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WELLBEING AT WORK

APPRENTICESHIPS
AND MENTAL HEALTH

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

The point at which a young person transitions out of secondary school is a key juncture in their life. In general terms, it's a time when a young person faces choices around whether to continue with education or find employment.

An apprenticeship, that provides a young person with a qualification that combines training and experience, is one pathway option. However, while apprenticeships are an established pathway to employment, almost half of the young people who start apprenticeships will not complete them. One of the reasons for the low completion rate is that apprentices are exposed to situations that negatively impact their mental health and wellbeing.

Therefore, providing targeted and effective mental health supports could increase the likelihood of young people completing their apprenticeships.

APPRENTICESHIPS IN AUSTRALIA

Contemporary apprenticeships are generally facilitated by an Apprenticeship Network provider. The provider helps the potential apprentice enter into a contract with the employer through which the apprentice is provided on-the-job training. The apprentice is also linked with a registered Vocational Education and Training institution where further off-the-job training is provided. Typically, approximately 80 per cent of an apprentice's time is spent on-the-job with the remainder in college or TAFE.(1)

Upon completion of the training contract, the relevant training agency or government department provides a completion or trade certificate and the apprentice is recognised as a tradesperson. The amount of time taken to complete an apprenticeship differs depending on the industry. Generally, three to four years in traditional industries, for example plumbing, carpentry, welding, and over a two year period in the service-oriented occupations such as hospitality.

Apprenticeships can be full time, part time or school-based. School-based apprenticeships are available for secondary school students who get on-the-job training towards a formal qualification while still completing their school studies.

DATA ON APPRENTICESHIPS IN AUSTRALIA

There were 183,180 apprentices in Australia as of 31 March 2020,(2) with high attrition rates among young people who commence them. Data from the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) indicates that approximately 44 per cent of apprentices who commence an apprenticeship will not complete it. A further 11 per cent of trade-based apprentices will not complete their apprenticeship with the original employer. The majority of apprentices who leave do so in the first year, approximately a third of them leave within the first year.

There are certain factors which can exacerbate attrition in employment. It has been noted that young men, who comprise the majority of apprentices, have higher rates of attrition. (3) Completion rates also vary according to employers, with larger government employers having less attrition than small employers, which suggests there may be more issues with working conditions among small employers.(4, 5)

Employment satisfaction has the largest effect on completion rates for young people. 80 per cent of those who completed their apprenticeship were satisfied with their employment experience overall, while only 42 per cent of non-completers reported being satisfied.

(5) The primary reasons for dissatisfaction or incompletion were problems with the employment experience, including poor working conditions, lack of appropriate supervision and training, being treated as 'cheap labour', and interpersonal difficulties with the boss or colleagues, including bullying and abuse.(5)

*"*Completing an apprenticeship wasn't worth it to me. I was unhappy*"*

YOUNG PERSON

While there are isolated studies examining why apprentices leave, there is a need for consistent, ongoing data collection on the reasons for apprentices' non-completion. NCVER maintains strong quantitative data, but there is a need for qualitative data on the reasons behind incompletion. Longitudinal research that annually tracks apprentices progress is required to understand why apprentices do not complete their apprenticeships and the degree to which mental ill-health plays a role. This research would aid the development of policy responses supporting apprentices' wellbeing.

POLICY SOLUTION

The National Centre for Vocational Education Research coordinate a national longitudinal research study of the experiences of apprentices. The study should include the mental wellbeing of apprentices, workplace culture, experiences of employers supporting apprentices with mental ill-health and a better understanding of factors behind non-completion. A minimum of five year study would be required, with at least two cohorts of apprentices for the length of their apprenticeship with biannual follow-ups of individual apprentices.

APPRENTICESHIPS AND MENTAL HEALTH

A recent review of mental ill-health among apprentices identified five key reasons why apprentices faced a reduced sense of wellbeing and potential mental ill-health – bullying, long hours, low wages, job insecurity and unrealistic expectations.(6) Orygen's consultation with young people completing apprenticeships further found that these key reasons were regularly the cause of young people experiencing mental ill-health while completing their apprenticeship.

