion, participants were also asked to complete a paper and pencil survey that the researchers administered and collected for DEST as part of a wider collection of statistical data on career-choices. Results of these data were not reported in the original study and have not as yet been published elsewhere. With permission from DEST, descriptive statistics collected during the process of the study are referred to later in this paper, particularly as they add a quantitative dimension to the themes that emerged from the qualitative data. In supporting the practice of drawing together multiple perspectives and approaches into the one study, Flick observes how multiple methodological practices bring richness and depth to any inquiry, an outcome that was evident in combining the varying data sources available within the study's framework (Flick, 1998, p.231).

Emergent themes

Consistent with an interpretative inquiry approach, the following sections address significant themes that the researchers identified as emerging from participants' discussions about what constitutes a traditional trade, the advantages and disadvantages of choosing a traditional trade as a career, and their interest in taking up an apprenticeship while still at school.

Lexical lessons

While parents and teaching staff were generally aware of what constituted a traditional trade, the student body generally was less familiar with the term. Most of the student focus groups began with lively discussion about what constituted a traditional trade, exposing students' overall lack of knowledge about, and interest in, trades' fields. The level of confusion about traditional trades was widespread with students citing 'teaching', 'nursing' and 'medicine', with one offer of the 'Lollipop Lady', as examples of traditional trades. Amongst one group of girls who were earnest in all respects during the interview, traditional trades conjured thoughts of anything from teaching to men bartering on ships. When the interviewer (I) introduced the topic, students (S) often expressed confusion, as was the case with these girls who were clearly all at sea when it came to understanding the concept:

I: *If I say to you, 'traditional trades' what do you think about?*

S: Teaching?
S: Men on ships! …
S: Yeah all those boxes!
S: Instead of using money and all that.
S: A barter?
S: Yeah! (Year 12 Females – Upper SES)

Confusion was not restricted to girls for whom, it could be argued, traditional trades featured less prominently in the material reality of their lives and in the realm of their desires. Many boys too displayed their lack of knowledge in their attempts to name any of the traditional trades:

S: It's something that was done in the Middle Ages. (Year 12 Males – Middle SES)

Without the benefit of participating in the interviews, some of these comments might be (mis)read as student knowledge of the history of trades but, in our judgment, this was not the case. Drawing on other aspects of textuality and performativity apparent in the enactment of the interviews – facial expression, tonality, bodily gesture – it was more certainly the case that students were unfamiliar with traditional trades as careers and that, importantly, the lexicon associated with traditional trades was not part of their lexicon.

Sometimes where members of a focus group might even contemplate a career as a tradesperson, the term 'traditional trade' itself was meaningless:

I: … So you're talking about taking up a traditional trade as a career. You're going to go off and do carpentry. Any of the rest of you thought about doing a traditional trade at all?
S: What's that? (Year 10 Male – Lower SES)

Apart from the apparent lack of understanding of the fields incorporated in traditional trades, there was further lack of recognition amongst students, sometimes reflected in negative comments, about the skill level involved in trades work.

I: What about jobs like plumbers and brick layers and carpenters? What kind of jobs do you think they are? What would you call those kinds of jobs?
S: Manual labour. (Year 10 Males – Lower SES)

As a point of clarification, tradespersons and related workers – hierarchised within the Australian Standard Classification of Occupations by skill level required on the job – are identified as the fourth major occupational category requiring skill level 3, behind managers and administrators (skill

level 1), professionals (skill level 1) and associate professionals (skill level 2), considerably ahead of the field of labourers and related workers who form the ninth major occupational group requiring skill level 5. No doubt traditional trades do require manual labour, but to characterise them exclusively as such is to misrepresent them – to deny them due status – in terms of the skill level required to perform the work. Other than for a few informed comments, there was an audible silence in student talk about trades work as skilled, accomplished, and clever – the work of experts.

Indeed, when the referent 'traditional trade' was clarified it sometimes operated in the pejorative with young adults. That is, amongst some of the student cohorts, the term was cast in opposition to newer cutting-edge sources of knowledge and skills that were, from their point of view, more clearly located in the sciences and newer technologies.

