Engineering Excellence Report

Competency based progression and completion for engineering trades
# CONTENTS

## 1. Executive Summary

## 2. Introduction

- 2.1 · Project Overview
- 2.2 · Methodology
- 2.3 · Surveys
- 2.4 · Communications

## 3. Project Outcomes

- 3.1 · Tailored training plans
- 3.2 · Seeking confirmation of competency from employers
- 3.3 · Work based activities employers can give apprentices
- 3.4 · Assisting employers to develop internal systems
- 3.5 · Addressing internal administrative processes
- 3.6 · Benefits for the participants directly involved in the project
- 3.7 · Benefits to apprentices
- 3.8 · Benefits to employers
- 3.9 · Consistency across jurisdictions
- 3.10 · Benefits to apprentices
- 3.11 · Barriers to implementing the project
- 3.12 · Long term benefits of the project

## 4. Communicating the Project Outcomes

- 4.1 · Broad awareness raising component
- 4.2 · WorldSkills
- 4.3 · Modelling Vocational Excellence
- 4.4 · Workshops and Information Sessions
5. Evaluating the Project

5.1 · Surveys
   5.1.1 · Employer results
   5.1.2 · RTO staff results
   5.1.3 · Apprentice results
   5.1.4 · Comparisons

5.2 · Other Data
   5.2.1 · Commencement numbers
   5.2.2 · Completions
   5.2.3 · Cancellations/withdrawals
   5.2.4 · Average durations (months)

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

6.1 · Recommendations

7. Appendices
Key Messages
Competency based progression and completion is one of the biggest changes to the apprenticeship system for many years. Apprenticeships have always been time based. Every stakeholder in the system - employers, teachers, supervisors, regulators - who completed an apprenticeship themselves did so over a fixed duration. To create a new system, where progress is based on assessment of skills and knowledge, takes time. Stakeholders need to be confident that apprentices are genuinely competent, at work and in training, before supporting the changes. They need to have confidence that apprentices can demonstrate skills in a range of contexts, and demonstrate maturity and a professional attitude. After all, these apprentices will reflect the decisions of all of these stakeholders.

The Engineering Excellence project set out to build a system where employers play a key part in confirming when apprentices are competent. Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) still assess competencies and award qualifications, but for apprentices this is done in consultation with their employers. This change reflects the centrality of the workplace in demonstrating competency, and the fundamental nature of the contract between an employer and apprentice. Everything else in the apprenticeship system; formal training, regulation, financial incentives, is there to support that contract.

Because this change is so significant, it will take time to become fully established. There will continue to be employers and teachers who don’t support it. There will be those who see it as meddling with a system that had worked for generations. But others recognise that apprenticeships have struggled for a long time to attract good applicants, and that completion rates remain poor. These are the ones who are prepared to try a new approach and will help ensure competency based progression and completion becomes more firmly established.

It is hoped that other RTOs will consider the findings of this report, and examine the tools developed by the participating RTOs. These tools will not only help them comply with state training authority guidelines and rules about confirming competency with employers, but will also help them improve their communications with employers.

Introduction
The Engineering Excellence project was established under the Accelerated Australian Apprenticeship Program to help RTOs develop and implement systems that ensured apprentices progressed through and completed their apprenticeship on the basis of achievement of competency.

The project related to engineering trades such as fitters, machinists, boilermakers, sheetmetal workers and others. These trades are generally employed under conditions set out in the Manufacturing and Associated Industries and Occupations Award 2010.

All of the RTOs had systems in place to assess competency, but few had strategies to involve employers in the process. This was despite the fact that the industrial award required employers to agree to the RTO’s assessment before an apprentice progressed, and rules and guidelines put in place by State Training Authorities that RTOs ensured that employers confirmed or validated their assessment.

The purpose of the project was to work with the participating RTOs to develop strategies and tools that ensured apprentices’ training and assessment more accurately reflected their workplaces, and that employers were able to confirm that apprentices were competent to workplace standards before they progressed or completed their
The project allowed each of the RTOs to appoint a full time project officer to work on the project objectives for two and a half years. Information about how the project officers were recruited, their induction and their professional development is contain in the Introduction.

Project officers researched how competency based progression and completion had already been implemented in their state and by their RTO. This was to establish a benchmark and to help identify further action that needed to be taken. The RTO Systems and Practices Report covered a range of topics including:

- State funding systems and rules regarding competency based progression and completion
- Internal funding processes
- How training and assessment is timetabled
- How Training Plans are negotiated
- Training Plan content, including units selected and unit sequencing.
- How assessments are conducted
- Workplace involvement in assessments
- How confirmation of competency is sought.

This report was first produced in September 2013. The project officers updated the report early in 2015 to help demonstrate what had changed as a result of the project. The findings of the 2015 version are contained in Section 3 (Project Outcomes), Appendix 4 (State funding systems and rules regarding competency based progression and completion) and Appendix 5 (Training Plan content).

Project officers then commenced work on developing tools to assist with competency based progression. These tools essentially covered the following:

- information for employers;
- training plans that reflected the four equal stages of an apprenticeship as described by the industrial award;
- processes for seeking the employer’s agreement or confirmation of competence;
- assessment processes that take into account what apprentices do at work; and
- processes for providing reports to employers to help them monitor their apprentices’ progress and pay the correct wage.

Examples of the tools developed by the project officers are contained in their case study reports at Appendix 1.

RTO staff, employers and apprentices were all surveyed twice about the project - during 2013, and towards the end of 2014. These surveys were intended to measure their understanding of and attitudes towards competency based progression and completion and to see if attitudes had changed during the project. All survey results, including the survey instruments used are covered in detail later in this report.

Communicating about the project, both internally and externally, has been critical to achieving its outcomes. All of the project...
officers identified key stakeholders and kept them informed of the project. Fact sheets were developed for employers and apprentices, and a process implemented for communicating with Australian Apprenticeship Centres, group training companies and other stakeholders.

Project officers also produced three editions of an Engineering Excellence newsletter that was distributed to employers and other stakeholders. Communication documents are provided at Appendix 2.

The communication strategy is discussed in more detail in Section 4.

Project outcomes
All of the ten pilots were able to achieve against the services they were contracted to provide, namely:

- tailored training plans that allow for the development of skills in the workplace as well as with the RTO before assessment,
- agreed processes for teachers to seek confirmation of competency from employers,
- work based activities employers can give to their apprentices to help develop their competencies,
- assisting employers to develop internal processes to manage competency based progression and completion, and
- addressing relevant internal administrative processes such as timetabling to enable implementation.

Not all of them were able to achieve to the same level, because of a range of internal and external influences. For detailed discussion about each pilot, see the Project Outcomes section and the individual case studies.

Tailored training plans
There are two aspects to making training plans more suited to apprentices workplaces. The industrial award divides an apprenticeship into four equal stages, so training plans need to reflect four stages rather than a three stage traditional TAFE delivery strategy. All of the RTOs were able to achieve a four stage training plan, but three are still in the process of developing four stages for each of the qualifications they offer. Elsewhere in this report is a discussion about the barriers to implementing change in RTOs.

The other aspect of tailoring training plans is to make their contents better reflect what apprentices do at work. The strategy used by most of the RTOs has been to develop equipment checklists for those who negotiate training plans; to help ensure the training plan reflects the workplace, and to open discussions about how an employer might confirm an assessment if they lack specific equipment or processes.

Seeking confirmation of competency from employers
All of the pilots now have in place a system for confirming competence with employers. Some have developed electronic systems and some have paper-based systems. An example of an electronic system is My Profiling, now used by TasTAFE and Hunter Institute. After an apprentice has recorded hours worked on particular tasks and the RTO has finalised its own internal assessment, the RTO generates a request to the employer which requires them to indicate that they agree that the workplace standard has been met.

Other paper-based systems generally list tasks an apprentice should be able to competently perform at work and ask the employer to sign a statement to the effect that they agree the apprentice has met the workplace standard for those tasks/competency units.

Work based activities employers can give apprentices
For the most part, this meant interpreting training system speak into the language of industry. Competency units can comprehensively describe what an apprentice should be able to demonstrate, but their structure and the language they use is not always understandable to employers. Project officers developed training record books, log books and confirmation systems that described tasks apprentices should be able to do at work, rather than reiterating elements, performance criteria and other training package terminology. These tasks were then mapped back to competency units within the RTO. Employers are able to use these tasks to help them set relevant work for their apprentices and make their own judgements about their performance.
Assisting employers to develop internal systems
Apart from jargon-free information, employers also need information about their apprentices’ progress, to help them monitor their progress and to pay the correct wage. All of the pilots now provide this information regularly to employers. Some use electronic systems like My Profiling, which at any time will indicate the percentage of the apprenticeship completed. Others provide reports each time they are seeking confirmation of competence, and some send formal correspondence noting each time an apprentice progresses to the next stage.

Addressing internal administrative processes
The ability of the pilots to address internal administrative processes that acted as barriers to the project outcomes varied. All were able to implement new systems to communicate with employers, to negotiate training plans and seek employers’ confirmation of competence, but not all were able to successfully address issues such as timetabling. These issues can relate to how RTOs administer their budgets, how they are funded by State Training Authorities, and the employment conditions of their staff. Not all of the pilots were able to resolve them.

Barriers to implementing the project
The Engineering Excellence project was about implementing change within the participating RTOs, and the project officers were effectively change facilitators within their organisations. Implementing change is never easy, especially within large public institutions with long standing practices and long serving employees.

What added a level of complexity for the project managers were various external factors that made implementing change even more difficult than it should have been.

Structural issues in the VET industry
During the course of the project, most RTOs were subject to changes in how they were funded and regulated by State Training Authorities. This might have been increased competition from private RTOs, lower amounts of subsidies per apprentice or changes in the way subsidies were provided. In a context where apprentice commencement numbers were declining, the end result was a climate where efficiencies needed to be found within each RTO.

Most of the RTOs experienced cutbacks to their teaching workforce during the project, and most were looking very closely at how to reduce costs for training delivery, mainly in terms of reducing attendance time for apprentices.

Structural issues in the RTO
An internal issue faced by the publicly funded TAFEs is the employment conditions of its teaching workforce. Most participating TAFEs now expect teachers to visit employers to negotiate training plans and facilitate training and assessment in the workplace, but TAFE teachers’ industrial agreements do not reflect these practices.

The commitment of participating RTOs to the project was variable. Some of the project partners embraced the project and saw it as a way to drive change within their organisation. Others were less enthusiastic. Some RTOs gave little management support to the project officers. They expected them to drive any changes on their own and did not encourage other teaching staff to implement new practices. These RTOs achieved less than the supportive RTOs.

Few of the RTOs seriously considered the way their budgets were constructed or how their teachers or trainers were timetabled. Most TAFEs will still timetable apprenticeship training and assessment to be completed over three years, despite the efforts of the project officers and despite the objectives of the project. To achieve results in this area requires more work to demonstrate how it can be done, and more time to bed down changes already implemented. It also requires the full commitment of management, and this was not always forthcoming.

State Training Authorities
The way RTOs are funded by state governments also affected the ability of RTOs to implement change. Most state governments now require RTOs to complete assessment against a competency before final payments are made, and an employer verification or confirmation of competency is usually a part of this process. This requirement means that RTOs generally
try to complete assessments as soon as they have finished the formal training and assessment component, which is often before an apprentice has had time to practice and demonstrate skills in the workplace. This issue is a key barrier to implementing competency based progression and completion to the satisfaction of all parties, especially employers.

Group Training Organisations
Group training organisations are an important stakeholder in apprenticeships and are not always supportive of competency based progression and completion. Many GTOs offer services and prices to host employers based on the assumption that apprenticeships will last four years. More work is needed to showcase those GTOs who have embraced competency based progression and completion.

Pre-apprenticeship training
Pre-apprenticeships, VET in Schools and pre-vocational training is still a barrier to competency based progression and completion. Around Australia, a range of different qualifications is used for these purposes, some of which allow for substantial amounts of credit into apprenticeships, even if the graduate has never set foot inside a workplace. MSA has tried to address this issue by developing a new Certificate II in Engineering Pathways, but its uptake nationally has been slow. This is also an issue for other industry areas beyond engineering.

