

**Senate Inquiry into the Effects of Climate
Change on Training and Employment Needs**

Submission from

Group Training Australia Ltd

August 2008

Introduction

Group Training Australia (GTA) is lodging this submission on behalf of its members.

GTA is the national association for a network of over 150 not-for-profit group training organisations (GTOs) operating from over 200 locations across Australia.

GTOs employ apprentices and trainees and hire them out to host employers for varying periods until the apprentice or trainee has completed their contract of training. A quick glance at some of the statistics on the number and characteristics of apprentices and trainees employed through group training arrangements is instructive. For example the group training network now employs:

- 13% of all new entrant apprentices and trainees;
- one in five apprentices in the traditional trades rising to as much as one in three in some trades in certain States and Territories;
- one in five Indigenous apprentices and trainees;
- one in five school-based apprentices and trainees;
- one in ten apprentices and trainees with a disability; and
- increasing numbers of adult apprentices in the traditional trades.

This mechanism is uniquely Australian and has enabled many thousands of job seekers to secure an apprenticeship or traineeship which might otherwise not have been available to them.

The host employers who employ apprentices and trainees through group training arrangements vary in their characteristics. While an increasing number of host employers are medium or large enterprises, the majority are still small or even micro-business owners who might not be involved in employment-based training were it not for the availability of group training services.

GTA estimates that the group training network would have contact with anything from 100,000-150,000 employers in the course of doing business around the country. This figure includes those businesses that are active hosts of group training apprentices and trainees as well as a large number of businesses that do not take an apprentice or trainee but with whom contact has been made. This penetration into industry provides the opportunity to gather considerable intelligence about employer views of the training system and other business related concerns.

The issue of climate change and sustainability and the implications for skilling are starting to emerge through those contacts. We draw on that intelligence when addressing the terms of reference and largely confine our comments to the vocational education and training sector, in particular contracted training arrangements, where our real expertise lies.

Terms of Reference

a. the ability of universities and other research and training institutions to meet current and future demand for climate change professionals; and

GTA believes that the vocational education and training system, no less than the higher education sector, will have a critical role to play in ensuring that the workforce is equipped with the skills and knowledge that will accompany the transition to an environmentally sustainable economy.

GTA is confident that the reforms to the training system of the last decade should lay the foundations for swift responses to the demands of industry as they emerge to meet the requirements of climate change and sustainability. These reforms essentially include the development of competency-based training and the Training Packages which themselves encompass the competency standards and associated qualifications. We understand that

over 80% of the Australian workforce is now covered by competency standards and Training Package qualifications.

The development of this training infrastructure is the responsibility of Industry Skills Councils (ISCs) which are also responsible for maintaining the currency of the standards and qualifications. In other words the standards and qualifications should at all times reflect the reality of the labour market, the jobs and occupations on offer and the needs of industry.

The ISCs are now also expected to work closely with Skills Australia which is the body established by the Australian government to provide high level advice on trends in the labour market, skills in demand and how to fine tune the capacity of agencies such as ISCs to respond. Provided the ISCs are sufficiently well resourced to capture the changes that are taking place as a result of the exigencies of environmental sustainability, there should be no concern about our capacity to be prepared for what lies ahead.

Indeed, GTA notes that some work has already begun using the available competencies and Training Packages to develop what have been labeled Go-Green Australian Apprenticeships. This initiative has been funded by DEEWR and undertaken by the Construction and Property Services ISC and Business Skills Victoria.

This initiative involves creating short courses to meet immediate needs that are comprised of units of competency drawn from a wide range of industry Training Packages. The courses would lead to a statement of attainment which would be recognized under the national training system and contribute towards the attainment of a full qualification if and when other units of competency are acquired consistent with the packaging rules.

More information on this project is available at www.bsv.org.au

Another possibility for meeting a skills need arising from environmental sustainability that has not yet been reflected in the existing vocational

education and training qualifications, or even the competency standards, is through the existing apprenticeship training period.

