Training providers as brokers in continuing education and training

ANN KELLY, MARK TYLER, and DARRYL DYMOCK
Griffith University, Australia

Abstract

As workplaces change in response to external and internal influences, the place of learning and training arguably becomes more significant in helping workers respond to those changes and prepare for future developments. In Australia, registered training organisations (RTOs) have been given the responsibility of undertaking, facilitating and assessing the outcomes of this learning and training. Yet, despite the apparently significant contribution providers make, little research has been reported on the nature of their role, particularly in regard to continuing education and training. In order to examine how such organisations manage teaching and learning in a complex training and industrial environment, semi-structured interviews were undertaken with eight highly experienced senior managers and practitioners employed by registered training organisations. The study found that education and training providers not only deliver and assess training, but also inevitably have a brokering role at the regulatory, enterprise and individual worker levels. The extent to which providers effectively carry out this complex brokering role is important not only in helping workers maintain and develop their vocational competence, but also in ensuring the integrity of the national training framework. The paper argues that there needs to be better acknowledgment of this broader role, which has implications not only for Australian workforce development, but for any national standardised system of vocational education and training.

Keywords: Workplace learning, Learning and training, National training framework in Australia.

Introduction

Workers are increasingly having to adapt to new ways of working as industries and enterprises respond to global competition, market demands and advances in technology (Fakhfakh, Pérotin, & Robinson, 2011), particularly in the more industrialised countries. The knowledge and skill-sets workers require in order to respond to workplace change depend on the nature of the industry in which they work and on the requirements of specific occupations. What is clear, however, is that, whatever their particular vocation, workers need to be resilient and adaptable if they are to maintain their employability.

Smith, Dymock, and Billett (2013) reported that workers' employability is enabled by integrating four elements: i) active learning by workers individually and collectively; ii) support for that learning by the organisations and workplaces within which they work; iii) the facilitation of accredited learning by education and training providers; and iv) governance by the bodies that regulate and monitor that provision. On the face of it, the role of the vocational education and training (VET) providers in that mix is a straightforward one — training workers in the competencies needed to qualify for accreditation and certification. In order to undertake that task, however, those organisations must not only engage with workers, but also interact with employers and liaise with government departments, which also monitor their activities.

In Australia there are some 5000 providers of accredited training, known as registered training organisations (RTOs), but there has been little research into how they juggle those three responsibilities and still ensure that ultimately workers are trained in the skills needed for the workplace. As a supplement to a larger study of continuing education and training involving enterprise managers and workers (Billett et al., 2011), semi-structured interviews were undertaken with eight highly experienced senior managers and practitioners employed by RTOs. Analysis of their responses showed that in order to effectively perform their function, these RTOs negotiated a pathway between employer expectations of training outcomes and employee motivations and learning needs, while at the same time endeavouring to maintain the integrity of their process in line with government requirements. The position taken in this paper is that this practice amounts to what might best be described as a brokerage role, and that the successful deployment of that role within the RTO context is vital to effective continuing education and training and needs to be better acknowledged with a national training system.

Role of providers in VET

Registered training organisations developed as the major providers of vocational education and training in Australia as a result of government policy in the 1990s aimed at establishing a national approach to training standards and the accreditation of training (Harris, Simons, & McCarthy, 2006). This policy initiative, which became the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF), established benchmarks for the operations of vocational education and training providers to try to assure the quality of VET provision and ensure consistent national standards. It also opened the market for the provision of VET courses to private providers alongside the traditional avenue of publicly-funded Technical and Further Education (TAFE) institutes and colleges, thus introducing the concept of "user choice" (Noble, Hill, Smith, & Smith, 1999). The 5000 RTOs in Australia employ more than 300,000

staff (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012), to provide nationally accredited training courses and assess students' learning outcomes. Sometimes they work with non-accredited organisations — such as enterprises — to oversee and assess workplace training but not deliver it.

