
**SUBMISSION
PAPER**

**Inquiry Into the
Quality of Vocational Education
and Training In Australia**

**Senate Employment, Workplace
Relations, Small Business and
Education References Committee**

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INTRODUCTION

The Fire Protection Association Australia (FPA Australia) takes this opportunity to forward comments to the Senate Employment, Workplace Relations, Small Business and Education References Committee inquiry into the quality of vocational education and training in Australia.

FPA Australia is the largest organisation in Australia with an interest in fire safety and the work of the fire protection industry. A large component of our 1,500 members are involved directly with either accredited or non-accredited vocational training and this, coupled with the Association's own initiatives, provides the background to the comments contained in this submission.

As will be explained briefly in this submission, FPA Australia believes that the current vocational education and training (VET) system in Australia is essentially sound, delivers the required outcomes in most cases, although the TAFE sector is not entirely relevant to the needs of industry. Opportunity does exist for improvement and this, too, is highlighted.

Effectiveness of the VET System

The fire protection industry is long established but generally lacks a structured career path for most of its trade-level employees. Of the four main disciplines (automatic sprinklers, portable equipment service, fire alarm detection/alarm and passive fire protection) only two have any specific qualifications. Sprinkler pipefitting became a declared trade in the 1920s and in the portable equipment area we expect a set of Competency Standards to be accepted within the Asset Maintenance training package in the early months of 2000. In other areas tradespeople are drawn from closely allied trades, but with some skill deficiency.

Development of New Training Initiatives

The opportunity to develop Competency Standards and therefore a career path for portable fire equipment service technicians has largely been made possible through the current VET system. FPA Australia would like to take this opportunity of thanking both the Australian National Training Authority and the responsible industry trading advisory body (ITAB), this being Property Services Training Australia, in supporting this project.

From FPA Australia's perspective, the portable fire equipment service technician program demonstrated that the current VET system is sufficiently flexible to provide the necessary infrastructure to put in place a new training program in an area where formal training had been extremely limited. Importantly, this has been accomplished at relatively low cost to the Commonwealth Government, and at a moderate but not excessive cost to industry.

Opportunities for Youth and Older People

In the experience of the fire protection industry, the TAFE sector appears quite adept at structuring and delivering entry-level training, particularly for young people. This segment of our community is able to make itself available for full-time study or part-time study, requiring say 15 hours (or greater) attendance per week.

However, training for "older" people requires a different strategy insofar as the trainees may have established positions within a company and

may not be available for TAFE-based study for a range of financial and family reasons. The move to competency-based training has been a most important development. It has provided a process to recognise an employee's skills before training commences and thereby reducing the cost to the community by not training an employee in areas where they are already competent. This is particularly important when dealing with an existing workforce as competency-based training can take place during work-hours when used in a self-paced mode.

Within the existing TAFE system, there are few opportunities for older people.

Obligations of Industry and Government

When we look at the existing workforce, the TAFE sector has not been enthusiastic about developing and implementing self-paced competency-based training. Most of this work has been undertaken by organisations like FPA Australia working with ANTA and a number of ITABs to identify training needs and develop the necessary skills.

Clearly, it has been the responsibility of industry to identify training deficiencies and highlight the need for these to be addressed. FPA Australia welcomes this approach.

However, like many specialised industries, fire protection does not employ a large number of people. Indeed, in each discipline we are talking of employees in the order of thousands nationally, and no more. TAFE sector training is simply not available as it would appear individual TAFE colleges do not envisage a sufficiently large profit for providing training for such small numbers. The absence of endorsed courses in fire protection may be partly attributable to this fact, leading to a skill shortage in some areas.

FPA Australia believes that the training gap left due to the absence of the TAFE sector can be filled with the assistance of ANTA funding channeled through the relevant ITABs. We remain willing to identify skill shortages and provide assistance in training package development, so long as this commitment is matched by the Commonwealth Government.

NEW APPRENTICESHIP SCHEME

In the fire protection industry, there are limited opportunities to access “New Apprenticeships” which address specific industry needs. However, this may change over time as new initiatives, such as those for fire alarm/detection technicians and in the passive fire protection industry are introduced.

On this basis, FPA Australia is therefore unable to forward any substantive comment on the evaluation of New Apprenticeships other than to say that there may be a need to look further at the promotion of this scheme within industry.

