

Experiencing pre-apprenticeships: participants' views of a program with dual purposes

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Abstract

Pre-apprenticeships, preparatory training off-the-job for entry into apprenticeships, have been in existence for several decades. Depending on the prevailing economic conditions, they have been asked to serve two major purposes: as labour market programs to discipline young unemployed people into the regime of study and work, and as one means of solving skill shortage problems in particular industries or the traditional trades in general. Research has previously focused mainly on their roles in succeeding in these purposes. There has, however, been little empirical research into the experiences of the participants themselves. This paper reports on part of a national project on pre-apprenticeships carried out during 2005-6. As part of this project, students in a number of courses in two States were surveyed about their experiences in their courses, and two longitudinal case studies were carried out, in different industry areas. The research revealed important differences among locations and among industry areas.

Introduction

In the current tight labour market in Australia, industries and employers are increasingly finding it difficult to attract good employees. The traditional trades area is experiencing particular difficulties, especially in certain trades. One way of attracting people, and especially young people, into apprenticeships has been through pre-apprenticeships. These are off the job courses generally lasting between three and six months, that provide students with some basic skills and knowledge which is designed to assist them gain employment in an apprenticeship, and also to provide some credit towards their off the job training while in apprenticeships.

This paper reports on part of the findings of a research project that was designed to examine the characteristics of pre-apprenticeships with a particular focus on whether they form an effective method for increasing the pool and quality of apprentices. Three trade areas were chosen for study: electrotechnology, automotive, and engineering. More information about the project can be found in the project report (Dumbrell & Smith, forthcoming). This paper focuses only on the experiences of pre-apprentices, and their views about their courses, as revealed through one phase of the larger study.

Background

In Australia there has been a huge growth in apprenticeships and traineeships to around the 400,000 mark (NCVER, 2006). With the growth in apprenticeships it might be expected that pre-apprenticeships might be an area that has been well researched and is well understood. However this is not the case. Dumbrell (2003) shows that there is a lack of common understanding of the term pre-apprenticeship, and that there are no definitive data that can be studied; as pre-apprenticeships are not

flagged as a course type in VET statistical data, proxy descriptors must be used to try to identify them. Similarly, identifying the historical development of pre-apprenticeships in Australia is difficult, but there is evidence that such programs began in the early twentieth century and that they were common, for example, in the 1930s in New South Wales as part of measures to combat unemployment. They were widely delivered during the 1950s and 1960s (Ray, 2001). Their existence is well documented by the 1970s and by the end of that decade measures had been taken to expand the number of pre-apprenticeship courses, (Ray, 2001). It appeared that total enrolments in Australia in 1999 were around 27,000 (Dumbrell, 2003: 18) and that they were greatest in Queensland and Victoria with only small numbers in other States and Territories.

Programs called “pre-apprenticeships” exist in a number of other countries; however they generally do not appear to be exactly equivalent to the Australian model. In Canada, ‘pre-apprenticeship courses’ are available in a number of provinces but vary from site to site (Douglas, 1998). In England ‘young apprenticeships’ have been in operation since 2004 but these programs, while sharing similar aims, are more like VET in schools than Australian pre-apprenticeships, although the VET qualification is always undertaken away from school premises, and they are aimed at 14-16 year olds rather than at young people of school-leaving age (DfES, 2006).

If one major purpose of pre-apprenticeships is to improve the chances of retention when the pre-apprentice gains an apprenticeship on completion of the course, then it is of importance to examine the literature on attrition and retention. Completion rates in apprenticeships have declined, although they are higher than for traineeships; for apprentices commencing in 1999 completion rates were around 60% (Ball & John, 2005: 5). Ball & John’s study detected some evidence that retention rates may be improving with apprentices commencing more recently.

The following table summarises some features that affect retention in apprenticeships.

