

How lower-level and vulnerable workers benefit from employers' engagement with the national qualification system in Australia

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ABSTRACT

This paper uses some of the findings of a major Australian study (Smith, Pickersgill, Smith & Rushbrook, 2005) carried out in 2003-4 into enterprises' use of nationally-recognised training, which is the Australian term used for formal vocational education and training (VET) qualifications. Using survey and case study data, the study found that some enterprises were delivering lower-level qualifications (up to Australian Qualification Level 4) to large numbers of their workers. Some commentators on Australian VET have argued that employers use such qualifications only to access the government funding that they attract. But this study showed clear benefits, not only to the enterprise, but also to workers. Although some problems were identified, in general the study found that workers who had never previously received formal training through work, generally those at lower levels and in non-standard employment contracts, appreciated their access to training, and were generally satisfied with the training they received and planned to build on the qualifications offered. Statistical analysis showed that the use of such training not only made training available to lower-level groups of workers, who have traditionally been under-serviced with training, but that those companies that used nationally-recognised training also delivered more non-nationally-recognised training to lower-level workers than those that did not. Thus the use of nationally-recognised training, introduced primarily to lift enterprise performance, also contributed to worker well-being. Workers at risk because of their non-permanent employment status, and because of anticipated redundancies, benefited because they gained a marketable qualification.

INTRODUCTION

This paper reports part of the findings of a national study into the engagement of Australian enterprises with nationally recognised training for their existing workers (Smith, Pickersgill, Smith & Rushbrook, 2005). By nationally recognised training we mean training based on national Training Packages, which contain units of competency gathered together into national qualifications. There are approximately 80 national Training Packages in Australia, which service most of the non-professional occupations in the workforce. Many of the industry areas covered by Training Packages previously had no qualifications; examples of these industries include cleaning, aged care and process manufacturing. Nationally-recognised training generally involves formal assessment of competence, which leads to the award to successful candidates of qualifications or Statements of Attainment (the latter certifying competence in one or more units of competency) that are recognised throughout Australia. This system of training has been gradually put in place over the past 20 years through a process often known as the Training Reform Agenda (Smith & Keating 2003).

While there has been a great deal of research into the new VET system, the uptake of national qualifications by enterprises for their workers has been little researched. This is partly because while enterprises are able to use national qualifications in a formal way, or indeed non-formally as the basis for non-assessed training or human resource practices, they are not required to report such use. Thus a great deal was previously known about VET delivered by TAFE, the public provider of VET, and by private providers of VET, but little about its use by enterprises. The research study on which this paper is based set out to rectify this deficiency. The paper explains the way in which the research study was carried out, provides a brief

overview of the major findings of the project, and focuses primarily on the findings that relate to lower-level and vulnerable workers.

BACKGROUND

Training is always important for the purposes of meeting individual enterprises' skills needs. However, enterprises' engagement with nationally recognised training has further significance. Public money and publicly-developed curriculum are used and therefore there is a legitimate public policy interest in this area as well as the capacity to influence behaviour through subsidies, availability of learning resources and other forms of support. Arguments for nationally-recognised training can be summarised as follows. Training which is nationally recognised has assured levels of quality and uses up-to-date curriculum developed from competencies suggested by industry stakeholders (Smith & Keating, 2003). Workers gain nationally recognised qualifications or statements of attainment, increasing the skill levels of the workforce as a whole and enabling easier transfer between companies and between States and Territories. Workers are able to move on to higher level qualifications, increasing their career prospects (Down, 2002).

However there are opposing views. Some commentators (eg Hampson 2002) argue that employers and training providers alike shamelessly misuse public funding in delivering nationally recognised training, and that the newer qualifications (as opposed to traditional apprenticeships) are virtually worthless. Other writers (eg E. Smith 2002) argue that there are deficiencies in the competency-based curriculum as expressed in Training Packages. Such arguments are commonly proposed overseas also; for example in relation to England's

National Vocational Qualifications and Modern Apprenticeship system (Fuller & Unwin, 2003).

