



Building effective RTO- employer partnerships: examples of good practice — support document: case studies

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This document was produced by the author(s) based on their research for *Building effective RTO-employer partnerships: good practice guide*, and is an added resource for further information. The Good Practice Guide is available on NCVET's Portal: <https://www.ncver.edu.au>.

Publisher's note

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This document should be attributed as Berghella, T, Circelli, M & Trimboli, D 2023, *Building effective RTO-employer partnerships: support document - case studies*, NCVER, Adelaide.

This work has been produced by NCVER on behalf of the Australian Government and state and territory governments, with funding provided through the Australian Government Department of Employment and Workplace Relations.

Published by NCVER, ABN 87 007 967 311

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About this support document

This support document provides the detailed description of each of the six case studies that formed the basis for the development of the accompanying Good Practice Guide focused on strategies RTOs can use to foster the development of quality partnerships with employers.

The premise for undertaking this project was our interest in what ‘effective’ RTO-employer partnerships looked like. In essence, why and how did these partnerships form? What were the key drivers, and what challenges were encountered in establishing, and sustaining, the partnerships? We were also interested in the benefits that came from these partnerships, not just for the RTO or employer more generally, but for their staff and trainers and assessors too.

The project was conducted in two main stages with first involving the surveying or interviewing of representatives from relevant government, employer, and training bodies (see the accompanying Research Report for more details about Stage 1).

The second stage, which is the focus of this support document, involved case studies of six RTO-employer partnerships. A number of potential case study partnerships were suggested by Project Advisory Committee members and were considered alongside those suggested by participants in Stage 1. Others were identified through desktop research. From this master list, a shortlist of partnership case studies was compiled that captured a reasonable spread of jurisdictions, industry types, and employer sizes (see table 1 for a summary of the characteristics).

Table 1 Characteristics of the participating employers in the RTO-employer partnerships

Case Study	RTO size [†]	Employer size [†]	Industry area	Location
1	Large	Large	Meat processing	New South Wales Regional
2	Medium	Large	Primary health	New South Wales Regional
3	Large	Large	Disability Care Services	Western Australia Regional
4	Small	Small	Retail (bicycle sales, repair)	Tasmania
5	Medium	Medium	Construction	Northern Territory
6	Large	Medium	Food manufacturing	Tasmania

[†]ABS employer-size categories: micro (0–4 employees), small (5–19 employees), medium (20–199 employees), large (200 or more employees), ABS 8165.0 *Counts of Australian Businesses, including Entries and Exits, June 2018 to June 2022, Annual Data cube 2: Businesses by main state by industry class by employment size ranges, Table 1, December 2022.*

Consultations were undertaken with individuals who were directly involved in the RTO-employer partnership at both the management level (i.e., RTO managers and employer managers) and at an operations level (i.e., RTO training and assessment staff and employees participating in training and assessment service). In some of the cases studies, current learners were also interviewed.

The topics covered in the consultations with RTO and employer partners are outlined in table 2. The interview questions for these consultations were developed by drawing on the literature review, feedback from the Project Advisory Committee, and the insights acquired through the survey administered to key stakeholders in Stage 1 (refer to the Research Report for more detail).

Table 2 Topics discussed in the RTO-employer consultations

About the partnership	Questions relating to the how the partnership was established; training-related questions (type of training, how many learners, how often, where it's delivered etc.); whether other services are provided or requested (e.g., help in navigating the VET system etc.)
Drivers and motivators	<p>Questions relating to the how many learners/workers are involved in the partnership; training-related questions (type of training, how many learners, how often, where it's delivered etc.); whether they have been involved in RTO-employ partnerships previously and if so, to make comparisons</p> <p>What drives the organisation (RTO or employer) to enter into the partnership. What drives them to work on the partnership</p>
Benefits and challenges of partnerships	<p>What are the main benefits to each party in the partnership? What are the main challenges for each party in the partnership?</p>
Determining success in partnerships	<p>What qualities do their organisation/the partner organisation have that make it a good partner? How do the qualities complement each other and strengthen the partnership? (Looking at RTOs specifically), what elements of their organisation do they think could be improved to make it more attractive to new industry partners?</p>
Supporting and sustaining partnerships	<p>What supports were useful in establishing the partnership? What supports are helpful in sustaining the partnership? What other roles and capabilities are required to support the partnership? What additional supports and capabilities would improve the partnership? What supports or initiatives would help other employers and RTOs establish and sustain effective partnerships?</p>

What follows is a detailed description of each case study covering the topics listed in table 2. To assist readers who may not wish to read all case studies, we have highlighted a particular aspect of each case study in their respective titles.

Case study 1: the importance of relationship management

Describing the partners

The organisations in focus in this case study were a large RTO and a large size employer operating in the meat processing sector. The employer was based in regional Australia and had a long history in the meat processing industry, having been established 90 years ago.

The RTO was a large provider with more than 400 000 learners enrolled per year in courses across its multiple metropolitan and regional campuses. A large VET provider, the RTO offered a wide range of courses which serviced a variety of industries, including agriculture, building and construction, food processing, engineering, hospitality, health care, and early childhood education and care. The courses offered ranged from preparatory courses through to VET certificate and diploma level qualifications.

This partnership had been in place for more than a decade.

Participants

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six individuals: three people representing the RTO and three people representing the employer.

The three RTO representatives included a business development manager, a training co-ordinator and a head teacher. The business development manager had been working with the RTO in the same role for five years. They were responsible for identifying the training needs of medium to large employers and working with the relevant teaching section to develop training solutions to meet those needs. The training coordinator had been working with the RTO for 44 years and in the partnership for 15 years. They were responsible for coordinating the [meat] industry training at the employer. The head teacher had been working with the RTO since 2007 and working in the partnership with the employer for the last five years. They were primarily involved in organising civil construction and high-risk training and also delivered some training and assessment.

The three employer representatives included one training manager, a supervisor and an apprentice. The training manager had been working with the employer for about 18 months and was responsible for coordinating all training for the employer as well as managing work health and safety.

The supervisor had worked with the employer for seven years during which time they had the opportunity to undertake a variety of work-related courses. They had been in the supervisor role for about three years. Prior to that their first job with the employer was as a meat worker in the boning room, during which time they completed the Certificate II in Meat Processing, which was delivered on-site. They had then completed an unaccredited beef specification course and a Certificate IV in Work Health and Safety, and now supervised a team of meat workers in the boning room.

The Certificate IV qualification, which the supervisor had undertaken, was delivered on campus and during COVID restrictions. The travel time to the campus was 45 minutes. The supervisor noted that restrictions brought in as a response to COVID (wearing masks, regular sanitisation of learning equipment including computers, online learning), together with the travel time and an extreme weather event, presented some challenges:

so work allowed for me to go to [the RTO] and they paid me to go to [the RTO] which is great help. So we were sort of in and out of the classroom doing face-to-face and doing sort of a bit of it online.

Then we went back into the classroom for six months or so. Then the floods happened in Lismore cause I was going to the Lismore Campus [which] obviously shut down and it still is shut down. So we went back online for a few weeks, then we actually got a classroom at the Ballina campus. I only ended up going to the Ballina campus once, but they always tried to make a facility available. If they couldn't make a facility available, we used Microsoft meetings I think.

The apprentice had been working with the employer for almost 10 years and had been involved in training for nearly all of that time. They had started on the slaughter floor and completed the Certificate II in Meat Processing which was delivered in the workplace during working hours. They were currently in their second year of the Certificate III in Engineering - Mechanical Trade which is delivered on campus, currently one day per week. Attendance on campus involves travel time of up to one hour each way.

Describing RTO-employer partnerships more generally

In responding to the question about how they would describe an RTO-employer partnership, the RTO business development manager described the reciprocity of an RTO-employer partnership. They said,

it's about having mutual outcomes and mutual benefit in relation to training and upskilling employees within a workplace. So, the RTO, their role will be to identify the training and provide the training solutions, and the employer on the other side of the partnership is very much about what are the training needs of their workplace. And... through that partnership is working together to try and meet the outcomes of the employer in terms of training and upskilling their people.

The RTO training co-ordinator described an RTO employer partnership as being a two-way commitment than a standard customer-supplier relationship:

it's basically where we're working pretty much as a preferred supplier, so to speak, and trying to find training solutions to their training requirements in a way that suits them best. So it's really about us suiting their needs not just in the qualifications but in how its delivered and with sticking well within the training package rules but customising the training to make it relevant to their needs. And from their point of view, them being committed to working with us to make it happen so that making the delivery happen is a joint arrangement. Not just, OK, we've signed you guys up to deliver cert 2 go and do it. No, how does it work for you? How does it work for us? OK, so we've made a commitment at the same time you guys have made a commitment and you've got to honour your part as well as us honouring our part. And in us honouring our part means going way beyond what is just required to deliver the qualification.

The RTO head teacher said an RTO-employer partnership involved anticipating and meeting employer needs. They said,

getting to know the people and the customers' needs so you're able to respond quickly and directly to their needs basically. So you know what their ongoing requirements will be or you have a really good idea of their requirements and how you can look after them. We tend to have, especially in [this region], we have probably half a dozen customers that are regular big clients. And you sort of have a fair idea in advance what they're going to need. Then you try to keep teachers available or work the schedules around the big clients so you're satisfying those needs.

The employer training manager said an RTO employer relationship supports them to plan and manage their training. They said it's,

having a partnership with a particular training organisation that you can go to and just say, 'look I need to do training and this'; it just makes it a lot easier from my side of things to be able to structure things and organise and plan out your years 'cause we can organise and spread that training out. And particularly when we talk about the partnership, I guess that's the greatest strength. We've

probably grown through this partnership over the last couple of years, getting ourselves to a point where we are a lot more organised and we're going to be able to make sure that we don't miss key parts or training or peak compliance training that we need to ensure we do. We're not going to miss that as easily having a partnership where we've got that structure and organisation. And I guess having a central point to go to also helps as well because they have a better understanding of what we're trying to do as well. In particular we've been at [the RTO] for a number of years now, so they've been able to develop themselves as well to better cater for us. So that's another thing with having a partnership with an organisation that understands what we need.