A benefit in implementing the project
One of the big benefits of the project has been the sharing of tools and systems between the project officers. This is not just within states or with public providers but right across the board. Every week during the project, each project officer informed others of what they worked on and that prompted a lot of sharing.

The regular teleconferences finished with the project, but the potential for greater sharing between RTOs remains. All RTOs compete to some extent, but more could be shared.

The project also provided the project officers with a much greater understanding of how the apprenticeship system works across the country. Apprenticeships are subject to state regulations and state funding, but a national perspective gave everyone the insight that not much differs regardless of the state. Some also were able to use the expertise of project officers from states that had already implemented new policies such as competitive systems or retrospective funding to help them prepare for change at their own RTO.

Recommendations summary
6.1.1 The project has revealed that pre-vocational and other institution-only qualifications complicate the implementation of competency-based progression and completion for employers. Accordingly, the Australian Government should undertake an analysis of the relationship between industrial awards and institution-based qualifications with competency-based progression and completion arrangements.

6.1.2 State Training Authorities need to develop mechanisms that enable RTOs to provide opportunities for employers to ensure that apprentices are meeting workplace standards before they are required to confirm competence.

6.1.3 That the Australian Government develop and implement a communication strategy in conjunction with States and Territories, to disseminate the findings of the Engineering Excellence project to facilitate the expansion of competency-based progression and completion practices into other industry areas.

6.1.4 That the Australian Government, in conjunction with the States and Territories, develop and implement a professional development strategy for RTOs which focuses on and clarifies the roles of the various parties concerning competency-based progression and completion.

6.1.5 That the Australian Government undertake a detailed analysis of the data obtained through the Modelling Vocational Excellence survey and provide the results to relevant stakeholders in the field of promoting trades careers.

See Section 6 for detail.
2. INTRODUCTION

2.1 PROJECT OVERVIEW

The concept of competency based progression and completion of apprenticeships follows from the fact that not every apprentice, indeed not every learner, achieves at the same rate.

Some acquire technical knowledge and understanding quite quickly, but might struggle with applying practical skills. Others might already have experience in practising hand skills before they commenced their apprenticeship, but have no technical understanding. Some may have literacy or numeracy deficiencies that make classroom learning a problem for them. Others still may have attitudinal problems that hinder their progress as employees.

For all these different types of apprentices, we had established a training system that ensured all of them completed their apprenticeship after a nominal duration of four years. There were exceptions allowed that took into account overtime worked, or allowed an early completion for personal reasons, but generally all apprentices took four years to complete. Some bright apprentices were encouraged by their RTO to include higher level studies once their standard qualification was finished, but they still took four years to finish (and in this age of tighter funding of VET training this option has all but vanished anyway).

The Australian Industry Group became interested in the duration of apprenticeships because issues with apprenticeships had been regularly reported by its members for many years. An Ai Group report produced in July 2005 titled *Making the economy work better: A model for contemporary apprenticeships* first called for apprentices to progress and complete based on their achievement of competency. The reasons for this are as relevant today as they were a decade ago:

- Skills shortages;
- The high attrition rate of apprentices;
- The mismatch with employer needs;
- A lack of flexibility;
- Inconsistencies between the State and Federal training arrangements; and
- Over-regulation.

Our thinking then, as it still is today, is that an apprenticeship system that recognises that apprentices learn at different rates and have different levels of motivation, and in turn rewards those who are prepared to work hard may make apprenticeships more attractive to potential candidates. This may help with the standard of those applying to undertake apprenticeships and may help improve the retention rates of those who commence.

**COAG**

The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) agreed with Ai Group’s policy, and in 2006 made a resolution that ‘By December 2006 all governments will have put in place arrangements that allow apprentices and trainees to work as qualified tradesmen and tradeswomen as soon as they have demonstrated competency to industry standards, without having to wait out a set time period or make special application.’

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Industrial Awards

In March 2006, the Metal, Engineering and Associated Industries Award was varied to reflect this decision and to allow for apprentices to progress through the apprenticeship wage structure on the basis of competency achievement.

The Award was changed to state that the nominal period of the apprenticeship was still four years, but the apprenticeship could be completed in a shorter period when:

“(a) the qualification specified in the training contract is successfully completed;
And
(b) the apprentice has the necessary practical experience to achieve competency in the skills covered by the training contract, provided that the determination as to whether this condition has been met must be by agreement between the registered training organisation, the employer and the apprentice.”

The Award also set out wages for each stage of the apprenticeship and the conditions for progression to the next stage.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STAGE OF APPRENTICESHIP</th>
<th>ENTRY, EXIT AND PROGRESSION REQUIREMENTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stage 1</td>
<td>Entry Nil entry requirements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Exit There is no exit point at this stage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage 2</td>
<td>Entry An apprentice enters Stage 2:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
|                          | • on attainment of 25% of the total competency points for the relevant AQF Certificate III qualification specified in the training plan; or
|                          | • 12 months after commencing the apprenticeship; whichever is earlier. |
|                          | Exit There is no exit point at this stage|
| Stage 3                  | Entry An apprentice enters Stage 3:     |
|                          | • on attainment of 50% of the total competency points for the relevant AQF Certificate III qualification specified in the training plan; or
|                          | • 12 months after commencing Stage 2; whichever is earlier. |
|                          | Exit There is no exit point at this stage|
| Stage 4                  | Entry An apprentice enters Stage 4:     |
|                          | • on attainment of 75% of the total competency points for the relevant AQF Certificate III qualification specified in the training plan; or
|                          | • 12 months after commencing Stage 3; whichever is earlier. |
|                          | Exit Upon the attainment of 100% of the total competency points for the relevant AQF Certificate III qualification specified in the training plan and subject to clauses 4.2.6(j) and 4.2.6(m) an apprentice will exit with the relevant AQF Certificate III qualification

2 Metal, Engineering and Associated Industries Award 1998, Clause 4.2.6(j)(ii), now contained in the Manufacturing and Associated Industries and Occupations Award 2010, Clause 15.8(a) and (b).
3 Metal, Engineering and Associated Industries Award 1998, Clause 5.3.2(a), now contained in the Manufacturing and Associated Industries and Occupations Award 2010, Clause 27.7.
Registered Training Organisations

Governments had agreed to allow for the implementation of competency based completion of apprentices, and the industrial instrument to allow this to happen had been created, but RTOs, those organisations that are contracted to assess competencies and award qualifications to apprentices, were not yet a part of the equation.

The typical training arrangement for an apprentice was to attend an RTO to complete a Certificate III qualification in the first three years of their apprenticeship. The fourth year was spent consolidating skills in the workplace before gaining a completion certificate from their state apprenticeship authority.

As state governments began to implement the COAG decision, they focused on RTOs and how they would handle competency based completion. It was generally accepted that RTOs would need to confirm an apprentice’s competency with their employer before awarding the competency, so most state training authorities began to build rules around that requirement.

Some states tied RTO funding to the confirmation process, so the RTO was not able to be paid their government contribution for training until the employer had confirmed competency.

This solution hit an immediate barrier, because RTOs had traditionally trained apprentices over three years, not the nominal duration of four years. Budgets, and staffing levels, had been established that relied on payment for an entire qualification within three years. When that payment was tied to an employer’s confirmation of competency, this was viewed by some as a further piece of administration to be dealt with before payment could be made, rather than a call to change the way they trained and assessed apprentices. The end result was that most RTOs continued to train and assess over three years and began to seek the employer’s confirmation as soon as the qualification had been completed. Suddenly, employers were being asked to agree to complete apprenticeships after three years rather than four, regardless of how competent they were in the workplace.

This of course was not what the original decision had intended. The intention had been that apprentices would complete their apprenticeship once all parties, including the employer, agreed that the apprentice had the “necessary practical experience to achieve competency in the skills covered by the training contract”. RTOs were interpreting this to mean that completion of the qualification was sufficient evidence of this, but the qualification was only one part of the apprenticeship. It covered the theory needed to understand how to operate machinery, or to make particular calculations, or why things were done in a certain way, but it didn’t take into account the time spent in workplaces putting that theory into action over and over again.

Employers were consistently saying to Ai Group that they accepted that apprentices had completed assessments at the RTO, but they still were not competent to the standard they expected in the workplace.

Ai Group’s role

Ai Group’s response was to publish a guide and develop a workshop for apprentice supervisors to help them understand competency based progression and completion, and to help them in their negotiations with RTOs. A key message in the workshop was that employers have an important role in the process, and they shouldn’t confirm an RTO’s assessment of competence until they genuinely believed that their apprentice could perform to their standards. We reminded them that those apprentices who complete and then leave to ply their trade elsewhere will be considered to have been trained by those companies, so their confirmation of competency reflected the quality they expected.

Ai Group also encouraged RTOs to develop better systems to seek confirmations from...
employers, and to communicate better with employers. Many of the workshops held were in TAFE colleges to encourage better cooperation between teachers and supervisors.

### Engineering Excellence

The Engineering Excellence project was established to help RTOs develop systems that took into account workplace performance in their assessment of competency, and allowed time for apprentices to practice skills at work before finalising assessments.

The tools developed by the project and the experiences of participating RTOs would be shared with other RTOs to help spread better practices for implementing competency based progression and completion, and to help improve communication between RTOs and employers.

Ten RTOs were chosen to participate in the project. They were chosen on the basis of their willingness to participate, their previous efforts at developing innovative systems, and also because of their geographical location. The intention was to have every state involved, with a mixture of metropolitan and regionally based RTOs, large and small providers and both public and private providers. This would help in disseminating the findings of the project and encouraging more widespread uptake of the processes.

### Participating RTOs

The project allowed each of the RTOs to appoint a full time project officer to work on the project objectives for two and a half years. The reason for this approach was that rather than have a new system imposed on them from outside, change was more likely to be accepted and implemented if it was developed internally. It was also felt that a substantial amount of time needed to be devoted to the project, because project officers needed to first gain a good understanding of systems currently in place, and then trial new systems over time if they were to have any chance of being imbedded.

Although it wasn’t a contractual requirement, all of the project officers were already working with their respective RTOs before the project began.

### Project governance

A National Project Steering Committee was established to guide the project planning, oversee implementation against the approved plan, contribute to the evaluation and review the results. The National Project Steering Committee met seven times over the duration of the project and included senior representatives drawn from the following:

- The Australian Industry Group;
- one representative from each of the six State Implementation Groups;
- Manufacturing Skills Australia;
- Australian Manufacturing Workers Union;
- the Commonwealth Government;
- Australian Industry Group Training Services (GTO); and
- Work Education Research Centre.

Six State implementation Groups were also established to oversee the project in their respective jurisdictions. This was to help address state based implementation issues such as how qualifications are funded and the evidence RTOs need to provide to demonstrate that employers have confirmed an apprentice’s competence.

The SIGs were constituted similarly to the National Project Steering Committee and

<table>
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<th>Regional/ Metropolitan</th>
<th>Public/ Private</th>
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<tr>
<td>Careers Australia (Qld)</td>
<td>Regional</td>
<td>Private</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenger Institute (WA)</td>
<td>Metropolitan</td>
<td>Public</td>
</tr>
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<td>Kangan Institute (Vic)</td>
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<tr>
<td>TAFE Queensland SkillsTech (Qld)</td>
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<td>TastTAFE (Tas)</td>
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<td>Public</td>
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<td>The Gordon (Vic)</td>
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<td>Public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training Prospects (SA)</td>
<td>Metropolitan</td>
<td>Private</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
also included employers, group training organisations and state government representatives.

**Employer numbers**

The Engineering Excellence project was not an opt-in exercise for employers. All employers with apprentices enrolled with participating RTOs were included in the project. This was because the industrial award had changed, so they all needed some way to confirm an apprentice’s competence and monitor their progression through the wage structure.