The Australian government has recently established a national vocational regulator, the Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA), to undertake registration and compliance monitoring of RTOs, and a "VET Quality Framework" has been implemented in an effort to achieve greater national consistency in the way RTOs operate (ASQA, 2012). The Quality Framework comprises standards for RTOs, "fit and proper person" requirements with respect to those who direct or manage an RTO, financial viability risk assessment, and requirements regarding data provision, along with the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF). This framework sets out a "ladder" of the various levels of qualification, from vocational certificates to doctorates. The AQTF has been replaced by national vocational regulator (NVR) Standards.

Within this regulatory environment, RTOs have to develop working relationships with employers. Among large employers, key issues with the Australian vocational education and training system identified in a study by the Allen Consulting Group (2004) included: that training is not companies' core business, but they still want a high degree of control over the training provided; most companies believe government regulatory authorities do not appreciate either business priorities or the nature of training undertaken in large enterprises; and that many companies have moved from the mass training model to training that meets particular training needs, which the authors believed was a challenge for some training providers. In another enterprise perspective, Blythe and Bowman (2005) found that employers value qualifications, but they regard more highly the skills needed to do the job, and that they use and value qualifications differently on the bases of the type of occupation, and the type and size of the enterprise. Similarly, Cully (2006) concluded from a review of case studies that employers favour the relevance and flexibility of training over accreditation. Such attitudes are clearly a challenge to education and training organisations attempting to provide certification under the AQF.

In an attempt to identify how enterprises and educational providers might best work together, Callan and Ashworth (2004) examined a number of such partnerships and concluded that one of the key elements is the quality of the relationship, and that considerable time is necessary to build a larger training partnership through mutual trust. They argued that VET professionals need to recognise the competitive realities businesses are facing, build as much flexibility and customisation into the training as is feasible, and accept that a break-even outcome might be the best financial result a training provider will initially achieve. According to Callan and Ashworth (2004), "the most successful partnerships were

characterised by high levels of cooperation between the two organisations which basically rested on good relationships and communication between several key people from both sides" (p. 52). The changing role of the VET practitioner evident in Callan and Ashworth's study is also seen in a 2010 paper on the future VET workforce, in which the Community Services and Health Industry Skills Council (2010) argued that workforce development will likely require VET practitioners to not only deliver training as per the NVR standards, but also become involved in workplace job design, employee recruitment and retention, and better utilisation of existing skills.

In a UK example of partnering, 'skills advisers' in a government-funded agency, Business Link, acted as brokers by linking employers with relevant courses and providers (Train to Gain, 2010). The Australian government has introduced an online version of a similar service, Skills Connect (2013), which is based on developing networks of regional and industry-based partners. However, there are also Australian examples of training providers undertaking what might be seen as a brokering role with individual enterprises. For example, Gientzotis Consulting (2003) identified a range of 'intermediary services' by registered training organisations, including: helping employers navigate the vocational and education training system; liaising with state and territory agencies about accredited training; helping align training and development plans with the long-term goals of the enterprise; managing the administrative tasks associated with accredited training; linking training to industry-wide objectives and acting as advocates for industry; and facilitating partnerships and training opportunities to meet specific community needs.

In a workplace context, educational brokering is generally undertaken by an agent or a person, group or organisation who liaises with employers and trainers (and sometimes others, e.g., trade unionists) in order to address specific training needs. Kilpatrick, Fulton, and Johns (2007, p. 213) said a training broker "plays an active and purposeful role in identifying training needs. A training broker considers the whole suite of present and potential training opportunities and actively matches needs to training, acting in the best interests of the client".

