Address by Jim Barron, CEO Group Training Australia

Skills in the Resources Sector – A Challenge for VET

- For this session, three questions were posed
- The three short answers to them are: No; with great difficulty; and only through exceptional planning, sustained investment and utilising existing resources and innovating with new ones.
- But such questions and this entire topic deserve more than three simple and straightforward answers such as the ones I have provided
- It is why the National Resources Sector Employment Taskforce was established
- And it is why on that Taskforce the government sought to cover all relevant bases by appointing a wide ranging and varied representative group
- We all have a role to play
- No one group or individual holds the answers nor corners the market with wisdom or policy solutions
- It will have to be a collaborative effort
- GTA and the group training network are part of that collaboration particularly in their role as facilitators and intermediaries and mentors – three recent buzzwords in the VET policy space

- A number of recent reports have highlighted the role of GTOs as intermediaries in the labour market linking employers seeking to develop their skilled labour force with employees seeking careers in skilled occupations.
- GTOs effectively facilitate this relationship; absorb risk and enhance outcomes for both parties.
- Skills Australia’s National Workforce Development Strategy saw GTOs as important elements to build on in delivering increased productivity, employee engagement and job satisfaction by making better use of skills in the workforce
- It identified GTOs as “brokers of business and skills development” while the Resource Sector Employment Taskforce saw GTOs as “facilitators of skills development”

- GTOs are a unique workforce development tool because of their focus on linking demand for skilled labour with both training opportunities and people interested in skilled careers.
- The need to win and retain support from host employers means they are focused on service delivery and performance that adds value for their customers.
The group training model is ideally suited to servicing the growing and demanding needs of many in the resources sector.

The first thing to say is that anything that assists group training organisations, wherever they might be located, to carry on the business of group training will assist the resources sector to meet its needs for skilled workers.

As far as I am concerned, group training is underutilised and under-resourced. As the Taskforce recognises, opportunities abound for group training to seriously ramp up its engagement.

But for this to happen, flexibility in regulation is key. At the moment, overregulation and duplication of effort across jurisdictions remain major impediments.

The issue of “rotation” is but one example.

The more workplaces that are available to a GTO the more chance it has of not only being able to recruit a new apprentice in the first instance but also to maintain that same apprentices employment and training when he or she is returned by a host employer no longer able to provide productive work.

The capacity to find an alternative placement is the strength of group training and minimises the likelihood of down time which is the point at which an apprentice is most at risk of walking away from his or her trade.

Clearly there would be enormous benefit if GTOs could more easily move an apprentice at risk of being stood down to a site in the resources sector, or a site within another sector that is enjoying the spin off benefits of the resources boom. This could entail being moved either interstate or intrastate out of the GTOs usual catchment area to a host employer who does not usually use the services of the GTO in question. There are currently however major barriers and disincentives to this including:

The training contract does not accommodate movement between jurisdictions nor is funding automatically available for the continuation of off-the-job training.

The training contract does not provide for GTOs to share apprentices between them within the same State to mitigate down time without cancelling and renewing the contract each time there is a change of employer, effectively discouraging GTOs from sharing.

OH & S and workcover differences have acted as disincentives; and

There are costs associated with such relocations such as accommodation, travel and arranging for the provision of pastoral care and supervision from afar which can make the exercise prohibitive for a GTO.
The point I want to make here is that if more flexible circumstances prevail than currently exist, the group training model is ideally suited to deal with skill needs in the resource sector— in the short, medium and long term.

Group training and its commitment to pastoral care and mentoring is already a major factor why one in five indigenous trainees and apprentices are under group training management.

Moreover, the model is well placed to be a key driver behind attracting mature aged workers into the resource sector.

And there are also opportunities to hold the group training model up to the light and examine different ways and means of applying it to deal with skill demands.

One of the recommendations in the Taskforce Report is to pilot a program that looks to use group training “up front” as a “incubator” if you will and then after a period of time (18– 24 months) release them for permanent positions with resources and construction companies.

Another is to broker group training tradespeople with an interest and aptitude for training, assessing, mentoring and supervising into Certificate Level 4 in Training and Assessment or other relevant qualifications.

Whilst we all want the system to be as flexible as possible to deal with the skill demands of the resources sector, we also need to be flexible in our thinking as well.

New paradigms need to be placed on the table.

There may be ways to deliver more traditional trade skills to the Australian economy other than through the time-honoured mechanism of contracted training, or at least with limited or less recourse to a contract of training (but debate continues to be stifled).

After all, the current system only works if there is an employer willing to take on an apprentice, pay a training wage and train that apprentice in the workplace. For too long now Australian industry has, for one reason or another, withdrawn from the process.

It is not as though traditional trade training without a contract of training is a new idea.

Have we not all heard of institutional pre-apprenticeships?

There is all sorts of evidence that such courses lead to better outcomes and higher completions and there is no suggestion of quality being compromised. Nor is it controversial.

GTA believes that the Taskforce should be at the forefront of 100 flowers blooming.

Nothing should be off the table.
• Institutionalised training pathways should be part of this – and if a period of indentured training is attached to the end of it so be it if it allows the debate to move forward
• In saying this we at GTA are in no way advocating a watering down and / or weakening of the traditional apprenticeship system.
• Rather we are advocating for an honest examination of possible supplementary pathways that could ameliorate skills shortages and provide additional opportunities for job seekers and career aspirants