The re-development of the national VET system in Australia has accompanied a growing emphasis upon training as part of enterprises' attempts to improve performance. Various studies (eg A. Smith 2002) have shown that training produces significant financial returns on investment to companies. While there is an increasing amount of training within Australian enterprises (Ridoutt et al 2003), training has not been evenly distributed either among companies or among workers. It has been generally agreed that there is proportionally more formal training in larger than smaller enterprises and that it is unevenly distributed across industries. Permanent staff are more likely to receive training than casual employees (Vandenhoevel & Wooden 1999). Employer expenditure on training disproportionately favours managerial and professional employees who already possess post-school qualifications (McKenzie and Long 1995). Nor is this skewed distribution of training expenditure a purely Australian phenomenon, but tends to be repeated throughout the developed world (Billett & Smith 2003).

There are several Australian government incentives for enterprises to train their workers but such incentives are increasingly being tied to nationally recognised training. By far the largest source of funding for nationally recognised training is New Apprenticeship funding. New Apprenticeships is the umbrella term used to cover the apprenticeship and the newer traineeship system, which between them have more almost 400,000 learners at any one time (NCVER 2004). There are two sources of new apprentice funding: Australian government employment incentives, and 'user choice' funding which is provided by States and Territories for the training given to apprentices and trainees (ACCI 2002). Employment incentives are available, under certain circumstances, for existing workers who move onto an apprenticeship or traineeship contract as well as for newly-recruited workers. The incentives are paid at

commencement and completion of the apprenticeship or traineeship. User choice funding regulations vary quite significantly from State to State although all States and Territories adhere to the same nine underpinning principles (ANTA, 2003). Some States and Territories offer user choice funding for existing workers while others prefer to allocate it only to newly-recruited workers. There are generally minimum-hours rules about part-time workers' eligibility¹ and additional funding is available for equity groups. There has been some evidence of inappropriate accessing of government funding in traineeships, which has been well-documented in reviews of traineeships in several States (eg Schofield, 2000).

A peculiarly Australian phenomenon is the ability of enterprises to become accredited training providers (known as Registered Training Organisations or RTOs) in their own right. Around 200 enterprises have taken advantage of this opportunity to become 'enterprise RTOs' and are thus able not only to deliver nationally recognised training to their workers but also to carry out assessment and award qualifications. They must comply with the strictly-audited Australian Quality Training Framework, which was introduced in 2002 and tightened in 2005. Other enterprises prefer to purchase nationally recognised training from external RTOs, often working in close partnership (Callan & Ashworth 2003).

¹ Information from States and Territories gained from telephone consultations December-January 2003-2004

RESEARCH METHOD

The research was carried out in the following ways:

Focus groups of employers and other industry stakeholders in two capital cities and one rural city were held. These helped to define the issues and ensure that the survey and the case study protocols were in line with industry practices and concerns. Case studies were undertaken in twelve enterprises, in four States and Territories: three enterprises with differing levels of engagement with nationally recognised training were selected in each of four industry areas. The industry areas were: hospitality, manufacturing/process manufacturing, call centres and arts/media. These were chosen to represent a range of 'old' and 'new' industry areas. Case studies involved interviews with line managers, trainers and workers as well as human resource and training staff. In some cases the workers were interviewed in groups.

Concurrently, a mailed survey was administered to all 195 enterprise RTOs (based on the National Training Information Service listing www.ntis.gov.au) and a sample of 400 medium-to-large companies (from the Dun & Bradstreet commercially-available database of companies) that employed human resource managers and therefore might be expected to have some commitment to training. The survey was lengthy and contained four main sections, which related to the organisation and its staff, the organisation's use of apprenticeships and traineeships, its training structures and practices, and the organisation's involvement with nationally recognised training. Part of the fourth section differed for users and for non-users, with six questions in common for all respondents. A fifth section for enterprise RTOs only asked about the organisation's experiences as an RTO.

Just over a quarter of enterprise RTOs (51) responded, together with 73 other companies (18.2%), an overall response rate of 20.8%. For the purpose of analysis, respondents were divided into three groups: enterprise RTOs (n=51), those purchasing nationally recognised

training from external RTOs (n=34), whom we termed ‘Purchasers’, and Non-Users of nationally-recognised training (n=39).