Kilpatrick et al. (2007) cite Thomas et al.'s (2004) argument that educational brokering involves six stages: i) understanding the current situation; ii) gaining entry and building trust; iii) making learning meaningful; iv) identifying the right learning opportunity; v) promoting learning success; and vi) addressing organisational issues. The authors (2007) also cite research conducted by Yarnit, Zachdev, and Zwart (2005) which further refined this framework into a five-phase learning brokerage chain: strategy; infrastructure and capacity building; brokerage; learning and skills delivery, and continuous quality improvement. In this framework, infrastructure and capacity building are key stages that precede the actual process of brokerage

and learning and skills delivery. The focus is on securing high-level commitment to the brokerage system at a local or regional level, as well as training and resourcing brokers. Both frameworks highlight the importance of monitoring the process.

The need for a brokering role is consistent with the nature of the current VET environment in Australia. As might be expected from the political nature of the introduction of RTOs and their subsequent monitoring, education and training providers constantly need to be cognisant of the regulatory environment within which they operate. In a study of leadership of RTOs (Harris & Simons, 2012), managing compliance requirements was identified as one of the key challenges, along with establishing credibility in the particular industry sector, and managing change.

Kilpatrick et al. (2007, p. 220) identified ten generic principles underpinning good brokerage practice in vocational education and training: (1) be learner-centred; (2) have links to, and build relationships of trust with local networks; (3) encourage a learning culture; (4) develop and maintain a wide network of stakeholders to identify emerging needs and awareness of other training opportunities; (5) have links to, and cultivate a relationship of trust with training providers; (6) maintain a continual awareness of training opportunities and gaps; (7) have appropriate professional standards in place and comply with relevant legislation; (8) actively match needs to training; (9) assure the quality of the training provided as a result of brokerage; and (10) evaluate the brokering process for credibility and quality assurance. According to the authors, although these principles are applicable across all broking contexts, different contexts may call for flexibility in their implementation.

This survey of literature has briefly charted the development of registered training organisations in Australia, and identifies some of the issues arising when they take on a more intermediary role, which can be considered as brokering. There appear to be two main elements of educational brokerage: environmental — responding to wider governmental and industry influences, and operational — dealing directly with enterprises and employees, but the role of the central agency in each case is quite different.

The study reported here presents the perceptions of a number of experienced trainers and administrators of accredited training providers in Australia about the nature of their role, and considers the extent to which registered training organisations might be seen as educational brokers. The presentation of findings is preceded by a section on the methodology of the data collection, and followed by a discussion of the brokerage roles that are revealed in the data, and a conclusion about implications of the findings for the place of training providers in a national system of vocational education and training.

Methodology

Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with eight experienced RTO practitioners in four main industry areas: transport and logistics, community services and health, financial services and services, and mining. The industries were chosen both because of their diversity and their key roles in the Australian economy. Five of the interviewees managed training operations and the other three had lecturing or training roles, and the RTOs which employed them were based in two widely separated Australian states. The respondents were identified to the researchers by enterprise managers who took part in the wider study of continuing education (Billett, et al., 2011). One of the eight was based in a regional area, and the others indicated their training programs were conducted in both rural and metropolitan areas.

Semi-structured interviews allow the interviewers to ask a set of pre-determined questions, while at the same time having the opportunity to "take a lead from a respondent's answer and ask other relevant questions not on the interview protocol" (Sekaran, 2000, p. 225). To ensure consistency, two experienced VET researchers prepared for and undertook the interviews individually, all face-to-face except one by telephone. With the agreement of the informants, all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, in accordance with Griffith University ethics requirements.

The interview schedule comprised a number of demographic questions, followed by questions grouped around three main themes: i) perceptions of industry and workplace changes ii) how RTOs work with employers and enterprises, and iii) how RTOs work with employees. Examples of the sorts of questions asked are: *What key changes in the industry sector over the last five years have required employees to learn new things to maintain skills currency?; How does your organisation engage with employers and enterprises to meet their training needs?; and Are your current training models effective in maintaining skills currency?*

The aim of the interviews was to obtain rich and thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973) from participants. To these data we applied an iterative analysis (Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009). We read and reread the interviewee transcripts and engaged in collaborative critique of each researcher's analysis of the interview data. Our aim was to give a voice to the interviewees through acknowledging their perceptions of the continuing and education and training (CET) landscape. In this way, we have undertaken qualitative research as described by Neuman (2000, p. 144), by explaining how people "attach meaning to events and learn to see events from multiple perspectives".