Apprentices who completed were more likely to have	Apprentices who did not complete were more likely to have
Concerns about using apprenticeship to build career	Had more haphazard entry patterns
Arranged apprenticeship before leaving school	Had a gap after leaving school before entering apprenticeship
Actively sought an apprenticeship through approaching employers	Failed to get an apprenticeship in their preferred trade
Left school in Year 10 rather than earlier or later	Had another preferred career choice before apprenticeship
Showed more initial interest in the trade	Enjoyed their trade training less
Enjoyed their trade training more	

Adapted from College Curriculum Services Unit (1990: 6)

If pre-apprenticeships can move more apprentices into the first rather than the second column then they are likely to increase retention.

Research method

The overall project from which this paper is derived involved a number of research components:

- 19 structured face-to-face and telephone interviews with peak bodies, such as state training agencies, representatives of training providers and key industry groups.
- 10 structured interviews with training providers that delivered pre-apprenticeship courses.
- questionnaire surveys (n=255) of apprentices and structured interviews with their employers to capture differences between apprentices who had and had not undertaken pre-apprenticeship courses.
- case studies and surveys of students undertaking pre-apprenticeship courses in NSW, Victoria and South Australia.

The final phase of the research is the subject of this paper. A survey was carried out among pre-apprentices in two States, South Australia and Victoria. 106 usable responses were received from pre-apprentices in nine courses; all except one of the courses were in TAFE Institutes. The other was in a private provider that specialised in programs in one industry area. In addition two longitudinal studies were carried out, one with automotive students in a pre-apprenticeship course in a NSW TAFE Institute and one with electrotechnology students in a Victorian training provider.

The survey was designed to find out about a number of issues:

- demographic data about pre-apprentices
- reasons why students had chosen to undertake a pre-apprenticeship
- students' previous and concurrent working experience
- students' views about the course
- the presence or absence of work placements in the course
- future career plans

The two case studies were designed primarily to provide a more in-depth picture than the pre-apprentice student survey. They also introduced teacher and employer perspective, which were not included in the survey. To provide some breadth, although only two case studies were carried out, they involved two different States (Victoria and New South Wales), TAFE and non-TAFE sites, and metropolitan and rural locations. Details are as follows (pseudonyms are employed):

Name	Course	State	TAFE/other	Location
Cable Co	Electrotechnology	Vic	Non-TAFE	Metropolitan
Countrytown TAFE	Automotive	NSW	TAFE	Rural

These two industry areas were selected as nationally there were more courses in these two than in the engineering area.

The case studies were longitudinal, undertaken between February and June 2006, with three visits taking place as follows: near the beginning, in the middle, and at the end of the course. The three visits enabled the researcher to track changes over the life of the course and find out why there was attrition from courses. The case studies also set out to identify the final destinations of students.

	Students	Course co-ordinator	Teacher	Employer
Visit 1	Focus group (s)	Interview	Interview	Two interviews
Visit 2	Focus group (s)			
Visit 3	Focus group (s)	Interview	Interview	

At the third visit, students also completed a short individual questionnaire about their destinations and their overall view of the course, as it was decided that it was inappropriate for them to be required to reveal these details to other students as part of the focus group. All focus groups and interviews, which all lasted between 30 minutes and an hour, were taped and transcribed, with permission. Each case study was written up separately and the findings then analysed under themes that were taken directly from the research questions for the overall project.

Findings

Survey findings

Nature of respondents

The majority of the respondents were in Victoria (60, or 56.6%) with 46 (43.4%) in South Australia. In both of these States, respondents were in metropolitan and rural areas. The largest proportion of respondents were in electrotechnology courses (67 or 63.2%), followed by engineering with 31 (29.2%). Only 8 (7.5% were in automotive courses. Only one of the pre-apprentices was female; she was enrolled in an automotive course.

The age distribution of the respondents was quite varied. Table 1 shows distribution across 4 age bands, by industry area.

