**Recognising the skills in jobs traditionally considered unskilled: Project Progress**

**Research team:**

Erica Smith and Andy Smith (Federation University Australia)
Ian Hampson and Anne Junor (University of New South Wales)[[1]](#footnote-1)

Research assistant: Sally Burt

Details of project partners and research phases can be seen at:

<https://federation.edu.au/faculties-and-schools/faculty-of-education-and-arts/education-and-arts/research/rave-researching-adult-and-vocational-education/folder2/recognising-skills>

**Project Overview**

The project is investigating unidentified and undervalued skill in people's jobs through research in nine occupations in service and manufacturing industries. It aims to provide evidence that can be used to improve government policy, qualification-based training for work, companies' management practices that relate to skill, skill levels and the perception of skill. Specifically, it will suggest improvements in the development of vocational education and training qualifications (through Training Packages) and in companies' use of skills. It will help improve the current inaccurate perceptions of skill in Australian jobs, through close study of nine occupations, providing individuals with better life chances and improved self-efficacy in the labour market.

The nine occupations on which the project focuses are: Hotel reception worker, Cleaner, Security operative, Metal Fitter & Machinist, Concrete products operator, Sewing machinist, Waiter, Chef, Retail (non-supermarket) assistant.

**Project Progress**

In 2011, Phases 1 and 2 were completed. Interviews with 19 senior officials in the Australian VET system and industrial relations, and with six industry level stakeholders and senior educators for each occupation provided an understanding of the place of the occupations under study within the industry of which they are a part. Interviewees discussed their own and others’ perceptions of skill in the various occupations being studied and the influence of those perceptions on policy, companies, workers, and Training Packages. These interviews were very productive and provided a great deal of context and guidance for the company level case studies that followed.

In 2012-13, we undertook 19 company case studies: two for each of the nine occupations under study and three for the retail sales assistant. In each, senior managers, HR managers, line managers, and workers were interviewed. These case studies took place in four States in Australia. During these interviews perceptions of skill in the roles were discussed, and evidence of the use of skill by the workers was gathered. As well as a series of qualitative questions, a short questionnaire designed to profile less visible skills in jobs, the “Spotlight tool”, was used for four of the occupations.  This tool was originally developed by members of the research team for the New Zealand Department of Labour in 2009.  All of the case studies also used another instrument which contained measures of employability skills, other measures of skill identified from the literature, and language, literacy and numeracy skills. This instrument was developed for the “Ways of Seeing” project (details provided below) and extended for use in this project.

In Phase 4 Occupational Summaries were produced for each occupation from Phase 2 & 3 data. In Phase 5 our partner Skills Councils, as well as the Construction and Property Services Industry Skills Council, organised forums of stakeholders in the relevant occupations for the researchers to present the Occupational Summaries for validation and feedback. These forums, and a number of other follow up teleconferences and meetings took place in November and December 2013. In the early part of 2014 the research team wrote up findings from these forums and expanded the Occupational Summaries. Phase 6, the Training Package examination stage, is almost complete. The researchers have examined the current qualifications relating to each of the occupations under study and compared our findings about the skills involved in those roles with the contents of those qualifications. The findings from the Training Package examinations were presented to the relevant Industry Skills Councils.

The last phase of the project is now underway and this involves presenting the findings from the project as a whole to high level policy experts and key industry stakeholders. The findings will also be provided to the project’s international reference group.

**Project findings so far**

**Phase 1**

The stakeholder interviewees believed that perceptions of skill are connected to education, training and qualifications and pay rates. The complexity of a task and the length of time taken to become proficient in a role were also seen as important measures of skill. It was a commonly held view that the key to improving perceptions of skill was through official recognition – either through adding certification requirements to work in the role, or through a national body recognising the job as being skilled. Official recognition certainly impacts funding and migration policy. Training that is required to work in an occupation is seen as more “worthy” of funding because job outcomes are more visible. A lack of recognition of “soft skills” leads to their exclusion from formal training, and employers are generally expected to deliver training on the job to develop these skills. A job being perceived as low-skilled also leads to issues around social status, self-esteem, pay distortions, and attraction and retention of labour. In general nearly all stakeholders commented that all jobs were skilled to some extent.

**Phase 2**

The findings from the Phase 2 interviews supported many of the Phase 1 findings. Interviewees in several of the occupations, such as concrete manufacturer, fitting and machining, sewing machinist, and cleaner thought that the low status of the role and working conditions, and perceived lack of career progression, meant that they were not attractive jobs for school-leavers. Several thought that a lack of licencing or qualification requirements for some occupations meant that they were viewed as less skilled than other similar roles that did require that kind of certification. Retail sales assistant was a good example of this; employers did not generally require applicants to have a qualification, yet the job was highly pressured and required good product knowledge as well as strong selling skills. More employer requirement for, and reliance upon, qualifications was seen as a good way to improve the public perception or status of these occupations. However, it was also the case that poor quality provision of qualifications by low quality RTOs affected public perceptions of the jobs. Other jobs, eg security guard, had a poor public image that derived from negative incidents or images involving some workers in the industry. Overall, there was a high level of recognition that the job roles were much more highly skilled than their public status and image suggested. This applied to the two apprenticed trades in the study as well as to the other occupations.

