Australian apprenticeships and traineeships in focus

"There is something in the apprenticeship system for everyone," says Chris Robinson

The apprenticeship and traineeship system is one of the most interesting parts of vocational education and training in Australia. Despite accounting for only 20 per cent of the students in VET, apprenticeships and traineeships seem to exert an endless fascination for policy-makers, employers, practitioners and students and their families. Perhaps it is because there is such a wide spectrum of stakeholders—there is something in the apprenticeship system for everyone!

Yet, despite the widespread interest in apprenticeships and traineeships, the system has been under-researched for a long period of time. Few people have a full understanding of the nature, scope and development of the apprenticeship and traineeship system. As a result, many myths have been created about the system and its development, particularly in recent years.

It was with this relatively poor public understanding of the system in mind that NCVER decided to undertake a full-scale program of research into the development of the apprenticeship and traineeship system in Australia. The results of that research program have now been released in the book, Australian apprenticeships: Facts, fiction and future.

As part of the research program, the National Research and Evaluation Committee funded a series of research projects examining a variety of aspects of the apprenticeship and traineeship system and complementing the work undertaken by the NCVER from its own statistical database. The results of the NREC-funded work have also been published as a companion volume, Australian apprenticeships: Research readings.

In this edition of the Australian Training Review, Andrew Smith summarises some of the key messages from this program of research in two articles.

Overall it is clear that the Australian apprenticeship and traineeship system is in very good health. Certainly by comparison with developments in other English-speaking countries where apprenticeship has languished or fallen into disrepair, the Australian system has grown massively, especially in the last 5 years.

But the story of Australian apprenticeship is not only about numbers. Many new occupations outside the traditional skilled trades base have been brought into the system—clerical, sales, production, transport. Young males used to dominate the apprenticeship system. Now many more groups in the workforce have the opportunity to gain an apprenticeship or traineeship—women and older workers in particular. Increasingly the apprenticeship and traineeship system more accurately reflects the structure of the modern labour market.

One aspect of the system that is often overlooked in discussion is the employment outcomes of apprenticeships and traineeships. Here the news is very good.

Over 93 per cent of apprentices and trainees who complete their training have an unsubsidised job within three months of completion. This is a far higher employment outcome than any other form of education and training. Even amongst those who do not complete their training, over 70 per cent are in a job within three months.

This result, of course, reflects the fact that apprenticeships and traineeships involve a contract of employment as well as a contract of training. Employers tend to keep their trained apprentices and trainees, even if they do not formally complete their training. There are few better ways of getting a job. This represents an important marketing edge for apprenticeships and traineeships.

The report concludes that apprenticeships and traineeships have a bright future in Australia. Despite the rollout of the system into the new occupational areas outside the skilled trades, there is still a lot of room for further growth.
In particular, the one million associate-professional jobs in the economy represent an important area for the future. These are the higher skilled, technical jobs in areas such as information technology, health, sports management, real estate and dentistry.

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Of associate professionals, 40 per cent hold no qualifications and these occupations are often not covered by university courses which tend to focus on the professions. Moreover, they are jobs that are not unlike skilled trades jobs—they involve higher level skills and are very suitable to forms of training that involve both off-the-job theory and on-the-job practical application and experience. They also represent a fast growing area of the labour market—with over 25 per cent growth since 1989. Currently associate-professional occupations account for only 3 per cent of apprenticeships and traineeships.

With industry and government involvement, there is the potential to create up to 100 000 associate-professional apprenticeships and traineeships.

It is the higher skilled, new and emerging occupations that hold the key to moving Australia's apprenticeship and traineeship system up a gear so that it becomes the foundation for national skill formation in the 21st century.

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