Table 1: Age of pre-apprentice survey respondents, by industry area

	Course							
	Automotive		Electro-technology		Engineering		Total	
Age	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
15-17	6	75.0	12	19.1	19	61.3	37	36.3
18-20	1	12.5	41	65.0	6	19.4	48	47.0
21-25	0	0	8	12.8	5	16.1	13	12.7
26-46	1	12.5	2	3.2	1	3.2	4	4.0
Total	8	100%	63	100%	31	100%	102	100%

The automotive pre-apprentices were concentrated in the youngest age group but as they were all in one course, this may not necessarily be typical. Electrotechnology pre-apprentices were concentrated more than other industry areas in the 18-20 ages group. Analysis by highest completed year of schooling showed that 72.3% of the electrotechnology pre-apprentices had completed Year 12 or 13 compared with only 25.8% of the engineering and none of the automotive pre-apprentices. In total, 22.1% of the respondents had only completed Year 9 or Year 10.

Almost two-thirds of the respondents (62.7%) were working part-time at the same time as undertaking their pre-apprenticeship course; engineering students were least likely to have a job at 54.8%. Only one respondent had **never** had a part-time job. Most said that their current part-time work was necessary (55.4%) or helpful (30.8%) to support them financially while studying. Almost half found it a little difficult (35.8%) or very difficult (7.5%) to fit their working hours in with their study. Very

few current or previous part-time jobs related to the industry area of the pre-apprentice course (7.4%) But the jobs of the respondents were less likely than average to be in the most common employment areas for teenagers: only 45.7% were in retail or fast food. Over a quarter (29%) had had a full-time job previously; of these 27 students, only 2 had worked in the same industry area as their pre-apprentice course.

Enrolment in the pre-apprenticeship

Pre-apprentices were asked the reasons why they chose to do the course. Responses could be expected to give some indication about whether participants regarded their course as a route into an apprenticeship or simply a labour market program. The responses given to a set of provided reasons (in descending order)¹ were:

- It was a good way to get into an apprenticeship (59%)
- Other reason (11.4%)
- Missed out on an apprenticeship (7.6%)
- Not sure if I wanted to do an apprenticeship (7.6%)
- Better than staying at school (4.8%)
- Parents wanted me to do it (2.9%)

These responses indicate, on the whole, very positive reasons for enrolling in their courses. ‘Other’ responses were mainly related to the wish for a career change or a better future (3), to prepare themselves for an apprenticeship (3), or the students’ outside interests (2, both automotive).

Respondents’ views about the course and their future destinations

Tables 2 and 3 show the views of the pre-apprentices about the extent to which they were learning from, and enjoying, their courses. Responses were positive on both fronts, with only 6.7% not sure or disagreeing that they were ‘learning a lot’ and a rather less positive result on the ‘enjoyment’ front, with 23.6% not sure or disagreeing that they were ‘really enjoying’ the course. Electrotechnology students seemed to be less satisfied both with their learning and their enjoyment. They appeared to be more ‘critical consumers’; possibly this was related to their higher education level.

Table 2: The extent to which pre-apprentices were learning from their courses

	Course							
	Automotive		Electro-technology		Engineering		Total	
Learning?	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Strongly agree	2	25.0	19	28.4	16	53.3	37	35.2
Agree	6	75.0	41	61.2	14	46.7	61	58.1
Not sure	0	0	5	7.5	0	0	5	4.8
Disagree	0	0	2	3.0	0	0	2	1.9
Total	8	100%	67	100%	30	100%	105	100%

¹ Note: 6.7% ticked more than one response, in error, so their responses could not be included in these figures.

Table 3: The extent to which pre-apprentices were enjoying their courses

	Course							
	Automotive		Electro-technology		Engineering		Total	
Enjoying?	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Strongly agree	2	25.0	11	16.4	19	61.3	32	30.2
Agree	6	75.0	32	47.8	11	35.5	49	46.2
Not sure	0	0	19	28.4	1	3.2	20	18.9
Disagree	0	0	5	7.5	0	0	5	4.7
Total	8	100%	67	100%	31	100%	106	100%

Respondents were asked to write the best thing about doing their course. All responded, and nearly all responses centred on the following issues, in descending order of frequency:

- The amount they were learning - which divided fairly equally into learning *skills* and learning *about the industry*;
- The hands-on and therefore enjoyable nature of the course;
- The envisaged outcome of an apprenticeship;
- Friends made during the course; and
- The teachers.