The small sample is not intended to be representative of registered training

organisations in Australia. Given the experience and seniority of the interviewees, however, it is argued that their responses are indicative of the current state of play among VET providers in that nation. As researchers, we also brought to bear on the data collection and analysis our considerable experience in, and understanding of, vocational education and training.

In order to consider the findings from the interviews regarding the roles of RTOs, responses are summarised in the next section. Three major themes from the interview schedule emerged: the changing workplace, how RTOs work with employers and enterprises, and how RTOs work with employees.

Roles of RTOs

This section presents the views of the senior managers and practitioners interviewed for this study. The perspectives relate to how they operate on a day-to-day basis.

Changing workplace

According to the interviewees from the transport and logistics industry, two key changes during the past five years have impacted significantly on workers: the introduction of new national and state legislation, and the greater prevalence of technical equipment that they are expected to use in a skilled, efficient and thus productive manner. First, with respect to legislation, RTO staff must have comprehensive and timely knowledge of the content of the relevant acts and the policies relating to the workers with whom they interact in the transport and logistics industry. One example of the codification of such legislation that was identified as impacting specifically on workers in this domain was the Compliance and Enforcement policy that regulates the management of dangerous goods in transport and warehousing environments. Because these compliance requirements are so important, one RTO has established a compliance team who ensure that "every single" trainer attends seminars "at intervals every single year".

Within an enterprise RTO within the railway sector, another example of a legislative development that has impacted on the transport and logistics industry has been the Rail Safety Act which focuses on the safety skills of rail workers, requiring them to demonstrate competence according to AQF criteria. Where the RTO interviewee had been training rail workers to develop skills according to the established company standards, this move from the local to the national has meant the organisation's trainers "have to go back and reassess all of these workers or find a smart way of giving them an AQF outcome for the work that they're doing

so that they can meet the requirements in the new legislation". That is, as with those RTO trainers who work with compliance legislation, these trainers must now a) learn new competencies, b) match them against those that have been operating at a more local level, c) identify where gaps exist, d) develop new recognition of prior learning procedures, including assessment regimes and, finally, e) modify their training programs to ensure that they that address all the competencies that comprise the new standards. In this one example it is evident that legislative changes are not static and, thus, it is incumbent on all trainers, but particularly those in industries that are characterised by continual change, to maintain currency of knowledge and its application to the industries with which they work.

Similarly to legislative change, a second challenge to RTOs in the transport and logistics industry is the need to know the diverse types of technology that are being introduced, to be able to use these effectively, and to be able to train others in their competent use. This technology includes devices with electronic data faces, global positioning systems, automated gearboxes and new engines, which are becoming common. Because RTOs themselves cannot afford to own the more expensive equipment, it has been necessary for them to "get them (staff) out into the market, get them out with the manufacturers, get them out with transport companies so they can keep abreast of all the new technology they're using".

The key change in the mining industry relates to its generally perceived wealth-generating capacity, its expansion, particularly in the Australian States of Western Australia and Queensland and its relatively high wages. As a result, there has been a rush to work in this industry. As one interviewee from the mining industry noted, while some other industries, for example, aged care, has traditionally "struggled" to attract employees, this situation had been exacerbated because "why would you work as a carer when you could go and drive a truck on a mine site" for a considerably greater wage? Yet, while there is a supply of workers keen to capitalise on this current situation, the actual numbers of workers who are employed in this industry remain small (DEEWR, 2013) and they must be skilled, a recurrent challenge for RTO trainers.