Describing the case study partnership

Partnership establishment

The RTO and the employer had a long history, primarily in relation to the delivery of the Certificate II in Meat Processing, going back more than a decade. However, over that time the relationship lapsed for a period. The RTO training coordinator said,

We'd been approaching them for years about delivering training. And our first agreement to deliver training there was for a pre-employment program whereby we had irreconcilable differences at the time and just said we wouldn't do it because the manager at the time did not believe in having women in the boning room and so he said our prevocational course could not include women. We will not run that program there, you know. Since then, there's a major change and if you walk into their boning room today it's 75% women. And the coordinator I had at the time was a female who, when we first started working there, the whole place would erupt into wolf whistles. So she would wear bright pink boots. Yeah. So we started with that.

The training coordinator remembered training in the tannery. They said,

Because they'd been negotiating with [the RTO] for years to try to deliver a qualification and had a major standoff with [the RTO] about it because it sat at that time within the fashion section. And their [the employer] view of training was that they would bus them all 50 kilometres to the nearest [RTO campus] to deliver in something that was totally irrelevant to what they were doing. And so we started out doing the tannery stuff which sort of proved ourselves to them and then the delivery I do has been incredibly up and down ever since you know.

The RTO business development manager explained,

we did have had a long history with [the employer], but what they hadn't had before was that role in which what I do, and I'm not trying to overstate what I do, but it does make it very easy for the employer to...they know they can pick up a phone today, any day, anytime and ring me up and say we need this, we need that. And prior to that, they didn't have that. It kind of lapsed and the training wasn't as coordinated.

Then, about five years ago, the RTO business development manager cold-called the employer to ask about their training needs and their past relationship with the RTO. The business development manager said, 'it started from a cold call, which was to their Learning and Development Manager and that initial conversation led to near a 5-year relationship, which has morphed into [the RTO] almost becoming part of the business. So we're embedded with absolutely every decision that they make now in terms of training.'

The RTO business development manager explained that he was developing, in collaboration with the employer training manager, an annual training calendar for the whole of 2023. The business development manager also involved the relevant teaching sections at the RTO in finalising the training calendar.

This openness to establishing partnerships with employers had not necessarily been a common business approach used by the RTO. As the RTO training coordinator, who as noted earlier has been employed with the RTO for over 40 years, said,

Well, [the RTO], for most of my time before we got the new structure with a business development person where it became one of [the RTO's] goals, there was nothing really driving [the RTO] to partner with an organisation. It was our own initiative really. The lady I [previously] had coordinating had a degree in workforce development, so she was really passionate about people as well as the training. But, yeah, the partnership stuff was really something that we, our own team, kept going and at times that was despite other people in [the RTO] very much wishing that we'd stop.

About the training: what, where and when

A broad range of training services were delivered, and the amount of training had been increasing over the last five years. The RTO business development manager said,

their staffing size varies, but when they're at full capacity and full production, they can have up to 1400 staff on site on any given day. And they have just a huge amount of training needs and then lots of different vocational areas...they've got some really diverse training needs within the business. And through that relationship in the partnership they come to [us] first for everything.

The employer training manager explained the broad training they delivered. This included required compliance training, such as First Aid, working in confined spaces, working at heights, elevated work platform, forklift training, and animal welfare.

Before I took on this head teacher role previous head teachers tended to concentrate on civil construction. Whereas I come from a high-risk work background, so I sort of offered more of that sort of courses as well. And when that become available to [the employer] well then they started getting more training from us because we could offer those courses. (RTO head teacher).

The head teacher described the learners as

a whole mixture of people. It depends on their work area. Lot of maintenance people would do that type of thing. It depends what sort of equipment is in their area and whether if they have to clean out the equipment, it'll be classed as a confined space. Like they might have to get in the bowels of something, and there might be a confined space, so I'll have to do the training. That would be the main one we deliver. We also deliver, we haven't done it very regularly, but we've delivered White Card which is your 'Prepared to work in the construction industry'.

Asked about why workers at a meat processing plant needed to do white card, the head teacher said,

... although it says 'Prepared to work in the construction industry', the White Card really prepares you for any sort of industry or any sort of warehouse or manufacturing. It really just covers a lot about identifying hazards and risks. So it can really be applied to any industry, although it's called, prepare to work safely in the construction industry, they should really just be prepared to work safely. So we do a bit of that.

- Meat processing

A key course the RTO delivers was the Certificate II in Meat Processing (Abattoirs) for entry workers. The RTO business development manager explained,

So in the, well, they're called kill rooms, floor to floor they can have up to 400 to 600 workers on the floor on any given day, cutting meat straight off the carcass. So it's a fairly high-risk environment and it's really specific skills. And so [the RTO] has been training their workers for a number of years now to improve those skills mostly around cutting and safety. So we're now embedded with those workers.

We have [the RTO] trainers on site at [the employer's] most days of the week, so they actually are on the work floor and working around; they're observing, they're assessing.

Workers could also progress to higher-level qualifications. The training manager explained,

We've put quite a few people through the cert 2 in meat processing and we also do a cert 3 in meat processing as well and people can continue on cert 2 to cert 3, cert 4, even up to the diploma, advanced diploma level. But yeah, a lot of our entry level workers we put through the cert 2 once they've been here for a while if they're interested.

- Other traineeships

Traineeships were also delivered to workers in administration and information technology and the employer was looking at offering traineeships to agricultural workers on their farms.

- Traditional trades

The employer also employed apprentices in traditional trades. The employer training manager said, 'we put on probably around four to six full-time apprentices a year, fitters and electricians, and possibly two or three school base apprentices.'

- Other accredited training

The employer training manager talked about other training that they were exploring with the RTO, such as training related to work health and safety, and risk management; training particularly targeted for those in supervisory roles. They said,

the other key thing that we also do training wise is we look at developing specific training. So at the moment, we're looking at developing training for our supervisors and managers around WHS and risk management and being able to develop that, to mould with our actual WHS management system. So not only are we going to give them the skills and knowledge around that, but we're able to actually make that program, I guess, more embedded around what our actual systems are. So when they're learning, they're going to be able to take those learnings back and put it in a lot easier in the workplace. So [the RTO's] got the ability to be able to make those changes to their programs to allow that sort of thing. So that's one example that we're working on with [the RTO] running those sorts of programs.

The supervisor who participated in the interviews had recently completed the Certificate IV in Work Health and Safety and found it to be valuable, 'So I wanted to learn more about the work health and safety side of things to help me with my job. Moving forward, it may possibly open up other opportunities further down the track'. The supervisor completed the Certificate IV during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic and under COVID restrictions which included having to undertake part of the course online instead of on-campus. More recently, flooding in the region resulted in him completing some of the course online. He noted that moving to an online format was not problematic, rather that it 'was fine, actually there's no real difference, because, I mean, they corresponded via e-mail. They had two teachers during the 12-month period and they gave out their work numbers. I could call them if I had a question outside of [the RTO] training day.' When he did attend on-campus, the supervisor was supported to attend the weekly training sessions which involved travel time of around 45 minutes each way.

- Non accredited training

The employer also accessed non accredited training through the RTO. The training manager explained,

a lot of the other short courses are courses that are handy as well for just giving people skills to help them with their jobs. So we're in the middle at the moment actually in working closely with [the RTO] to try and promote some of those short courses as well and give them the opportunity to

develop. I guess it's not so much, like a lot of those courses like Excel and that a lot of people can use computers and do it Excel, but it's just giving them the opportunity to say right, I well, here's a short course you can do to expand on those skills or to be able to do more. So that's another advantage that a large organisation like [the RTO] and partnering with them, they have a broader scope of training that you can use.

In terms of where the training was delivered, it was mostly at the work site. The employer training manager explained,

we try to do as much of it as we can here, cause obviously that cuts down a lot on our costs and it also increases our ability to be able to train more people, I guess, put more people through the course rather than paying for a lot of expenses for them to travel or accommodation. That's an extra lot of people that we can put into these courses and also by doing it here, they could do a lot of it hands on.

The RTO business development manager explained,

So on-site they have some training rooms and so some of the training, particularly if it's theory classes, our training will be delivered in their on-site training rooms. And just by doing so much of our training on-site there it takes away some disruption to the workforce if they have to down tools and go to a local campus. But in saying that, we do do a fair bit of campus delivery as well. So, it's a bit of a mixed delivery mode. It's never evening classes unless there's individuals from the workforce who haven't been able to create like a cohort of workers and an individual needs training and they might join what we would call a mainstream class at a campus. But for the most part, it's very much, it's dedicated training for [the employer]... mostly we're delivering to dedicated cohorts of staff in the workplace.

In relation to the meat processing training, the RTO training coordinator explained,

This group is all delivered in the workplace. We insist on the theory, delivery and assessment being done ... off the job on the work site ... It's a very different delivery model to anybody else that I know that's working in the meat industry. [The employer] is different in their approach. Nearly every abattoir starts all their new workers as a cert 2 trainee, which is very largely tied to the government incentives that they get. [The employer] will not start the employees as a cert 2, so they're normally three to six months or more into their employment before we do any training which makes our training much more relevant to them and much easier to get through because they've got real experience. And a lot of cases it's not a matter of explaining what they need to do, but it's more the why's and the fine tuning and working directly with their line managers or their leading hands as to, 'OK what issues have you got? What do we need? What do these people, guys and girls need help with?' Etcetera. And it gives them an opportunity to really get involved. I think it really improves their retention.