The total numbers per RTO were accurate in 2014, but the breakdown between sizes of employers is based on a combination of actual numbers where known and reasonable estimates by project officers and general industry intelligence.

**Project Officer Activities**

All of the project officers were brought to Melbourne late in 2012 to attend a workshop that commenced the project. At this workshop, the project manager discussed competency based progression and completion from the employers’ viewpoint, and how the industrial award dealt with the matter. Relevant parts of Ai Group’s Apprentice Supervisor workshop were presented and discussed. Other topics covered included managing change inside an RTO and involving employers in the assessment process.

A further workshop was held for project officers in August 2013 to enable each to discuss their approaches and the tools they were developing, and share ideas with each other. They came together one last time in Perth in September 2014 at the WorldSkills Australia national competition.

After returning to their RTO, the first role of the project officers was to conduct information sessions for their fellow RTO staff. These information sessions were to inform others of the project aims, answer questions and discuss some of the strategies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RTO</th>
<th>SMALL (1-50)</th>
<th>MEDIUM (51-200)</th>
<th>LARGE (201+)</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
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<td><strong>540</strong></td>
<td><strong>389</strong></td>
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Those who attended the information sessions were also surveyed about their understanding of and their attitudes towards competency based progression and completion. The survey results are summarised in Section 5 and provided in detail in Appendix 3.4.

RTO staff were also asked about their length of service and the highest level of technical and teaching qualifications they possessed. This formed the basis of a report titled Professional Development and Currency of RTO staff, produced in March 2014. An updated version of this report is provided at Appendix 6.

Project officers researched how competency based progression and completion had already been implemented in their state and by their RTO. This was to establish a benchmark and to help identify further action that needed to be taken.

The RTO Systems and Practices Report covered a range of topics including:

- State funding systems and rules regarding competency based progression and completion
- Internal funding processes
- How training and assessment is timetabled
- How Training Plans are negotiated
- Training Plan content, including units selected and unit sequencing.
- How assessments are conducted
- Workplace involvement in assessments
- How confirmation of competency is sought.

This report was produced in September 2013. The project officers updated the report early in 2015 to help demonstrate what had changed as a result of the project. The findings of the 2015 version are contained in Section 3 (Project Outcomes), Appendix 4 (State funding systems and rules regarding competency based progression and completion) and Appendix 5 (Training Plan content).

Project officers then commenced work on developing tools to assist with competency based progression.

These tools essentially covered the following:

- information for employers;
- training plans that reflected the four equal stages of an apprenticeship as described by the industrial award;
- processes for seeking the employer’s agreement or confirmation of competence;
- assessment processes that take into account what apprentices do at work; and
- processes for providing reports to employers to help them monitor their apprentices’ progress and pay the correct wage.

Examples of the tools developed by the project officers are contained in their case study reports at Appendix 1.

2.3 SURVEYS

Project officers were also required to communicate with their employers, so once the RTO information sessions were completed, a series of sessions for employers was conducted. Again, these sessions were designed to inform about the project, and also to introduce early versions of the tools that were under development. Employers who attended were also asked to complete a survey about their understanding of and attitudes towards competency based progression and completion.

The final group to be surveyed were the apprentices, towards the end of 2013. Some apprentices were also asked to respond to another survey developed by WorldSkills called Modelling Vocational Excellence. This survey attempts to understand what motivates those in apprenticeships to perform well.

RTO staff, employers and apprentices were all surveyed twice about the project - during 2013, and towards the end of 2014, to see if attitudes had changed during the project. These surveys were conducted in a separate round of information sessions undertaken...
Communicating about the project, both internally and externally, has been critical to achieving its outcomes. All of the project officers identified key stakeholders and kept them informed of the project. Fact sheets were developed for employers and apprentices, and a process implemented for communicating with Australian Apprenticeship Centres, group training companies and other stakeholders.

Project officers also produced three editions of an Engineering Excellence newsletter that was distributed to employers and other stakeholders.

WorldSkills was also identified as an important avenue to publicise the project.

The project was about implementing best practice for RTOs in developing apprentices’ skills and WorldSkills is about celebrating the achievement of apprentices, so a demonstration event was staged at the WorldSkills Australia national competition in Perth in September 2014.

The communication strategy is discussed in more detail in Section 4.
3. PROJECT OUTCOMES

All of the ten pilots were able to achieve against the services they were contracted to provide, namely:

1. tailored training plans that allow for the development of skills in the workplace as well as with the RTO before assessment,
2. agreed processes for teachers to seek confirmation of competency from employers,
3. work based activities employers can give to their apprentices to help develop their competencies,
4. assisting employers to develop internal processes to manage competency based progression and completion, and
5. addressing relevant internal administrative processes such as timetabling to enable implementation.

Not all of them were able to achieve to the same level, because of a range of internal and external influences. For detailed discussion about each pilot, see below and the individual case studies at Appendix 1.

### 3.1 TAILORED TRAINING PLANS

There are two aspects to making training plans more suited to apprentices’ workplaces. The industrial award divides an apprenticeship into four equal stages, so training plans need to reflect four stages rather than a three stage traditional TAFE delivery strategy. All of the RTOs were able to achieve a four stage training plan, but three are still in the process of developing four stages for each of the qualifications they offer. At 3.11 is a discussion about the barriers to implementing change in RTOs.

The other aspect of tailoring training plans is to make their contents better reflect what apprentices do at work. The strategy used by most of the RTOs has been to develop equipment checklists for those who negotiate training plans. This is to help ensure the training plan reflects the workplace, and to open discussions about how an employer might confirm an assessment if they lack specific equipment or processes.

At South Western Sydney Institute, all first stage engineering apprentices and their employers are paid a visit at work by their teacher to discuss training issues, including negotiation of the training plan. This is conducted once classes have begun and within the 12 week deadline set by State Training Services. SWSi now uses equipment checklists to help negotiate suitable training plans and now have a four stage training plan for mechanical trade apprentices.

At Hunter Institute, workplace visits are carried out within 12 weeks of training contract approval, with typical peak periods occurring from February to April each year. Representatives from each teaching section visit their local employers to ensure the workplace has the necessary work, resources, facilities and experienced people needed for the apprentice to successfully undertake the on-the-job component. This process has led to the development of various training plan templates to satisfy the diversity of engineering trades. As an example, MEM30205 has four (4) training plan options available to ensure employers and apprentices are aligned to the appropriate stream of training.

At TAFE Queensland SkillsTech, Workplace Services Officers visit employers to discuss the type of work conducted on site, check on resources and negotiate the training plan, especially for a new employer. Usually they will present a template training plan and then negotiate to remove unsuitable competencies and include more relevant competencies, provided that all pre-requisites are met. All training plans are now in four stages. Delivery options are also offered to the employer, including block release, workplace delivery (on-the-job) and a combination of the previous two. The workplace delivery option is only available if resource requirements are met and the relevant work is covered.
At Careers Australia, training plans are negotiated when the induction is completed with the employer, apprentice, and where applicable – parent/guardian and school. Careers have training plans in a template form, however employers can negotiate to swap electives where required to suit the employer’s workplace, if workplace delivery is negotiated, or where there is an elective Careers can deliver on campus if required. Training plans for the mechanical trade are in four stages.

At Training Prospects, training plans are negotiated between the employer, apprentice and trainer at the induction process. Training Prospects has suggested units that the employer can select from to tailor the training to suit their needs. All engineering training plans are now in four stages.

At TAFE SA Whyalla, once notification occurs from the STA, the relevant lecturing staff meet with employers and apprentices to discuss the training plan. The employers in Whyalla tend to have similar requirements for their metal trades apprentices. This is due the employers all working in the resource sector and predominately contracting services to the OneSteel works and surrounding regional mines. Over time TAFE SA has negotiated specific training plans to suit the local employers and apprentices. The training plan is discussed and adjusted if required by either the employer or apprentice. All engineering training plans are now in four stages.

At TasTAFE, teachers make initial contact with the employer to discuss the units that they may want their apprentice to complete. In most cases they have already engaged with the employers previously and taught their apprentices so an existing training plan would be available to be used, otherwise changes are made as needed. At the time of the visit the employer is asked if they prefer block release or day release and dates are finalised to suit the mode required. All engineering training plans are now in four stages.

At Kangan Institute, contact is made by teachers to organise workplace visits to negotiate training plans and inform the employer of a start day and date for the apprentice. The teacher visits with a laptop with the skills pro program loaded (soon to move to skills book) and a portable printer. A Training Plan negotiation checklist is also taken to ensure compliance with Training Package rules and ensure all information is given to both employer and apprentice. The Training Plan is negotiated, printed, and signed immediately by the employer, apprentice and teacher. All engineering training plans are now in four stages.

At The Gordon, training plans are now set up on a 4 stage delivery strategy via the Student Management System which contains specific training plan templates for various trade pathways. The process involves teaching staff making contact with and visiting the workplaces of apprentices/ employers. The purpose of the contact is to ensure the workplace has the resources and supervisory experience to support the negotiated units for entry onto the training plan. The teacher has checklists which have been developed to assist them with this process.

At Challenger Institute, there is a suggested training plan for each trade developed in consultation with industry. Upon receiving the commencement notification advising that Challenger is the chosen RTO and the apprentice has been indentured, contact is made with the employer. A lecturer will visit the employer to ascertain that the suggested units are suitable and if not then alternatives are discussed. Three options are available; changing units, hosting apprentices to another employer or Challenger delivering training and deeming the apprentice competent.

All of the pilots now have in place a system for confirming competence with employers. Some have developed electronic systems and some have paper-based systems. An example of an electronic system is My Profiling, now used by TasTAFE and Hunter Institute. After an apprentice has recorded
hours worked on particular tasks and the RTO has finalised its own internal assessment, the RTO generates a request to the employer which requires them to indicate that they agree that the workplace standard has been met.

Other paper-based systems generally list tasks an apprentice should be able to competently perform at work and ask the employer to sign a statement to the effect that they agree the apprentice has met the workplace standard for those tasks/competency units.

At South Western Sydney Institute, log books are used to enable employers to evaluate the workplace performance of their apprentices. A letter is sent out to employers listing the units of competence covered during the semester and the employer is asked to confirm SWSi’s assessment. Once the letter is received and the apprentice has completed all assessments a competent result is entered into SWSi registers (electronic roll books). Units awaiting sign-off are followed up by the teachers. SWSi has developed a PDF logbook which will streamline much of this process by accepting a digital signature, eliminating paper, generating progression data and capturing employer comments.

At Hunter Institute My Profiling is used. After an apprentice has recorded hours worked on particular tasks and the RTO has finalised its own internal assessment, the RTO generates a request to the employer which requires them to indicate that they agree that the workplace standard has been met. Hunter asks supervisors to respond within 21 days of receiving the notification. If there is no notification within the 21 day time period, the teacher is required to make phone contact with the supervisor and explain the process requirement. The supervisor is given another opportunity to respond with “Workplace Standard Achieved” or set a new date to allow the further development of workplace skills and knowledge. A record of these communications is filed in the system.

At TAFE Queensland SkillsTech, once the apprentice has been back to work after the completion of a block and has had sufficient time to practice and relevant tasks, either a Workplace Services Officer or teacher will contact the employer to verify competence against the various competencies covered during the block. This contact can be either by phone, email or workplace visit. If it is conducted via workplace visit, then the logbook is also reviewed and signed off, otherwise the logbook will be signed by the teacher during the next attendance at the campus by the apprentice. If an employer cannot verify competence for any valid reason, then a new timeframe is set and the apprentice advised of this and if required, further assistance is offered. This is noted on the verification form and then followed up on the new date agreed on.

At Careers Australia apprentices are not deemed competent until all theory and practical assessments have been completed. A third party verification is used for the employer to confirm competence. This third party verification is normally sent to the employer via fax or email immediately the apprentice has completed their campus training and assessment. If the training and assessment has occurred on site through workplace delivery then the third party verification is given to the immediate supervisor by the workplace trainer at the end of the site visit.