PROVISION OF VET SERVICES AND PROGRAMS

FPA Australia's involvement in the delivery of VET services has been virtually non-existent, having in the past limited our activity to assist in the development of competency standards. Although we are currently progressing an application to become a private provider (through the Office of Training and Further Education in Victoria) we should premise the following comments by saying that they are made more from observation than active involvement.

Process for Recognition of Registered Training Organisations

As FPA Australia is currently seeking registration as a registered training organisation (RTO) we are well positioned to comment on this aspect of training in the current system, particularly from a Victorian standpoint.

The Office of Post Compulsory Education, Training and Employment (formerly the Office of Training and Further Education) has a list of "approved training recognition consultants" who recommend to OPCETE that an organisation company become an RTO. However, FPA Australia had difficulties in finding one who was genuinely interested in working-through the association's specific needs. Additionally, the consultancy fees were extremely close which is inappropriate given that organisations are compelled to use an OPCETE consultant to progress their RTO application. The Victorian system also fails to recognise that organisations may have available staff with all the necessary experience to progress an RTO application on their behalf.

Aside from the application process which we find inappropriate, FPA Australia generally believes that the onerous obligations placed on RTO's are suitable, given the need to ensure consistent and quality training outcomes. The emphasis on compliance audits and validations are necessary as our members have stated that they believe them to be necessary in order for them to have confidence in the qualifications issued.

VET – QUALITY & ACCESSIBILITY

Although less than half of the employees in the fire protection industry have access to fire protection specific trades, FPA Australia is confident that this number will diminish so long as the current commitment to the VET system is maintained.

Regional Australia

Access to TAFE colleges and RTOs does not appear to be a problem in the capital cities for most trades, although this holds less true when one considers specialist trades. For instance, in recent years some sprinkler pipe fitting apprentices from Perth, Western Australia, have attended a Melbourne TAFE to complete certain modules of their apprenticeship.

The availability of flexible learning options and self-paced learning has increased the accessibility of some programs into regional Australia. For instance, the system under which the FPA Australia portable fire equipment service technician program is to operate will function more or less the same in Townsville as it will Sydney. Naturally, there are added costs with training and assessment delivery in regional Australia. FPA Australia plans a degree of cross-subsidy of its training programs so the costs are largely the same, irrespective of locations.

Indeed, it is only through the availability of flexible learning options and self-paced learning that FPA Australia will be able to make accredited training available in regional Australia, and the continued acceptance of these learning modes is encouraged.

Quality of Teaching and Resources

As stated earlier, the fire protection industry suffers from an absence of endorsed training in most areas and therefore can only provide limited advice on the quality of teaching and learning resources.

From the limited experience that FPA Australia does possess, it would appear that the most effective training is that delivered in the workplace. This enables the trainee to more properly relate what is being taught to their actual employment situation. FPA Australia does accept that this

may be somewhat more relevant to trade training as opposed to clerical training.

Existing Subsidies and Associated Arrangements

One of the issues that FPA Australia has identified has been the changing eligibility requirements for subsidies. These changes are numerous and others would be better positioned than FPA Australia to provide advice on such matters but we note that there is a degree of confusion as to how to attract training subsidies and the extent to which they apply to existing employees.

In FPA Australia's experience, it is hazardous to structure a training program so that it attracts subsidies because the conditions to attract subsidies vary from time to time. Unfortunately, the fire protection industry may have limited opportunity to utilize subsidies in the process of increasing the skill level of its workforce. This is not a criticism, but intended to highlight the fact that the current system is not sufficiently attractive to make subsidies a priority at this stage.

Perhaps it is time that the basis for subsidies be reviewed to determine their exact purpose and make the purpose of subsidies quite clear – are they intended to reduce unemployment or increase the skill level of the existing workforce?

FUTURE VET PRIORITIES

The current VET system is working well and FPA Australia would not encourage a wholesale reform of the current system. In saying this, we acknowledge that there is scope for improvement and offer the following suggestions.

Competency Standards Development

FPA Australia would like to see additional resources put into the continued expansion of competency-based training with a particular emphasis on the development of competency standards in new areas. In many disciplines VET has not been available simply because the requisite Competency Standards are not available to underpin training.

In working with the fire protection industry to encourage VET, FPA Australia has found that we are to negotiate with a range of ITABs. For instance, in the sprinkler area it's Construction Training Australia. In the portable equipment area it's Property Services Australia and in fire evacuation area it's the Public Safety ITAB. Absurdly, for fire detection and alarm system the relevant ITAB is conceivably Property Services Training Australia, Information Technology & Telecommunications ITAB, or the National Utilities and Electrotechnology ITAB.