The supervisor had three workers reporting to them who were doing meat processing training. The supervisor described how the training was integrated into the worker's day, beginning with class-based training and ending with practical-based training in the processing area: 'So yeah, it's all delivered on site and it sort of worked around our work hours.' They felt this made it easier for people: 'Like I said earlier, after the guys finished their course they come into the shift for a couple of hours so we still get a few hours for the day and they've already done their course the week. So just sort of ties in nicely: they're getting a course, we're not losing them for the whole day.'

Similarly, the employer training manager valued the RTO's ability to deliver all compliance training at the work site and the fact learners did not need to travel:

You can't really go past being able to deliver on site in your own environment, where it's easy for them [the workers], they can just walk straight out of the workplace into the training room, and then after they're finished, they either back to the work, or they could go home straight away ... that's definitely an advantage. But I also think... the flexibility and the delivery, that too is a big advantage ... during that COVID time a lot of organisations probably didn't have the ability to be able to deliver it, whereas [the RTO] has got those advancements to be able to do different types of training and deliver in different ways when they need to.

In terms of timing, training was delivered across the shifts. This was to accommodate the business operating 24 hours a day, seven days a week, with two main shifts—a day shift and afternoon shift (there is also a night shift that cleans). The employer training manager explained,

...we've actually got a couple of [the RTO] teachers that come on to site on a regular basis that are pretty much part of our team really in a way. Like they work for [the RTO], but they come on site and deliver that training in the work environment. So they do cross into the different shifts as required. So you can certainly do it with those sort of programs. Because we are a larger organisation we also, with some of the programs and training that we run, we do try to schedule training to cater across shifts as well. But in saying that there is times where we do have to bring people off night shifts and the afternoon shifts to fit into the various training courses.

For the meat processing training, the RTO training coordinator explained they were currently doing morning and afternoon shifts to try and correspond with the workers shift start times as much as possible. The RTO training coordinator further explained,

So one lot's doing 6 till 10, the others are doing 11 till 3. And then there's obviously people that miss those sessions and whatever. So then we spend our time ... walking around the floors, doing their practical assessments and ...-job observations You know it's observing them and asking them questions.

The head teacher also said the compliance training was done during business hours.

About the learners

With respect to the number of learners engaged in training at any one time, this fluctuated according to the training need. For example, the RTO head teacher explained that around 200 learners in groups of 8 to 12 did compliance training each year, while the RTO business development manager indicated that, at the time of the interview, there was a group of 20 supervisors scheduled to undertake work health and safety and risk management training in the first quarter of 2023. The employer training manager also noted that,

at the moment, we're in the middle, we've just enrolled I think we're up to about 50 for this year. And that'll grow during the year. So we didn't do too many last year, we only did about 30 last year. The floods up here that we had and COVID sort of made it a little bit slow. The year before we did know over 100 through the cert 2.

Over time, the workforce had become increasingly diverse as the employer had implemented strategies to meet its labour demands. The RTO business development manager explained,

Yeah, it is diverse, but also traditionally, so the location's... a regional town, it has a large Aboriginal population ... as well. And their workers there traditionally have been mostly local. But in recent years they've really had to diversify. The turnover rate of staff there, because it's a challenging job working in an abattoir, the turnover rate's pretty high. And so the local labour market has become a bit short, it's dwindling. So in recent years they've had to reach out to different locations to basically get the numbers they need.

- Pacific Islander workers

The RTO and employer were currently developing a training program for a group of Pacific Islander workers on Temporary Work visas. The RTO business development manager said,

...there's a reasonable amount of workers on [403] and now this really large cohort with Pacific Islander workers¹. In terms of that cultural diversity there in the workplace, from my understanding and from feedback, it's a really positive thing for the workplace there. And it hasn't been division around nationality. It's actually, if anything, it's kind of brought people together a bit more. That was made really evident in the recent Northern Rivers floods in Lismore where those Pacific Islander workers actually got on the national news, I don't know if you saw it or not, but they were quite instrumental in getting out among the community and really assisting and volunteering in the flood recovery up there. So yeah, that diversification of the workforce is a quite a positive thing for [the employer].

The business development manager explained what they are currently working on. They said,

just to give an indication of numbers, and also probably to give an indication of the business' commitment to training, we're just currently enrolling a cohort of 120 of their staff and they're actually Pacific Islander workers where they've come out and started working with [the employer] during COVID because there were some labour shortages during that period. And so those workers they're on a specific visa that doesn't grant them any "Smart and Skilled" eligibility, so they don't access any funding for training. So, we've been able to lobby to get funding for these workers, and that's been approved. And so we're just about to start off with a cohort of 120 Pacific Islanders enrolling into the Certificate II in Meat Processing.

The training coordinator explained that 'the company is paying the \$1120 Smart and Skilled fee because NSW has given them an exemption from the full fee-paying thing which is a bit of a nightmare we're hitting at the moment.'

The training coordinator said, 'We've got a big group now that we're working through, which is a pilot group of 403 visa holders, Pacific Islanders. Which has just hit so many [sic] bureaucratic headwind that it's not funny, but they're a good group and we're slowly making it work.'

Drivers and motivators

What drives the employer to partner with the RTO?

- Quality service and training delivery

The employer training manager said,

... really the driving force is being able to find a provider that can deliver on our training needs and to be able to do the training at a high level and also to be able to maintain and be efficient with the training delivery. So they're very flexible like, for example, just this week alone we just started doing, next three weeks, we're doing forklift training because we need some more forklift operators. And so having that partnership there, I guess...they are able to go out of their way and try and move things around to cater for us knowing that we've got numbers that we could put on the ground so they can come on site and deliver it.

¹ Temporary Work (International Relations) visa (subclass 403) Pacific Australia Labour Mobility stream (homeaffairs.gov.au)

Related to this employer driver, the RTO training coordinator also suggested that the capacity of the RTO, in terms of ‘the availability of trainers, our flexibility, and our ability to cover a pretty wide range of their training needs’ was likely to be a driver the employer’s decision to choose the RTO.

- Understanding the need to invest in staff

The employer supervisor said,

How do I sort of explain it, the more that the [employer] puts into their workers, the more they’re going to get out of them. So obviously spend that time to train people to get a better quality, I guess at work to get more out of their workers, to make them feel valued. Yeah, I think that, you know, by them putting in the time, sending it extra courses makes you feel more valued as a worker and you’re going to try and do better; you’re going to try and better yourself. And yeah, just I think that’s probably the biggest reason.

The RTO head teacher agreed saying, ‘it’s the wide range of courses we can offer. And because we do have that government or state training connection and able to source the funding, I know it’s not exclusive to [the RTO], but we have got that connection and we have a wide range of expertise to call on as well.’

What drives the RTO to partner with the employer?

- A desire for quality outcomes and to provide a quality service

Describing the relationship as rewarding and mutually beneficial, the RTO business development manager said the driver for the RTO was the

ongoing work and good work with really good outcomes. It’s not like we’re just creating a course and we’re hoping some students might enrol. This is really genuine needed training. We know who the cohort is. We know why the participants are coming. We know what the outcomes are that the business wants. So, in terms of having a quality of student and learning outcomes it doesn’t get much better than that. It’s so understood and so targeted.

- RTO drivers - quality service

The RTO head teacher said,

It’s funny, with [the RTO] we can offer a wide range of courses and being honest here, some sections within [the RTO] don’t have the inclination to offer short courses. Where I’ve come from, that background, I’m happy to deal with the business development people and try and offer the training where we can. A lot of the time we can get funding for these courses through training services so that makes it appealing to the client to get a lot of the training for free or at least subsidised. And so [there’s a] cost benefit to them and to me, it’s just the satisfaction of providing a good service.

- Employer size

The employer training manager said, ‘We’re a large organisation that ... has a lot of training needs, so I assume we’d be a pretty good customer as well.’

The supervisor said,

Well, being such a large organisation, I think we’ve got sort of roughly 1200 employees we can fill the classroom if that makes sense. We have, you know, just for example, like 10 people that that are wanting to undergo a Cert 2 in Meat Processing or Cert whatever other, you know, courses that they’ve done here. So I think that helps [the RTO] actually justify running those courses. We also have the facilities here like we have rooms sort of like this room, you know, you can run a small class from. Sounds silly but it’s probably another bonus for [the RTO].

The apprentice said, 'It's probably just a large place. There's like a lot of opportunities out there and just help them really, it's a large working place around this community.'

Benefits and challenges of partnerships

Here we were interested in what the perceived benefits and challenges were for both the RTO and the employer, and their staff, from being in the partnership.

What are the main benefits for the employer and its staff?

- Developing the skills of their staff

The training manager said that the meat processing training gave workers,

a better understanding of our industry and it also gives them a piece of, I guess, a certification to show what they're doing in the workplace that they can take away if they want to work [elsewhere]. 'Cause it's as much as that we're trying to give these people some skills for life as well. So by doing the cert 2 in meat processing, you know, hopefully this is an industry they like it and they stay in and they can progress in. But at least at the end of the day they've got something if they want to go and look for another career, they have something to take with them.

The apprentice said, 'It's just a good thing to have really. Like you're putting a lot of people for a different certificates and stuff and bettering their knowledge of certain things. And if they want to stay in that industry, that's good. I mean, broadens everything for your future.'

- Managing turnover

The employer's training manager said,

there is a reasonable turnover. It's one of the things that we do need to focus on and I guess that's why training and having those partnerships is so important as well, because it does help us in reducing the turnover and also it helps us, you know, with other things around the HR part of the business as well trying to control absenteeism and all those sorts of things by educating them, being able to train them, put them through all the courses that we need to, it helps that side of things as well.

