

qualification  
how employers value  
getting accredited  
training value use  
leading to qualification  
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job training

## Getting the job done

How employers use and value accredited training leading to a qualification

*Ray Townsend*

*Peter Waterhouse*

*Marg Malloch*

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How employers use and value accredited  
training leading to a qualification

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The views and opinions expressed in this document are those of the author/project team  
and do not necessarily reflect the views of ANTA or NCVER.

## Publisher's note

Additional information relating to this research is available in *Getting the job done: How employers use and value accredited training leading to a qualification—Case studies*. It can be accessed from NCVER's website <<http://www.ncver.edu.au>>.

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# Key messages

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- ✧ Generally, qualifications are viewed by employers as serving two purposes: as a 'gate-keeping' mechanism at point of recruitment of new employees and as a development tool, providing a career pathway for existing employees.
- ✧ Compliance with external regulations and/or standards emerges as a key motivator for acceptance of formal qualifications by employers.
- ✧ Different interpretations of what is meant by the terms 'qualifications', 'competency' and 'work-related learning' influence the value which individual employers place on them. Training providers may also have a different understanding of these terms.
- ✧ An innovative and responsive partnership between training providers and employers is more likely to make employers view vocational education and training (VET) qualifications positively.

# Executive summary

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This study investigates employers' views on the value of qualifications. It is a qualitative study and involved interviews with 14 employers and their representatives in different companies across eight industry sectors.

The study found that, generally, qualifications are viewed by employers as serving two purposes:

- ✧ as a 'gate-keeping' mechanism at point of recruitment
- ✧ as a development tool, providing a pathway for employees.

All of the employers had their own unique stories to tell. They articulated the issues and responded to our questions on the basis of their experiences and in relation to their businesses. Many employers want to make their own judgements about a person's skill level. Employers interviewed utilise qualifications as 'indicators of potential rather than proof of competence'.

Companies which offer employees the opportunity to gain qualifications for development within a job are usually medium to large. Typically, the qualifications can range across certificates I–III and include licences such as crane driving, rigging, scaffolding, forklift driving, certification in first aid and occupational health and safety. Some of the qualifications are recognised under the Australian Qualifications Framework but much of the training did not lead to a recognised national qualification.

The discussions with employers overall found that they chose to value qualifications for the following reasons:

- ✧ because they trust the qualification and feel that a person with a certain qualification will get the job done
- ✧ because there is a compliance issue—contractual obligations, standards and regulations make it mandatory for employees to have certain qualifications
- ✧ because the government offers the employer an incentive—if the training offered by the employer leads to a qualification, then the employer gets a contribution from the government
- ✧ because it is good industrial relations and human resources policy to offer employees career paths through qualifications, and this leads to effective working relationships and higher levels of morale in the workplace.

For many employers, qualifications are not an issue at all. For them, what matters is capability and expertise and actual performance on the job. These employers engage in a range of training activities, including informal training, experiential learning and development of people, as well as accredited training. As one employer commented: 'Competence is experience and verified in action, and they will believe it when they see it'.

Employers placed a very high value on informal and on-the-job learning. For many employers contributing to this study, particularly those in smaller enterprises, formal training does not come into the picture. They are too busy coaching, checking, demonstrating, explaining, correcting, challenging, supervising and supporting their staff to be thinking about 'training'. The



resounding message to come through from the interviews is that employers value learning—irrespective of whether this leads to a formal qualification.

Throughout the interviews employers made many comments about their relationships with providers, particularly their desire for personal contact with providers for flexibility and responsiveness, and for providers who have a business orientation.

# Introduction

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## Background

Australia's national training framework was created in 1996 as a means by which nationally consistent vocational education standards could be established and maintained. The aim of the system is to enhance national productivity and competitiveness by building the national skills base. Through the use of training packages, consistent and agreed competency-based standards regulated by the Australian Quality Training Framework ensure that qualifications are consistent, yet respond to and reflect local needs. In this way employer and employee skill requirements can be met and maintained.

Constructed around these industry-determined national competency standards, the national training framework is described as being industry-driven (Hawke 2002a). Hawke (2002b) claims that the policy framework assumes that most of industry is aware of and is actively involved in its development. One might assume for instance, that most employers will be aware of training packages and their use. However, Moy and Hawke (1997) in a survey of the introduction of training packages reported that there was minimal or no involvement by workplaces in the formulation of training packages. This applied to an even greater degree to small business.

The situation has improved somewhat in the ensuing period. The National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) Employer Satisfaction Survey for 2001 confirms relatively high levels of employer satisfaction with the vocational education and training (VET) system. The Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) review of training packages (ANTA 2002, 2003a) also signals some good news. It reports enthusiasm about training packages from a number of key stakeholder groups, including employers. Commentary in the ANTA review indicates some success in the implementation of training packages:

- Their effective use by both industry and individual employers
- Increased relevance and better meeting of workplace needs
- RTOs' becoming increasingly responsive to learner and employer needs. (ANTA 2002, p.5)

Nevertheless, the review also identified significant challenges, including the ongoing need for professional development for VET practitioners and:

- The time and skills needed to translate Training Packages into teaching and learning programs and develop the required supporting resources. (ANTA 2002, p.5)

The intent and design of training packages and the importance of workplace delivery has challenged practitioners of technical and further education (TAFE) institutes and registered training organisations to provide qualifications that are appropriate to individual learners and employers, and industry generally. On the other hand, as Hawke (2002b) notes, firms are increasingly being asked to get involved in a level of training which they perceive as not 'core business'.

It is against this backdrop of seemingly contradictory and challenging circumstances that this project examined how a selection of employers actually perceive and use qualifications.

## Purpose of the study

The aim of this study was to investigate the use and value of qualifications to employers. The study was premised on an understanding that employers do not necessarily value training to the same extent as VET professionals.

VET professionals work within a national training system which operates from a set of assumptions and understandings about the value of qualifications. Employers carry their own assumptions and values. Our experience, as VET practitioners, consultants and researchers, as well as some previous research (Ridoutt et al. 2002) suggested that some of these assumptions might be worthy of further investigation and evaluation. This study provided a valuable opportunity to do so.

Using a qualitative, case study-based approach, we talked directly with a small number of employers to get beneath the surface, to explore their ideas, perceptions and appreciation of qualifications.

We were concerned primarily with accredited qualifications issued under the Australian Qualifications Framework.

Such qualifications might be considered as discrete commodities with a life and value of their own. Certificates, statements of attainment, credentials or ‘tickets’ may be thought of as the key ‘products’ of the training system. They can be seen as ‘currency’, tradeable products which have a certain market value—a ‘face value’ to employers and to employees.

During the data-gathering for this study the employers we consulted discussed the use of ‘face value’ qualifications as indicators in processes of recruitment, gate-keeping and recognising potential in prospective employees. While a useful tool, it was apparent that employers felt that qualifications in this instance had a valuable, but limited applicability.

This pragmatic view of the use and value of qualifications was emphasised even more when questions about the value of qualifications for existing employees arose. It was made clear to the researchers at every interview that employers were primarily interested in the enhanced capability that qualifications potentially provided for their businesses.

Thus the value of the ‘qualification’ was not assessed in terms of an abstract ‘face value’ in the marketplace—but rather in terms of what difference it might make within their workplace.

So the employers we interviewed were vitally interested in what underpinned the qualification; its substance; its practical meaning. Hence the focus of this study was on the make-up of qualifications: the employer’s perceptions of content, structure, skills, learning experiences and environments which underpin and create qualifications.

At the enterprise level, as articulated by the participants in this study, interface with VET system qualifications chiefly concerned matters relating to the quality and relevance of the qualifications delivered, that is, the training dynamic. Employers’ comments about these aspects form the basis of our report. Key issues that emerged include trust in qualifications, the nature of competence, forms of training and the nature of workplace learning, contextualisation, customisation, and the costs and benefits of training for qualifications. Our discussion and analysis therefore follow these themes.

However, in considering employer demands of VET qualifications, it is also important that we acknowledge that there are other interests to be considered. The education and training system

has wider responsibilities. Recognising these wider concerns and appreciating the bigger picture highlights points of tension and potential contradiction.

It would be naïve, for instance, to assume that the needs of individual learners, trainees and apprentices will always be met by responding to the expressed needs of their employers. In the context of increasingly casualised, contracted and precarious employment, it is even more important to be mindful of where individuals sit within the system, regardless of employer and enterprise needs.

Taking into account the bigger picture means recognising the legitimate ‘small picture’ stakeholder needs of regions and communities. Recognising the potential impact of VET on communities and regions, Buchanan et al. (2001), for instance, argued for place to be factored back into VET policy considerations.

The revised national VET strategy, *Shaping our future 2004–2010* (ANTA 2003b) gives some explicit recognition to these issues by identifying individuals, regions and communities as important stakeholders in the national VET system. Hence, in this study, we consider employers’ views within this wider context.

## Research questions

The research questions for this study were clustered around a consideration of the industry contexts for the case studies and the perspective of the enterprises contributing to the study.

### Industry context

- ✧ Does the industry context shape or influence the use and value of qualifications?  
If so, how?
- ✧ Why do employers choose accredited qualifications?
- ✧ What role do industrial issues play in influencing employers’ perceptions of and commitment to training and qualifications?
- ✧ Is there consistency across different industries in the relative importance given to different types of qualifications?

### Enterprise perspective

- ✧ How are qualifications used by employers in their industries? For instance, is there a commitment to ‘in-house’ and ‘on-job’ training for qualifications or are qualifications primarily point-of-employment tools?
- ✧ Does the nature of the business affect the perceptions or importance of qualifications?
- ✧ Are VET qualifications from preferred providers valued more than others, and if so for what reasons?
- ✧ Does the size of the company have an impact on the importance of a qualification?
- ✧ How does the employer perceive the relationships between workplace learning, training and qualifications?
- ✧ What is the profile of qualifications held by employees in the organisation?
- ✧ Is there a perceived link between qualifications and productivity?

This report presents the findings of this research, while the support document, which can be found in the NCVET website, presents the actual case studies conducted across eight different sectors of the Australian economy. It is hoped that this report contributes to a richer

appreciation of the national VET system and how it is perceived by employers, and that this improved understanding will inform the system's capacity to manage the tensions involved and to respond more effectively to the needs identified.

## Defining terms

The terminology used in this report accords with the definitions contained in the ANTA Glossary (ANTA 2003a). As this study has unfolded we have found that many terms, commonly used and often taken for granted by VET professionals, have multiple interpretations, ambiguities, shades of meaning and subtleties of significance. We therefore begin with some discussion of key terms and issues of definition. In this way, both our position in this report and that of employers interviewed can be clarified.

## Qualifications

ANTA describes a qualification as 'certification awarded to a person on successful completion of a course in recognition of having achieved particular knowledge, skills or competencies'. While this may be a generally accepted meaning, the employers we interviewed tended to focus more on the skills and competencies that the qualification delivered, rather than the piece of paper or face value of the qualification. They had a more dynamic and practical view of the qualification. This view will be presented later in this report.

We also note that some employers in the case studies refer to workers who have 'achieved particular knowledge, skills or competencies' in an informal way, as qualified. For the purposes of this study, we recognise VET qualifications as those accredited through the Australian Qualifications Framework. However, we also recognise that some regulatory authorities and some private organisations like Microsoft offer their own forms of accreditation.

## Training

Formal training is generally taken to mean structured planned activity, organised by a teacher or trainer, leading to an accredited qualification.

Informal training or education is generally agreed to be learning through experience, reading and/or social contact:

A natural accompaniment to everyday life ... informal learning is not necessarily intentional learning, and so may well not be recognised even by individuals themselves as contributing to their knowledge and skills. (European Commission 1999)

## Contextualisation and customisation

Contextualisation is described by ANTA (2003a) as the 'addition' of industry information in order to make the learning program more relevant. This phenomena (at its worst and least understood) is referred to later in the report as changing the 'badging' on an otherwise unchanged program. As with the following definition of customisation, we believe that this definition is narrow and shallow, providing little guidance or encouragement to those who seek to make meaning in learning for employers and those learning. The work of Down (2002), Schofield (2000) and Chappell (1999a) is relevant to the elaboration of these key aspects of VET responsiveness.

Customisation involves designing a training program to meet the specific needs of the individual and/or enterprise. While ANTA explains this term by referring to the practice in training of 'combining competencies from different training packages to create a new qualification outcome', the researchers believe that effective customisation goes much further; that is, it also

involves ‘contextualisation’ and the construction or building of curriculum (that is, program style, methodology and content) around individual, team, or enterprise needs and goals. Such understandings are consistent with approaches to flexible delivery as defined by ANTA and advocated by Guthrie (ed. 2003).

# Methodology

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The central thrust of this investigation was a study of the perceptions, understandings and expectations of employers in relation to VET qualifications. It was essentially an interpretive study building on a long-established tradition of research method that reaches back to Berger and Luckman (1966) but more recently embraced by researchers investigating workplaces and vocational learning (Sandberg 2000; Down 2001, 2002). As Boud and Griffin note:

Qualitative research is not easy; it has its own standards of rigour ...[and] it is suitable for exploring only some kinds of questions—the meaning people attribute to their experiences, how people perceive themselves and their world and how they communicate their understandings. (quoted in Miller 1993, p.259)

To investigate questions about meanings and perceptions, this study utilised qualitative research methods. In particular it embraced the principle that the researchers were the key ‘research instruments’. This principle, well established in naturalistic or qualitative educational research, ensured that the researchers themselves had the sensitivity and flexibility to respond to issues and interpretations as they arose in the data-gathering process. They were able to request clarification, ask further, more probing questions when appropriate, and shape the data-gathering process in response to the issues and circumstances.

Previous quantitative studies also provided valuable background data on such issues as the perceptions of employers (Fairweather 1999) and satisfaction levels (NCVER 2001). In this study factors such as the size and age of an enterprise, the number of employees, and expenditure on training have been collected and analysed.

It is important to note here that these cases were not intended to be *representative* of their respective industries.

The case study approach was also informed by an ethnographic appreciation of the importance of industry cultures and enterprise contexts as factors shaping training and how qualifications are perceived within the industry.

A key challenge for this research was to avoid talking only to the ‘converted’ employers. It is reasonable to suggest that those enterprises which have already made a significant commitment to training, lifelong learning and the growth of a ‘training culture’ (Robinson & Arthy eds 1999) might view VET qualifications quite differently from those who have not embraced these strategies.

However, for VET policy-makers and the national system as a whole, the perceptions, insights and expectations of those who have *not* embraced training are just as important (perhaps even more important) than those already committed. Accessing these views was more problematic. For this reason the research design also included interviews, consultations and input, where possible, from industry and employer associations and industry training advisory bodies.

## Approach to data-gathering

Data have been gathered from a range of sources. Case studies from eight industry sectors were constructed from interviews with 14 enterprises offering a range of characteristics, including size and location. Sites in different states also helped to provide a national orientation to the project. The case studies include employers in:

- ✧ motor vehicle manufacturing
- ✧ coal mining/power generation
- ✧ baking
- ✧ seafood processing/retailing
- ✧ viticulture
- ✧ surfboard manufacturing
- ✧ hospitality accommodation
- ✧ information technology.

The purposeful sample of case studies included small, medium and larger enterprises; businesses in rural and urban locations; enterprises in several states; and enterprises that might be characterised as ‘new’ and ‘old’ economy businesses.

For each of the case studies a series of semi-structured interviews was carried out with the employer and/or employer representatives of the case study organisations (usually one to four interviews per organisation). The interviews have contributed vivid and coherent accounts of the use and value of qualifications within these enterprises.

In order to gather data, proformas were developed (see appendix B). The ‘enterprise profile’ provided information on the core activity, size, location and training profile of each case study organisation. The ‘respondent profile’ provided details on the role and background of respondents. The interviews were tape-recorded, and a written record of interview was also made.

In each case, a company/enterprise profile contributed to establishing the organisational commitment/attitude to training as a background to gathering more specific information in response to the research questions. The case study method here has valuable precedents in earlier work by Sefton, Waterhouse and Cooney (1995), Harris and Volet (1997), Malloch (1999), Malloch, Cairns and Hase (1998). However, this project was specifically concerned with gleaning information about the place and value of VET qualifications.

Interviews were conducted face to face, at the interviewee’s workplace. Some telephone interviews and email communications have been utilised to support a national research focus.

