**Enterprise RTOs in Australia: An overview from research data**

**Abstract**

This paper reports on overview data from a national research project funded through the Australian Research Council Linkage program. The research question for the project as a whole was [**'How do qualifications delivered by enterprises contribute to improved skill levels and other benefits for companies, workers and the nation?'**](http://federation.edu.au/faculties-and-schools/faculty-of-education-and-arts/research/fea-research-groups/rave-researching-adult-and-vocational-education/folder2/qualifications-delivered-by-enterprise) The research was carried out with the support of the Enterprise RTO Association. Enterprise Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) are companies that are accredited to deliver qualifications to their own workers. These 250 RTOs have to meet the same registration and quality standards as institutional training providers.

The project as a whole included qualitative and quantitative components. It included longitudinal case studies in eight enterprise RTOs. This paper reports on part of the quantitative research. It presents findings and preliminary analysis of two surveys of enterprise RTOs (2012 and 2014), and a 2013 learner survey undertaken in the case study RTOs. The enterprise RTO surveys included a range of questions about the enterprise itself; and about the RTO’s qualifications, learners, and training methods. The learner survey asked respondents about their views about training and outcomes. The response rates for the surveys were 35.7% and 26% respectively, with a representative distribution across industry areas. The paper provides a snapshot of the operations of enterprise RTOs and the views of those gaining qualifications in this context.

**Introduction**

**This paper reports on some initial findings from a research project into a relatively new development in Australian vocational education and training: the offering by enterprises, as training providers, of nationally-recognised training to their workers. The research was undertaken within Enterprise Registered Training Organisations (enterprise RTOs), which are companies or other non-educational organisations that have actually been accredited to offer qualifications, primarily to their own workers (Smith & Smith, 2009a). Within their companies, they have set up specialist training arms. These are required to exhibit the same characteristics, and adhere to the same regulatory framework, as specialist training providers including public TAFE colleges. Enterprise RTOs represent the extreme or epitome of the practice of offering qualifications to workers, or, collectively, what Flyvberg (2006) calls a ‘paradigmatic case’. Flyvberg describes such cases as** ‘cases that highlight more general characteristics of the societies in question’ (2006: 232). Fifteen years ago, McIntyre (2000) suggested that a parallel workplace-based system might grow up alongside, or even supplant, the institutional VET system. This has not occurred but it remains a possibility; hence the importance of this research.

Enterprise RTOs**’ ‘extreme’ involvement in this method of offering qualifications (rather than simply working in partnership with external RTOs) is manifested by the investment of considerable resources in their RTO systems; they are what might be called ‘heavy users’ of nationally-recognised training for workers within companies. They are the companies that are most experienced in this method of making qualifications available through work, and the most committed to its success. The number of Enterprise RTOs has grown, from their inception in the mid-1990s to 195 in 1993 (Smith, Pickersgill, Smith & Rushbrook, 2005) and 256 in 2009 (Enterprise RTO Association, 2009a) with a slight fall to 250 in 2015.**

**Why is this an important phenomenon? The offering of qualifications by Enterprise RTOs and other companies offering nationally recognised training to their workers contains many benefits, discussed below. However there are also some potential risks, which have been little investigated. The qualifications offered by these RTOs are currently missing from the national VET data collection, AVETMISS, because they do not attract public funding, although this situation is about to change. So, at the moment, public policy lacks a proper evidence base for decisions in this area, and other companies have insufficient evidence for decisions about involvement in the enterprise RTO system. This project was designed to provide an evidence base for these and other purposes. This paper provides an initial overview of enterprise RTOs, from the employer and the learner perspective, based on survey data.**

**Literature review and background**

The use of nationally recognised (qualifications-based) training by enterprises in Australia has grown significantly in recent years. Estimates by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) ten years ago suggested that up to 25 per cent of employers provide nationally recognised, or qualifications-based, training to their employees (Cully, 2005). In most cases, employers partner with external registered training organisations including TAFE Institutes or private training providers to deliver training and award qualifications to their employees. Enterprises gain significant benefits from providing such training. These include the ability to attract high quality staff (i.e. as ‘employer of choice’), accessing government funding to defray the costs of training provision, the integration of training with everyday work and the confidence to be sure that workers are trained to a recognised standard (Smith, Pickersgill, Smith & Rushbrook, 2005). A relatively small, but growing, group of enterprises decide to become enterprise RTOs, able to deliver qualifications, and parts of qualifications (‘skill sets’, which are awarded as Statements of Attainment) to their workers, in their own right. There is little scholarly literature on enterprise RTOs, although some general VET literature discusses instances of training within enterprise RTOs as part of a broader discussion.

