

# Investigating ‘Wellbeing’ as a platform for development: outcomes from the WA Public Service professions.

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## Abstract

This paper reports on the initial outcomes from a large ARC grant with multiple industry partners that is changing VET focus by investigating *wellbeing* within the police, teachers and nurses of WA. These professionals are significant subjects as they are instrumental within the community, dominate the public employee sector, and represent the complex role tensions associated with knowledge workers. The paper specifically focuses the implications for national VET in terms of managing workplace learning, rather than the functional organisation implications of the study.

The study proposes that much training and learning activity in organisations is functionally derived, focuses upon formal inputs, and excludes vital informal and social interactions. This traditional perspective largely ignores the pervasive nature of organisational culture and informal interactions in shaping learning, extending identity, and mediating subsequent performance. The paper asserts through metaphor and literature the relational nature of organisational performance and then models such instrumental relations as a conceptual framework underpinning this study.

This study involves the generation and distribution of a questionnaire to 21k police, teachers and nurses. In this paper, the focus of the analysis is upon the WA police. A review of the method indicates specific learning issues for researchers. The analysis indicates three specific issues that are informing subsequent developmental activity. The paper concludes by emphasising how understanding the key mediating influences of culture upon organisational actors is critically important when orchestrating learning and development within organisations and specifically professions who are instrumental in shaping our social standards.

## Introduction

The paternalistic discourses of ‘welfare’ within organisations positioned ‘wellbeing’ as a given and generated supportive interventions in cases of extreme personal incapacity. Some organisations are currently re-examining wellbeing as a *measure of organisational capability*, relational health, and informal learning. If organisational culture is *how we do things around here*, individual wellbeing is how organisational actors feel about how we do things around here. Organisations are re-conceptualising their developmental systems to recognise the relational nature of work and learning and in doing so including and repositioning informal interactions as a critical part of their development systems. Of course, the power of such relations and the connectedness have been clear to others many years before.

*No man is an Iland, intire of it selfe; every man is a peece of the continent, a part of the maine.....any mans death diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankinde; And therefore never send to know whom the bell tolls; It tolls for thee.      John Donne*

This quotation prefaces Hemmingway’s (1941) most famous work. I expect his rationale was most probably was the same as mine, to indicate to the reader the inextricable relational and cyclical nature of our existence. Positioning agency and structure as a duality as structure mediates action and is itself formed by those actions. How does such a concept help us understand the complexity of wellbeing in terms of professional development? First, it assaults

the workplace training traditions that visualise learning as primarily instructional, as such perspectives largely ignore the pervasive nature of our everyday social interaction in mediating our organisational learning and performances. If we reflect on our own knowledge working lives, it is really possible to draw any form of line between working and learning time, or are the two inextricably mixed and related?

We are a product of, and we also produce, our organisational relations (Schein 1991). It is important to recognise their instrumental value and that of informal learning when orchestrating our formal developmental processes within organisations. This paper explores these issues through reporting on a study that is centred on the wellbeing of professionals, or how their everyday interactions makes them feel about their *organisation, their leaders, their colleagues, their team, and themselves*. Your wellbeing strongly mediates what you know and what you do. Cumulatively, what we do determines what happens in our organisations and in our society. Conceptions of VET should change to encompass performance as a relational production, not just the outcome of competence, and include the powerful mediating influence of culture through every informal interaction (Mulcahy & James 2000).

### **The issue and significance**

This paper, and the study it represents on the page, is concerned with two significant issues. Practically, the study is about helping to improve the performance of groups of professionals. Significant professionals who are in the public spotlight, who set or contest community standards and whose personal interactions generate both 'life and death' decisions. Academically the study is significant because it searches for new understanding and organisational action that includes informal relations within organisations as instrumental to HRD systems and performance. Simply, the study asserts and explores the role of informal cultural relations in shaping learning and performance. As such, it contributes to the ongoing debate about the nature of learning within organisations, exploring how the informal can be framed for mutual advantage, and also exploring to what extent our knowledges honed from previous institutionalised learning situations can inform these new workplace practices. As such, the study informs national systems of VET.

