WORK AND LEARNING IN JOBS THAT ARE TRADITIONALLY CONSIDERED UNSKILLED OR LOW-SKILLED

Erica Smith and Andy Smith
Federation University
Australia

ABSTRACT

This paper reports on part of a major research project on jobs traditionally considered to be unskilled. The project was funded by the Australian Research Council and involved detailed exploration of nine occupations, seven of which are considered to be low-skilled, to attempt to uncover the skill that was present in those jobs.

It is common for the general public, policy-makers and, indeed, researchers to dismiss certain jobs as unskilled or low-skilled. In fact these perceptions are often the result of social construction of skill (Sawchuk, 2006; Healy, Hansen & Ledwith, 2006) and do not reflect the actual, or indeed potential, skills content of the occupations. As Vallas (1990) points out, judgments about skill in work have real consequences, which can affect people’s lives in fundamental ways. The project hoped to correct some perceptions of these types of job, to effect an improvement in training for the occupations, and to provide evidence for industry stakeholders to help improve the perceptions of the jobs and the people that undertake them. As the economy continues to evolve, new jobs will emerge and the findings of the project will continue to be of utility.

In this paper we look at so-called low-skilled work through the lens of three of the nine occupations: retail assistant (non-supermarket), security officer and concrete products worker. In these occupations the consequences of perceptions about lack of skill are manifested in low pay, low status, low levels of government funding for training, poor quality training, and self-perception by workers that their jobs are not worthwhile. The method for each occupation was as follows: six interviews at national stakeholder level, two company case studies, a validation forum with industry personnel, and an examination of the respective qualifications. The research showed that all three jobs involved many technical and non-technical skills that were not generally recognised. The workers tended to internalise external negative perceptions of skill in the job, finding it difficult to articulate many of the skills they deployed. Managers and industry stakeholders, on the other hand, tended to be more aware of the inherent skill in the occupations.

The paper uses the research in these three occupations to examine a number of issues. These include the reasons for perceptions of low skill in the jobs; consequences for workers and their on-the-job learning, of perceptions of low skill; the interplay of training quality and training take-up with the respect accorded to the
occupation; and the ways in which perceptions of skill in work might be more closely aligned to the real nature of occupations.

INTRODUCTION

The paper examines three jobs that are traditionally considered unskilled in Australia – retail assistant (non-supermarket), concrete products operator, and security officer. These jobs have only in recent decades had qualifications available, and in only one instance – security officer, and that because of a licensing requirement – is a qualification required in order to practice. The research was carried out as part of a major project funded by the Australian Research Council, with contributions from three industry partners: Manufacturing Skills Australia, Service Skills Australia and United Voice. The latter organisation is a trade union and the two former organisations are Industry Skills Councils, which each oversees training and qualifications in a range of related industry areas. The project set out to examine the skill involved in jobs regarded as unskilled, and sought to provide evidence that would improve the status for those occupations and to improve the training that was provided.

While the research questions for the project as a whole were quite extensive, the questions for this paper are as follows:

- What technical and non-technical skills are involved in the occupations?
- What are the perceptions of skill pertaining to the occupations?
- How can the ‘actual’ skill and the ‘perceptions of skill’ be more closely aligned?
- How far do the findings support or challenge existing theories of skill?

LITERATURE REVIEW AND BACKGROUND

Skill is a broad area of study. It should be noted that our project did not examine the skill that workers possess or how it is developed; it was about the nature of skill and perceptions of skill. Overall, there are four major schools of thought about the concept of skill in work. These are explained in the following paragraphs.

Positivist/technicist approaches view skill as an unproblematic, measurable ‘quantity’ (Attewell, 1990; Felstead et al., 2005). In this view, skill is seen as being based on indicators such as complexity and autonomy (Adler, 2007). Skills relating to working with people are generally seen as less important than skills relating to working with things.