Having to deal with several ITABs is a difficult situation and with respect to training in the fire alarm and detection area, the difficulties in identifying the most appropriate ITAB has been a major impediment to progressing the development of VET programs.

VET In Schools

Although VET in schools (either public or private) may have a role to play in some industries, it is not a priority for the fire protection industry when we look at trade-level training.

However, the secondary education sector may be able to liaise with TAFE and industry in order to provide some orientation for the requirements of certain professions such as engineering or building surveying, but this is not a consideration we have given serious thought.

Licensing & VET

In industry, these seems to be a link between VET and licensing and/or accreditation of individuals. Depending on the particular job, this may be desirable. On registration/accreditation matters FPA Australia has noticed that there is not a good understanding of the requirements of mutual recognition of qualifications which are underpinned by ANTA-endorsed competency Standards. As VET comes of age, one important initiative will be to ensure the recognition of skills across states, particularly when such skills are used for registration/accreditation of individuals.

SUMMARY

The current VET system currently available is probably the best model for Australian industry and FPA Australia does not believe that any significant change is required, although the Association does suggest that improvements are possible to ensure that the system remains relevant to the needs of industry. Key observations of the VET system in Australia include:

- The current VET system enables training program development in areas where training has not previously been available;
- The TAFE sector is able to cater for the needs of younger employees whereas private providers offering competency-based (self-paced) learning can better address training deficiencies in the existing workforce;
- The fire protection industry is keen to continue working with ANTA and ITABs in order to introduce new training programs;
- New apprenticeships are not readily available in the fire protection industry;
- The process of becoming a RTO is essentially sound, although the Victorian means to become an RTO could be reviewed;
- Compliance audits and assessment validations are required to maintain the quality of training;
- TAFE colleges are of little value in delivering specialist industry training in regional Australia where as flexible delivery modes offered by private providers appear more adapt at this challenge;
- There is a need to more clearly define the scope of each ITAB in an order to more identify where responsibilities for training development lay; and
- VET in schools is of marginal relevance to the work of the fire protection industry, but may play a role in other trades.

FPA Australia has taken this opportunity to briefly overview its, and its membership's, experience in vocational education and training. The current system has the potential to meet the needs of the fire protection industry so long as there are no wholesale changes and the issues identified within this paper are addressed.

Appendix A – Introduction to FPA Australia

The Fire Protection Association Australia (FPA Australia) was formed by the coming together of the Fire Protection Industry Association of Australia (FPIAA) and the Australian Fire Protection Association (AFPA) in early 1997. Both organisations enjoyed a long and successful history with the foundations being laid for an Association back in 1927.

With some 1,500 members, FPA Australia brings together the broad range of individuals, companies and organisations involved in fire protection, including government, fire and emergency services, insurance, research, engineering, architecture, building, health, education and training, transport, manufacturing, mining, and working in the design, manufacture, installation and maintenance of fire protection systems.

What FPA Australia Does

FPA Australia pursues its mission through the publication of *Fire Australia*, Australia's principal journal and the production of other specialist newsletters such as *AirFire*, *SeaFire*, *EduFire* and *HazMat News*. It maintains a number of national technical committees and interest groups within the Association.

FPA Australia is the largest participant in the development of Australian Standards for fire safety and fire protection. It also makes Representations to government regarding the regulatory environment.

Both National and state offices conduct conferences, exhibitions, seminars and workshops in addition to promoting formal education and training in fire technology. The state offices also provide training in equipment service and industrial fire safety.

On an annual basis the national office coordinates Fire Awareness Week activities between states and conducts a number of public awareness programs.

Management and Administration

Management of FPA Australia is overseen by a Board of Directors comprising eight members elected by the membership plus an additional two Directors appointed by the Board itself. The Board meets on a six weekly basis,



predominately in Melbourne or Sydney. The Executive Director reports to the Board with the Assistant Executive Director - Policy providing support.

Most of the Association's work at a national level is undertaken by staff of the national office. Most state committees have paid secretariats to take care of administrative tasks.

Following the purchase of new, larger premises, the national office relocated to Box Hill, a suburb of Melbourne, capital of the State of Victoria in early 1998. The contact details are:

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However, to ensure that the Association maintains a truly national perspective, both the Executive Director and Assistant Executive Director - Policy travel regularly to meet with the membership in each state. Similarly, events such as the annual conference, *Fire Australia*, and the annual general meeting are held in a different capital city each year.