BULLYING IN APPRENTICESHIPS

Bullying and abuse is one of the major risks to the mental health and wellbeing of apprentices. A study of trade industries by Safe Work Australia Workplace found that 39 per cent of mental disorder claims were caused by harassment, bullying or exposure to violence.(7) Young workers were particularly susceptible, with16 per cent more likely to be compensated for anxiety or stress disorders and over half more likely to have a mental disorder claim as a result of exposure to workplace or occupational violence compared to older workers.(7)

A 2020 survey of Queensland construction industry apprentices found that just over 27 per cent had experienced bullying in the past 6 months.(8) Previously, surveys of apprentices who did not complete their apprenticeship found that for a quarter of apprentices, bullying was a factor in deciding to withdraw from their apprenticeship.(9)

"I was bullied at work ... I was worried that if I said anything I may be forced to leave"

The Productivity Commission in their final report on mental health have identified that apprentices may be considered 'soft targets' due to an imbalance of power and status and limited potential to defend themselves. It has been noted that apprentices struggle to fit in and higher members of the hierarchy can be seen as inaccessible.(6, 10)

WORKPLACE CONDITIONS

Apprentices often face long working days. Working long days has a compounding impact on a young person's wellbeing and has negative consequences for study, sleep, diet and social connection.

Apprentices are also more likely to experience financial stress due to their comparatively low pay. An extended period of low wages can undermine confidence and create a sense of urgency to obtain the qualification as quickly as possible.(6)

Lastly, apprentices are more likely to be provided responsibilities beyond their level of knowledge with impractical deadlines. Pressures due to unrealistic expectations in the workplace can have a detrimental impact on mental health that could also lead to bullying, as the apprentice may be perceived as not completing the requested tasks.(6)

HIGH RISK APPRENTICES

Research indicates that the mental health of young people is further jeopardised if they join male-dominated "blue-collar" industries. These industries and trade-related occupations tend to exacerbate psychological distress through risk factors including poor working conditions, work stress and psychosocial factors such as unsupportive workplace relationships.(11)

Apprentices in male-dominated industries have also been found to have the highest prevalence of risky alcohol and other drug (AOD) use.(12) Variations in AOD use among workgroups are also influenced by poor working conditions, work stress and workplace psychosocial factors.(13)

There is also evidence that male-dominated industries such as the construction industry have increased suicide rates among people within that industry.(14) Similarly, a study of suicide in the Queensland construction industry found that workplace psychosocial factors played a contributory role in the increased rates of suicide among people working in the construction industry.(15)

Australian construction apprentices are a high risk group for poor mental health with relatively high levels of psychological distress. Construction apprentices had significantly higher mean score for psychological distress when compared to Australians of similar age and gender.(16)

One approach which has been tailored to construction apprentices is MATES in Construction. MATES is supported by the Australian Government to provide a local care program on construction sites. A five year review of the MATES program has noted a slight relative decline in the suicide rates of men within the Queensland construction industry.(17) However, this study did note that they could not draw a causal relationship between MATES and that slight reduction.

OPTIONS TO SUPPORT WELLBEING

As highlighted earlier, there are a range of workplace experiences which can increase the risk of mental ill-health among young people undertaking apprenticeships. This section will outline and examine programs and models which aim to support wellbeing among apprentices. This will focus upon anti-bullying programs, mentoring and peer support, Employee Assistance Program, digital supports, and resilience training.

RESPONDING TO WORKPLACE BULLYING

Workplace bullying is a common issue faced by young people in apprenticeships. Bullying in the workplace is generally reflective of cultural issues within that workplace/industry and requires a workplace/industry wide response to minimise the risk of bullying occurring.(18)

The traditional approach of formally reporting bullying has been shown to be ineffective and can lead to increased harm. Instead, educational interventions which promote professional conduct in the workplace have been shown to be effective.(19) One limitation of educational interventions is they do not provide in-the-moment assistance to a person who is dealing with bullying.

A further approach to protect the victims of bullying involves cognitive rehearsal of responses to common workplace bullying behaviours. This approach provides apprentices with basic bullying information and a safe environment to learn and practice responses toward bullying behaviours through cooperative group work, building confidence in workplace bullying management.(20)

Organisational leadership style is also related to workplace bullying. Both authoritarian and laissez-faire' leadership patterns were strongly related to workplace bullying while 'democratic' leadership styles—such as supportive, authentic, transformational and fair leadership —protected the organisation against bullying.(21) As such, there is value in considering the provision of leadership training to organisations who employ apprentices.