The study is based upon the proposition that much training and learning activity in organisations is functionally derived, focuses upon formal inputs, and as a result excludes vital informal social interactions. Traditional perspectives largely ignore the pervasive nature of organisational culture, and informal organisational interactions in shaping learning, extending individual identity, and mediating subsequent performance (Rhodes & Garrick 2000; Legge 1995). The instrumental nature of such relations will be modelled in the conceptual framework that underpins this study.

### **Positioning the study**

Much of VET focus is concerned with the micro perspectives of learning relations within institutions and the macro marketplace relations of access and equity. This study is firmly located within the world of organisations and explores how they orchestrate learning for professionals in the workplace. It is a worthwhile focus because the ways in which we manage learning within organisations have significant effect upon each individual as employees and consumers. How we manage learning for professionals is of even greater importance because of their extensive relational influence within organisations in legitimising ways of being, knowing<sup>1</sup>, and relating. Educational institutions can prescribe curriculum and learning goals as their work is learning. In organisations such relations immediately become far more complicated. The goal is work production, but we are increasingly aware how necessary concurrent learning production has become to fuel business development especially with knowledge work. Unfortunately, many

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<sup>1</sup> Knowing can be defined as a situated combination of learning and doing.

organisations are willing to allow professional development to be a displaced contracted out activity, divorced from the organisational body (Poell et al, 2000).

During AVERTA 05, Kaye Bowman (2005) indicated that 'well being' was a specific interest of national VET research. The keynote speeches by Stevenson (2005) and Boud (2005) emphasised that future research should move on from a fixation upon cognitive design, sequenced delivery, and the dispensation of codified knowledge. Stevenson (2005) indicated the implicitly relational and situated nature of VET training and learning. He warned the audience of the dangers of extraction that strips away the interrelated complexity of context, casts peers as shadows, and removes the experience of 'knowing in situ' (Gee et al 1996). He indicated that performance is a complex relational activity. Formal learning processes based upon codified data never capture the rich complexity of doing as 'others' are painted out. Boud (2005) urged us to refocus on supporting learning about work, in work and at work, as relational identity development. He termed this extension of selves at work 'productive reflection'. Such a process is not based upon formal practices of skilling, but inquires into the relational nature of the performance. How an individual feels, their 'wellbeing', is central to such reflection. Such reflection is not an isolated experience but is an inquiry into relational issues with others. These views indicate the primacy of knowing and knowledge making within local vocational communities and the instrumental role played by informal relations in such constructions. The concept of wellbeing fits well with such emerging philosophies of workplace learning and may provide one of the tools that organisations use to integrate their formal and informal practices as a whole system of development.

Traditional needs analysis treats learning as an input and performance as an output, largely ignoring that performance is a function of competence and context. Social influences, as the work of Lave and Wenger (1991) indicated, are instrumental in legitimising what can be learned and practiced in the workplace. Our workplace performances are inevitably a function of the wide range of formal and informal interactions that occur within the field of professional practice that we struggle to access and others struggle to shape (Gratton 2000, Billett, 2001, Stevenson 2005). It is therefore reasonable to assume that if measuring performance indicates possible learning needs, so does measuring how we feel about the informal relations that shape that performance.

