

Investigating learning through work: The  
development of the *Provider Learning Environment Scale*

Clive Chappell

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Research activity 5:  
Investigating learning through work

*Supporting vocational education and training  
providers in building capability for the future*

CONSORTIUM RESEARCH PROGRAM





# Investigating learning through work

The development of the *Provider Learning Environment Scale*

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The views and opinions expressed in this document are those of the author/project team and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Australian Government, state and territory governments or NCVER

## Publisher's note

Additional information relating to this research is available in the following support documents: *Investigating learning through work: What the literature says*; *Investigating learning through work: Learning environment scale and user guide to the provider*; and *Improving your organisation's workplace learning: Fact sheet*. They can be accessed from NCVER's website <<http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/2062.html>>.

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# About the research



## *Investigating learning through work: The development of the Provider Learning Environment Scale*

Clive Chappell, Geof Hawke, University of Technology, Sydney

There has, perhaps, been too great an emphasis on formalised approaches to professional and workforce development in the vocational education and training (VET) sector. While formal programs are important, it is also time to give greater consideration to how to more effectively embed learning into the routine work of VET providers. If nothing else, more effective workplace learning will help them to achieve a competitive advantage through the people they employ.

This research, which is part of the wider research program examining ways to build VET provider capability, used a literature review (see the support documents) to explore the characteristics of organisations which have established effective workplace learning processes.

This information helped the researchers to develop and trial an instrument—the Provider Learning Environment Scale. The scale can be used by training providers to determine whether they have a working environment that encourages learning; it can also help them to consider how to create or improve that environment. It contains two domains—‘organisational development’ and ‘job complexity’—and is supported by a user’s guide (see the support documents).

The scale needs a sample size of 50 or more to get sufficiently robust data. However, a ‘facts sheet’ (see the support documents) provides a series of questions to help smaller providers and small organisational units within larger ones to assess the effectiveness of their learning through their work.

Those interested in other projects within the wider program on building VET provider capability should visit <http://www.ncver.edu.au>.

Tom Karmel  
Managing Director, NCVER



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# Introduction

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## Purpose and products

The purpose of this research activity was to investigate contemporary understandings of the connections between learning and work. This initial work was then used to inform the development of an organisational tool that registered training organisations (RTOs) could use to identify organisational practices likely to lead to greater learning at work. The two specific goals of the research were to:

- ✧ survey the contemporary literature that focused on the issue of learning at work in order to identify the factors that lead to greater learning at work
- ✧ construct and trial an organisational tool that could be used to evaluate the extent to which registered training organisations exhibit these factors in their organisational practices.

This document aims to describe the logic and approach taken by the researchers in developing the Provider Learning Environment Scale as well as provide a copy of the final scale (appendix 1). Two support documents report on our survey of the relevant literature, and provide a guide to users of the final scale. A third support document is a ‘facts sheet’ which provides a short commentary and a series of questions that smaller providers and business units within larger organisations can use to help them determine the extent to which they are learning through their work. Discussions generated by the facts sheet will enable smaller providers to consider ways in which they could change practice and create opportunities to learn more effectively through work.

## Rationale

All organisations, including vocational education and training (VET) providers, are looking for ways to achieve competitive advantage through the people they employ. Creating this advantage comprises a number of facets, and most of these depend on the training/development of people and their ability to learn. However, the use of traditional training as the key to improving individual and organisational capability is no longer regarded as sufficient by itself to satisfy the needs of the contemporary work environment.

Recent research has investigated this issue by identifying particular features of the work environment that appear to encourage or inhibit learning while working. Our interest in this research activity is to understand the ways in which workplaces provide an environment in which learning becomes a natural and automatic outcome of experiencing work—without direct educational interventions. We hope that, by identifying and making explicit those aspects of the work environment that lead to and encourage learning at work, registered training organisations will be assisted to develop and maximise their work environment as a learning context for all organisation staff.

Although previous research has begun to understand the environmental dynamics that influence learning at work, a practical method of measuring the extent to which these insights have been applied practically is as yet unavailable. The complexity and number of factors involved and their

composite interplay are such that it is difficult to see how hard-pressed registered training organisation managers with a role in learning and development can utilise these insights without further assistance.