The approaches outlined are promising, yet have not been tested for apprentices. As such, there is an opportunity to examine how these approaches could be tailored to apprentices in Australia.

POLICY SOLUTION

Safe Work Australia be commissioned to review anti-bullying approaches and develop best practice training and awareness materials. This review will be informed by stakeholder perspectives and use a co-design approach to developing an anti-bullying model.

Development of training and awareness materials would include trial and evaluation of the impact on wellbeing and mental health in the long- and short-term. This trial should be followed by national implementation across Apprenticeship Network providers.

MENTORING AND PEER SUPPORT

Common approaches to supporting wellbeing among apprentices include the development of mentoring and/or peer programs. In general, mentor programs take two forms. Hierarchical mentoring that involves someone with more experience, guiding someone with less, and peer mentoring that involves guidance from people who have the same or similar levels of experience. (22) (22)

A study of small to large construction firms by NCVER found that structured mentor-like programs were in place on most of the organisations studied.(22) These programs have been found to be for effective for apprentices, if the mentors or peers are identifiable to the young people.(23) It is also vital that young people are supported to communicate with their mentor or peer, as young apprentices place a heightened value on open communication. (24),(25)

"I learned a lot from other people who had completed apprenticeships"

While there is value in promoting mentoring and peer programs, more research is needed to identify and evaluate how mentoring and peer support programs can be optimised to support the mental health and wellbeing for young people.

EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS

An Employee Assistance Program (EAP) is a work-based intervention program designed to enhance the emotional, mental and general psychological wellbeing of all employees and includes services for immediate family members.(26) They differ from mentoring and peer approaches by providing an independent, outside voice to support employees in the event of mental ill-health.(26) EAP programs are resource intensive and are therefore most often provided by larger employers and group organisations which have access to EAP.

A systematic review in 2018 found that utilising EAPs enhanced employee outcomes in certain measures, specifically improved levels of presenteeism and functioning.(27) Yet, there is little information on how EAPs impact other measures, including wellbeing and productivity. There is also limited evidence on the effectiveness of EAP for apprentices.

Further research is needed to evaluate how EAP programs can be optimised for young people in apprenticeships, as there is also little evidence examining uptake rates of EAP by apprentices.

DIGITAL SUPPORTS

Digital supports are an accessible means of delivering wellbeing support options for apprentices. The use of mental health programs delivered online (eHealth) and via mobile technology (mHealth), can overcome barriers to young people receiving mental health information and support.(28)

While there are a range of digital mental health supports, there are few tailored to apprentices. One example is the mental health app, HeadGear, a tailored eHealth program for apprentices. An initial study of the app found that there was a positive qualitative response from the apprentices surveyed but limited quantitative evidence on the effectiveness of the program.(28)

An example of a digital support for young people is the Moderated Online Social Therapy (MOST) platform, which offers continuous, integrated face-to-face and digital care to young people accessing certain mental health services. Evaluations of the MOST platform have found that it has been successfully adapted for young people with a range of mental health concerns. (29–32)

Another digital platform for mental health support is eheadspace, which provides online and telephone support and counselling to young people. Early analysis of eheadspace has found that it is effective in reaching a unique client group who may not otherwise seek help and is associated with strong user satisfaction.(33, 34)

For each of the other digital supports outlined above, there is an opportunity to examine how impactful digital supports can be for young people completing apprenticeships. Such a study would lead towards new opportunities to use these supports to aid apprentices.

LIFE-SKILLS AND RESILIENCE TRAINING

Consultation with apprenticeship providers has suggested that resilience or life-skills training could be another beneficial approach to promote the wellbeing of young apprentices.

One such course is the Victorian Automobile Chamber of Commerce's life-skills course for apprentices. This course is provided during induction and includes training on mental health, alcohol and drugs, financial skills and communication skills with regular follow up training

Life-skills and resilience programs potentially have a protective effect against the negative aspects of apprenticeships. Resilience interventions based on a combination of cognitive-behavioural therapy and mindfulness

techniques appear to have a positive impact on individual resilience.(35)

There is emerging evidence demonstrating the effectiveness of online ehealth interventions, which target resilience in the workplace.(35) However, further trials into these training courses is recommended to ensure these courses meet the needs of young people.