**Phase 3**

In the company case studies, the findings from the interview questions and skills instruments showed that there were unrecognised communication, teamwork and other interpersonal skills in most of the occupations under study. Often described loosely as “customer service skills”, these could be things like security guards needing negotiation and dispute resolution skills, sales assistants needing product knowledge to be able to engage a customer and make a sale, or sewing machinists needing to gauge the rate of progress of the next station in the production line process so that they can pace themselves and maximise efficiency. In some of the occupations there were also language, literacy and numeracy skills that are largely unrecognised, such as in measuring out concrete batches and cutting cloth to in ways that minimise waste. These skills were generally underrated by those working in the role, as they often take those skills for granted because they use them subconsciously. In some occupations, managers rated the skills inherent in workers’ jobs more highly than workers did themselves.

The findings from the “Spotlight tool” showed that there were unrecognised skills in some of occupations studied, including awareness of contexts and impacts; interpersonal communication; an co-ordination and teamwork, and also that there were unexpected levels of management skills needed, for example in the role of a chef. These skills do not seem to be well addressed in the current Training Packages and career pathways. These preliminary findings are based on small sample sizes and further research would strengthen the claim of these results; however they reflect other findings from the project and thus are quite robust.

**Phase 4**

This was a data analysis stage. The researchers consolidated the findings for each occupation from Phases 2 and 3 of the project into Occupational Summaries. These documents analysed the Phase 2 stakeholder interviews and the data collected in the company case studies from interviews with managers and workers, the interviewees’ completion of various scales relating to skill, and in four of the occupations, the “Spotlight” analysis tools used to identify the hidden skills required to operate in each of the occupational roles. The Occupational Summaries formed the basis of the presentation of the findings for validation by industry level stakeholders at the forums held as part of Phase 5 of the project.

**Phase 5**

With the assistance of the Industry Skills Councils responsible for the occupations being examined, a series of forums were organised in order to gather stakeholders from industry bodies, RTOs and enterprises for each occupation. The forums were each attended by eight to ten industry stakeholders. After examining the findings from the company case studies for the relevant occupation the participants were asked to comment and provide feedback about them. The case studies were seen by the participants to present accurate pictures of the roles examined and the skill required to perform in them. At some of the forums suggestions were made about ways to broaden the coverage of the research with either extra visits to companies or other stakeholders to consult with. These were followed through and resulted in several further teleconferences and visits that provided additional insights into the occupation or the industry as a whole.

Industry forum participants generally agreed that the project’s method had achieved its purpose of identifying the types of skills involved in each of the nine occupations being studied. In several cases the differences in the responses to the scales used to rate different types of skills as requirements by managers and workers was discussed. There were also some instances of the forum participants being surprised at the overall rating of certain skills as requirements for the role. This led to discussions about the self-perception of workers about their role and the undervaluing of their own skills. In some cases, some participants reported that skills they considered necessary or important requirements for the role were missing, were too thinly covered, or could be better articulated in the relevant Training Package. These points are being explored as part of the Phase 6 Training Package examinations.

**Phase 6**

The research team examined the Training Package qualification and units’ documentation for the qualification associated with each occupation, to identify the skills and knowledge covered in training and compare them with the project findings about the occupation. There have been a series of consultations with representatives from the Industry Skills Councils to inform the researchers about specific matters in relation to the Training Package contents. The aim of Phase 6 was to provide the Industry Skills Councils with information that may assist with Training Package updates and reviews. We produced documents for each qualification and also a generic “preface”. These documents have been sent to the three relevant Industry Skills Councils, including the Construction and Property Services Industry Skills Council, for comment.

**Phase 7**

Phase 7 will be carried out during November 2014-June 2015. This stage will comprise a presentation of the findings to a seminar for policy experts and high level industry stakeholders and a synthesis of the project’s findings being provided to the project’s international reference group. The reference group includes well-respected international academics and experts in the area that have close links to policy advisors and industry in their own countries. Presenting the findings to this group will lead to the dispersal of the project’s outcomes to a broad international audience.

**Interest from stakeholders**

The findings from our retail and manufacturing industry occupation case studies were requested by the Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency to inform the development of their Retail and Manufacturing Workforce Development Strategies that can be found at: <http://www.awpa.gov.au/publications/Pages/Publications-2013.aspx>

**For further information**

The project’s website is:

<https://federation.edu.au/faculties-and-schools/faculty-of-education-and-arts/education-and-arts/research/rave-researching-adult-and-vocational-education/folder2/recognising-skills>

1. Peter Waterhouse (independent research consultant) – carried out the Sewing machinist and Hotel receptionist case studies [↑](#footnote-ref-1)