Such a perspective places formal learning and development activity as just one mechanism in the framework of organisational change. In such a framework, learning within organisations is viewed as a continual social process of extending individual identity through both formal and informal means. Thus, there appear to be two polarized views about change, knowledge and workplace learning, with a continuum stretching between them. Perspective one takes a Foucauldian Actor Network position of organisational change (Law 1985), where powerful discourses dominate direction and subjectivity. In terms of knowledge, they determine truth and fact. In terms of learning, people are objects who must consume the functionally defined codified edicts for performance, based upon performance diagnosis, and presented through formal processes and monitoring. Perspective two takes a more relational perspective in terms of change theory as framed by Giddens (1984), where individual agency is able to mediate the existing culture and instigate change. From this position knowledge is constructed by contesting global discourses within local contexts to mediate locally relevant, often co-producing knowing (Farrell 2002; Fenwick 2001). In terms of learning, each person is a subject continually in development, constructing new knowing, located in their organisational context and relations, and where understanding the impact of informal relations upon wellbeing is a foundation of development.

The political reality is that both perspectives co-exist in every organisation, educational institution, and inside each actor's head. Naturally this paper is about facilitating perspective two, as every author has an agenda and opponent to displace. The active subjects of perspective two seems to have a relational compatibility with knowledge-based organisations and holistic, generative and sustainable development practices. Such organisations seek to construct, through formal and informal processes, relational interactivity that will mediate what actors know, can do,

and are. Of course, even these intentions are permeated hegemony and contested legitimacy. However, from perspective two, performance is shaped more by informal relations than by formal skill delivery. Knowing how to perform is viewed as a relational product, produced with others, in specific contexts, and at particular times. Therefore understanding the influences of relations between actors and the mediating nature of organisational culture is a vital part of developmental planning. Wellbeing, how an actor feels about being in the organisation is a platform for development. Measures of wellbeing inform in two ways. First, by revealing how culture is shaping performance; and second, by indicating issues for change, through formal and informal practices. In the end individual performance is not just about what individuals know, but about how they relate and are managed. Smith (2004) indicates that the isolation of training as a dislocated function is bad for organisations and individuals. At the organisational level, training is inextricably part of the broader strategic programme of organisational development that reviews goals and encompasses cultural, structural and systems realignment through a 'bundling' of HR orientated responses (Dyer & Reeves 1995).

This study contributes to the VET field of 'needs analysis' by both highlighting the importance of, and providing systematic investigation into, what constitutes 'professional wellbeing' as a basis for subsequent development processes, alongside the traditional skills inventories. While skills inventories seek to reproduce existing work organisation practices, a focus on wellbeing aims at cultural and identity development. This study seeks to understand, substantiate and operationalise these relations between a focus on wellbeing and developmental activity. This particular field study is partially located within policing. There is a long tradition in researching the professions and policing of a polarized focus between occupations/professions on the one hand, and the organisations/bureaucracies which this study assaults (Scott 1966; Cruess, Cruess & Johnston 2000). While recent research into policing highlights the importance of the characteristics of 'healthy' occupations and organisations, it has uncovered largely negative states of affairs. Even when individuals express satisfaction with organisational functioning, this gives way over time to major dissatisfaction and reduced commitment to organisational priorities (Meyer & Allen 1997).

This study marks the beginning of the use of the term 'wellbeing' in policing research, where previous relevant issues investigated have included professional status (Morris, Shinn, DuMont 1999) and service to the public (Richbell, Simpson, Sykes, & Meegan 1998). Previous studies have recognised issues of work stress and burnout (Thompson, Kirk-Brown, & Brown n.d.), cynicism (Atwater, Waldman, Atwater, & Cartier 2000), the need for family support (Morris, Shinn, & DuMont 1999), and organisational support (Metcalf & Dick 2000) within the profession. Other studies have investigated job characteristics (Van der Vegt, Emans, & van de Vliert 1998), teamwork, morale (Richbell, Simpson, Sykes, & Meegan 1998), job performance (Truxillo, Bennett, & Collins 1998), job satisfaction (Magenau & Hunt 1996), and corrective feedback (Wilson, Boni, & Hogg 1997) within policing organisations. This study is evolutionary in generating a holistic measure incorporating these perspectives that places the perspective and voices of professionals as the key mediators of subsequent developmental practices.