- Training outcomes

The RTO business development manager said the employer,

absolutely see the huge benefit in the training in terms of the outcome of their workers. Some of it's, you know, it's purely about they need a license and so they do that training, they have to have that license to remain employed in their role. But some of it, some of the training is very much about building the general skills, knowledge, quality of person, of their workers. We did do some leadership training going back a couple of years ago where we put, I think in the end it was about 100 of their workplace supervisors through a leadership and management part qualification...it was only a short course, was four units ran over...one day a week for eight weeks, something like that. So yeah, short, to-the-point customised training as well. So actually our trainers, they tailored the content to suit the workplace. So it wasn't [the RTO] coming in saying this is what you should do as a leader and a manager and a supervisor. It was [the RTO] coming in after having had many meetings with the [employer] and the [employer] saying 'well, this is what we want you to train our people in. Here's some of our workplace documents. Can you customise the solution, the training solution to meet those needs?' which our teaching section was able to do. And the outcome was that they actually had some of the workers writing to the executive management saying... that was the best thing that they've ever done. They feel that they're now in a better position to be equipped to lead their own teams. So in terms of improved culture in the workplace as well, really positive outcomes. So yeah, I

think that the benefit there is that the partnership is so targeted and it's so focused on outcomes and I think that's probably the real win out of it.

- Learner outcomes

The apprentice said, 'so now with my apprenticeship you just learn basic things where you can take that knowledge away like you learn at [the RTO] and even do stuff for yourself at home like it just makes you more knowledgeable I think really. It's good for me.'

What are the main benefits for the RTO and its staff?

- Becoming a preferred supplier

The employer training manager said,

in the past we might have used other providers for some of the courses, the compliance courses that we've done. But now that we've been able to streamline how we do our training and planning on giving them more of the compliance stuff that I've maybe wouldn't have given them in the past, I would have gone through someone else. But that structure and the way that we communicate has enabled us to do that as well because I know that they can organise and structure around other things that we're trying to do.

- Meaningful for staff/staff satisfaction

The RTO training coordinator said,

the organisation always likes the money. But it is rewarding and there are those in the organisation that really, truly do believe that's what we should be doing, right? I know [the business development manager's] got monetary targets but to me it's, you know, it's what we should be doing. We often get asked, which we've done a few of targeting disadvantaged groups, but people will say 'we've got money for a prevocational course, can we run a prevocational course for [the employer] or something?' And I'll say, 'well, why?' And they'll say, 'well, so they can get jobs out there.' And I say, 'mate, all they've got to do is walk out there and ask. They don't need a course and it's very hard in a course to teach somebody to be at work at 6:00 AM.' Although, when we do prevocational we do ... work placement in work hours. They [the employer], you know, they're very short of labour and I think one of the benefits they see is the training does increase their retention [of workers].

- Source of income

The head teacher said,

As a manager of a section, ... we try and run each section within [the RTO], not to make huge profit, but not to lose money. We got to make it viable. Running a lot of our courses, we struggle to be viable, but a lot of this short course training such as the forklift and the confined space, the funding we get helps me to employ a lot more teachers and it helps to grow our section as far as the benefits, the overall budget of the section if you like.

What are, or have been, the main challenges of this partnership for the employer and their staff, and for the RTO and their staff?

- COVID-19 pandemic

Training was disrupted by COVID-19. The RTO business development manager explained that some training was put on hold and some training was delivered online. They said,

more so in the space where we're able to do some theory delivery or there were some training around say business services units and those kind of things. But some of the prac training actually just had to

be put on hold. It's a pretty high-risk site in terms of their COVID safety protocols. So we actually had to put some training on hold for a while during COVID, but we were innovative where we could.

The employer training manager said, 'We have tried the online, that is available. I wouldn't say it's something that as a site that we've done a lot of. I find a lot of our workers prefer the face-to-face and hands on rather than the online but during COVID we did do a lot more online.'

- RTO responsiveness, agility

The RTO business development manager said that a challenge was,

...sometimes our ability to be agile and quick enough for industry and I'll probably say that a bit more broadly about [the RTO]. We're so big and we've got systems and processes in place and compliance systems which are fully needed, which other RTOs, private RTOs that may be smaller RTOs that perhaps don't have quite as many layers... So, it doesn't happen much, but there's been an odd occasion where my contact at [the employer] has said, 'hey, I really need to get my guys through, you know, a licensed course in two weeks time, can you do it?' And sometimes we can't.

The RTO training coordinator said,

And the other challenge I have is that so much stuff happens at [the employer's] last minute... To be able to respond and drop the response, you know, like the group that the guy's working with today: between when he's said he could release his staff and when we walked across to the other side of [the employer's] to the tannery, he'd got a new order in for that section of the tannery, which meant that they had to reprocess a huge heap of stockpile material, containers to go to India as quick as possible. So they're actually taken staff from his area and relocated to somewhere else that was really, really busy. Now they've had to pull those staff through and like he's working with us, you know, and we're saying we're going to have two guys out here most of the time now. So that's the big challenge.

- RTO systems

Related to the points made by the RTO business development manager when describing the challenges for the RTO in trying to be responsive, the RTO training coordinator also highlighted how the RTO's administrative processes and systems can be a challenge for many employers:

Despite what they say, our organisation, in my opinion, is very much geared to school leavers enrolling in a "bums on seat" [the RTO] course. Everything is geared that way. And so everything is geared for putting a course on the internet, having people inquire, lodge, do all that. Whereas [the employer] puts out the expressions of interest and then it's up to us to get them enrolled and into the system. And people just don't seem to understand that you've got people that are working from 6:00 AM, don't get home till 3:00 PM, that they can't just duck into [the RTO] office at lunchtime if they have an inquiry, that a lot of them have got very limited internet access and stuff. They probably won't answer the phone when you ring them at 9:00 AM in the morning. The whole thing about ringing and getting put through to a 1300 number, not being able to deal when there is a problem, you know, not being able to deal with a person, just an organisation. That's one of the biggest challenges.

- Business constraints, employer staff release

The RTO training coordinator said,

the leading hands are so committed to working with us or most of them, it's not funny. But to understand their constraints, like even now with all their staff, the employer makes a lot of its own money out of the resale of offal which is a by-product which normally goes into meat meal and blood and bone and low value product. But they can turn it into high value product. Like, next week, they're just going to have to shut down a lot of that section and let what potentially could be high value product turn into very low value product. And if we take too many of their staff away at once, it costs

them, you know, thousands or tens of thousands of dollars in losses. We've got to be aware of that and I hear other teachers in other things say, but I know they're getting this training for free and I said, well, no, they're not. They're paying their staff wages and that's costing them in some sections thousands of dollars in production they're not doing. And it's not like other businesses...if it's not processed within hours, it's gone. You can't do it tomorrow.

The RTO training coordinator said,

we still have the challenge of a couple of recalcitrant leading hands who just continually say no, my staff are too busy today. And we just luckily know the Chief Executive Officer and [the training manager] will sort of say to them, you know, at some point along the line, well if you want us to allocate new staff to your area, you're just going to have to deal with it.

Providing another perspective to this view, the supervisor we interviewed said,

We're a sort of labour-intensive environment, so if you take someone out, then you've just got to pick up the slack basically. So obviously if you're down one person or a couple of people you do notice it. I guess it's the only drawback, but it's obviously worth it as gaining skills for the employee and you know benefiting them and benefitting us as we'll get a better worker and product out of that employee.

- Administrative issues: visas

Somewhat unique to this case study was the issue of acquiring the appropriate visas for the group of Pacific Islander workers. The RTO head teacher said,

Some of the challenges has been visas. With the funding that we get through training services, they don't cover a lot of the temporary work visas. So [the employer] has employed a lot of Pacific Islander people. That has been one of the issues, visas and some of the Pacific Islanders have trouble providing enough identification for a Work Cover ticket, so that can be a bit of a challenge... If I haven't got the visa, they won't normally be put in the training. Most of... the visas they've got these days, they can get the training, there's different classifications of visas. But it still can be a challenge if someone slips through who's got the wrong visa. And then we have to charge them... it's not a great problem, it's more an administration, not a problem.

- RTO staffing

The RTO training coordinator said,

They're a great organisation to work with except for the stop/start. How you turn people on and off is a problem you know. To get this current program, we've actually engaged a guy from Tamworth, hire a car for him to drive over, and pay for his accommodation for the week. So we can go back again, alright? But we can make that work.

The RTO head teacher said, 'the main challenge was just the location and finding teaching staff, having teaching staff available in that region... a country town surrounded by all farming area'.

Determining success in partnerships

In looking at what makes a partnership successful we were interested in learning about the qualities held by both the RTO and the employer that complemented each other and helped to strengthen the partnership.

What qualities does the employer have that make it a good partner?

Here we asked the RTO representatives to describe the qualities of the employer that made it a good organisation to partner with.

- Being organised

The RTO head teacher said that because of the training manager the employer was organised. They said,

A lot of the partnerships can come down to your relationship with the customer and the actual person, the main contact on the site. And [the training manager], the fellow there, he's excellent, he's really good at organising his people. Some partnerships you can be let down a bit by the organisation ... we had a trainer turn up last Monday to a Coffs Harbour company for four days of training and their training manager had gone on holidays and hadn't organised it. Things like that. Whereas the [employer] very well organised and the amount of training they have with [the RTO], like I don't really know the full numbers for the meat processing side, but I believe the numbers are fairly substantial. I've always had a good experience with them as far as being organised, being prepared.

- Genuine commitment to developing staff

The RTO training coordinator said,

Their commitment to their staff. I mean, obviously they like the money when it's subsidised training and when it's training that's attached to things like traineeships, which, you know, after that boost program last year has dropped off. So, I mean, they like that. So the poor training manager...I've got the utmost sympathy for [him] you know, he's got to justify his position and be able to put some figures down, but it's not their sole notification. I talked to other meatworks and they cannot believe that [the employer] will actually pay for the fees for students that aren't trainees and let them off the job. Other meatworks, if there's not a quid in it, if they can't see themselves making a dollar out of it, tough.

