Modernising Apprenticeships

Employer and Apprentice/Trainee Inputs

Prepared by DPCTas

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Disclaimer

This report has been prepared specifically for Skills Tasmania as the client.

The information contained in this document has been gained from interviewing of employers and apprentices/trainees, RTOs, websites and desktop research. It has been prepared in good faith and in conjunction with Skills Tasmania. DPCTas, nor its consultants, agents, or staff shall be responsible in any way whatsoever to any person in respect to the report, including errors or omission therein, however caused.

Acknowledgements

DPCTas thanks all stakeholders consulted for their input.

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Executive Summary

The primary objective of this consultancy initiative is to gather input from employers and apprentices/trainees regarding the current state of apprenticeships and traineeships within the Tasmanian labour market. By actively collating perspectives from diverse stakeholders, including industry representatives, employers, and learners, the aim is to distil a nuanced understanding of the best practices associated with the delivery of apprenticeship programs in the state.

The dynamic nature of the contemporary labour market necessitates a proactive approach to ensure that apprenticeship systems remain responsive and relevant. Skills Tasmania, in its commitment to maintaining a contemporary apprenticeship framework, has initiated this process to gather insights that will inform strategic decision-making.

Engaging industry players will help identify evolving skill requirements and industry-specific needs. Employers' perspectives are crucial in understanding the expectations and challenges of integrating apprenticeship programs within their organisations. Additionally, gathering learners' views will provide essential insights into the effectiveness and relevance of existing apprenticeship structures from the perspective of those directly involved.

Through a multifaceted exploration of these key perspectives, this report seeks to identify current best practices and to address emerging trends and potential challenges. This proactive approach ensures that the apprenticeship system remains appropriate and resilient in the face of evolving workforce demands.

Employers and apprentices alike care greatly about the value and structure of an apprenticeship. They are proud of what it represents and the structure it provides to build a workforce. A strong theme that came through research for this report was the importance of an apprenticeship, which employers want to retain. They want to see depth and breadth of learning and skill development, and apprentices seek to possess those trade level skills. This trend is connected with the idea of refining and developing apprenticeships rather than starting anew ('don't throw it out and start again'). Industry wants to be involved in training delivery, with many offering their facilities and sites for training, especially in regional areas.

The findings of this report are expected to provide actionable recommendations to enhance the responsiveness and contemporaneity of the apprenticeship system. By incorporating the collective wisdom of industry, employers, and learners, this work represents a clear step toward that ultimate goal.

As will be outlined, the consultation process for this report gathered input from a diverse spectrum of industries across Tasmania, encompassing a wide array of variables, including industry types, geographical locations, organisational sizes, and specific areas of focus. This deliberate inclusivity ensures understanding of the nuanced challenges and opportunities prevalent in various sectors and locations. Valuable insights were also gleaned directly from apprentices and trainees, offering a firsthand account of their experiences within the Tasmanian apprenticeship system.

Employers expressed resolute views, demonstrating a profound passion for the existing processes and systems designed to support their newly recruited personnel along a trajectory toward

becoming qualified professionals in their respective fields. The consultation process for this report revealed varying perspectives regarding the nominal duration of training contracts, with some employers viewing the opportunity for early completion with a supportive stance, while others displayed resistance. In simple terms, trades want a four-year duration, and traineeships are much more flexible. For a considerable number of apprentices, the four-year timeframe was regarded as an invaluable opportunity to hone their craft and reciprocate the investment made by the business.

The prevailing sentiment among the majority of apprentices and trainees was overwhelmingly positive regarding their experiences within the apprenticeship or traineeship framework. This positivity was consistently observed both in cases of direct employment and those facilitated through a Group Training Organisation (GTO). Notably, a significant number of apprentices and trainees encountered minimal challenges in securing their roles, indicative of both the current economic climate and their own high-quality candidacy.

It's important to remember that this report is focused on capturing best practice from engaged employers and learners. It underscores the resonance of apprenticeships and traineeships as effective pathways for individuals to seamlessly integrate into the workforce, benefiting both the aspirants and the prevailing economic landscape. Quality recruitment led to higher quality candidates which extrapolated out to higher rates of completion. Some employers are making the decision to pay apprentices qualified rates half way through their third year to encourage completion and retention. Others were introducing a range of support structures, well beyond a simple EAP or mentor support, such as nutrition advice, living away from home support, gambling support and of course future development and promotional opportunities.

Divergence within the employer cohort was evident, with some identifying the perceived lack of work readiness as a problem that should have been addressed earlier in the apprenticeship journey. Conversely, others took a proactive stance by implementing solutions to tackle this challenge, demonstrating a commitment to the holistic development of apprentices. These proactive employers went beyond addressing work readiness alone, providing comprehensive support, including nutrition advice, assistance with mental health, gambling, and drug and alcohol issues.