This research activity analysed the complex factors identified by various researchers as contributing to a learning environment at work (see literature review in the support documents). From this analysis, the factors identified by the researchers were categorised and appeared in the first instance to fall into four domains of the organisational environment:

- ✧ job structure
- ✧ work process
- ✧ social interaction
- ✧ managerial support and recognition.

Almost all of the characteristics identified by the research outlined in the companion literature review influence the ability of people to learn at work and also fit into these four domains.

In the context of our research, this suggests that the *job structure* found in registered training organisations can either facilitate or impede learning at work. Quite diverse factors, such as the degree to which work has clear work objectives, the degree of exposure to change, and the extent and quality of feedback provided, contribute to the ways in which staff in registered training organisations experience their work and their ability to learn through work.

Second, the *work process environment* may also be a major contributor to learning at work in registered training organisations. Factors such as having an understanding of the context in which the organisation operates, together with an appreciation of the business objectives, as well as experience in working in different areas of the business, all influence the extent to which learning occurs at work.

Third, the *social environment* includes the extent to which work groups in registered training organisations experience and shape the work of the organisation, the degree to which individuals are exposed to professional contacts outside the organisation and the value the organisation places on the work of the individual. All of these factors influence the degree of learning that takes place at work.

Fourth, factors in the *managerial environment* of the registered training organisation also influence the degree to which learning occurs at work. These include the managerial support given to learning, rewards and recognition from management, the extent to which managers provide useful feedback and the degree to which organisational knowledge is made available to individual workers.

Learning and development practices within registered training organisations can be better organised to support learning at work when they focus on improving the characteristics of work, of the work process, of social interaction and of the managerial environments that encourage learning.

The first step is for registered training organisations to identify how well they are doing in each of these work domains. Once these organisations have identified their current position, strategies can be developed to strengthen the learning environment in each of the four areas. This involves recognising the current characteristics that act as enablers and constraints influencing the organisation's learning environment and then initiating organisational practices that encourage learning at work in all four environments.

Survey statements were generated that reflect factors within each domain. The subsequent survey—the Provider Learning Environment, or PLE, Scale—was then used to determine the extent to which these factors were perceived by employees as being present in the organisational environment of their registered training organisation.

Each participating registered training organisation received a report on their results and an indication of how they compared with the total sample group.

The results of the trial were then analysed and this analysis revealed that the initial four-domain hypothesis could not be sustained. Rather, the data from the research appeared to signify a two-domain structure operating in the registered training organisations, with each domain containing factors that encouraged learning at work. This was confirmed in a subsequent analysis with new data sets.

# Trialling the *Provider Learning Environment Scale*

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As discussed above, our analysis of the literature pointed to four major clusters of factors (domains) that seemed to impact on the extent of learning in the workplace. These four clusters were the basis upon which 75 draft items were developed. These were approximately equally distributed across the four domains. Significantly, however, the domain least well defined by the initial analysis (work process environment) produced a smaller set of potential items and consequently provided a smaller number of items for the subsequent trial.

## Two forms of a draft instrument

Given the breadth covered by each domain and the need to keep the time commitment of registered training organisations to a minimum, we decided that it would be of most benefit in exploring the potential of a Provider Learning Environment (PLE) Scale to pilot two approximately parallel forms with different (but overlapping) sets of items. Table 1 sets out how the items in the two pilot forms of the instrument were distributed across the four domains.

**Table 1** Composition of the two pilot forms

	Form A	Form B
Job environment scale	12 items	12 items
Management environment scale	10 items	10 items
Social environment scale	11 items	11 items
Work environment scale	7 items	7 items

We asked staff in each of the participating registered training organisations (see below) to respond to only one of these forms and we ensured that the two forms were equally shared across the different kinds of registered training organisations participating in the trial.