## The respondents

The principal interviewees for the case studies were management/employer representatives. In some instances, other stakeholders within the enterprise (middle managers, shop floor representatives, unionists) were sought to corroborate the data—thus enabling a form of ‘triangulation’ of the data (Lincoln & Guba 1985). Seventy per cent of interviewees were male; 63% of all participants were aged between 26 and 45 years of age. Only one interviewee had a non-English speaking background. One-third had some form of qualification, and, in some cases, multiple qualifications.



Where time, resources and circumstances permitted, industry training advisory body personnel, industry and employer groups and training providers were also interviewed, particularly in relation to their knowledge and experience of industry/employer attitudes and practices.

The case study organisations varied in number of employees, from 5000 in the automotive industry, to eight in the sole proprietor bakeries. Annual turnover for Excell Motor Company worldwide rivals that of the Australian gross domestic product, while for the power generation and wine industry organisations, both part of multinational conglomerates, turnover is more than \$15 million. On the other hand, the study also included businesses with turnovers of less than a million dollars per annum. Some of the businesses were located in regional or rural settings, others were firmly situated in metropolitan contexts. Some were clearly local in focus, catering to domestic, even neighbourhood markets. Others were truly global industries, with both suppliers and customers well beyond Australian shores.

Employment modes in the companies studied also varied: the power industry organisation used a combination of both permanent and contract employees; the wine production company, a combination of casual and permanent staff and included some trainees. The baking enterprises were essentially family businesses with family members as the core staff and ongoing employees. In the surfboard-making enterprises, the company owners worked with an itinerant progression of employees. It is difficult to draw generalisations across the different sites and businesses.

In all, interviews were conducted in 14 businesses to construct the case studies.

## Enterprise profiles of employee qualifications

The study also sought to establish profiles of qualifications—as well as other basic demographic information—on the employees in the organisations participating in the study. Some of this information is summarised in table 1.

**Table 1: Case study participants—employee qualifications profile (% of workforce)**

Participant	Industry sector	Total employees	Degree/ diploma holders	Trade	IT	Industry certs	Other
North Star Wines	Wine production	2000	5	15		50	30
Biggs Power	Power generation	100+	30	20	10	30	10
Excell	Automotive	5200	60*	10	0	78	0
Bake on	Baking	8	0	25	0	0	0
Coast Bake	Baking	8	0	25	0	00	0
Bake Right	Baking	14	0	17	0	0	17
Sweet Delight	Baking	30	0	13	0	90	0
Coastal	Seafood	11	0	0	0	9	0
Fisherman's Basket	Seafood	24	0	0	0	83	0
Seaside Village	Hospitality	100+	0	15	0	10	75
Wild Bill	Surfboard manu.	6	0	0	0	0	0
Wave Wizard	Surfboard manu.	12	0	0	0	0	0
Ram Ltd	Info tech	100+	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Curve	Info tech	25–50	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

Notes: \* % applies to management staff only

These data were gathered directly from participants, not through any examination of official records. As such, they may not be completely accurate.

There are a number of features of note revealed in this brief compilation of employee qualifications.

The first is the comparatively large percentages in the 'other' column. We know that in all enterprises these are qualifications considered not relevant to that particular workplace. For enterprises other than Excell and North Star, the 'other' category is an indicator of high levels of casualisation of the workforce. Senior secondary or tertiary students also make up a high proportion of the workers in one of the case study organisations.

Secondly, we note the understandable lack of diversity of qualification in the smaller enterprises, where trade qualifications predominate.

## Literature review

A literature review was conducted on topics relevant to the value of qualifications and training, along with theoretical perspectives in this area. A number of the theoretical considerations addressed in the literature review informed the interviews conducted during the case studies.

## Project monitoring

A reference group was established to monitor and guide the progress of the project. Members were from TAFE, industry associations, a large manufacturer, private consultancy, a new economy industry and higher education. Members of the reference group are given in appendix A.

# Literature review

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## Introduction

A wide range of research studies and perspectives could be considered relevant to this study. However, there is not the scope in this review to explore all the possibilities in the literature. The review is therefore confined to brief references to some of the key perspectives. The review has been structured to reflect literature addressing:

- ✧ the value of qualifications
- ✧ the value of training
- ✧ some theoretical perspectives.

## The value of qualifications

### Licensing and compliance

In an interesting study which provided a useful starting point for the current research, Ridoutt et al. (2002) investigated ‘the relationship between total competence requirements of an enterprise for the performance of specific jobs and that part of the competence that needed, in the opinion of employers, to be formally recognised’ (p.6). Perhaps not surprisingly, the study identified a perceived ‘gap’ between the ‘total competence’ required and the competencies that employers believed should be formally recognised as valuable to the qualification. The study highlights the formal qualification as only one of several possible outcomes of training—not necessarily the outcome most valued by employers. Ridoutt et al. conclude their report by noting:

This study was initiated to explore the seemingly simple question of the value of qualifications as a measure of the outcome of training effort in the eyes of enterprises. The beguilingly simple answer is that qualifications are not significantly valued by employers as outcomes of their own training efforts, although this response varies ...

(Ridoutt et al. 2002, p.62)

One form of recognition the Ridoutt et al. study did note was the significance of various forms of occupational licensing—or the importance of various ‘tickets’ to enable vocational practice in different contexts.

Occupational licensing is conducted for a variety of purposes—from the establishment of statutes that prohibit practice in the occupation without a designated credential, to the use of credentials as quality assurance for services, with or without government backing. It can also take the form of threshold-level qualifications to set minimum entry requirements to a sector of employment. This has frequently been used in the public sector. As Rottenberg and Simon (eds 1980) have noted, occupational licensing has not resulted so much from consumer demand, but rather from within occupational communities. Stenning and Associates (2002), in a survey of the implications of licensing for the implementation of training packages, reported that licensing

regulatory authorities represented a parallel form of jurisdictional credentialling across all states and territories. They reported little evidence of consistency in assessment forms across regulatory systems and with training packages:

The diverse nature of the occupational regulatory environment and its associated processes can make it difficult for national ITABs to reach agreement with industry regulators as to the use of Training Packages as a means of satisfying their skill and knowledge-based requirements. (Stenning & Associates 2002, p.8)

The Ridoutt et al. (2002) study indicated that an employer's commitment to qualifications needs to be considered in the context of licensing and along with their need to comply with other regulatory frameworks stipulating qualifications or credentials as mandatory for practice.

## Trust in the community and labour markets

The preceding argument also appears in Keating's (2000) analysis of the use and value of qualifications within the labour market. He suggests that qualifications are 'essentially about closure and restriction on the part of occupational and institutional (educational) communities' (p.2). In other words, qualifications are used by some groups with a vested interest to control the entry of individuals into these communities.

Keating also makes the significant point that, ultimately, 'Qualifications are based upon "communities of trust"' (OECD 2001). Qualifications controlled or endorsed by relatively closed communities will tend to have a high degree of trust within the community. Broadening communities (as inevitably happens with the introduction of national standards) and loosening control by key stakeholders over qualifications, will reduce the degree of trust. The extent to which state intervention in the form of quality assurance (training packages and the Australian Quality Training Framework) can act as a substitute for the control by the communities (stakeholders) will vary. Keating's analysis provides a very useful overview of various arguments, opening up the taken-for-granted assumptions about qualifications being inherently good things to have (or to give). He notes 'there is a broad consensus of culture' that supports the contention that qualifications are 'assets that expand employment opportunities, especially for young people' (p.1). He notes (p.5) a number of criteria, some of which are pertinent to this study, that need to be considered when looking at the value of 'qualifications as currency' in the labour market.

These are:

- ✧ the structural characteristics of qualifications need to be considered
- ✧ the interaction between the structural characteristics of the qualifications and the labour market which exerts significant effect upon employer behaviour
- ✧ the influence of industry and labour market structures on demand
- ✧ broad cultural factors within a society/culture.

The research makes reference to the policy attention directed at the 'supply side' of the Australian qualifications market, which Keating claims has been 'premised upon an analysis that employer demand has been met by an imperfect supply response' (see Ryan 1999 for contrary perspective on this issue). This suggests that employers are not satisfied with the skill levels and/or the responsiveness of providers operating within the national training system. The implication is that perhaps the level of trust in qualifications is declining in some areas.

Keating also makes reference to the inflation of qualifications and a focus on credentialling 'rather than an educative or skills formation function' (Keating 2000, p.8).

Warrington (2001) makes a similar observation in the context of his review of the training system in the United Kingdom. He highlights the dangers for VET systems if the assessment tail begins to wag the training dog. In considering key skills for employability, Warrington notes that United

Kingdom employers have begun to express some frustration with an over-emphasis upon assessment systems for qualifications. He notes:

The future for these skills will be brighter, if the UK does not 'go overboard' on rigorous assessment and external testing. A turn-around has already occurred on the insistence that the national 'key skills' qualification is a requirement of A Level students (both academic and vocational). (Warrington 2001, p.12)

## The value of training

### The benefits of accredited training

Another relevant body of literature—with a strong theme of economic analysis—addresses questions about the return on investment for training.

While the orthodox view sees such correlations in positive terms, others express concern about the extent to which the VET system is driven by and assessed purely in terms of economic measures. Yeatman (1994, pp.115–16) observes 'vocational and educational training tends to be viewed economically, in terms of how that can enhance productivity as distinct from knowledge'. Moy (2001), building on the work of Phillips (1991), discusses how the term 'return on investment' had its origins in the fields of finance and accounting. Their suggestion is that it may be more useful to talk about 'return on training investment' or simply return(s) on training, and to adopt broader, more inclusive and holistic approaches to evaluation which embrace both quantitative and qualitative indicators of value.

Kilpatrick and Allen (2001) highlight the difficulty of quantifying returns to enterprises from training. Blandy et al. (2000) looked for evidence linking on-the-job training and starting wages, wage growth and productivity growth. Their survey established positive links between improved profitability and higher levels of training. This was particularly true in industry sectors where recruitment and retention were issues.

Sloan (1994, p.130) comments on perceived links between training and its benefits, suggesting that an uncritical 'more training is better' policy approach has emerged which is at odds with return on investment strategies. She notes:

More latterly, an additional objective has been the establishment of nationally consistent training and skill standards. More training is seen as better, rather than the benefits of training being weighed in relation to the costs of training. (Sloan 1994, p.160)

As suggested above, weighing the benefits involved taking account of many factors. Maglen, Hopkins and Burke (2001) conducted a comprehensive comparative case study investigating management processes and work practices to help interpret any correlations between training and productivity. They refer to overseas research indicating that productivity levels result from a combination of human resources practices, forward planning and training, not training alone.

Maglen, Hopkins and Burke (2001) found that firms with higher levels of productivity in manufacturing and services considered that their successes were predicated on training of personnel. Training was seen as an ongoing process.

... if lasting benefits are to be expected, it means building learning into everything that happens. (Maglen Hopkins & Burke 2001, p.74)

This finding is broadly consistent with a wider body of work suggesting the importance of organisational or workplace learning culture(s) and a systemic approach (Senge 1990; Sefton, Waterhouse & Cooney 1995; Harris & Volet 1997; Hager 1997). Maglen, Hopkins and Burke also found a high level of firm support for customised national industry standards.

The Office of Training and Further Education in Victoria produced a comprehensive literature review (1998) *Benefits to employers from an investment in training*, and a report, *Return on training investment* (1997). In the 1997 report, the profitability of firms is directly related to the quantity and quality of training provided by them and is also reflected in firms paying above-market wage rates and in experiencing difficulties in their finding suitable employees. Informal learning and training methods, on and off the job, were regarded by many businesses as superior to formal classroom training because real knowledge was learned in the former. There was a perception that classroom learning is about paper qualifications. For the businesses, the most important skills were communication, team working and leadership skills.

The evidence presented here tends to confirm studies cited earlier (Ridoutt et al. 2002), that the substance of qualifications, the training experience and its outcomes, are more important to employers than qualifications per se.

## Employer satisfaction levels with VET provision

Fairweather (1999), reports that satisfaction levels expressed by employers were reasonably high. However, he also notes that employers are increasingly critical and sophisticated ‘consumers’ and that there are gaps between their expectations and the level of service provided. He makes the point that, like other industries facing increasing demands, the VET system will need to give priority and continuing attention to employers’ expectations and ways of continuously improving the system.

NCVER conducts regular surveys of employer views on VET. The results of the 2001 survey include the following statements:

- ✧ Overall, around 80% of employers of recent VET graduates reported being satisfied to very satisfied with VET providers.
- ✧ Over two-thirds of employers (69%) of recent VET graduates held the view that VET system is providing graduates with skills appropriate to employers needs.
- ✧ Some 84% of employers were very, or quite satisfied with the skills of graduates.
- ✧ Some 82% of employers were very, or quite satisfied with VET course delivery.
- ✧ Around three-quarters (74%) of employers of recent VET graduates held the view that training pays for itself through increased worker productivity.
- ✧ The reason for not having VET graduate employees most cited by employers (58%) was that VET qualifications are not relevant to their industry (NCVER 2001).

While, from a VET sector perspective, the overall view presented in the 2001 survey is positive, respondents to the survey also had views about areas for improvement. The statement ‘There should be more work experience or work placements as part of vocational training’ was supported by 84% of employers of recent VET graduates, and 77% of employers of recent VET graduates agreed that ‘The VET system needs to provide more practical job skills’.

A third of employers of recent VET graduates agreed, or strongly agreed, that ‘The VET system does not take into account the needs of employers’. Over three-quarters (76%) also agreed, or strongly agreed, that ‘It is difficult to tell what a person can actually do from their educational qualifications’. Thus, while the overall picture is positive, there were clearly areas where there is a perception that things could be better. One such area was identified as ‘the relevance of course content’ which was rated by 29% of employers of recent VET graduates as the highest priority for improvement (NCVER 2001).

## Demand for VET qualifications

It is assumed that, in a demand-driven system such as the VET system purports to be, demand for programs and services will be expressed directly by employers as well as other users. Kilpatrick and Allen (2001) have conducted a review of literature examining such issues. Their review offers a comprehensive overview of the multiple factors affecting 'demand' for VET. Key points include:

- ✧ There has been a neglect in policy of 'learning to improve quality of life and knowledge' (in favour of focus on work and work-related issues).
- ✧ There is need for attention to individuals and communities.
- ✧ Some areas/people have less choice (in VET) than others.
- ✧ 'Knowledge work', soft skills and literacy/numeracy are cited as areas where demand is expected to increase.

The review notes that 'the relative contribution of economic and social factors to the demand for VET by various stakeholder groups requires further research'. Kilpatrick and Allen (2001) adopt an inclusive definition of stakeholder groups, and their review is broad in scope. It raises some concerns with the concept of 'user choice', suggesting there is 'a dearth of empirical evidence about the quality of decision-making by enterprises and students'. However, the review is also sensitive to the inadequacy of the metaphor of 'demand' within a simplistic market demand–supply model. It notes the need to provide support and facilitation in articulating needs and in meeting the identified demand.

There is some discussion of the factors which cause industry/employers frustration in dealing with TAFE. The needs of smaller businesses in particular are mentioned. The authors also discuss the complexities of price and cost issues affecting demand for VET. The review notes that 'There is no systematic research into the impact of price of VET on demand'.

Echoing studies cited elsewhere in this study, Kilpatrick and Allen's review reports on research which shows that fewer employers provided structured training, with manufacturing recording the greatest reduction. They note, that demand from enterprises for apprentices and trainees:

... is expected to fall ... a third of enterprises saying that apprenticeships and traineeships do not meet the needs of their business ... As well, there is a concern about the low level of award completion in courses sponsored by enterprises ... larger enterprises with more complex work practices are more likely to provide structured training ... The review also notes that ... Many small business managers and owners are not resourced or skilled enough to determine training needs ... and lack negotiating power ... there is confusion and lack of knowledge about the training system ... (Kilpatrick & Allen 2001, pp.45–7)

The authors suggest reconsideration of the definition(s) of industry, suggesting that more recognition might be given to occupational groups with similar functions rather than traditional 'industry'-based definitions.

A different perspective on the 'demand' for training may be gained through consideration of employers' contributions to it. Hall, Buchanan and Considine (2002) note that the research findings on employers' contributions to funding training in Australia are unambiguous. They note:

- ✧ According to OECD data Australian employers have been amongst the worst in the world in creating high skilled white collar jobs.
- ✧ While there are some differences between industries, employers' contribution to training and education funding has been falling.
- ✧ The training provided to non-standard workers is limited at best and at worst non-existent.