Another theme which emerged was the quality of organisation and planning around training delivery and exposure/experience in the workplace. Many employers were already planning for where and what apprentices would be doing in the following year, further supporting retention and completion. This approach aligns with the need to develop career pathways and be strategic in workforce development approach – especially when engaging youth into those pathways. The emphasis on greater flexibility in training delivery demonstrates a commitment to inclusivity, ensuring diverse cohorts can engage and complete training contracts successfully. This adaptability not only accommodates a broader spectrum of learners but also underscores a responsiveness to the evolving landscape of skill development. There was minimal concern raised around the nature of training contracts, obligations to be met or eligibility. The perennial challenge of a casualised workforce and barriers to developing that workforce in line with permanent workers was raised as an issue. The other perennial challenge raised was around the complexity of the system and the opportunity to streamline and simplify. School based apprenticeships and the process/stakeholders and paperwork involved to commence a student was used as the example of complexity.

Recognising the pivotal roles of both employers and learners, the focus on capturing their views early in the process was well-received by participants. The majority expressed that this effort demonstrates a commitment to refinement, continuous improvement, inclusivity and a recognition of their invaluable perspectives. This proactive engagement ensures that the apprenticeship system remains appropriate, accessible, responsive, and attuned to the needs of its primary stakeholders.

Background to this Report

Objective

The purpose of this report is to gather input from industry, employers and learners on the best practices for delivering of apprenticeships/traineeships in the current labour market. The goal is to support Skills Tasmania in maintaining a responsive and contemporary apprenticeship system.

Additionally, this work will enhance the capability of Skills Tasmania's Industry Partnerships Team. This will be achieved by an Industry Liaison Officer to 'shadow' DPCTas in structured engagement sessions with employers and learners during the preparation of this report.

Context

Australian Government incentives and Tasmanian Government policy have driven a focus on apprenticeships and traineeships, which has been supported by significant federal Government schemes to encourage apprentice and trainee pathways. However, the end of generous Australian Government incentives will impact the uptake of apprenticeships and traineeships in Tasmania. This provides an opportunity to review and design a modern system to support the desired future workforce and skill needs in the Tasmanian economy.

With a shift in national and state government policy focus towards quality outcomes, and a renewed focus on modern apprenticeships through the Ministerial Priorities for the Training and Workforce Development System, the environment is right to re-align Tasmania's apprenticeship system to better meet the needs of the contemporary economy and labour market.

In the Tasmanian context modern apprenticeships require, amongst other things:

- Good employment relations where both parties to the training contract benefit from the relationship (signalling a departure from an indentured labour ideology).
- Greater flexibility in training delivery to allow more cohorts to participate in, and successfully complete, training contracts.
- Clear understanding by industry and employers about the occupations in their sector where an apprenticeship/traineeship is the best and most appropriate pathway to those occupations.
- Clarity of roles, responsibilities and obligations for parties and other key stakeholders in the apprenticeship and traineeship system, with a view towards supporting commencements and training contract completions.
- Targeted Government investment aligned with industry needs and the achievement of outcomes for the learner.

Given the critical role of employers and learners in the apprenticeship system, it is important that their views and perspectives are captured early in the conversation about modern apprenticeships. This report has been written as a key input to understanding broad themes raised by representative stakeholders to the apprenticeship/traineeship process.

Project Methodology

Duration

This project ran for a period of six (6) months, commencing in October 2023 and concluding in March 2024.

Survey Questions

Below is an overview of the questions used to capture detail for all stakeholder groups including:

- Employers,
- Apprentice/trainees,
- Disengaging or disengaged employers and RTOs.

Employer Questions

Employers represented small, medium and large employers, including one national employer. Employers surveyed were asked the following questions:

- What does the employer consider are the key features of a modern apprenticeship, and how might this differ from traditional approaches?
- What business considerations are made when deciding whether to engage in Tasmania's apprenticeship system?
- What factors are important for the employer when assessing potential apprentice suitability and making hiring decisions?
- How aware is the employer of learner pathways in their industry?
- Where is an apprenticeship a necessary and appropriate pathway, where is it not?
- What factors contribute to a successful outcome? (i.e., completion of the training contract)

Apprentice questions

Apprentices/trainees represented small, medium and large employers, including one national employer. The apprentices surveyed were asked the following questions:

- What factors contribute to success in their apprenticeship/traineeship?
- How aware are they of the pathways from training into skilled jobs in their industry?
- What factors did they consider when making the decision to undertake an apprenticeship/traineeship?
- Did they experience any difficulties finding a suitable apprenticeship/traineeship?

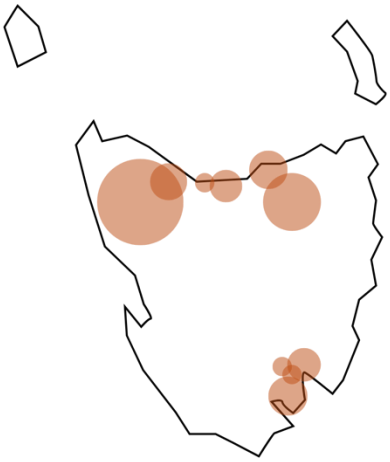
Industries and locations represented

Below is an overview of the industries represented both by employers and apprentices/trainees and their general location. In a number of instances, the employers had multiple sites so the primary location was used.