## Registered training organisations recruited to participate

Registered training organisations throughout the VET system were asked to indicate an interest in participation in the pilot of the Provider Learning Environment Scale. Around 20 responded, indicating a willingness to participate and, from these, 12 organisations that provided a reasonable spread over both registered training organisation type and location were selected (see table 2). Each was asked to provide survey responses from one or two groups of staff—comprising around 50 people wherever possible. Of the total group of staff to be involved, organisations were asked to try to provide responses from a mixture of teaching, administrative, management and other staff.

Each participating organisation was asked to nominate a liaison person from amongst the staff to manage the receipt, distribution and return of the survey forms. This liaison officer was supplied with either an electronic master version of the relevant survey form or an appropriate number of printed copies. In addition, these individuals received a covering letter for their staff that explained the purpose of the survey and the uses that would be made of the data. By this means they were

informed that summary data for the group would be returned and discussed with their management but that no individual data would be provided.

**Table 2 Registered training organisations that agreed to participate in the trial**

		Form A	Form B
Type	Public	4	4
	Other	2	2
State	ACT	1	
	NSW	1	2
	SA	1	1
	Vic	2	2
	WA	1	1

Nine of the 12 registered training organisations that agreed to participate provided data in time for the analysis (table 3).

**Table 3 Registered training organisations that supplied data**

	Form A		Form B	
	Public	Private	Public	Private
No of RTOs	3	1	3	2
Sample size	80	13	136	43

The participating registered training organisations were unable to return responses from 50–60 staff, as the study had hoped. (The total sample size across the two forms was 272.) Although this is not in itself cause to disregard the findings reported below, it does mean that they must be regarded as indicative only, and further pilot-development of the PLE will need to be undertaken before any more extensive use is made of the instrument. Indeed, one limitation of the instrument is the necessity to get a sufficiently large sample size. The user’s guide (see support documents) recommends about 50. This limits its potential use to public and the larger private providers.

## Differences between registered training organisations

The results for each registered training organisation were reported back to them and each was also given information that compared their results with the group as a whole. (Each scaled score was converted to a standardised form with a mean of 50.) This process highlighted the quite considerable degree of variation between organisations in the ways in which staff had responded to the draft instruments.

For example, ‘Public RTO A’ (see figure 1) performed below average on all four of the original scales, and the same was true when their results were reported for the revised scales. By contrast, ‘Public RTO B’ (see figure 2) scored consistently higher than average on all scales.

Figure 1 Scale scores for 'Public RTO A'