(Hall, Buchanan & Considine 2002, p.1)

This last point is particularly significant, given the changing nature and patterns of work and employment, which have seen a significant increase in forms of non-standard and precarious employment. These authors also stress that there is ‘strong evidence that the skills that are presently in much of the Australian workforce are currently being under-utilised’ (Hall, Buchanan & Considine 2002, p.17). They stress the importance of reconsidering skills, training and employment issues in the context of ‘skills eco-systems’ and a broader more holistic appreciation of the policy context. The challenge, they suggest:

... is not just to raise the levels of funding provided by employers for training. The challenge is to change the regime that underpins current arrangements.

(Hall, Buchanan & Considine 2002, p.1)

The underpinning ‘regime’ they describe is shaped by policy, and by prevailing social, market and economic forces. It is the systemic and holistic interaction of these factors that needs to be understood. Complex as this challenge is, the authors note that there are precedents and guiding lights, both in Australia and overseas. In summary, they stress that employers ‘value what they pay for’:

Where employers invest in training they are more likely to value the skills that result and are more likely to ensure that those skills are deployed to productive ends. It is notable that two of the most developed and successful training regimes in the world—Denmark and France—both have in place training funds financed at least in part by industry levies.

(Hall, Buchanan & Considine 2002, p.37)

Since the publication of these reports, the classifications used and the modes of reporting have become more refined and sophisticated. In its recent reporting, NCVET (2001) gives considerable information on ‘module completers’: graduates who have ‘successfully completed at least one module’ (p.12) and left the system. This may indicate a change in the way that qualifications and training are being valued and used. Approximately 40% of module completers ceased study, claiming that they had ‘gained what they wanted from the training’ (p.12). While this trend appears to confirm an earlier comment on the value employers place on specific competencies, the extent of influence of employers through recruitment markets or workplace training practices is only speculative at this stage. More research and analysis needs to be done.

## Small-to-medium enterprises

A recurring theme in the literature concerns the particular circumstances of small-to-medium enterprises. Childs and Wagner (1998) and Field (1998) comment on the apparent difficulty of the VET system to respond effectively to the needs of small businesses. Gibb (1999) reframes the argument on ‘training’ in small business by addressing the issues of the training–learning culture. She makes the point that many small businesses ‘simply do not need the product’ that VET provides as ‘training’. However, this is not to say that small business does not have learning and development needs. Nevertheless, there is a need for a paradigm shift if VET is to respond effectively to these needs. Gibb concludes:

If we in the VET system devote our energies solely to the development of a training culture which focuses on the delivery of structured training leading to a qualification, we will miss opportunities to provide the small business sector with the support and cluster of services it needs and we will be irrelevant to its needs.

(Gibb 1999, p.60)

Ball and Freeland (2001) report that ‘firms that undertake programs of formal structured training and on-the-job training for their employees are highly likely to utilise the apprentice and trainee system for entry-level training’ (Ball & Freeland 2001, p.5). These authors also noted:

It would appear that firms that provide more than a quarter of their staff with on-the-job training are significantly more likely to train apprentices and trainees than other firms.



Firms that use the informal training method of job—rotation and job—exchanges are not likely to provide apprentice and trainee training. (Ball & Freeland 2001, p.22)

The size of the organisation was a factor influencing likelihood of apprentice and trainee training. Enterprises with more than 20 employees were ‘significantly more likely to provide apprentice and trainee training’ (p. 20). Not surprisingly, the study also found that enterprises with a high proportion of full-time employees and those which had expanded employment between 1994–95 and 1997–98 were significantly more likely to provide apprentice and trainee training (Ball & Freeland 2001, p.20).

## Some theoretical perspectives

The preceding section provides examples of research which informs our understandings—largely through quantitative data analysis. On the basis of such analysis, careful generalisations can be made and judgements might be formed to shape VET policy and practice.

As noted however, this study was based on an interpretive method, the aim being to select ‘information rich cases’ (Caulley 1994) and to explore and understand the meanings, interpretations and perceptions that case study informants carried about the issues in question. Hence we were interested in employers’ understandings and reactions to the ‘VET service’ they received in relation to qualifications.

This volume of the report recounts some of the stories of employers. However, before examining employer perspectives, it is important to elaborate on the understandings and concepts underpinning the study. In the following section we make reference to a wider body of literature which informed our interrogations of the case study sites and the qualitative data gathered on these issues.

This section is organised around key concepts such as:

- ✧ context and values
- ✧ conceptualising competence and capability
- ✧ workplace learning
- ✧ customisation.

### Context and values

Qualifications are centrepieces of the national training system and consequently credentialling has become a major activity, and an issue for employers and for the researchers.

Earlier comments by Keating (2000) and Warrington (2001) were noted regarding the tendency for training systems to emphasise the credential rather than genuine education or skill formation. Schofield (2000) points out that, at the end of the day, it is not credentials, but the development of genuine skills and understandings that will sustain the training system.

I don’t think the survival of apprenticeships and traineeships as an institution will depend on the quality of the system management, on the rigour of auditing, on the quality of the training provided, on the level of public subsidy, or even on community perceptions of their value. Rather I think their survival is likely to depend on the extent to which they actually develop genuine skills needed by employers to remain or become competitive and, at the same time are valued as genuine skill pathways by apprentices, trainees and their union representatives. (Schofield 2000, p.9)

Schofield (1999) also reminds us, as do some others (Hawke 2002a, 2002b; Chappell 1999a, 1999b; Falk & Smith 2001) that the VET system has a wide set of responsibilities and multiple

purposes and stakeholders. The processes of globalisation, she reminds us, have social and political dimensions, as well as economic and technological ones. Schofield argues that the social and political concerns are important areas of attention and action for VET managers and practitioners. Building communities, promoting access and equity, and ‘contributing to the evolution of Australian culture’ are essential VET tasks. Schofield notes that:

It is difficult to talk about Australian cultural identity in VET, because unlike the other educational sectors we don’t imagine VET as an Australian cultural institution ... we imagine VET far more narrowly—that it is simply about developing occupational technique. From this narrow view, we make assumptions that our teaching and learning is value free or even more blindly, culture free. (Schofield 1999, p.12)

However as Schofield points out, our choices—including all of our choices in teaching and learning—are expressions of our cultural values. She stresses:

The values of merit, a fair go, tolerance, environmental sustainability, gender equity and, above all, cultural pluralism must be represented in our teaching and learning materials. (Schofield 1999, p.12)

Such concerns, although they may not be fully reflected in the Australian Quality Training Framework, go to the heart of conceptualisations of quality in Australian VET qualifications.

As has been noted, Schofield is not the only critical thinker urging consideration of VET purposes and the wider social, political and cultural context. Chappell (1999a, 1999b) has argued that the systemic changes affecting the VET system are such that they challenge TAFE teachers’ understandings of their roles. He suggests that the influential discourses of ‘new vocationalism’ and ‘economic rationalism’:

... leave little room for ambiguity and contradiction. They provide no discursive space within which teachers are able to construct meaning making practices that are capable of spanning the world of work and education or the world of private enterprise and public service. (Chappell 1999a, p.12)

This narrowness of vision, Chappell argues:

... leaves some advocates ‘unable to imagine that the business of TAFE is not identical in every respect to the ‘business’ of business. (Chappell 1999a, p.12)

Seddon and colleagues have conducted a series of studies investigating the socio-political and economic shaping of education, including vocational education (Seddon, Angus & Brown 1997; Brown et al. 1996). They discuss the ‘re-norming’ of VET. Laurie Angus notes:

It is the fundamental shift in teaching and managing that has occurred and is still occurring in TAFE that I believe must be appreciated. There has been an underpinning shift in norms, values and purposes ... it is ludicrous to argue that the nature of work in TAFE—for teachers, managers and support staff—has not become more complex and demanding. (Angus cited in Seddon 1998, p.10)

Waterhouse, Wilson and Ewer (1999), reviewing literature on the changing nature and patterns of work and implications for VET, highlight the need for a paradigm shift in vocational education. Alluding to issues of contextualisation and customisation, they summarise the required shift as a movement away from a focus on prepackaged content for delivery towards ‘dialogue on designs’ for effective learning. Employers are one of the stakeholders identified as necessary partners in the dialogue processes.

More recently, Down (2002), investigating the qualitative impact of the introduction of training packages, highlights the achievements gained—but also the continuing challenges. She discusses the relationship between training packages, curriculum development, and teaching and learning processes. Down emphasises the need for professional development to help practitioners

understand both the nature and the potential of training packages and how they can be used innovatively and responsively. One of her research informants neatly sums up the situation.

The best teachers thrive on Training Packages. They use them flexibly because they are in tune with the needs of learners and Training Packages give them the opportunity to provide learning paths individually tailored to their learners. Other teachers feel uncomfortable within the loose framework that Training Packages present. They want more direction, more support. They want someone to tell them what to do and how to do it. It is not that they are bad teachers. It is just that they are followers and they expect someone to provide them with clear direction as to what they should do.

(STA participant cited in Down 2002, p.34)

These references highlight the context within which this study was conducted. It is a context characterised by what some would argue has been profound change for vocational education and training. It has entailed shifts requiring different conceptions of practice and new practitioner identities. Much of the change has been, *prima facie*, designed to provide a more 'responsive' vocational education system, a system more in tune with the needs of industry and employers. It is within this wider context that we need to consider the views and understandings of the employers contributing to this study.

## Conceptualising competence and capability

One way of reframing questions about the use and value of qualifications to employers is to consider, from the employers' perspective, the relationship between qualifications and competence. This raises certain questions about what the employer means by 'competent' within a given context.

There is not the scope in this review for a comprehensive discussion of conceptions of competence and how various understandings have shaped competency-based approaches to training.

However, in an illuminating paper on human competence at work, Sandberg (2000) develops a cogent argument for a quite different way of thinking about competence. He argues that conventional 'rational' ways of thinking about competence fail to capture the complexity and true nature of competence as it is manifested in actual work situations. The traditional approaches, he argues:

All regard competence as an attribute-based phenomenon ... Hence, those who perform their particular work more competently than others are regarded as possessing a superior set of attributes. Furthermore, attributes are primarily seen as context-independent. That is, a particular attribute, such as communication skills, is regarded as having a fixed meaning in itself; it is viewed as independent of context and thus as able to be adopted in a range of work activities.

(Sandberg 2000, p.3)

Sandberg shows how a recent generation of interpretive studies of work and competence has exposed the inadequacy of this way of looking at competence. Rather than seeing the work and the worker as separate and distinct units for analysis, the interpretive approach appreciates, and investigates, the way work and worker are interrelated. Hence:

Competence is not seen as consisting of two separate entities; instead worker and work form one entity through the lived experience of the work. Competence is thus seen as constituted by the meaning the work takes on for the worker in his or her experience of it.

(Sandberg 2000, p.4)

Put another way, Sandberg argues that the way workers conceive of their work and the way they make sense of it, makes up their competence. Through a detailed study involving engine optimisers in a Volvo plant in Sweden, Sandberg illuminates the way in which different

conceptions or understandings of work construct workers with varying levels of competence. Simply put, his analysis suggests that moving to a new level of competence entails not merely the acquisition of new skills or attributes but a reconceptualisation of the task—understanding the work in a way that is qualitatively different from earlier understandings.

Sandberg's analysis also provides a useful frame of reference for considering non-attribute-based dimensions to competence. Such dimensions, which have been highlighted by recent work on generic skills and skills for employability (Kearns 2001; Virgona et al. 2002; Curtis & McKenzie 2001), stress the significance of the mindset, attitudes and values underpinning the approach to work. Employers are placing increasing emphasis upon such aspects of competence.

To Sandberg's analysis we must add and acknowledge the insights gleaned from researchers such as Scott (1991), Hager (1999) and Gonczi (2002) stressing the relational, holistic and integrated nature of competencies in action. We note the work of Darrah (1994), Billett (2001) and Stevenson (ed. 1996) who highlight the situated and embedded nature of competence in real-life contexts. We believe that competence is structured, defined and enacted within a social context, within communities of practice as illuminated by Lave and Wenger (1991) and others, Virgona, Waterhouse and Sefton (1998) who stress the socially constructed nature of competence.

Establishing new levels of understanding or going beyond current notions of competence to encompass attitudes, values and esteem, for instance, is described by researchers (Malloch & Cairns 1999; Stephenson & Cairns 1999) as becoming 'capable'. These authors argue that it is only 'capable' individuals and organisations who will have the ability to thrive in the future. They argue that conventional notions about competence and the way in which competence is assessed lock individuals and organisations into the past rather than create future potential.

Two descriptions of capability by Stephenson echo the needs expressed by employers we interviewed. He defines capability as:

... a necessary part of specialist expertise, not separate from it. Capable people not only know about their specialisms; they also have the confidence to apply their knowledge and skills within varied and changing situations and to continue to develop their specialist knowledge and skills long after they have left formal education. Taking effective and appropriate action within unfamiliar and changing circumstances involves judgements, values, the self-confidence to take risks and a commitment to learn from experience.

(Stephenson 2002, p.1)

An earlier definition from Stephenson and Yorke is even more apt:

... an all round human quality, an integration of knowledge, skills personal qualities and understanding used appropriately and effectively—not just in familiar and highly focused specialist contexts but in response to new and changing circumstances.

(Stephenson & Yorke 1998, p.2)

Major features of capable learners and capable organisations are:

- ✧ Flexibility and adaptability.
- ✧ Self-managed learning.
- ✧ Mindful awareness of capability and learning.
- ✧ Values bounded behaviour.
- ✧ Readiness and confidence to engage the unknown (risk taking).

(Malloch, Cairns & Hase 1998, p.5)

In this context therefore we could speculate that the dissatisfaction evinced by some employers in our study may be related to VET qualifications being unable, or perceived to be unable, to produce the 'capable' employees that they require.

## Workplace learning

A significant effect of the 'industry driven' objective of the national training system has been its impact on workplace learning. The shift of much TAFE-based accredited training to real workplaces has created questions about whether the needs of stakeholders, including employers, can be adequately met. While workplaces are not well understood by VET providers, tensions will arise around the nature and substance of provision, including qualifications and the credentialling process.

As O'Connor notes, concepts and definitions of industry are ambiguous, fragile and problematic in themselves:

... any description of an industry is only what somebody or some set of political interests wants it to be at any given time for a particular purpose. (O'Connor 1994, p.273)

He argues, and the findings of this study support the contention, that generalising about industry is not particularly helpful. O'Connor (1994) describes in some detail the multiple layers of context-shaping or influencing training. Meaningful conversations about the value of training and qualifications need to be informed by a rich appreciation of these layers of context. 'Obvious' factors such as the size of the organisation, the role(s) of unions and the industrial relations arrangements need to be considered. The developmental stage or state of the enterprise and the industry also emerges from this study as a significant factor shaping employers' engagement with the VET system and the way they appreciate and make use of qualifications.

Equally (or more) significant may be the intangible and immeasurable aspects of company culture and organisational dynamics. As Figgis et al. (2001) note, the prevailing 'climate' of interpersonal relations can have a profound effect. Issues of place, locality and regionality are significant. The shifts and changes in the industry need to be appreciated, since they provide both a need and opportunities for learning and development. However, at the enterprise level these same shifts may be perceived as threats.

The ability of workplaces to participate as key players in the national training strategy is seriously raised in a paper by Hawke (2002a). He questions the reliability of informal learning, the most common form of workplace learning, to deliver broader conceptual and generic skills to workers. Hawke (2002a) suggests that the singular motivations of employers prevent commitment to the wider training agenda, as does a profound lack of understanding of the wider system, particularly by small business, which appears to lack the skills and resources to respond to the present structure in a meaningful way

However, a study by Sefton, Waterhouse and Cooney (1995) in the automotive industry found that the characteristics of business that create change were strongly related to the development of *the workplace as a learning environment*. The same study noted the importance of informal learning, highlighting the idea that effective learning is not always dependent upon formal training—and that learning is not always reflected in formal qualifications.

