

Apprenticeship outcomes and client expectations - A pilot survey of Commercial Cookery graduates and employers

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Abstract

This project was an attempt to establish whether the outcomes of the same qualification issued by different training organisations meet the expectations of employers and graduates and whether they do so in a consistent manner.

The project was a pilot and focused on graduates of a Commercial Cookery apprenticeship and their employers.

Overall, the findings of the graduate survey were positive, with good satisfaction rates and high rates of successful work outcomes in terms of gaining employment.

Employers' views were mixed on whether the knowledge and skills of those who have completed a Commercial Cookery apprenticeship met industry expectations. A number of employers commented that the completion of the certificate was only the beginning and that more experience in the kitchen was needed before graduates could progress to more senior positions in the kitchen. The results of the employer survey suggest that there are at least five parameters that influence the outcome of a completed apprenticeship

Introduction

This project was the result of a desire to know the extent to which training delivery of one and the same qualification by different training organisations meets client needs and expectations in a consistent manner. For the purposes of this project, "clients" incorporate both employers and apprentices.

The purpose of this project was twofold:

Firstly, to test whether the selected process/methodology would work; whether this type of research could be done and whether it could produce meaningful information to answer the question of meeting client needs and doing so in a consistent manner.

Secondly, to determine whether client needs and expectations **were** met; and whether they were met in a consistent manner.

This project was a pilot and focused on those who had completed an apprenticeship in Commercial Cookery in 2007 and 2006, as well as a number of their employers.

The project was a collaboration between Skills Tasmania and the Tasmanian Qualifications Authority.

Methodology

The project consisted of two surveys: one for graduate apprentices and one for a number of their employers. The surveys took place in April – May 2008.

The graduate survey was a telephone survey (Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing -CATI). Of the 175 graduates (87 completed in 2006 and 88 in 2007), 73 responded to the survey (42% response rate) and five declined to participate. It was not possible to contact the remaining graduates (reasons included: no reply after several attempts, change of telephone number, interstate or overseas move, not responding to messages left).

The employer survey consisted of face-to-face interviews with 14 employers at their business premises. Employers from various regions of Tasmania were interviewed and across various types of businesses (café, pub, restaurant, hotel, catering business, etc). These interviews were semi-structured and allowed for open-ended comments. This survey was more of a qualitative nature rather than quantitative. Therefore no quantitative results are presented in this document. Instead, the major themes that emerged from these discussions are presented.

Findings - The process

The following comments relate to the overall efficiency and effectiveness of the survey process.

Firstly, the research was relatively easy to carry out and could be scaled up to a larger number of respondents. A contractor was employed for the telephone survey of the graduates. The employer interviews were carried out by two researchers, one from the Tasmanian Qualifications Authority and one from Skills Tasmania.

Both graduates and employers were quite willing to talk to the researchers. In fact several employers were very pleased to have the opportunity to do so.

Some of the questions, particularly those for the employer survey, could be further refined to draw out more focussed comments.

The qualification might be chosen a bit differently for a future project. Possibly a qualification that is offered by more providers; perhaps not an apprenticeship.

This type of research has the capacity to provide important information for future policy and practice, such as identifying areas where closer scrutiny might be required, identifying where stronger collaboration between employers and providers might be beneficial, and guiding allocation of funds to areas that are delivering the desired outcomes.

Findings - Graduate survey

For most respondents (85% of responses), the majority of the training took place on-the-job.

Forty three per cent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that what they were learning off-the-job was fairly consistent with what they were learning on-the-job. More than half of the respondents (53%) neither agreed nor disagreed.

About three quarters of respondents agreed that the off-the-job training provided additional knowledge and skills over what was learned on-the-job.

The majority of respondents gave positive ratings to the training provided by both the employer and the RTO. Eighty two per cent of respondents rated the training provided by the RTO as Very Good or Excellent and 70% rated the training provided by the employer as Very Good or Excellent.

Graduates were asked to what extent their training met the expectations of the employer they worked for immediately after they finished their apprenticeship. Forty one per cent indicated “Very well” and 45% indicated “About right”. Thirteen per cent indicated “Not very well” or “Not well at all”.

Ninety five per cent of respondents were employed at the time of the survey. Eighty one per cent of these were employed as chefs/cooks while 19% were employed in other occupations.

Nearly all of the respondents employed as chefs/cooks believed their training was good preparation for their current job (96% of respondents). However, 43% said there were some aspects of their current jobs that they would have liked to have learned in their training.