Policing is perhaps the most visible profession as actions are in public arenas, focus on social conflict and distress, and are subject to adversarial litigation. In addition, increasing social diversity and pressures for social accountability and responsiveness place additional responsibilities on the profession, adding to the complexity of operationalising law and order. Concurrently, the profession has had to adapt to police the new borderless domains generated by technology. Such pressures have been instrumental in creating significant organisational change. The dilemmas of changing priorities and social expectations of higher performance have problematised the professional role.

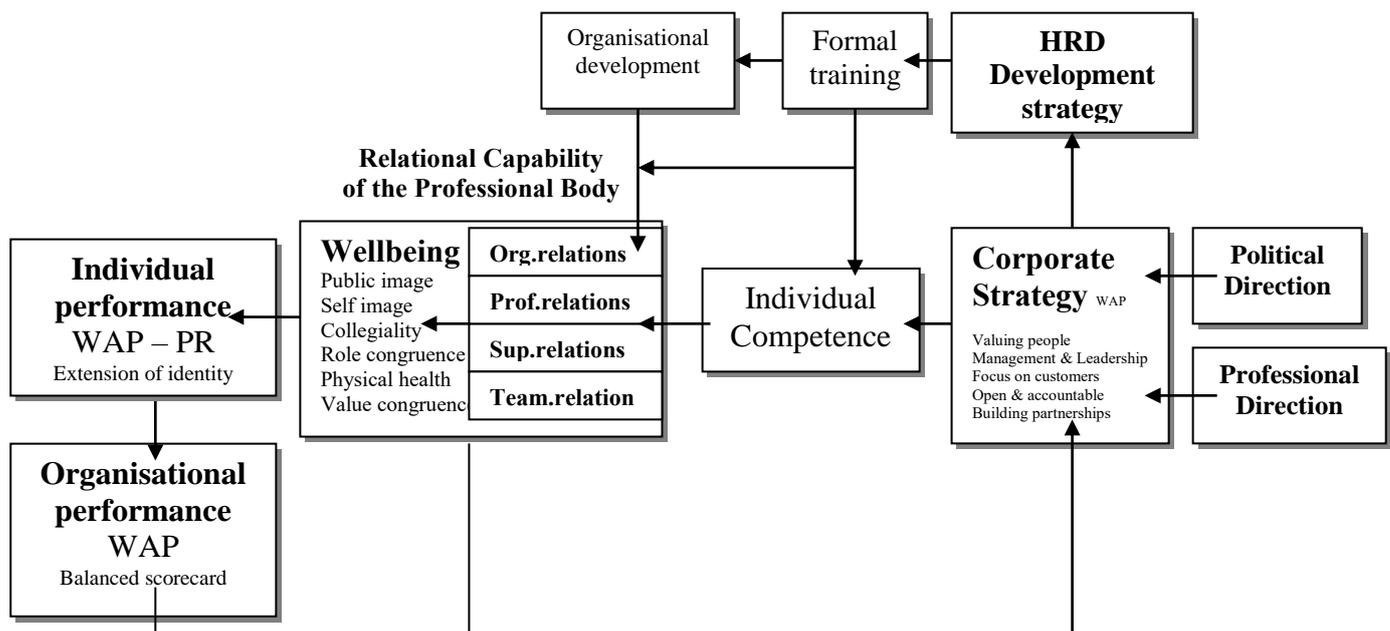
This study is an important mechanism in terms of the WA Police reform agenda and their response to the criticism and the Kennedy Royal Commission. The purposes of this study in

terms of police stakeholders are to place professional wellbeing on the future agenda of the organisation; to make a clear statement about valuing people; to generate an organisational scorecard of professional wellbeing to measure success; to protect the investment in staff; and to guide developmental action. Embracing this study indicates the commitment of the WA Police to operationalise their codified statements on these issues in their ‘Frontline First’ service delivery philosophy and associated ‘values’. Their vision relies upon high levels of professional wellbeing within the organisation to deliver the stated community outcomes.