More recently Figgis et al. (2001) have reported on a two-stage study which investigates the concept(s) of training—learning cultures within enterprises and their value as exemplars for other organisations. The study highlighted the importance of informal learning methods and strategies—informality referring to specificity of outcomes and formality/informality of guidance and support given to learners. Indeed, *informal learning* emerged as perhaps equally important to (but different from) formal strategies for training. The authors note:

The majority of enterprises in both stages of the study felt that informal strategies for skill development and expanding the knowledge available to the enterprise are more important and effective than the Australian vocational education and training sector acknowledges. Information provided to enterprises by authorities in the sector tends to ignore informal processes. To enterprises it appears that the sector is more interested in selling its own

product (formal training) and not in developing their capacity to grow using a range of approaches. (Figgis et al. 2001, Executive summary)

The study also highlighted the importance of the internal culture of the enterprise with particular reference to interpersonal relations. The authors report:

The fulcrum on which the capacity of an enterprise to gain maximum value from training and learning—formal and informal—turns is its climate of interpersonal relations ... in the small to medium-large enterprises we spoke to, the point that it isn't training alone, nor learning alone but the dynamics of the relationships within the enterprise that is the key ... (Figgis et al. 2001, Executive summary)

We have already referred to work by Gibb (1999) highlighting issues of workplace culture and workplace learning—as distinct from formal training. These insights are also strongly reinforced by a substantial body of research recently published by Billett (2001). He stresses the considerable—yet largely unrecognised—value of workplace learning. Like Schofield (1999) he notes that the formal education and training system remains deeply ambivalent about workplace learning, partly because it represents a shift away from a focus on the VET teacher (as 'the sage on the stage') towards a focus on *learning* (with the teacher as 'the guide on the side'). He argues that, despite the system's ambivalence, much valuable learning can and does occur in workplaces. Furthermore, much of this important learning takes place without formal instruction, training or guidance. This is not to say however that workplaces are always very effective learning environments. Clearly they are not, and there is a great deal that skilled and creative educators can do to cultivate more effective learning in workplaces (Billett 2001; Chappell 1999a; Sefton & Waterhouse 1997). However, 'delivery' of 'training' and qualifications is not necessarily the prime strategy.

Figgis et al. (2001) also stress the importance of providing enterprises with real, grounded, 'warts and all' accounts of training and development initiatives. They note:

... the examples need to be real and detailed. Rosy, good news stories that make training and learning a panacea are patronising and ultimately unconvincing. People will make up their own minds about what to take from other people's experience if that experience is fully presented. (Figgis et al. 2001, Executive summary)

Studies such as those by Gibb, Figgis et al. and Billett highlight the complexity of issues to be addressed when considering the use and value of qualifications to employers.

This review of the literature is indicative of the broad scope of the study and highlights the richness of the interrelated sets of variables that shape employers' perceptions of qualifications and the use and value of qualifications to employers.

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### Summing up: Key points

- ✧ Licensing is a form of qualification which is valued within certain industries/occupations.
  - ✧ Qualifications imply trust—those who value them trust them and tend to use them.
  - ✧ Qualifications are control mechanisms determining entry to certain occupations and labour markets.
  - ✧ Most importantly, the real value of qualifications to employers is not in the pieces of paper (credentials) but the extent to which they genuinely enhance the competence and capability of individuals and enterprises.
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# Factors influencing the use and value of qualifications

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This section of the report presents an overview of the case studies conducted and documented by this research. Each of the case studies provides its own set of answers to the research questions. All of the employers had their own unique stories to tell. They articulated the issues and responded to our questions on the basis of their experiences and in relation to their businesses.

The following section provides a ‘round up’ of key themes and issues emerging from the case studies in different sectors of the Australian economy. This section highlights some of the voices of employers and some of the ‘flavour’ of the case studies. It is important to reiterate that:

- ✧ The cases are not necessarily representative of their industries.
- ✧ The research sought the views of employers not necessarily committed to training.

It is also important to appreciate that the issues and voices identified here are neither uniform nor homogeneous. There were some commonalities and shared concerns across the employers participating in this study, but there were also significant differences. In work of this nature, tensions, contradictions and differing perceptions and understandings are to be expected. The aim of this research is to illuminate and better understand such tensions and contradictions rather than to pretend they do not exist. The challenge here is to represent these data in a meaningful and helpful manner, despite the fact that these representations are necessarily partial and extracted from their respective contexts.

This section of the report is structured around the research questions. However, before moving to consider the questions in light of the various industry contexts and the particular enterprise perspectives, the wider economic and global context is briefly examined.

## The economic and global context

The cases selected for study were a purposive sample from eight industry sectors. Most are enterprises within ‘old’ economy industries; that is, the sectors have ‘an economy based on the production of physical goods’ rather than ‘an economy based on the production and application of knowledge’ (Rauch 2001). The information technology sector is the only sector firmly in the ‘new’ economy.

Despite their differences, all of the sectors reveal and reflect responses to the economic, social, political and industrial changes wrought by globalisation over the past decade. Those changes include:

- ✧ multinational companies producing ‘world’ products using components from various international locations
- ✧ increasing use of outsourcing of some manufacturing processes

- ✧ restructuring involving flattening of hierarchical structures, consequent downsizing, and the creation of ‘flexibility’ in working conditions, through outsourcing, contracting and casualisation in the workforce
- ✧ the disaggregation and sale of public utilities.

However, the old economy industries have adopted ‘new’ methods of organisation. That is, features of the new economy are used in more traditional forms of industry. These features include:

- ✧ e-commerce and other forms of digital communication
- ✧ use of synchronous commercial relationships, such as ‘just in time’ supply systems
- ✧ integrated logistics systems, to organise trade, production and work
- ✧ electronic stock control systems, such as ‘paperless’ warehouses.

Globalisation has also influenced local and international quality and safety standards for enterprises working in local and international markets.

National and state VET policies and structures have also changed considerably over the past 12 years. Those changes can be summarised as:

- ✧ the adoption of competency-based training and assessment
- ✧ movement from content-based accredited curriculum to flexible frameworks where training/learning can take place in a variety of contexts
- ✧ establishment of broad industry-based national training packages requiring constant adjustment and knowledge updates for participants and stakeholders in the VET system
- ✧ the development of a complex training market with corresponding expansion in the numbers and types of providers and other players
- ✧ changes to the apprenticeship system, including the introduction of traineeships and the move to New Apprenticeships.

## The industry context

### How context shapes and influences the use and value of qualifications

The first research question underpinning this project was concern with how the industry context shapes or influences the use and value of qualifications. As previously noted, this research is based largely on enterprise case studies. Nevertheless, it is important to appreciate each enterprise within its particular industry context. The following section provides a brief overview of each case sector and identifies the significant industry factors which appear to be shaping employers’ approaches to qualifications.

#### *Automotive*

Excell Motor Company, established in Australia for over 50 years, is an international company producing vehicles and components for the domestic and international market. International rationalisation of this industry worldwide over past decades has exerted significant cost and competitive pressures on this company. Domestic tariff reduction strategies established during the Whitlam years, later through the Button plan, have created a leaner, more efficient and productive, high-quality industry. Unionists played a significant role in shaping the National Training Reform Agenda, which linked skills development through accredited training to wages. The major stakeholders in this sector have had considerable experience in negotiating, designing and implementing accredited training programs for the bulk of their ‘non-trade’ employees.



These experiences are reflected in the comments of our interviewee. It is worth noting here that Excell is the only one of our case study participants which is a registered training organisation. Within the automotive industry the key contextual factors shaping the use and value of qualifications appear to be:

- ✧ federal government policy for the industry; for example, phasing-out of tariff protection
- ✧ enterprise bargaining agreements and the role of unions
- ✧ pressures from international/global competition
- ✧ the need to increase flexibility and devolved responsibility.

### *Viticulture*

Wine production as an activity has been undertaken in Australia since the early settlers arrived. Since the 1960s, commercial wine production has enjoyed steady growth, buoyed by strong local consumption, high-quality products and growing recognition in overseas markets. The industry is as diverse in the styles and varieties of its products as it is in organisations—from small family boutique vintages to large corporate operations. North Star Wines has developed through commercial rationalisations in this industry and is one of a number of medium-to-large businesses which have emerged over the past decade in response to potential rewards in the export market. Growth has brought with it a need for formalised training for all employees, which is a relatively new concept in this industry. At the time of interviews with North Star, accredited training pathways were still being constructed to meet industry needs. In these terms, the relationship between North Star and the national training system, which includes providers, is relatively new. The industry must also deal with emergent employee requirements through union organisation and representation, which have arisen as a result of growth and competition: quality, productivity and legislative pressures. The key contextual factors shaping North Star's approach appear to be:

- ✧ developing export markets
- ✧ changing trends in consumer behaviour
- ✧ requirements for quality assurance
- ✧ the role of unions and enterprise bargaining.

### *Power*

Biggs Power Company extracts brown coal from open-cut mines and produces electricity. It was formerly a state-owned electricity utility, which was disaggregated and sold to private interests in the 1990s. Biggs Power's parent company conducts similar commercial activities internationally. The coal extraction operation fuels power generation facilities nearby. The power is primarily for state consumption. However, there are links to the national power grid. Biggs Power is based in a rural region, its former structure having been the major economic resource for an entire community for at least two generations. The region has experienced massive restructuring, downsizing and rationalisation over the past decade. The coal industry itself faces growing national and international pressures from environmental lobbyists, as it is alleged that the activity is a major contributor to global air pollution. Employees of Biggs Power have a history of union organisation and participation. Their negotiated enterprise agreement incorporates links between accredited training and wages. This influences the way the company views accredited training. The key contextual factors shaping Biggs Power's approach to training and qualifications appear to be:

- ✧ regional restructuring
- ✧ changes in ownership as a result of privatisation and globalisation

- ✧ changing attitudes towards coal-fired power generation and its effect on the environment
- ✧ the role of unions and enterprise bargaining.

### *Surfboard manufacturing*

Surfboard Manufacturing in Australia has grown from backyard beginnings in the early 1960s into a commercial business operation. Coupled with parallel developments in other surfing equipment, such as wet suits and leisure wear clothing, it represents a billion-dollar global industry. However, the industry has not shaken off those early beginnings. The industry still supports sole-producer-type operations in the local market. This may be because the industry is still largely unregulated and informal, lacking the industry peak groups and governmental relationships characterising other industry sectors. However, it should be noted that the interviewees, Wild Bill Surfboards and Wave Wizard, have links with the global industry through which they are developing export opportunities. The surfing industry has strong attachments to a curious mix of lifestyle and cultural values, like individualism, spiritualism, tribalism, and youthful anti-establishment sentiment. Paradoxically, the industry is also unashamedly commercial. Dedicated accredited training for board manufacturers does not exist at this time. Nevertheless, training and skills are crucial to the business success of Wild Bill Surfboards and Wave Wizard. Their approach to qualifications is shaped by:

- ✧ an unregulated industry context
- ✧ an unusual mix of cottage industry characteristics with growing production specialisation at commercial levels
- ✧ linkages to global markets using e-business technologies
- ✧ lack of a formal training culture
- ✧ an intensely competitive manufacturing environment.

### *Baking*

The baking industry case study consists of a small ‘constellation’ of four baking companies, three of which—Bake On, Bake Rite and Coast Bakeries—are sole traders operating traditional retail bakeries, serving a local clientele. Sweet Delight, the fourth participant in the case study, is a family business developing specific products to meet supply contracts with national supermarket chains. In essence, Sweet Delight is developing an industrial manufacturing operation, which is necessary to attain levels of production, efficiency and quality required by its customers. The expansion of service provided by supermarkets and the development of national franchising operations have placed local, traditional retail bakeries like Bake On, Bake Rite and Coast Bakeries under considerable commercial pressure.

Apprenticeship has been the traditional form of accredited training in this industry. However, anecdotal evidence from our Baking Industry Association interviewee suggests that *formal* training is a relatively low priority issue in the industry. This sentiment is confirmed but with caveats by the other interviewees to the study. The key factors in the industry context appear to be:

- ✧ a traditional history of trade and apprenticeship training
- ✧ diversification and restructuring within the industry
- ✧ work–life issues associated with the continuous daily production
- ✧ compliance—associated with quality assurance and new legislation
- ✧ intense local competition.

## *Seafood*

Through the establishment of national and state industry bodies, the seafood industry has only recently begun collaborating to maximise opportunities for government support and to develop the industry collectively. Fishers have traditionally raced each other to the catch and protected local knowledge about catch sites. This is also a family-oriented business, which, through competition, can set families against each other on a daily basis. Relationships at this level are still developing, still influenced by commercial rivalry. While nationally accredited training programs are being developed, industry cultural issues, distance and location play a strong part in how this 'roll out' will transpire.

Coastal Seafoods is a small family company which processes abalone for domestic and overseas markets. It is situated in a rural coastal region, close to a large provincial city. Businesses like this have traditionally provided employment, sometimes seasonal, to unskilled local people and itinerant workers, so that accredited training is quite novel. Fisherman's Basket is part of the growth and variation in seafood retail outlets in Australia, responding to changes in eating preferences. One aspect of formal training at Fisherman's Basket provides its employees with accredited hygiene and food handling qualifications, now mandatory requirements in the industry. For the seafood businesses contributing to our study, the key industry factors shaping approaches to training and qualifications appear to be:

- ✧ historical—the absence of a formal training culture
- ✧ compliance—associated with quality assurance and new legislation
- ✧ the potential for qualifications in marketing the business.

## *Information technology*

Technological development, knowledge management, speculation, risk, fluidity and fast-paced change and the information super highway are all aspects of the information technology sector. Included in this case study are a software development company specialising in cutting-edge research and development (Curve); an international computer solutions company (RAM Ltd); an information technology recruitment agency (Expert IT); and a professional association, Australian Computer Society (ACS). The industry values accredited training that meets its needs, but such training does not necessarily have to include elements of the Australian Qualifications Framework. Perhaps more so than other sectors, the information technology industry is compelled to keep up with the rapid changes in technology; therefore the demand for training and accreditation is high. The industry values both accredited and non-accredited training as long as it meets the needs of the individuals and the organisation. In this context, whether or not the training and/or certification falls within the Australian Qualifications Framework is not generally emphasised. The key industry factors affecting our interviewees in this case appear to be:

- ✧ the value placed upon knowledge and knowledge management
- ✧ the global and intensely competitive nature of the industry
- ✧ the fast pace of change affecting product development and obsolescence
- ✧ a growing pool of unemployed information technology specialists.

## *Hospitality*

Tourism is a major sector of the Australian economy. Accommodation forms part of the services provided. The participant in this case study, Seaside Village, manages serviced apartments on behalf of individual owners. Unlike resorts, hotels and similar types of tourist accommodation, this sector provides a limited service. Food and beverages, and entertainment, for instance, are not provided. The organisation reports that providers of accredited training often fail to appreciate these differences. Casual and part-time work are employment features in this industry,

such that training may only extend to induction and informal on-the-job training. The key factors shaping Seaside Village's approaches to training and qualifications appear to be:

- ✧ the patterns of employment in the industry
- ✧ high levels of casual workers
- ✧ limited scope for skills development.

The issues highlighted above provide some notion of the complex pressures driving industry, the national training system and individual enterprises at the beginning of the new millennium.

## Why employers choose accredited qualifications

Why then do employers choose to engage with, or utilise qualifications under the Australian Qualifications Framework (the second research question)? There are four themes which emerge from case study responses. These are:

- ✧ *Getting the job done*: enterprises want qualifications to deliver performance skills that work for them, and which assist profitability. There is some evidence of a continuing 'community of trust' encouraging employers to believe that having qualified employees will help in this regard.
- ✧ *'Because we have to'*: customer contractual obligations and standards, and acts and regulations, make some forms of accredited training mandatory (although not always leading to a qualification).
- ✧ *Government incentives ease the cost of training*: a contributing factor for many of the interviewees to this study was the opportunity to have training costs met in part or whole by government. While this seems not to be such an important factor for large enterprises in this study, it certainly was important to the small businesses.
- ✧ *Good human resources policy*: some employers are using accredited training because it is good human resources and industrial relations policy. Providing career paths through qualifications helps to create effective working relations between groups, generating a capable enterprise culture, as well as high morale. The influence of industrial issues is elaborated during discussion of the third research question.

These four themes, often interrelated, are discussed below.

