



# GOOD PRACTICE GUIDE

## Alternative pathways to apprenticeships

*Apprenticeships are changing. The increasing proportions of people entering apprenticeships at various levels of ability and backgrounds are stimulating demand for alternative pathways to completions.*

This good practice guide assembles the key findings for education practitioners and workplace supervisors from three related research reports on facilitators of earlier completion such as competency-based progression and recognition of prior learning (RPL).

The reports provide a nuanced and multifaceted view of today's apprenticeship reality, including the enablers of and barriers to alternative apprenticeship pathways and advice for improved practice.

Competency progression enabling early completion is not a new phenomenon and is a key feature of competency-based approaches to VET more broadly. There remains a gap between the policy construct and the lived reality, which has preserved, largely intact, in the time-based approach to apprentice training.

— *Berwyn Clayton, Hugh Guthrie, Pam Every and Regan Harding*

This good practice guide is based on the following reports:

- *Competency progression and completion: how is the policy being enacted in three trades?* by Berwyn Clayton, Hugh Guthrie, Pam Every and Regan Harding
- *Adult trade apprentices: exploring the significance of recognition of prior learning and skill sets for earlier completion* by Jo Hargreaves and Davinia Blomberg
- *The returns to completion or partial completion of a qualification in the trades* by Tham Lu

Full reports can be downloaded from [www.ncver.edu.au](http://www.ncver.edu.au)

## WHAT IS A COMPETENCY-BASED PROGRESSION AND COMPLETION?

With the application of competency-based training, individuals who have the capability to complete their apprenticeship earlier than via the traditional time-served model are supported to do so. Decisions reached by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG), the Commonwealth and the states/territories have formalised support for competency-based training progression, and all have existing legislation to enable competency-based training progression and completion for apprentices and trainees. Legislation can vary from state to state and different industries have different approaches.

## HOW DOES RPL APPLY FOR APPRENTICES?

Recognition of prior learning, or recognition of current competency (RCC) acknowledges the practical skills gained from experience in a trade and from other informal learning, in combination with tailored gap training (skill sets), in the completion of a trade qualification or certificate. While there is evidence of increased rates of recognition occurring for trade apprentices, and increases of RPL use amongst qualification completions in the older age groups, the numbers are still considered low for trade apprentices when compared with other apprentices and students overall.

## WHY IS THIS RESEARCH IMPORTANT TO YOU?

Apprentices with the ability to complete their apprenticeship earlier rely on your knowledge, experience and influence in the sector. Adult apprentices with informal but sound work experience in particular will benefit from an easier and more straightforward process for RPL and gap training, as well as early sign-off. The research also highlights gaps in communicating information about and support for alternative pathways between policy-makers and program administrators, to practitioners and workplace supervisors, and between the training provider and the workplace.

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## ADVICE FOR PRACTITIONERS AND WORKPLACE SUPERVISORS

The key messages from this suite of work are:

### Recognise changing apprenticeship characteristics

- There are currently significantly more individuals aged 25 years and over commencing a trade apprenticeship (40.1% in 2013) compared with ten years ago (14.9% in 2004).
- The data confirm that a large number of adults commence an apprenticeship with no formal prior education but with knowledge and skills gained via existing workforce participation.
- Recognition of prior learning is still not being offered by all publicly funded registered training providers, and relatively high numbers of apprentice graduates are not having their training shortened despite reporting relevant prior skills and experience.
- While assessment and validation is generally the collective responsibility of teacher-assessors and workplace supervisors there is now greater involvement of apprentices in their own assessment through their collection of evidence and decisions about whether they are ready to progress.

While a one-size-fits-all model for earlier completion may not be possible and some flexibility is required to accommodate different industry requirements, it is also possible that the various approaches create confusion and barriers for employers, providers and apprentices.

— *Jo Hargreaves and Davinia Blomberg*

## Be aware of a variety of apprenticeship completion options and outcomes

- While there is the recognised tradition and culture of a time-served model, there are also growing numbers of individuals across all ages completing their trade apprenticeship in a shorter timeframe. This is especially noticeable for adult apprentices, with over half completing within two years via a range of options such as early sign-off, competency-based progression and advanced entry using RPL and gap training.
- At a subject-enrolment level, the RPL-granted subject outcome for trade apprentices 25 years and older has increased from a low base (3.5% in 2009, to 7% in 2013); however, these subject-enrolment RPL levels for trade apprentices are markedly lower than peer-age students (with presumably similar past experience), who either have no training contract or who have a traineeship. For this group, the subject enrolments with RPL-granted outcomes are far higher (78% in 2013).
- On average, completion of a full qualification in the trades leads to better employment outcomes than modules-only completion. However, the returns from qualification completion vary greatly and depend on the trade area in which students undertake their training.

## Understand the challenges and enablers for practitioners and workplace supervisors

- Some of the challenges to competency progression lie in the provision for flexibility in training providers' administration, where apprentices are able to complete early via flexible delivery and personalised training plans. Training providers need to be shown more clearly the positive outcomes for apprentices and their own training business, and be encouraged to make a commitment to the investment of the extra administrative and resource burden accompanying a more flexible and intensive approach.
- Competency progression and early completion models may not have been convincingly and clearly explained to all education providers, practitioners and workplace supervisors.
- Employers rely on good advice from training providers on the processes, expectations and provision of information about training.
- Workplace supervisors ask for improved information and communication from providers to better understand their role in facilitating early completion.
- The 'VET language' and the overall 'busyness' of the work environment appear to hinder good communication; this was particularly problematic in carpentry where the workplace supervisors and apprentices work on a variety of sites.
- Variations to training generally occur through informal negotiations and these are not always recognised in the apprentice's training plan, suggesting that the training plans are not necessarily the dynamic document they are intended to be.

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## SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVED PRACTICE

- Ensure that the RPL process is available, explained clearly to eligible apprentices and their employer, and ensure it captures informal work experience as evidence.
- Support the updating and day-to-day use of training plans.
- Allow mature and experienced apprentices to be involved in self-assessment. This includes the provision of clearer advice on the collection of credible evidence.
- Share knowledge and expectations with trainer counterparts, for example, workplace supervisors, trainer-assessors or training organisation administrators.

*Change is possible in areas where employers, educational institutions and governments share common objectives. Effective collaboration, understanding of various apprenticeship pathways and awareness of apprentice characteristics will pave the way to more rewarding trade apprenticeship outcomes for both individuals and employers.*

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

These findings are based on three research reports published by NCVER:

- *Competency progression and completion: how is the policy being enacted in three trades?* by Berwyn Clayton, Hugh Guthrie, Pam Every and Regan Harding available at [www.ncver.edu.au/publications/2813.html](http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/2813.html)
- *Adult trade apprentices: exploring the significance of recognition of prior learning and skill sets for earlier completion* by Jo Hargreaves and Davinia Blomberg available at [www.ncver.edu.au/publications/2815.html](http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/2815.html)
- *The returns to completion or partial completion of a qualification in the trades* by Tham Lu available at [www.ncver.edu.au/publications/2816.html](http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/2816.html)



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Level 11, 33 King William Street, Adelaide SA 5000  
PO Box 8288, Station Arcade, Adelaide SA 5000, Australia  
P +61 8 8230 8400 F +61 8 8212 3436  
E [ncver@ncver.edu.au](mailto:ncver@ncver.edu.au) W [www.ncver.edu.au](http://www.ncver.edu.au)

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