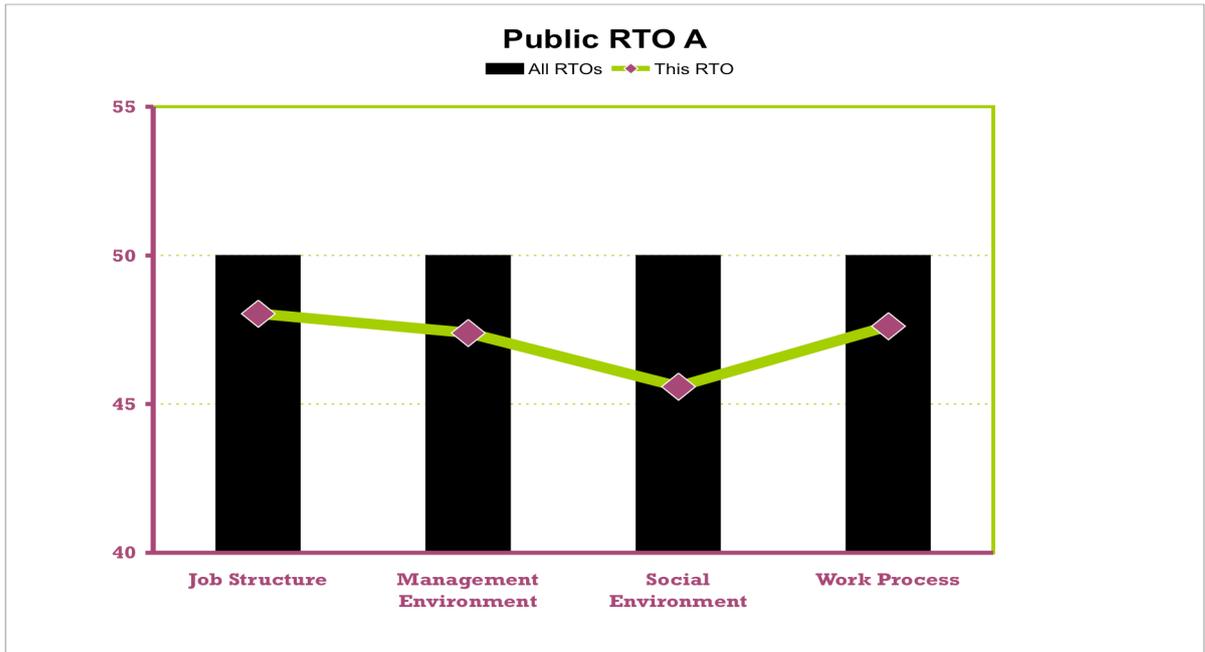
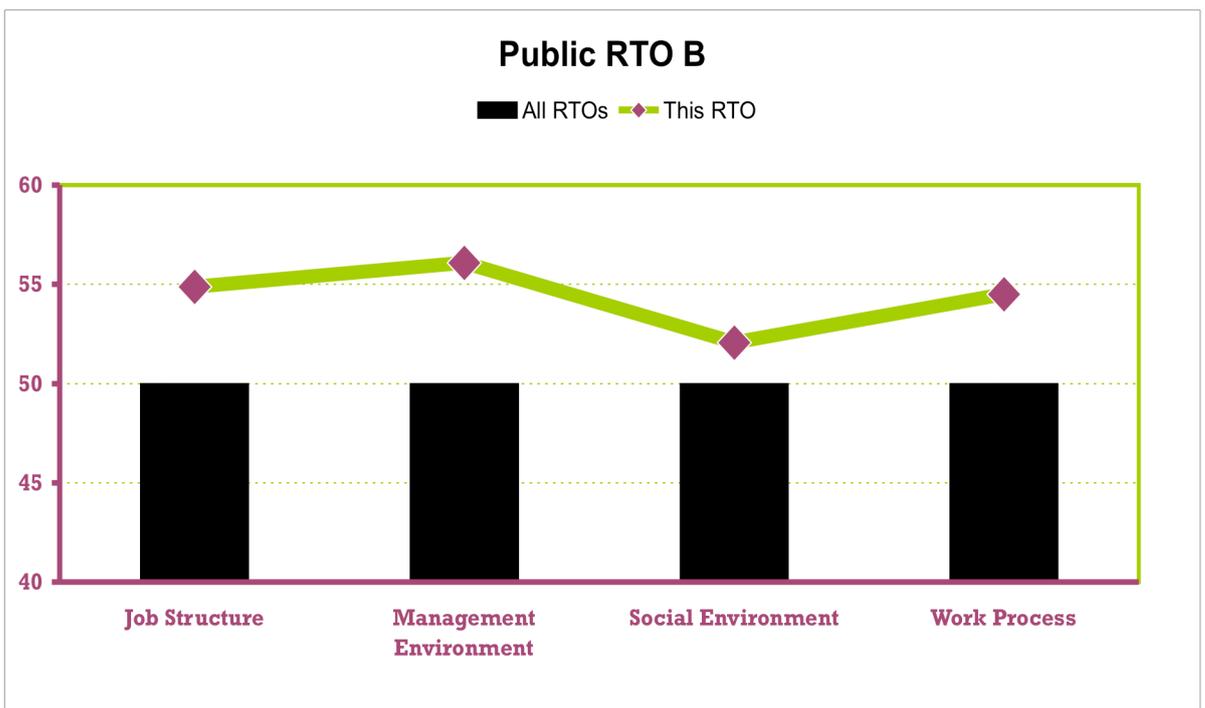