Industry	Employer	Apprentices	Employers Not Engaged
Construction		(3)	
Renewable energy			
Civil construction			
Advanced manufacturing			
Hospitality		(6)	
Retail			
GTO	(2)		
Food Production/ Agriculture			
Energy/ Energy distribution		(2)	
Heavy Vehicle/ Mechanical		(3)	
Insurance			
Aquaculture			
Hairdressing			
ICT			
Health			
Early childcare			
Disability			
Forestry			

Location of participants surveyed included the following LGAs:

Burnie
Clarence
Devonport
George Town
Glenorchy
Hobart
Kingborough
Latrobe
Launceston
Waratah-Wynyard



Key Themes - Employers

Throughout the interview process employers provided input on a wide variety of topics. Conversation was guided through the use of questions identified in the Project Methodology, but there were instances where employers were particularly passionate about specific topics or subjects that fell outside the scope of the guiding questions. Extended contemporaneous notes from these facilitated engagements, including side-bar conversations, are included in Annex A ('The Detail').

The key themes raised in discussion are summarised below.

Apprenticeships are vital to workforce development

In every employer discussion one thing resonated above all else: an apprenticeship is a great vehicle to develop a workforce. The apprenticeship system is highly valued, understood and cared for, serving as an effective and consistent instrument for employers to develop skilled workers for centuries, if not longer. The passion and value that employers place on apprenticeships cannot be overstated. While there were frustrations regarding applicants, work readiness, training delivery, costs, process complexity and retention, not a single employer was critical of the apprenticeship structure itself. Nominal duration was identified as a challenge in school-based apprenticeships but not in any other areas. For those employers who are engaged and modelling best practice they were prepared to defend the value of the apprenticeship, an encouraging position and something reflected in the majority of apprentice interviews.

Need for - and lack of - work readiness

In the majority of interviews, particularly in trades areas, the lack of work readiness in apprentices was identified early in the discussion. Employers cited numerous examples where applicants lacked key employability skills attributes. In some instances, these gaps were identified through the application and interview process, while others emerged only in the early stages of the apprenticeship. Despite these employers being exemplars of best practice in Tasmania with strategies in place to support apprentices and a proactive attitude toward development, the overall response was concerning as to work readiness of candidates.

Even in these employers with full and appropriate recruitment processes, applicant volumes have steadily declined over time, some to alarming levels. Non-trades employers echoed this sentiment as well, having already become used to a lack of applicants for roles.

Desire to support school involvement in preparing students for work

Building on the previous point around the lack of work readiness, the employers' considerations then shifted to schooling and the curriculum delivered to students. Language, Literacy and Numeracy (LLN) skills were flagged as a challenge, particularly in light of Tasmania's functional literacy rates. Employers expressed a willingness to collaborate with schools to provide additional information and suggestions to better prepare students for the workforce. Several employers raised the need for a coordinated career awareness strategy to help students understand various roles. They questioned how this coordination could be improved to ensure students are well-informed about career options.

Critical importance of recruitment and retention of apprentices

Recruitment based on attitude and passion for the role was flagged as a priority for a large number of employers interviewed. Finding a process to ensure that these candidates would standout during the recruitment was high on the list of priorities for those interviewed. The risk of then losing apprentices as soon as they become qualified, and finding strategies to mitigate this threat was also a consistent concern.

Secondary strategies to mitigate attrition were flagged in some instances. It was not quite to the point of recruiting two apprentices to ensure at least one would become qualified, although this was alluded to, with a sense of frustration. There was a clear perception that completion of apprentices was much harder than it used to be as well as solid evidence of reduction in overall candidate volume and quality to select from by employers.

Employers frustrated by candidates lacking understanding of the role and organisation

Employers expressed frustration over the high volume of candidates who lacked genuine interest in the role they were applying for and did not understand the organisation offering the role. This gap in understanding disappointed employers, especially considering the widespread access to information through devices and the internet.

Openness to use of a skill set instead of a full qualification

Employers cited several examples where offering specific skill sets to individuals, rather than full qualifications, could be beneficial. These examples spanned across various sectors, with two main considerations:

1. Could the programs that subsidise skill set training be similarly available to the program that subsidises apprenticeship training?
2. Currently, to employ an individual as an apprentice/trainee, they need to be under a registered contract of training with the state, which requires a full qualification rather than just a skill set.

In some cases, employers noted that the structure of a traineeship/apprenticeship was more valuable than the qualification itself. This structure, defined within a training contract, outlines predetermined and agreed-upon obligations with specific timeframes. While Industry specific training was highly valuable, the lack of alignment to units of competency led to a hybrid approach to find the best fit based on available resources.

Commitment to increased resilience and responding to mental health challenges

A significant number of employers emphasised their focus and strategies for supporting mental health among their workforce. The majority of employers highlighted the importance of developing resilience in their apprentices. They acknowledged a significant increase in the need to support apprentices and trainees well beyond the basic obligations of a training contract, extending to what would traditionally be seen as reasonable employment practice.