The process of becoming an enterprise RTO is an onerous process for enterprises and those that take the step to become an enterprise RTO are likely do so to meet specialised skill needs for their workforce or a need to train large numbers of workers to a high standard of quality. They perceive the possibility for greater customisation of training and more control over delivery (Enterprise RTO Association, 2009b). They are likely to be larger enterprises working in industry sectors characterised by relatively slow organisational or technological change (Smith *et al*, 2005). In some cases enterprise RTOs offer training via traineeships (apprentice-like arrangements, used mainly in service industries), enrolling large proportions of their new and sometimes existing workers (Smith, Comyn, Brennan Kemmis & Smith 2009). Some commentators believe that traineeships are not of high quality and that employers adopt them only to attract employer incentives (Snell & Hart, 2007; Schofield, 1999); however, there is comparatively little empirical research evidence to support this view in the present day.

**What are the benefits and challenges for companies?** Enterprises have been shown to gain benefits from being an RTO in their own right. These include the ability to deliver qualifications to large groups of workers quickly and in a manner that is customised to the enterprise’s own needs and requirements; the ability, through their increased knowledge of the national VET system, to seek available government funding for training and to use this funding to develop their own training infrastructure; and the ability to gain supply-chain benefits by training workers from other organisations such as subcontractors or suppliers to ensure the quality of work performed by these organisations (Smith & Smith, 2009a; Enterprise RTO Association, 2009a). **They also have a stream of workers ready to move onto higher-level training and promotional positions (Smith *et al,* 2009a).** They have an ability to shape their approach to human resource management around the awarding of national qualifications, creating more innovative ways of managing and developing people (Smith & Smith, 2007). Enterprise RTOs also face some challenges, particularly the complexity of obtaining and retaining registration as an RTO, originally under different arrangements in different States and Territories), and the potential distraction from the core business of the enterprise. Some enterprises abandon their RTO status but may continue to engage with the national system (Smith *et al*, 2005). A similar concept has been trialled in the UK (PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP, 2008), with similar benefits and challenges identified to the Australian system.

**The benefits to workers are in many ways reported to be equivalent to those for companies. Workers receive qualifications, free of charge, they develop useful skills and they can progress to higher level positions and higher level qualifications. For many workers, particularly in industries which do not have longstanding qualifications, such as cleaning and meat processing, the opportunity to gain a qualification is a major event for an individual (Smith, Comyn, Brennan Kemmis & Smith, 2009). Smith (2006) argues that delivery of qualifications through work removes many of the barriers for women to gain VET qualifications which had been identified by Butler and Ferrier (2000). Smith and Smith (2011) argue that the availability of qualifications through work has broader social inclusion potential. Few challenges have been identified in existing research, except that workers may became overly reliant upon their employer for information about qualification opportunities (Smith & Smith, 2009b).**

**Research method**

**The project had four research questions, as follows**

1. **What are the benefits and challenges for companies associated with training through their own enterprise RTO?**
2. **What are the benefits and challenges for workers associated with enterprise RTOs?**
3. **What is the equivalence of workplace-delivered qualifications among companies and with qualifications delivered in educational institutions?**
4. How do enterprise RTOs help us to understand the extent and nature of an emerging, alternative employer-based VET system?

The project included several components including longitudinal case studies in eight enterprise RTOs, but this paper reports only on part of the quantitative research. It presents the findings and preliminary analysis of two surveys of enterprise RTOs (2012 and 2014), and a 2013 learner survey undertaken in the case study RTOs. It helps to answer the first two research questions. Qualitative data-gathering in the case study RTOs also contributed towards answering these two research questions, but those interviews are outside the scope of this paper. Human Research Ethics Committee permission was received for all phases of the project.