The nominal duration of most traditional apprenticeships, especially those in building and construction where many of the new skills will be required, is four years although of course it is generally open to apprentices to finish earlier under a system of competency-based completions. It may be possible, as some group training organisations (GTOs) have suggested, to use time gained this way to build in additional skill sets, using units of competency if they have been developed, in those areas where the trade is changing to reflect new technologies and processes. Some that come to mind are new hot water devices and water recycling in the plumbing trades and solar installations in the electro-technology trades. Further information on how plumbing is responding to some of these issues is available at www.greenplumbers.com.au

Such skill sets will eventually find their way into the standard qualification, if they are not already there, but in the meantime they can be delivered additionally while the apprentice is still under their contract of training. GTOs are in an excellent position to foster this kind of rational approach to the use of the existing infrastructure.

While this aspect of the existing vocational education and training infrastructure gives us hope that Australia will be able to respond to the demands of environmental sustainability, the capacity of its teaching workforce may not be so assured. This was already shaping up as an issue in traditional trade training before environmental sustainability and its attendant demands became apparent.

The vocational training workforce is aging, like the rest of the workforce, and fast approaching retirement. The skill shortages increase the demand for tradesmen and the wages which industry is willing to pay to retain them. This in turn reduces the number that is willing and available for work for TAFE or for other Registered Training Organisation (RTOs) as trainers. The issue is

likely to be even more pronounced where a range of new skills is required to deal with climate change.

GTA has argued for the adoption of a number of innovative approaches to the imminent retirement of many in the vocational training workforce including:

- providing incentives for existing trainers to continue working;
- transition strategies to enable tradespeople to use their skills in an off-the-job training capacity;
- bringing tradespeople out of retirement and providing them with accelerated teacher training and the relevant 'green' competencies;
- providing better release programs for teachers, trainers and instructors between schools, TAFE, RTOs and industry; and
- encouraging new people into the vocational training workforce.

Initiatives such as these are likely to prove equally relevant to the question of our readiness to deal with environmental sustainability.

b. measures to assist understanding of climate change in the Asia-Pacific region, including provision of training and skills assistance

Some GTOs are also RTOs and some of these have had experience with overseas students as well as the delivery of training services within the Asia Pacific region. Their expertise is in taking the Australian training system and its associated infrastructure into these locations and delivering training based on the Australian model. This model has been in the making for the last 15 years and, despite some criticism, has essentially proved durable and beneficial.

Any experience they acquire in dealing with the training and skilling needs generated by environmental sustainability will be built into their capacity.

GTA has also had experience with the development of the now defunct Trade Skills Training Visa (TSTV) which may have some applicability to this

particular term of reference. The TSTV was developed as a measure to meet Australia's chronic skill shortages in the traditional trades. It was designed to enable foreigners, most of whom were expected to come from the Asia Pacific, to take up an apprenticeship in Australia under certain conditions. These included the proviso that no Australian was available to take up the position and they would pay for their own formal off-the-job training, the cost of which is currently largely paid for by government for Australian citizens or permanent residents.

While the TSTV was eventually scrapped for lack of uptake, not surprising in view of the attached conditions, it is possible that a variation could be reintroduced as part of Australia's foreign aid effort. The new visa would operate somewhat along the lines of the visas being proposed for short-stay horticultural and agricultural workers from the Pacific Islands. It would cover the cost of training in apprenticeships with an approved program of environmentally sustainable competencies; would entitle the foreign apprentice to full award wages and other award conditions and would not permit residency in Australia once the qualification had been obtained.

However, it might still be necessary to ensure that no Australian was disadvantaged as the result of the introduction of such a scheme. GTOs could conceivably play an important part in ensuring the orderly management of such a scheme with the pastoral care provided by their field officers, their capacity to act as settlement officers and their ability to rotate apprentices between host employers as the need arises.

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