A ‘road map’ to completion: the architecture and negotiation of apprenticeship training plans

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This research examines explicit and implicit understandings of the training plan in apprenticeship contracts, and the potential impact of mismatched expectations on completion rates. In order to examine the effects of mismatched understandings, a small research enquiry of four case studies was conducted with participants from the food trades industries. Apprentices, employers, and trainers were all interviewed for their knowledge and understandings of the apprenticeship training agreement or training plan. The research findings show that the apprentices had poorly informed understandings of both the explicit conditions for training set out in their training plan and the implied understandings associated with the training between the three signatory parties. These misunderstandings resulted in three of the four participants considering leaving their apprenticeships.

Introduction

In this research paper the term ‘apprentice’ covers both apprentices and trainees. Their training is conducted within an employment-based training arrangement, whereby the apprentice receives training instruction from their employer and a registered training organisation.

A recurrent theme in the literature reviewed for this research is the role that training plays in an apprentice or trainee’s decision to withdraw from their training contract (Commonwealth of Australia 2011; Curtin University, Centre for Labour Market Research 2007; Smith, Walker & Brennan Kemmis 2011). Industry groups, government, and educationists all acknowledge training’s importance in an apprentice or trainee’s decision to stay or leave (Strickland et al. 2001; Commonwealth of Australia 2011; Chan 2011). Many reasons for non-completion are listed in the Commonwealth of Australia’s comprehensive report, A shared responsibility (2011); however, of note in this influential report’s findings is the lack of knowledge that apprentices, employers, and trainers have about their training responsibilities. It has been this lack of knowledge of training commitments in the various apprenticeship participants that has provided the framework for the research question in this paper: are broken training expectations and understandings contributing to higher non-completion rates within the food trades?

Literature and background

For most of the twentieth century the completion rates for traditional apprenticeships have been in the 80–90% range (Stromback 2006). Interestingly, in the last 30 years those rates have declined to a figure of 55.4% in 2011 (Knight 2012; NCVER 2011), with some areas such as food trades experiencing completion rates as low as 38.7% (NCVER 2011). In the Australian Government report into apprenticeships for the twenty-first century (2011), this was highlighted as ‘unacceptably low’ (p.9),
with the authors identifying training as an area for improvement if completion rates are to rise, while the Victorian Government Auditor-General’s report (2014) also identified apprenticeship training as an area of concern. Importantly, the Auditor-General identified the role that employers play in apprenticeship, by providing on-the-job training, and the exposure required for an apprentice to receive the range of work experience necessary to complete their qualification (p.24). In this area of supporting and developing the skills of apprentices, the authors found that not all employers were ‘fit and proper’ (p.18), and recommended that the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority (VRQA) ‘develop a robust employer approval process’ (2014, p.18). This view echoes the findings of the Commonwealth of Australia’s report that ‘a fundamental element of an apprenticeship or traineeship is the employment relationship, underpinned by a training contract and quality training’ (2011, p.11). This concern for the propriety of employers as workplace trainers and skill developers has also been identified in the sphere of educational researchers such as Fuller and Unwin (2013), who argue that employers are responsible for creating ‘expansive’ or ‘restrictive’ workplaces. Here the authors paint a vivid picture of ‘expansive’ workplaces, which promote the status of apprentice as both learner and employee engaging in a gradual and educationally rich transition towards expertise and tradesperson status in contrast to ‘restrictive’ workplaces, where the status of employee dominates over learner, and apprentices are treated as an extra set of hands who require only limited knowledge and skills for specific tasks (Fuller & Unwin 2013).