The findings of the case studies concurred to a great extent with the survey and focus group findings, with the enterprise case studies providing greater depth. A reference group representing stakeholder groups provided advice at several stages of the project.

GENERAL FINDINGS OF THE PROJECT

While to some extent it is difficult to separate out training in general from nationally recognised training, the research participants in both the qualitative and quantitative phases of the study were able to discuss nationally recognised training as a specific type of training. Some of the findings about the nature of enterprises that used nationally recognised training, however, are also findings that might be expected of enterprises that are heavy users of training in general.

The project showed that enterprises that used nationally recognised training were likely to be large organisations, to have large numbers of staff in particular occupations, and have significant geographical concentrations. They generally had an established training infrastructure and some evidence of a training culture and they knew a great deal about most aspects of nationally recognised training. Enterprises that took the extra step to become enterprise RTOs were likely to have highly specialised skill needs for large groups of workers, to be in service sector industries, and were reasonably static in terms of organisational or technological change. In general, enterprise RTOs were low users of vendor or proprietary training and training from industry associations; they tended to involve unions in training decisions, and for operational reasons they needed flexibility in training delivery.

Enterprises' decisions to adopt nationally recognised training were complex and were not one-off decisions. While companies made an initial decision either to become an enterprise RTO or to purchase training from an external RTO or RTOs, every time a new training need presented itself, enterprise RTOs needed to make decisions afresh about whether to use their RTO status or to seek training externally. Further decisions were then made by all enterprises using nationally recognised training about whether the training should be in the workplace or (in cases of purchasing) at the RTO premises, and (if in the workplace) whether it should be on the job or off the job. The initial decision about RTO status generally hinged around whether the benefits of RTO status, such as greater control over training and access to subsidies, outweighed the initial set-up and continuing compliance costs.

The process of embedding nationally recognised training within enterprises appears to be a three-phase process of engagement, extension and integration. In order to extend the use of nationally recognised training within an enterprise beyond the initial phase which often involved mass training of shop floor workers, training staff needed to be able to sell the concept and use of nationally recognised training to senior managers. The complexity of the VET system and the high cost of compliance with VET quality requirements meant that wide scale use of nationally recognised training was not a step to be taken lightly. There needed to be a 'VET evangelist' who could persuade management that nationally recognised training would benefit the enterprise as well as individual workers. The success of initial engagement and the availability of suitable nationally recognised training were important factors here. In the integration phase, the competency standards used initially as the basis for training delivery came to be used as the basis for additional human resource management processes such as performance management and recruitment. The use of nationally recognised training was fragile in the first two phases and could be abandoned if experiences with a partnering RTO

were poor or if the VET evangelist left the company. Once nationally recognised training was fully integrated it became less likely to be abandoned.

The benefits of nationally recognised training were clearly articulated by training and human resource management personnel. Benefits discussed by such staff included the advantage to workers of a structured approach to training and to career progression, and the ability to reward and motivate employees and validate their working experiences. From the management point of view, nationally recognised training brought confidence in the quality of work undertaken by employees and the ability to demonstrate this to external parties; and a competitive edge in attracting and retaining staff. From a training delivery viewpoint, it provided funding to help cover training costs and the opportunity to embed training with normal work and to customise Training Packages to enterprise needs. The ability to reshape human resource management systems around competency standards was also highly valued.

Enterprises reported some difficulties with nationally recognised training, including the perceived complexity of the system and the jargon associated with VET. Purchasers were assisted in their understanding by external RTOs (although information provided was not always complete), while enterprise RTOs were more likely to know how to get information directly from national or State bodies concerned with managing and promoting the VET system. Enterprise RTOs' experiences with State Accreditation Bodies were generally unsatisfactory, with many complaints about 'bureaucracy' and 'red tape'. Such experiences appeared to reflect more than the necessarily stringent requirements of the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF). Enterprises and their workers reported some problems with Training Packages and with delivery methods; some workers did not like on the job delivery while in other cases it suited working environments well.