Several employers have implemented extensive support measures to assist apprentices and the broader workforce under the banner of self-care. They emphasised the importance of providing access to these services rather than imposing them. Apprentice feedback was highlighted as a

crucial tool for developing supports, alongside regular check ins and good supervision practice. Examples included coordinated mentoring, access to nutrition advice, mental health support at a local level as well as broader supports, information around gambling, drug and alcohol supports, and other development offerings.

Resilience was repeatedly identified as a challenge rather than a clear strategy to address it. Employers universally acknowledged resilience as a challenge they needed to address.

Eagerness to be engaged in co-delivery of training

Industry stakeholders are enthusiastic about co-designing and co-delivering with their training provider. Several employers offered their facilities or shops up for training delivery, including apprentices from other employers to attend and participate in a particular area of training.

Employers occasionally expressed frustration with training delivery models or the currency of learning materials and/or equipment used during off the job training delivery. They welcomed the opportunity to partner and explore alternate, contemporary delivery models to enhance the overall apprenticeship experience for students and better equip those being trained.

Learner pathways are well understood

Employers were very comfortable in expanding on learner pathways for their apprentices, including the transition from school to work and the opportunities beyond the apprenticeship. Some employers recognised limitations in their current pathways and saw opportunities for further development within their business. However, all were able to articulate the existing or potential learner pathways for their apprentices and trainees.

Apprentices urged to seek simple solutions before tech

In trades interviews, employers expressed concern over younger apprentices' tendency to rely on technology, rather than troubleshooting problems manually. While the employers acknowledged the importance of technology in modern trades, employers cited numerous instances where a simple solution would have been more effective and should have been considered first before resorting to technology.

Key Themes - Challenges with the Existing System

During discussions with various employers, a number of key challenges were consistently raised, as summarised below.

Effective planning requires consistent training delivery

Employers stressed the importance of consistent training delivery for effective planning, particularly in recruitment. They support block delivery of training but emphasise the need to confirm delivery methods for short to medium-term planning. For businesses planning recruitment two to three years ahead, the location of training is critical, especially for work crews in remote and regional areas.

Qualifications and units not keeping pace with technology

A perennial question that was raised during employer engagement sessions was: Why does TAFE deliver X unit when it hasn't been used in this workplace for X years? During discussions there was acknowledgement that units, qualifications and training packages are not set by RTOs but through federal structures. Jobs and Skills Councils will encourage employers to provide this input to them through consultation, but as employers are very busy and this isn't core business, the problem remains.

System needs simplification

Language used to explain the apprenticeship/traineeship system itself is confusing and can be misleading. The VET sector has its own suite of acronyms and phrases, such as user choice, TPO, endorsed status, RPL etc. This jargon needs to be contained to within the sector as it creates a barrier for learners and employers alike. Training packages have a similar issue with needing to simplify its language. This general topic was picked up by a number of employers in different contexts.

Key Themes – Apprentices/Trainees

Throughout the interview process apprentices and trainees provided input based upon several key questions, outlined above in the Project Methodology. The key themes raised in discussion are summarised below.

Opportunities varied based on location

While apprentices in metro areas found it relatively easy to secure positions, those in regional areas faced greater challenges due to factors like distance and a limited range of opportunities. In regional areas, the limitation of opportunities had additional impact of driving individuals into sectors or roles that they were not interested in. This is because individuals felt that they couldn't afford to be patient and wait for the right opportunity to align with their interests in case such an opportunity didn't present itself.

This phenomenon highlights a common scenario where young people express a desire to secure an apprenticeship without a specific pathway or industry in mind. This lack of clarity can lead to challenges in retention, especially in regional areas, where individuals may feel compelled to accept the first available role rather than waiting for a more suitable opportunity. It's important for individuals to have a clear understanding of the role they are pursuing and whether it aligns with their interests and capabilities, as this greatly impacts their likelihood of success. The interviewed apprentices and their employers recognised this, highlighting the importance of having a plan, utilising networks, demonstrating interest, and being well-supported in their apprenticeship journey.

The apprenticeship system is complex

In most instances apprentices found their pathway into their chosen field outside of standard processes in place, such as through friends of friends and networks. In some instances, individuals had simply applied for jobs on Seek. It was noteworthy that when the discussion moved to the apprenticeship system itself the majority of apprentices interviewed lamented the complexity of it; their stories focussed on being sent from place to place to source information and answers to their questions. Those apprentices who had a well-structured and organised employer saw the process of becoming an apprentice as easy: they applied, did an interview, got the job, started the job, filled in some paperwork along the way and got to work and learning. A significant proportion of those interviewed already had a relationship with their employer prior to commencing their apprenticeship, either as an existing worker or through a personal connection.

Success factors for apprentices and trainees

Mentoring emerged as a consistent theme among interviewees, highlighting its critical role in their success. Having a mentor to speak with, receive support from, and to share experiences with was universally valued over a supervisor or employer. In the instance of apprentices and trainees under Group Training Organisations (GTO), their field officer (mentor) was praised across all interviews, seen as the centrepiece of the entire process.

Cost of living as an apprentice or trainee

Managing the cost of living was identified as a significant issue in almost every interview. Apprentices and trainees often struggle financially due to low income, which was a sentiment echoed by most of the interviewees. For this reason, wages were seen as a barrier to commencing and completing an apprenticeship/traineeship by both apprentices and by employers as well.