Proxy measures of skill are often used to ‘measure’ skill or to allocate a label of ‘skilled’, semi-skilled’ or ‘unskilled’ (Esposto, 2008). Proxy measures include the length of training for the job, wage rates (Spenner, 1990) or, in Australia, the Australian Bureau of Statistics ANZSCO (occupational) classifications. However it is argued that such proxy measures may be problematic (Young, 2004; Grugulis and Lloyd, 2010) and that they are used primarily because of a lack of other data that would enable skill to be measured directly.
Social construction of skill theory maintains that beliefs about skill and the job hierarchies are operationalised through institutions such as industrial relations arrangements and requirements for qualifications (Steinberg, 1990: 455). Feminist literature (for example, Healy, Hansen & Ledwith, 2006) extends this labour process approach, arguing that ‘male’ jobs have gained the reputation of being skilled at the expense of ‘female’ jobs. In social construction theory, the proxy measures and the positivist/technicist approaches described above are themselves regarded as products of social construction (Steinberg, 1990).

Soft or generic skills have received an increasing emphasis internationally over the last thirty years (Gatta, Boushey & Appelbaum, 2007). Soft skills have been operationalised in Australian training policy as ‘key competencies’ or ‘employability skills’ (Business Council of Australia/Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, 2002), and more recently as ‘foundation skills’, and in other countries through different lists of ‘generic skills’. The issue of ‘soft skills’ has become a further problematic in the debate around skill (Grugulis and Lloyd, 2010). Some scholars claim that soft skills are no more than personal attributes (Grugulis, Warhurst & Keep, 2004); that they are no different to those used in everyday life; and, in an extreme position, that it degrades the notion of skill to consider soft skills as skills (Payne, 2009).

Why does it matter whether people think of particular jobs as skilled or unskilled? Vallas (1990) has pointed out that judgements about skill have real consequences. Skill under-recognition is a serious issue, influencing workers’ life chances and status as well as companies’ and national performance. Workers in jobs that are regarded as skilled attract significant advantages such as high public esteem, a range of available and well-developed qualifications, funding for training, better pay and conditions, and strong career pathways. In a circular process, these advantages are then taken as indicators of skill. Workers in jobs that are not regarded as skilled therefore have lower public standing, few or poorly developed available qualifications, restricted funding for training, low pay and poor conditions, and fewer career pathways. Recently in Australian States including Victoria, funding for training for jobs considered to be unskilled has been reduced to a rate at which no reputable training provider could deliver training (Guthrie, Smith, Burt & Every, 2014). Employers are disadvantaged because ‘lower status’ jobs tend to attract lower quality and/or uncommitted applicants and have high labour turnover (Smith & Teicher, 2011). Workers in jobs publicly regarded as unskilled tend to have low self-esteem and low self-efficacy in the labour market, which may persist lifelong. Thus, notions of ‘skill’ have very real effects which impact on a large segment of the labour market and particularly on women and disadvantaged groups.

METHOD

The project as a whole contained a number of phases over a period of nearly four years. These are summarised in Table 1 below. The project as a whole involved over 250 participants. This paper reports on data from Phases 2, 3, 4 and 5.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>No. of</th>
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Table 1: The research method for the project as a whole
1. Telephone and face to face interviews with senior officials and stakeholders in VET and industrial relations. 19
2. Telephone and face to face interviews with targeted senior stakeholders in each of the nine occupational areas. 44
3. 19 company case studies (two per occupation - three in retail), involving interviews with managers, workers, trainers, and including 31 specialised ‘Spotlight’ interviews (The latter data are not reported in this paper). 115 31
4. Analysis to produce occupational summaries.
5. Eight industry forums (waiter and chef were combined) to validate findings to date, through guided discussion of occupational summaries. 53
6. Training Package comparison (mainly through a desk audit). 6

The aim of Phase 1, in 2011-12, was to uncover perceptions of skill among senior national officials who were responsible in different ways for devising and implementing policy relating to skill in work. Telephone interviewees included senior officials from Commonwealth and State Governments responsible for training and industrial relations, statutory bodies, peak employer and employee bodies, and education system bodies. These officials were carefully selected as those with high-level government responsibilities and as leaders of national working parties, initiatives and committees in the area.