Another factor related to the general issue of skill shortages that was identified by one interviewee was the ephemeral nature of skill demand and the maintenance of "a balance" between anticipating future demands and the certainty of knowing that the qualifications that are promoted and acquired are sufficiently broad to allow people to take up other job roles or occupations in the future. This issue has ramifications for registered training organisations in their planning, staffing and curriculum and resource development. While there are demands for certain types of skilled labour in the mining industry at the moment, this situation is reliant on high prices and the continuing demand for coal and other power- generating resources

by Chinese industrial companies. If these factors are lessened, then the focus of RTOs may need to change.

A further change resulting from the growth of mining sites that was identified in the interviews with mining industry trainers was the increased emphasis on ensuring the efficiency, quality and consistency of the training that is delivered. Where, in the past, the training may have been decentralised, with training providers negotiating the processes and delivering the products on an individual basis and, again, similarly to the transport and logistics example discussed above, using national standards to inform curricula across the different. It was recognised that there is a desire for "greater harmonisation" of worker competencies to exist between them. The longish quotation below exemplifies this move to the replication of training across a number of settings using a common template:

> *... I can think of another company which is … rolling out one model to one project. They're going to take that model to five sites. They've got another six sites in the pipeline, which is typical of [x state] and they want to just replicate. They want to get a model, cookie cutter it and then drop it in. And our job is basically to train the leading hands, supervisors, experienced guys on the ground to be able to work to a national standards system.*

In aged care, one interviewee identified a major shift in the past five years or so from higher education qualifications to VET qualifications for vocational education and training, as the number of enrolled nurses and assistants in nursing increased relative to the number of nurses in the health workforce. Another person noted the conflict arising from trying to meet immediate skills needs for industry and still prepare for future needs:

> *How can we maintain a balance between … filling [skill shortages] and anticipating and being able to equip people so that they know what that we're in it for life really, and so that their qualifications … are broad enough or they're able to go off on a different tangent as and when.*

This person also nominated as a key change in vocational education and training the introduction of what are now the NVR standards and their "cumbersome" accountability practices, requiring constant vigilance to ensure compliance and currency.

The dynamic context facing RTOs is indicative of the relative consistency in changes associated with legislation, compliance and technology. These changes have three key drivers: occupational health and safety requirements, market

demands, and the knowledge and skill imperatives that emerge from developing a more efficient economy and hence workforce. The impact of these changes is initially felt at the enterprise level, so how RTOs engage with enterprises is a key consideration.

Engagement with enterprises

The eight interviewees revealed how they engaged on a day-to-day basis with enterprises in delivering accredited training in a variety of learning environments, including workplaces, training rooms and computer mediated training environments. The variation across industries that these RTOs service offers a picture of shared experience around particular issues, for example, dealing with skill shortages, particularly in the resource rich states, navigating and traversing the Australian Quality Framework terrain, and undertaking training in rural and remote areas. No single issue appeared unique to a particular RTO. Their interview data suggest that each shares these issues in varying degrees, but the data also offered nuanced and unique perspectives on these experiences.

Developing strong, trusting and enduring training relationships with enterprises was a theme that encapsulated the RTOs fundamentals. RTOs reported their willingness to build these relationships but also reported that employers appeared less attuned to this aspect. Participants cited instances of employer resistance with regard to "correct workplace habits", suggesting that long-held attitudes — "this is the way we've always done it" — are holding back the aligning of RTO and enterprise philosophies around organisational learning and the benefits this brings to productivity and sustainability. This RTO position on employers also extended to their role in informing best practice in training. Industry skills councils (ISCs) exist for this exact purpose, but some of the participants reported that getting industry engaged in the training agenda through prompting membership of the relevant ISC is difficult. One participant also reported that he believed that some employers are threatened by formal training, because the employers themselves have none, and that therefore these employers "might close doors". There is some skepticism that national training packages are effective in influencing a change in attitude regarding the value of accreditation, as exemplified in the following quote about employers' attitude: "They just want a guy to be able to go in and drive the dozer and do the job. The fact that it's nationally qualified or nationally standardised is by-the-by". However, enterprises differed in their attitude to the value of qualifications. Also, one participant said that when talk is about building a learning culture, a different attitude comes through.