*Surveys of enterprise RTOs*

Links to on-line surveys were sent, in 2012 and 2014, to all enterprise RTOs, using the national database of enterprise RTOs which had been ‘cleaned up’ by ERTOA to remove anomalies.

The first employer survey asked questions of the enterprise RTOs under five broad headings:

* Your organisation;
* Your industry;
* About the organisation;
* Workforce structure; and
* Training activities.

To avoid over-taxing enterprise RTOs, questions on topics which had been included in a recent internal ERTOA survey were not included. These included items about the reasons for becoming an enterprise RTO and some challenges of holding that status. The data from that survey will be analysed later in the project together with the data from our own surveys.

The draft surveys received extensive feedback from the project reference group which included some of the partner enterprise RTOs, representatives from national government and other stakeholders. The response rates for the 2012 and 2104 surveys were 35.7% and 26.0% respectively, with a representative distribution across industry areas, as can be seen in Table 1 below, which compares industry areas of responses to the two surveys, with the industry distribution of the whole population, as of 2102. For the 2102 survey, potential respondents in under-represented industry areas were followed up by telephone to help to achieve representativeness, but for the 2014 survey this did not prove necessary.

**Table 1: Industry distribution of initial respondents to Survey 2 of enterprise RTOs, compared to responses to the 2012 survey and the 2012 industry distribution of the population of enterprise RTOs**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **2012 Survey Response****No. %** | **2014 Survey Response****No. %** | **2012 Population****No. %** |
| Accommodation, cafes, etc. | 1 | 1.2 | 2 | 3.1 | 2 | 0.9 |
| Agriculture, forestry, fishing | 4 | 4.8 | 2 | 3.1 | 6 | 2.6 |
| Community services1 | - | - | - | - | 2 | 0.9 |
| Construction | 3 | 3.6 | 2 | 3.1 | 4 | 1.7 |
| Cultural & recreational1 | - | - | 1 | 1.5 | 8 | 3.5 |
| Electricity, gas & water | 2 | 2.4 | 3 | 4.6 | 11 | 4.8 |
| Finance & Insurance | 4 | 4.8 | 3 | 4.6 | 9 | 3.9 |
| Government admin and defence | 18 | 21.7 | 8 | 12.3 | 58 | 25.1 |
| Health and community | 20 | 24.1 | 14 | 21.5 | 45 | 19.5 |
| Manufacturing | 7 | 8.4 | 5 | 7.7 | 11 | 4.8 |
| Mining | 4 | 4.8 | 4 | 6.1 | 10 | 4.3 |
| Personal and other1 | - | - | 1 | 1.5 | 5 | 2.2 |
| Property & business1 | - | - | 1 | 1.5 | 11 | 4.8 |
| Retail | 4 | 4.8 | 2 | 3.1 | 16 | 6.9 |
| Transport & storage | 10 | 12.0 | 8 | 12.3 | 25 | 10.8 |
| Wholesale trade | 1 | 1.2 | 0 | 0.0 | 8 | 3.5 |
| Education2 | 1 | 1.2 | 0 | 0.0 | - | - |
| Communication2 | 2 | 2.4 | 1 | 1.5 | - | - |
| Emergency services | - | - | 8 | 12.3 | - | - |
| Industry not identified | 2 | 2.4 | - | - | 4 | 0.0 |
| TOTAL | 83 | 100.0 | 65 | 100.0 | 235 | 100.2 |

Notes. 1 ANZSIC Industry categories not included in 2012 survey; 2 Industry categories included in 2012 survey not ANZSIC classification

*Survey of learners*

The participating enterprise RTOs were asked to distribute a link to the online learner survey to people who had completed qualifications or skill sets with the Enterprise RTOs. Responses to the survey are listed below (Table 2). In addition, 66 responses were received from volunteers who undertook nationally recognised training as part of training for a rural fire service, but these were not analysed for the current paper. All of the respondents except eight had completed qualifications from 2011 onwards, so their training could be expected to have been fresh in their minds.