This view about the employer's commitment to developing their staff was supported by the supervisor we interviewed, who said,

I guess the [employer] just wants to try and raise the skill level of people by putting them in various different courses, [the RTO's] just one of them really. There are various other courses that we do, you know, send workers to. [another training provider] have a workshop for our supervisors. Just the company's attitude to try and build us up, as much courses, knowledge, as possible to try and get the best product, I guess, at the end of the day for our customers. And to make our employees, you know, feel like they know what their worth. Yeah, try and lift, I guess, the overall mental health of all their employees as well. That's probably a big one that we're trying to focus on... Definitely mental health is a big part of the [employer's], I guess, initiative to make sure you know, sort of, no one gets left behind sort of thing. They've run mental health days. I'm training for mental health for supervisor and key people in various work areas around the around the plant just to [learn] how to identify different types of mental health issues, how to approach those people that are could be experiencing those issues.

- Challenges the RTO

Following on from the employer's commitment to the development of their staff, the employer training manager considered that their organisation's growth and its drive to develop their workforce were great opportunities for the RTO to continuously look at their scope of delivery and consider what it could do to contribute to the employer's work plan. They said:

For example, you know, in the meat industry, butchers are a very common denominator in the meat industry trade. Whereas we have a hundred butchers down on the floor, yet they don't qualify at the moment to be able to do a butcher qualification and become a butcher apprentice. So, you know, being able to work with a big organisation like [the RTO] it enables us to challenge them and be able to do that. So we're looking at different ways... we can make our meat processor boning operators full tradespeople. They're the sorts of things. We're able to have a look at some different scopes and see

what we can do... And I guess, you know, the other examples are the development of our own specific, relevant programs like, you know, WHS and risk management for supervisors and managers. We're able to be a lot more specific with the content of that, deliver it to the needs of what we need and how we need them to be able to understand the principles around risk and safety and apply them to our own procedures, policies. I don't know whether a lot of other partners have the ability to be able to do that. I'm sure there's some that can, I've done it in the past, but [the RTO] certainly have a lot more flexibility and a lot more scope to be able to help you with that and being able to bring courses together.

In a similar vein, the RTO head teacher, noting the size of the employer and the variety of job roles and contexts, challenged the RTO to tailor the training for these different roles and contexts:

there's a fair range of different sections, different jobs within the Co-op itself. So the training can be applied across different sections. We try and tailor the training to suit the particular students that are in the training. If we have people working from a particular section they might be doing confined space to be able to access something, the trainer will work with them to make the training apply to that section ... The maintenance workers usually have a lot bigger range of jobs and access to the plant. Meat workers might be specifically to one area. Maintenance will access lots of different areas. So we might have to vary the training for the process people, give them more examples and it's usually a bit more concentrated, say for meat workers, than it might be for maintenance workers. Bit more targeted

- Loyal customer

The RTO business development manager said,

They keep coming back! They love their relationship with [the RTO]. It makes life so much easier for them. It really does. You know, they just don't have to think too much about it. They just can contact me, [the RTO], and [say] I need this, I need that and we're able to, nearly every time, deliver on what they need. I just think that having the trusted relationship is crucial to them. It just takes away a lot of the hard work of, I need to go on Google and I need to find out how do I do this and where do I do it? They know they can come to me and [the RTO]. You know, we're such a large organisation that we do most of the training that they need.

What qualities does the RTO have that make it a good partner?

- The size and delivery scope of the RTO

The employer training manager said,

the main difference is I guess is that they're [the RTO] are much larger organisations so for a business our size that needs a lot of different, a lot of variety of our training I find that they can take on a lot more. Like, as I said, we still have other training providers that we have to reach out to for various training needs that [the RTO] can't deliver but [the RTO] have the ability to deliver a lot more, I guess, than a lot of the other RTO's, which I think to me, it's a benefit. It really makes it a lot easier to try and organise things and get things happening. Like last year when we were really trying to catch up on our compliance training I was able to schedule it and we could do it like I had trainer come in for a week and deliver three or four different types of training. So it makes it a lot easier to be able to do things like that. Whereas in the past the RTO's I've dealt with didn't have that scope.

- Experienced and caring staff

The head teacher said,

I just think the experience of the teachers that we have. All my teachers, we're a bit of a 'Dad's army' we're all fairly mature. We've all been had industry backgrounds. So I think we can relate to the students being from industry and we've all had a lot of years of training, so we've got a lot of experience on both sides of the fence, if you like. So I think that's our main benefit. And we're all keen to offer the service. Everyone enjoys their job and likes to pass on their knowledge and skills.

The supervisor said,

... their willingness to come on to site. The teachers that have employed are really good. Like I'll see a teacher, even now, it could be five or six years since I've done the course and they'll still say hello and have a chat to you. The teachers really just care more than just, you know, getting in and passing students, they never seen them again, if that makes sense.

The RTO training coordinator said,

the little extra things that you do that you don't have to do or you're not supposed to do if that makes sense. Like getting the qualifications to the training manager. Because no matter how many bits of paper you signed within [the RTO], the transcript, well it doesn't go to the student. An e-mail goes to the student asking them how they want their transcript. So half of these guys never get their transcript because they don't respond to the e-mail. And then the company doesn't get the transcript, and then they've got an overseas audit and the auditor wants to see a transcript. So they're supposed to get the student to ring 1300 and request and all this sort of stuff. Whereas we just go 'round the back door and at least get them a Photoshop of it or something like that.

- Knows and understands the VET sector

The RTO business development manager said,

Sometimes they don't even necessarily know what the course or the units are and they might just come to me and say, hey, we've got some guys that are working in the HR or WH space and we have this specific need around risk-management, can you work something out for us? And I'm not the content specialist, so I'll go to the teaching section and sort of join the dots there... So often from that first conversation with me around what's the training need, I'll go to the teaching section and then bring them into the meeting and the conversation as well. So that through them, [the employer], and [the training manager]-the contact at the RTO-sometimes he'll bring in his workers as well who have the specific training inquiry. And so you get the person who has the need with the person who has the knowledge, bringing them together in that conversation. And then we come up with the training solution for them. And sometimes it's non-accredited as well, it's mostly accredited training, but if something needs to be a workshop style, needs to be a 2 hours then we can do that as well.

- Quality training

Of the RTO's own qualities, the business development manager said,

I would say this about [the RTO] broadly and our quality of training is second to none. Absolutely. So the outcomes from the training is meeting the needs of the employer. If we weren't achieving that, regardless of how many times I ring them up, it's not what I'm doing and it's not even what my contact there, [the training manager]'s necessarily doing. It's actually about the training and we really deliver quality training which has great outcomes for their staff and therefore for the employer.

- Business understanding

The head teacher said,

So I've come from a business background, I've been on the other side as an employer, and struggled at times to get training from [the RTO]. Now I'm on the other side of it I'd like to provide the service that we can. Where a customer needs training I'd like to try and give it to them if we can because I

battled [the RTO] for a couple of years to try and get trainers. I was up at Hunter Valley and had a business trying to get training up there and basically that's how I became a [the RTO] trainer because they couldn't provide a trainer and they suggested that I get the qualifications and start teaching myself. So I did.

- Building relationships

The employer training manager said,

I guess from my experience with [the RTO] in this partnership is we've been able to structure it and make it so that we've got a bit of a personal relationship with them, I guess having built that up with [the RTO business development manager] and been able to have that point of contact is a really big plus. And that's something that I guess was an advantage that other smaller training providers that I've used in the past have had is that they are able to be very personal with their delivery, whereas [the RTO] have been able to, I guess, harness something like that but on a bigger scale. By putting a coordinator in that can take care of your needs it makes it so much easier having that one main person be able to call upon to talk to about what you want and what your direction is I guess.

The training manager further stated that,

they've got resources and they build relationships. As I said, I can't really go past the of just the support that the [RTO business development manager] is able to give me, over the last 12 or 18 months, that's been the big difference. I can get on the phone if we've got any dramas. And being in a large organisation a lot of things do change from day-to-day basis, and being able to have someone that you can go to and they're able to be flexible and change on the spur of the moment is a big benefit as well. Like they're very flexible with us and able to help us out with our needs. I think that's a really big plus when it comes to doing any sort of business with anyone, but particularly when training, you know, we're working with people that have got jobs that have lots of demands on them and that can change from day-to-day... particularly over the last two or three years we've had COVID and we've had people away, we've been absent or your workforce is down and you've got to change the date because it's just not feasible to do training because of operations, well they're able to adjust to that. So that's been a really positive.

- Meeting industry needs

The RTO business development manager said,

I think it's actually a real benchmark of how training probably should be delivered a bit more with industry, around that focused delivery and that targeted delivery ... as an RTO we tend to put courses up and then we hope students enrol and we've been doing that for a long time. And there's real merit in that as well because you need to have courses available for the general public to enrol into. But this approach with industry is a partnership and you know we do training because that's what they need and want. So yeah, I think there's some really positive learnings to come from the relationship. And when I say we, the team that I work with in the business development team, that's our primary goal is to try to create informal partnerships everywhere we can with our touch points with industry so that we can achieve that same outcome that we're really delivering focused and targeted training meeting the needs of employers and industry.

The RTO training coordinator said,

The other thing I think that makes it work is that the RTO really has to understand the limitations on the workplace and their reasons for training, and what it means to them, and how to make things as convenient as possible for them. And honestly we inconvenience ourselves to an nth degree. Like, the trainer that's working out there today, at 1 o'clock yesterday afternoon, was told that he could have a group of people that he wasn't planning on at 6:00 AM this morning. So he's there at 6:00 AM this

morning with those people, because they had a change in production schedule that made a group of people that we had difficulty accessing [suddenly] available.

- Learner support

The RTO business development manager said,

We've had a couple of workers who ... needed some support to get through training and that's where [the RTO] is fantastic. And I think that's really where [the RTO] probably stands up over, not to make comparisons, but maybe compared to other RTOs, that we do have that support in place. So you know we have our literacy support workers that can come out and help students if they're struggling getting through their training basically. So we've even had a case with forklift recently where one of the workers had some hearing challenges and so that person had to be assessed in a different way. We were still able to get that person through the course competently and they could come out with their forklift licence and be able to continue in their work.

