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SENATE

EMPLOYMENT, WORKPLACE RELATIONS AND EDUCATION
REFERENCES COMMITTEE

Reference: Current and future skills needs

Roundtable

MONDAY, 31 MARCH 2003

BRISBANE

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SENATE
EMPLOYMENT, WORKPLACE RELATIONS AND EDUCATION
REFERENCES COMMITTEE

Monday, 31 March 2003

Members: Senator George Campbell (*Chair*), Senator Tierney (*Deputy Chair*), Senators Barnett, Carr, Crossin and Stott Despoja

Substitute members: Senator Allison

Participating members: Senators Abetz, Boswell, Buckland, Chapman, Cherry, Collins, Coonan, Denman, Eggleston, Chris Evans, Faulkner, Ferguson, Ferris, Forshaw, Harradine, Harris, Hutchins, Johnston, Knowles, Lees, Lightfoot, Ludwig, Mason, McGauran, Murphy, Nettle, Payne, Santoro, Sherry, Stephens, Watson and Webber.

Senators in attendance: Senators Allison, George Campbell, Stephens, Santoro and Tierney

Terms of reference for the inquiry:

To inquire into and report on:

- a) areas of skills shortage and labour demand in different areas and locations, with particular emphasis on projecting future skills requirements;
- b) the effectiveness of current Commonwealth, state and territory education, training and employment policies, and programs and mechanisms for meeting current and future skills needs, and any recommended improvements;
- c) the effectiveness of industry strategies to meet current and emerging skill needs;
- d) the performance and capacity of Job Network to match skills availability with labour-market needs on a regional basis and the need for improvements;
- e) strategies to anticipate the vocational education and training needs flowing from industry restructuring and redundancies, and any recommended improvements; and
- f) consultation arrangements with industry, unions and the community on labour-market trends and skills demand in particular, and any recommended appropriate changes.

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Committee met at 4.05 p.m.

Participants

BESSELL, Mr Michael (Private capacity)

CAMERON, Mr Robert Charles, Training Supervisor, Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union

EDEN, Mr Dane Andrew, Member, Australian Metal Workers Union

HARRIS, Mr Matthew, Member, Australian Metal Workers Union

MEIKLE, Mr Andrew, Group Training Australia

NAGEL, Mr Dave, Third-Year Apprentice Diesel Fitter, Australian Metal Workers Union

ONG, Mr Peter (Private capacity)

ROSCROW, Mr Drew Gordon, Apprentice Carpenter, Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union

SHOOTER, Mr Peter, State Organiser, Australian Metal Workers Union

CHAIR—I thank all of you for coming along this afternoon. I do not know whether it has been explained to you, but this is a public hearing. We have Hansard here, who will record everything that is said in the hearing; therefore, everything that is said will go on the public record and be available to all and sundry within the community to access. So what you say will be available for people to access and see. You are covered by parliamentary privilege; therefore, what you say cannot be used against you in any proceedings, nor can you be threatened as a consequence of what you say. If anyone is not happy with that process, let us know now and we can regard this meeting as an informal discussion rather than a public hearing. Provided you are comfortable with what is said going on the public record, we would prefer to do it that way because it then forms part of the proceedings of the hearing and researchers and others can look at the transcript in years to come and be able to access your comments in relation to the training agenda. If all of you are comfortable with this being on the public record, we will proceed.

One of the purposes of trying to get some apprentices, tradespeople and union organisers here to speak to the committee was to hear from you what you think of the current training system—why you think the system is meeting your needs as apprentices; whether you think the training is adequate; whether you think the system is providing you with the skills base to be able to come out at the other end as competent tradespeople and to be confident that you will earn a reasonable living at the end of the process and that you will be able to meet the needs of industry down the track in terms of your capacity to operate as a tradesperson; and whether there are any issues in terms of the whole training agenda which you think are being projected wrongly or improperly or which we need to take note of in preparing this particular report. At the end of the day, this report will be about the skills shortages in the community and the economy and what we can do to improve the skills base of the Australian community.

With those few opening marks, would anyone like to kick off and give us a thumbnail sketch of how you think things are going? Maybe one of the union organisers could start the ball running and the apprentices can pick it up from there.

Mr Ong—The biggest problem in our industry at the moment is that there seem to be fewer and fewer apprentices being direct-hired to electrical companies than there were, say, eight to 10 years ago. These days it is more popular to have the group training schemes hire apprentices to companies. We find that the skills that the guys are picking up in the four years that they are supposedly indentured to these group training schemes seem to be inadequate. These companies seem to be producing apprentices who are not as skilled as they used to be. They are not getting the full facet of the trade and they are not getting all the skills that they should be taught. We believe this is because the main objective of the group training companies that are hiring or setting them up as apprentices is to create money. Sure it is to create employment as well, but I do not think the skills basis is looked at as a priority in farming the boys out. They need to place the blokes to make money, and the companies themselves seem to take apprentices on only when there is a high demand for the work force. Also, the apprentices seem to get used to a fair extent as cheap labour—especially if you look at the price to hire out first- and second-year apprentices compared to third- and fourth-year apprentices.