The response rate to the learner survey was a little disappointing; hence companies were also asked to supply, where possible, non-identifiable ‘AQTF’ data; this was obtained from some enterprise RTOs and will be analysed later along with our own survey responses. (‘AQTF’ data refers to the mandatory learner surveys that are required by the national regulator, with the acronym AQTF referring to the previous quality framework.) The learner survey asked respondents about their views about training and outcomes. Some questions were used or adapted from the National Centre for Vocational Education Research’s survey of learner outcomes, so that a comparison could be made between learners from enterprise RTOs and those from RTOs in general.

**Table 2: Responses to learner survey (pseudonyms used for companies)**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Enterprise RTO** | **No** | **%** |
| Docklands Co | 4 | 3.9 |
| Cable TV Co | 33 | 32.0 |
| Road Building Co | 33 | 32.0 |
| Rail Infrastructure Authority | 20 | 19.4 |
| Metro Transport Authority | 13 | 12.6 |
| Total | 103 | 100.0 |

**Findings and discussion**

In the findings section, percentages are reported to the nearest whole number.

*Employer survey*

Most of the data below are from Survey 1. Survey 2 results are given where they provide a somewhat different picture from Survey 2, as some questions were repeated in Survey 2 and some respondents were presumably different companies. In addition, several new questions were asked in Survey 2, to address emerging issues or themes that had arisen during the qualitative research, and findings from a small number of these questions are provided.

The organisations:Survey 1 confirmed the large scale of most enterprise RTOs. About 50 per cent of the respondent organisations operated across 10 or more sites in Australia and 50 per cent of them operated in more than one state. Only slightly over 10 per cent of the respondent organisations operated from a single site. Over one third (39 per cent) of the respondents were part of an international operation and most of these had their headquarters in Australia.

Industry sector:Over two thirds of the respondent enterprise RTOs in Survey 1 were to be found in just four sectors. The top four sectors are shown in Table 3 below.

**Table 3: Top four sectors for enterprise RTOs in 2012**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Industry sector** | **Percentage of enterprise RTOs** |
| Health and community services | 24.1 |
| Government administration and defence | 21.7 |
| Transport and storage | 12.0 |
| Manufacturing | 8.4 |

Most of the responding organisations (almost half) were, therefore, in the government or service sectors.

About the enterprise RTOs:Most of the responding organisations reported that they had undergone significant expansion in their businesses in the previous five years (2007-12), as might be expected in the years of the resources boom. About two-thirds of respondents reported that they had expanded their business operations and this was reflected in the growth of employee numbers with about 60 per cent reporting that the number of permanent employees in their organisations had grown. In line with the growth of the business, the respondent enterprise RTOs also reported that their use of technology had increased over the previous five years and this was also reflected in their organisation’s use of technology. About two thirds of enterprise RTOs felt that technology had increased steadily and nearly a quarter that it had increased rapidly. The increased uptake of technology fed into increased skill requirements in the organisations with over 95 per cent responding that skills needs had increased – 30 per cent saying that they had increased rapidly.

Workforce structure:As noted above, the enterprise RTOs tended to be large organisations. Only 18 per cent of the organisations surveyed had fewer than 500 employees with 36 per cent employing more than 5000 employees and 11 per cent more than 30,000. In Survey 2, 43 per cent of respondents had more than 5000 employees. Most of the workers in the enterprise RTOs were employed on a permanent basis either full-time or part-time; across the sample on average 82 per cent of workers were employed permanently. On average about a quarter of employees were casual and about 20 per cent were employed through labour hire companies.

Training in the enterprise RTOs:As the enterprise RTOs were large organisations supporting a dedicated training arm devoted to nationally recognised training, it is not surprising that they support significant numbers of training staff. On average, the enterprise RTOs in the sample employed ten training staff to teach nationally recognised training, and nearly 60 workplace instructors. However, these figures varied widely, with one enterprise RTO reporting employing 400 dedicated training staff and 2900 workplace instructors. Enterprise RTOs seemed to be well resourced for their training activities. In terms of management of the RTO and the training function, over half of the enterprise RTOs surveyed said that their RTO was overseen by a dedicated senior manager with 17 per cent responding that the activities of their RTO were managed through a Learning and Development Committee.