One apprentice provided a simple example of the fridges at the TasTAFE campus being too small. With four apprentices sharing a unit, they struggle to fit their food in the fridge, leading to additional expenses and an unexpected barrier. While a larger fridge is not the solution, this example illustrates a challenge that can impact recruitment and retention but may not be immediately apparent. This example was used to illustrate the point of cost of living impacts in the forums.

Training pathways into industry

In the case of trades apprentices, a large percentage had undertaken a Certificate II in College that related in some way to their pathway. A small number followed a direct path from MDT at school to a Certificate II in Construction at College and then commenced a building apprenticeship. The majority followed a defined pathway that led them to their apprenticeship. Additionally, the majority of those interviewed had little to no difficulty in finding an apprenticeship.

The need to listen to young people

Young people are clearly articulating their needs and priorities as apprentices and trainees. Mental health is an absolute priority for young people. This is articulated through the interview process and in the broader community. It also came through via employers in both interviews and forums held. The youth cohort bring different priorities and different requests and demands of employers. The opportunity for employers is to reshape and redesign roles to meet those needs. Invariably the redesign can also aid accommodating emerging skills and technological requirements in organisations.

Key Themes – Employers not engaged in system

Four employers from various sectors, including retail, disability services, heavy vehicle and forestry, were interviewed regarding their disengagement, under engagement, or lack of engagement with the apprenticeship/traineeship system. Their input highlights five key themes contributing to their current status and point towards areas for improvement to encourage greater participation and satisfaction among employers.

Lack of relevance between units of competency/qualification and requirements on the job

One employer couldn't see a value proposition in engaging with pre-determined units of competency, despite having effective recruitment and retention strategies and a strong training culture. They did not see a need to commit to a training contract or engage with an RTO to achieve their skills development goals.

These employers found many units of competency irrelevant to the skills, attitude, and knowledge required in tasks in the workplace. They questioned the alignment between the units of competency and on-the-job requirements and seemed to value the training contract with its obligations and rules, above the substance of the units.

Lack of access due to eligibility of employment type

A perennial challenge in a casualised workforce was highlighted, where permanent staff could undertake traineeships while casual staff could not. The traineeship was mainly seen as a cost-save measure to offset the commercial cost of training, rather than an opportunity to access to apprentice/trainee pay rates. In these instances, the casual workforce was undertaking similar hours of work to permanent staff but an alternate approach was required. To a lesser extent limitations around visas related to hours of work and employment status were also flagged as a barrier to engaging in the training system.

Unsatisfied with delivery models

Employers expressed frustration with the delivery models offered by RTOs and the lack of RTOs that can meet their expectations for training delivery. Specific reasons cited include reduce options and sometimes lower quality of training product in thin markets, leading to their disengagement from apprenticeships/traineeships.

Unsatisfied with candidates to recruit into roles

One of the employers had lost faith in securing candidates, particularly younger candidates, into roles due to burdensome recruitment, development and retention processes. Instead, the employer had shifted focus to recruiting mature age and qualified workers. The other option being explored by the employer is to look at recruitment of migrants into targeted roles.

Complexity of process

Employers found the complexity of the training system, providers and associated jargon to be a significant barrier. They expressed frustration at the lack of a central point of contact or information, especially when navigating both the training and the employment services systems simultaneously

time. The employers felt this needed simplification to aid in engagement for both employers and learners.

Key Themes - RTO inputs

From the perspective of RTOs, challenges faced within the training system can be analysed as follows:

TasTAFE Input

Challenges with Training Packages

TasTAFE are aware that employers are frustrated with their organisation because of their unit delivery, especially in instances where they do not align with the needs of industries. An example provided was the perm unit that is offered in hairdressing qualifications.

However, RTOs are caught in the tension because they are limited by the structure and requirements of their training packages. There is a need to educate employers on how training packages function and who is accountable for various aspects. Training packages are highly prescriptive, which can lead to misunderstandings and frustrations.

Delivery Models Improvements

TasTAFE acknowledged several areas for internal improvement in their delivery model. They emphasised the importance of enhancing collaboration with industry to better understand their training requirements. There was also an awareness of the need to improve communication with employers regarding apprentice progression and the necessity for a clear, easy-to-understand reporting mechanism relating to this progression. They also recognised the challenges associated with meeting diverse employer preferences, including the desire for block/day release models and the difficulty of accommodating everyone's needs. This would hopefully mitigate the trend currently being seen of employers holding apprentices back from attending TasTAFE classes due to work requirements.

Furthermore, TasTAFE acknowledged the impact of external factors, such as the disruptions caused by COVID-19, which put a significant cohort of apprentices behind schedule and created pressure in catching them up. They also noted challenges related to the scale of their operations, including managing a higher volume of apprentices in recent years while also addressing the shortage of trainers.

TasTAFE also spoke about the significance of anticipating future technology and industry needs, such as renewables and advanced manufacturing.