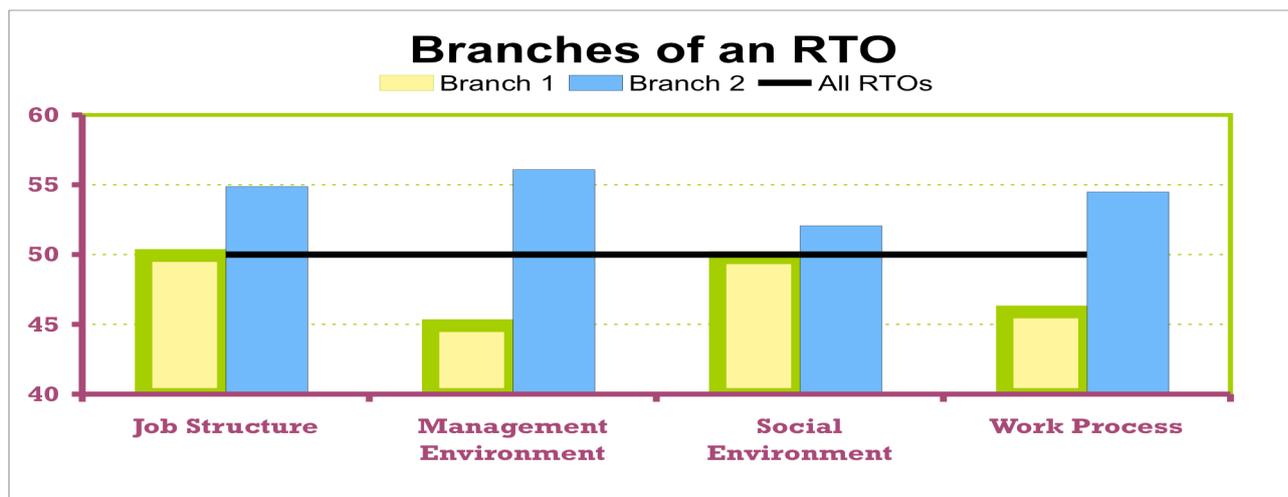
Figure 2 Scale scores for 'Public RTO B'



A range of different patterns was identified amongst other registered training organisations, with many showing patterns of above-average performance on two or three scales, but below-average performance on the others. This suggests that the instruments highlighted patterns in the ways work is organised in these organisations, which are worth examining to identify areas where improvements or changes could be made.

The reports also identified substantial differences within registered training organisations, as well as between them. For example, in one organisation with a number of branches, there were considerable differences between the two branches in the organisation (figure 3).

**Figure 3 Scale scores for difference branches of a single RTO**



## Analysis of the instrument in use

The data provided by the registered training organisations were entered into a database and analysed using a range of statistical procedures, primarily through the use of the SPSS statistical package. The initial analyses focused on the responses to the survey items of the four hypothesised domains which had motivated the development of the instrument.

With two exceptions, this analysis showed desirable levels of consistency and reliability. And as table 4 indicates, six of the eight versions showed reasonable levels of performance (that is, an alpha of 0.7 or greater).

**Table 4 Reliability coefficients for the pilot forms of the *Provider Learning Environment Scale***

	Form A	Form B
Job environment scale	0.70 (n = 86)	0.49 (n = 174)
Management environment scale	0.78 (n = 84)	0.82 (n = 171)
Social environment scale	0.76 (n = 85)	0.79 (n = 172)
Work environment scale	0.59 (n = 88)	0.78 (n = 173)

The two exceptions—job environment in form B and work environment in form A—were substantially below normally acceptable levels, and this indicated potential difficulties with the survey items attached to these domains.

Further examination showed that some specific items were detracting from the effectiveness of the survey and were therefore candidates for revision and/or rewriting. This is not an unusual circumstance at this stage of instrument development.

## Inter-correlation of *a priori* scales

The four domains identified in the literature review are not necessarily independent of each other. However, our analysis showed that there were high correlations between items across the domains in both forms and this therefore questions the extent to which the hypothesised domains are distinct, in terms of the workplace (table 5).

