Learning and Assessment Issues in Apprenticeships and Traineeships

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1. Introduction

Evaluating on and off-job approaches to learning and assessment in apprenticeships and traineeships is an ANTA-NREC funded project that is administered by the NCVER. It is one of a suite of eight research projects that will form the basis of a substantial body of knowledge culminating in an NCVER report to be available late in 2000.

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the learning and assessment experiences of apprentices and trainees in order to identify areas that pose particular challenges and to make recommendations about approaches to best practice.

The specific objectives for the study are to:

- Identify what different stakeholders in apprenticeships and traineeships expect apprentices and trainees to learn as part of their contracts of training.
- Identify and analyse the different approaches to learning and assessment that can be undertaken by apprentices and trainees as part of their contracts of training.
- Evaluate the extent to which these different approaches to learning and assessment contribute to the learning goals and needs of apprentices/trainees.
- Evaluate areas where improvements might be made to learning and assessment practices and the strategies and interventions that are required to bring about change.

The study involves a range of methods that aim to collect data from a broad range of stakeholders. Data collection involves focus groups, case studies and a national survey.

Focus groups of key stakeholder (State Training Board Representatives, ITAB/industry representatives, VET curriculum staff, teachers and trainers) will be held in each state and territory. These will establish key issues relating to expectations about the nature of the learning that should be promoted in apprenticeships and traineeships. They will also examine the impact of these expectations on approaches to learning and assessment.

Case studies will be conducted at 20 selected sites that reflect a range of industry areas, modes of delivery and type of employment contract. These will be used to collect data from a range of people including apprentices and trainees, VET teachers and trainers, HR managers/supervisors, group training scheme personnel and host employers.

A national survey of all apprentices and trainees enrolled in two specific qualifications will also be conducted. The survey will map different approaches to assessment and learning from the apprentice/trainee perspective, including their views about most effective ways of learning.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The results of the literature review show that entry level training policies are directed to providing training for people entering the workforce and promoting achievement of qualifications up to and including Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) level 4 (Lundberg 1997:3). Apprenticeships and traineeships are a key component of government policies aimed at increasing the quality and quantity of entry-level training and have been the focus of considerable change and debate during the implementation of training reform over the last 10 years. Issues relating to participation rates,

industrial relations, and wages policies have all received significant attention during the reform period (Finn 1991, DEET 1991, Sweet 1995, Kemp 1996, Lundberg 1997). Issues relating to learning and assessment within apprenticeships and traineeships, however, have not received the same attention. Because apprentices and trainees spend most (and in some cases, all) of their time in the workplace, this is a primary learning site for both apprentices and trainees. In the workplace, learning and work can occur simultaneously - that is, it is learning through work as well as learning at work (Seagraves and Osborne 1997).

The extent and structure of the workplace learning undertaken by apprentices and trainees is shaped by a range of factors including the size of the enterprise (Smith et al 1995), the nature of the work undertaken in the enterprise (Field 1997; Baker and Wooden 1995), the links that exist between the enterprise and the formal VET sector (Guthrie and Barnett 1996), and the degree to which the specialisation of the enterprise coincides with an area of VET provision (Billett and Cooper 1997:12).

Potentially, the workplace can offer apprentices and trainees a "rich" learning environment. In a study of housing apprentices Harris et al (1998: 151) found that the on-site learning environment makes a valuable contribution to the development of apprentices as tradespersons and workers and the study explored in detail the nature of that contribution.

The workplace however cannot be assumed to be an "ideal" learning environment. In general, it is accepted that on-job learning aids transfer (Smith, 1998) and is more 'authentic' (Billett, 1994). However, on-job learning also has some significant disadvantages. In many instances the goals, methods, ideals and strategies of business enterprises are very different from those of learning institutions. The former is concerned with productivity and survival, the latter with learning and professional growth. Thus an enterprise (especially a small business) is not primarily concerned with learning, and in particular the sort of learning that might lead to qualifications (Harris, Simons and Bone 2000).

Regardless of the model of training adopted, the literature suggests that, for apprenticeships and traineeships, there are a number of critical features that should be present in contemporary contracts of training. These features support the ultimate goals of apprenticeships and traineeships - that is the development of work related and employment related skills.

- a breadth of experience and exposure to authentic work which enables the apprentice and trainee to gain a view of their current and future roles and the skills, knowledge and attributes necessary to fulfil current and future occupational expectations.
- a depth of learning which does not promote the continual dichotomy between theory and practice but which rather promotes
 - ...a framework whereby apprentices [and trainees] have the opportunity to develop and apply their theoretical and conceptual knowledge in the work situation and to further the capacity to think critically about practice
- **interactions and interpersonal relationships** where apprentices and trainees have opportunities to discuss their work with others. This interaction provides the basis for facilitating apprentices and trainees to "make the connections" between what they have learned and the implications it has for their work
- attainment and progression not only in regard to the attainment of national qualifications but also in the development of a "platform" which will encourage apprentices and trainees to
 - ...conceptualise qualifications as platforms for transfer to further learning and attainment rather than as points where learning terminates
- **communities of practice** built around partnerships between employers, training providers and apprentices and trainees which recognise the mutual, but sometimes conflicting interests that can be brought together through a contract of training. (Fuller and Unwin 1998)

3. PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

To date, 4 focus groups have been conducted. This section contains a preliminary attempt to identify some of the issues that have arisen from those focus groups. The results of the remaining 4 focus

groups will be used to verify, enhance, expand or challenge the themes that have currently been identified.