FINDINGS ABOUT OPERATIONAL WORKERS

There was clear evidence that nationally recognised training was extending the ‘reach’ of enterprise training to groups of workers that had not previously received structured training and certainly had not previously received employment-related qualifications. This opportunity was clearly related to the availability of Training Packages covering new industry areas and a broader range of qualifications. These findings are now discussed in detail.

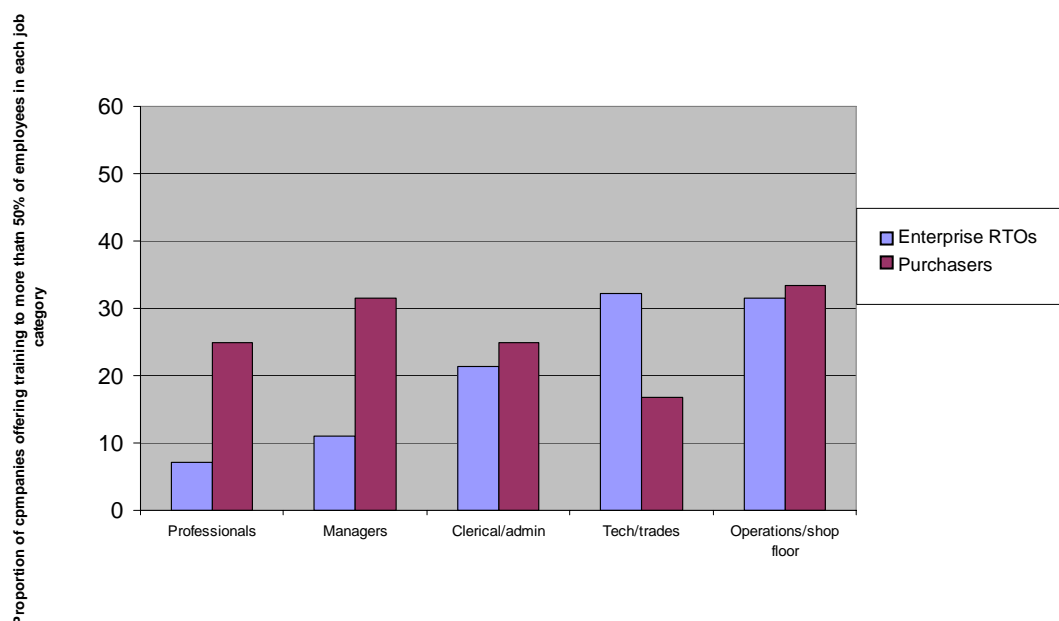
Findings from the survey

The most commonly awarded qualifications by the enterprises who offered their workers nationally-recognised training were (in order)

- Certificate II
- Certificate III
- Diploma (AQF level V)
- Certificate IV
- Certificate I & Advanced Diploma (AQF level VI) (about equal)

There was thus a clear bias towards lower-level qualifications rather than towards the types of qualifications that managerial or technical staff might undertake. Enterprise RTOs were more likely than purchasers of nationally recognised training to offer full qualifications rather than just Statements of Attainment. Full qualifications are of more use to workers wishing to progress onto further training, and are of more benefit on a worker’s curriculum vitae than part qualifications, and thus the companies that were most closely engaged with the national VET system, ie enterprise RTOs, appeared to be offering most benefit to workers.

Figure 1: Companies offering nationally recognised training to more than 50% of each of the different levels of employees since January 2002