**Table 5 Correlation of the form A sub-scales**

Form A	Job env. score	Management env. score	Social env. score	Work env. score
Job environment score		.265 (*)	.719 (*)	.574 (*)
Management environment score	.265 (*)		.527 (*)	.472 (*)
Social environment score	.719 (*)	.527 (*)		.585 (*)
Work environment score	.574 (*)	.472 (*)	.585 (*)	

Note: \* = statistically greater than zero with  $p < 0.05$ .

## Factor analysis of forms A and B

A further analysis was conducted to determine the extent to which the data from forms A and B reflected the proposed four-domain structure.

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The results of both the statistical analysis of forms A and B and this factor analysis strongly suggest that the hypothesised four domain structure cannot be supported by the data. Rather, it suggests that a simpler, two factor structure would better account for the data produced by this research.

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## A new and more simple structure?

In order to gain some insights into what this simpler structure might resemble, we re-examined the items that had received the highest scores (that is, factor loadings) in forms A and B.

### Form A

This examination revealed that items that focused on the complexity of the job itself and which involved ‘a wide range of factors’, ‘unusual situations’ or ‘a high degree of negotiation’ with external clients were prominent in one of the dimensions, as were those items that were connected to the managerial environment domain on a second dimension.

### Form B

The analysis of form B also confirmed that items connected to the managerial environment domain were prominent. However, this analysis also revealed that the same dimension involved a substantial number of items from the social environment domain, although these latter items were restricted to those that reflected the inherent demands of the work organisation that were determined, or at least influenced, by management practices (for example, focus on teamwork, collaborative approach, knowledge-sharing). We therefore suggest that they have a better fit within the managerial environment domain.

Items concerned with the complexity of the job were also prominent in the analysis of form B, although they were not as strongly defined as in form A.

All of this suggests that two domains, rather than the four initially proposed, would better characterise the major influences involved in learning at work.

## The two proposed major domains

This final analysis reveals a consistency that points to two principal workplace domains that influence learning at work. We have tentatively labelled these as *organisational environment* and *job complexity*.

### Organisational environment

We hypothesise that organisational environment is defined by items that focus on the following areas:

- ✧ manager/management support
- ✧ intentional creation of learning opportunities by the registered training organisation
- ✧ involvement in teams
- ✧ provision of useful feedback on performance
- ✧ a clear sense of the organisation's mission/purpose
- ✧ ready access to necessary information
- ✧ ready access to other people in the organisation.

### Job complexity

We also suggest that job complexity is characterised by items that reflect:

- ✧ work with considerable variety
- ✧ regular contact with a variety of people and ideas external to the organisation
- ✧ regular contact with a variety of people and ideas within the organisation
- ✧ ongoing change
- ✧ work with high intensity/demands.

## Initial reliability estimates

The hypothesised new domains were re-examined by testing them against the original existing data from forms A and B, using the same statistical techniques as before. As is shown in table 6, the results support the new hypothesis. However, we suggest that greater clarification of the content and structure of the 'job complexity' scale may well be needed in follow-up work before the instrument could be tested more widely.

**Table 6 Reliability estimates for new scales**

	Form A	Form B
Organisational environment	0.85	0.91
Job complexity	0.87	0.56

## Validating the two-domain structure

The initial analysis of the two forms had clearly suggested that two domains better explained the responses of the initial sample of registered training organisation employees than did the hypothesised set of four.

Thus a new version of the Provider Learning Environment Scale was constructed using the items from the two trial versions that best accommodated the two dominant factors. This version was

then trialled by a new sample of 124 staff in five registered training organisations—four public and one small private registered training organisation.

This further trial confirmed the factor structure and provided two quite reliable scales, as shown in the following table.

**Table 7 Reliability coefficients for the final form of the *Provider Learning Environment Scale***

	<b>Form A</b>
Organisational environment scale	0.81 (n = 124)
Job complexity scale	0.76 (n = 124)

# Summary and conclusions

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Learning is increasingly regarded as an integral and ongoing feature of contemporary work. At the same time, the use of traditional training as the key to improving individual and organisational capability is no longer regarded as sufficient to satisfy the needs of the contemporary work environment.

Much of our understanding of learning continues to be tied to the assumptions that underpin learning in formal educational settings. Because we think of learning in this way, we limit our understanding of learning at work in terms of the opportunities that work provides for learning.