Challenges for TasTAFE

In addressing challenges faced by TasTAFE, several key areas were identified:

- There is a significant issue with LLN skills, with a lack of basic literacy and numeracy skills posing a barrier to individuals starting an apprenticeship;
- There is still a bias towards university education, leading to a lack of interest in Vocational Education and Training (VET) pathways. This is compounded by TasTAFE having limited ability to interact with students to engage and inform of VET pathways;
- Completion rates for apprentices are a concern, highlighting the need for more effective support mechanisms. Some employers had also expressed concerns about losing

tradespeople once their apprenticeship contracts are complete, emphasising the importance of these supporting mechanisms including options for continued development and retention strategies;
- The rigidity of training contracts, including rigor around quality, and the substantial workload involved in apprentices were noted as challenges, as well as the transition to a competency-based system from a time-based one (which some employers are struggling to accept);
- Need to balance theoretical and practical components of training, as some trainers tend to focus excessively on theory over practical assessment (compounding known LLN challenges);
- Outdated units are a challenge, which is difficult when these units are set by the training package. An example of this is the need to teach outdated methods, such as the use of quad in construction;
- Desire to recognise apprentice work more readily in the workplace;
- Ready Skills is in use and being utilised by Australian Apprentices to capture evidence from the workplace.

Higher Apprenticeship Example - Swinburne

Higher Apprenticeships

The Siemens Partnered Advanced Manufacturing Pilot provides a case study for a form of higher apprenticeship. This program was developed in collaboration between Siemens, the AI Group, and Swinburne University. While traditional apprenticeships typically involve entry-level positions and on-the-job training, higher apprenticeships are more advanced programs designed for individuals who are already qualified or experienced in a relevant field.

In the case of the Siemens pilot, a cohort of 20 existing qualified employees from Siemens who were released from their regular work duties to undertake additional study. The program aimed to provide advanced training in manufacturing practices, particularly focusing on Industry 4.0 concepts and technologies. 17 employees completed the program with an Associate Degree of Applied Tech (Ad Man), with 80-90% successfully moving into a higher role.

The program's success was attributed to strong employer engagement, meticulous selection processes, and a curriculum that adapted to market changes. It served as an example of how industry partnerships and advanced training programs can drive innovation and upskilling within the manufacturing sector.

Project Delivery

The Siemens Partnered Advanced Manufacturing Pilot was delivered at the Factory of the Future lab in Melbourne, Victoria. This ensured a practical, hands-on learning environment. Participants were required to have prior qualifications in a trade relevant to the field, bringing valuable real-world experience to their apprenticeships. Additionally, individuals with higher education qualifications were also involved, enriching the program with diverse perspectives.

The program emphasised collaborative learning, with participants engaging in small teams and group work. Subsequent iterations of the pilot, such as the Big Build Civil project, incorporated a

work-integrated approach. This major project aimed to integrate Industry 4.0 concepts into the workplace, providing apprentices with hands-on experience in applying advanced manufacturing principles. All apprentices (AAs) were involved in Big Build contracts in Victoria, contributing to real-world projects.

Notably, one apprentice successfully mapped the costing benefits of their workplace project, resulting in multi-million-dollar improvements for the business. This highlights the practical outcomes and tangible impact of the apprenticeship program on industry practices and innovation.

Stakeholders

The Pilot was developed through a collaboration between Siemens and AI Group and delivered by Swinburne. Federal government funding support was provided through the Department of Education, Skills and Employment/Department of Employment and Workplace Relations.

Keys to Success

Employer engagement emerged as the cornerstone of success in the program. Swinburne University invested significant effort in establishing a meaningful partnership, conducting extensive roadshows, and dedicating substantial hours to achieve this goal. The program required employers to provide work release for apprentices, ensuring their full engagement.

Furthermore, a strong briefing process was implemented upfront for employers and executive members, involving the onboarding of supervisors, line managers, and mentors. This approach facilitated the embedding of learning into the workplace, transforming these individuals into effective change agents. The selection process for apprentices was characterised by rigor and intent, ensuring that only the most suitable candidates were chosen to participate.

Swinburne took responsibility for developing the curriculum, which was designed to be adaptable, evolving in response to changing market demands over several years. This adaptability ensured that the program remained relevant and effective in preparing apprentices for their future roles.

What didn't Work in Big Build

The Big Build program, which commenced in March 2020, initially faced challenges with its off-the-job delivery model. Line managers struggled to release workers, especially aspiring managers and engineers, leading to low attendance and a subsequent high dropout rate. The program involved multiple employers, complicating engagement and collaboration efforts.

Furthermore, the qualification's lack of tailoring to specific needs resulted in changes over time. Gathering sufficient industry intelligence proved challenging, highlighting a lack of understanding of industry needs. Employers required clearer visibility of the benefits of releasing their employees for the program to be successful.

After the first semester, the program was paused and reassessed. It was then redesigned as a Diploma of Applied Technology (Civil Construction) with half the number of units. This revision, delivered by VET educators with appropriate qualifications and experience, spanned a two-year period with reduced work release and study time. Additionally, a major project component was introduced, providing a comprehensive assessment that spanned the qualification.