After Phase 1 the project began to focus on the nine selected occupations, which were proposed by the industry partner organisations. This paper reports on Phases 2, 3, 4 and 5 for the three relevant occupations. The research for these occupations was carried out by the authors of this paper. In Phase 2, industry-level interviews were undertaken across each of the occupational areas during 2012. We aimed at five targeted interviews per occupation: officers in the Skills Councils, employer associations, and trade unions; and senior staff in major TAFE Institutes and private providers (‘Registered Training Organisations’ [RTOs] ) which offered those qualifications. We were not always successful in gaining exactly the desired types of respondent due to the idiosyncratic nature of the training and industrial arrangements in some industries. The aim of these interviews was to set the context of industries and the occupations, discuss stakeholders’ perceptions of skill and to examine the outcomes of perception of skill on policy, companies, workers and Training Packages. The industry stakeholders were also very helpful in providing suggestions for case study sites.

Table 2: Industry-level interviewees for the three selected occupations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Job title</th>
<th>Organisation (pseudonyms used for training providers)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Retail assistant (non-supermarket)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job title</td>
<td>Organisation (pseudonyms used for training providers)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CEO</td>
<td>Service Skills Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CEO and Director, ARA Retail Institute (two interviews)</td>
<td>Australian Retailers Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Secretary</td>
<td>Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manager, Centre for Retail and Personal Services</td>
<td>South Coast TAFE Institute (public provider)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Director and CEO (two interviews)</td>
<td>Best Practice Training (private provider)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Security officer</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project Manager</td>
<td>Construction and Property Services Industry Skills Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manager, Compliance and Regulatory Affairs</td>
<td>Australian Security Industry Association Limited</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACT Branch Secretary &amp; National Assistant Vice President</td>
<td>United Voice trade union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior Educator, Security &amp; Safety</td>
<td>Metro Institute(public provider)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CEO and trainer</td>
<td>Complex Training Academy: Private RTO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Concrete products operator</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shop steward - Forklift driver in a large concrete company</td>
<td>Australian Workers Union delegate who was a workplace official in a large concrete company (No employed union official was allocated to this occupation)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Executive Officer</td>
<td>National Precast Concrete Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training Coordinator</td>
<td>A large civil construction company – partner with a TAFE Institute (No TAFE Institute provided training except in this mode)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Co-owner &amp; General Manager</td>
<td>Big Construction Training RTO</td>
</tr>
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</table>

In Phase 3, in 2012-13, we undertook 19 company case studies: two for each of the nine occupations under study and three for the retail sales assistant. In each case study, senior managers, HR managers, line managers, and workers were interviewed. During these interviews, perceptions of skill in the roles were discussed, and evidence of the use of skill by the workers was gathered. All of the case studies also used an instrument, the so-called “Ways of Seeing” tool which contained three components: employability skills; six other selected skill indicators (such as level of autonomy) based on the literature; and literacy and numeracy requirements. This instrument was originally developed for a pilot project (Smith & Teicher, 2011) and was extended for use in this project. For each indicator, participants were asked to mark the requirements of the occupation that was being studied as either low, medium or high. The “Ways of Seeing” tool was administered to all people interviewed in each company, but was in relation only to the occupation being studied. So, for example, in the retail assistant case studies, all participants were asked about the job of retail assistant, not their own jobs.
Details of the Phase 3 case studies for the three occupations are provided in Table 3 below. Three retail case studies were carried out because three organisations agreed to participate during the period of following up leads, and it was considered disrespectful not to accept all of the offers.