The employer supervisor reaffirmed the high level of support offered by trainers, explaining that the trainers made themselves readily available: 'You know, I can go up and just chat to [the trainer] and ask [them], you know, how this works in relation to the course and how that works in relation to the course.'

What qualities do the employer and RTO share that make them good partners?

- A good fit

The employer training manager said,

Well, I guess we've both got the same goals. We're trying to not only, I guess, improve the knowledge and the skills that we need to run the business, but we're also trying to personally develop our workforce so that they have a positive career outlook, a positive future. And whether that will be with us or with someone else... I guess that's also [the RTO]'s main goals and objectives are to increase skills and knowledge in the workforce. And, yeah, we're heading in that same direction and we hope that we give them enough reasons and that we can continue to help them grow within our organization. But it's also about the communities, all very community orientated and trying to upskill the people in our community. So that helps. And it's a bit of a catch 22 here: you're trying to give everyone skills and you want to upskill your workforce. But the main thing is that everyone knows that it's a positive place to come and work and that you are going to get the opportunities if you want to take career progression and education, that you're going to get it in a place like the Co-op.

The employer supervisor also described how the respective circumstances of the RTO and the employer complemented each other well.

Well, I guess we've got a lot of people from various backgrounds and abilities that, you know, are happy and willing to learn more. [The RTO] offers courses at different levels that provides for those people that are on different levels ... [The RTO]'s willing to come on site for us. We have the capabilities to have them on-site. That does go hand-in-hand.

- Working together

The RTO training coordinator said,

I think we've got a really good business partner there with [RTO business development manager], you know, who can work with staff. And [the employer] is driving what they want. And we are responding to it, but [RTO business development manager] and myself ... are putting up the opportunities when an opportunity arrives. And then it's up to them whether they go with it or not. We're not pushing stuff down their head, but ... I think the difference is all the leading hands, everybody can see that we

and the other people are committed to some quality education. Not just tick and flick, but not jumping people through hoops that we know they can get through either.

- Quality outcomes

The head teacher said,

They're obviously after, you can tell just by the amount of training that the company does, that they have that as a huge, what's the word I'm looking for, like it's a target of the company to have their staff properly trained. You can see that by the amount of people they put through training each year. I know they do have a turnover of staff, but they still have a big emphasis on having properly trained staff. And we have an emphasis from [the RTO] background of making sure any training we deliver is trained to best practice.

- Continuously improving

The employer training manager talked about how the partnership had developed over time. They said,

I think, as I said, the main thing is we've ironed out a lot of those issues through having the partnership and the relationship, particularly in the last 12 to 18 months, we've really streamlined how we're going to deliver our training and we're more organised and structured around how we can do that and we're starting to schedule different training needs throughout the year so that we don't get stuck having to deliver this big clunk of training in one time. So we're starting to get a lot more structure to it. And I guess as we're developing the partnership too, they're enabling, as a business, they've been able to bring more training courses and more availability to what our needs are. So when we first started, there was probably some courses that they had available, but we'd never utilised... whether that's just been because we haven't discussed it or it just hasn't worked in the past. Whereas now we're able to structure and get a lot more organisation around what we're doing so we're now starting to be able to bring in and do extra courses that we probably haven't done in the past. Which as I said, helps a lot.

Improvements

Here we were particularly interested in what elements of the RTO could be improved to make it more attractive to new partners.

- RTO systems

The business development manager said,

we [the RTO] could improve by having some better systems for our commercial customers. So our commercial customers are invoiced and they are enrolled in the same way as a mainstream student who might just walk in off the street. And, on the surface, that sounds like it would be OK. But the reality is that, from my opinion and experience, I think some of our [commercial] customers probably deserve a little bit of a higher level of attention around some of those finance and admin elements that make the process a little bit more seamless ... there's some admin and a few systems challenges which I think potentially could be improved to better service the needs of our commercial customers.

The business development manager further reiterated the need for improvements to some current RTO systems, using a repeated administration issue, namely, how the RTO manages academic transcripts, as an example.

...that's a real bug bear for some of our customers. I get contacted all the time about...[it] ... So again, it's just some systems' challenges that if were slightly improved would probably improve the process even more so for that relationship.

- Learner support

The supervisor said,

I guess there's probably always more courses that could be offered. I can't think of a specific example, but you know always more courses as you've got a larger pool of people that might be interested in doing a course, but I'm sure there's something out there. For me, for example, like I said, I've done a little bit in the human resource department and when I got up there I sort of struggled a little bit with the computer system because my work is very much labour based, you know, notes, handwriting, numbers. So when I was using the computer I just found like, 'So how do I do this? How do I do that?' I wouldn't have minded if there was some sort of basic computer course or something like that. I don't know. Maybe it's a specific course, just for example. Obviously I picked it up, but I think that would be something good for all of us really.

Supporting and sustaining partnerships

The focus of this section was on the types of supports that were useful in establishing and sustaining the partnership, along with the roles and capabilities required to support the partnership. We were also interested in what additional supports and capabilities would improve the partnership.

- The business development manager

The RTO business development manager is a key support. Describing their role, they said,

I act as the one point of contact for them. So, [the RTO's] a pretty large organisation. Rather than the business having to ring up our 1300 number or to try and find out, you know, where is computer aided design delivered, where is welding delivered, and all these different phone calls they need to make, they can come straight to me. It's a very mutual, positive relationship because that employer has now become one of the largest commercial customers for [the RTO] in the North region and the business itself has seen significant improvements in the skill of their workforce, reduction in time off from injuries. So it's been a really successful partnership with really positive outcomes.

The training co-ordinator said, '[the business development manager] ... really opened up the training at [the employer] because as a business development officer type person assigned to them, he's sort of like a neutral person assigned to meeting their training needs, so it actually breaks down the issue of delivery silos if you know what I mean'.

The head teacher said the business development manager would liaise with the different sections. 'And so most of the organisation's done by [the business development manager], who would then come to me for dates and availability and that type of thing'. They said it was a model the RTO used for larger clients. They said,

there's several business development people for the North Region. [The business development manager] looks after normally Coffs Harbour to about Ballina region, maybe be a bit south of Coffs Harbour. But [the business development manager] will deal with all the type of clients, I'll deal with the meat processing, the councils - I do a lot of work with the councils - and [the business development manager] will basically be the main contact for [the RTO] but if they have any questions related directly to delivery schedules well then they'll contact me directly.

The training manager said,

You know, I work closely with [the RTO business development manager] from [the RTO] and having someone like that is really beneficial in making it all work together 'Cause [the RTO] being a big organisation, I guess it could be difficult if I was dealing with hundreds of different people and trying to coordinate all these different types of training; you can get quite busy. I've had that with other training providers in the past. But having a central point that helps coordinate and keep that together

has made it a lot easier as well. Like I've probably broadened out now and I talk to a lot of the other direct trainers and coordinators as well, but just having that central pointer that we can sit down and coordinate and work out our plan for how to deliver all the different training over the years really is beneficial for us and I think it's beneficial for them too, because it gives them more opportunity to scope out where they need to put their trainers.

The RTO business development manager said,

I often say I'm just the conduit, I'm the middleman and just kind of piecing stuff together, but I'm certainly not a specialist, I'm not a teacher, although I used to be, but I'm not a teacher these days. And also my conversations are so varied and they're across so many different vocational areas, it's just impossible to have knowledge on everything. And a conversation at the moment at [the employer] where they've got a cohort of workers, about 10 staff needing to do the Certificate III in Instrumentation and Control, which is electrotechnology. I know absolutely nothing about that. So it's very much then a case for me of handing that onto the head teacher and saying, hey, meatworks need this, can you come to a meeting with us next week and you know, you take the lead and let us know what we can and can't do. So it's very collaborative.

The head teacher said,

[The business development manager] would be the biggest influence in supporting the partnership. He has the most contact with them. Also, even just some of my teachers who directly teach the students have a good rapport with the management or the people that organise the training. So they can ring our teachers direct or our teachers can ring their staff direct and organise training from that point of view. But [the business development manager] is definitely the biggest influence or driver within [the RTO] that supports me if you like.

- Communication

The training manager said,

I think the part is communication really like, you know, as I said, we've built that communication and now been able to structure and having a structure in place is going to enable us now...I can see in 12 months time we're going to be able to look at some different scopes and some different courses that we can bring into our organisation to further develop our workforce. Whereas we probably didn't have that two years ago, just going through the motions and you're doing the training and getting the training done. But I think to be able to add that edge to it and to be able to bring new possibilities to your business while maintaining the core elements that you need around training in your businesses are real positive.

- Support: from management, from peers, for each other

The supervisor said,

they [management staff] always make time for you to go out and do the course ... [they] are very happy if you want to better yourself and complete a course and work allows for that ... they sent me to [RTO] one day a week and they pay me for a day of doing that.

The apprentice said,

...all the tradesmen and people you work with all support you in different ways and if you don't understand something a lot of them will take time out of their day to give you a hand. I just reckon it's a really nice place to work. There's a lot of people that give you helping hand if you need it.

The employer training manager said,

Definitely from our perspective and from [the RTO business development manager's] perspective, it's the people that we've got around and I guess by being...we're in a situation now where the courses are a lot more structured and we're able to plan a lot better, so, you know, the cooperation with our teams on site in coordinating and getting people out is a really important thing, and it's the same on [the RTO business development manager's] side... We're building those relationships...so that partnership, I guess, is strengthening through those connections as well. For example, we support [the RTO] in other ways too through our partnership. Like, last year they were doing some training which doesn't involve any of our workers, but they're able to come on and do site tours and find out about our experiences that relate to something that they're doing. All that adds to the partnership because we're supporting each other. That help's the other way as well, they do the same for us.