I believe that most first and second years get a great deal of work out there because they are cheaper but, again, they seem to be used to do the same thing. We have had some apprentices go through the whole four years, they are indentured as electrical fitters and mechanics, and all they have done is pull data cables for four years, like the CAT 5 cables. At the end of their four years, they have got to redo another year, year and a half, two years or whatever to get their skills up to what they need to complete their apprenticeship. I am sure it is looked at by the provider, but their priority still seems to be making money and not producing the best apprentices and the best qualified apprentices that they can turn out, which used to be the case when they were direct hired. The company took a bit more time to look into what skills the boys had and whether they had all the skills that were required for their training.

CHAIR—When I was an apprentice, which was a long time ago, the company that I served my apprenticeship with had a curriculum which all of the apprentices had to fulfil. In other words, it was a range of skills that you had to spend a period of time on learning. At the end of that you were qualified as a tradesperson. Do the group training companies do that? Do they have a curriculum of skills that each of the apprentices have to complete or is that not practical with the group training system if they are hiring them out to particular companies?

Mr Ong—You would probably be better off with one of the other guys answering that, but, as far as I know, they have to complete a certain number of modules. But, when it comes to the practical side of things, I am not too sure whether they have a set schedule that they run through and the boys get ticked off when they have advanced in those skills or whatever. I know they would have to follow the modules but, as for the prac side, I think it gets let down a bit. Do you guys want to answer anything on that?

Mr Meikle—They do not have a schedule to follow for practical. If you go to TAFE, it is all theory for electrical—which is understandable—but there is no practical in there whatsoever.

CHAIR—How does the group hire company ensure that you are getting the range of skills that is necessary for you to be a complete tradesperson at the end of the program?

Mr Meikle—I think they are relying on the people that are employing us from them, and on us getting our own skills out there. We cannot really develop any skills from college. All we have got is theory, so we cannot develop any skills there. Really, the skills are out on the job.

CHAIR—If you are hired by company A, who determines what work you do in the period that you are hired?

Mr Bessell—The tradesman you are working with, I guess.

CHAIR—In that particular company?

Mr Bessell—Yes.

CHAIR—He sets you your tasks. Are all the apprentices here from the group training?

Mr Nagel—No.

CHAIR—You are directly employed. It is different for you?

Mr Nagel—Yes. You see it at TAFE when you go to TAFE. I have no real qualms about my company—they have a big emphasis on training—but there are the guys from the group training places and they are cheap labour. In my case, you have all your competency modules. At least you have got them in front of you and you can go to your leading hand or whoever and say, ‘Look, I need to get trained-up here,’ and they know it is their responsibility. But if you speak to the guys from group training, they are told that they are employed to make money for whoever they are working for. They do not have the skills. They might have the brains and they might be all right at TAFE with the maths or the communication or whatever, but, when it comes to the skills—this is generic; there are obviously differences—they tend to miss out a bit.

Mr Bessell—I think every apprentice has a different experience going through their apprenticeship. My experience has been pretty good because I have opened my mouth a bit more. If I am not getting enough experience doing one thing I will say something about it. I think I have been treated pretty well through my apprenticeship.

CHAIR—Have any of you come across a situation where you have gone to a company which employs its own apprentices directly?

Mr Meikle—CSIRO.

Mr Bessell—Yes.

CHAIR—So you have been engaged by a company that employs its own employees directly?

Mr Bessell—Yes.

CHAIR—Are you treated differently from other apprentices?

Mr Bessell—No, not at all.

CHAIR—It is on the same basis?

Mr Bessell—That is my experience on that. Everyone will be different.

Mr Shooter—One of the things that the AMWU have found recently is that there is a real reluctance on behalf of industry to put on apprentices. There seems to be a greater reluctance than there has been previously. I find it reasonably extraordinary. At the moment the AMWU are in a major round of enterprise bargaining, and one of the items on our log of claims and that we go in to bargain about with employers on a daily basis is that they should increase their level of intake of apprentices. Oddly enough, we run up against as much resistance on that item of the log as we do on most items of the log. Particularly at the moment wherein those industries that we represent have a skills shortage, we find it frustrating and extraordinary. It seems that there needs to be some method of increasing the encouragement somehow for industry to involve itself in training.

The three apprentices that I have organised to come today are from companies who do commit themselves to training. Hastings Deering has a ratio of less than about one apprentice to eight tradespersons, which is a very good ratio. Matt Harris is a printer who works for Goprint. I am not certain of the level of apprenticeships there. Matt, you might be able to tell us.

Mr Harris—We have not got any apprentices.

Mr Shooter—You have none at the moment?

Mr Harris—None at all.

Mr Shooter—Matt has recently completed his apprenticeship. There are now no apprentices. How many—

Mr Harris—Just in my area, and we all have different areas, there would be 12 or 13 tradesmen. When I started, there would have been five or six apprentices. Now I have finished my time there is no-one else who has been put on after me as an apprentice.