The fact that WA Police recognise professional ‘wellbeing’ as a critical component of operationalising strategy is itself a significant statement about the corporate climate. Participation in the project is a major step in producing an instrument that could both symbolically and substantively take such rhetoric off the page and into the organisational interaction. In the end, the impact of policing strategy is dependent upon the wellbeing of each police officer and their ability to interpret codified objectives as appropriate actions in each context.

### Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework for this study has been developing incrementally with each phase of the study. The focus groups, the pilots, the first questionnaire, and the industry partner interaction have all developed understanding of the complex relations associated with wellbeing. The framework below maps our current understanding of the complex relationships associated with how wellbeing is produced by and itself produces organisational performance. In the framework wellbeing is positioned as a critical component mediating organisational performance and therefore a vital issue that should shape the focus of future organisational development activity.



Measurements of Performance and Wellbeing inform development

**Figure 1: Professional wellbeing mediating individual & organisational development.**

In the framework pictured as figure 1, strategic direction is formed through a combination of political and professional inputs and performance feedback. Individual capability is recruited and formally developed. However this individual competence can only be translated into effective social performance where individuals have effective social relations with their organisation, their profession, team and supervisor (Mulcahy & James 1999). Without a individuals feeling good about themselves, their profession, their job, team and method of operating, their anxieties invade the social space of operations with performance adversely effected. While it is usual to monitor

individual and organisational performance, the measurement of wellbeing also provides vital cultural clues to performance inhibitors. Similarly, HRD actions are more holistically informed and can engage with actions that reframe the culture rather than skill input.

Put simply, in many organisations the framework is viewed as far less complex with the organisations relying upon formal training inputs to improve competence, believing that this will translate into improved performance. This perspective ignores the pervasive influence of informal interaction upon eventual performance (Seddon 2001). These informal relations have a cyclical relationship with performance, simultaneously acting to both generate considerable informal learning and inhibit individual capability. Wellbeing is both a measure of what is preventing effective performance and a measure of where informal relations are generating learning. It takes an intelligent and perceptive executive to recognise this complex series of relations that underpin their organisational performance, luckily WAP has such leadership.

## **Research methodology**

This is a large study extending over five years and involving over 20 thousand subjects (Barratt-Pugh and English 2005). The initial phases involved multiple focus groups of 163 officers developing vignettes of their professional encounters which were used with previous research constructs to develop and pilot a wellbeing questionnaire. This research was mirrored with Nurses and Teachers to construct and instrument for a subsequent survey. The survey was segmented into sections concerning how individual felt about the *organisation, their leaders, their colleagues, their team, and themselves* with questions developed from the focus groups and previously testing questionnaire items. Considerable industry interaction and confirmatory factor analysis were used to re-construct the final questionnaire format of 157 questions and 20 demographic categories issued in June 2005 to over 21 thousand professionals in WA, including 7 thousand police<sup>2</sup> with a 47% response rate from a distribution to the total population.

It is little help to researchers to present a bland retrospective account of operationalising the study and questionnaire. Due to the inherently political nature of this project there are three significant interlinked learning issues for the research team. First, with eleven funding associates located in three professions, coordination within and between the professional groups is onerous and complex. Achieving consensus and managing the regulation and distribution of data is a continuous process of partnership management as each professional group involves partners who are often positioned in oppositional relations. Maintaining relations across such representatives of 100k professionals involves the continual briefing of new partners as roles and responsibilities changed. Second, the confidentiality of the growing database has required detailed attention to the researchers' ethical responsibility. This involves treading a fine line between developing relations by sharing data and retaining data to protect individuals for the integrity of the study. The construction of a detailed Memorandum of Understanding was the primary tool to achieve this balance. Despite such a document, with thirty people party to the final draft report, the data was leaked to the press the day before the launch and the study received third page coverage under the title 'Public servants rat on their bosses'.