A key feature of providers' engagement with enterprises was tailoring courses

to meet employers' needs. Several respondents mentioned using training needs analysis as a basic tool, but the findings were then discussed with the employer in order to identify training needs specific to a particular workplace. One mentioned doing a desk-top audit for anything the company might have missed, such as meeting occupational health and safety requirements, and another said they first asked the client what they wanted out of the training and how this aligned with the organisation's strategic plan. Another said, "We build on a national framework. We build on the training packages. ... And we customise as much as possible."

The enterprise RTO was in a different position, of course. The learning and development team was responsible for writing the materials and organising the training in response to learning needs identified within the company by "learning alignment managers". So, the training was much more targeted, but still used the national standards as their benchmarks. Across this large organisation there were people with qualifications as workplace trainers and assessors who would be called upon as required in their area of expertise.

In discussing how they work with organisations, one interviewee from an RTO that trained truck drivers said 90 per cent of the training was conducted in the workplace: "The work's done out on the truck — they don't have to take anyone out of their target role." This issue of the extent to which employers are prepared to release staff for training emerged as a significant factor in interviewees' responses.

In the resource rich states, the attraction of employment with better than average wage levels offered through the current natural resources boom was reported as influencing employee retention. For example, in the aged care sector participants told of a struggle to keep employees. Aged care workers now "go and drive a truck on a mine site". Further, participants reported that skill shortages in the construction and mining sector also existed as a result of an apparent insatiable demand for labour. It appears that during a resources boom "everybody is working, so there is no time to train". One participant reported the issue of maintaining of a balance between the supply and demand of appropriate and required training, and helping employers and employees select training that will provide an opportunity to branch into other skill areas when the economy requires it. This suggests that RTOs eyes should be focused on the future, a future when the demand for natural resources is not so great.

With regard to worker availability for training, one participant summed up the issue in this way: "Employers want people now and they want them to have a certain level, but everybody's working and there is no time to train". According to this informant, at present there is a "tension between getting to them [for training] and the employer needing them to work". This appears to be exacerbated in small to medium sized organisations who can ill afford to release workers for training.

It was reported that this is even more of an issue when isolation and distance are elements within the training rubric.

The main issue of training perceived in rural and remote areas was its cost effectiveness, that is, the costs of getting to, and the delivery of training in these areas. The small returns obtained from the small numbers of trainees feeds into this equation. These coupled with the difficulty associated with employer release of trainee, was considered as a real issue in delivering training in regional areas. In response to this, RTOs are cross-pollinating, by organising training responses that line up a "work trail" incorporating several locations on one training sortie. This, it was reported, enabled a balancing of costs within the RTO to keep down delivery costs in rural areas. Often choices are made by some RTOs to deliver at a loss with the hope of attracting repeat business in the same area once relationships have been established and bedded down.

Generally, for these RTO representatives, relationships with enterprises, tailoring courses to meet specific enterprise need, negotiating worker availability for training and seeking ways to conciliate regional training needs, were seen as central to the day-to-day engagements that they had with employers and enterprises, in effect, engendering a training culture. Beyond that industry and enterprise agenda, however, the training takes hold, is assessed and certified at the individual level, that is, when trainers interact with the workers.

Engagement with workers

Typically, RTOs initially engage directly with employers and managers to determine training needs, because enterprises, not individuals, are their clients. It is only once a training program has been agreed to that the RTOs become involved with the workers as learners. Their perspectives on engaging with workers therefore tended to be within the framework set by employers. One respondent expressed it this way:

> So *we'd be taking into account what their aspirations are, what their motivation is, why they are on the course … we try to get a feel for what's the company plan, and where does the training fit, and where do the individuals fit within that?*

Nevertheless, it is evident that the RTOs tended to take seriously their responsibility for training and assessing, with most of them noting the need to motivate individual workers and recognise their prior learning, either through a formal process, or at least by acknowledging the workers' experience as part of the training process — "you assume they've got some background knowledge, so it's

really building and developing". An interviewee from a mining RTO said that since companies in that industry hired whomever met their employment needs, there was a wide age range, with trainees in their 20s, 40s and 60s, and training approaches had to be modified to suit. On a slightly different tack, an interviewee employed by a transport RTO said that because their trainers did all their training on the job, they often had to be with a driver on whatever shift the "student" was working, which could be midnight to 6am. This recognition of people's individuality as learners was widespread among the interviewees.