At Training Prospects conversations are held with employers on a regular basis about the progress of the apprentice. If the apprentice is being trained on the job then direct contact is made with the employer at every visit to determine if there are any problems. Quarterly progress reports are sent to employers by post and they will contact trainers directly for any information they might need.

At TAFE SA Whyalla, log books are used to collect workplace experiences that contribute to evidence used by lecturing staff to deem competence. All competencies are signed off by the employer, apprentice and lecturer clearly identifying that each believes that the apprentice is fully competent in their workplace. Extensive work has been undertaken on the apprentice logbooks that are used in Whyalla. A checklist of actual skills/jobs and operational expectations that an apprentice was expected to be competent
in at each stage was developed and added to the log book. Apprentices’ competence and performance proforma for both stage progression and final sign-off were also developed.

At TasTAFE My Profiling is used. After an apprentice has recorded hours worked on particular tasks and the RTO has finalised its own internal assessment, the RTO generates a request to the employer which requires them to indicate that they agree that the workplace standard has been met.

At Kangan Institute a workplace competency workbook is used. These books provide indicative tasks that an apprentice should be able to do to be deemed competent in a unit. The tasks are written in plain easily understood language rather than training jargon. They also allow for employer comment both on the unit and the apprentice’s progress (or lack off) for units contained within the stage that the book addresses. Once the employer, apprentice and RTO agree that competency has been reached following these indicative tasks, the employer (or representative) signs the apprentice’s record book as do the apprentice and RTO.

At The Gordon, an Employer Confirmation Advice form is used, which in plain language sets out the main skills and knowledge the apprentice requires in the workplace for each unit of competency. This helps the employer in determining whether they are competent. The apprentice’s progress can also be monitored by employers using the Employer Confirmation Advice which also indicates the total points achieved by the apprentice at any point of time, the stage of completion that the apprenticeship has achieved and the current wage progression point achieved.

At Challenger Institute, confirmation of competency is sought from the employer by their signing against each competency in the apprentice’s training record book. An apprentice tracking document has been developed which automatically calculates the percentage of completion once results are entered. This document populates an employer confirmation report which is emailed to the employer at the relevant stages.

For the most part, this meant interpreting training system speak into the language of industry. Competency units can comprehensively describe what an apprentice should be able to demonstrate, but their structure and the language they use are not always decipherable to employers. Project officers developed training record books, log books and confirmation systems that described tasks apprentices should be able to do at work, rather than reiterating elements, performance criteria and other training package terminology. These tasks were then mapped backed to competency units within the RTO. Employers are able to use these tasks to help them set relevant work for their apprentices and make their own judgements about their performance.

Refer to the case studies and samples of project materials at Appendix 1 for further information.

Apart from jargon-free information, employers also need information about their apprentices’ progress, to help them monitor their progress and to pay the correct wage. All of the pilots now provide this information regularly to employers. Some use electronic systems like My Profiling, which at any time will indicate the percentage of the apprenticeship completed, others provide reports each time they are seeking confirmation of competence, others send formal correspondence noting each time an apprentice progresses to the next stage.
Above: My Profiling shows at any time the percentage of completed units reached by the apprentice.

Left: The Gordon indicates with every report the progression expected when confirmation is sought.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unit code</th>
<th>Unit title</th>
<th>Points</th>
<th>Result</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MEM1502A</td>
<td>Apply Quality Systems</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Verified</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MEM1202D</td>
<td>Interpretational drawing</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>To be Approved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MEM1202A</td>
<td>Perform engineering measurements</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>RPL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MEM1207B</td>
<td>Mark off structural fabrications and shapes</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>N/C</td>
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<tr>
<td>MEM1801C</td>
<td>Use Hand tools</td>
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<td>4P</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
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<td>Interface using computer technology</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Credit Th</td>
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<tr>
<td>MEM3003B</td>
<td>Perform sheet and plate assembly</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>To be Approved</td>
</tr>
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<td>Select welding processes</td>
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<td>Verified</td>
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<tr>
<td>MEM3002A</td>
<td>Apply safe welding processes</td>
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<td>Verified</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stage 2</td>
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<td>Weld using gas metal arc welding process</td>
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<td>Verified</td>
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<td>To be Approved</td>
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<td>MEM0501C</td>
<td>Geometric development</td>
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<td>MEM0501A</td>
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<td>Stage of Completion</td>
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<td>Wage Progression Point upon sign off</td>
<td>50%</td>
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3.5 ADDRESSING INTERNAL ADMINISTRATIVE PROCESSES

The ability of the pilots to address internal administrative processes that acted as barriers to the project outcomes varied. All were able to implement new systems to communicate with employers, to negotiate training plans and seek employers’ confirmation of competence, but not all were able to successfully address issues such as timetabling.

These issues can relate to how RTOs administer their budgets, how they are funded by State Training Authorities, and the employment conditions of their staff. Not all of the pilots were able to resolve them. See barriers to implementing the project at 3.11 for more information on this.

For example, changing a training delivery structure from three years to four can create cash flow problems for an RTO in the first few years. If an RTO is claiming government subsidies for 320 hours of training and assessment for each apprentice for three years (960 hours), there would be a 25% reduction in monies claimed if the hours are reduced to 240 per year over four years. The money is the same over the full term of the apprenticeship, but the reduction in the first year was a barrier for most RTOs, especially given that most were already experiencing general reductions in funding.

Refer to the case studies for further information on what each RTO was able to achieve.
One of the major benefits of the project has been the sharing of tools and systems between the project officers. This is not just within states or with public providers but with all of the project partners. Every week during the project, each project officer informed others of what they worked on and that prompted a lot of sharing.

The regular teleconferences finished with the project, but the potential for greater sharing between RTOs remains. All RTOs compete to some extent, but more could be shared.

The project also provided the project officers with a much greater understanding of how the apprenticeship system works across the country. Apprenticeships are subject to state regulations and state funding, but a national perspective gave everyone the insight that not much differs regardless of the state. Some also were able to use the expertise of project officers from states that had already implemented new policies such as competitive systems or retrospective funding to help them prepare for change at their own RTO.

All bar one of the project officers have now returned to positions within their own organisations. Most have commented that they have gained great insight into how the VET system works nationally and within their own state, and have been able to implement change across their organisation.

For participating RTOs the project has developed tools for implementing competency based progression which are now being used within engineering departments. Some are now also rolling these out to other departments. Refer to the case studies for more information on this.

3.6 BENEFITS FOR THE PARTICIPANTS DIRECTLY INVOLVED IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PROJECT

3.7 BENEFITS TO APPRENTICES

All of the participating RTOs have developed tools to help employers participate in the assessment process, which in turn helps apprentices by establishing much closer links between formal training and the workplace. This disconnection between formal training and workplaces has long been an issue for apprentices, who may learn skills at training they may not use at work for months or even years. When employers are participating in assessments, they are obliged to provide opportunities for apprentices to practise new skills at work before they make their judgements. This means apprentices can apply new skills at work as soon as they have received training.

Apprentices are now also given more time to practice skills at work before being assessed.

Some of the RTOs also developed additional learning and assessment resources for workplace based and online delivery which has helped improve the quality of both on and off the job training. See the case studies for examples.

3.8 BENEFITS TO EMPLOYERS

Employers with apprentices enrolled with the partner organisations now have a much better understanding of competency based progression and completion. This was a change that affected every employer with apprentices covered by the Manufacturing and Associated Industries and Occupations Award 2010, but not all employers understood the change or how it would affect their apprentice’s training and employment conditions. Employers in some states had experienced RTOs trying to complete apprenticeships in less than three years, while others had seen no changes at all.

The Engineering Excellence project has helped each participating RTO develop systems that enable employers to comply with Award provisions. The Award expects the employer to agree that apprentices are competent at work before progressing to the next pay rate or completing the apprenticeship. The project has ensured that
participating RTOs will ask employers for their agreement before finalising their own assessments.

The project has also ensured that RTOs will help employers in making agreements about competency by interpreting training package jargon into language used by industry. Employers are not being asked to confirm elements, performance criteria, etc., but to confirm that apprentices can perform typical tasks in the workplace to their standards. So there is less confusion about their role.

Another benefit has been the increased level of communication between employers and their RTOs. The surveys of employers showed a 15% increase in employer satisfaction with communications from their RTO over the course of the project.

All of the participating RTOs have increased the amount of times they visit their employers and the number of times they report on the apprentices’ progress. The improved apprentice commencement numbers at The Gordon in 2015 have been attributed mainly to the increased amount of communications and reporting to employers which has resulted from this project.

A weekly teleconference of all project officers was held from the start of the project to share information and issues.

The last teleconference was held on Monday 30 March 2015. A group was also established on LinkedIn to enable all the project officers to initiate and participate in discussions on a national basis. Shared space on Wikispace was established to enable all project officers to share assessment materials and other documentation.

Each of the partner organisations works within its own jurisdiction, so each has different requirements they are expected to follow. For example in NSW, South Australia, Tasmania and Western Australia, RTOs are required to confirm an apprentice’s competency with their employer, but government subsidies for training are not dependent on this. In Queensland and Victoria, RTOs must provide evidence of the employer’s confirmation before final payments are made. RTOs in those two states therefore already had processes in place for confirming competence before the project.
began, while those in other states had no systems developed.

All of the partner organisations now have systems in place for confirming competency as well as processes for negotiating training plans, helping employers make decisions about their apprentices' performance and advising employers about apprentices' progression through the four stages. Not all of these systems are identical but all of them achieve the same result.

The National Project Steering Committee and the 6 State Implementation Groups all contained representatives from industry, employers and trade unions. All participants were supportive of the project as evidenced by the minutes of these meetings.

The employer surveys indicated that most are supportive and believe strongly that they must play a central role in confirming apprentices' competence.

3.10 BENEFITS TO APPRENTICES

The Engineering Excellence project was about implementing change within the participating RTOs, and the project officers were effectively change facilitators within their organisations. Implementing change is never easy, especially within large public institutions with long standing practices and long serving employees.

What added a level of complexity for the project officers was a range of external factors that made implementing change even more difficult than it should have been.

3.11 BARRIERS TO IMPLEMENTING THE PROJECT

3.11.1 Structural issues in the VET industry

An apprenticeship is a direct employment relationship between an employer and an apprentice, but apprenticeships themselves have long been regulated closely by governments. Governments provide incentives to employers to take on apprentices, and governments pay for much of the formal training that apprentices receive. When governments are closely involved, apprenticeships (and vocational training more generally) are subject to policy changes that can impact on the employment relationship and the training component. It is even more impacted when the training provider is a publicly funded TAFE, as 80% of the project partners were.

Refer to the pie charts in the Evaluation section of 5.1 for more detail.
Without discussing the politics or nature of events, all of the TAFEs involved with the project, across all six states, were subject to changes in how they were funded by state governments. Some of this related to increased competition from private RTOs, some related to lower amounts of funding per apprentice, some related to changes in the way the funding was provided. In a context where apprentice commencement numbers were declining, the end result was a climate where efficiencies needed to be found within each RTO.

Most of the RTOs experienced cutbacks to their teaching workforce during the project, although not because of the project. One large RTO lost almost 50% of its engineering teachers while the project occurred. Other RTOs reduced their workforce by smaller percentages but the downsizing was across the board.

Besides reductions in teacher numbers, RTOs were also looking very closely at how to reduce costs for training delivery. Most of those involved with the project reduced attendance time for apprentices as a way to reduce those costs. The numbers vary from RTO to RTO, but an example is one that reduced its annual attendance days from 40 to 30, a 25% reduction.

The qualifications were not changed and the hours funded by governments did not change (although rates were reduced), but the perception of RTOs was that more could be expected of apprentices to manage their own training back in the workplace rather than in the TAFE classroom. All of the RTOs involved were expecting more online or workplace-based training delivery than attendance-based by the end of the project.