I: *What do you see as the advantages or disadvantages of taking up a traditional trade?*
S: *There are more things available now. There are other options that you can branch into that are more interesting – science, those kinds of things.*
S: *The non-traditional stuff is more appealing.*
S: *Yeah! Newer kinds of things. (Year 12 Females – Rural)*

For some students, 'traditional trades' clearly signified not keeping up with reform, being left behind the times:

S: *And so I think sooner or later it will be a world where a lot of things are reformed and the people who do learn those traditional skills – not that there's anything bad with it – they do have to keep up with the world changing – civilisation. (Year 12 Females – Upper SES)*

In contrast with the negative use of the term, one male student who had chosen a trade as a career made the point, almost defensively within his group, that traditional trades were transforming in ways that positively embraced more advanced technologies. In professionalising the image and in technologising the work involved, 'Mechanics' were being transformed into 'Technicians', a positive feature that was reflected in the language practice of naming the trade's workers:

S: *Something I've … I went to an introductory thing that was about T3 traineeship and they were saying that it's very … the mechanics area is becoming more professional, and they call mechanics 'technicians', because it's quite a lot more skills now, and lots of people are doing it at the moment. There's become a need for mechanics, technicians. I think they'll be needed – I think 'cause everyone uses cars. (Year 12 Male – Upper SES)*

Focus group interviews with students provided compelling evidence that they were largely unfamiliar with what constituted a traditional trade, and that they mostly lacked knowledge of the skills required and of the topography embraced by traditional trades. While it may not be surprising that this was the case, the claim is instructive to consider in terms of possible differences wrought by social change, and distinctions written into generational differences in experiences and perspectives and 'the diversification of life worlds'.

From our analysis of student talk, we argue that political, public and media commentaries focussing on traditional trades in general, rather than on the specifics of career opportunities in particular occupations, are likely to be devoid of meaning and to remain unheard by young adults. Moreover, many young people may be uninspired by the tag 'traditional trade' and may identify more with newer technologies and with more contemporary descriptions of skilled work. Clearly what is needed here is an understanding of how language and semiosis operate in the process of meaning-making, in this instance, in defining and distinguishing occupational fields – as the young interviewee protested, he wanted to become a 'technician' as opposed to becoming a 'mechanic', a distinction that more accurately reflected the changing skill base, at the same time as rendering the work more desirable. Meanings associated with words shift and change over time as social, economic and semiotic communities redefine themselves. Sensitive communities adjust their language accordingly. Clever adults – politicians, policy makers, educators and parents – those who care about young people's futures – may consider how a new lexicon, new semantic spaces, might be needed, and negotiated, in improving communication with students about skilled labour.

The demographics of investing in a trade as a career

Across the three states, few students attending upper and middle SES schools reported an interest in adopting a traditional trade as a career or in pursuing a school-based apprenticeship. By comparison, more students in the lower SES schools, and in the rural school, were favourably disposed to the idea. Gender too was significant in that, predictably, more boys (17.1%) than girls (8.2%) selected a trade as their first choice of career. Acknowledging the variations that exist within every demographic group, the locus of interest in trades and school-based apprenticeships was strongest amongst males in the rural and low SES schools.

Students generally discussed their willingness to invest in trades as future careers in terms of freedom of choice and personal interest, typically expressed as, 'It's not what we want' or 'It doesn't interest me'. For the most part, in expanding on their responses, students drew on egalitarian discourses – any number of variations of the 'horses for courses', 'follow your heart' or 'follow your nose' discourse. But beyond claims of personal choice, classist perspectives were also evident. Some students were sufficiently

self-reflective, sufficiently sensitive to the workings of socio-economic and cultural contexts, to be self-conscious about how they might sound in their rejection of trades as a career option.

