

# Star rating for skills

An important step in tackling the skills shortage is to assess the schooling of new apprentices and the people who train them. **Susanna Nelson** takes a closer look.

**T**radies are, more than ever, a valuable breed. With the population continuing to age, and fewer school leavers taking up a trade, there is a shortage of technical and vocational skills.

Some say the shortage is the result of years of value and prestige being attributed to university degrees at the expense of skilled trades.

Minister for Education, Science and Training Andrew Robb believes the shortage is with us because of a relentless talking-down of technical education in the 1980s and 1990s. This fostered a generation of parents who feel they have failed if their children – regardless of technical, creative or vocational talents – don't have a university education.

Group Training Australia chief executive Jim Barron says we should aim for 'disengaged' young people by connecting vocational education and training to the middle years of schooling. Increased funding for pre-apprenticeship training and group training organisations in general is also crucial.

This sentiment is echoed by industry bodies such as BIGA, a Queensland-based building group training and placement organisation. Chief executive Brett Schwimming says students and parents should see apprenticeships and traineeships as viable and credible, enabling educational goals that fit with life goals – not as something young people must do because they are failing to make the grade.

And it's not just school leavers who need convincing: older apprentices also need to be encouraged and fostered in the trades.

A recent study by McCrindle Research



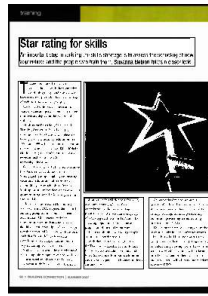
indicates that, in addition to a changing economy, demographic shifts are contributing to the skills shortage. The population is older, with an average age of 37, as opposed to 28 in 1976, and the working population is in decline as a proportion of the total population.

There are simply fewer young people around to enter the trades.

With these issues in mind, the Institute for Trade Skills Excellence aims to raise the profile of the trades, recognise and foster high standards in trades education, and encourage people at all stages of life to consider a trade.

As part of its drive to promote the quality of technical and vocational training it has introduced a scheme that uses star ratings to recognise high-performing public and private registered training organisations (RTOs).

Under the star rating scheme, one of the institute's eight industry reference groups – including a building and construction group – will evaluate participating training providers using a rating of one, two or three stars. Interested institutions will make an initial self-evaluation, then evaluators and industry experts will visit and independently assess the RTO.



The three broad criteria for ratings have been developed in partnership with businesses that employ tradespeople.

The scheme will allow prospective trainees, as well as employers, to assess the standard of training provided by a particular RTO in a particular industry.

“It will allow students, parents, career counsellors, employers and industry to ascertain which registered training organisations have been recognised by the institute,” says institute chief executive Brian Wexham.

The scheme seems to have received support and interest from RTOs. A recent trial by private and public RTOs had an excellent response, and the institute has extended an invitation to another 100 potential participants.

The Institute for Trade Skills Excellence

has also launched two other initiatives – the Trade Teacher of the Year awards and the Employer Campaign.

“The quality of the apprentices entering the workforce is a reflection of the teachers who are equipping them with the knowledge and skills they need,” Brian says.

“As part of the institute’s work to foster, acknowledge and reward excellence in trade skills teaching, the inaugural Australian Trade Teacher of the Year awards will be held in November 2007. Twenty-three awards of \$10,000 will be presented to trade teachers.”

In the Employer Campaign the institute will work with employer groups to ensure training is beneficial and meaningful to employee apprentices.

“The aim is to improve the future uptake

and help ensure completion of ‘on the job’ training,” Brian says.

“Employers need to recognise the importance of mentoring. Investment in apprentices is an investment in their business – their industry. The institute is talking to industry groups on how best to do this. Included in these discussions are ways of overcoming the challenges of retaining Generation Y recruits.” ■

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