Despite these challenges, the program saw 18 participants start, with 9 completing the revised program. The achievement of this outcome required significant effort, impressing both the department and employers involved.

Lessons learnt for the future

When considering a qualification, it's essential to thoroughly evaluate its alignment with the required level of expertise and the expected work release commitment needed for achievement. This evaluation should not limit consideration to just an associate degree but should encompass a broader spectrum of qualifications to ensure the most suitable fit for the program.

Emphasising the importance of securing buy-in and engagement from employers is crucial for the success of such initiatives. Establishing a strong partnership with employers can lead to better program outcomes and increased support for participants. Swinburne's approach, focusing on a small cohort, proved effective. This strategy allowed for a more personalised and attentive approach, supported by a well-organised team dedicated to the project. The use of agile project management and effective coordination further enhanced the program's success, highlighting the importance of adaptability and efficiency in managing such initiatives.

Key Themes - Forums

Key themes and priorities from the forums closely mirrored those from the interviews. During the forums, attendees were presented with a condensed list of inputs gathered from employers and apprentices/trainees, based on pre-defined questions. This allowed forum attendees to review the information provided, express agreement, identify gaps or dispute any key points. Through this collaborative process, forum attendees were able to highlight critical aspects of the modernisation of apprenticeships.

Mentoring sat comfortably as the priority for employers attending the forums. Other priorities were consistent such as career awareness and work readiness. These are described in more detail in final recommendations.

Career awareness was confirmed in both forums as a priority to – in some instances continue – and in other instances commence in earnest. Lack of appropriate applicants and lack of volume of applications were cited as simple examples of the clear need to embrace career awareness. Linking back to the need for mentoring – support for mental health for apprentices and trainees was confirmed in both forums as well as across interviews of all cohorts.

Work readiness was seen as an increasing and ongoing challenge for employers, strong agreement from both forums – without any specific strategies to address in the short term.

What does mentoring mean? An aggregated example

Throughout the process of interviews and forums – mentoring was in every conversation. It is important to note that the definition and purpose varied depending on the cohort and/or individual in the discussion. For some employers it was clear and defined through structure and process with a purpose and strategic value. For other employers it was closer to 'the right thing to do'. For apprentices and trainees, they saw a person supporting them and providing guidance through a range of phases and activities in their time as an apprentice or trainee.

Very few apprentices and trainees would view mentoring as a retention strategy or method to support completion rates in an organisation. They saw it as a person of immense value and generosity to them personally, as opposed to a mechanism to drive business outcomes. The reality is that in most circumstances both perspectives are correct. The value of the mentor was in their ability to guide and support in a range of areas, not as a technical expert. While technical skills and knowledge are highly valued in the workplace – the mentee saw more value in the kindness, understanding and generosity shown. This didn't mean that performance in a role was a negotiable or that apprentices and trainees could 'slacken off' to quote one employer.

Mentoring was a role that was in place from the outset, not at the point of fracture or risk of disengagement, with trust and value built over time and part of everyday life in the workplace. A fortunate few inherently understand how to operate effectively in the role of mentor. Many acknowledge the need for assistance to be an effective mentor, requiring a specific set of skills - not found in electrotechnology, hairdressing, baking or any other trade.

Final Recommendations

Mentoring

Mentoring, in all of its versions and definitions, emerged as a clear priority for both employers and apprentices/trainees. Whether discussing existing mentoring programs within their organisations or the need to cultivate mentoring skills, it stood out as the most favoured action or function of employers. From an organisational point of view, mentoring was seen as strategic, aimed at retaining satisfied workers with valuable skills. Apprentices tended to view it more from a personal perspective, emphasising the support received from a generous and kind mentor.

Exemplars of mentoring were present in the employer interview process as well as confirmation from forum attendees. Mentoring must be needs based and broad to accommodate the support requirements of apprentices and trainees. These supports may have been seen as a buddy system – less formal in description as structured mentoring but capturing the essence of the critical components required to be successful.

Recommendation: Skills Tasmania to explore potential solutions to build mentoring capacity – leveraging from existing best practice in the training system.

Mentoring support for small business

As described above – mentoring shone as a strategy to aid in retention and completion of apprentices and trainees. For larger organisations this strategy could be formulated and implemented to drive this critical KPI. For small business in Tasmania, implementing this function is far more challenging. There is a key need to further mentoring for apprentices/trainees to better support retention and completion – regardless of pathway. Whether the mentoring is provided, offered or developed as a skill within the business, it is an obvious opportunity to directly address retention and completion to support skills shortage challenges in Tasmania.

Recommendation: Skills Tasmania to investigate opportunities to shape mentoring as a value proposition for small business to aid in retention. Suggest connection to Employer of Choice.

Career awareness

Strong support for career awareness strategy and implementation echoed through every interview and forum. There was a shared interest in exploring additional measures to attract individuals to certain industries. Example questions raised include: What more can be done to attract employees to X industry or X occupation? How can this be coordinated? What are effective strategies to achieve this? Overall, the consensus was on the importance of proactive and innovative approaches to raising awareness and generating interest in various career paths.