**Table 3: Details of company case study organisations for the three selected occupations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Case study sites (pseudonyms)</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Retail sales assistant (not supermarkets)</td>
<td>1. Books</td>
<td>1. Melbourne, Vic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Shoes</td>
<td>2. Melbourne, Vic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Airshop</td>
<td>3. Melbourne, Vic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Safeguard Co</td>
<td>2. Melbourne, Vic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concrete Products Machine Operator</td>
<td>1. Pre-mix Co</td>
<td>1. Ballarat, Vic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Pre-cast Co</td>
<td>2. Ballarat, Vic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In Phase 4, occupational summaries were produced for each occupation, analysing the data from Phases 2 and 3 of the project for each occupation (the industry-level interviews and the company case studies). In Phase 5, we completed a series of industry forums to review and validate the findings from Phases 2 to 4. Representatives of the relevant occupations from companies, RTOs, industry bodies and the industry skills councils themselves were invited to meet with the research team and provide feedback about the project’s findings. The research team was able to ask questions to clarify issues arising from the study at that point. Eight forums were held, one for each occupation, but with waiter and chef forums combined. The participants were provided with the Phase 4 Occupational Summaries. There were a small number of stakeholders unable to attend the forums, but keen to provide feedback and suggest extra fieldwork. As a result of these conversations, two short visits to concrete plants were undertaken to add more breadth to the case study base, and an additional teleconference was held with two concrete industry representatives.

For all of the qualitative fieldwork, including the industry forums in Phase 5, ethics approval was gained and participants agreed to their comments being included. All interviews were recorded and transcribed, with permission. The majority of interviews took between 45 minutes and one hour, and the industry forum discussions took about 90 minutes each.

In the final phase of relevance to this paper (Phase 6), we carried out a comparison of what we found about the skill in the occupations we studies compared with the relevant qualification. The purpose of this ‘Training Package examination’, in 2014, was to compare the skills in that occupation that we found in our research fieldwork with the skills and knowledge that are recorded in the qualification that aligned most closely with that occupation. In Australia, Training Packages are official national documents which contain units of competency for occupations, specifying skills and knowledge to be acquired, and required conditions for assessment of learners, gathered into qualifications (Smith & Keating, 2003). Our aim was to produce documents that could be useful when Training Packages were being reviewed or
updated. The qualifications were selected in consultation with the ISCs as those being most appropriate for the occupations being studied. For the three occupations examined in this paper, the qualifications were, respectively, the Certificate III in Retail Operations, the Certificate III in Security Operations, and the Certificate III in Manufactured Mineral Products. However, a planned series of industry forums on the Training Package comparison did not take place, at the request of the industry partners, due to political developments at the time in the area of VET curriculum. Hence we were not able to validate our findings and we do not discuss them in this paper. The comparison findings for all nine occupations are, however, analysed from a curriculum viewpoint in a paper by Smith, Smith, Hampson and Junor (2015).

The method for the phases of the project examining specific occupations was designed to utilise the benefits of case study research, as articulated for example by Yin (2009), in being able to examine the phenomenon in context, but to improve generalisability by the inclusion of two stages at which a broader, and expert, audience was consulted about the phenomenon (Cresswell, 2003). Qualitative research was selected as a research approach for the project as discussions about skill lean heavily on perspectives, which are best researched qualitatively (Maxwell, 2002); Attewell (1990) argues strongly for qualitative research in investigating skill.

FINDINGS

The research showed that all three jobs involved many technical and non-technical skills that were not generally recognised. Information about the skill content of the jobs was gathered through the Phase 2 and Phase 3 interviews and the completion of the ‘Ways of Seeing’ tool.

Retail qualifications are quite widely available but are not required in order to practice, and in the case study companies, they were rarely utilised and not required for entry. Concrete operator qualifications are very rarely delivered and were not used in the case study companies visited. The job of security operator requires a qualification to practice; however there was a general belief among interviewees that entrants to the industry were not well-prepared for the job, and on-the-job training needed to be provided to augment the qualification-based training.