Another internal issue faced by TAFEs is the employment conditions of its teaching workforce. Most participating TAFEs are now expecting teachers to visit employers and apprentices in the workplace to negotiate training plans and facilitate training and assessment in the workplace - practices routinely undertaken by private RTOs. But TAFE teachers’ industrial agreements restrict the amount of face to face teaching hours spent each week. These agreements were made with an assumption that a teacher was looking after a classroom rather than visiting a small number of apprentices each day. A common discussion within TAFEs is whether these visits amount to teaching hours, and where travel fits into the equation.

Other government initiatives in the VET sector also had an impact. Group training companies, who employ large numbers of apprentices, lost access to a substantial funding stream called the Joint Group Training Program which was aimed at improving commencement and completion numbers for apprentices. Group training companies were a key focus of the project because they employ so many and because they measure their success in terms of numbers of apprentices rather than the productivity of apprentices.

The Australia Apprenticeship Centres were also affected by funding changes. Their contract was rolled over for 12 months while the federal government worked on a new model, and they have now tendered to perform a new role, with more emphasis on career promotion and mentoring of apprentices.

Again, AACs had been a focus of the project because their field officers are usually the first person an employer sees before taking on an apprentice, so they were well placed to pass on information about competency based progression and completion.

These changes to other organisations did not affect the project objectives directly, but they made the project officers’ role in passing on new information and new systems to employers more difficult than it previously was.

3.11.2 Commitment of the RTO

The commitment of participating RTOs to the project was variable. Partly this can be attributed to other pressures, eg funding system changes noted above, but there was also a lack of interest in some RTOs at looking internally for fundamental change.

Some of the project partners embraced the project and saw it as a way to drive change within their organisation. These were the organisations that gave their full support to the project officers and were prepared to dedicate additional resources to seeing innovative changes implemented. Others were less enthusiastic. Some RTOs gave little management support to the project officers. They expected them to drive any
changes on their own and did not encourage other teaching staff to implement new practices. These RTOs achieved less than the supportive RTOs.

Few of the RTOs seriously considered the way their budgets were constructed or how their teachers or trainers were timetabled. Most TAFEs will still timetable apprenticeship training and assessment to be completed over three years, despite the efforts of the project officers and despite the objectives of the project. To achieve results in this area requires more work to demonstrate how it can be done, and more time to bed down changes already implemented. It also requires the full commitment of management, and this was not always forthcoming.

3.11.3 State Training Authorities

The way RTOs are funded by state governments also affected the ability of RTOs to implement change. Most state governments now require RTOs to complete assessment against a competency before final payments are made (see Appendix 4 for more detail). An employer verification or confirmation of competency is usually a part of this process. This requirement means that RTOs generally try to complete assessments as soon as they have finished the formal training and assessment component, i.e., that conducted at the RTO. Their perspective is that they have completed their job and now wish to be paid. The employer confirmation is seen only as an administrative process. What it means for the employer is that they feel pressured by RTOs to confirm competence before the apprentice has had time to practice and demonstrate skills in the workplace. This issue is a key barrier to implementing competency based progression and completion to the satisfaction of all parties, especially employers. RTOs need to appreciate that the employer confirmation is a final but critical piece in the assessment process. Currently they feel that it is an additional requirement of state governments for which they are not paid (see recommendations at Section 6.1).

3.11.4 Group Training Organisations

Early on in the project, group training organisations were identified as an important stakeholder and potential barrier to competency based progression and completion. Many GTOs offer services and prices to host employers based on the assumption that apprenticeships will last four years. For example, an apprentice may be charged out at a low price in the first part of the apprenticeship, with the expectation that the GTO will recoup that money with higher rates later on. These models work better when the apprenticeship is for a fixed duration.

GTOs are also, understandably, protective of their customers’ needs. Many of these customers are small businesses with little understanding of the changes the apprenticeship system has seen in recent times. These host employers still expect an apprenticeship of fixed duration similar to the one they may have done some years ago. GTOs can sometimes bend to their customers’ expectations rather than help them adjust to new systems, especially if it will help sign a new training contract.

Some GTOs, however, have embraced competency based progression and completion. They charge host employers a rate based on the apprentice’s actual progress and manage that progress on behalf of their hosts.

The project manager and project officers identified a number of GTOs that were supportive and wrote small case studies about their experiences. These case studies were used in a presentation at Group Training Australia’s national conference and are also included at Appendix 2.6.

3.11.5 Pre-apprenticeship training

When the project commenced, there were a number of different qualifications used for VET in Schools, pre-vocational or pre-apprenticeship training in engineering around Australia. The most common was the Certificate II in Engineering, but some states also used accredited courses or the Certificate II in Engineering - Production Technology. Each of these qualifications carries some level of credit into a 96 point
Certificate III in Engineering apprenticeship:
- Certificate II in Engineering Pathways 11 points
- Certificate II in Engineering 32 points
- Certificate II in Engineering
  - Production Technology 64 points
- Certificate II in Engineering Studies
  (Victorian qualification) negotiable, minimum 4 points

Before competency based progression was implemented, state governments used to set an amount of time credit into a fixed term apprenticeship for those who completed these qualifications. A typical credit would be nine months off a four year apprenticeship.

With competency based progression, the amount of credit is determined by the qualification itself. A 32 point qualification provides for a 33% credit into a 96 point apprenticeship. This means a student without any work experience can start an apprenticeship well into the second stage, and the employer is required to pay the relevant wage. When employers understand the credits a student can get with these other qualifications, some deliberately do not hire them, which defeats the purpose of doing the training.

The new Certificate II in Engineering Pathways tried to address this issue by offering a credit of 11 points, or just under half of Stage 1. Some states have been slow to approve the use of this purpose built qualification in schools.

Queensland and Tasmania have endorsed its use although there are still some questions about other qualifications Tasmania may use next year as schools are gaining increased independence about this.

Victoria is still using the Certificate II in Engineering Studies in 2015 but should adopt the new qualification in 2016.

In South Australia, the Skills for All program has been under review for some months and until this is finalised no new qualifications have been approved.

In NSW there is consideration of approving the new qualification as a ‘board endorsed course’ in schools, which will allow it to be taught but with no ATAR score attached to it.

The Certificate II in Engineering will continue to be used with an ATAR attached, which makes it more attractive to students than the industry-endorsed qualification.

MSA, Ai Group and others will continue to press for the adoption of the Certificate II in Engineering Pathways nationally.

Other industry areas are now finding this to be an issue as competency based wage progression clauses appear in their awards. Western Australia recently tried to address the issue by changing its apprenticeship policy to state that an apprentice who has completed an institution-only qualification before the apprenticeship can only access a competency based wage progression clause in their award after serving nine months of the apprenticeship. The South Australian Government now requires such apprentices to be assessed under a training contract arrangement by their registered employer in an approved log book.

There is a need to examine how industrial awards treat pre-employment training. If apprentices with prior non-work based qualifications or competencies commence an apprenticeship they could demonstrate their competencies to employers before they are paid for them. There are obviously various aspects of this that would need to be taken into consideration, but a solution that would encourage more to undertake pre-vocational training without unfairly treating employers is worth striving for.
3.12 LONG TERM BENEFITS OF THE PROJECT

3.12.1 Has it driven systemic change?

This final report includes case studies from each of the 10 pilots, describing how each RTO has implemented competency based progression and completion for their engineering apprentices. The 10 project partners include a mix of large and small public and private RTOs, with mixed coverage of metropolitan and regional areas. This mix was carefully selected to demonstrate to other RTOs that competency based progression and completion can be successfully implemented regardless of size, location or ownership.

The project partners, in conjunction with the project manager participated in activities to communicate and disseminate the project findings to other RTOs. There were nine information sessions held around Australia to discuss the project and showcase the project tools.

One interesting aspect of these dissemination workshops was that a number of RTOs and other stakeholders covering the building and construction industries attended. This sector has had competency based wage progression included in its awards since January 2014, but little has been done to implement changes within RTOs. This sector is also grappling with a pre-apprenticeship program that provides for significant credits into apprenticeships. As can be seen from the case studies, some of the RTOs have also implemented project tools to other industry areas within their organisation.

3.12.2 What measures will ensure its sustainability?

Each of the 10 project partners was contracted to implement competency based progression and completion for all of their engineering apprentices. This was because projects that isolate new systems to only a select group can easily be forgotten once the funding disappears. Some of the RTOs have now committed much greater resources than the project allocated to ensure their systems are compliant.

Examples of these are the online systems such as My Profiling, SkillsBook and Jigsaw which have been purchased from external suppliers.

These new systems implemented by the RTOs have been trialled, assessed and rejigged over the course of the project, and further changes are still being discussed with some of the pilots as can be seen in the case studies.

Progression and completion of an apprenticeship based on competency is a substantial change from the previous and long standing time-based model, so there will still be resistance from some teaching staff and from some employers because of that.

State Training Authorities have been critical in ensuring the model will continue by developing rules and guidelines for RTOs to follow, and the new systems implemented by the project help RTOs comply with these rules. This compliance will help maintain the systemic changes implemented.
4. COMMUNICATING THE PROJECT OUTCOMES

4.1 BROAD AWARENESS RAISING COMPONENT

A number of strategies were used to raise awareness of the project, namely:

- branding
- a web presence
- fact sheets
- media releases, and
- information sessions

The project was called Engineering Excellence to convey the understanding that competency based progression and completion was not about fast tracking or unduly accelerating apprenticeships but about allowing apprentices to progress as soon as all parties agreed that they were competent.

Ai Group’s marketing department developed templates for presentations, fact sheets, newsletters and the website to help establish a professional look for the project. These templates have also appeared on other websites and newsletters when other organisations have carried articles about the project.

Ai Group established a web page for the project at http://www.aigroup.com.au/portal/site/aig/education/engineeringexcellence/. This site has been updated about every six months with news about the project and forthcoming events.

Two fact sheets were produced; one for employers and one for apprentices. All employers and apprentices involved with the project were provided with copies. The AATinfo website was also provided with copies of the fact sheets for AAC staff to download and pass on as appropriate. These fact sheets appear on www.aatinfo.com.au against sample training programs for the relevant trades. Copies of the fact sheets can be found at Appendix 2.

A media release to launch the project was prepared by Ai Group in August 2012 and released in conjunction with the then Minister, Senator Chris Evans. Two major newspapers carried the story.

Information sessions and interviews were also held with RTO staff and employers throughout the project to raise awareness and advise of progress. This is covered at Section 4.4.

Newsletters

Three newsletters were produced by each of the project officers to inform about the project. These were published in August 2013, June 2014 and December 2014. The newsletters were distributed to all employers involved with the project and other relevant stakeholders. Copies were also held on the Ai Group web page.

Each newsletter carried a number of national articles about competency based progression, as well as information about what each of the project officers had been developing. Samples of the newsletters can be found at Appendix 2.

Articles in journals and other newsletters

The project manager and project officers made extensive use of other organisations to publicise the project and associated events. Articles about the project and associated events were carried by:

- Manufacturing Skills Australia
- Group Training Australia
- TAFE Directors Association
- Australian Council for Private Education and Training
- Skills @ Work
- Australian Apprenticeship website, and
- state training authorities
Monthly reports to Ai Group State Councils and quarterly reports to AI Group National Executive

The project manager provided a written report to Ai Group State Councils and the National Executive each time they met during the project. This forms part of the broader Education and Training update.

Conference presentations and other speaking engagements

The project manager actively sought opportunities to present at conferences and other forums about the project and competency based progression more generally. Presentations were made at the following:

- SA Government RTO forum, March 2013
- NSW GTO conference, August 2013
- two Victorian TAFE senate conferences, August 2013 and 2014
- WA Training Providers forum, May 2014
- Apprenticeship and Traineeship TAFE Network (Victoria), October 2014
- GTA Australia national conference November 2014
- MSA NSW RTO conference, November 2014
- still to present at GTA Vic conference, June 2015

Project officers also sought opportunities to publicise the project with local groups. See the case studies for examples.