CHAIR—Does the company have any intention of putting more apprentices on, do you know?

Mr Harris—I have no idea. That is Goprint over there and we have no apprentices.

Mr Shooter—That is not extraordinary. In fact, the other employer represented here—Hastings Deering—is the exception to the rule. We argue this point while enterprise bargaining all the time. and I find that both amazing and annoying.

Senator TIERNEY—We used to have a lot of big trainers of apprentices—BHP, power generating groups, railways and those sorts of groups—and they have more or less gone in terms of large-scale apprenticeships. Apart from those big ones that used to do it, was there a widespread culture in middle sized businesses like Hastings Deering, for example—that sort of scale of operation—of hiring apprentices? Did they, going back 20 or 30 years ago, have a

tradition of doing it or were they dependent more on the bigger companies and sort of fed off them for employees or the TAFEs to do it? What has actually changed?

Mr Shooter—I am actually not qualified to answer that. Probably the chair of the committee is in a better position to talk about the history. But the feedback that I get from long-term officials of the AMWU is that certainly the big employers provided large numbers of tradespeople to the industry but it seems that there has been a decline in the smaller levels as well. I think I am right in saying that. I am not an expert. I have not been associated with the union long enough to be able to answer that. But I work now in places where there are 20 to 30 fitters and no apprentices—middle sized maintenance crews in big manufacturing industries.

Senator TIERNEY—I will come back to one of the examples of the middle sized firms you mentioned. There was Hastings Deering, which David Nagel is working with. Matt was with a different company, which used to have a number of apprentices and no longer does. I do not know whether your company is in the same business as Hastings Deering. I am just trying to use that as a comparison between two similar organisations: one that decides to train and one that seems to have got out of that or is getting out of that. Have either of you any explanation for why they are doing that?

Mr Harris—We are actually going through a bit of a change at the moment; they are downsizing. We had near on 200 people a year ago and we had a VR process go through in mid-September where we lost 33 people. But prior to that there was not a lot of apprentices. The union has been in there just trying to get them to put on apprentices but it just has not been happening. I do not know why; it is just one of those things.

Senator TIERNEY—Is your company in the automotive business?

Mr Harris—No, we are printers. Goprint is actually a printing company.

Senator TIERNEY—A different type of industry.

Mr Harris—Yes.

Senator TIERNEY—So it is a restructuring of the business that is perhaps one of the things that is causing that.

Mr Harris—It was not really happening before that anyway. It is more of a process of their probably reaching the number of staff they wanted and just not putting any more apprentices on.

Senator TIERNEY—In relation to what you were saying about TAFE and theory at TAFE and then practical on the job, could you just describe to us your experience of that balance between what is at TAFE and what you find on the job? How are you are finding that working in preparing you for work?

Mr Meikle—In relation to TAFE and the work, when we go out on the job and we work, TAFE does help with all its theory but a lot of it I have not even used. About 85 per cent of college I have not even used out on the job. It has not helped me. It is all in hand skills—the practical—and really today it is how good you are and how quick you are.

Senator TIERNEY—On the job: just describe the experience of training there specifically for that task that you have to do, apart from—

Mr Meikle—It is really up to the tradesman to show you first how to do it; that is how you learn a lot of different ways of how to do things and that is how you develop better skills.

Senator TIERNEY—Are they doing that in your situation?

Mr Meikle—Yes, I am doing that now and have done all the way through my apprenticeship.

Mr Ong—I do not want to put any words into Andrew's mouth, but he was saying that the college has a structure with the modules set out. They have to be trained in those modules; they have to pass the modules. From my personal experience on the job—and the guys can say whether or not this is right—when the apprentices were direct hired to the companies, they took a bit of time to make sure that they included all the practical abilities that these guys needed as tradespeople and they made sure that they were proficient in the practical side of things.

The group training scheme does not have a general interest in what the guys have learned practically or what they still need to make up their full trade. Because they go to college, they have to do the modules there. But when they are farmed out on jobs, the foreman or the supervisor just directs tasks: this has to be done, that has to be done, more blokes are needed over here or there. Apprentices are brought on to make up the numbers. They go to a crew; they pull cables; they put up cable trail.

One apprentice can go from one job, to the next job, to the next job, without doing anything more than putting up cable trail or pulling cables. When they come on the job, they do not say, 'Okay, we have received an apprentice from group training. He is proficient in his modules; he has done all that at college. So far, on the practical side of things, he has done that, that, that and that. He still needs to be trained up in these things. We will look at placing him in areas on the job where he can get practical experience in those parts of his training.' They would not even consider that. All they would consider is, 'We need more blokes on the job. Sure, if we can get some apprentices in, we will be able to give them a bit of training.' Basically, they are looking at making up the numbers on the job, and those blokes go where the numbers are needed.