There is also evidence of gradually changing delivery mechanisms, at least in mining, where worksites are scattered, with one RTO using blended learning — a course for administration assistants utilising Skype and video conferences, followed by a face-to-face gathering at head office. "We used to be a face-to-face company," one interviewee reported, "but the pressure is to have diverse platforms." Another example of changing delivery approaches came from an interviewee involved in training drivers, who had converted ten driving habits on to a CD which the driver played as he drove, while trying to use the tips to improve fuel economy. The trainer would later sit with the driver in the cab as he drove and assess that person's responses to the instructions using an iPad to record the results. Another RTO interviewee involved with truck driver training observed that every trucking company had drivers who could teach other drivers, but "employees generally felt more confident by receiving training from somebody external".

These RTO representatives' engagement with workers is shadowed by the imperative to meet enterprises' needs first, but once this is negotiated their connection with workers as learners takes their focused attention. Their respect for learners is exemplified in their belief that all workers come with certain knowledge and skills and that these augment the learning process. Other commitment to worker learning is shown in the degree to which RTOs modify the training process to meet the learning needs of various ages and skill levels. In addition, there is evidence of RTO willingness to engage in the various blended methods of training delivery from traditional face-to-face to ICT mediated delivery.

As a result of such commitment, participants were confident that they were having an impact on individual employees and often on the wider organisation, and even on the industries themselves. Among the outcomes they identified were that they made a difference in individual working lives, promoted productivity, improved occupational health and safety, and promoted efficiency in the workplace. They believed the impact on the workplace came through such factors as the worker/learners coming up with new ideas as a result of their training, and subsequently influencing changes in the organisation, and (at Certificate IV level) through involving their supervisors: "There was actually a physical and visible difference in their attitude towards quality improvement," said one respondent.

The findings from the interviews in this study reveal a dynamic workplace and training environment in which RTOs operate at three levels. The first level is that of the regulatory environment associated with legislation and compliance in order to meet national standards, along with the need to address industry knowledge and skill demands in a competitive global market, where increased productivity is an important goal. Secondly, at the enterprise level, RTOs are involved in tailoring courses to meet the demands of specific workplaces, or, as in the case of mining, to train workers capable of operating at different sites operated by a single company. Within these enterprises, RTOs also attempt to foster a learning culture and employers' commitment to continuing education and training that will enhance their role within the organisation and possibly contribute to the advancement of the industry itself. Even the embedded enterprise RTO was faced with the challenge of developing such a culture. Finally, at the level of worker training, while tailoring training to meet employer expectations, the RTOs recognise they also need to motivate and engage employees. So at this level there is acknowledgement of different age and skill levels, and of previous training and learning, along with a variety of delivery methods. In operating across these three levels, the RTOs clearly act in a brokerage role, which is discussed in the next section.

Discussion

A key brokerage role for registered training organisations is keeping up to date with legislative and regulatory requirements and technological changes, interpreting their significance for industries, and ensuring relevant developments are reflected in current training. These roles are consistent with the "intermediary services" identified by Gientzotis Consulting (2003). In addition, RTOs often do not have the resources to provide training in technological advances (e.g., in trucking), and rely instead on manufacturers and suppliers to update their clients and customers, which is more in line with the 'wide network of stakeholders' included in one of the brokerage principles enunciated by Kilpatrick et al. (2007).