Recommendation: Harness the appetite of interviewees and forum attendees to collaborate on career awareness strategies in partnership with DECYP, Jobs Tasmania and through the industry compacts.

Work readiness

Employers expressed frustration over the lack of work readiness among many candidates entering the workforce. Employers highlighted the difficulties in training individuals for skilled trades and occupations when they lack essential work readiness skills from the start. This shortfall not only adds to the overall developmental process, but also strains all parties involved. Employers emphasised that work readiness should be addressed before individuals begin working, viewing it as an external responsibility that forms part of their recruitment and retention strategies.

Recommendation: Explore specific challenges for employers and collaborate with DECYP and Jobs Tasmania to formulate an approach.

Mental health

Acknowledgement of the challenges stemming from mental health was significant. Both apprentices and trainees mentioned facing challenges such as anxiety, particularly during transitions like moving from school to the workplace. Many employers also discussed the impact of mental health on apprentices and trainees, highlighting the strategies they have put in place to support apprentices and trainees in their organisation.

Recommendation: Continue to engage and promote the benefits of supporting mental health in the workplace for apprentices and trainees. Suggest connection to Employer of Choice.

System needs simplification

Language used to explain the apprenticeship/traineeship system itself is confusing and can be misleading. The VET sector has its own suite of acronyms and phrases, such as user choice, TPO, endorsed status, RPL etc. This jargon needs to be contained to within the sector as it creates a barrier for learners and employers alike. Training packages have a similar issue with needing to simplify its language. This general topic was picked up by a number of employers in different contexts.

Recommendation: Explore an approach to refine and simplify information for stakeholders related to the VET sector and Tasmanian training system.

Delivery in partnership with industry

Industry is seeking co-design and delivery in industry where it appropriate and applicable. Employers expressed an offering for training delivery to occur on-site as opposed to off the job, with access to facilities and equipment as well as industry trainers. This delivery may be at a regional delivery model or focused on skills specific requirements.

Recommendation: Drive aspiration through the industry skills compacts for increased partnership delivery across industry. Explore facilitation of program development using co-design.

Review and streamline funding models

Throughout the interview process skill sets were named up as a valuable method to develop skills in the workforce. However, accessing funding to reduce the commercial cost of a skill set was a barrier for employers engaging. As a result, some employers were accessing traineeships and apprenticeships (predominantly for existing workers) to offset the commercial cost of skills development. Year-round funding and other cost offset availability for full qualifications instead of contestable funding for skill sets may have led to this outcome.

Recommendation: Skills Tasmania look at its programs and funding models to streamline processes to ensure there is accessibility as well as enhanced knowledge of availability of programs directed towards the attainment of skills sets, as opposed to apprenticeships and traineeships.

Future Potential Actions

Interview apprentices and trainees who have cancelled across a range of occupations to understand why/what/how and what can be done.

To gain insights into the reasons behind cancellations and non-completions, forum attendees proposed interviewing apprentices and trainees who have discontinued their training across various occupations. The suggestion was to meet with them and understand what their barriers/reason for non-completion were. One GTO has indicated they'd be open to assisting in supporting this process, and Skills Tasmania would be able to provide data to support the action.

To ensure the effectiveness of this initiative, it is crucial to select interview candidates carefully. For instance, if an individual's training contract was terminated, it might not be appropriate to interview them. Similarly, it's important to seek a diverse range of candidates to ensure a comprehensive and balanced understanding of the challenges faced.

Another approach to capture challenges in completing qualifications is to engage with apprentices/trainees who recommenced their training multiple times.

Arrange a follow up interview process and forum with TAFE/RTO teachers for their inputs (possibly include AASN representation)

A suggestion was made to capture additional perspective and inputs from VET stakeholders, focussing particularly on those supporting apprenticeship/traineeships. This additional input could come from TasTAFE/RTO trainer/assessors, ANP field staff and managers, the DECYP APTSL team. These stakeholders have close contact with apprentices/trainees, and their insights could be valuable for the review process.

Interview additional apprentices and trainees

Employers indicated an appetite for more apprentices/trainees to be interviewed. In particular, one employer in the Hobart forum offered for all of their first-year apprentices to be interviewed. If there was a need for more apprentice/trainee input, or to further explore their perspectives on next steps, conducting more interviews would be a valid approach.

Summary

Throughout the process of interviewing, testing and distilling the information in this report, one thing has stood out above all others: Tasmanian employers care greatly about the vehicle of an apprenticeship/traineeship. They see value in it, believe in it and want it to be protected, enhanced and treated with respect. Recognising its immense value as a time-tested method of workforce development, possibly spanning centuries, they are invested in its continued success.

Despite this positive outlook, there are notable barriers and challenges. Factors like work readiness and resilience, crucial for success, are key concerns, and yet, not seen anywhere in the obligations of a national training contract.

Tasmanian employers generally expect apprenticeships to last around four years, with some flexibility but a strong preference for this timeframe. Any changes to this structure would likely be met with resistance.

Delivering effective training remains a complex and ongoing challenge for all involved. However, these challenges also present opportunities for adaptation and improvement, aiming for the best outcomes for everyone involved.