Third, perhaps most importantly, and also most unusually for a research project, the release of the findings were of significant public interest, and the management of this process displaced completely the usual debates with industry partners negotiating the weight being placed upon various interpretations. It was evident from the first questions assembled in the questionnaire, such as *behaving unethically in some circumstances is the only way of being accepted by one's co-workers*, that while the responses would provide great organisational interest, given the public profile of these professions similar interest by the press and public might damage the study aim. The analysis period was therefore dominated by how the responses should be publicly presented

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<sup>2</sup> The survey will be issued again in June 2006

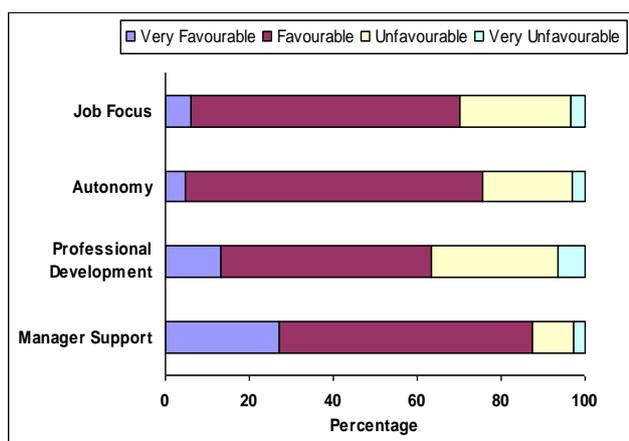
to minimised press damage to enable the ‘real analysis to continue. Impression management became of primary importance in the dissemination, relegating organisational investigation and action planning to a secondary role.

## Findings and discussion

This extensive data collection and the analysis will continue for some period of time. Indeed, this year there will be a second distribution of the wellbeing questionnaire that will open up the analysis to comparative issues between the two measures in each profession and across the professions.

At this stage the analysis process has been centred on providing immediate feedback from the first survey and ensuring a controlled public presentation of the data. With such a large volume of responses the analysis will continue for some time and to present all the findings within the confines of this paper would not be possible<sup>3</sup>. This paper therefore intends to focus upon specific and global aspects of the police responses in order to indicate the value of such investigation to organisational learning and development activity rather than simply report broad findings.

The survey findings are grouped into 24 constructs. The first series of constructs consisted of responses to issues of Work Focus, Autonomy, Professional Growth and Manager Support. Detailed below is an example of how all the constructs have been displayed in the omnibus report with a specific attention to issues that are significant in terms of career continuance.



**Work Focus** - Nearly 30% of respondents would like to spend more time on front line tasks rather than on paperwork and clerical duties.

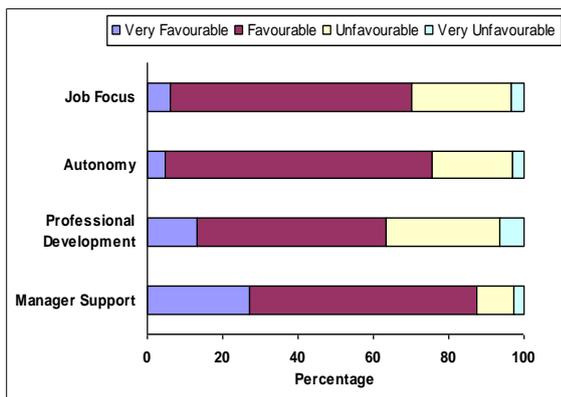
**Autonomy** - About 75% of less experienced respondents and over 80% of long-serving respondents feel they have sufficient direct control over their work and are rarely frustrated by the instructions they receive.

**Professional Growth** - Over half of all respondents rate informal feedback, coaching and the interest taken in their professional growth unfavourably. Dissatisfaction levels are higher among long-serving respondents.