The literature on workplace learning has provided a rich and deep understanding of the factors in workplaces that support and encourage learning. By analysing the factors in the work environment that either encourage or inhibit learning at work, a number of researchers have made contributions to our understanding of learning that takes place as a normal feature of working.

Our analysis of this literature had led us to hypothesise that four domains could describe the ways in which organisations might understand how their own practices and systems impacted on the learning that occurred in their workplace. These four organisational domains reflected the nature of an individual's own job, the work process environment within which that job was situated and the social and managerial environments of the workplace.

This four-domain hypothesis was tested by preparing a survey, called the Provider Learning Environment Scale, consisting of statements that reflected these factors. Two parallel forms of the draft Provider Learning Environment Scale were developed and piloted in nine registered training organisations around Australia. The analysis showed that, while the draft sub-scales for 'management environment' and 'social environment' appeared to provide succinct and reliable measures of the workplace culture in registered training organisations, the other sub-scales—'job environment' and 'work environment'—were not providing satisfactory measures.

Further analysis of the data indicated that the hypothesised four-factor structure was not supported and that a different two-factor solution gave a better interpretation of the pattern of responses provided by registered training organisation staff. This two-domain model was then tested and confirmed with another group of registered training organisations. This research suggests that 'job complexity' and the 'organisational environment' are the two domains that have a major influence on learning at work in registered training organisations.

A survey instrument with statements that cover the factors identified in these domains is likely to provide registered training organisations with data by which they can evaluate how well the organisational setting in these two domains encourages learning at work. It is important to recall, however, that the focus of this investigation has been on producing a useful instrument for registered training organisations. Thus, while there is some theoretical support for the two factors identified, their significance as theoretical structures should not be over-interpreted.

The research has shown that there is value in a self-report instrument that seeks to characterise the ways in which the organisational setting is configured and how the individual relates to it. The differences found between registered training organisations indicate that these organisations can

profit from the sort of information such an instrument will provide. In many cases, the feedback provided to organisations who participated in this study was able to identify one or more areas where changes and improvements could be made in the nature of jobs or in the ways in which the organisations organised their work.

While the two-domain model has been validated, further experience with the instrument (see appendix 1) will strengthen it as a diagnostic tool by providing a larger reference base.

# Appendix 1: The *Provider Learning Environment Scale* (version 2.0)



## Provider Learning Environment Scale

Training providers are, of course, workplaces as well. This scale looks at your workplace as an environment that does or does not support your continuing learning.

For each of the following statements, please circle the answer that best describes how your registered training organisation (RTO) operates and how your job in the RTO is organised or structured. Every workplace is different, and some of these statements are likely to be good descriptions of your RTO. Others may be quite inappropriate. Think about each of these statements separately and give the answer that seems to best describe your situation. We don't need your name, and no individual answers will be made available to your RTO's managers. However, a summary of all responses will be provided to them as a guide to ways in which they might be able to improve the organisation's capacity to provide a better learning environment for staff.

In which section/faculty of the RTO do you mainly work?

		Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1	My work involves extensive contact with professionals in other organisations.	SA	A	?	D	SD
2	My manager in the RTO actively involves him/herself in providing me with learning opportunities.	SA	A	?	D	SD
3	The RTO clearly communicates its mission/purpose to staff.	SA	A	?	D	SD
4	My job requires me to work with a range of different networks of people in the RTO.	SA	A	?	D	SD
5	The RTO regularly creates project teams of people from different sections when something new crops up.	SA	A	?	D	SD
6	My work requires me to undertake a high degree of negotiation with clients outside the RTO.	SA	A	?	D	SD
7	I regularly meet with colleagues in other organisations.	SA	A	?	D	SD
8	The objectives set for me relate directly to the objectives of the RTO.	SA	A	?	D	SD
9	In this RTO, co-workers routinely provide helpful feedback on performance.	SA	A	?	D	SD
10	I have ready access to the knowledge or information I need for my job.	SA	A	?	D	SD

		Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
11	For most of my job, I deal with only a fixed part of the product/service my section of the RTO offers. Others do the rest.	SA	A	?	D	SD
12	I am kept informed of changes that impact on the education and training provided by my RTO.	SA	A	?	D	SD
13	My job requires a high degree of concentration most of the time.	SA	A	?	D	SD
14	A lot of our work requires different sections to collaborate on a problem or issue.	SA	A	?	D	SD
15	I am given sufficient feedback regarding my work.	SA	A	?	D	SD
16	The rules and regulations that govern the work of the RTO are constantly changing.	SA	A	?	D	SD
17	My work requires me to engage in professional conversations with colleagues outside my RTO.	SA	A	?	D	SD
18	I have opportunities to work with different groups in my RTO.	SA	A	?	D	SD
19	My work involves me in a wide range of the RTO's activities.	SA	A	?	D	SD
20	The RTO regularly changes the ways in which my work is organised.	SA	A	?	D	SD
21	RTO managers actively support and encourage learning.	SA	A	?	D	SD
22	I regularly work with other sections of the RTO.	SA	A	?	D	SD
23	My work requires me to undertake a wide range of different activities.	SA	A	?	D	SD
24	My manager in the RTO sets me clear objectives for my job.	SA	A	?	D	SD
25	The RTO has clear rules about who can access such things as information about individual clients.	SA	A	?	D	SD
26	My work requires me to undertake a high degree of negotiation with clients outside the RTO.	SA	A	?	D	SD
27	Interpersonal relationships in my job involve managing a wide range of issues/personalities.	SA	A	?	D	SD
28	My work in the RTO often requires me to manage unusual situations.	SA	A	?	D	SD
29	In the course of a typical week, I will do a wide variety of very different tasks.	SA	A	?	D	SD
30	My manager in the RTO delegates some decision-making to me.	SA	A	?	D	SD
31	I've learnt a lot about my job from discussions with more experienced colleagues.	SA	A	?	D	SD
32	The work I do in the RTO is complex and involves a wide range of factors and variables.	SA	A	?	D	SD
33	My RTO provides opportunities for me to undertake interesting tasks and rewards success.	SA	A	?	D	SD
34	My manager in the RTO encourages me to learn while I am working.	SA	A	?	D	SD
35	I feel that I am part of a team that works collaboratively to reach work goals.	SA	A	?	D	SD
36	Relationships with colleagues in the RTO are collegiate rather than competitive.	SA	A	?	D	SD
37	Demands from the RTO's clients and my colleagues are a constant feature of my work.	SA	A	?	D	SD
38	My manager in the RTO works with me to develop, monitor and review my work plan.	SA	A	?	D	SD

		<b>Strongly agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>
39	When faced with a new challenge in my work, I am aware of the person in the RTO I should talk to.	SA	A	?	D	SD
40	The way my job in the RTO is constructed limits what I can do.	SA	A	?	D	SD
41	My RTO actively encourages me to learn in order to improve my work performance.	SA	A	?	D	SD
42	My supervisors and line managers in the RTO routinely provide helpful feedback on my performance.	SA	A	?	D	SD
43	The objectives set for me relate directly to the work outcomes of my job.	SA	A	?	D	SD
44	The RTO clearly expects all staff to support the learning of other employees.	SA	A	?	D	SD
45	The RTO clearly communicates its mission/purpose to staff.	SA	A	?	D	SD
46	My colleagues in the RTO share their knowledge with each other.	SA	A	?	D	SD

# Support document details

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Additional information relating to this research is available in the following support documents which can be accessed from NCVET's website <<http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/2062.html>>.

- ✧ *Investigating learning through work: Learning environment scale and user guide to the provider—Support document*
- ✧ *Investigating learning through work: What the literature says—Support document*
- ✧ *Improving your organisation's workplace learning: Fact sheet.*



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The consortium, *Supporting vocational education and training providers in building capability for the future*, comprises leading vocational education and training researchers from across Australia. Its program of research aims to investigate the vocational education and training workforce, its capability and professional practice development. Research funding is awarded to organisations via a competitive grants process.

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