S: It's [i.e. a trade] not of interest to us. It's not what we want to end up in ...
S: It makes us sound so snobbish though. It's kind of disturbing. (Year 12 Males – Upper SES)

Other students acknowledged that the social and economic communities in which they lived shaped their career expectations in divisive ways and operated less on the basis of personal interest and choice than on a principle of social determinism:

S: I think there's a very small percentage of kids around these kinds of areas, like these areas of Sydney who would want to go into trades – like the blue-collar force – because of the expectations society – as in North Shore people are expected to go to University, get those academic jobs, become lawyers, doctors, whatever, while people in the Western suburbs of Sydney, they're the ones …
S: We're expected to go into white-collar jobs, and people in the Western suburbs are expected to go into blue-collar jobs.
I: So there's a community expectation?
S: Absolutely.
I: Cultural expectation?
S: Absolutely. (Year 10 Males – Upper SES)

Like so many of the students, education staff were clear in describing the dominant expectations of the communities they served, sometimes echoing student claims about the determining features of enculturation. At one upper SES school, for instance, the Principal explained that the school was 'strongly academically focussed', that parents were 'generally tertiary-oriented' and that destinations of students were 'overwhelmingly tertiary-oriented'. Moreover, with a high population of culturally and linguistically diverse students at the school for whom tertiary access was a driving force, few students at the school would ever be trade bound.

By comparison with students in middle and upper SES schools, boys in lower SES schools and in the rural school held more favourable attitudes to trades and to apprenticeships. Amongst these boys there was often a measure of enthusiasm at the thought of being able to pursue a trade through a school-based apprenticeship. Their main concern was that there was too little information and too little school support for them to move in that direction.

I: Would you consider a school-based apprenticeship? One where you could still do your schooling?
S: Oh. Yeah, yeah. Definitely….

I: *What have they told you about it?*
All: *Nothing. …*
S: *They show us that they do exist. We get things in notes that say 'If anyone's interested in a school-based apprenticeship for this, come up and see 'Miss Lamont'.' (Year 12 Males – Lower SES)*

Younger students, too, at the school showed a marked interest in taking up a trade as a career and responded positively to a question about whether they would begin an apprenticeship if it were available to them through school:

S: *Yep.*
I: *Why.*
S: *It might be my big chance in life from one. That could be the big shot for you. (Year 10 Males – Lower SES QLD)*

At the rural school, too, there was a palpable sense of interest amongst some of the boys in taking up a trade as a career. In discussing the issue, it was clear that some of these boys had already invested considerable thought in the idea. They saw many advantages in trades and listed the following:

S: *A lot of work for you.*
S: *Job security.*
S: *It needs to be done.*
S: *It gives you a career.*
I: *Okay, so when you say it gives you a career – what's that mean?*
S: *Well, you always can stay in that job. Because you have the Certificate, you can basically go anywhere and still do that job because you're qualified.*
S: *Even if you get another job, say you go to uni or something for a year and get another course and you do that for a while and you don't like it, you can fall back on your trade.*
S: *Then you can get your Clerk of Works and become your own boss and employ other people and stuff – make it your own business. (Year 12 Males – Rural)*

There was no clear-cut divide amongst schools in that all schools produced some students who expressed some interest in a career in a traditional trade. However, the descriptive statistics generated from the survey that we distributed for DEST – displayed in Figures 1 and 2 – corroborated the themes identified by the researchers as emerging from the multi-voiced texts of the interviews. The qualitative and quantitative data support the claim that student preference for pursuing a trade career was inversely related to the socio-economic category of the school that they attended. The lowest level of student interest in pursuing a trade was associated with the highest SES schools, while the highest interest amongst students was expressed by those in the lowest SES schools.

Figures 1 and 2 show the steady increase in interest in taking up a trade as a career – either as a first option, or as one of their top three post-school options – as students were identified as attending schools in higher, middle and lower SES catchment areas. Figures 1 and 2 also show that rural students' level of willingness to contemplate a trade career was more closely aligned with students attending lower SES schools although caution must be exercised in interpreting the data as only one rural school was included in the sample.