IMPLEMENTATION OF WELLBEING SUPPORTS

For each of the possible wellbeing supports outlined, there is an opportunity for further research into their applicability for young people completing apprenticeships.

There are two key steps to support the development of this improved evidence base. The first is to develop a clear plan providing strategic guidance to employers and apprenticeship providers on how to support the mental health of apprentices. An equivalent example of this approach can be seen with National Mental Health and Wellbeing Roadmap

for the road transport, warehousing and logistics industries developed by the Healthy Heads in Trucks & Sheds Foundation and supported by the Australian Government.(36) The heavy vehicle industry needed to address concerns around employee wellbeing, and the roadmap outlines a path forward for all parties.

Secondly, and concurrently, there is a need for trials of government funded wellbeing approaches at selected employers and apprenticeship providers to examine how wellbeing supports can be made accessible for apprentices. To provide the greatest benefit to apprentices, these trials should initially be offered to small and medium sized businesses.

Larger companies tend to have greater financial and human resources. Further, larger employers tend to have less attrition among apprentices than small employers.(4) Research by Jobs Queensland found that larger firms with more than 50 employees, a human resources department and have been in operation for longer than ten years have higher retention and completion rates than very small businesses with few staff.(37).

POLICY SOLUTION

The Department of Education, Skills and Employment develop, in consultation with employers and apprenticeship providers, a pathway to supporting the mental health and wellbeing of apprentices. This will outline the options available for employers to best support apprentice wellbeing.

Trials of wellbeing supports in selected small and medium businesses who employ apprentices will inform development of the roadmap. A minimum of 50 businesses be funded to implement one of the following wellbeing supports for a period of two years:

- peer support trialled at a minimum of four businesses, with at least 40 total apprentices;
- mentoring programs trialled at a minimum of four businesses, with at least 40 total apprentices;
- EAP trialled at a minimum of three businesses, with at least 30 total apprentices;
- digital supports trialled at a minimum of five businesses, with at least 50 total apprentices; and
- life-skills and resilience training trialled at a minimum of two businesses, with at least 20 total apprentices.

Trial sites should be selected through a public tender process. The selection of the businesses should comprise (1) a range of small and medium size organisations; (2) in metropolitan and regional centres; and (3) represent the breadth of industries employing apprentices.

The Department of Education, Skills and Employment will evaluate apprentice awareness and use of these wellbeing supports and publicly report their findings.

REGULATION OF APPRENTICESHIPS

The states and territories are primarily responsible for regulating the employment and conditions of apprentices in Australia. Each state and territory has their own governing legislation and compliance entity. The Australian Government developed the National Code of Good Practice for Australian Apprenticeships – the Apprenticeships Code – to provide a common set of obligations designed to form the basis of any agreement between an apprentice and an employer.

Through the Apprenticeships Code, the Australian Government has a potential mechanism to improve the experiences of apprentices and support their mental health. The Apprenticeships Code requires that the employer will provide 'a safe workplace, free from bullying and verbal, physical, racial and sexual abuse' and will ensure that 'all occupational health and safety requirements are addressed'. While the provision of a 'safe' workplace does include protection of mental health, there should be a more explicit reference to the need to promote mental wellbeing among apprentices.

There are two primary ways in which this could occur. Firstly, the code could make specific reference to the systemic factors which lead to mental ill-health among apprentices – notably working conditions and bullying – and specifically provide that employers must reasonably endeavour to respond to these potential systemic risks. Secondly, the Apprenticeships Code could be used to provide best practice examples of how an employer or an organisation can promote wellbeing among apprentices.

POLICY SOLUTION

Complete an efficacy review of the National Code of Good Practice for Australian Apprenticeships. Key objectives for the review will:

- consider how the national code can be amended to provide for greater reference to supporting mental wellbeing among apprentices;
- determine whether the national code enables mitigation of differences in the states and territories regulation of apprentices;
- examine how the national code can respond to existing systemic flaws within the apprenticeships system, and help support apprentices' mental health; and
- determine whether the national code can be supported by guidance material outlining best practice approaches for mental health supports for apprentices.

This efficacy review is to occur following the aforementioned trials of wellbeing supports to ensure the review reflects this additional evidence.

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ADVOCACY IN MIND

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