4.2 WORLDSKILLS

WorldSkills was seen early on as an important way to provide publicity to the project. In conjunction with WorldSkills Australia, all ten project partners entered a team of two apprentices to compete in the Engineering Excellence Team Challenge at the national competition in Perth in September 2014.

Background

WorldSkills is an international movement that aims to develop and nurture the skills of young people around the world. Their purpose is to promote and build a skills culture by inspiring young people, celebrating skills excellence and providing them with an opportunity to showcase their trade and skill talent. They achieve this goal through competitions held on a regional, national and international level.

Competitions are held over a two year cycle starting with regional competitions. Winners of the 2013 regional competitions were given the opportunity to compete on a national level at the WorldSkills Australia competition held in Perth in September 2014. Australian champions are then able to represent their country at the international competition in Sao Paolo in 2015.

The Engineering Excellence project partnered with WorldSkills Australia to present a demonstration challenge at the national 2014 competition. The Engineering Excellence Team Challenge was modelled on the Manufacturing Team Challenge, an event currently staged at the international competition but not at the national.

Each of the Project Partners put forward a team of two apprentices – one from fitting/machining and one from metal fabrication. These apprentices were tasked with manufacturing a crane that can lift and move a set weight over a set distance. The idea from a project perspective was to gain publicity for the project and also to demonstrate that apprentices in a competency based progression environment are just as skilled as those working through more traditional models.

The Event

The WorldSkills event was held at the Perth Convention and Exhibition Centre on 18-20 September 2014. The competition attracts competitors from all over Australia. There were 49 different competitions, covering VET in Schools, traineeships and apprenticeships. About 500 people competed for prizes, and about 40,000 visitors, many of them school children, attended the event.

The Engineering Excellence Team Challenge was included as one of the Metals and Engineering competitions, with team members representing their RTO but belonging to their state’s overall team. The judges and volunteers for the challenge were the project officers, led by one WorldSkills expert. The actual challenge was designed by the project officers and all administration such as competitors packs, judges packs etc
were also produced by the project officers, with some help from WorldSkills experts. Competitors had three six hour days to make the cranes. Because of space requirements the competition ran over two shifts, from early morning to late in the evening. The competitors themselves worked hard but all enjoyed the event and were grateful for the opportunity. Project officers were regularly asked by visitors what the competition was about and what Engineering Excellence was about. The site was located with all of the other Metals and Engineering competitions, meaning judges and visitors to those sites were also interested in the challenge. Some were hoping that it would be available more broadly in future.

The Aftermath
The future of the challenge itself is unclear, given the amount of funding made available by the project. Some of the project officers are keen to participate further if it becomes a mainstream challenge, and a number of people noted that it is one of the few challenges where people work as a team, despite that being the normal way people operate in the workplace. WorldSkills Australia is interested in hosting the challenge again, but costs will be an issue.

From the project manager’s perspective, the exercise was a worthwhile bonding experience for the judges, given that they all worked together for a week to set up, run and then dismantle the site. The sharing that results from these experiences is hard to quantify, but definitely increased after the competition concluded.

From the perspective of getting more publicity for the project, that definitely occurred during the event and WorldSkills acknowledged the project and its partnership with Ai Group during the opening and closing ceremonies.

All participants were presented with a certificate acknowledging their participation. For the record, the winners of the first Engineering Excellence Team Challenge are:

1st Todd Fitzsimmons and Brock Goodwin Hunter TAFE
2nd Bradley Clark and Mathew Luttrell TasTAFE
3rd Shari Hunt and Matt King TAFE SA (Whyalla)
Agreement was also reached with WorldSkills International to participate in a project called Modelling Vocational Excellence (MoVE). MoVE International is a multinational research partnership brought together by the WorldSkills Foundation. Rather than focus on barriers to skills formation, the MoVE research explores skills development from a positive perspective. The project is being coordinated by the University of Tampere in Finland, and its purpose is to learn what kinds of personal characteristics and attributes produce high calibre vocational performance.

The Engineering Excellence involvement in the project was to adapt a survey produced for WorldSkills competitors in 2011 and ask selected apprentices covered by the project to complete it. It is hoped that the survey results will be useful in informing innovating ways of promoting trade careers to young people. The survey was conducted twice during the project, in 2013 and 2014. Only apprentices who had progressed at least beyond Stage 2 were asked to complete it. This was because some of the questions assume a level of achievement. 580 apprentices completed the survey in 2013 and 427 in 2014. Of those who completed in 2014, 23% had previously completed it.

The survey asks questions about what motivates apprentices, what creates difficulties and how the apprenticeship has changed perspectives about work and the future.

10. I think more seriously about where my career will lead:

20. When you think about your apprenticeship journey, which of the following is MOST important to you? Please tick ONE only.

- Being stretched to learn new skills: 38%
- Getting feedback on how well I am doing: 31%
- Seeing how my skills compare with national standards: 17%
- Knowing where I stand in relation to my peers: 9%
- Building friendships and networks: 4%
Apprentices are also asked questions about what attracted them to their trade, questions about some of their attributes, and also questions about some of their general attitudes towards themselves and others.

20. What attracted you to your chosen skill? (Tick as many as relevant to you)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attraction</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Good job and career prospects</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Producing useful things</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I enjoy a job with a variety of tasks</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I enjoy a job where there is a lot to learn</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I just love my skill area</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being able to work with new technologies</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being able to get a job overseas</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being of service to others</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

26. I am...

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attribute</th>
<th>1 totally disagree</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5 totally agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stress tolerant</td>
<td>22.74%</td>
<td>32.69%</td>
<td>35.10%</td>
<td>16.59%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competitive</td>
<td>6.54%</td>
<td>23.24%</td>
<td>33.93%</td>
<td>29.54%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A problem solver</td>
<td>25.24%</td>
<td>45.67%</td>
<td>25.00%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spatial (able to imagine or visualise things in 3 dimensions)</td>
<td>25.66%</td>
<td>40.55%</td>
<td>28.78%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focussed</td>
<td>20.14%</td>
<td>49.16%</td>
<td>25.42%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambitious</td>
<td>26.23%</td>
<td>41.26%</td>
<td>23.43%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>5.55%</td>
<td>19.37%</td>
<td>37.77%</td>
<td>33.35%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivated</td>
<td>19.23%</td>
<td>40.24%</td>
<td>33.42%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Handy (practical)</td>
<td>12.39%</td>
<td>47.02%</td>
<td>37.95%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interested</td>
<td>12.77%</td>
<td>42.43%</td>
<td>41.20%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A full analysis of the survey results and how it can be used to motivate apprentices and attract new applicants has not been undertaken by this project. The survey results have been forwarded to MoVE International, and also to the institutes that participated in the project to make use of what they can for marketing purposes.

A recommendation for further detailed analysis of the survey results is included in the conclusion at Section 6.

The full survey results from 2014 can be found at Appendix 3.5.
4.4 Workshops and Information Sessions

Workshops or information sessions were held at the outset of the project for both RTO staff and employers and then later on in the project for the same groups to discuss progress and identify barriers that had arisen. Because of poor registrations for employers to attend the later sessions, most of the project officers opted to visit employers directly.

A final round of information sessions were held in early 2015 to discuss the project and share some of the tools developed with other RTOs and stakeholders.

2012/2013 Information Sessions for RTO Staff

18 information sessions were conducted for RTO staff within the partner organisations between November 2012 and January 2013, with 188 people attending. These sessions were to raise awareness about the project and competency based progression and completion, but also to assure employers that what the project would be trying to achieve was to ensure employers had a key role in confirming an apprentices’ competence and therefore retaining some control over their progress.

Those who attended were asked some information about their company (size, number of engineering tradespeople and number of engineering apprentices) and also surveyed about their understanding of competency based progression and their attitudes towards it. The survey questions were very similar to those asked of RTO staff so that results could be compared. The results of the survey are discussed in Section 5.1.

Employers were generally more favourable towards competency based progression and completion than RTO staff, especially once they understood that a competency unit would not be signed off until they had confirmed it. Some were very sceptical, and could not see how an apprentice could learn a trade properly in less than four years, but a typical comment was that employers would be happy to pay an apprentice a higher wage sooner provided he or she could do the work to the proper standard, ie they would pay for productivity.

Competency based progression and completion had been on the agenda in some states for a few years, and in other states people were unaware of it. Regardless, there were misconceptions about the concept which were addressed at the sessions, especially around involving workplaces in confirming competency.

Those attending were asked to report some information about themselves (length of service, highest level of teaching and technical qualifications) and also complete a survey testing their understanding of competency based progression and their attitudes towards it. These surveys were again conducted towards the end of the project (late 2014) to see if attitudes had changed. Survey results are reported on in Section 5.1.

The responses from RTO staff were quite varied. Some were very supportive and others quite disparaging. Some saw it as a fast tracking method which would ‘dumb down’ the trades. There was a misconception by many that competency was determined solely by the RTO and that employers should not have a say in confirming competence. There was also a common response that employers would be reluctant to confirm competence because it would mean higher pay for apprentices. It was also a common complaint that employers were not properly informed of the new process and would blame the RTO for instigating it.

2013 Information Sessions for employers

17 information sessions were held for employers between March and June 2013, with 223 attending. Again, these sessions were to raise awareness about the project and competency based progression and completion, but also to assure employers that what the project would be trying to achieve was to ensure employers had a key role in confirming an apprentices’ competence and therefore retaining some control over their progress.

Those who attended were asked some information about their company (size, number of engineering tradespeople and number of engineering apprentices) and also surveyed about their understanding of competency based progression and their attitudes towards it. The survey questions were very similar to those asked of RTO staff so that results could be compared. The results of the survey are discussed in Section 5.1.

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2014 Information Sessions for RTO Staff

Ten information sessions were held in the second half of 2014 for RTO staff, with one, at Kangan Institute, delayed until February 2015. This was because of uncertainty around that institute because of the merger with Bendigo Regional TAFE, expected retrenchments and the subsequent change of government in Victoria. The project officer had also organised three meetings over the course of 2014 to update staff on changes, in February, May and August.

Two sessions were held by Challenger at their Henderson and Rockingham campuses, while SkillsTech did not conduct a session. Instead, the project officer had been attending monthly team meetings at the various SkillsTech campuses to keep staff abreast of changes. An overview of the Engineering Excellence project has been a standing agenda item at these meetings. The project officer used these meetings to provide updates and also to get feedback on what he has implemented.

RTO staff were again surveyed like the previous time, and comparisons are contained in Section 5.1 and Appendix 3.4.

RTO staff were also asked to identify the biggest barriers to implementing competency based progression and completion. The barriers identified can be broken into seven categories. The quotes shown are representative of those received:

- employers not interested or engaged,
  “Some employers use the apprentices as cheap labour to save money.”
  “Employers need to take ownership for checking training record books and signing them when they are filled in correctly.”
  “Employers still believe that the 4 year apprenticeship is best.”
  “Employers waiting for ages to sign off apprentices.”
  “Employers are very happy with current arrangement. They like block training and like us to be in charge of the training.”
- employers lack the full scope of a trade to offer apprentices,
  “Scope of work offered by employer very limited and may not justify the awarding of trade status to the apprentice.”
- group training organisations are not supportive,
  “Group training companies don’t appear to want to let apprentices progress due to increase charge out rates. Would prefer to see employers hire their own apprentices rather than use GTCs.”
- the RTO lacks relevant resources,
  “Constant unplanned reduction in training (college) hours allocated to training.”
  “The paperwork involved in signups, training plans.”
  “Time. To cover all the course work and assessments. We keep having to dumb down our resources to fit the training into the allocated hours.”
- the RTO lacks flexibility,
  “Our RTO is still operating under a lock step based methodology and it does not provide the flexibility in its system that CBPC requires.”
  “Alignment of the funding model with delivery model.”
  “A lack of desire to change.”
  “Set beliefs regarding the value of RTO training versus on-the-job training/consolidation.”
- better communications needed between RTOs and employers,
  “A stronger working relationship with employers needs to be forged for the proper working of CBPC.”
  “The employer’s understanding of competency based progression.”
  “Learners not understanding the system and their rights.”
  “Not enough people in the RTO understanding the needs of CBPC.”
- competency based progression is about fast tracking, not quality.
  “Most employers want quality training. They need quality tradesmen. CBPC is reducing the ability of RTOs to deliver quality training. In theory it is good, but in practice it is failing the student.”
  “Apprentices need the 4 years to get enough practice to know what they are doing.”
  “Competency based training should not be used as a political tool to fast track numbers to fill shortages that have been created through lack of foresight in past decades.”