Mr Bessell—I am with Electro and Technology Group training. I do not know how Group Training Australia works, but electro group training monitors every apprentice. Everywhere you have to fill out a sheet of everything you can do as a 'sparky'—as an electrician. If you are doing cable tray for two hours one week, you put down two hours on cable tray, and so on with every other different thing you do. They look at that. Every task has a benchmark that you have to complete. If you are low in one area, they will try and put you with a company that will teach you that area. I do not think Group Training Australia does that.

Mr Meikle—They have a whole different system. They have the old logbook system and you write down what you have done. Throughout your apprenticeship, you are supposed to write in the logbook every day. But I do not think a lot of apprentices do that; I do not really think the system works to its full extent. I reckon the new system that the electro group has provided, that Michael Bessell is in, is a good system. You do not have to go home every afternoon and write what you have been doing in your logbook. You just tick off what you have done on a job each week. It is a great system; it is better than the logbooks. At the moment, every tradesman on my

job site at Lane Park waits weeks or months for the electrical board to say, ‘You are right; you have done enough in this, enough in electrical fitting, enough in mechanics. Yes, you pass.’ With the electro group system, they know straight-up where you are lacking and they know they can fix it up.

CHAIR—Are you saying that there are people on your job site at Lane Park who have completed an apprenticeship?

Mr Meikle—Yes.

CHAIR—And they have not yet had their level of qualification established?

Mr Bessell—No. They have had their apprenticeship extended for five months to get that experience.

CHAIR—So the group apprenticeship scheme that you are with has not been able to provide, within the four-year period, the range of training that allows people to be regarded as proficient in their trade?

Mr Meikle—Yes.

Mr Ong—And that is quite a regular occurrence, I know for a fact—whether it is a jam-up in the electrical safety office or whether it is the licensing board or whether the guys are not getting the range of skills needed, I don’t know. But, especially from the group training schemes, I could state that, since the end of last year and the beginning of this year, at least 30 have been knocked back and have had to do another five or six months training.

CHAIR—So they have had to do additional training?

Mr Ong—Yes.

CHAIR—What does that mean in terms of wages? Do they stay on apprenticeship wages for that period of time?

Mr Ong—Apprenticeship wages.

Mr Bessell—They get something like a probationary licence. They do not have a licence number, but they are getting paid tradesman’s wages.

CHAIR—So they are on P plates?

Mr Bessell—Yes.

Senator ALLISON—Mr Ong, perhaps you know how many come through under the group training scheme and how many are individually employed by organisations. Do you have those stats?

Mr Ong—As a percentage, and you cannot quote me on this one—

Senator ALLISON—I am afraid we have to.

Mr Ong—Okay. I would say about 80 per cent from group training and 20 per cent direct hire. I might be going a bit overboard there; it may not be as many as 20 per cent. But I would say on an average 80 per cent from group training and 20 per cent direct hire.

Senator STEPHENS—Mr Ong, is it possible to get the actual figures for your industry?

Mr Ong—I am sure you could find them if you looked. Do you want me to get them?

CHAIR—Can we ask you to find them and provide us with them?

Mr Ong—I could have a look for them.

Senator STEPHENS—If it is possible; it would be very useful for us.

Mr Ong—I could do something like that.

CHAIR—Have any of the others had a similar experience to this with apprenticeships being extended because the group company has not been able to provide the range of training within the desired period of time?

Mr Cameron—Not with apprenticeships being extended, no. But I certainly agree with Mr Ong about the way group trainings are used these days. They were not originally meant to be like that. Some group trainings are better than others. As the boys there were saying before, you get a different range of things. But in a lot of instances they are used as cheap labour because the boss wants them on the job. He just wants enough heads on the job to do it. He will only want them for two weeks, three weeks, and that is it. A lot of group training is driven by numbers. They have to have so many on the books. They are always taking more on. They are always after host employers, and so they are not very selective about what a host employer is. We had an instance the other day where four or five apprentices turned up with one tradesman. Group Training know that it is one-to-one. They will not observe that, because host employers are too hard to come by. We try and promote the direct hire model and try and promote it in the industry. Some employers are very good. Drew's employer, Wideform, run 10 per cent of their work force—somewhere around that—in direct hire apprentices. They use a top-up from Group Training, if they need it, and the government's '10 per cent' jobs up here. One thing that does work really well up here is the 10 per cent training guarantee on state government jobs. It has worked well for direct hire; it has worked well for group training schemes as well.

Senator TIERNEY—What does not quite add up in all of this is that, if we have a competency based approach and if we take, for example, the electrical industry, someone has to go out with the competencies before being signed off—it is pretty important in electrical work that you know what you are doing. If what you say is widespread in group training, how on earth do these people finally get all those competencies ticked off to become tradesmen?

Mr Ong—They do an extended apprenticeship.

Senator TIERNEY—But how extensive is that? What percentage do an extended apprenticeship and for how long?

Mr Ong—As I said, I have had about 30 in the last 12 months who have complained to me about the fact that they have finished their time and now they have got to do another six months.

Senator TIERNEY—Thirty out of how many? We have to get proportions to have any understanding of what is happening. Are we talking about one per cent, 10 per cent?

Mr Ong—Maybe 10 per cent.