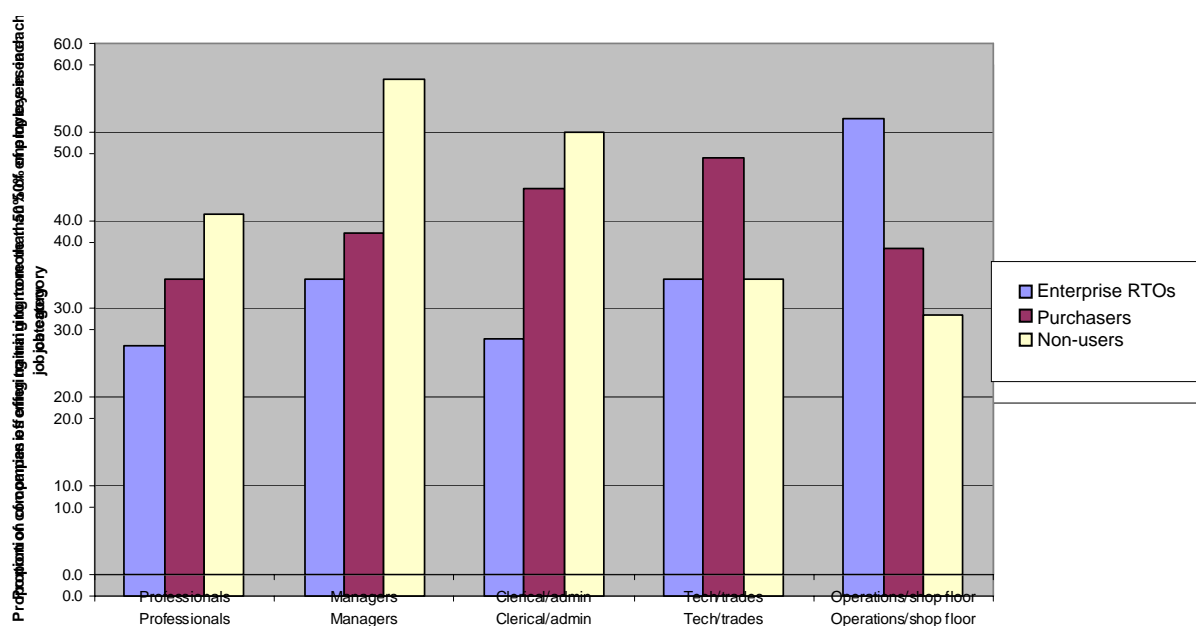
Respondents were asked to nominate the percentages of staff in five groups that received nationally recognised training: professionals, managers, clerical/admin, technical/trades and operational/shop floor. Figure 1 depicts the proportion of companies offering nationally recognised training to more than half of the workers in the different categories since January 2002 (the survey was administered in late 2003). The groups of workers that received nationally-recognised training appeared to be skewed towards lower-level operational occupations. This contrasts significantly with the traditional picture of training being offered most frequently to more senior staff. The finding was particularly marked for enterprise RTOs where the amount of training increased markedly the further down the hierarchy the worker was located.

Moreover, there was some evidence that the adoption of nationally recognised training actually ‘pulled up’ the *total* amount of structured training (ie not just nationally recognised training) offered to these lower level groups. Figure 2 shows the structured but not nationally

recognised training offered to the different groups. For Non-Users of nationally-recognised training, the distribution of training conformed to the traditional distribution in favour of managers, professional and administrative staff. For enterprise RTOs and purchasers, the distribution was significantly changed, with enterprise RTOs displaying a full reversal of the orthodox distribution².

Respondents were also asked to state the actual job classifications that received nationally recognised training. A very wide range of occupations/jobs were listed including machine operators, stevedores, agricultural workers, sales staff, bus drivers, firefighters and drivers. 'Higher level' occupations included: managers, trainers and IT staff. There did not seem to be any appreciable difference between the enterprise RTOs and the Purchasers in the types of jobs for which they used nationally recognised training.

Figure 2: Companies offering structured training to more than 50% of each of five different levels of employees since January 2002



² It is recognised that this finding could be the result of the nature of the companies themselves.

As discussed earlier, previous studies have shown that part-time and casual workers have had less access to training than permanent and full-time staff. Respondents were asked to estimate percentages of their workforce that were permanent full-time, permanent part-time, casual and contractors. Their responses were then placed into ten per cent intervals. Table 1 depicts, by the type of involvement with nationally recognised training, the degree of full-time permanency in the workforce.