### Getting the job done

#### *The primary purpose*

*It's not what you know it's whether you can do the job that counts.*

*The employees are there to make [vanilla] slices—we don't want to be an RTO.*

For education and training providers committed to the development and provision of learning opportunities, it is a salutary lesson to be reminded that, for most employers, indeed for most people, training and learning are (merely) a means to an end.

While the enterprises contributing to this study produced very different goods and services, they were all united in stating that this daily activity: production of goods and services for profit, was their chief focus. They all shared the view that providing training and learning opportunities was not their primary goal and it is important for those involved in developing and marketing training and qualifications to keep this in mind. As one manager commented:

*It's not the qualification that's important—it's whether they can do the job.*

Another respondent pointed out:

*Industry is not just looking at the qualification, it is looking at the skills within that qualification ...*

### *Trust in qualifications*

For some employers accredited training provides a degree of security: a belief that the system can deliver the standards of quality, skills, and compliance that the company requires. There was a perception that accredited training provided a greater guarantee of consistency of standard in the skills delivered.

*Accredited obviously will always matter in that there's something you'll know for sure that the standard is there. Whereas with the non-accredited there is no guarantee that the standard is actually maintained or was even intended to be maintained.*

Other similar comments reflected this continuing trust in the system and its standards.

*The employees want the accredited training which means they want the transferable accreditation.*

*Accredited is always better in that the standard is there.*

*It provides some portability for the employee, a certain standard.*

At Seaside Village they prefer to recruit people who have had some accredited hospitality training as this assures them that workers have a level of skill and orientation: an understanding and expectation of what the work involves.

An officer for the peak body for the wine production industry expressed the view that training per se was not new, but that the implementation of the training package had taken training to the workplace and this was perceived as a good thing.

*The training package ensures consistency and maintains standards, giving recognition of employee achievement. [However] training has always happened.*

For the power industry peak body, the comment was made that a link was yet to be established between qualifications and competent people and safety. Once this had been achieved, it was felt that the value of accredited training leading to qualifications would be recognised.

## 'Because we have to': Compliance with regulations, agreements and quality standards

The second theme emerging from the case studies concerned the influence of statutory and industrial requirements: and external 'drivers' for qualifications.

### *Service agreements*

Service agreements with suppliers and customers to ensure product quality standards have pushed Sweet Delight into accredited training:

*We have our own in-house training program now. [It] came about as one of our customers requirements. On top of that, becoming co-producers of [another major customer]—their standards are a bit demanding ... They actually want us to have a bit more ongoing formalised training, to make sure that people's skills are up to date and as part of that we've signed up last month, we're putting all our employees who have no qualifications at all through Certificate III in Food Processing*

### *Statutory requirements*

Government legislation, like the *Occupational Health and Safety Act* and its various sections, provides guidelines for employers and employees in relation to their statutory responsibilities in workplaces. Legislation addressing food safety requirements provides another example.

Consequently employers must provide accredited training for occupational health and safety and first aid, as well as for specific machine operations and hygiene and food handling standards. Many of the basic aspects of this type of training are written into training packages.

*Yes, in some particular areas, for example areas of statutory need. We can't afford to have unqualified people ... We need skilled people for specific jobs.*

Addressing such requirements was a key reason for accredited training, particularly in the seafood and bakery enterprises.

*With HACCP [Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point] requirements everyone does a 4-hour program. This is a necessity because of the new legislation.*

Employers, such as the wine industry participant cited earlier, stressed that they would conduct training regardless of the existence of training packages or qualifications. It was reported that where qualifications address compliance issues, the implementation of training then becomes a key strategy for meeting quality standards. In the food enterprises, for instance, the training packages are assisting in achieving the required performance for legislative compliance.

On the other hand, some employers admitted that, if it were not for some external requirement to comply, they would not support qualifications.

Such employers remain sceptical, if not cynical, about the capacity of qualifications to generate workplace change. In relation to issues of food safety and environmental hygiene, one respondent noted:

*... most [employees] would do the right thing [anyway] and I think the right thing is generally good enough ... those who chose not to do it in the past, choose not to do it in the future you know ...*

Scepticism about the capacity of qualifications *alone* to generate workplace change is indeed well founded—they rarely do so. However, the point being highlighted here is that, for some employers, the engagement with training is driven more by a need to comply with external pressures or regulatory requirements than by an appreciation of the value of qualifications. This finding is consistent with the findings of Ridoutt et al. (2002)

### *Industrial agreements*

The role of industrial issues in influencing employers' perceptions of and commitment to qualifications (the third research question) emerged as a significant issue. It is clear that, in some cases, unions have played key roles in promoting accredited training and the place of qualifications within their industries

Effective operations require certain levels of skill to deliver productive outcomes, as well as skills and knowledge that assist in maintaining sound working relationships. The employer–employee relationship is crucial in achieving productivity outcomes and skills growth. Through enterprise bargaining agreements negotiated by unions, employees, and employers, workers in the larger enterprises gain qualifications that deliver career and financial rewards. Enterprises with skills progression systems, linking qualifications with wage rewards, provide the motivation for employees to participate. Employers hope to get the upskilling and productivity returns they are planning for. Unions and employers see this as a 'win win' situation.

*Pay outcomes are matched to the training achieved with payment only after the skill is reached.*

*Our EBA ties the training programs pretty well. [It] states that we have to provide 32 hours of training for our employees per year. We have to reclassify upon achievement of skills, it also mentions about achieving Certificate 3 as a desire both for the company and employees. So the EBA now tends to ensure that official training.*

It would appear that, in the larger enterprises we spoke to, enterprise bargain agreements increasingly codify training or discrete sets of accredited and non-accredited qualifications

through which employees can access career structures and wage increases. The larger operations interviewed: Excell, Biggs and North Star Wines, followed this pattern.

In some instances employers perceive that it is only the prospect of more money that convinces workers to take up training:

*If we're talking about Certificate I, II & III then I would say, honestly, the majority would be as a means to get more money because our pay rates are based around those.*

*We were struggling to get people into training so the pay rates makes it [a bit easier] ... there's something else for us other than just a qualification.*

Unions had no involvement in negotiating training in the smaller participating organisations.

## Government incentives

The third theme concerned the influence of government funds. Our smaller business interviewees tended to be appreciative of the incentives available for training, which suggests that cost is a significant factor in their decision-making about training. We also need to make it plain that incentives are only available for accredited training, that is, endorsed training leading to recognised qualifications.

Coastal Seafoods reported that the government funds do provide a significant support.

*Well it makes it ... that you're not forking out for things yourself.*

The interviewee from Sweet Delight indicated that the financial subsidy involved in training was an important factor in taking up accredited training:

*It's through the traineeship ... I think it's the incentive scheme from the government? Each new employee costs us \$300 dollars and we get it all back ... that's part of the motivation.*

Another employer commented similarly:

*The government assistance, it facilitates us being involved in it because obviously it reduces the cost quite significantly.*

However, attitudes to incentives were not uniform. An interviewee from North Star offered a different view.

*Personally, I don't believe those subsidies are there to get people a certificate. Those subsidies are there to get untrained people into a job and get them skilled and so many companies abuse the system and use it as a means of free training and openings for getting their people qualifications for free and that really is not what it's all about, mind you there have been times when I thought, 'well everyone else is doing it, why not?'*

North Star has a small number of its people training in apprenticeships and traineeships.

Respondents involved in surfboard manufacturing saw themselves to be sitting outside the national training system, like fringe dwellers unable to access the benefits of government subsidies, or the perceived benefits that qualifications would bring to the industry and the workers in it.

*... since the change of governments, there's been offers for money to help train people but then when I've looked into it there's nothing in our industry 'cause our industry is not classed as an industry ...*

*Oh, I would like to be able to pull younger people and then train them if there was a kick-back, you know, if there was money from the government. So that it wasn't just cost, cost, cost, cost.*

## Good human resources policy: Activating employee motivation

It is apparent that some employers value training and the provision of qualifications as an integral part of their human resource management strategies. Despite their ambivalence, all case

study employer participants reported that employees were perceived as valuing the qualifications they gained—workers see value in certification, in getting the piece of paper. Hence accredited training is sometimes provided as a motivator to get workers involved in training.

*We have to have it. Boiler ticket, [and] Level 1 First Aid is compulsory. Accredited training is valued Australia-wide.*

The Training and Development Officer at North Star Wine Company recognised the morale boost a qualification could provide to an employee.

*Apart from being able to do the job easier and getting more knowledge, it also makes their skills recognised so then it's easier to pick up other employment if that's what they want to do. I guess in a way giving them a sense of worth because traditionally ... it's been classified as non-skilled work. Whereas now it's really a certificate level, it's really giving some worth to what they do.*

Portability and transferability of qualifications was referred to as benefiting employees. Enterprises constantly stressed the importance of qualifications geared to meeting their very specific and defined needs. The Biggs Power Production Manager commented:

*Portability is not a huge selling point [for the company]. Another employer would want their own competencies.*

Nevertheless, all the case study respondents, except the surfboard manufacturers, emphasised achievement of a certificate as motivation for employees to undertake formal training.

*They were just all really keen, [before] there wasn't any incentive.*

*Working in an abalone shed, I never thought it would be something that would happen ... the more certificates that you have, you know, the more places you can go.*

Excell Motor Company, North Star Wine Company and Biggs Power all provided additional incentives in that employees were encouraged to take part in accredited training that was conducted during work time. In some cases higher levels of qualification were rewarded with training fees paid upon successful academic results.

## The relative importance of qualifications across industries

The multiple contextual factors identified earlier, as well as the role of unions and industrial issues, all play a part in determining the relative importance placed upon qualifications in a given industry or enterprise. One of our research questions asked: Is there consistency across different industries in the relative importance given to different types of qualifications?

The study showed that, for employers, qualifications must be instrumental, in that each qualification in each sector must deliver the skills and knowledge required. For employers using the Australian Qualifications Framework, certificates I to III are commonly used. This is true for all, except surfboard manufacturing, where developmental aspects of the industry restrict the use of this type of qualification.

For various reasons in the enterprises we spoke to, a certificate IV ceiling seems to have developed—a stalemate in relation to skills acquisition, career progression and wages and salaries of workers. In instances where all of these are linked by agreements and human resources policy, employers and employees are yet to find solutions that would allow the expansion of qualifications. Higher-level qualifications have traditionally been the preserve of skilled tradesman or management.

In other instances, such as at Sweet Delight, a level of de-skilling has occurred as a consequence of new developments, including technologies, which have removed the need to have traditionally qualified trades people.



In yet other cases, like the wine industry, certificates at higher levels are still in the process of being developed, or focus primarily on administration and management, which were not perceived as appropriate for the organisation.

A third reason for the ceiling on qualifications and possibly linked to the previous points is that current enterprise authority structures restrict career advancement beyond certificate III to management positions, thus reducing access. Moreover, training packages at certificate IV and above reflect this management focus.

In Excell, both the information technology and the automotive industry invest heavily in tertiary graduates. The major concern seems to be to capture potential employees who have a solid generalist underpinning, which provides a basis on which to build skills, although the information technology industry is becoming involved in the customisation of degrees to suit employers.

More than those in any other sector, the information technology enterprises placed considerable importance on qualifications which were outside the Australian Qualifications Framework, yet delivered and assured the maintenance and growth of their employee skills base.

We have also seen that ‘compliance meeting’ qualifications are commonly sought throughout all sectors; for example, forklift, or specialised load shifting equipment tickets. These are often subsets of other certificates.

The following section illustrates just how individual employer purpose influences the uses to which qualifications are put.

## Employer perspective on qualifications

### Employers’ use of qualifications across different industries

How then, are qualifications used by employers in their industries? (the fifth research question).

First, not all employers interviewed use qualifications. For Wild Bill and Wave Wizard the concern is for their employees to demonstrate capability and expertise. They engage in informal training, experiential learning and the development of their people, but qualifications—in the sense of formal credentials auspiced under the national system—do not really come into the picture.

The other employers interviewed utilised qualifications to address multiple needs or issues, including the industrial relations and compliance issues discussed above. Qualifications were also used as screening tools at point of employment and as a means to employee development beyond the recruitment phase. These issues are discussed in more detail under the appropriate sub-headings below. We also discuss the finding that the employers interviewed tended to utilise formal qualifications as ‘indicators of potential’ rather than as ‘proof of competence’.

For the enterprises contributing to this study, the use of qualifications can be summarised in table 2.

**Table 2: Motivation for formal training by case study organisations**

Participants	Recruitment	Compliance – regulatory	Compliance – enterprise bargaining agreement	Skills development	Morale
Bake On	*	*		*	
Bake Right	*	*		*	
Sweet Delight		*			
Coast Bakery	*	*		*	
Coastal Seafoods		*			
Fisherman's Basket		*		*	
North Star Wines	*	*	*	*	*
Biggs Power		*	*	*	
Excell Motor Co	*	*	*	*	*
Seaside Village Resort	*			*	
Ram Ltd	*			*	
Curve	*			*	
Wild Bill					
Wave Wizard					

The use of qualifications by employers in this study meets two broad purposes, which, in practice, overlap. First there is the use of qualifications as gate-keeping mechanisms at point of recruitment or employment. Secondly, there is the use of qualifications beyond recruitment as developmental tools or pathways for employees. Each of these is considered in turn.

#### *Qualifications and recruitment*

For most of the enterprises in the case studies, some form of selection criteria, based on formal qualifications, was applied or would be applied to new entrants into the organisation. The use of credentials was particularly apparent in the information technology industry enterprises: Expert IT, the information technology recruiters, reported that degrees were a minimum entry standard, particularly for technical positions, while TAFE certificates were acceptable for people seeking PC support and customer service positions:

*... if someone is just coming into the IT industry they have to have some kind of certification ... Our [Expert IT] clients definitely want [entrants] with degrees or some kind of certification.*

The Australian Computer society confirmed this view:

*Our stance is that you need professional qualifications to demonstrate that you've got the broad experience, and that means generally university; later on you might specialise.*

As a general rule, this expectation did not apply for base-level positions in manufacturing or production environments. However, as the Coastal Seafoods interviewee suggests, if a prospective employee does have a relevant qualification, for instance in food handling, then it will enhance their employment prospects. Seaside Village also looks for new entrants with hospitality qualifications, but does not consider such qualifications a necessity. In blue-collar environments, like vehicle assembly or power generation, particular skill tickets may be useful. However at management level, undergraduate degrees are preferred. Engineering and similar professional positions require appropriate qualifications. The information technology industry also follows this practice.

Small businesses reported that, while 'unskilled' workers were usually recruited, people with relevant qualifications would be given preference. Wild Bill's methods were informal, but reflected a view that many small businesses, particularly hotels and restaurants take in selecting new staff.

*If someone rings up and I'm looking for a glasser, I'll ask them, 'Well come around and see the work'. I look at their own surfboard in the car. Well you can't really judge them on that 'cause a good sander could make the glass job come up pretty good, but you gotta get them in for a day and you've got to get them to try it out, and there is no, like, no accreditation system.*

However, Wild Bill continued:

*They've got to have enough 'qualifications' that I can get them to do half the work and leave, but if they've got none whatsoever, they're going to cost me ... I can't afford to put them in.*

The knowledge and skill required in information technology software and technical support changes rapidly. Developers such as Microsoft provide their own accredited training in the use of their constantly changing products. Information technology service provider enterprises see, as mandatory, that employees have current skills.

Curve not only seeks graduates whom it knows have mastered aspects of technology relevant to their business operation, it is also proactive in forming relationships with a provider who will incorporate Curve's needs into the curriculum.

*University of NSW have specific courses that are relevant to our technology. It is one of the elective subjects ... students that are from those specific areas are actually suitable for our company. We have been working together with the University. Also we sponsor some of the scholarships.*

### *Qualifications beyond recruitment*

Looking beyond the point of employment and the recruitment process, the medium-to-larger enterprises integrated certified training into their employee wages and skill progression structures. This generally involved certificates I to III. North Star uses certificates I to III in food processing for production employees as well as frontline management and other management training. Levels IV and V are yet to be developed for the sector. Biggs Power uses a range of accredited training programs, including the Certificate in Open Cut Mining, levels II and III.

*The Certificate in Open Cut Mining (Brown Coal). About six have finished it and about 50 out of 120 workers have done units.*

Excell, like the other major vehicle manufacturers, has used the Vehicle Industry Certificate, now the Certificate in Automotive Manufacturing. Sweet Delight, and Coastal Seafoods utilise the Certificate II in Food Processing, while Fisherman's Basket, relies on the Certificate II in Seafood (Sales and Distribution). The three owner-manager bakers have used the traditional apprenticeship system to fulfil their skill requirements for bakers and pastry cooks. Seaside Village used Certificate II in Hospitality.