Senator TIERNEY—So they end up having to spend more time?

Mr Ong—Yes.

Senator TIERNEY—Which is inefficient from their point of view, obviously.

Mr Ong—Absolutely. The only person that ends up telling these kids that they have not got the skills to get their ticket is the electrical safety office, at the end of what they believe is their apprenticeship. So they are not going to know until they put in their paperwork and it gets knocked back because, they are now told, they have not done the practical side of things to complete their apprenticeship.

Senator ALLISON—Can I ask about the experiences of our apprentices in terms of drop-out rates. Do you have a lot of mates who did not go on with their apprenticeship? What might have been some of the reasons for that? Maybe the two up the end who have not spoken yet could answer that.

Mr Roscrow—I do not know of anybody that has dropped out. As far as I know they are pretty happy with what they are doing.

Mr Eden—I cannot say I know a lot of people that have dropped out. I work for Hastings as well, with Dave, and we are pretty well off there, I think. These guys here were saying before that when they go to TAFE all they do is theoretical work. When we go to TAFE we have got theory and practical as well. At our workplace we go to our leading hand and we say, 'I'm in this section for six months. I've got these competencies that I need to get. Can you give me that work?' As long as the work is there for us to do and we get along with the leading hand all right then most times we will get the experience there. Then our tradespeople will sign us off so that we can go to the TAFE assessor, and they will test us as well and see how we go with that. That is how we pass all ours.

Also, you were saying before that having to fill out that logbook all the time is annoying. Our is competency based as well, so we are getting tested on it. But with ours—and I think it is probably a good idea—you can look back through your logbook and see what you did. You write down, 'I did this, but this is the way I had to go about it,' and you have got all that information there, so you do not forget it and you can look it up again later. Also, with our competencies we have got to write out all our evidence, to show that we can actually do this. All that sort of stuff comes from our logbook, so in a way I think that is a good idea, otherwise you are going to forget that. When it comes around, you will think, 'I think I can do this now,' but you will not have the information there to prove that you have done that. Your leading hand has not signed off to say, 'Yes, I've seen him do this; I know he can do it.' Otherwise you can just bluff your way through on theoretical.

Senator ALLISON—You seem to be suggesting that the leading hand is an important person in all of this. Is that the view that others have? If so, to your knowledge, what sort of support does the leading hand get from the organisation and from TAFE in helping you and mentoring you through this?

Mr Eden—Beforehand, we did not have to get our leading hand to sign off. We had an apprentice coordinator there, and he used to look at our stuff and test us theoretically as well and say, 'Righto, I can see you've done this before,' and we would go through from there. It has only changed recently, because I do not think they were very happy with the level we were going through at. So it has come back to our leading hand to give us the experience and say, 'Yes, they can do this.' As far as coming back to TAFE with our leading hands, I am not sure what you mean there. What do you mean when you say, 'coming back to TAFE' to do with our leading hand?

Senator ALLISON—I think the committee is interested in the relationship between TAFE, your employers and your leading hands—how the relationship between TAFE and the workplace can help you to be through your course in the required time, but also how the two complement one another.

Mr Eden—At TAFE we do our theory and practical, but that is pretty broad over the span of stuff we have got to do, whereas at a workplace it is pretty specific, because we are only working on the one sort of machine. So our leading hand will say, 'Yes, I think he's got enough practical knowledge to do this.' Then we will go back. There is a TAFE assessor that comes out to our workplace and then he will assess us as well as to whether he thinks we are good enough or not. In the end, it is up to him as to whether or not we are competent at that.

Senator ALLISON—Is that the experience of others? If it is not, could you speak up?

Mr Meikle—No-one at all comes out to our workplace to see if we are competent.

Senator ALLISON—Which is your TAFE college?

Mr Meikle—North Point Institute of TAFE on Norris Road at Bracken Ridge. We do not have anyone who comes out to the job to see if we are competent.

Senator ALLISON—You do not do any practical work at the college either—is that right?

Mr Meikle—That is right, except for safety.

Mr Eden—It could be that it is our trade as well. David and I are both diesel fitters, and it is part of our trade. As far as I know, for all the guys we have seen at TAFE, the same thing happens for them. The TAFE assessor comes out to check them over. That could just be our trade. It could be totally different in another trade.

Mr Meikle—Every trade is different.

Mr Nagel—Could I add that the leading hand system we have had brought in has been beneficial because it has meant that the person who is giving us the work is more accountable for what we are learning. It makes the person giving us the work accountable. They have to

make sure that we are learning, whereas previously it was up to the apprentice coordinator in the office to make sure that we had the right experience. Now, because it is down on the floor, they look out for when this job comes up. It is up to the apprentice as well to be up front, as Michael was saying, and to open their mouth and make sure that they do get the experience that they need.

Senator ALLISON—We ask because this committee can make recommendations after it has finished this inquiry. If that is a good model and it is not picked up elsewhere, that might be one of our recommendations.