Retail sales assistant: The role of the sales assistant was described as being to greet customers when they enter the store; ascertain from the customer what products they might be interested in purchasing; apply product knowledge to guide the customer to making a purchase; close the sale and process payments. Specific skills for the job included computer skills, including but not confined to the operation of sales equipment; the appropriate application of product knowledge which is vitally important in some environments (e.g. shoe shops, bookshops); a high level of expertise in ‘reading’ customers; and the ability to juggle looking after existing customers with acknowledging customers coming into the store.

There was a high emphasis on the possession of sales assistants’ ‘personal’ skills in their recruitment and in their performance. In recruitment, experience and maturity were seen as better indicators of the possession of these skills than formal qualifications, even when the value of a formal qualification for the role was acknowledged. However, the case studies also showed the requirement for more
technical skills including a heavy emphasis on product knowledge and closing the sale. As customer knowledge had grown with the internet, so the requirement for sales assistants to have a full mastery of product knowledge had come to define the public’s perception of what a good customer experience comprises. In effect, these personal and more technical skills were combined into what some interviewees described as the ability to "read" the customer and know how to nudge customers towards purchase. There was significant correlation between the views of the stakeholders, management and sales assistants about the level of skills required for the job. If anything, in one case the management identified the role as more skilled than those in the role.

Many of the skills identified as being needed in the role were difficult to articulate, and were seen as personal traits or natural qualities, rather than being considered in the traditional notion of skill. These perceptions seemed to affect training practices, in that training for staff in these roles in the case studies was not well developed and was largely on the job. Skills were seen as being acquired as much as something to be taught. Although one of the case study companies made formal qualifications available for long term employees seen as having a future at the company, generally the qualifications were not greatly valued, even by employees working for that company.

The case studies also showed, however, that retail work could offer fast tracked career pathways. This is contrast to the widespread public perception of low skilled work and lack of advancement in the industry and the notion that retail is, in some way, a “transitional” occupation for those seeking “better” work in other industries. In fact, all three company case studies produced strong evidence of effective career pathways in management which were often filled by relatively young people who had gained significant experience on the shop-floor.

Security officer: Interviewees in Phases 2 and 3 pointed out a range of security roles including crowd control, aviation security, concierge duties, security for shopping centres and public buildings, armed guard for ATM fill-up, and technology-related security work (e.g. CCTV monitoring). The case study sites were, respectively, a major museum and a shopping centre, and the job involved patrolling premises, responding to instructions from a supervisor, dealing with incidents among members of the public, assisting colleagues in incidents, and helping with tasks that were more properly part of the job of those employed in the premises or those visiting, for example (in the shopping centre) assisting with setting up and dismantling exhibits, directing tourists to sites, or (in the museum) helping to control school parties. The security officers used a radio to communicate with each other and their supervisors. The officers needed to record their patrolling, for example by ‘touch point’. They needed to write incident reports if anything unusual occurred and could be required to appear in court. From time to time they would need to manage evacuation of the premises, in conjunction with others, and to assist in other emergencies; for example, if a customer had a heart attack. It should be acknowledged as a limitation that the company case studies focused on the permanent full-time workforce. We did not undertake field research in the large casual workforce servicing sporting and other events.
Security had a diverse workforce divided into casual and full-time mature people. The job was an occupation with occasional but high risk associated with people's behaviour. There was need for communication skills rather than physical strength; companies recruited for inter-personal skills, because situations were generally best defused by 'talking down'. There was a requirement for qualification-based training, but a lack of satisfaction with its quality and/or efficacy. The industry had a business model based on contracting, driving wages down and hence further devaluing the occupation. There was a high public awareness of the job, but low public perception, which impeded the ability to recruit good staff.