At the management level, Excell has, for some time, structured a management development program into its human resources effort. Staff are enrolled in masters level business qualifications as well as in undergraduate programs which are run in partnership with local tertiary institutions.

At Curve, currency of skills is given high priority:

*[We] do conduct training in-house, technical training on our products and also quality engineering. Software development methodology, etc. ... [We do] training off-site—technical training ... [we] also have requested a couple of training experts to come in and train the whole company in-house, for things that are very technical ... we have sent people for management training, business communication. This year we have spent about \$40 000 on training.*

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<sup>1</sup> Wild Bill's use of the term here is an example of employers' determining their own meanings for what constitutes a 'qualified' worker.

All of the activity described above ensures that enterprises are getting training that is current and reliable.

Licensed activities like cranechasing, rigging and scaffolding and four-wheel driving are standard for Biggs Power. Essential skills delivered through qualifications such as forklift operation, first aid certificates, and occupational health and safety and hygiene, are a common feature across all the case study sites. Curve, one of the information technology companies interviewed, expects individuals to be fluent and have current skills in the software and technical programs it uses. Employees are encouraged to keep up to date.

Globally the information technology industry has recently developed a program called ICDL, the International Computer Drivers Licence. The purpose of this qualification is to provide a generic suite of business applications software knowledge and expertise, and to ensure that employers have some certainty about employee information technology skills at entry level.

RAM Ltd provides an online global skills development program, which has currency only within the company itself.

*We have an online university which is getting very positive write-ups ...the bulk of internal education that we need for our service people, sales people and others is available on line ...[it] ensures consistency and reduces the need for classroom type training.*

Hence all the case study enterprises, except those in the surfing industry, support some accredited training they perceive is essential to their business operations. These are courses that 'qualify' individuals within their own sector and/or business and are perceived by employers to deliver the skills they require. From the employer's perspective, whether these qualifications of choice emanate from the Australian Qualifications Framework or not, appears to be largely immaterial.

### *Qualifications as indicators of potential*

Consideration of qualifications is invariably one of the factors taken into account in the selection process. However, the findings of this study also offer some challenge to the orthodox VET position that nationally accredited certificates (or statements of attainment) should be universally accepted as 'proof' of competence.

The case study participants reported using qualifications in recruitment as indicators of 'promise' or potential: a base upon which to develop an employee with the skills that they require.

*We do prefer that they have a degree, we find that it helps them when they are preparing reports or even summaries for clients on candidates. They just have a better way of presenting and writing and things like that.*

An interviewee from Ram Ltd referred to an earlier company study (unpublished) where it was attempted to pinpoint key selection criteria for graduates. It found no particular correlation between specific types of degrees and later success in the company:

*We did a study across Latin America, Africa, about 60 countries and we recruited people and pulled from different sets of skills, computers, engineering, archaeology, you know lots of different skills or degrees and there was no statistical difference in success [within the company] based on qualifications. The difference was based on people's attitude.*

Although employers did appreciate the presence or attainment of a qualification, their viewpoint was one of sceptical or provisional acceptance. They talked about the need to form their own judgements about competence—judgements informed and shaped by their own particular work culture and context.

Put simply, they take the view that competence is expressed and verified in action and they will believe it when they see it.

## Qualifications, provider performance and the unique needs of employers

The sixth research question asks whether the nature of the business affect the perceptions or importance of qualifications.

This clearly is the case for the employers we spoke to. However, this response requires further clarification.

In many cases, employers seek qualifications because of statutory requirements, and to develop and maintain positive relationships in the workplace. Equally important are employers' judgements about the value of productive skills delivered to their particular workplaces through qualifications.

There is a complex dynamic at work here. Employers' perceptions of qualifications are not formed in isolation. They are formed in the interface between the registered training organisation, its delivery methods, and the idiosyncratic features of each business. Functional operational characteristics, purpose, the type of business, personal perspectives of individual employees and employers all come into play.

Thus the perception of the qualification is mediated through the employer's experience or knowledge, and by the provider's performance.

Accordingly, this study found that these issues of interface, including relationships, communication, customisation, cost and relevance, are part of the body of information assisting employers to make decisions about qualifications. The realisation of the importance of this relationship enables us to combine discussion of this research question with the question immediately following: Are VET qualifications from preferred providers valued more than others and if so, for what reasons?.

The responsiveness by training providers to the perceived unique needs and circumstances of enterprises was a significant influence on the value that individual employers placed on the qualifications awarded to their employees.

As a consequence of this process of negotiating with their local registered training organisations over the components of qualifications, and the manner in which they were to be delivered, employers also formulated opinions about the relative quality of providers. Hence, employers' judgements about the value of qualifications are intimately tied to their understanding of these qualifications as 'delivered' by particular providers in particular contexts.

While every employer expressed some unique needs, a number of opinions expressed were consistent across all case studies—except the surfboard manufacturers.

In a focus group discussion interviewees from the baking industry highlighted the importance of training that addresses the particular requirements of each enterprise. All were relatively small, owner-operated retail bakeries—they were all family-owned, shop-front businesses. There were even family connections between the businesses and a common paternal 'master baker' who had trained the business owners as apprentices.

Yet despite the obvious similarities between the businesses, what these bakers talked about were the differences, the idiosyncrasies, the things that made their business and their products unique. Bake Rite, Bake On and Coast Bakery all used apprenticeship qualifications as a good basis on which to build, like a driver's license.

Nevertheless, they believe that this formal trade-based training is not sufficient for their unique operations.

*TAFE may cover the basics, but there will still be a lot of retraining to do as each bakery business operates differently to one another ... TAFE could never cover it in a lifetime, each baker has his own methods and theories and why he does things and that basically comes in the type of bakehouse you work in*

*We all use the same ingredients, it's what you do with it makes a difference.*

All the enterprises interviewed for this study expressed the need for focused attention by the VET system to enable their particular needs to be addressed. As a member of the workplace training committee at Biggs Power commented:

*I don't think you can send people on a particular course and say, 'Yep, that will suit it', especially in the area that we work. Sometimes you need the TAFE to come out, or the adult education provider, to come and say 'Alright, what systems do you [have in] place? This is our course we'll modify it slightly or we'll modify to make it relevant to where you work' ... I don't think there's enough of that.*

The emphasis here is on recognising that the enterprise and its particular context should be the starting point for program design and development.

While national training packages with their endorsed industry standards were appreciated, employers stressed that they need to be interpreted and re-interpreted in light of their lived reality. What industry standards and endorsed competencies *mean* needs to be negotiated and (re)established in each particular enterprise and context.

*We've got to look at the competencies and what they mean to the company ... what's the outcome we want and they have to work towards that.*

As another employer explained:

*I have a fairly good understanding of the training package, how it's meant to work but it isn't necessarily consistent with the way they [TAFE provider] want to apply [it]. For example, Training Packages have units, units of competence and it's almost impossible to get certain lecturers with certain training providers to provide training for that unit. They would want to provide training for an AQF II packaging operator, which means that we cover it in a number of units. But there's no distinction [between the units of competence]. We want to send our people to that unit ... they [TAFE] can't do that. They haven't set it up that way and they'll refuse to budge and come into line with the training package.*

While communication occurs, it seems to be not always two-way, nor is it in the same language.

*Providers: Listen and understand our business and learning needs*

In virtually all of the conversations with employers about qualifications, both provider adaptability in delivery and being listened to were regarded as crucial.

*... personal contact and communication, that the training organisation listened to needs and was responsive to the organisation.*

It seemed that the relationship with the training provider was being worked out over the content and implementation of the qualification being sought. Employers pointed out that factors such as relevance, onsite delivery, flexibility and the quality of the training were important to them.

*Relevance is a big issue and availability*

*Quality assurance has to be good and assessment rigorous and solid.*

*Quality and locality, not so much price—although it's a factor, [the company] won't pay through the nose.*

*Price doesn't come into it. First there is the ability to deliver what you require, [then] location, [then] flexibility and then the price.*

As noted earlier, the employers interviewed in this study wanted qualifications to provide an effective match to the skills that reflected their business requirements.

In the information technology industry, software developers train and accredit as part of their service to clients. In these cases the skills transfer is directly applicable. Through their

relationships with universities, firms such as Excell and Curve have developed undergraduate and masters programs to meet their specific needs. The International Computer Drivers Licence (ICDL) program is an example of this need to assure certainty in levels of service performance.

The Australian Computer Society, a national body serving computer professionals actually recommends courses to its members to best suit their needs. Such is the power of this society that it claims it can influence course providers in shaping the content of courses relevant to its constituency.

Again and again our case study informants stressed the importance of having VET providers who listened to them actively and effectively.

*I like someone that I can actually talk to who doesn't keep telling me they're going to come and save the world. I can talk to them about what we need and then they'd go away and come back with a product that is going to meet that need.*

The Training and Development Coordinator of North Star also emphasised the importance of personal contact for his selection of training providers and the value of having a range of training needs addressed through the one provider.

*Quality, price, reputation doesn't mean much to me. There are so many [providers] now. The personal contact is important ... We use TAFE because we are covering so many areas.*

Long-term relationships on which to build were also important for the General Manager of Biggs Power Company. In addition, when selecting a provider, he looks for skills, reputation and realistic price.

A recurring criticism was the lack of a business understanding on the part of providers or the trainers they despatched to the workplace. As one manager commented:

*A lot of those [TAFE] instructors are not business oriented, they've never been down that path ... [one instructor had] only six years in the industry, she's already a TAFE instructor.*

A similar comment from a different employer highlighted the employer perception that at least some trainers do not fully appreciate the demands of running a business.

*... but it is a significant difference [between] ... somebody who's done it and somebody who hasn't done it.*

Others commented on the perception that the system and, by implication, its providers, are out of touch with 'real industry'.

*There is a gap between the State Training Authorities and real industries. It's definitely the general feel.*

## How enterprise size impacts on the importance of qualifications

The issue of size was anticipated as one of the variables impacting upon the importance of qualifications (research question 8). Hence the businesses chosen as the basis for case studies included larger corporations (such as Excell and North Star), medium-size enterprises (such as Sweet Delight and Biggs Power) and small businesses such as Wild Bill's Surfboards and the family-owned retail bakeries.

The smaller businesses, except for Wild Bill and Wave Wizard, all accessed the national training system for qualifications. Seaside Village and Sweet Delight used traineeships. Fisherman's Basket accessed traineeships after developing a relationship with a training provider.

It seems that the small employers interviewed have less of an awareness of the national training system than do the medium-to-large enterprises. However, it is difficult to generalise about size and knowledge from this study.

The small employers showed very little understanding about the national system in its present form; that is, changes to apprenticeships and traineeships; available incentives; private provision of training; the principle of ‘user choice’; and the introduction of training packages.

The owner of Wave Wizard reflected some of the mixed and inadequate understandings about the system and expectations based on traditional models of ‘bonded’ or indentured apprentices. He was concerned about:

*... the chance of losing someone because there’s no regulation, there’s no law that you know, that we can sign someone from apprenticeship and they’ve got to stay with you. That they can’t just go and do something else.*

Some employers with limited knowledge are unsure about what they may reasonably expect from the system. Employers’ expectations may be based upon their own experiences of education and training, often many years earlier.

It appears that for some employers we may say: ‘They do not know what they want—but they want what they know!’ In other words, their ‘demands’ as consumers of training products and services may be informed by limited knowledge of what is available or possible. Thus they may ask for what they know rather than what they really need.

The study also suggests that small businesses were often introduced to the system through proactive marketing by training providers rather than through their own enquiry. Most small employers complained that they really didn’t have the time to pursue information and update their knowledge. This places a greater responsibility and burden on local providers and other agencies such as New Apprenticeship Centres.

It also appears that, for virtually all of the small employers we spoke to, release of workers for training during working hours was difficult, although ironically, larger businesses frequently commented that it must be easier to conduct training in a smaller business. As an interviewee from one of the larger employers noted:

*If you’ve got a small organisation with three people running the staff ... it would be easier to handle it.*

Despite this ‘big business’ perception of how much easier it would be to ‘handle’ training in a smaller organisation, smaller businesses highlighted the difficulties created by their lack of numbers. A smaller scale of operation does not necessarily reduce complexity or the need for specialist skills.

*As an operation here, where I have one glasser and one sander and one guy that maybe does all the finishing work etc. ... that puts you in a situation where if your glasser goes away for three weeks to college ... where’s your production? What happens?*

Irrespective of the size of the business, the ability to release workers from their shift for training was recognised as having difficulties and being expensive. Those with the responsibility for releasing workers for training usually had the responsibility for production at the shopfloor level. This presented a significant conflict for them to be damned whatever they did—whether stopping or reducing production for training, or vice versa. This dilemma was often resolved by ignoring training until being ordered to stop, or release participants. As our opening theme suggests, given this type of pressure, employers are understandably ambivalent.

Having a small business makes it even more difficult to withdraw workers without a severe impact upon work flow and productivity. Smaller businesses are by nature leaner, with little capacity for built-in redundancy. The withdrawal of one worker for training may effectively render a production operation unworkable.

Fisherman’s Basket is a small operation with two retail shops. Here training and assessments need to be carried out on the job, but usually only at very carefully negotiated times, and sandwiched between essential work activities. Such arrangements necessitated considerable adaptability from the training provider. Without this type of integration of work and learning, it



would have been very difficult. Off-the-job aspects of training were undertaken in the trainees' own time.

Clearly the needs of small businesses require training and development solutions which enable them to continue operations. This may require new forms of organisation and creativity on the part of training providers and employers: in the design, timing, structuring, location and implementation of training. It may involve the adoption of 'informal' or 'natural' methods of learning that smaller employers engage in on a daily basis. Our study indicates that, generally, the needs of small business were not met very effectively.

## Relationships between workplace learning, training and qualifications

We were interested to know how employers perceived the relationships between workplace learning, training and qualifications (research question 9). Exploration of this question led to some interesting discussion and insights on the nature of learning organisations—the journey towards becoming a learning organisation and the multiple ways in which learning and development take place in work environments. A key theme emerging from these discussions was the value placed upon informal and on-the-job learning. These issues are discussed in the following section.

### *What counts as 'training'*

Some employers commit substantial amounts of their time, energy and resources into activity that could easily be identified as 'training'. Yet in many cases this important activity is not recognised, valued or supported within the national training system. The limited and traditional notions of what counts as 'training' still persist in many mindsets, both within the VET system and amongst employers.

It was apparent throughout the case studies that employers valued relevant learning and development, regardless of whether it was identified as leading to qualifications. When Wild Bill the surfboard-maker was asked if he conducted training, initially he said he didn't. However, when a broader, inclusive description of training was provided, his answer changed dramatically.

*Well I worked out the other day that around about 30% to 40% of my time every week has been in [that sort of] training.*

However, despite this commitment to building capability, Wild Bill was not concerned with qualifications per se. For some of the employers contributing to this study, particularly those in the smaller enterprises, formal 'training' doesn't come into the picture. They are too busy coaching, checking, demonstrating, explaining, correcting, challenging, supervising and supporting their staff to be thinking about training!

As VET practitioners we may see them as 'trainers' under another name, but they do not identify with that label. These employers may even say they have no time to do 'training', being sceptical about its value. Yet they can see the value of what they are already doing. They see the effect of their work almost immediately and know (from bitter experience) what happens when they fail to undertake these activities. What the VET system is offering as 'training' seems to them to be something different.

'Training' is seen as classroom-based, paper-based, teacher-directed and formal—institutionalised learning. These employers are probably not qualified to do it and probably wouldn't want to do it anyway. It was also apparent that some employers demonstrated a sound understanding that formal classroom-based training cannot show an employee how to work effectively in the real day-to-day environment of the workplace (see Mournier 2001). They had developed their own strategies for doing this.

The respondent from Seaside village alluded to this in her comments:

*I am biased towards people who work their way up. Nothing beats hands-on experience.  
The [national training] system can never satisfy this.*

The challenge for the VET sector here is to consider whether it is actually consolidating traditional views of training, or whether it is open and inclusive, ready to embrace new strategies for learning. This study suggests the need to legitimate good practice even where it may be unorthodox.