Mr Eden—We are pretty lucky, being a large company. We have our own training facilities set up so we get sent on in-house training courses, as we call them, through our apprenticeships. Those courses are specific to the machines we are working on. We are lucky there because that complements the stuff we are learning at TAFE as well. We learn it at TAFE, but that will be on over 50 types of machines. When we come back to work and we do the training course, we are covering the same sort of stuff but more in depth, looking more specifically at what we are actually doing on the floor. Coming back to our leading hand, before it was up to us to open our mouths to get the work that was coming in, but at the same time there might have been a lot of work on and only little jobs coming in all the time. We were not getting a lot of experience in what we wanted. Now it has come back to the leading hand a lot, and we can go to our apprentice coordinator and say, ‘I have been in this section for three months but I still haven’t got this job’, and then he will go down to the leading hand and say, ‘I am sorry, I know you have a lot of work on but we really need to get this guy into practical training on this part.’ They will work it out from there, and hopefully we will get the training.

Senator ALLISON—What is the union’s role for you, and what do you think it ought to be? Could it be more helpful? Does the union assist with mentoring? In what practical sense is the union useful to you?

Mr Eden—Personally, I am not a member of the union yet, because we are supposed to be covered by the apprentice board, but when I finish my trade I will be part of it. They still do help us out a lot; they are always there for us. If we have any troubles, they come and say that we can go and see them about it and they will try to work it out. If we are going to have meetings with anybody, they will come into the meeting with us so that we have a third person there that can verify everything that went on. If I have any troubles I know that I can always go to the union and they are always offering their help.

Senator ALLISON—What about the subject of skills and whether or not you are getting them on the job. Are you able to go to the union and say, ‘My employer will not provide me with this kind of experience’? Is that possible and does it work?

Mr Eden—I do not think we have to do that. As I said before we can go—

Senator ALLISON—Maybe you do not have to, but some of these other guys who have had difficulty in that respect may have to.

Mr Meikle—I have not had to.

Mr Bessell—I am sure that they would be willing to help though.

Mr Ong—With regard to these Group Training guys especially, if they were to approach us, we would be receptive. We have been approached by apprentices, and I have gone and spoken to their supervisors and said, ‘This guy needs to get some skills in this area: is there any chance of changing him around?’ Now some employers are receptive to that, and they do the right thing; others say, ‘Give him a big black mark. He has complained to the union. We will move him on. We will send him back and get someone who will not open their mouth.’

Senator ALLISON—Is that the experience of anybody here?

Mr Eden—I think you can get yourself offside if you go to the union and complain about these sorts of things. We have had incidents in the past—not actually to do with our training, but things that have happened where the apprentices have gone to their union and the union has jacked up about it and got it set out straight. It does put the company a bit offside because you are not playing by their rules. They are trying to tell you one thing, and then you are saying, ‘That’s not right. We want to do it this way.’ It does tend to get you a bit of a black mark next to your name.

Senator ALLISON—Does that just apply because you are an apprentice? Do you think it would change if you were not an apprentice?

Mr Eden—It is probably a little bit easier to pick on an apprentice, because they are probably more likely not to say anything. Compared to a tradesman, they probably do not push the boundaries as much.

CHAIR—To what extent do you have a dedicated tradesperson mentoring you through your apprenticeship? Do you work with a tradesperson?

Mr Roscrow—Pretty much the whole time. You work and do what you are supposed to—they help you out, you ask questions and they tell you what is going on and how to go about it.

CHAIR—Does he have the time to spend with you and go through that process?

Mr Roscrow—Yes.

CHAIR—Is there any pressure on him in terms of carrying out his work?

Mr Roscrow—No. You ask him a question and he will tell you exactly how it is supposed to be done or not supposed to be done, or why you have to do it that way.

CHAIR—Are you employed directly by a company?

Mr Roscrow—Yes.

CHAIR—What about the boy at Hastings Deering? Do you have a dedicated tradesperson who is working with you?

Mr Eden—We do not have one dedicated tradesman, because we are a fair sized company so we will not work with that one tradesman for a long time. We will work with that one tradesman on a job, and they will help us out a lot. They always say to you, ‘If you have any questions,

feel free. There are no stupid questions. Just ask whatever you need,' and they will help you out a lot.

CHAIR—What about the Group Training people?

Mr Bessell—Every tradesman is different, and some will help and some will just give you a task and you do that task.

CHAIR—So it is a bit of a mixed bag for you, because I suppose you are changing companies.

Mr Bessell—Yes.

CHAIR—How often would you change companies?

Mr Bessell—In my four years I have probably been with about 15 different companies.

CHAIR—Over that period?

Mr Bessell—Yes. But I might have been with some companies for three weeks when they have needed work and I might have been with other companies for eight months.

Mr Ong—We do have problems with some employers, where they use first-, second- and third-year apprentices as tradesmen on the job. I have been on jobs where there are no tradesman on the job, and I have had first- and second-year apprentices wiring the job up. It is great for a bit of experience for the apprentice, but who is to say that they know what they are doing anyway, especially at a first- and second-year level? I have certainly come across that numerous times, but that is the smaller companies that are just trying to get the work done. They will get a Group Training apprentice in, set him up on a task and say, 'See you later. I've got to go and look after this job.'