Pre-apprentices were asked what one thing they would change if they were in charge of the course; responses could all be included under the following issues, which are listed below by industry area.

Automotive	Electrotechnology	Engineering
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Better tools & equipment • Remove disruptive students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More hands on classes • Improve the quality of some teachers • Remove communication & computing classes • Reduce hours, use time better • Add work placements and work visits • Improve the organisation of the course • Assess more regularly 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More practical work • Reduce hours but use time better • Improve the quality of some teachers • Better resources/equipment • Remove some students who were disruptive • <i>'Nothing, because the course is great as it is'</i> (4 responses)

Nearly all expected to finish their course, with only 5 answering 'not sure'; the latter, however, were nearly all in engineering courses. There was, however, a rather muted response to a question asking the extent of respondents' agreement with the statement 'my pre-apprenticeship course is assisting me with achieving my career goals'. Although three-quarters agreed or strongly agreed, only 29 (27.6%) were in strong agreement. 22.9% were not sure. Qualitative comments from electrotechnology students were mainly negative, while engineering students were more positive.

When asked about their plans when the course was finished, responses to a set of provided destinations were (in descending order)²

² 7.5% ticked more than one so their responses cannot be included.

- Find apprenticeship (74.5%)
- Apprenticeship already organised (8.5%)
- Another job that was not an apprenticeship (5.7%)
- TAFE or other VET course (2.8%)
- Travel - no job (0.9%)

Unfortunately we did not ask at what point in their course they were answering the questionnaire, so it is not possible to comment on the low proportion that had an apprenticeship already lined up. Qualitative comments (all from electrotechnology students) indicated that students would have appreciated more assistance with job seeking:

- *I wish we were given more help in getting into the field we want*
- *There should be an apprenticeship available for all students that get over 80%*
- *I believe this course should help students to get some work experience in a real work place*

Final comments from students included some very positive remarks:

- *The lecturers are fantastic, very helpful and make the course thoroughly enjoyable!* (automotive)
- *I thank all the teachers for teaching me and my mates, (I) really really enjoyed coming and haven't missed a day* (electrotechnology)
- *I consider myself fortunate to be able to participate in this course* (engineering)

Case study findings

The nature of the two courses

Cable Co was a private non-profit company set up by electrotechnology employer and employee associations. It had been running pre-apprenticeships for eight years and took several intakes each year. The company also operated as an RTO for apprentices and for other electrotechnology courses, and had a Group Training Organisation with around 250 electrotechnology apprentices. Staff and employers explained that in the electro-technology industry, a pre-apprenticeship was considered to be the best route into the industry. Countrytown was a small rural TAFE campus also offering apprenticeships in automotive (and a range of other courses) and usually had two pre-apprentice courses each semester. At Countrytown, the pre-apprentices took most of their classes alongside the apprentices; this was not the case at Cable Co.

What were the characteristics of the pre-apprentices?

At Cable Co the pre-apprentices in the course studied were all boys and were aged between 17 and 23. Most had completed Year 12 and two had turned down university places to undertake the course. They were all well aware that a pre-apprenticeship was the way into an electrical apprenticeship, and several had approached employers for jobs to be told to return when they had completed their pre-apprenticeships. Most of these students had part-time jobs although a few had given them up because the course hours were so long. At Countrytown the pre-apprentices that attended the focus groups were more varied. There were two women, both with children, and one male in his mid-twenties; the remainder were boys aged under 20. The Countrytown group were not as sure as the Cable Co group that they definitely wanted careers in the industry; some were taking the course because of an interest in cars but not necessarily in an automotive career.

What did the pre-apprentices think of their courses?

The pre-apprentices at Countrytown enjoyed the close relationship they had with the teachers because only a few teachers were involved. They particularly liked the practical work and received extra help with learning problems. They enjoyed the opportunity to work on their own cars or their friends' cars. At Cable Co the students were not quite so satisfied; they tended to expect higher standards and found the course a little disorganised and some modules not very interesting, but on the whole they too were satisfied. Despite being better educated the electrotechnology students found their course more difficult than did the automotive students. All students tended to enjoy the practical work more than the theory work.