### *To be or not to be, a learning organisation*

When asked about becoming a learning organisation, the majority of enterprises were not sure whether they were on this path or not. Indeed several were not sure about what was meant by the term. However, they considered the question seriously and grappled with the concept.

The Excell Motor Company supports learning in the workforce and values qualified workers. This case study identified this enterprise as, if not a learning organisation, then certainly one with a commitment to teaching and ongoing development processes.

The Training and Development Coordinator, North Star Wine Company felt that the challenging and constantly changing nature of the industry was a driver for learning.

*... people who come here learn. People need to produce wine; wine is developing, changing quickly.*

The wine industry peak body officer summed up the industry. He suggested that the picture is mixed, with many companies still needing to do more to cultivate effective learning cultures.

*My perception is that the bulk aren't [learning organisations]; the basic approach is too mechanistic and basic. The [good] examples are the ones with strategic links and where training is a part of everything.*

All of the respondents in the information technology industry identified with ideas of organisational learning. They tended to see themselves as members of 'learning organisations'. Such a status seemed to reflect not only the necessity of continual skills and knowledge upgrades, but also a commitment to professional development and a sense of responsibility to both their clients and staff. This interest is a further reflection of the value placed on learning and development within this industry. The case study revealed the importance placed not only on earning the title of 'learning organisation', but on actually being one. As one respondent noted:

*[We] don't try to describe ourselves as a learning organisation ... when the learning is happening you've got a learning organisation.*

While the language and concepts of 'organisational learning' were not familiar to all respondents, what was clear was that all employers valued learning within their organisations—providing the learning was relevant.

## Links between qualifications and productivity

Our final, but not least important, research question concerned whether or not employers perceived links between qualifications and productivity (research question 11). For most of the employers interviewed, the connection between qualifications and productivity was not one that could be directly measured or assessed. The lack of concrete measures or clear checklists made it difficult for employers to be certain about the cause(s) and effect(s) in relation to training, qualifications, job performance and productivity. There was serious consideration of the question but uncertainty in the responses.

While it may be possible to show how accredited training influences bottom lines (Doucouliagos & Sgro 2000; Maglen, Hopkins & Burke 2001), few of the firms interviewed could quantify returns from investment in training.

However, given the key themes and relationships revealed above, it seems that some benefits are self-evident; for example, supply contracts secured that relate directly to demonstrating that employees have hygiene qualifications and can understand and follow procedures; and industrial harmony. It is also evident that employers believe that certain qualifications are of benefit to output, regardless of whether or not the investment in training is accurately measured. Employers, through their strong responses to questions about the value of training and qualifications, clearly sense what is useful and what is not. As we have seen, an employer's motivation to train or not, may go well beyond simple task-focused performances. This is one of the factors that makes accurate measurements or calculations difficult.

Of the interviewees, about half had a direct relationship with the training system through a training provider. However, even the more sophisticated training provider relationships did not provide strong evidence of established procedures or methodologies for assessing return on investment or the impact of training on productivity, or anything else. There was a sense that some employers were attempting to be more deliberate and strategic about their approach to training and its value. As discussed above, for some, the concept of the 'learning organisation' (Senge 1990) was of considerable interest.

The North Star Wine Company Training and Development Coordinator gave a typical response on the links between qualifications and productivity. He expressed the view that training ought to make a difference and that he hoped and believed that it did. However, he also noted that convincing his colleagues was not an easy task.

*I'd like to think so [that there are links] but we don't actually measure this and you can bet your life if you spoke to a frontline manager they would say 'No'. It's because we've managed so well and because we bought all this new equipment. So it's hard [to separate the causes and effects] and if someone could give me something that will enable me to prove the fact that it's true, I'll welcome it with open arms.*

Many respondents had difficulty in coming to terms with an item they had not measured and for which they had no immediate concrete indicators. For some the commitment to formal training was akin to a leap of faith.

*I guess it takes a bit of a leap of faith; you don't see the value 'til it's finished.*

Small business employers seemed to be closer to, and more directly engaged in the actual productive work in their organisations. The risk, challenge and anxiety of operational decisions, including training, seemed to be far more dramatic and immediate to them. So too may be the observable benefits of training.

Wild Bill the surfboard-maker seemed to be more certain about the costs and benefits; not so aware of the financial risks in allowing novice employees to do particular tasks, that he avoided putting them in such situations altogether. However, he placed his trust in the training and expertise of others to meet his quality requirements.

*... with this [surfboard manufacture] from the shape right through, it's a precision job, the whole thing is a fine level precision job, you know ... I've physically got to the stage where financially, I can't afford to do that sort of [training] any more ... I actually send out 40% or 50% of my work to another company, where they've got a full team of guys and it all gets done there. It's [the product] got to be a top notch straight, so I'll go through another place where they've got quality control, they've got [trained] staff, ... I send that off to Japan and I know it's spot on.*

He stressed the high skill levels and attention to detail involved, as well as the consequences of mistakes.

*... it's that point two of a millimetre ... so if you've got a beginner there that can make a point two of a millimetre mistake, well then you've got something that goes from high performance, high quality to something that it's a total dud.*

It would appear that the employers we spoke to believe that they understand the cost and benefits of training or not training, and their actions attest to this.

In some instances, return on training investment is deliberately monitored; in others, it is taken on trust or faith. At the recruitment stage a qualification assists in general judgements about investment in new employees. Developmental training appears to focus on skills and outputs, rather than qualifications.

More work needs to be done with a broad range of employers to establish and demonstrate the value of measuring returns on training investment. Further, a range of practical, user-friendly models will need to be developed which capture, in any calculation, the unique needs and variables of individual businesses.

This section has attempted to identify the key themes and findings of the case studies. We have attempted to convey some of the multiple voices which the case studies highlighted. It should be remembered that they were each different businesses, with different stories, challenges and 'answers' to the problems of finding, developing and retaining clever and capable employees. At some points along the way these differences may be manifested as seeming contradictions.

# Emergent issues and implications: Reconceptualising the VET role

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## Appreciating the industrial and organisational context

This study has shown that the use and value of VET qualifications to employers is determined by a complex web of interrelated factors in the industrial and organisational context of the enterprise. This study suggests the importance of VET professionals developing and articulating a rich appreciation of this context. Such an appreciation needs to go beyond a superficial understanding of the industry setting and training packages. It needs to embrace the particularities and idiosyncrasies of employers and learners within each enterprise and each enterprise within its context.

Within the national VET system as it has evolved, there are now many players. VET advocates may include New Apprenticeship Centres, industry training advisory bodies, industry associations, training brokers and diverse providers, both public and private. If the intention is for VET advocates, providers or others, to engage with employers with a view to promoting VET programs, products and services, then the message from employers in this study is that the advocates need to be prepared to listen effectively, to learn quickly, appreciate the tensions, contradictions and constraints involved, and be prepared and able to educate not only their students, but also their 'clients' or consumers, which includes employers.

This study has not investigated VET provision or qualifications from the provider's perspective. It is drawing primarily upon the perceptions of employers as consumers in the national training system. The study was also informed by a literature review and by the researchers' own experiences in the field. Taking all of these sources into account, it is clear that the response from providers needs to be engaging, flexible, available and adaptable: adopting a service orientation to the work. The challenge emerges as considerably greater than simply 'delivering' the program. It also appears that, in some cases, VET management needs to continue to change, to authorise and to empower practitioners to work in this way.

## Employer scepticism

### Making the case for qualifications

The credibility of the national training system, its training packages and qualifications, rests, as has been noted earlier, on shared values or what might be termed a 'community of trust' (OECD 2001). This study was initiated with an emergent appreciation that Australian employers are not necessarily enthusiastic about the value of formal VET qualifications. This understanding was informed to a limited extent by previous research (Ridoutt et al. 2002). It was also based substantially on the researchers' years of experience as teacher-practitioners in diverse industry and workplace contexts. We were interested in further exploring what seemed to us to be scepticism, sometimes even cynicism demonstrated by employers with regard to formal qualifications for their employees.

This study reveals the existence of employer scepticism. It shows that, while these employers are not necessarily hostile to formal qualifications, neither are they prepared to accept 'on faith' that sponsoring or otherwise supporting qualifications for their employees will be good for their business. Where formal qualifications are required for external regulatory, quality assurance or mandated standards, they are accepted—even if not embraced. However, in the absence of some external 'driver' or imperative for compliance, the case for formal qualifications must be made—it cannot be assumed.

The implication and subsequent challenge here is that VET advocates need to identify and articulate the value, to employers, of formal training and qualifications. Furthermore, the case must be made largely in the employers' terms, taking account of the particular requirements of the enterprise in question. For the employers we spoke to, these terms related to the skills development and business performance that qualifications can provide.

In this respect the literature on returns on investment in training and, by extension to this context, qualifications (Doucouliagos & Sgro 2000; Billett & Cooper 1997; Blandy et al. 2000), competency (Sandberg 2000) and capability (Malloch, Cairns & Hase 1998; Stephenson & Cairns 1999) is significant and useful. However, even familiarity with this literature and the ability to cite figures on the returns on training investment is not the answer. Many employers are interested in their particular business, often in a narrow and focused way. They may have little interest in generalities. Overcoming an employer's scepticism requires enabling them to see how credentialled staff and/or a relationship with a training provider will help them to realise their goals.

While this is true, this study has also revealed evidence of some continuing trust in formal systems and qualifications. Respondents talked about the value of having standards set and maintained by industry and government authorities. As one respondent summed it up, 'Accredited is always better in that the standard is there'.

There was also evidence of some employers actively engaging with the education and training sector to both challenge and maintain qualifications and standards so that they remain relevant and meaningful to their industry. This was particularly evident with the information technology case study—although we could also note here that the emphasis in this case was more on higher education and qualifications at AQF level VI and above.

The message of this study is that the employer's immediate and overriding concern is whether or not the employee (or potential employee) has the necessary skills, knowledge and aptitude to contribute to the business efficiently and effectively. In most cases, even in the absence of formal business plans, employers had clear objectives.

It is against these objectives that employers judge the value of qualifications.

While representatives of the VET system value industry standards and packages, these system artefacts are of secondary concern to the employer. Indeed they may be quite meaningless to the employer without effective explanation and mediation. The study showed how employers not familiar with the institutional infrastructure of the field and its language need mediators, 'interpreters' and 'caring brokers' to help them negotiate the territory. ANTA has also highlighted the need for 'intermediary services' (Gientzotis Consulting 2003).

This study highlights the value of efforts to enable employers to take a more informed role in the interface between their enterprises and the provider networks—those who provide the accredited training leading to qualifications. For this to be achieved, employers need to understand how the skills and attitudes they value can be built into the particular qualifications for their industry. Research cited earlier indicates that many employers know little or nothing of the national training system, and were even less articulate about learning. This was also evident in this study.

The VET sector values the engagement and involvement of employers as key stakeholders. However, this study demonstrates how difficult it may be for some employers to engage and how significant the gap may be between the ‘real world’ of work and the worlds of VET policy and practice. The language and understandings are not necessarily the same. There is potential for qualifications to act as more effective bridges between these worlds. For this to happen and for employers to be full players in the bridge-building processes, some businesses, particularly smaller businesses, may require targeted training support and resources.

## The things employers value

A recurrent theme in the case studies is that employers view appropriate employee attitudes, values and even passions as essential elements in being able to do the job to their (the employers’) satisfaction.

In the interviews with employers of this study these issues emerged as more important than, or as an essential overlay to, the technical skills and knowledge implied by qualifications. This finding is consistent with the findings of other recent work which emphasises the place of employee attitudes, values and attributes (see Kearns 2001; Curtis & McKenzie 2001; Virgona et al. 2002). Mournier (2001) argues that employers are placing increasing emphasis upon what he characterises as the ‘behavioural’ aspects of skill. This focus raises serious questions about the appropriateness and the capacity of VET providers as agencies for the enculturation and socialisation of employees. Precisely how are the ‘appropriate’ values and attitudes to be determined, developed and assessed? Given the requirement for national and transportable qualifications, whose values and attitudes will be the determining ones? How will principles of access, multiculturalism, inclusivity, gender equity and diversity be maintained?

The critical point here is that in many cases traditional competency-based VET qualifications may be largely irrelevant to the development and demonstration of these qualities. These domains are not the traditional educational purpose of competency-based training. Indeed Field (1991, pp.77–88) notes that competency-based training is not particularly well suited to the development of these sorts of competencies.

Employers describe ideal employees in terms that we would articulate as ‘capable’—people who are flexible, adaptable and able (Stephenson & Yorke 1992). Earlier research conducted for NCVET has explored the notion of capability in relation to VET and to workplace training. The study, *Capable organisations: The implications for vocational education and training* (Hase, Malloch & Cairns 1998) concluded that, to facilitate more effective training in workplaces, a paradigm shift was required in the VET system.

For many of the employers we interviewed, particularly those in small business, finding, developing and retaining clever and capable employees was a constant challenge, and source of anxiety and frustration.

The bakery case study interviewees emphasised that the calibre and approach of the people they employed was most important. They also talked about issues of attitude and passion, qualities not so easily ‘delivered’ or demonstrated via orthodox competency-based training.

*People coming to work in the industry need to be passionate about the industry, that they need family background and family support ... it is important for people to have skills and to be able to adapt ... skills of adaptability and being able to relearn even though you have learned things you still need to continue to learn, be flexible and be prepared to change your ways. Pride. Identifying with the product and identifying with the business, connecting with it and that passion of how to do it.*

Wild Bill the surfboard-maker cannot offer accredited training. However, he also spoke about the importance of having employees with the ‘right’ attitude. He spoke highly of one employee:

*Someone that wants to learn more and wants to be good at what it is [they do] ...that's the kind of attitude ...it's hard to find in those sort of people too and I know I've got a lot of good ones there.*

*It's a lifestyle, definitely ... If you don't like it and you haven't got the patience for it, you've got problems.*

*He was willing to work ... he wanted to work ... He's got a work attitude and he's turned out really good.*

Wild Bill went on to speak with some pride about the effectiveness of his informal training.

*I've been through about 20 staff round about in the last three years, 12 of those were completely off the street and I've trained them into the trade, nine of them are still on the trade and doing it somewhere else, either at home or in backyard sort of deals and three of them have left the trade. So I've created useful people for other people all along.*

He was not alone in expressing this sentiment; other employers expressed this idea in different ways. As one of the bakers put it:

*You've got to be interested in giving something back. If you're not interested in giving something back you would always have problems as an employer because you're not passing knowledge over to your employees.*

We have seen that some employers are keen to develop their employees, in an altruistic sense, and as a means of helping themselves and their profits. Qualifications are one avenue through which these goals may be attained. If these aims, as well as the goals of the national system are to be achieved, the responsiveness of the VET system needs to continue to develop.

## VET responsiveness

This study has highlighted a number of issues which occur at the interface between the VET system and enterprises or employers and which relate to the system's responsiveness. As noted in previous studies (Waterhouse, Wilson & Ewer 1999), there is a recognised need for a shift in the VET system from a focus on predetermined content for 'delivery', to meaningful dialogues on designs for effective learning in different contexts. There is tremendous potential for such dialogues to evolve when we consider training packages as providing multiple entry and exit points rather than predetermined pathways. The pathways, in an educational sense, need to be designed and built—through collaborative processes.

The good news is that these shifts are, at least to some extent, already taking place. A substantial and growing body of emerging literature, particularly from Reframing the Future projects funded by the Australian Government, provides testimony to the innovative and responsive nature of VET programs and services designed to address industry, employer and learner needs (Mitchell & Wood 2001; Mitchell & Young 2001; Mitchell et al. 2002; Mitchell et al. 2003). The ANTA high-level review of training packages (ANTA 2002; Chappell et al. 2003), referred to earlier, also reports positive news in terms of provider responsiveness and the relevance of training packages. Ferrier, Trood and Whittingham (2003) also discuss VET 'going boldly into the future', with links to new, high-tech emerging industries. Guthrie (ed. 2003) documents exciting and innovative developments in flexible delivery throughout the system.

However these, and other writers, also stress the continuing challenges which involve 'cultural enhancements', business redesign, new and different connections and partnerships, paradigm shifts, capacity building and the re-invention of VET. As Mitchell and Young (2003) note, in discussing 'core ideas' for strategic management and change management in VET, the quest is never-ending and the challenges ongoing.