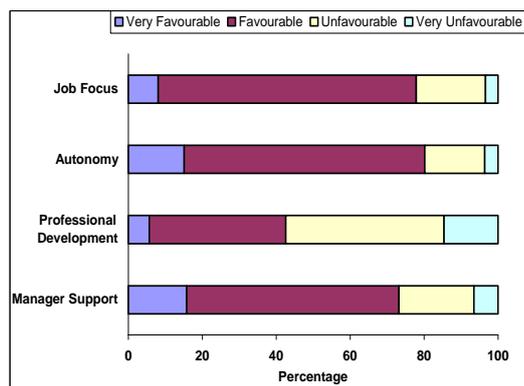
**Manager Support** – Almost 90% of the less experienced respondents feel favourable about the way their line managers negotiate objectives, encourage teamwork and provide information. Long serving respondents are less satisfied by these aspects of manager support

<sup>3</sup> The full initial report is available at the ECU – Institute of the Service Professions website.

### Officers less than five years



### Officers more than 25 years



Overall, less experienced staff are highly satisfied with the way they are supervised, but some would like to spend more time on direct service and there are concerns about career development. Long-serving staff, despite their experience and acquired skills, would welcome more feedback, coaching and further personal development opportunities.

There are 20 more constructs that have been built from the questionnaire responses and the following passages highlight the most critical information gathered. Personal recognition was not a significant issue for officers. However despite 70% favourable responses for leadership of their units, a majority of respondents, including 75% of those with 25 years service, felt unfavourably about departmental responses to work unit level issues, and disagreed that changes had produced good results for them. Overall, there are strong indications that police officers responding to the survey feel major change is not well managed and that individual excellence is poorly rewarded despite a majority of officers feeling positively about their work unit leaders.

Inter-professional collaboration and dealings with colleagues on work matters were given favourable ratings by nearly all respondents, regardless of length of service. Respondents are confident of collegial support and can rely on close colleagues for assistance with little friction within work units. All aspects of teamwork are rated favourably by more than 85% of respondents who know their roles, share information well, meet their objectives. Police officers rate workgroup cooperation highly in a culture where there is strong mutual support. A majority of respondents were concerned about work pressure the difficulties of dealing with a continuous, heavy, urgent workload. Few respondents felt they were discriminated against except some long-serving older staff. Bullying by other officers is something that is not considered acceptable, although 20% had concerns about bullying. Ratings on safety are generally high, but less experienced respondents expressed slightly less favourable views.

Nearly 90% of less experienced respondents had no plans to seek work outside policing, but 20% of long-serving respondents were actively seeking a different job. Pride in, identification with, and enthusiasm about policing were reported by 90% of less experienced respondents. The corresponding rating for long-serving staff is slightly lower, but commitment to the job is high overall. Respondents report high levels of personal interest in their work, but 30% of all officers reported little sense of belonging and attachment. In contrast, about two-thirds of respondents consider there is a gap between expectations and rewards, especially promotion. Many respondents report they criticise the policies and practices of their organisation to people outside policing. These attitudes are more common among long-serving respondents. The majority of respondents to the survey are positive with respect to staying in a job that stimulates them.

Around 90% of respondents regard their job and work unit highly for quality, importance and the desire to perform even better. In terms of Job Image, about 80% of respondents feel that police

are widely regarded as approachable, helpful, trustworthy and dedicated. However, the professional status of policing is rated less favourably, even by less-experienced staff. The many positive feelings of the importance and quality of police work contrast with a perceived poor public image and professional status.

Establishing an appropriate balance between the demands of work and life outside of work appears to be less of a problem for long-serving respondents than those with less experience. Work interfered with sleep, was emotionally draining and caused reluctance to get up for about 30% of less experienced staff, and 50% of those with 25 years or more of service. An appropriate life-work balance does not appear to have been achieved for 40% of the police officers who responded to the survey.