Thus far, the results of the focus groups have been fairly uniform, both in the range of identified issues and also the emphases on what have been considered crucial factors impacting on the quality of learning and assessment. A summary of issues appears in the table below. Without wanting to preempt further findings of the full project, there are some emerging issues we would like to tease out a little, as likely pointers to areas worthy of deeper investigation in the case studies.

Employers' Attitudes have been variously reported as covering a range from committed to trainee/apprentice learning, through to motivated purely by financial incentives. At one end of the scale, the employer is committed to establishing a workplace culture in which learning is likely to thrive. These enterprises see training as a form of organisational development. At the other end of the spectrum, the employer is involved in the apprenticeship or traineeship, firstly for what "an extra pair of hands" can do for the business and what additional funds an extra pair of hands represents. In this scenario, the trainee or apprentice is more likely to be expected to "fit in", learn what they can under their own steam and will be expected to undertake the off-job component of the training in their own time. In these scenarios and all points in between, the employer considers learning the workplace culture to be a very important "competence". What model of workplace culture the trainee/apprentice witnesses, experiences and absorbs is, of course, crucial to what and how s/he learns all the other skills and competences.

Skills Development has been emphasised particularly as an issue for traineeships. These are perceived as being more in the nature of a "taster", than a thoroughgoing skill development program. Industries with a well-established tradition of apprenticeships seem to be more likely to avoid traineeships. These are seen as contrary to maintaining the standards of vocational practice and not providing long lasting, high quality skills to the industry.

Assessment provides a wealth of opportunity for confusion of roles, especially with regard to the training provider compared with the employer. There was a general perception that enterprises saw assessment as the role of the provider (RTO). Problems might then arise when assessors have little communication with or understanding of the structure of the workplace in which they are required to assess. Those few enterprises which train there own employees in Workplace Assessor programs are likely to be large enterprises who are RTOs in their own right or enterprises where a training culture already exists. A common concern was the perception that many enterprises want skilled workers but they do not want to provide opportunities for skills training.

Roles of the Stakeholders seem to have become more blurred with the advent of New Apprenticeships, Training Packages, User Choice and other "innovations". Whose role is it to drive training? Who provides training? Who assesses training? Who pays for training? Whose role is it to ensure quality of training? Who is the "client"? Often concern was expressed in the focus groups that roles are not understood as clearly as they need to be to ensure quality of learning and assessment across the Traineeship and Apprenticeship systems.

Funding Issues	• The impact of financial incentives on the employer's attitude to training.
9	The impact of funding levels influence of the quality of program
	delivery.
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Enterprise/Industry Related	• The impact of enterprise characteristics on the ability to support training
Issues	(eg. size, complexity, business).
	The impact of a pre-existing training culture.
	 The impact of an enterprises commitment to training.
	 The relationship between training and organisational development.
	 Impact of skills needed by the enterprise and broader training.
Learner Related Issues	 The need to distinguish between apprenticeships and traineeships.
	 The influence of traditional values in apprenticeships.
	The innovative nature of traineeships.
	 The role of traineeships as a 'taster', 'probation' or reintroduction to training.
	 The need to treat adult learners differently from younger learners.
	The role of up front assessment for adults.
The Role of Secondary	 Possible differences between schools' and industry's view of

Schools in VET	assessment and training.
	The relationship of secondary providers and TAFE.
Metropolitan – Rural Issues	• The social impact of apprenticeships and traineeships in rural areas.
	The role of apprentices in creating an employment market –
	apprentices often become employers.
	The role of traineeships in returning people to work.
Assessment Issues	Concerns regarding the validity of workplace assessment
	Little evidence of 'terminal assessments' being undertaken by
	workplace assessors
	Concerns regarding the validity of simulated assessment
Learning Issues	The importance of 'workplace culture' as a core learning outcome
Elements of Good Practice	Detailed training plans
	Employer commitment to training
	Access to a breadth of experience
	Flexibility
	The need for a balance of on and off-job training
Provider Issues	Group Schemes
	Ability to provide a broad experience base
	• TAFE
	• Image
	 Impact of broadened scope of activity with workplace assessment and other reforms

4. CONCLUSION

Thus far, the focus groups have consistently acknowledged the benefits that traineeships and apprenticeships deliver to individuals, enterprises and industry. They have identified a number of issues that will be further investigated through case studies and a national survey of apprentices and trainees.

Three factors have emerged from the four focus groups conducted to this point:

- The extent to which enterprises view training as a valuable activity within their operations.
- The extent to which a true partnership exists between the trainee, employer and training provider.
- The ability to achieve a suitable balance between on- and off-job training and assessment.

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