- Access to free training

The training manager said,

For me, some of the things that [the RTO] are doing, with their fee free courses for developing staff are really important. So we're just exploring that at the moment, offering that out to people, saying look, here are some courses that may help you, they might not directly be related. Like they might be working in the logistics department but doing a cert 4 or diploma in business leadership may help them down the track in their roles or in their development of roles. Having that is definitely a big asset. We're pretty lucky, a large organisation, our leadership team are very supportive of developing and enhancing the skills of our team so we do put a lot of resources and a lot of money into that field. But at the end of the day, it's very beneficial to have a partnership with an organisation that, you know, can help make that happen in a lot more simplified way. So we'll have a lot more people probably take on like some of these fee free courses. [RTO] are going to be able to possibly support us by doing some of them in-house, bring them on-site because we'll probably have the numbers to be able to cater for that.

- More support from within the RTO

In considering the question related to what additional supports and capabilities would improve the partnership the RTO business development manager highlighted the need to have full engagement by VET trainers and assessors in building a partnership with an employer:

The key is, for everything we do at [the RTO], is having a good willingness from all areas of the business and mostly that's OK, and like any business, sometimes it's not. I would like it [the RTO] to perhaps be a bit more engaged. I mean, the head teachers on the whole, because they're my go-to around delivery, content and training, for the most part are absolutely amazing and are engaged. So I'd say those product specialists as a support base, without them none of this would work and would happen. So that's probably key is that our vocational teams, our delivering teams that they are on board, they're engaged and committed and are interested in the same outcomes for the customer and in the main they are. And so, you know, again it wouldn't be as successful as what it is without that support base.

Related to the need for more support from within the RTO, the RTO training coordinator highlighted the need for greater administrative support to enable better responsiveness and efficiencies,

From my point of view at the moment. If I could employ an office assistant two days a week to help me get through all the stuff we've got to do in a big hurry that would be really, really helpful... we're in far northern NSW, my head teacher is based in Newcastle and our clerical assistant person is based in Newcastle doing two days a week across all that section. And so when you've got a real surge in work, you know, the ability to respond to surges is a real issue. And the other issue is the up and down nature of the work.

While the RTO head teacher raised the issue of having sufficient staff,

It comes down to within [the RTO] itself, having enough people to deliver the training. So more admin support and more teachers, from my point of view, we'd be able to offer a better, bigger service... there's limits on what we can provide due to the amount of teaching staff we have. So that does limit my section anyway or what we can offer, and I'm sure if we could offer more, they would probably request more training if it was available. If we had the staff, yeah.

The employer training manager concurred, saying,

The main thing is really the resourcing of it. For our perspective like, we're getting it to a position now where it is manageable. So I think that's good. But it I think from [the RTO]'s perspective, it's just about making sure they have enough trainers and making sure they have the needs because we're not the only business that they've got to look after I guess. I've got no complaints at the moment. They're certainly working around the clock trying to do that. There might be some time to time where they have trouble getting trainers for certain courses, but normally you'll find if they're having trouble others are having trouble as well. It's a trend I suppose in that sector. But I guess resources is probably a really big one.'

Supports or initiatives that would help other employers and RTOs establish and sustain effective partnerships

- Building a trusted relationship

The RTO business development manager said,

I actually think, more than anything, it's about building a trusted relationship. I really do. I think that if you can be there to listen and then to act promptly and accordingly, and then more than anything, deliver on what they're needing in terms of training, that's the basis of a very, very good industry-RTO, employer-RTO relationship... it's just that trusted relationship that if you work with that customer for long enough, or industry or the business for long enough, and you keep going back to them and offering your support and your help, then they know, they get to a stage pretty quickly, that they can just come to you and they keep coming to you. And as I said before, even more importantly is that through that you've got the trusted relationship, but then you actually can deliver quality training as well. That's it, it's pretty simple.

The RTO training coordinator also described the importance of building a relationship with a trusted partner:

And again over the years, we've had partnerships that we did have destroyed across the whole of industries. Like with food processing where we actually had trainees that were progressing along pretty well and it was a nationwide company. They did a deal with another RTO who promised much better deals, better payments, you know. You sign up with us and you'll get this much money, etcetera, etcetera. So they changed from us and signed up heaps of people around the district on the promise of these incentives. Put in one trainer who was overworked, who never got round to any of them. And all those companies had paid the existing worker traineeship fees to that company [RTO] and never got a single incentive that they'd promised.

- Fully committed employer and employees

The training coordinator described how working cooperatively with a local organisation committed to training their employees has helped the partnership develop strongly. They described how partnerships with very large corporations can be somewhat volatile, as decisions for training to go ahead can change suddenly or due to larger political reasons. They also reflected on a partnership that 'fell over' because

the employer was motivated by funding reasons alone, as opposed to a genuine need or desire to upskill staff.

I mean in partnerships that have been successful but haven't continued, one of the things with it is that somebody in the organisation has decided that it would be good to do this for whatever reason and they haven't got their own staff on board. So all they [the staff] see is the inconvenience.

- Staff limitations

The head teacher said,

it's a bit of a catch 22. We would love to establish more partnerships with these bigger companies but I'm always limited by the... like we can offer a lot of training, but we don't have the staff. I would love to establish more partnerships with the bigger companies. Like we do with Corrective Services, we have an ongoing contract with Corrective Services that we trained every year in my section probably two or three hundred students from Corrective Services. So those partnerships are great, but we're always limited by, and in the current work environment, finding enough people..... And it's hard to get people out of industry...to offer them a role as a casual teacher. Because you can't bring them straight into [the RTO] as a permanent teacher. We have our permanent teachers and then we have casual. So usually the casuals, well after a period of time become permanent. But to get someone to leave industry and come and work as a casual is difficult because you can't guarantee them a certain amount of hours ... And plus the wages in industry seem to have really gone ahead in recent years.... Like when you see bricklayers and people getting paid \$600 and \$700 a day it's hard to get someone like that to come to [the RTO] as a casual teacher... It's just such a shortage of tradesmen [sic] and it's got a lot to do with government policies and funding of [the RTO]'s stuff over the last 10 or 15 years where the amount of apprenticeships or the amount of apprentices dropped off dramatically. And now it seems to have gone full circle. We're now getting smashed with apprentices but we got that lag period where we've got a huge gap in the amount of qualified people and with the baby boomers retiring, we had a whole generation, like myself, that are, should be hanging up their boots and yeah, it's just hard finding the enough people in general, yeah.

- Find the right partner

The training manager said,

The main thing for me, if I was to suggest anything to any business is finding a partner that understands what your needs are and where you're trying to go with the training. That's the biggest opportunity I think for a business and to be able to be successful is to have a partner that can make sure you know that if they can't deliver it, they don't also beat around the bush and they are upfront with us, they tell us what they can and what they can't do. And you know, as I said, over time we're certainly doing more training with [the RTO] now then we were 18 months, two years ago because of that partnership and them understanding what our needs are. And then you're able to develop and grow from there.

- Manage the risk

The training manager said,

And I guess the challenge for [the business development manager] and myself is or the next step for us is to make sure that we set it up in a way that if [the business development manager] or I leave the business she doesn't collapse because the structures and that are there. So I think you know we're fair way down the path to creating that, both structure and the setup that we're putting together and the planning and having.

Case study 2: focus on learner-centric design

Describing the partners

In this case study, we explored how a small RTO and a large regional employer in the health industry worked in partnership to deliver a culturally safe and culturally specific Aboriginal leadership program that achieved significant outcomes for the employer, the learners and the community.

The RTO had been operating since 1982 and offered nationally recognised training in a wide range of industries, including business and management, building and construction, manufacturing, local government, and transport and logistics. While based in one jurisdiction, it delivered training nationally.

The employer was a public health organisation that provided hospital and community health services to communities living in regional New South Wales, including to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Services included a network of hospitals, health clinics, community health services and mental health services. Employing over 5000 healthcare staff, the service supported over 200,000 people in the region.

Participants

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with five individuals, including one person representing the RTO and four people representing the employer.

The trainer and assessor had been working for the RTO and involved in the delivery of training and assessment for over four years and had been working with the employer for one year at the time of the interview.

The four employer representatives included two members of the education team and two learners. The education team members included one senior manager and one program manager. The senior manager was responsible for leading education across the organisation including clinical education (medical, allied health, nursing and midwifery), leadership development, Aboriginal workforce development and cultural capability, building school-based trainees and managing training. The program manager who no longer worked for the employer was responsible for developing and delivering leadership programs and Aboriginal workforce development. The two learners included a clinical nurse who worked in both emergency and chair-based services, and a mental health professional working with suicide prevention outreach. The program manager and the two learners were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders.

Describing RTO-employer partnerships more generally

Asked to describe an RTO-employer partnership in general, the interviewees offered a range of responses. The trainer and assessor said that it started with a frank and open conversation about what the RTO can and can't do, and the value that the RTO can offer the employer. The senior manager said that a partnership was about strong collaboration and strategic congruence and that the partners needed to be flexible, adaptive and collective.

Describing the case study partnership

Partnership establishment

The partnership was established a couple of years ago and was initiated by the employer to meet an identified workplace need in their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce—identified through consultations with this workforce—for nationally recognised leadership training.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people working for the organisation typically worked on projects and delivered health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in local communities. The consultations identified that these workers wanted their existing leadership and project management skills recognised and further developed through nationally recognised training.

The managers and the learners recognised the value of nationally recognised outcomes, particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in regional communities. The clinical nurse said, ‘it’s usable across all districts and usable across all areas, and it’s certified. So it’s not just our little organisation putting together a program, it’s about further progressing and building up certifiable degrees’. The program manager explained

...accredited training for anybody gives opportunities that probably weren't there before. You're competing for roles with people with privilege, education. So a lot of our Aboriginal community, Aboriginal people in small communities may not have the same privileged education as the majority of the workforce, so that accreditation gives an extra opportunity and gives my open few more doors that's not quite open now so. So it was really about recognising people skills through accredited qualifications.