The specific focus of enterprise RTOs on the nationally recognised training (i.e. qualifications and skill sets) that was most relevant to their businesses was reflected in the fact that nearly all (95 per cent) of the responding enterprise RTOs had a major focus on only one Training Package. In the Australian VET system, Training Packages are industry-specific bundles of qualifications. The most common Training Packages delivered by the enterprise RTOs reflected the industry sectors in which they were congregated, the top five being:

* Public Safety;
* Transport and Logistics;
* Community Services;
* Business Services; and
* Resources and Infrastructure.

Involvement in Training Package development: The enterprise RTOs played a major role in the development process for the relevant Training Packages, with 25 per cent of them providing people to sit on national committees for Training Package development, 16 per cent commenting on drafts and 35 per cent sending people to attend consultations. Only 22 per cent of enterprise RTOs reported no involvement in Training Package development. As might be expected, the provision of nationally recognised training constituted a major element of training delivered in enterprise RTOs with 45 per cent of responding organisations stating that such training comprised over half of their training activities.

Partnerships: Enterprise RTOs, however, were not entirely self-sufficient in their training. Most worked with other RTOs to provide training. Thus nearly three-quarters (73 per cent) of enterprise RTOs said that they purchased nationally recognised training from a private RTO, and 60 per cent from TAFE. In terms of unaccredited training, nearly half (48 per cent) reported that they purchased training from a private RTO and 25 per cent from TAFE.

Delivery of training: In Survey 2, questions were asked about the delivery of training as we were interested to examine what might loosely be called ‘training quality’. They were asked to answer for the qualification or skill set most frequently delivered. One anecdotal criticism of enterprise RTOs, and an issue that also arose to a limited extent during the case studies, was that training is not differentiated enough from normal work. Responses showed, however, that on a scale of 1 (entirely as part of normal work) to 10 (delivered entirely in the training room) 38 per cent of respondents gave ratings of 6 and above, with the most common response being 5 (almost one quarter) and 3 (almost one-fifth). This indicated that enterprise RTOs were tending to mix classroom delivery with learning through normal work.

Which workers benefit? Survey 2 also explored further the availability of training to workers outside the full-time permanent workforce. Responses indicated that provision of training to casual workers varied, but that 15 per cent of companies had provided nationally recognised training to more than three-quarters of their casual staff, and that it was not always limited to instances whether the qualification or skill set was mandatory for their work. Three-quarters said that workers received training in paid work time. Sub-contractors were also eligible to receive nationally recognised training from the enterprise RTO, in 40% of cases where sub-contractors were used by the enterprise (60 per cent of the companies used sub-contractors).

Recognition of achievement: We were also interested in the practice of recognising learners’ achievement, as this issue has arisen during the case studies, and found that just over 75% of responding enterprise RTOs said that they recognised or celebrated achievement, for example with a graduation ceremony.

Evaluation of enterprise RTO status: Finally survey 2 explored whether companies evaluated the effectiveness of being an enterprise RTO. Almost half said that the company conducted cost-benefit analyses of using national qualifications, and three-quarters said that the cost of conducting the training in-house rather than using an external RTO was compared.

*Learner survey*

Who were the learners and what were they studying? The largest number of qualifications among our respondents were the Certificate III in Customer Contact (31 per cent of respondent), the Certificate II in Rail Infrastructure (24 per cent) the Certificate IV in Civil Construction (11 per cent) and the Certificate III in Driving Operations. (10 per cent) These accounted for three-quarters of all respondents. Most of the respondents were working full-time for their employers but 13 per cent were working part-time. Just over 80 per cent were male and just under 30 per cent were from a non-English speaking background; over 90 per cent were aged 25 or over, with a third of those aged 45 or over. One-third of respondents had only achieved Year 10 or less at school, although 9 per cent had bachelor’s degrees or higher.

Two-thirds (65 per cent) said that the main reason that they undertook the training was that it was a requirement of the job, and nearly half of these were learning as part of a traineeship, but nearly 20 per cent said it was to gain extra skills.