Table 1: Percentage of workforce in full-time permanent employment

| % | RTOs | Purchasers | Non-Users |
|-----------------|-------------|-------------------|------------------|
| 0 - 10 | 8.2 | 3.2 | 2.8 |
| 11 - 20 | 6.1 | 3.2 | 8.3 |
| 21 - 30 | 8.2 | 6.5 | 5.6 |
| 31 - 40 | 2.0 | 3.2 | 5.6 |
| 41 - 50 | 6.1 | 6.5 | 5.6 |
| 51 - 60 | 12.2 | 6.5 | 0 |
| 61 - 70 | 4.1 | 3.2 | 0 |
| 71 - 80 | 12.2 | 19.4 | 16.7 |
| 81 - 90 | 14.3 | 29 | 13.9 |
| 91 - 100 | 26.5 | 19.4 | 41.7 |

Table 2 shows the total degree of permanency (ie including permanent part-time staff as well as permanent full-time staff)

Table 2: Percentage of workforce in permanent employment

| % | RTOs | Purchasers | Non-Users |
|-----------------|-------------|-------------------|------------------|
| 0 - 10 | 6.1 | 0 | 2.7 |
| 11 - 20 | 0 | 0 | 5.4 |
| 21 - 30 | 4.1 | 3.2 | 2.7 |
| 31 - 40 | 2.0 | 3.2 | 0 |
| 41 - 50 | 6.1 | 6.5 | 5.4 |
| 51 - 60 | 4.1 | 9.7 | 5.4 |
| 61 - 70 | 6.1 | 0 | 0 |
| 71 - 80 | 10.2 | 9.7 | 8.1 |
| 81 - 90 | 22.4 | 19.4 | 18.9 |
| 91 - 100 | 38.8 | 48.4 | 51.4 |

The tables show a lower degree of permanency in enterprise RTOs than in other types of organisations. The Purchasers showed a large proportion of permanent part-time staff. While respondents were not asked whether part-time or casual staff received training, these tables,

together with the figures relating to occupational level, suggest strongly that use of nationally recognised training is likely to increase access to training for part-time and casual workers.

Findings from the case studies

The view amongst many of the companies was that nationally recognised training, with its on-the-job nature, provided a high volume form of training that could be rolled out to large groups of employees quickly whilst at the same time ensuring that all those who received the training were operating at a nationally recognised standard. In some cases, it had been the emergence of this high volume training need that had prompted the organisation to provide nationally recognised training in the first place. Two case studies can be used as examples. SingTel Optus, a major telephone services company, met the training need associated with massive recruitment of call centre representatives by turning to nationally recognised training. Similarly, the Radio and Retail divisions of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation used nationally recognised training to train large numbers of existing workers, at the shop floor or production level, quickly, and to a common standard. These groups of workers represented large concentrations of lower-level staff and, particularly with the Optus call centre staff, workers whom it was very difficult to release from their job for any length of time.

Nationally recognised training seemed to fit the training needs of different groups in the workforce that might formerly have not had good access to training. For operational level employees, where release from the job was a major difficulty in the provision of traditional forms of training, the on-the-job emphasis of nationally recognised training meant that the training could still be delivered, but without encountering significant employee release problems. This was because nationally-recognised training lends itself to on-the-job delivery, or to flexible delivery to small groups of workers. Some of the case study companies showed how nationally recognised training could suit the working patterns of non-standard workers.

The Adelaide Festival Centre Trust, a capital city performing arts centre, traditionally employed large numbers of casual and even volunteer staff, who felt a sense of commitment to the arts and wished to work at the centre. However, the centre had not always been able to meet what it saw as its human resource obligations to these workers, especially in terms of training and recognition of the often considerable skills that such workers brought to the centre. The adoption of nationally recognised training had enabled the centre to recognise and accredit the skills of casual and volunteer workers and provide them with extra training that improved their marketability in the arts world as well as meeting their training requirements especially in the area of occupational health and safety. Capital Clubs in Canberra, a hospitality company with several major venues, was also able to use nationally recognised training to train its large numbers of casual staff without the need for complex employee attendance arrangements, the complexities of which had hindered previous attempts to standardise training.

In the case study companies, there was a clear sense among HR and line management staff that nationally-recognised training was offered for the benefit of employees as well as the company. Optus, for example, felt that nationally recognised training not only increased the skills of their entire call centre workforce but also offered a significant level of employability to the employees who completed the qualification. At the end of the 12 month program, a graduation ceremony was held. As the Optus College Manager remarked:

‘A lot of people really do value it (the qualification). We actually have a graduation ceremony three times a year and quite often we get a rep to speak about what the qualification has meant to them. Quite often we have had mature age students get up and say “This is the first qualification I’ve ever had and I can go home and say I’m really proud of this qualification”.’