In Strickland et al. (2001) these views are extended to include technical trades teachers. The authors call for ‘quality interactions and interpersonal relationships’ (Strickland et al. 2001, p.26) between apprentices, employers and trainers from registered training organisations to ensure that workplace training is delivered to a high standard. This concept of increased cooperation is further reinforced in overseas literature by Chan (2011), identifying that ‘all three parties are required to work together to ensure shared understandings about expectations, roles, and responsibilities’ (p.15). This emphasis of the crucial involvement of all parties in training in workplace learning is similarly enforced in the work of other workplace learning theorists such as Billett (2004), Illeris (2011), and Beckett and Hager (2002). Central to their research on workplace learning are two common ideas: that learning is a social process taking place ‘between’ people and not only ‘in’ people, and, secondly, that an appropriate culture of learning, training and a supportive environment, are important for learning to take place effectively. Smith, Walker and Brennan Kemmis (2011) further the argument for shared understandings in the workplace and identify the role that mismatched expectations of a workplace and of the apprenticeship participants has in leading to apprentice disengagement. In this study the authors examine the implicit and explicit understandings of an apprenticeship agreement created at the outset of an apprenticeship. Here the authors identify explicit promises as those that refer to pay rates, conditions, and industrial awards, whereas implicit understandings are identified as those that are unstated and generally inferred through conversation, actions, and unspoken understandings.

In this research paper we have sought to extend this line of examination to the understanding that the three parties have about training commitments. We focused on the training plan as a means to investigate the implicit and explicit understandings created around apprenticeship training. The training plan is a document that is ‘signed on’ at the beginning of the trade commencement, and then ‘signed off’ once the apprentice is deemed to have completed their training (Commonwealth of Australia 2011). It is referred to in this report as a ‘road map’, due to its linear progression towards the destination of completion. The Education and Training Reform Act 2006 requires employers, trainers and apprentices to comply with training contracts and training plans (Victorian Government Auditor-General 2014), and as such it is considered an important legal document. The document works to encapsulate the contractual commitments of all three parties to the training process, from the
start of the apprenticeship until completion (Commonwealth of Australia 2011; Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development 2014; Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority 2014). In creating a training plan, the apprentice, employer, and the representative from the registered training organisation all discuss and negotiate the methods of training delivery and assessment. Time lines for the delivery of curricular activities, as well as theoretical knowledge and practical training delivery, are negotiated by the parties. The trainer initially constructs the document but is required to include the other parties in the negotiation of its contents (Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development 2014; Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority 2014). The employer, for their part, is required to make a commitment to the structured training of apprentices, with allocated time set aside in the workplace for scheduled training. The input of the apprentice is essential, especially in relation to consultation over assessment and curriculum delivery methods. Importantly for the apprentice, once all the training competencies have been met, they are then entitled to complete their apprenticeship under the rules of ‘competency based completion’, which allows for the provision of the early completion of their apprenticeship (Commonwealth of Australia 2011; Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development 2014; Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority 2014). In their large and influential inquiry into apprenticeship training models in 2001, Strickland et al. recommended the stricter implementation of training plans as a means of ensuring higher-quality training and learning outcomes in apprenticeship training (Strickland et al. 2001). The researchers posited that training plans could facilitate increased communication between parties, especially in the areas of training and assessment. The researchers further recommended that training plans provide greater opportunity for apprentices to have increased input into the training and assessment process.

Research methods

Four case studies formed the basis of this research, which used a parallel mixed-methods research design (Mertens 2005) and incorporated the use of semi-structured interviews and Likert scale surveys. The surveys were administered to the three key participant groups – apprentice, employer, and trainer – as a means of measuring their explicit and implicit understandings of the apprenticeship arrangement. Their purpose was to examine training and analyse understandings of training responsibility and expectations. These understandings were triangulated for comparative inferences in the ‘findings and discussions’ section. The questions covered the issues given below:

- that the apprentice should have time set aside for scheduled and specific training within the workplace by the company tradespeople (explicit requirement within the training plan)
- that the employer should expose the apprentice to different training/learning experiences while they are in their employment (potential implied understanding harboured by an apprentice)
- that the apprentice should be released from the apprenticeship early if they achieve the competency-based completion requirements (explicit understanding within the training plan)
- that the apprentice should not be trained by other apprentices (potential implied understanding harboured by an apprentice).

Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with the apprentices. Their purpose was to obtain clearer understandings of apprentices’ experiences of apprenticeships, focusing particularly on their implicit understandings. Both pragmatist and interpretivist (Mertens 2005) approaches have been utilised in the collection, collation and analysis of the paper’s research and its findings.
Each participant group was comprised of an apprentice, their employer, and their trainer. All three within the group were signatories to an individual apprenticeship training contract. They were initially approached randomly through an email sent out to apprentices at the Holmesglen Institute of TAFE, and were then selected for their ability to be demographically representative (apprentice age, gender) as well as in relation to business models and trades within the food trades industry. Food trades apprenticeships were targeted in this study due to their low rates of apprenticeship completion. It was thought that poor training practices may be exaggerated in the foods trade models of apprenticeship provision, and that this would offer insights into broader problems within apprenticeship training.

### Table 1  Survey of apprentices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Apprentice gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Apprentice trade type</th>
<th>Employment period</th>
<th>Business type</th>
<th>Size of the business – no. of employees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>App. 1</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Cook</td>
<td>18 mths</td>
<td>Café</td>
<td>Over 20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>App. 2</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Patisserie</td>
<td>13 mths</td>
<td>Cake factory</td>
<td>Under 20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>App. 3</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Cook</td>
<td>15 mths</td>
<td>Restaurant chain</td>
<td>Over 100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>App. 4</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Cook</td>
<td>12 mths</td>
<td>Restaurant, small</td>
<td>Over 50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: The surveys were based on four apprentices and the co-participants of their individual training plans. Interviews were conducted with the apprentices only, and as such the pseudonyms reflect the identity of the apprentice.

### Findings and discussion

Important to this study have been the analysis of unmet explicit obligations and the mismatched implicit expectations of the three parties of an apprenticeship training plan agreement. Explicit obligations are often important legal requirements, and are included in the training plan by the trainer before being signed off in negotiated agreement by all three parties. Three of the four research participants indicated a common mismatch in shared knowledge and important explicit obligations with the other parties — the employers and trainers. These included: their knowledge of the training plan’s contents and how it works; the rights of the apprentice to equity in negotiating the training plan content; and the rights of the apprentice to early release from their training contract through the provision of competency-based completion.

Misunderstandings stemming from implicit expectations were also common in the responses of the apprentice participants. These are important expectations established during the early stages of the apprentice’s indenture but are never documented. These implied expectations, if perceived as having been broken, were identified as resulting in the apprentice disengaging from the process and potentially leaving their apprenticeship (Commonwealth of Australia 2011; Chan 2011; Smith, Walker & Brennan Kemmis 2011). Many mismatched implicit expectations identified in this research were unique and had not been previously identified in the literature, including the level of contact the employer and apprentice had with the trainer; that competency-based completion would be implemented and that the apprentice could be released early from their training; that it was alright for apprentices to be trained by other apprentices; that working overtime was a significant obligation for the apprentice; and that the level of personal commitment to training and the prioritising of work over personal life by the apprentice are often viewed differently by the apprentice and the employer.

The research revealed more specific evidence of mismatched expectations on training, particularly in the areas of training volume and training delivery. In three of the four case studies, apprentices
registered dissatisfaction with the amount of training being delivered in the workplace by the employer. A common theme in the apprentices’ responses was that they ‘assumed there would be a lot more training’ (App. 1). This is indicative of a mismatched expectation and a potentially unfulfilled obligation by the employer. The delivery of training by other apprentices was also a very contentious issue in all four case studies. The apprentices gave strong responses indicating their opposition to the practice of senior apprentices training them in their daily duties.

At the moment I don’t actually know who’s meant to be training us, because at the moment I’m being trained by other apprentices, so I’m learning from apprentices. (App. 2)

There has been little government direction on the issue of apprentices providing training to their less experienced colleagues. The issue is alluded to by the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Education and Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority in their guidelines on apprenticeship training. However, the only standard addressing this issue is the requirement that an ‘experienced trainer’ be available for the training of apprentices. What constitutes ‘experienced’ is not clearly identified (Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Education 2014; Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority 2014). While all employers and trainers indicated this arrangement as acceptable, all four apprentices clearly indicated this as unacceptable and counter to their understandings of the employer’s obligations.