## **Interpretation**

These responses provide a significant baseline for the future measures. However, even these current responses can also be used to compare between the three professions to highlight incongruities. Such comparison indicates the police have high motivation for the profession, the job, teamwork, local leadership, and sufficient autonomy. Staff are nearly unanimous in feeling there is no discrimination bullying or intimidation. However, when staff look beyond their own jobs and work units, there are significant concerns. About two thirds of police are uncomfortable with the pressure of work. They feel emotionally drained, have difficulty in sleeping and often feel reluctant to face the demands of the working day, and appear to have difficulty achieving an appropriate life-work balance. There is a feeling that status and earnings are too low for the importance of their work. The management of change is widely viewed as problematic and failing to impact on local issues. There is less attachment by police to their organisation, with some openly critical, and unlike other professionals, have no choice employers.

The differences in wellbeing ratings between staff who have up to five years service or at least 25 years service are generally small, but there are exceptions. Long-serving staff report less favourable ratings for the support given by managers, change management and development opportunities than do their less experienced colleagues. Long-serving police feel more drained by their work and are more cynical than those with less experience.

The comparison with the other professions adds to the value of this study. In terms of the Police, it indicates that change management is more of a concern than with the other professions. At this stage three main issues emerge to inform the practices of managing learning and development within the police in WA. First, the findings suggest that there needs to be a focus on the 'ecology' of development activity by reducing the organisational recruitment and retention 'churn'. Development resources expended upon short term employees restrict the opportunities for cultural development. A focus on managing role tension and work pressures may alleviate the re-recruitment 'churn' and minimise development resource wastage. A sustainable culture is one that does not have continual 'drip through', undermines relational confidence. Second, it is evident that apprehension and frustration with change management is demoralising and reducing performance. To offset the negative perceptions about change management there needs to be a focus on those most instrumental in changing culture for the better. Managers set the standard through every action they make. The development focus should be re-orientated to these cultural change agents. Finally, longer serving officers feel detached from development activity. This needs exploring through more focussed programme development and mutual goal setting. The survey responses already provide some clear targets for police development activity. While some responses may be in terms of formal programmes, re-framing manager interactions may have far greater informal influence upon attitudes within the organisation and eventually personal wellbeing.

## Conclusion

There has always been considerable conflict and debate about the most appropriate modes of formal vocational learning that will supply the right people, with the right skills, at the right time for organisations. Vocational education and training literature is vexed with contradicting perspectives about who should receive what learning in which particular mode. This paper has argued that such perspectives are often based upon a far too formal and functional view of learning within organisations, one that often excludes relational performativity. Social performance is a complex production where individual competence is relationally mediated. The justification for the study presented within this paper is that organisations and individuals may gain greater benefit from a more holistic approach, one that recognises that learning as a pervasive social process underlying each organisational interaction where meaning and direction are constantly negotiated. Performativity is the visible product of such social processes. An investigation of the social issues mediating performativity and individual wellbeing therefore provides significant clues to organisational and individual 'learning needs'.

This paper has positioned wellbeing as a strategic issue for organisations concerned about orchestrating workplace learning that encompasses formal and informal interactions. Formal training is just one mechanism within organisational development. Most significantly the concept of wellbeing is a powerful cyclical tool as it is a measure of both the result of organisational culture upon actors and an indicator of subsequent performance and development needs. It is significant for the individual because it indicates that how they feel counts. In addition, it links their lifeworlds and traverses organisational boundaries. It continues to be inspiring to be involved with a public organisation who position learning, cultural development and professional voices as a focal part of their strategy. This study is a response to the external pressure upon organisations to bow to the development demands of managerialism and fast capitalism (Gee 1996), construct a relevant mechanism that privileges organisational voices in VET development processes, and to shape an emerging future that may produce more sustainable identity.

## Acknowledgements

This study much acknowledge the primary funding of the ARC and the continual support, financially and relationally of the many officers, managers and union officials associated with the study. We would also like to acknowledge the many other research associates that have combined to make this project a logistic success and the helpful AVETRA's reviewers comments.

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