Parents too reflected these patterns of responses. Most parents avowed that their children were free to choose their futures and paid homage to notions of free choice and egalitarianism. However, participating parents from the middle and upper SES schools expressed an overall lack of personal interest in encouraging their children into trades careers while those from the lower SES and rural schools were more positive. While parents were generally polite in saying why they would guide their children into professional careers instead, one parent from a low SES school echoed the class divide referred to over and again by the students. In his response to the interviewer, the parent implicitly described the way that cultural capital operated to coerce choice in his pithy aphorism, 'We're Westies, mate', which was meant to explain it all:

P: *If you're a bricklayer or a plasterer, you can earn a lot of money. Because there's no point in being good and going to uni – it's what you get at the end of it. It's very well paid.*

I: *So you see it as offering financial rewards – yeah? Can you think of any other advantages of perhaps taking up a traditional trade?*

P: *Well, we're not living on the North Shore so –.*

I: *I don't know – can you explain that to me not being from Sydney?*

P: *We're Westies, mate.*

I: *Okay, so what's the implications of – ?*

P: *Well, trades people, blue collar workers in the West – over in the North Shore we've got better people – you know the barristers and the solicitors and the like. (Parents of Year 12 Students – Lower SES)*

While careers in trades appeared attractive to more students in lower and rural schools, it was overwhelmingly the male students in those schools who expressed an interest. Girls in the lower SES and rural schools were as lacklustre about taking up a traditional trade, with the exception of hairdressing, as were their counterparts in the middle and upper SES schools. Interestingly, in terms of gendered social constructions of careers, there was a detectable storyline circulating amongst girls about formerly female-identified trades surrendering to equity pressures in ways that male-identified trades had not:

S: *Well with regards to hairdressing it sort of … it used to be the woman would do hairdressing … and then there would be the barber … but it's*

very unisex now whereas the other traditional things like the plumbers and the builders, you don't really see very many women doing it.

I: Right. What about chefs? I mean you're interested in…

S: I am.

S: I know you see all the television programs and they're mostly all guys.

S: Jamie Oliver, Jamie Oliver!

S: Yeah, he's dreadful. (Year 12 Females – Upper SES)

The story of uni-directional shifts in gendered work relations was also reflected at interview with some of the Career Advisers:

> I had a girl this morning who put her hand up for a school-based traineeship in automotive – two in fact. So yeah! It is still a minority for girls wanting to go into traditionally male areas. Although the other way round – although hospitality is no longer probably considered traditionally female. There's a lot of boys who are interested in hospitality. This is probably something that has changed over a period of years. (Career Adviser – Middle SES)

In summary, our analysis of the demographics of investing in a trade as a career suggests that the bulk of the future workforce is most likely to come from males who attend lower SES and rural schools, a claim that is corroborated in other research (see for instance, Teese and Polesel, 2003). In the interest of social equity, and in the interest of diversifying and enriching the pool from which applicants are drawn, initiatives, strategies and media campaigns aimed at bolstering young people's interests in traditional trades will almost certainly need to challenge sexist and classist understandings about trades which appeared to be so resilient amongst participants in this study.

Issues of access to school-based apprenticeships in a trade

As the country was awakened to the skills shortage in the traditional trades, it was assumed that the introduction in the 1990s of the School-Based New Apprenticeship scheme would help swell the rank and file of work-ready apprentices thereby serving the needs of a fast growing economy and a resources boom. What was not immediately apparent was that the 'New Apprenticeship' scheme, renamed Australian Apprenticeships in July 2006, rolled together traditional trades apprenticeships with lower-level traineeships aimed, for example, at retail training in coffee shops, or 'your Targets, your K-Marts, your KFCs' (Career Adviser – Middle SES). The aggregation of apprenticeships and traineeships rendered indistinguishable the skill-level distinctions between the

two. When it came to helping students who wanted to take up a traditional trade, Career Advisers and Principals lamented how official figures on New Apprenticeships disguised the fact that few apprenticeships were available through their schools and that, in fact, in the state of New South Wales no apprenticeships, only traineeships, were available at all at the time of the study:

> *We haven't got school based apprenticeships – we've only got school-based traineeships. (Career Adviser – Lower SES)*

> Well in the town like ours, the opportunities for apprenticeships are pretty miniscule really. (Principal – Rural)

> *So a lot of traineeships are in that fast food area or in the customer service area which formally would have been a part-time job. (Career Adviser – Middle SES)*

> We don't get many school-based apprenticeships … school-based traineeships are not uncommon … often they're in hairdressers or coffee shops or things like that, or shops, the Retail Traineeships. (Principal – Upper SES)