At Capital Clubs, where nationally recognised training was in its infancy, the bar supervisor reported the enthusiasm of staff involved and the career opportunities it opened up for them. She said:

'I know they are very keen to do it and I know that because it is nationally recognised that it's better for them too, for when or if they ever leave this industry that is going to help them. You know some people think that you are going to train them in nationally recognised training and then they will go off and get a job elsewhere (but) in the long run it might make them stay as well.... They know that whatever they learn from this training they can bring back into this organisation, but it's not specific to this organisation. They (will) know what is happening out there in the industry and I think that is really important as well, (that) they know what the standards are and what the expectation are in their role outside of this organisation.'

One of the bar workers said:

'I'm excited; I am looking forward to it... this training will open new fields that I haven't learnt. So this will give me a different outlook on how to do my work better.'

This worker voiced strong support for the system. When asked about her understanding of nationally recognised training, it was evident that she had clearly listened very carefully to the explanations that had been given, saying:

'We will be doing nationally recognised training and the company are paying for everything. It can go anywhere from three months up to two years depending on how you go within your level. We have our own mentors and there will be training on site at the administration building and they will come in and assess how you are going, and if they feel that you are competent in that then they will move you up a level. So you can

advance till as high as you go, and if you want to go higher then you can go to Dave (the manager) and then he will get (you) up to a higher level. So they are more than willing to move us up to a higher level. And if they train us then it is a benefit to them and us. And it is nationally recognised and should we only stay for a couple of months during the course then (that) will be recognised and will be able to ... take the balance of that course and go somewhere else and continue training with it.'

However, not all staff felt the same. One staff member was mentioned as having refused to undertake any training or assessment as she felt she already had all the required skills and did not want a qualification. It was reported that she had said "No bit of paper's going to make me a better barperson".

It was recognised by the case study enterprises that staff might leave the company and make use of the training that had been given to them. In some cases this was a deliberate strategy to protect and advantage staff in their future careers. The Training Manager at Bluescope Steel, Australia's leading producer of steel, which was going through a period of contraction at the time of the case study, said

'When you are reducing numbers and you want to reduce the amount of heartache, if you said 'we're going to outsource this security' and none of these guys had the opportunity of getting a job because they haven't got a qualification..... But if you've given the people the skills and the accreditation, it makes it that much easier for them to be able to go out there and get themselves a job, either with the company you're outsourcing to, or with somebody else.'

Capital Clubs was also anticipating downsizing in the medium term future, as no-smoking legislation was about to be introduced in the Australian Capital Territory and such legislation was known to be accompanied by a loss in custom to clubs. The Training Manager saw

nationally recognised training as a marketing tool for those staff; he explained that pay levels at Capital Clubs were above the industry norm.

‘To be honest with you, a lot of the people getting high wages, their skill level doesn’t justify that wage level in this industry.’

Providing them with nationally-recognised training would ensure that their qualifications and skills would match the wages that they would need to maintain their family circumstances.

CONCLUSION

It was clear that nationally recognised training was improving the current and future prospects of three types of disadvantaged workers in those enterprises that used it. The three types of workers were those at lower levels of the organisations, those not in permanent full-time employment, and those that were at risk of being made redundant. The remainder of the findings of the study, which are not reported upon in this paper, indicated that nationally-recognised training was not unproblematic, and it was evident that improvements need to be made to delivery methods and to the quality control exercised both by RTOs themselves and State and national governments. Problems concerning delivery methods included a perception by workers that new content was not being delivered; that the ‘training’ was in fact primarily assessment of skills that were already possessed. In addition, comments from workers and from supervisors in some companies indicated that the qualifications selected for delivery were not always a good fit with the roles of the workers who were in training. Quality control issues included poor service from State accreditation bodies and a minimalist service to companies from some RTOs. These are, however, incremental and achievable

improvements, and need not detract from the fact, as outlined in this paper, that workers in those enterprises that engage with the system appear to be enjoying considerable benefits.

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