Concrete products operator: The concrete industry had two main arms: pre-mix and pre-cast. Pre-mix concrete plants produced ‘wet concrete’ which was sent out in liquid form to building sites and homes where construction was taking place. Pre-cast concrete plants produced concrete products such as bridges for freeways and panels for large buildings; sometimes they had a pre-mix plant on site. The occupation examined in pre-mix concrete was batcher. The batcher oversaw the mixing of the concrete, which was usually then loaded into trucks for delivery to building sites. In the ‘pre-cast’ arm of the industry, a range of jobs within a concrete works were studied. Workers were nearly all male and mature-aged and typically had undertaken a range of previous jobs (generally, but not always, other jobs regarded as low-skilled) before entering the industry. While there was some variation, the workers interviewed generally enjoyed the work although it was stressful, particularly in wet concrete; and, in pre-cast, heavy. In general the evidence from the stakeholder interviews and the company case studies suggested that concrete manufacture, both ‘pre-mix’ and ‘pre-cast' concrete formed part of a ‘hidden’ industry which was little understood by the public unless they happened to end up in employment in the industry. Concrete manufacture was not seen as an industry to which people actively aspire.

Workers were not required to have formal qualifications in the case study sites or in the two sites visited in supplementary fieldwork, and yet the jobs were complex and could take a long time to learn. In particular literacy and numeracy requirements were quite high, although under-rated. The low rating could be because they were used routinely and therefore became invisible, or even because they were skills learned at school and therefore regarded as low-level. While qualifications were available for the occupation, they seemed to be little used and it is not clear why this was so. While numbers of workers were not great, the industry – particularly wet concrete because it has to get to the customer quickly - is necessarily widespread. Also, the risks in the work were high; if mistakes are made, in either branch of the industry, consequences were great.

The occupation of concrete products operator appeared to be ill-defined, which could add to the perception of low skill. The two branches of the industry were quite different in some ways, although there was agreement among stakeholders that it was appropriate to have the same qualification for the occupations of batcher and ‘labourer’. But the lack of clear definition perhaps contributed to the low penetration of qualification based training and also to the lack of public awareness of the work. Even within the same ‘sub-section’ of the occupation there was a lack of consensus about matters such as the time it took to become a skilled operator; estimates for
concrete labourer in varied from six months to one year; for batcher there was more of a consensus, around one year.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This section is based on the analysis that took place in Phase 4 of the research project and on the discussions at the industry forums in Phase 5. It is therefore based on a wide range of sources: the four to seven industry-level interviews with experts in each industry nationally; the two (or in one instance, three) case study sites for each occupation, involving interviews at several levels of each company, and the use of the ‘Ways of Seeing’ tool with the interviewees; and the industry forums, with an average of seven experts from the occupational area per forum.

In all three occupations discussed in this paper, discussions with the workers about the skills required in a job were often difficult. Workers had not often had reason to think about the level of skill they required to perform the work. This may be related to the lack for formal qualifications based training that workers especially in the retail and concrete products industries. Workers found it difficult to articulate many of the skills they deployed. Even with the aid of tools such as he ‘Ways of Seeing’ tool, the retail workers, for example, still found it hard to talk about the skills they used. They also under-rated the product knowledge required for the job. The managers, on the other hand, were easily able to articulate the skills involved in the job of sales assistant.

Related to the lack of recognition of the level of skill required to work effectively in the industry, workers tended to internalise external negative perceptions of skill in the job. A common factor amongst workers in all three occupations was that they did not realise the level of skill that was inherent in their jobs and this tended to agree with the community perceptions of their jobs as unskilled. Thus, retail sales assistants, for example, tended to find it difficult to express the level of skill required to work effectively in the industry. They tended to agree with the common notion that retail could only attract “transient” workers such as students who would naturally progress to “real” jobs once they had finished their study. Despite the fact that retail offered its workers excellent career pathways into well-paid management positions, the sales assistants often discounted this knowledge against the common view of jobs in the industry. Another reasons for the low esteem in which workers held their occupation was the perception of the supermarket checkout operator as a representation of retail in general, when the majority of retail workers are in fact employed outside the supermarket sector. Security officers similarly had a fairly low perception of the worth of the work which they did, despite the difficult situations with which they had to cope and their responsibilities for safeguarding people and property.