Some staff expressed their frustration and resentment at the way that traineeships and apprenticeships had been conflated in New Apprenticeship figures creating an unfortunate illusion that schools were more fully engaged and successful in supporting apprenticeship training than they actually were:

> *The whole thing is nonsense in the first place. They used to have apprenticeships and we used to have traineeships which are different things. They put them all together and called them all New Apprenticeships but they are still different things. … I tend to not talk about the things as New Apprenticeships and stuff. I tend to talk about apprenticeships and traineeships. (Career Adviser – Middle SES)*

> *… And if anybody wanted to pick on anything they could start picking on the education system, and start redoing the system of apprenticeships because we just can't find them. (Career Adviser – Upper SES)*

In the interim, concerns that teachers expressed at interview about the lack of real opportunities for apprenticeship training have been substantiated through political contest (ACTU, 2004; HRSCET, 2004; Mitchell &Quirk, 2005), corporate issue papers (AiG, 2005; Hendy, 2005) and academic literature (Toner, 2002, 2003, 2005). For instance, Toner (2003, 2005) explains how the privitisation and corporatisation of public utilities, an accelerated move to just-

in-time management in commercial ventures, and increased competition and outsourcing of labour – all of which aim at paring back operational expenditure to increase profitability – lead to a situation where corporations overlooked responsibility, previously assumed by the government, for the longer term training of a succession workforce. The situation has no doubt been exacerbated by the buoyancy of the economy, the consequent demands on skilled labour, and the ageing profile of the trade workforce. While recognising market forces at play, Toner also acknowledges that the reduced training rate apparent in the 1990s is currently being addressed, for example, with a substantial rise in New South Wales apprenticeships starts, especially since 2004 (Toner, 2005). Nevertheless the data can be slippery and as Karmel (2004) demonstrates, while Australia is experiencing growth in apprenticeships numbers, growth in traditional trades apprenticeships has been modest compared with the more spectacular growth in 'other', non-traditional apprenticeships.

Apart from not being able to supply sufficient apprenticeship positions in schools, some staff were also concerned about problems associated with, for instance,

- inflexible time tabling that meant that students often missed class to attend training
- transport from school to the training institution or to the work site which, in the metropolis, often involved combinations of buses, trains and taxis, and in the rural area, travel outside of town
- school supervision and quality assurance of the overall process.

All of these concerns are supported in the national inquiry into vocational education in schools (see HRSCEE, 2004) and in other research literature (Stokes et al, 2003). However, it must be said that while staff at all of the sites complained about the lack of apprenticeships on offer, some schools were more advanced than others in flexing the timetable to accommodate diverse student needs, re-thinking delivery modes, forging and sustaining industry links and supporting the few students who were able to access an apprenticeship in a traditional trade.

Schools that continue to commit to the provision of school-based trade apprenticeships will need to address these issues. Structural support and government intervention may well be on the way to sustain mainstream school efforts as some schools re-think practice-as-usual, transform delivery modes, and re-negotiate time and place correlates of pedagogy. What may be emerging on the horizon, however, is competition for scarce apprenticeship places between mainstream schools and newly-funded, design-built Australian Technical Colleges.

Looking to the future

In looking to the future, the government has pledged a raft of structural and training reforms. To better meet its labour needs, the government has also invested heavily in Career Advice Australia (DEST, 2006) to ensure the production of robust networks of stakeholders to deliver timely prediction of trends and to strengthen knowledge transfer about skills shortages and career opportunities across the nation.

Many of the reforms subsumed by Career Advice Australia come as a cascade of acronyms. Through LCPs (Local Community Partnerships) for instance, industry, employer groups and schools will promote, inter alia, vocational education and training in schools. Operating through the LCPs, local industries will lead 'Adopt a School' projects in their region to improve communication between industry, schools and secondary students. Industry leadership will be intensified as RICAS (Regional Industry Career Advisers) work with the LCPs to provide 'relevant industry career information, advice and resources particularly in skills needs areas' to a range of end-users including schools and Australian Technical Colleges (DEST, 2006). A national network of NICS (National Industry Career Specialists) will support the RICAs by providing big-picture, industry sector-specific advice. To this end, the networking effort has drawn the interest of hefty corporate and industry players who have competitively tendered for positions at the helm. The Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the Australian Industry Group, and Rural Skills Australia, for example, have been selected to generate information networks and, if they operate effectively, they will help with planning, creating and sustaining the labour force into the future.