Another brokerage role identified by all respondents was the development of sustainable relationships with employers, which they saw as a key element of effective continuing education and training. In undertaking this role, RTOs have to be flexible enough to meet the needs of different sized organisations, which can vary from one-person businesses to major companies with thousands of workers, as well as companies such as those in the mining industry, which operate across multiple sites. Providing training to smaller organisations is not always cost effective, and if they happen to be rural-based, meeting budget targets can be even more challenging. In general, however, the research found RTOs willing to try various strategies to meet such needs, sometimes seeing a financially marginal activity as a "loss leader"

for potentially more work in the future. The attitudes of RTOs as expressed in the interviews reflect the key element of successful partnerships found by Callan and Ashworth (2004): good relationships and communication between the educational provider and the enterprise. Such partnerships also demonstrate the first of Thomas et al.'s (2004) six stages of successful brokering: understanding the current workplace and training environments, gaining entry and building trust. There are also elements in the interview responses of RTOs trying to develop a learning culture, which is one of the ten principles of good brokerage identified by Kilpatrick et al. (2007). In promoting such a culture, RTOs sometimes find themselves in the position of challenging long-held conventions of workplace practice that do not align with the requirements of contemporary training packages.

A further brokerage role is managing the tension between aligning training and development plans with the enterprise's long-term goals, one of the intermediary services identified by Gientzotis Consulting (2003), and ensuring training programs are learner-centred, the first of Kilpatrick et al.'s (2007) ten principles. This tension increases in situations where employers' desire for training conflicts with their willingness to release workers to undertake training, and is exacerbated in rural areas where it is difficult to release key staff in small organisations and where there are often no qualified staff available to backfill positions. Interviewees indicated they have to tread a fine line between meeting employer demands (and hence retaining their business) and preparing employees for work beyond immediate needs. Also, while tailoring training for particular workplace contexts may suit the immediate needs of employers and employees, it may not be in the long-term interests of workers seeking to advance their careers elsewhere. Nevertheless, among the interviewees there were frequent mentions of students' learning needs and motivations, indicating an alignment with the learner-centredness in Kilpatrick et al.'s (2007) list, along with those same authors' principles of making learning meaningful, identifying the right learning opportunity, and promoting learning success. Interviewees also identified ways of making provision for particular circumstances such as a rural locations and isolated learners — another example of the brokering role of RTOs.

Conclusion

What this study shows is that the role of providers in continuing education and training education and training is about much more than training workers. Training organisations are forced to take on a significant brokering role — interpreting legislation and regulations and acting as advocates for their employer clients, and negotiating with enterprises to address immediate skill requirements — while at the same time meeting national standards of accreditation and being cognisant

of wider industry development. At the training level, providers must adhere to the goals they have already agreed with employers, but also motivate and engage individual workers by relating the training to the employees' workplace learning needs and utilising appropriate pedagogies. At the end of the training, the training organisations are responsible for the assessment and certification of the learners.

The extent to which education and training providers effectively carry out this complex brokering role is key not only to helping workers maintain and develop their vocational competence, but also to ensuring the integrity of the national training framework, which is dependent upon the rigour of the training and assessment. Although the sample for this study is small, there is sufficient diversity of organisations and industries, as well as geographical spread, to suggest that there are pointers here for any national system of vocational education and training, and in particular, that providers must be well prepared and supported to undertake a brokerage role, not simply a training one.

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Authors' profiles

Ann Kelly is a Lecturer in Adult and Vocational Education at Griffith University, Australia. She has a particular interest in adult literacy and more broadly in vocational education and training.

Mark Tyler is Senior Lecturer, Adult and Vocational Education, Griffith University Australia. His research interests are related to workplace learning and mentoring, teacher identity, critical spirit (the dispositions of critical thinkers), collaborative concept mapping and older adults' digital competence.

Darryl Dymock is a Senior Research Fellow at Griffith University, Australia, and has long experience in the practice of adult and vocational education, with research interests in adult learning, adult literacy, the capabilities of older workers, and workplace learning.