Many of the barriers identified by RTO staff were little changed from the commencement of the project. The issue of employers not being interested or engaged still remains. While the survey results are dealt with elsewhere in this report, it is worth
commenting on one question and the different responses by RTO staff and employers. Both employers and RTO staff were asked the question “CBPC will turn employers off taking on apprentices.” 37% of RTO staff agreed with that statement, with only 16% disagreeing. For employers, 16% agreed and 53% disagreed. This disparity says more about RTO staff attitudes towards employers rather than employers’ attitudes towards competency based progression and completion. To an extent, it may reflect an unwillingness of some teachers and trainers to engage with new processes, especially when other issues are impacting on their jobs, such as retrenchments and new funding regimes. It is hoped that these attitudes will change as more RTO staff spend time visiting and communicating with employers.

Employers not offering the full scope of work for a trade is also a long standing concern. When employers are not asked to confirm apprentices’ competence the issue can be hidden, but not so when they are.

There are two formal safeguards put in place to address this issue. Australian Apprenticeship Centres are expected to check in broad terms that employers are recruiting for relevant apprentices, but the reality is that AAC field officers generally have little understanding of the workplaces they service and will leave it to employers to make their own decision. State training authorities expect RTOs to look at the suitability of workplaces to train apprentices, and some require RTOs to state how they will address competencies in Training Plans that are not covered by an employer. Again, the reality can be different to the expectations. RTOs need enrolments, and will stretch their requirements to sign a new customer.

The Engineering Excellence project has highlighted this as an issue and has helped some employers to change their expectations. Most of the project partners now use ‘Equipment Checklists’ in their Training Plan negotiations with employers, which will show what competencies they can and cannot cover. This may result in changes to a Training Plan to better suit a workplace or show how inadequate a workplace is to train an apprentice. The need for an RTO to generate enrolments in a competitive environment where an employer may well just go elsewhere, is not addressed by this project.

Group training organisations were highlighted early on in the project as a potential barrier to competency based progression. The project manager and all project officers have targeted group training organisations in their communications strategy. Case studies of supportive GTOs have been written, the project manager presented at the 2014 Group Training Australia national conference, and GTOs were well represented at the 2015 information sessions.

The issues about RTOs are that they lack resources and lack flexibility. Some of the resourcing issues are beyond the scope of the project, but one emphasis of project officers has been to make internal changes simple and less time consuming than previous arrangements. Before the project commenced, some RTOs had no systems in place for negotiating Training Plans or seeking the employer’s confirmation of competence, despite the requirements of their state training authorities. For these RTOs, any new system required resources to be allocated, but this should have been happening anyway.

The flexibility of RTOs has been a focus of the project. All of the project officers have worked internally to address the attitudes of teachers and trainers.

State government funding systems have been examined, and usually found not to be a barrier. Instead, it is often the internal funding and budgeting systems that are the real barrier. RTOs typically work to a calendar year budget which requires competencies to be signed off in the same year, and not carried forward if the employer has not confirmed competence. RTOs have also traditionally required apprentices to complete their qualification within three years, and timetable staff accordingly. These internal barriers can be difficult to address in a large bureaucracy. See the case studies for examples of actions taken.
Better communication between employers and RTOs has been a key focus of the project. All RTOs have reported improvements in their communication methods, which have been well received by employers. See the case studies for examples.

The final point about competency based progression being about fast tracking is an internal communication one for RTOs, which will continue to be addressed.

2014 Information Sessions for employers

Most project officers did not hold information sessions for employers because of poor responses. Three were held, and three were cancelled due to low numbers. Instead, project officers opted to visit employers to discuss the project and how they were working with the new processes. About 50 attended the information sessions and about 150 were visited.

Employers were again asked to complete the survey, with comparisons with the last time contained in Appendix 3.4.

Again, employers generally reacted more positively towards competency based progression and completion than RTO staff.

Most employers contacted are now aware of competency based progression and the requirements of their industrial awards. They are generally satisfied that their RTO is working to ensure they are kept fully informed and are consulted before competency is confirmed.

One interesting aspect of the employers’ general response is that they are pleasantly surprised by the increased amount of contact from their RTO. One question the survey asked employers in both 2013 and 2014 was “it is very difficult to get information out of our RTO about how our apprentice is progressing.” In 2013, 24% agreed with this statement and 41% disagreed. In 2014, 18% agreed and 56% disagreed. This result bears out the anecdotal evidence from project officers. One particular RTO attributed its increase in apprenticeship commencement numbers in 2015 to the increase in communications with their employers.

Of those employers directly visited by the project officers, a few responses from those interviewed are indicative of how the changes introduced by the project have been received by employers, especially the increased amount of communication.

One engineering company in the Hunter Valley had been dismissive of competency based progression at the outset of the project, and had also publicly expressed concerns about other changes introduced by their RTO. By the end of the project, they had 20 apprentices undertaking workplace-based training with the same RTO. They have set up a well-equipped training room at their workshop and use an online process for confirming their apprentices’ competence. All of this resulted from direct visits from the project officer.

A manufacturing company in Whyalla used the project to completely revise the way its apprentices progress through the organisation. Their concern had been about attracting and then retaining apprentices, as they often lost them to the resources sector. Working with the project officer, they developed a model where apprentices complete substantial training upfront before they start in the workplace, but their competence at work is assessed before they progress. A company-specific logbook was developed that linked tasks apprentices needed to perform at work to competencies in the training program. As the apprentices successfully provide evidence of their performance, and demonstrate appropriate attendance, timekeeping, attitude towards others and attitude towards learning, they progress to the next stage or finish their apprenticeship.

Other companies also used the project as the catalyst for implementing change within their own organisation.

An engineering company headquartered in Melbourne organised workshops for its branch managers and supervisors across two states to learn about competency based progression, and devised their own internal system for monitoring apprentices’ progress. A food manufacturer in Hobart arranged a briefing from the project team so its HR personnel could learn about the project
and develop internal systems to manage progression.

Much of the feedback from these interviews and meetings helped the project officers refine their systems to better meet the needs of employers, but just as importantly it helped employers understand their central role in confirming apprentices’ competence and monitoring their progress.

**2015 Information Sessions for other RTOs.**

Nine information sessions for RTOs not involved in the project and other stakeholders were held in February and March 2015. These sessions were to share the findings of the project and showcase some of the tools developed by the project partners.

These dissemination workshops were held in Adelaide, Melbourne, Hobart, Devonport, Sydney, Wollongong, Perth, Brisbane and Townsville. Each of the sessions involved an overview of the project and competency based progression and completion by the national project manager and a state training authority presentation in some states (Victoria, NSW and WA). The project officers presented in their own states, showcasing the tools they had developed and the issues they had addressed, and the project manager demonstrated some of the tools developed in other states.

A total of 114 people attended the nine sessions. Of these, 65 were from RTOs, 14 were from group training organisations, 12 were employers and 23 were from other stakeholder organisations, such as Australian Apprenticeship Centres and state government agencies.

A number of RTOs and other stakeholders covering the building and construction industries attended the sessions. This sector has had competency based wage progression included in its awards since January 2014, but little has been done to implement changes within RTOs. This sector is also grappling with a pre-apprenticeship program that provides for significant credits into apprenticeships.

Most of those who attended were satisfied with the tools showcased, but many were also grateful for the opportunity to discuss apprenticeship issues more broadly. Some of those who attended are also interested in providing the opportunity for other staff to see the presentations.
5. PROJECT EVALUATION

5.1 SURVEYS

Employers, RTO staff and apprentices were all surveyed twice about their understanding of competency based progression and completion and their attitudes towards it. Copies of the survey instruments can be found at Appendix 3. The first surveys were conducted from November 2012 to January 2013 for RTO staff, from March to June 2013 for employers and in November to December 2013 for apprentices. The second round of surveys were conducted in the second half of 2014.

The apprentices were also asked to complete a survey titled Modelling Vocational Excellence, Designed by WorldSkills, this survey attempts to understand what motivates those in apprenticeships to perform well.

The Engineering Excellence surveys for employers, RTO staff and apprentices were as similar as possible so that results could be compared between the three groups. Employers were also asked about the size of their workforce and how many engineering tradespeople and apprentices they employed. RTO staff were also asked about their length of service and the highest technical and teaching qualifications they hold. Apprentices were also asked their age, the stage of their apprenticeship and whether they had completed any pre-apprenticeship training.

The full survey results are included at appendix 3.4 and shown for employers, RTO staff and apprentices. For each cohort, the results from each year are compared, and then the results of the three cohorts are compared with each other.

This section contains analysis of those survey results that displayed noted changes between 2013 and 2014, and where different results between the three cohorts are worth commenting.

5.1.1 Employers results

The employer results generally reflect an improved understanding of competency based progression and completion, and a better appreciation that it will not adversely affect their employment of apprentices.

The results also indicated that employers are receiving better communications from their RTOs, which has been a key outcome for the project.
A substantial number indicated their understanding of the Award had improved. This may indicate increased communications as a result of the project. Certainly, those employers who attended information sessions, read the newsletters or have even been asked to confirm competencies would have a better understanding of this aspect of the Award.

A small decrease in the number agreeing with this statement suggests that employers may be more comfortable with competency based progression.

More disagree with this than previously. This may reflect that employers are becoming more familiar with confirming competence.

CBPC will turn our business away from taking on apprentices.

Our business does not have people with the ability to judge an apprentice’s competence.

The apprentice’s Award must be the main consideration when scheduling training delivery.
A similar percentage increase in both those agreeing and those disagreeing. This at least reflects a better understanding of some of the factors involved in scheduling training delivery.

![Pie chart 2013: Agree 41%, Neutral 24%, Disagree 35%]

![Pie chart 2014: Agree 56%, Neutral 18%, Disagree 26%]

It is very difficult to get information out of our RTO about how our apprentice is progressing.

The number of those disagreeing with this statement increased by 15%. All of the RTOs in this project are providing more information to employers about how their apprentices are progressing, so this response may indicate an acknowledgement of this change.

![Pie chart 2013: Agree 41%, Neutral 24%, Disagree 35%]

![Pie chart 2014: Agree 24%, Neutral 51%, Disagree 24%]

Our RTO ensures that our apprentice’s Training Plan is tailored to our workplace.

An 11% increase in those who agree with this statement. Again, all of the RTOs have implemented new processes for tailoring training plans to individual workplaces as can be seen in the case studies.

5.1.2 RTO staff results

Generally the RTO results indicate a better understanding of how competency based progression affects the operation of the RTO but a reluctance still about its implementation. The survey results and anecdotal evidence suggests that this reluctance stems from a general unwillingness to implement changes and also an appreciation that state training authority rules about funding being dependent upon an employer confirmation can affect cash flow within the organisation.
This increase reflects the professional development undertaken by project officers within their RTOs. Most teaching staff attended at least two information sessions outlining how the Award had changed and the obligations faced by employers.

A 10% reduction in those who agree with this statement. This indicates that RTO staff are better understanding the role the employer has in confirming competence, and that it is not solely determined by an RTO's timetable.

CBPC means that most apprentices will complete inside of three years in line with the RTO delivery schedule.

An 8% reduction in those agreeing with this statement reinforces the survey question above.
CBPC will turn employers off taking on apprentices.

A 13% increase in those who agree with this statement. It contrasts with a 4% reduction in the number of employers who agreed. RTO staff in some organisations were quite hostile to competency based progression, as discussed elsewhere in this report. It is worth acknowledging that the changes implemented by this project have focused on the activities of RTO staff rather than employers, and this response may indicate a reluctance to take on new responsibilities, but to deflect opposition to it elsewhere.