There was evidence in the research data that the majority of the participating apprentices had signed the training plan without a full understanding of the terminology or its contents. The possibility that three of the apprentices had either not read the document before signing it or that the trainer had failed to explain its contents adequately must be considered. As an important legal document (Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Education 2014; Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority 2014; Victorian Government Auditor-General 2014) developed to encapsulate the training rights and responsibilities of the apprentice, this is considered to be an important finding. If an apprentice has little or no knowledge of their training rights or entitlements at the beginning of their apprenticeship, the likelihood that training expectations will be unfulfilled or unrealistic considerably increases. When expectations are unmet, apprentices are more likely to disengage from or consider leaving their apprenticeships (Commonwealth of Australia 2011; Chan 2011; Smith, Walker & Brennan Kemmis 2011).

Evidence from the participating employers’ responses indicated that they engaged only with those training commitments that suited their workplace priorities. Competency-based completion and scheduled training in the workplace were considered to be conditional and subject to their discretion. The views of the apprentices supported these findings, with one apprentice identifying that they were ‘employed to work, not to [undertake training]’ (App. 4), and that ‘the boss would never allow’ (App. 1) for the early competency-based completion and release from their apprenticeship. The data from the apprentice’s responses further indicated the presence of ‘restrictive’ workplaces, identified in the literature (Fuller & Unwin 2013) as being workplaces where the status of employee dominates over learner, and training is secondary to production.

I thought there would be a lot more training in the workplace. I didn’t realise it would be so, ‘use your initiative’ style of working. You need to be shown certain processes and certain things, it’s not like there is someone there to show you how to do it, then you talk about it, and they watch you do it. It’s more that you have a conversation and you give it a go, and if this works then it works, so, I assumed there would be a lot more training. (App. 1)

Nobody has the time in this day and age to train someone ... and I think that in workplaces, when people are actually doing apprenticeships you assume that you are actually gonna learn and get
trained up ... at work it’s not so much a training, you are employed to work, not to [undertake training].

(App. 4)

There was evidence in the data that trainers are not fulfilling their obligations towards apprenticeship training, specifically in the requirement for them to construct a training plan through consultation with the apprentice and the employer. There is the possibility that trainers are negligent in imparting knowledge and understandings to the other parties when asking them to sign the training plan, or that trainers are assuming that a comprehensive understanding exists when the other parties read the plan and agree to sign. There was further evidence from the apprentice interview responses that the trainer had not fulfilled the important obligation of consulting and including them in the construction and negotiation of the contents of the training plans.

I just sort of ignored it. It didn’t really go past me at the time so I didn’t really worry about it. I just let everyone else deal with it. (App. 1)

This is considered an important finding, with clear implications for both the rights of the apprentice and the responsibilities of the trainer.

In the interviews with the apprentices, participants were asked whether they had ever considered leaving their apprenticeship. While all participants acknowledged that they had toyed with the idea, three indicated they had seriously considered it, while the other indicated that it was a temporary and isolated experience.

Conclusions

The specific aim of this research was to examine the explicit and implicit understandings of the training plan in apprenticeship contracts, and the potential impact of mismatched expectations around training on completion rates. While this was a small research project, its findings have both supported the current research into apprenticeship non-completion as well as identified a number of areas for potential future research. As identified in the literature, misunderstandings and poor training lead to disengagement and non-completion by apprentices. The possibility exists that trainers are not fulfilling their role of creating well-understood training arrangements between all parties. There is also evidence to suggest that employers are selective in implementing the required workplace training and reluctant to engage with competency-based completion requirements.

What this research indicates is that, despite the important role that training plans could play in clarifying understandings and delivering on training expectations, apprentice expectations are still not being met.

References


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