In view of the situation that has emerged over the decade, interventions like these are clearly necessary. Nevertheless, it may be equally important to understand that change is unlikely to be just about smoother structures, better training, or more informative advice to students about where skills shortages and work opportunities are to be found. A powerful influence in determining 'personal choice' will be found in the play for young people's hearts and minds, tapping in to their aspirations, their desire, their will to engage with various forms of work. In this respect, we argue that there are lexical lessons to be learnt in the way that young people may search for more contemporary descriptors of trade fields, for work titles that more accurately reflect the modernising, technologising and re-definition of many trades, and for a language newly inflected with the cleverness, and skills level required of the work – not just the 'hands-on-ness', or the financial remuneration of what may be perceived as undesirable jobs.

Moreover, we argue that the LCPs, the RICAs and the NICS would be well advised to address a potential image problem associated with traditional trades, as intimated by the gendered and classist prisms through which young people construct them. The lexical lessons may be buried deep in the contours of demography.

With these factors in mind, the newly created career networks will do well to consider how they might, for instance, capture the hearts and minds of young women who intransigently have resisted populating diverse trades fields – how they might convince more young adults from well heeled and aspirational families that trades work demands knowledge and skills and intellectual nouse – that they are not the preserve of failed students. These are challenging tasks for which there has been scant discussion and for which the industry networks may not be prepared. Nevertheless, in the first instance the networks should be better equipped to support committed teachers in finding more structured work placements, more willing employers, to accommodate more students who already wish to invest in a traditional trade as a career.

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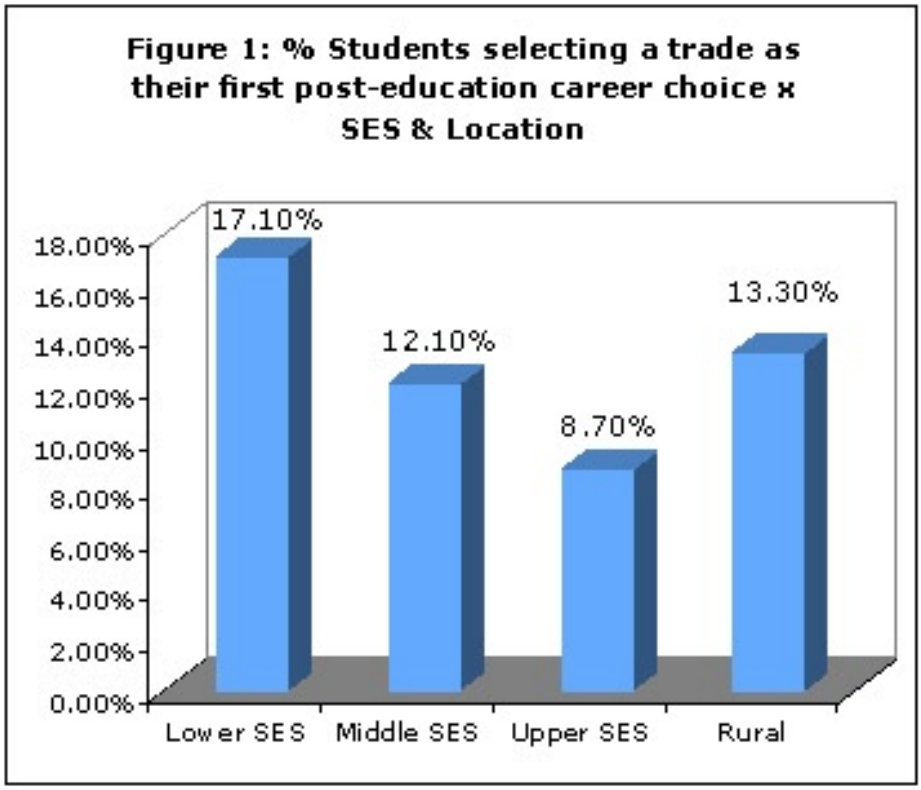