In the course of the telephone interviews, graduates had the opportunity to offer prompted comments (at the end of the interview they were asked if there was anything they would like to add) as well as unprompted as they were answering particular questions. These comments range from very positive to reasonably negative. Several concerns were about administrative matters such as record keeping by the RTO, there were several comments that the programs could be more challenging, the importance of the content and the learning experiences reflecting current industry practice – rather than what they saw as out-of-date practice, various suggestions for additional topics that could be included, several concerns with what they saw as aspects of competency-based training – eg one-off assessments.

Findings – Employer survey

The employer survey was more of a qualitative nature rather than quantitative, with 14 employers being interviewed. Therefore no quantitative results are presented in this document.

Most of the employers interviewed commented on the significance of the enterprise in which the apprentice was employed in influencing the overall outcomes. They noted the very different learning environments presented by different types of enterprises whether they be café, hotels, country pubs, fine restaurants, bakeries, commercial catering establishments. Because of the impact of these differences, the need to move apprentices between establishments was noted by some employers.

Many employers interviewed regarded themselves, or their staff, as being very involved in the training of their apprentices. They spoke of practices such as going through assignments with them, monitoring their progress, contacting the RTO, providing new learning opportunities for them. Many of those interviewed seemed pleased to be involved in the training.

One of the issues discussed with employers was what they expected from graduates. A number of employers commented that the completion of the certificate was only the beginning and that more experience in the kitchen was needed before graduates could progress to more senior positions in the kitchen. They spoke of the qualification indicating that the person was ready to begin working – able to ‘hit the ground running’ – get into work straight away. No-one expected graduates to be able to work unsupervised or to manage a kitchen.

There were mixed views about the relevance and value of the off-the-job training to their business. Those who regarded it positively spoke of: keeping apprentices up-to-date with what is happening in the industry; providing under-pinning knowledge; broadening their understanding of the industry. Negative comments included:

- not demanding enough, too easy, not long enough, boring

- some topics are not relevant to the current industry
- some trainers appear not to have recent industry experience.

Employers also spoke of the importance of the individual trainers in determining the value of the off-job component. Another concern related to perceived fully institutionalised training that appeared to not provide sufficient practical, real world experience. Overall, however, most employers agreed that the off-the-job training was of benefit to their business.

Similarly, there were mixed views regarding the consistency of outcomes between different RTOs. A few commented that they had noticed a difference; most said that there wasn't any significant difference. Where there was a difference, this could sometimes be attributed to individual trainers. The issue of different trainers using different approaches and producing different outcomes could sometimes be true even within the same RTO.

Nearly all employers commented on the importance of the personal attributes of the apprentice in determining their suitability. They spoke of 'flair', 'attention to detail', 'creativity', 'passion'. Personal attributes were particularly important because of the nature of the industry they said. The job was hard with long hours, relatively poor pay, and stressful working conditions. Only those that had a passion for food and for the industry would survive they felt.

Generally, the qualification is not seen as important in recruitment decisions. Most employers said they regarded experience as more important and characteristics such as keenness and eagerness to learn. While the qualification is taken into account, it is not the primary consideration in making a decision to employ. Several employers commented that qualifications become more important for the higher positions such as head chef because it carries with it an assumption of the person having broad under-pinning knowledge.

Overall comments about both the industry and training appeared rather more negative than positive. There is much concern about staff shortages, about turn-over of staff,

and of people being accepted into training and the industry who are neither prepared or suited to it. There were concerns about the standard of training with several comments that it is not as high as it was in the past.

Conclusions

The project established that the methodology was appropriate and achieved the desired purposes.

Graduates were in general satisfied with their training and believed it was good preparation for their current job. Graduates also achieved a good rate of being successful in gaining employment. A large proportion of graduates indicated that there were some aspects of their current jobs that they would have liked to have learned in their training.

The results of the employer survey suggest that there are at least five parameters that influence the outcome of a completed apprenticeship. These are:

1. *The type of business that employs the apprentice.* A person undertaking their whole apprenticeship in a small, specialised business (a café, a pub, a catering business, a salad bar, etc) may not have the opportunity to gain a wide range of food handling and preparation experiences. This can be offset if the employer offers alternative/innovative opportunities to the apprentice.
2. *The quality and type of the employer-provided training.*
3. *The level of personal involvement of the manager or owner of the business in the apprenticeship* (usually, the manager or owner and the person who provides the on-the-job training are two different people).
4. *The quality and type of the RTO-provided training.*
5. *The attitude and aptitude of the apprentice.* Some persons may have a natural flair for this occupation. A lot also depends on the willingness and readiness of the apprentice to take up the various training and learning opportunities that arise.

Employer views were mixed about the relevance of the content of the course. They also had mixed views about the consistency of outcomes between different RTOs.