Does the completion of a pre-apprenticeship facilitate entry to apprenticeships?

In the electrotechnology industry in Victoria, a pre-apprenticeship seemed to be more or less a requirement in order to get an apprenticeship in the larger companies. An employer that was interviewed said:

Most of the large companies like ourselves will do the same. It's as simple as that. If they want to get a job in the industry, that's what they've got to do.

Companies liked the fact that ex-pre-apprentices had basic skills and knowledge of the industry, and that they had received extra maths tuition. In the automotive industry in the rural area of the case study, employers were not so decisive about a preference for pre-apprentices. However one of the case study students had gained a job in a spare parts dealership and her pre-apprenticeship certainly assisted. Her employer said:

Her knowledge of what she's picked up so far in the apprenticeship(sic) has definitely helped her in the spare parts, identifying different parts of a vehicle... knowing what a ball joint is or what basic oil fluid is, rather than coming to me knowing nothing... she can look up parts books, mark stock off knowing what the product is...

In the Countrytown case study the teachers felt that the course had succeeded not only if a student had gained an apprenticeship, but also if he or she had been rehabilitated from drug or alcohol problems or if he or she enrolled on another course. For example the course co-ordinator said of a previous student:

XXXX had actually been on the dole, long term unemployed. On drugs, all this sort of stuff. Family, Centrelink benefits virtually all his life. Did the pre-apprenticeship course, absolutely loved it. He found his passion. And he sort of couldn't quite get a job because of his appearance, he had earrings everywhere and all that, long hair. But he was a really nice kid and during that time we told him you've got to lift your game. You've got to have no drugs, blah, blah, blah. And he did that. But he didn't get a job at the end of that year. So I said to him, look you can start second year if you actively look for a job. Within two months he, like he was coming to TAFE and he used that as a positive when he went and saw an employer, and he's been employed at Y Motors ever since. Got a hair cut, never touched the drugs, that I know of, and he just had to complete his, well his work evidence stuff in his fourth year. But that's because he couldn't get it done in his second year. So he was, you know, he's now a fully qualified mechanic and he got student of the year... and if we never offered the pre-apprenticeship that would be one less tradesman.

A few of the Countrytown case study students said they still did not feel ready for work even near the end of the course.

What factors contribute to attrition in pre-apprenticeships?

A distinction was drawn between ‘positive’ attrition where a pre-apprentice left for an apprenticeship or similar job, and ‘negative’ attrition where people left for other reasons. A reason cited by several people was that people may enrol on the course as a requirement of retaining Centrelink benefits, and then leave once attendance had been established³. A teacher said

Generally the ones that are really keen you can tell within a week or two. And the ones that aren't are either just there cause their Mum told them they've got to be there. You can tell those as well.

Conclusion

It was clear that there was a consensus among all stakeholders – students, teachers and employers – that pre-apprenticeships were a good thing: that they provided basic skills, familiarisation with the industry culture and discipline into regular study habits. The two industry areas provided an interesting contrast (although some differences were no doubt due to other factors): electrotechnology students were better educated and more capable than automotive students, and perhaps as a consequence exhibited both in the quantitative and qualitative phases a propensity to be more critical of their courses. Considering that pre-apprenticeships are the preferred means of industry entry there is some evidence that greater attention needs to be paid to better quality curriculum and pedagogy in this industry area.

The findings from the survey about previous and concurrent working experience suggest that pre-apprenticeships do not necessarily have a major role in providing basic employability skills but that their employability focus is more about orientation to a particular industry and occupational culture. Nevertheless the case study at Countrytown TAFE suggests that a more basic role in regard to general employability or labour market re-entry may still be an area of importance in particular geographic areas and/or with particular client groups.

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³ It has not been verified whether this would in fact be sufficient to retain benefits, at least under current regulations.

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