Mr Meikle—I can relate to that: I was at a job on Coronation Drive. Cove Corpe were building the job, and my employer was Group Training Australia, but I was working through Charlie Gardener Electrical. They had a second-year apprentice running the show—two high-rises going up side by side. He was running six or seven other Group Training apprentices around. Who is there to police that? There is no-one there to police it. There is no-one to say anything. That is one of a kind, really. I have never come across anything that extraordinary before, but that is one of the worst cases I have ever seen. He was a second-year running fourth-years around the job—and the fourth-years just eat it, they don't really say much because they are still apprentices. He did have the know-how, he knew how to do things; but, still, he was a second-year apprentice.

Senator STEPHENS—Mr Harris, I would like to talk to you about the apprenticeship you have just finished. In this inquiry we have been thinking about competency based training and the assessment process. I just wondered if you could tell us how your apprenticeship panned out over the four years. How much time did you spend on the job and how much time were you at TAFE? Did you have the competency based system, with check lists and things to tick off, or did you use some other system?

Mr Harris—Basically, the way they assessed us was that we went to TAFE for a certain amount of time each year. There were modules. Once you had completed a module, the TAFE teacher would fill out your logbook. You took that back to work and showed it to your employer, and then your employer was supposed to fill out other parts of the book. Then, once that was finished, they sent it off to the apprentice board, and you got your trade certificate.

Senator STEPHENS—Did you do your TAFE training as block release or regular attendance?

Mr Harris—I think we did five weeks, five weeks, five weeks, four weeks, three weeks and two weeks. We went twice a year for a couple of years.

Senator STEPHENS—At the end of it all, can you make any comment about what could have been better for you?

Mr Harris—I would say it was more of a workplace thing for me. We have six coal machines down there, and I only got a glance over those. I got stuck running the same machines throughout my entire apprenticeship. Obviously, I needed the experience and the skills sets from that machine. That was the biggest thing for me.

Senator STEPHENS—Do you think you will be able to get those skills on the job now, as part of your work—

Mr Harris—I will have to.

Senator STEPHENS—if you are exposed to that?

Mr Harris—That is it. There is not really that big a difference. It is something you pick up over time now. It is experience.

Senator ALLISON—So your TAFE college did not intervene then? Did you mention that to your trainers?

Mr Harris—Yes, I did. I actually got in touch with the apprentice board.

Senator ALLISON—Did they talk to your employer?

Mr Harris—They came out and, because of the way my apprenticeship was worded, I could not do anything about it.

Senator STEPHENS—I have one other question to all of you. We have had a lot of discussion this morning not just about the technical skills that are involved in the trades area but also about the human skills—communication skills, writing skills, social skills and those kinds of things. I am quite interested in how those kinds of things can be developed. If you were in a group training company and you were moving from employer to employer, it seems to me that there would be fewer opportunities to get involved in your workplace through social interaction. Whereas those people who were in a fixed workplace would be able to participate and make networks and relationships that perhaps you would not have been able to make. Is that a fair assessment?

Mr Mickle—I think that, from a Group Training point of view, we get to see a lot of tradesmen out there. We get to talk to them and get to know them. I think we get a good view of what tradesmen are like in their work. Obviously, you meet some good ones and you meet some bad ones, and you learn how to relate to them. I reckon you build better—

Mr Bessell—More confidence.

Mr Mickle—Yes. You talk to so many tradesmen that you can really pick what they are going to be like from the way they talk to you and the way they treat you.

Senator STEPHENS—Will your company keep you on at the end? Do you know? Do you have a guarantee of employment?

Mr Nagel—You have to apply to keep your job at the end. Our company puts a fair bit of money into apprentices so, if you are any good, they want to keep you. If you are not, they will give you the boot.

Mr Eden—Of last year's group, I think 12 of them have moved on. But that is also within Hastings Deering—they have moved on from the branch. A Brisbane one went to Cairns, and I think another one went to Mount Isa.

Senator STEPHENS—So they were kept within the companies.

Mr Eden—They are still in Hastings, yes.

Senator STEPHENS—What happens to you at the end of your time?

Mr Mickle—I find a job.

Mr Bessell—Yes.

Senator STEPHENS—So this networking with the tradespeople perhaps helps in securing a position?

Mr Bessell—You can ring up past employers because they have already seen what your—

Mr Mickle—work is like. Your work ethics.

Mr Bessell—Yes. I think it is an advantage.

Senator STEPHENS—Is there a requirement for employers that you are placed with to provide you with a reference or any kind of report?

Mr Bessell—Only if you ask for it.

Senator STEPHENS—So it is not part of the reporting mechanism of the group training company?

Mr Meikle—No.

Senator STEPHENS—Only the competencies?

Mr Meikle—Yes.