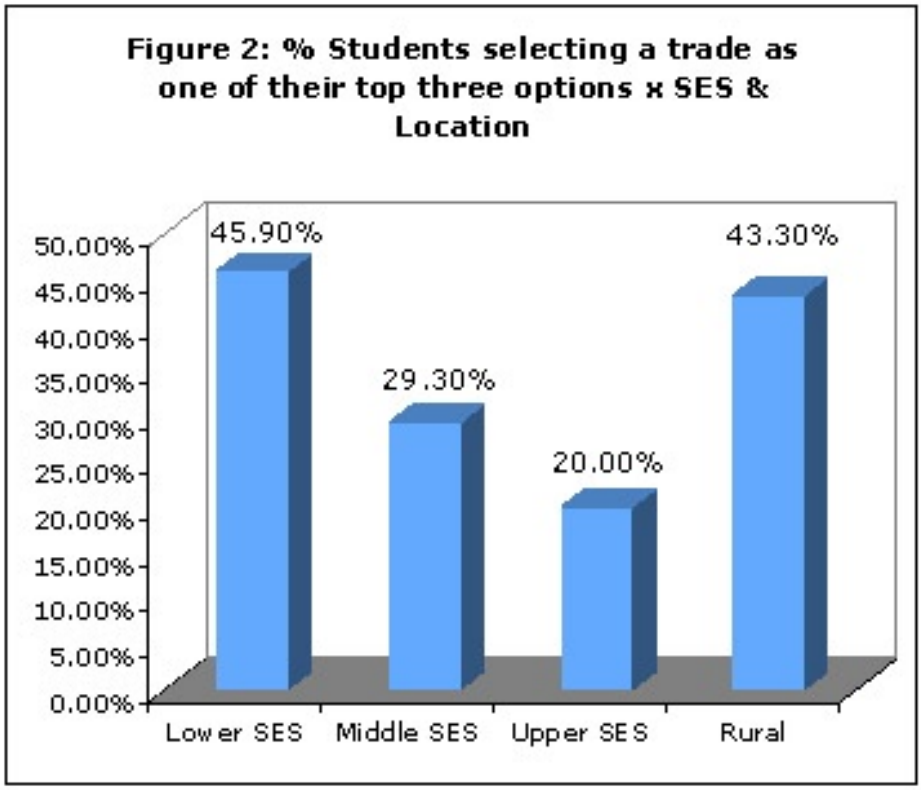

Annex 1: Major, sub-major and minor classifications of Tradespersons and Related Workers

4 TRADESPERSONS AND RELATED WORKERS

41 MECHANICAL AND FABRICATION ENGINEERING TRADESPERSONS
411 Mechanical Engineering Tradespersons
412 Fabrication Engineering Tradespersons

42 AUTOMOTIVE TRADESPERSONS
421 Automotive Tradespersons

43 ELECTRICAL AND ELECTRONICS TRADESPERSONS
431 Electrical and Electronics Tradespersons

44 CONSTRUCTION TRADESPERSONS
441 Structural Construction Tradespersons

442	Final Finishers Construction Tradespersons
443	Plumbers
45	FOOD TRADESPERSONS
451	Food Tradespersons
46	SKILLED AGRICULTURAL AND HORTICULTURAL TRADESPERSONS
461	Skilled Agricultural Workers
462	Horticultural Tradespersons
49	OTHER TRADESPERSONS AND RELATED WORKERS
491	Printing Tradespersons
492	Hairdressers
493	Textile, Clothing and Related Tradespersons
494	Miscellaneous Tradespersons and Related Workers

(ABS, 1997)

(Footnotes)

1 The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and not those of DEST, who commissioned the original report and data collection.

2 In Australia, traditional trades are identified by the ABS (1997) within an Australian Standard Classification of Occupations (ASCO). The major, sub-major and minor categories for Tradespersons and Related Workers are shown in Annex 1. Further sub-groupings by 'unit groups' and 'occupations' are available within ASCO (ABS, 1997).