RTOs should be able to fully determine the competency of an apprentice without having to seek sign off from the employer.

A 6% reduction in those agreeing with this statement, which indicates an acceptance that employers have a role in confirming or validating competence.

If an employer won’t sign off an apprentice in a reasonable period the RTO should have the power to award competency without the employer’s sign off.
An 8% increase in those who agree with this statement, which contrasts with the survey response above. This probably relates to how state government subsidies flow to RTOs. Most STAs now require RTOs to confirm an apprentice’s competence with their employer before making final payments for training and assessment. If the employer is not facing the same time pressures as the RTO it can create tension between the two parties. This is discussed elsewhere in the report.

### 5.1.3 Apprentice results

Apprentice survey results generally reflected little change between 2013 and 2014.

#### CBPC needs to be publicised more widely.

![Circle Chart 2013](chart.png)

- **2013**
  - Agree: 12%
  - Neutral: 42%
  - Disagree: 46%

![Circle Chart 2014](chart.png)

- **2014**
  - Agree: 15%
  - Neutral: 46%
  - Disagree: 40%

A 6% reduction in those who agree with this statement. This could indicate that the apprentices surveyed believe they now understand competency based progression or that its promotion elsewhere is unnecessary if it has not greatly changed the apprenticeship experience for them.

#### CBPC is all about rushing apprentices through their training.

![Circle Chart 2013](chart.png)

- **2013**
  - Agree: 43%
  - Neutral: 29%
  - Disagree: 28%

![Circle Chart 2014](chart.png)

- **2014**
  - Agree: 35%
  - Neutral: 37%
  - Disagree: 28%

An 8% reduction in those who disagree with this statement, although they have become neutral rather than agreeing.
A 5% reduction in those who agree with this statement suggests that there is better understanding that employers have a role in confirming competence.

### 5.1.4 Comparisons

Comparing the responses from employers, RTO staff and apprentices indicates some significant differences of opinions. On the whole, employers seem to be more receptive to competency based progression and completion than RTO staff, which may reflect the fact that the project has focused more on changing the responsibilities of teachers and trainers than employers.

The responses of employers and RTO staff do not differ greatly, but apprentices are convinced that progression is controlled by the RTO. A fact sheet was developed for apprentices after viewing the response to this question in 2013. The fact sheet focuses on the role of the employer in confirming competence. A copy of the fact sheet can be found at Appendix 2.2.
Many more RTO staff agree with this statement than employers or apprentices. As discussed earlier, this may be because RTO staff are looking to lay opposition to competency based progression elsewhere to justify their own concerns.

At the very least, it indicates the need for improved communications between RTOs and employers if there is such poor understanding of each others’ attitudes.

A great diversity of opinion between all parties. This may reflect an attitude from some teachers and trainers that they are formally qualified as assessors when an employer usually is not. From the employer’s perspective, they judge the performance of all of their employees, and they are the best placed to review an apprentice’s performance in the workplace.

It is interesting that less than half of the apprentices disagreed with this statement.
RTOs should be able to fully determine the competency of an apprentice without having to seek sign off from the employer.

The different attitudes to this statement are not surprising. Most employers expect to have a role in determining the competence of an apprentice, especially when this relates to their employment status. Some teachers and trainers still maintain that this is their job, not the employer’s, although the number agreeing to this statement declined by 6% from 2013.

Only a third of apprentices believed there is a role for employers in determining their competence, which may indicate an impatience to progress through their pay levels.

If an employer won’t sign off an apprentice in a reasonable period the RTO should have the power to award competency without the employer’s sign off.

Two thirds of employers are clear that the sign off of competency is within the employer’s timeframe, not the RTO’s. This reflects a regular comment from employers that apprentices are not competent until they can perform to standards in the workplace, rather than passing an assessment process at an RTO.

For RTOs, this response may indicate the financial pressures they can face when government subsidies depend on the employer’s sign off.
It is not our job to train apprentices. That is the RTO’s responsibility.

Employers are not interested in training. They rely on the RTO to do the training.

My employer doesn’t need to train me. That is the RTO’s responsibility.

It is interesting that the employer response is more closely aligned to the apprentices’ rather than RTO staff. Again, this reflects mostly the need for better communication between the parties.

There is an element of teacher opinion that employers take on apprentices to exploit cheap labour and they are not really interested in developing skills. The employer opinion is that apprentices are the future for their organisation and industry.

### 5.2 OTHER DATA

All data relates to MEM30205 Certificate III in Engineering – Mechanical Trade and MEM30305 Certificate III in Engineering – Fabrication Trade. The data has been provided by state training authorities. State data includes data from participating RTOs.
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5.2.4 Average Durations (months)

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Average duration data includes apprentices who may have received RPL, or had previously completed a school based apprenticeship, or other factors influencing the duration.
Establishing competency based progression and completion for apprenticeships in a way that meets the needs of employers, apprentices and RTOs is a long term exercise. Apprenticeships have been the means of training tradespeople in Australia since employment laws began in the nineteenth century, and the system dates back hundreds of years in Europe.

Until the concept of competency based completions was adopted by COAG in 2006, apprenticeships have always been time based. The standard duration of four years was established in the 1950s. Under this system the completion of an apprenticeship occurred after four years but the issuing of the relevant qualification normally occurred at the end of three years. The fourth year of the apprenticeship was spent full time in the workplace to complete the apprenticeship after the qualification had been achieved. Under the current competency based model the apprenticeship is completed once the qualification is completed.

The vast majority of today's frontline trade training stakeholders i.e. employers, managers, supervisors and RTO teaching staff were probably indentured under the old four year apprenticeship model. Many training stakeholders therefore have a strong personalised link with the now superseded methods of traditional trade training. As a result cultural change and the full acceptance of the new competency based apprenticeship model will be difficult for them to achieve in the short term.

Most employers, and most teachers and trainers do however understand the rationale behind competency based progression. They accept that more needs to be done to attract candidates for apprenticeships, and accept that competency based progression can help make apprenticeships more attractive and motivate those already in training. But new employment conditions and new training arrangements in a traditional industry will take time to bed down.

This project has been about introducing the concept to a much wider audience, and providing RTOs with the tools to help them manage its implementation, but the effect of the changes will not be seen for some years to come.

For the project officers, the first twelve months was about spreading the message to employers, teachers and trainers, and then developing tools that would be suitable for their own organisations. The second twelve months was about trialling these tools and making adjustments. Some of the systems now in place will remain as they are, some others will undergo further refinements. How they affect commencement numbers, completion rates and average durations will not be seen until the cohort of apprentices commencing last year near the end of their training.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1.1 Examine how industrial awards treat pre-vocational and other institution-only qualifications.

Pre-vocational, pre-employment and pre-apprenticeship training present difficulties for competency based progression and completion. If an apprentice commences with an employer and already has completed competencies in his or her training plan, these are expected to be recognised for the purposes of wage progression.

Employers will generally say that if an apprentice is competent they are happy to
pay for the skills, but the issue with these institution-only qualifications is that the graduate may have demonstrated knowledge and skill in a learning environment but not in a workplace context.

This raises all sorts of questions. Why is the RTO offering competencies that are designed for assessment in a workplace context? Who is checking on their assessments? Why do some state governments not fund purpose designed qualifications?

From the employers perspective, any pre-vocational training for potential apprentices is beneficial and should be encouraged. But they should not be expected to pay for skills a new apprentice does not yet have.

The South Australian Government recently gazetted changes for apprentices in the building and construction industry stating that competencies achieved outside of an apprenticeship arrangement may not contribute to competency based wage progression, unless they have been assessed under a training contract arrangement by their registered employer. Evidence of that assessment must be recorded in an approved log book and represent agreement between an RTO, employer and apprentice of that competence.

There is a need to examine how industrial awards treat pre-employment training. If apprentices with prior non-work based qualifications or competencies commence an apprenticeship they could demonstrate their competencies to employers before they are paid for them. There are obviously various aspects of this that would need to be taken into consideration, but a solution that would encourage more to undertake pre-vocational training without unfairly treating employers is worth striving for.

“The project has revealed that pre-vocational and other institution-only qualifications complicate the implementation of competency-based progression and completion for employers. Accordingly, the Australian Government should undertake an analysis of the relationship between industrial awards and institution-based qualifications with competency-based progression and completion arrangements.”

6.1.2 Examine ways to encourage RTOs to deal with competency based progression and completion as it applies to workplaces.

A common attitude of RTOs is that they are funded to deliver training and assessment for apprentices, not to confirm competence with employers. Much of their funding is derived from state training authorities and is used to pay for teachers, training facilities and training and assessment resources. The attitude is that once the RTO has completed their off the job training and assessment, their work is done and they deserve to be paid.

With funding systems that require confirming competence with employers to take place before final payments are made, this process is viewed as an additional unfunded administrative hurdle that interferes with their cash flow. It means that some RTOs will pressure employers to confirm competence before apprentices have had time to practice and demonstrate skills in the workplace.

State training authorities should examine ways that encourage RTOs to give employers the time to be satisfied their apprentices are performing to workplace standards before they confirm competence. Funding systems that provide for most of the payment to be made before competence is confirmed would help. Funding mechanisms that require apprentices to spend time in the workplace after formal training is completed but before assessment is finalised would also assist.

“State Training Authorities need to develop mechanisms that enable RTOs to provide opportunities for employers to ensure that apprentices are meeting workplace standards before they are required to confirm competence.”
6.1.3 Disseminate findings to other RTOs and industry areas

The dissemination workshops and attendance at various conferences has highlighted the need for greater dissemination of the project findings and the tools and processes developed by the project partners. 65 RTOs were represented at the dissemination workshops and many were interested in enabling other staff to attend more information sessions.

The expansion of competency based wage progression to other industry sectors, notably building and construction, has also raised interest from those RTOs in developing their own systems and tools.

Consideration should be given to funding further information sessions and further consultancies beyond the timeframe of this project.

“That the Australian Government develop and implement a communication strategy in conjunction with States and Territories, to disseminate the findings of the Engineering Excellence project to facilitate the expansion of competency-based progression and completion practices into other industry areas.”

6.1.4 Encourage more professional development for teachers and trainers

There is still a mindset among many teachers and trainers that competency based progression and completion somehow reflects on their professionalism and their responsibility for training and assessing apprentices. A common response in the workshops was that teachers are custodians of the trade. It has been alleged that employers take on apprentices to pay cheap wages, and are not really interested in training them. This may be an extreme representation of the view, but more needs to be done to help teachers understand that an apprenticeship is firstly an employment contract, and teachers are engaged to service that contract.

It is a common belief for many in the VET system, especially within public providers, that the real customer they service is government. Government provides the funds and sets the rules. Teachers need a better understanding of their role in the system including that that they are in a service industry and their livelihood depends on keeping customers satisfied, and that there is no apprenticeship without an employer.

A professional development program about the VET system, the various players and where RTOs fit into the structure would help with everybody’s understanding.

“That the Australian Government, in conjunction with the States and Territories, develop and implement a professional development strategy for RTOs which focuses on and clarifies the roles of the various parties concerning competency-based progression and completion.”

6.1.5 Undertake further analysis of the Modelling Vocational Excellence survey

The Modelling Vocational Excellence survey is discussed at section 4.3 and supplied in full at Appendix 3.5. The survey was conducted to establish what motivates apprentices, what attracted them to their trade and to learn something about their personal characteristics. Over two years, almost 1,000 apprentices completed the survey.
For the purposes of this project limited analysis of the survey results was required. The survey results offer further significant potential to gain insights into how trade careers can be promoted to young people.

It is recommended that a further project be undertaken to analyse the survey results and make recommendations about its findings.

“That the Australian Government undertake a detailed analysis of the data obtained through the Modelling Vocational Excellence survey and provide the results to relevant stakeholders in the field of promoting trades careers.”