Senator ALLISON—Why did you take an apprenticeship rather than go to university or choose another path? Was it your careers teacher at school who suggested this or was it family connections? What is your experience? We heard this morning the complaint that a lot of people are directed away from apprenticeships for various reasons, and we are just trying to understand what we might do to make this option a bit more attractive to young people.

Mr Ong—I thought being paid more money would be the first thing that would come out of the experience.

Mr Meikle—There is a prevocational course at college to start you off. I think it is a 10-month course, and it takes six months out of the first year of your trade—or any part of your trade.

Senator ALLISON—This is what you would suggest?

Mr Meikle—Yes, this is what I did and I found I wasn't green when I went out to the job site. I knew a few things such as, 'Yes, that's red active et cetera.' When the tradesmen said, 'Go to the van and get this,' I wasn't wondering, 'What the hell is that?'

Senator ALLISON—Where did you do this prevocational course?

Mr Meikle—I did it at the TAFE college at Bracken Ridge.

Senator ALLISON—At what year in secondary school did you do this?

Mr Ong—No, this was after secondary school. If the guys are not too sure what trade they want to do when they finish school, they can go to college and enrol to do a nine-month prevoc course. They do nine months at TAFE college—that is, going every day—and they get a broad overview of all trades.

Senator STEPHENS—So it is a bit of a taster?

Mr Meikle—Yes, and basic hands skills too.

Mr Ong—At the end of that, they have to go out and chase an apprenticeship for themselves—they do not get any help from TAFE for that—but it gives them a bit of a mind-set of what trade they might like to do and it gives them a broader overview of the skills that tradesmen use.

Senator ALLISON—Did your school suggest you do this? How did you get into this?

Mr Meikle—School did nothing for me really. I was there physically but—

Senator ALLISON—That is what we want to find out.

Mr Meikle—School ran a careers thing, and I really did it for the bludge, for the light cruise out of year 12, to be honest.

Senator ALLISON—So you did year 12?

Mr Meikle—Yes, I did year 12. They had this course going that had trade and business maths, communication and English, and I thought, ‘Yes, that’s me—cool.’ I had a lot of pressure put on me from my parents, because they are builders, my brother had his trade and my twin brother had already started his trade. I had a lot of pressure put on me to start my trade, so I did everything in my power to do it after finishing school. That is when I started my prevocational course. That was my first step in the door.

Senator ALLISON—Did anybody have a different experience?

CHAIR—What would you have liked to have done? I know you did these things because there was a lot of pressure on you.

Mr Meikle—I would like to be sitting in an airconditioned office—sitting down.

CHAIR—Work hard and you might get there.

Mr Meikle—Yes; Senator Andrew Meikle.

Senator STEPHENS—Sillier things have happened!

Mr Nagel—When I went through high school the definition of success was not an apprenticeship. When I went back to school after I got my apprenticeship and said that my plan was to do an apprenticeship, the teachers thought they had failed. With my OP, I could have gone to uni, but I wanted to be a diesel fitter and so I went ahead with that. The guidance counsellor gave us different options and said that apprenticeships were a possibility. Probably from a guidance counsellor’s point of view apprenticeships are good thing—they probably have more idea of what is happening—whereas the teachers have gone through uni and that is their background. I had one manual arts teacher who had done his trade and then his teaching course. I think it is good to have people in the system who have done a trade, because at least they know where you are going and they have a bit more of an understanding.

CHAIR—Is that a common experience for all of you?

Mr Eden—I was accepted into university as a mechanical engineer, but by the end of grade 12 I was sick of school. I was never into the theory thing; I have always been a practical person. When I was at school there were people who had been in a trade and who had come into the system. That was pretty good because we were able to talk to them and they knew what it was about; we could move on from there and make our own decisions. One thing that you talked about before was a better way to direct people towards apprenticeships. There was a guy in the year before me who did a school based apprenticeship and he dropped one lesson and would go out one day a week to do an apprenticeship. It started off from there, and when you finished school you went on from there.

CHAIR—I do not want to cut this off, because you are all starting to get interested and we are starting to get some information; but it is five past five and I understand some of you have to go. Perhaps that is a good point at which to adjourn today's proceedings. Thank you very much.

Mr Eden—I would like to add one other thing. When I sat down and looked at things practically, I chose the apprenticeship because you get paid for the four years training compared to university where you are working off your own bat with a huge debt at the end of it. A lot of my friends sit back and laugh at me because I have to go to work every day while they sit there bludging for half the day until uni starts and party all night. But when it comes down to it, I will not have a \$50,000 HECS bill at the end of the year; I will have \$50,000 in my bank because I have a trade.

CHAIR—But you may well want to go back to university some day.

Mr Eden—Yes; and that is always an option.

CHAIR—That option is still available to you.

Mr Eden—Yes. I am not coming straight out of school to try to do that; I have financial backing behind me so I can go back and do that.

Senator STEPHENS—That is a good point.

CHAIR—That was very interesting; thank you all for coming in and for making the contributions you made. The hearing stands adjourned.

Committee adjourned at 5.03 p.m.