Method of delivery as experienced by the learners: Learners were asked to select as many options as applied from a list of training delivery modes. Nearly 90 per cent said that face-to-face learning was involved; 35 per cent mentioned printed learning materials; and 33 per cent ticked on the job coaching or mentoring. 28 per cent mentioned on-the-job practice. Interestingly, only half (51 per cent) said that they had been assessed for RPL, although 76 per cent said they had relevant experience and skills prior to starting the training.

Satisfaction: Only one person said he or she had not achieved the main reason for training, and only three said they would not recommend the training to other people. Almost 60 per cent said that the training helped them to do their job better, and 26 per cent felt more secure in their job as a result of the training (multiple answers were permitted).

With relation to their experience of the learning and assessment, fifteen statements (derived from the standard NCVER survey) were provided for learners to reply on a five-point Likert scale. These included items such as ‘My trainers had a thorough knowledge of the area’ and ‘My trainers treated me with respect’. In almost each instance, nearly all of the respondents said that they agreed or strongly agreed with the statement. Statements about generic skills development received the largest number of neutral or ‘disagree/strongly disagree’ responses with the development of written communication ranked worst (29 per cent in those three categories) and next to that, development of problem solving skills (15 per cent). Assessment related statements received generally favourable responses, but compared with the training delivery statements, people were more likely to select ‘agree’ for assessment statements rather than ‘strongly agree’.

Outcomes: Just over three-quarters of the respondents were in the same occupation they had been in at the start of the training. Almost one-quarter had gone on to study other qualifications, and nearly half of those were at Certificate IV level. Learners were asked to identify ‘personal benefits’ from a provided list. They were able to choose as many as they liked. Over three-quarters reported that the training had ‘advanced my skills generally’, 43 per cent reported a growth in confidence, and 41 per cent ‘satisfaction of achievement’.

*Discussion*

When drawing together the results from the two employer surveys and the learner survey, the first thing that needs to be acknowledged is that the learner responses did not match the distribution of enterprise RTOs across industries. The learner responses were drawn only from our case study enterprise RTOs and reflected the type of worker in those enterprises which managed to encourage their workers to respond to the survey. Unfortunately, although there was a case study enterprise RTO from the health and community services, it produced only two learner responses, which were not included in the analysis because of the small number. Thus, for example, because of the nature of employment in the different sectors and the particular occupations, an unrepresentative proportion of our learner responses therefore came from men, with only ‘Cable TV Co’ employing significant numbers of women.

Analysis of the data suggests that the benefits for companies and learners alike were quite similar. Learners confirmed that the training was highly relevant to their jobs, affirming the enterprises’ RTOs commitment to qualifications in specific areas for particular sections of their workforces. They reported a mix of training methods, as the enterprise RTOs themselves had stated.

The large proportion of respondents in the same occupation as previously confirms that enterprise RTOs’ evaluations of the effectiveness of their enterprise RTOs had reached appropriate conclusions, since retention of staff has been noted as major goal of companies having their own RTOs.

Learners confirmed additional benefits beyond the job or company-related benefits reported. Their reported ‘personal benefits’ and their movement on to higher-level qualifications reflect such advantages. Their relatively low prior education achievement and the fact that over 30% spoke language other than English at home confirms previous studies showing that enterprise RTOs assist disadvantaged worker groups.

**Conclusions**

Bearing in mind the limitations imposed by the limited sample of learners accessed, the results confirm a positive picture of benefits for companies and workers alike. However some challenges did emerge.While learners were overall very satisfied with their training, the areas of greater relative concern (primarily relating to assessment) suggests that (as with the Australian VET sector as a whole) some attention to assessment might be warranted. This issue was therefore explored further in the second case study visits. There is also an indication, from the learner responses, that generic skills were less well developed than specific job-related skills, but until the findings are compared with the national NCVER learner outcomes survey, it is not possible to speculate whether this is a specific feature of enterprise RTOs; or indeed whether it is a significant issue. However it is important not to overstate these relative differences as the general picture was one of satisfaction. Further analysis of the data gained during the overall project will assist in confirming whether these challenges are substantial and whether some companies had found ways of addressing them.

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