The evidence from these case studies suggests that, in the end, the confidence that employers have in 'the system'—with qualifications from accredited training being an integral element of the system—ultimately rests on the quality of the relationships they have with individual representatives of that system. The necessary dialogue depends on effective communication strategies and working relationships.



There are many interrelated variables involved in building and shaping these interpersonal relationships. These include:

- ✧ the influence of the industry and regional contexts
- ✧ the inherent complexities and challenges of the particular business(es) involved
- ✧ the quality of the educational experience being offered
- ✧ the integrity and capability of the provider(s) offering the program
- ✧ the levels of autonomy, responsibility, knowledge and control possessed by each of the relevant players in the dialogue
- ✧ the dynamic resulting from how all of the above are perceived and communicated by each of the relevant stakeholders.

How these many factors play out in practice will vary from one context to another. Nevertheless, this study suggests the value of rethinking several dimensions of VET responsiveness.

## The importance of effective listening

The logic and rhetoric of the national training system is that it is industry-driven. This commitment has been expressed through industry training advisory bodies and peak industry councils, and through the policy of 'user choice'. In practice however, relatively few employers are involved actively on or with industry training advisory bodies. Of the employers contributing to this study, only one was directly involved with the industry training advisory bodies covering their industry.

The case studies suggest the value of all parts of the VET system continuing to build their effective listening skills with employers. Part of the ongoing challenge lies in VET 'experts' setting aside their (sometimes) preconceived views about what employers (and their businesses) need, and actually engaging in conversations with employers about their needs and aspirations. Such an orientation might be characterised as one of service.

It was clear from the case studies that employers value having their opinions about training heard and tend to resent being told what they need. Furthermore, these conversations need to be couched not in generalities about the perceived value of VET accredited training and associated qualifications, but with a rich appreciation of the particular circumstances of the business/enterprise in question. These conversations require a deep and specific understanding of how particular teaching and learning experiences may enhance an operation as well as an awareness of training packages and their potential.

## The language of VET

Access to appropriate information and guidance about the system and provider services and capabilities continues to be a critical issue, as noted earlier.

In addition to urging the value of effective listening, this study also suggests the value of VET advocates becoming particularly conscious of their own language. Some of the employers involved in this study were well familiar with the language of the training bureaucracy and the language of competency-based training. Some employers are also members of powerful and effective employer and lobby groups which have significant effects upon the training system.

However, not all employers are so connected. Paradoxically in an industry-driven system, some employers, as consumers or customers of the VET system, know so little about the VET system, and the teaching and learning possibilities on offer, that they are unable to advocate effectively for their own needs, or those of their employees.

The implication is that VET advocates, providers, brokers and associated personnel, need to appreciate that there is a need for continuing education in the marketing process. In this sense the ‘target’ learner is not only the trainee or learner to be enrolled in the program, but his/her boss as well.

Once again the issue is one of communication. We found that some employers had seen advertisements for the national training system or for local providers, but they had not associated the advertisement with their own work or needs. Even a relatively straightforward word like ‘training’ proves to be ambiguous upon closer examination.

## Rethinking ‘customisation’

The metaphors we use shape our thinking and our actions. Often the most powerful metaphors are those we are not even conscious of as metaphors. In the VET sector the metaphors of ‘delivery’ and ‘package’ are in this category. Another worthy of consideration is the metaphor of ‘customisation’.

Some computer users customise their computers and some auto buffs customise their cars. In this sense customisation is a form of after-market modification. In most cases the changes are relatively superficial: the colour, the style, the appearance may be altered, but the underlying structure remains unaffected.

Customising a training program for a particular workplace might amount to little more than changing the company name and logo on the cover of the training materials. Such customisation is an ‘outside in’ process. The training program is ‘imported’ to the company and adapted in ways to make it more acceptable in the local context. The assumption is that the basic structure, content and design of the original training program are satisfactory. This approach has its origins in the content-driven paradigm of education and training. It is assumed that the teacher has the relevant knowledge, and this merely needs to be ‘delivered’ or transmitted to the receivers. This paradigm is discussed by Hager (2000) as an outmoded approach to education.

The findings of this study also challenge the ‘delivery’ paradigm. Even within a given industry, every workplace is different. The baking industry case study highlights the diversity of business practices and training requirements even amongst a small group of bakers with similar retail operations. As one of the bakers put it: ‘we all use the same ingredients, it’s what you do with it makes a difference’.

This message was not unique to the bakers—it was virtually unanimous from all of the employers interviewed. Even while acknowledging the authority and usefulness of industry standards and training packages, they stressed the need to interpret the training package from their company’s point of view.

*We’ve got to look at the competencies and what they mean to the company ... what’s the outcome we want and they [the VET providers] have to work towards that.*

The findings of these cases studies suggest that the assumption that the ‘base program’ or VET ‘template’ is already appropriate may need to be challenged. At the very least it needs to be checked or verified, not with an assumption that it will ‘fit’, but rather with an assumption that it may not.

Extending this notion of customisation invites discussion of perhaps a more appropriate form of program—the ‘custom built’ program.

## A concept of uniqueness

The notion of ‘custom built’ education and training programs captures more effectively a recurring theme identified in the case studies, that of the individuality of each business. Employers spoke about the distinctiveness of their operations; they saw themselves as unique and identified the need for training and qualifications to both reflect and consolidate their businesses. They sometimes lacked confidence in the capacity of VET providers to do this. As one respondent noted:

*TAFE could never cover it in a lifetime because each business is different.*

There are, however, precedents for the development of VET programs that respond effectively to the particularities of enterprises, while still maintaining fidelity to national standards. Some references to VET innovation and responsiveness were cited earlier and the system seems to be improving on these issues.

Given certain conditions, context-based curriculum can be developed collaboratively, in partnerships at the enterprise level, and in ways which enhance the individual business while providing nationally recognised and transportable qualifications. It is not necessary for a highly contextual program to be reductionist or narrow in its focus. On the contrary, the generic elements and the underpinning principles which will also apply in different contexts can be addressed in a program relevant to the enterprise (see Sefton, Waterhouse & Deakin [eds] 1994; Waterhouse 1996; Virgona, Waterhouse & Sefton 1998). A relevant and context-based program can teach transferable skills and knowledge, since relevance and transferability are not mutually exclusive. Such context-based approaches are possible and highly desirable for workplace training. Their starting point is the serious notion that each business is different.

The same principle can work in college or institution-based VET programs. Here the TAFE teacher may work with a class comprised of individuals from many different businesses. It is unlikely that s/he will have the resources or the capacity to completely redesign the training program to meet the particular needs of every business represented in the class. Nevertheless, the principle of uniqueness is manifested through a learner-centred approach to the curriculum and the learning. Every learner is different and each comes from a different context. Through a respectful appreciation of individual students, their needs, histories and contexts, capable teachers are able to reflect and respond to diverse needs.

There is nothing new in this; good teachers have been doing it for years.

## Flexibility

The penultimate point on VET responsiveness to employers relates to employers’ concerns about flexibility. This issue is another aspect of the broader argument about the need for training to ‘fit’ the particular requirements of the enterprise. Most of the employers contributing to this study expressed a strong preference for on-the-job training and workplace delivery. They highlighted their preference for VET providers to be available on-site (that is, at the workplace), at times that suited the workplace, working in ways that complement workplace practices. They wanted training that did not get in the way of their main business.

It is significant to note that the cost of such flexible and ‘demand’ rather than ‘supply’-driven programs was not their major consideration. While price was recognised as a factor, the more important issue was whether the training provider could implement the program effectively, with minimum disruption to the workplace. One employer summed it up in this way:

*Price doesn't come into it. First there is the ability to deliver what you require, [then] location, [then] flexibility, and then the price.*

Another employer noted:

*Quality and locality [counts] not so much price—although it [price] is a factor, they [the company] won't pay through the nose.*

Once again, the picture emerging here is one of employers forming their own judgements about the use and value to their businesses of accredited training leading to a qualification. The primary considerations were about the 'fit' of the qualifications and their relevance to the business and the flexibility in scheduling and delivery. The value of the training is assessed in these terms, and on this basis, cost–benefit judgments can be made. Only after these criteria have been met does the issue of qualifications come into play.

## Harnessing the institutional and educational potential of the system.

The findings of these case studies suggest that the VET system needs to continue to develop its responsiveness, but it also needs to be proactive in building bridges and relationships with employers.

To so assert, however, begs a series of questions about whether the system has the leadership and the organisational resources, the capability and capacity to be more proactive. Certainly there are compelling arguments (Schofield 2002; Down 2002; Buchanan et al. 2001) suggesting the need for substantial public re-investment to build the capacity of the system for such development.

Significantly, it is essential to highlight the *educational* shift required.

Some might argue that there was a time when TAFE teachers could lay claim to possessing all of the relevant skills and knowledge for effective workplace practice (in their chosen fields). Their role, as institution-based educators, was to disseminate or transmit their knowledge and skills to new initiates to 'their' industry. The teacher was, as some have suggested, 'the sage on the stage'.

This research suggests the inappropriateness of attempting to continue with such an approach and also highlights the need for vocational educators to have a rich appreciation of a diverse range of strategies for learning and development, and the capacity to apply these strategies flexibly and creatively, according to the needs of particular individuals, enterprises and industry contexts.

Given the stated intention of training packages, it is disappointing and somewhat ironic that some respondents perceived their implementation as constricting or limiting the VET system's capacity to be responsive. Unlike the previous generation of fixed accredited national curriculum documents, the training packages do not specify educational activities, pathways or methods—they are not prescriptive in this sense. The new approach with training packages places considerable responsibility on VET providers for educational design and development. There is much potential in this responsibility.

However, to realise this potential requires an approach that moves away from traditional methods and towards processes of active and effective collaboration with the multiple stakeholders involved—including employers. To make such a system-wide shift, and effectively manage the multiple tensions and contradictions involved, requires significant support and investment in professional development (Down 2002), systemic leadership (Falk & Smith 2001; Callan 2001) and capacity building (Modra & Seddon 2000).

The findings of this research suggest that, while progress has been made, the VET system does need to acknowledge and remedy the issues identified in this report to ensure that employers value accredited training leading to a qualification to enable them to 'get the job done'.

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# Appendix A

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## Reference committee

A project reference committee was established to guide and assist the researchers throughout the project. The expertise and experience of this group was an invaluable aid at all stages, particularly in design, data collection and analysis, and with critical feedback. The committee met several times, as well as teleconferencing at crucial points.

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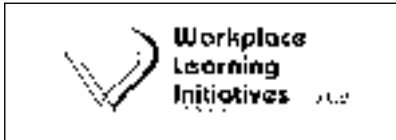
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# Appendix B

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## Survey instruments



## Use & Value of Qualifications to Employers

A National Centre for Vocational Education and Research (NCVER) funded project

### COMPANY/ENTERPRISE PROFILE

Survey No	1001
Date:	

Thankyou for you participation.

**This survey should take you about 20 minutes to complete**

Instructions:	A.	Fill in the Date
<b>Do not write your name on this form</b>	B.	For Yes/No questions place a "1" in the appropriate box
	C.	For multiple choice questions, like question 1, place a "1" in the most appropriate box or boxes.
	D.	Questions which require expanded answers should be completed within the space provided.
	E.	Record the time taken to complete the survey.
	F.	Post, fax or email the completed survey to WLI as per agreed mode.

1. What is your Industry sector?

Mining	Auto	Food Process'g	Service	Other Manuf

2. How would you describe your core business?


3. Location

State	Capital City	Capital City Region	Prov. City	Rural

4. Annual Turnover Approx (\$ Millions)

0-1m	1-5m	5-10m	10-15m	15m+

5. Market (circle relevant aspects)

Local	State	Nationa	Internationa

6. Number of employees

0-25	25-50	50-75	75-100	100+

7. Employment modes - eg No. of Casual, permanent and Contract Employees

Casual	Perm	Contract	Trainees

8. Is your company a Registered Training Organisation?	Yes	No

9. Why did you choose to become/ not to become an RTO?	

10. Do you conduct training on this site?	Yes	No

11. Do you sponsor/support training off site? Or in other ways?	Yes	No

Please give reasons for your answer


12. Do you access govt funds to support training programs?	Yes	No

If yes, what type of training funds do you use?


13. How much of your operating budget is allocated to training?	0-1%	1-3%	3-5%	5%+

14. What type(s) of training do you provide?	in house informal training	in house accredited training	non-accredited by external provider	accredited by external provider

15. What is the major reason behind your company engaging in training?	

16. Do you use an external training provider?	Yes	No

If above answer is Yes, please specify provider

University	Tafe	Private RTO	Group Training	Other

**1001**

17 Do you use consultancy services?		Yes	No			
If so ,what for?						
18 Is there a training committee, or somebody responsible for training?		Yes	No			
19 Are training/ skills audits conducted?		Yes	No			
20 How many people are in training?	shopfloor	trades/tech	supervision	admin	mgt	
21 Is there an EBA in place?	Yes					No
22 Is training a part of the EBA?	Yes					No
23 What is the qualification profile of employees? ( Approximately)	% Of Degree/ Diploma Holders	% Trade	% IT	% Industry Certs	Other	
24 What are the qualification requirements of new employees?	Operators/ Shop Floor	Supervision	Trade/ Technical	Admin	Management	

Thankyou for taking the time to fill in this survey.

Please note that this is stage one of our investigation. Stage two will involve a face to face interview, which should take no more than one hour . As has been previously discussed with you, if you are a medium to large enterprise, we will need to talk to other stakeholders in your oragnisation. This is done to provide validation of opinions, facts and other information provided. The case studies generated from information that your organisation has provided will be, prior to any circulation or publication, subject to your review and approval.

**As part of our contract with NCVER we will ensure that information provided by you remains anonymous**

How long did it take you to complete this survey?  mins



A National Centre for Vocational Education and Research  
(NCVER) funded project

**Use & Value of Qualifications to Employers**  
**EMPLOYERS PERCEPTIONS OF QUALIFICATIONS**

Survey No 1001

Date:

**To be filled in by the researcher**

1 What levels of accredited training do you conduct?

cert 1	cert 2	cert 3	cert 4	Diploma	Other

2 Do you have a preference for a particular type of training?

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3 Do you provide incentives for employee participation in training?

Yes	No

Explain

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4 What relevance do your employees give to accredited training?

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5 What types of qualifications do your employees value?

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6 Are unions involved in negotiating training?

Yes	No

7 How does this involvement influence your training programs?

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1001

8 Does the the availability of Govt subsidy influence your involvement in accredited training?

Explain

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9 Is the VET system meeting your needs at the moment?

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10 Are your training priorities met through accredited training? Explain

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11 How would you rate the type of accredited training provided in your industry sector?

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12 Has the 'training package' influenced training in your business?

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13 Has the 'training package' influenced training in your industry?

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14 How could the VET system best respond to your needs?

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15 Are qualifications not directly related to the job recognised by the organisation?

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16 Would you describe your organisation as a learning organisation? Why?

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17 Is there a link between Qualifications and productivity? Please explain.

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18 What is the nature of the link(s)?

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19 Does the nature and/or size of your business effect the impact/importance of qualifications? Explain.

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20 What other factors are important in the selection of an external provider? Price? Location? Flexibility? Size? Reputation?

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21 Are there any other factors not mentioned here that effect your involvement in accredited training?

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# Support document details

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Additional information relating to this research is available in *Getting the job done: How employers use and value accredited training leading to a qualification—Case studies*. It can be accessed from NCVER's website <http://www.ncver.edu.au>>. This document contains the following chapters.

- ✧ Executive summary
- ✧ Introduction
- ✧ Automotive manufacturing: Excell Motor Company
- ✧ Viticulture: North Star Wines
- ✧ Biggs Power Company
- ✧ Surfboard manufacturing
- ✧ Baking
- ✧ Seafood
- ✧ Information technology
- ✧ Hospitality
- ✧ Summing up

How employers perceive, use and value vocational education and training qualifications is an important, but also complex, issue. This report captures the views of a small number of employers within 14 different companies, over eight industries. The broad conclusion is that employers place high value on learning and capability and competence, irrespective of whether this leads to, or is reflected in, qualifications held. The detailed findings offer valuable insights for both employers and providers.

NCVER is an independent body responsible for collecting, managing, analysing, evaluating and communicating research and statistics about vocational education and training.

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