Perceptions of low skill in these occupations amongst the public and amongst workers in their industries had significantly poor consequences for workers in those industries and occupations. A key consequence that was confirmed by the industry forum participants was the relatively low pay for the occupations. In all three occupations discussed in this paper, union representation and density were low. The lack of strong union representation allied with the poor perception of the skill required in the jobs results in relatively low levels of pay for these occupations.
Another consequence of the poor perception of skills in the three occupations was the poor employer take up of qualifications. This was not the case in security, where licensing required that workers had undertaken the qualification, although participants in Phase 2 and Phase 5 reported that the training was often of low quality) But in neither retail nor concrete, were workers required to undertake the qualifications that were available. The awareness of concrete qualifications in particular was extremely low. Retail qualifications, though easily available and still funded at the time of the research, were not viewed by employers in the industry as necessary or, in some cases, as useful to the workers. The underutilisation of qualifications was somewhat at odds with the views of managers about the skill demanded by the occupations. The lack of respect for the qualifications could be linked to the comparative recency of such qualifications. In all three instances, the qualifications were less than thirty years old and sprung from the Australian ‘training reforms’ on the 1980s (Smith & Keating, 2003). In contrast, the fitting and machining occupation, also researched in this project, had a qualification that was highly respected and that had been in existence for much longer. It is possible that tradition played a part in this; it is also possible that qualifications which were in place prior to the introduction of competency-based training in Australia were more respected. The project was not able to explore these issues; however what did seem to emerge (e.g. in Phase 5 forums) was that the absence of well-respected qualifications that were in genuine demand by most employers played some part in the low status of the three occupations studied in this paper.

Some suggestions were gathered about how the perceptions of skill in work might be more closely aligned to the real nature of these occupations. Responses tended to vary among the occupations depending on the extent to which the occupation was visible to the community. Most respondents in retail and security tended to emphasise the need for better marketing of the occupation. In retail in particular it was thought that there was little awareness of the excellent career prospects that existed in the industry. In security there tended to be an emphasis on combating the public image of ‘bouncers’ who relied on brawn and not brain. The security industry was keen to attract applicants to the industry who understood this and the training providers emphasised that they sometimes counselled people out of the industry who had been attracted by the public image. The concrete industry seemed to be less concerned with the public image, perhaps resigning itself to the fact that the industry would never be a first choice in the labour market.

The findings of the project do not align neatly with the literature on perceptions of skill in the occupations. In all three of the occupations examined in this paper, respondents identified that a range of skills was required, including both “soft” and “technical” skills. Security work and retail work were based mainly on soft skills with a relatively low emphasis on the technical aspects of the job. However concrete work required a far higher level of technical skills. There was also variation in the degree of formality of the training required. Retail and concrete work did not require formal, qualifications-based training. Security work, on the other hand, despite the emphasis on soft skills, is a licensed occupation and formal qualifications were required to practice.

If we use the proxy (Esposto, 2008) lens for looking at skill, security should be regarded as skilled, as it requires a qualification, and yet it is not. Perhaps this is
because the qualification is not well-regarded, or perhaps because it is an occupation that relies primarily on ‘soft’ skills. The pilot project (Smith & Teicher, 2011) had already identified that soft skills are highly-valued in higher-status occupations yet were seemingly little valued in lower-status service-sector jobs. Thus the value of ‘soft skills’ is highly problematic. If we turn to social construction of skill theory, it certainly has some application; retail is definitely a feminised occupation, yet security and concrete are both ‘male’ occupations; and certainly none of the occupations are well-unionised.

On balance, we feel that further analysis of the data from this project is likely to lead to an extension and critique of both proxy theories and social construction theories of skill.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to acknowledge the other two chief investigators involved in this project: Anne Junor and Ian Hampson (University of New South Wales); research assistant Kerrie Scott who carried out on the case study visits for concrete products operator; and research assistant Sally Burt, who undertook some of the data analysis for the occupation of retail assistant.

REFERENCES