Based on the consultations, the employer developed a strategic plan for the development of their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce. Once approved, the employer then developed a leadership program to build the skills of their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce and facilitated career progression of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers into leadership roles. The content of the leadership program included project management, emotional intelligence and self-awareness, leadership coaching and diversity inclusion.

The employer also wanted to access available funding. The program manager said, ‘because we were able to go through training services, the fund, the funding was there to contract the RTO. I'm not quite sure if it had to come out of the budget of [the employer], whether it would have happened, frankly.’

The education team researched nationally recognised training products and found that the content of the proposed leadership program aligned with nationally endorsed units of competency from the Business Services Training Package Diploma in Leadership. The employer then went to the market seeking an RTO partner able to help them to deliver training that was nationally recognised, access funding and be willing to work collaboratively.

The employer found that there was a limited number of RTOs able to deliver the program and willing to work in regional locations. They considered several RTOs that they found through online searches and word of mouth. A local RTO was rejected because it was unwilling to deliver on-site at the workplace.

The employer selected an RTO that was based in another state but willing to travel to the region, had experience delivering training to an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce, understood the need to support cultural safety and was willing to collaborate. The RTO and the employer had not worked together previously.

About the training: what, where and when

The leadership program was designed to prepare Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workers currently employed in clinical roles for higher-level management roles. The training consisted of several units of competency from the Diploma of Leadership from the Business Services Training Package.

The program manager explained that time limitations and an inability to provide the necessary project management led them to select the diploma level and enrol in six units rather than the full diploma. The limitations were pronounced given COVID-19 restrictions, a point the senior manager also noted, in addition to the limitations of the funding model,

... we're going through COVID, we're not going to be able to come off the floor to attend the workshops. And how are they going to go with the study because it is diploma level and we ... also, you know, wrapped around them with the literary support as well with all that extra coaching and mentoring.

About the selection of the units, the senior manager said, 'They were chosen - for the obvious core modules, but we also wanted alignment to the health leadership framework that we go by as well, building our capabilities and leadership, to map to those nicely.'

- Applying a co-design model

Both partners described the program as having a clunky beginning.

The initial delivery of the program used a traditional trainer-centric model but through that approach it became evident that a shift to a more learner-centric design model reflecting the learning needs of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners was needed. Aligning with the employer's leadership framework, the RTO was willing to collaborate using the employer's co-design model and co-deliver with the employer. The program manager explained,

we first came together traditionally, the way it's normally, but as we workshoped and facilitated what we wanted to achieve and how we're going to achieve it, then there was a respectful sort of, there was a bit of tension in that changing the model delivery to suit the participants for the outcomes that they need. So there was a willingness to flex those traditions to meet the needs of the participant.

Co-design is a collaborative and participatory approach to designing learning experiences that involves both trainers and learners in the design process. Traditional training, on the other hand, typically involves a top-down approach where trainers design the training program and deliver it to learners. The main difference between co-design and traditional training is that co-design involves learners as active participants in the design process, while traditional training is designed and delivered by trainers without significant input from learners.

The learners had a say in the design of the learning experience, including what topics were covered, how they were covered, and what methods and tools were used for learning. As one of the learners explained, 'we like to come together as a community, sit around and have a yarn about whatever the topic is, whatever we need to, you know, through story through talking with each other, we get a chance to, you know, unpack what we know and share with others and then maybe express how that somebody else may have done it differently'.

The RTO was also willing to use Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander two-way learning. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander two-way learning involves integrating the knowledge and perspectives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures into Western-style education. It involves a dialogue between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and Western knowledge systems and seeks to promote mutual respect and understanding between different cultures. In this approach, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges are not merely an add-on but are integrated into all aspects of the learning process. Two-way learning emphasises the importance

of language and culture in the learning process and recognises that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners may have different learning styles and needs than non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners.²

Reflecting on the beginning of the partnership, the senior manager said, ‘we got more excited and more excited as it went. And again, it was that strong connection through strong communication. And they actually applied for all the funding for us too which is a big help because we’re very time poor’.

The employer had several other RTO employer partnerships, including school-based training programs, T-VET programs and enrolled nursing. When asked how those partnerships compared with this partnership, the senior manager described this partnership as ‘co-facilitated and co-designed’.

Comparing this partnership with other partnerships, the mental health professional said, ‘I feel that the organisation supported it as much and the RTO themselves definitely I feel went above and beyond compared to other sort of ones that I’ve been involved in.’ Of the trainer, they said they were,

really supportive and if we had any questions we could e-mail him and get sort of feedback and things like that. And when they were sort of here face to face, it wasn’t just like an education environment, it was just a really engaging environment where, you know, we could have a bit of humour and really felt like we were listened to and you know, all that sort of stuff, yeah.

The manager described how the trainer and assessor’s development modelled the leadership development of the learners, ‘facilitating was all about adaptive and a collective relational leadership. So an adaptive leadership is about developmental rigor in how we manoeuvre and facilitate and learn and grow our workforce and challenge the system’. The program manager was ‘able to sort of get the trainer and assessor to feel comfortable and safe enough to step outside the status quo and run with it a bit. And that’s what they did. So and to their credit they took that leap of faith and then learnt how to challenge their thoughts and beliefs.’

The trainer and assessor had experience working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners seeking employment in the building industry; however, this was their first time working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners in professional occupations in the health industry. This showed that the trainer and assessor was open to different ways of working. The program manager explained,

There was a genuine want to look after First Nations’ needs. So I think there was a... and I never felt that it was a tick-a-box exercise with me. [The RTO] they had a genuine want. Did they know exactly what they were doing? Like I don’t think so. There was a lot of cultural... lack of cultural protocols understanding, but it wasn’t that they weren’t willing to learn different ideas. Their cultural knowledge was very focused around giving Aboriginal people jobs in construction, so there’s been some basic uplift programs that they’ve run in low socioeconomic areas and their Aboriginal understanding of Aboriginal cultural beliefs, behaviours, knowing, doing belonging and all, all those concepts was only through a lens of a connection to these cohorts that they work with also, probably their own learning about First Nations people, but I don’t think it was an intensive understanding. But those are very genuine compassion, to do it right, you know it was never a tick box.

Of the trainer and assessor’s role in relation to meeting learner needs, the program manager said, ‘all the participants were busy, busy employees doing really complex work. So [the trainer and assessor’s] goal was to simplify it as much as possible to get people into the learning and but not breach the integrity of the units’.

2 Hooley, N 2002, ‘Two-Way Enquiry Learning: Exploring the Interface Between Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Knowing’, Discussion Paper, Victoria University, Melbourne, pp. 40-51.

The trainer and assessor also had to change the way they delivered the training by, as the program manager said, 'doing it relationally. So, you're getting the group to feed off each other to give the psychological safety to start to see things in a different context and you know and then, then focus it on a project that's going to go, able to be implemented into the organisation.'

The senior manager explained the adjustment,

you're not delivering to a normal group, you've actually got allow time for yarning unpack it, sit back and listen, OK, not just keep wanting to teach, and what's on your agenda. Pull back and listen. Yeah, listen to what's going on in the room. You're there to map nicely to the eight ways of learning in the Aboriginal way. And if you, actually as a facilitator, can actually step back in that space, there will be learning being shared, but maybe not aligned to how you want to run your run sheet or your session plan.

The senior manager said the trainer and assessor had strong facilitation skills but needed to further develop his cultural awareness to work effectively with the cohort. They said, 'And he did very quickly. He learned from after workshop one how it played out in the audience. Yeah. And the rich discussions that were going on, which actually were proven, that they understood and they were getting learning from it.'

The training and assessor adjusted the way they worked to better meet the needs of the learners,

The way they learn is not just me as a trainer sort of standing up there, you know, killing them with a PowerPoint presentation and doing it my way. We had to change, or I had to. I had to change my thinking to the way we did. So, the training, if you looked at it, it had to become conversational because they, you know, I mean they like telling stories and that's how they learn from each other.

The program manager said of the trainer and assessor,

Hats off to [the trainer and assessor]. [They] were able to see the vision and see the importance and actually change their delivery, although I don't think they knew exactly what they were in for until they got there...But then when it started to you started...they said they got a lot, a lot more momentum from it.' To be fair, the program manager says, 'This sounds like that there was, you know, [the trainer and assessor's] upskilling, but maybe any organisation coming in that was outside of [our] district might have needed some getting up to speed.'

The program manager said the trainer and assessor,

never swayed away from doing the right thing for the people in the room because once he sat in there and listened to people's stories and realised that there's a lot of the people in the room came from disadvantaged backgrounds. And they're just trying to work their way to a point to give community, give themselves and give their families opportunities. And he also, I think he's also been a, you know, someone that respects the battler, you know and has that, that genuine respect for people. I think that makes a difference. It wasn't all about the funds and ticking boxes it was really about when he sat in there and listened to the stories of some of the participants that have had no education and started doing a [RTO] course and then gone and done a degree.

This approach allowed the learners to be vulnerable and honest. The trainer and assessor said,

we did some neat stuff, you know, I'm just doing some like self-awareness. Like, you know, you get the photos and you know, what does that image mean to you? And you know that kind of stuff was pretty emotional, you know? You know, one of the guys broke down in tears telling stories. And so it's set a new, I guess dynamic for the group. And then it just took off.

The program manager provided an example of a mother and daughter who participated in the training,

Mum's led the way for the daughter and the daughter was way outperforming Mum, like it was great to see. And this... respect and he just, you can see him really enjoy that... those real life stories, he felt honoured to be sitting in that space and listening to the vulnerability and you know, and that's part of my remit is building that cultural safety and psychological safety for real developmental learning. And part of that is building vulnerability by giving people the opportunity to be vulnerable. And build that relational bond to actually get the rigor out of the learning, you know. So, it's really deep, more deep developmental learning.

The program manager also described that the trainer and assessor also engaged in the story telling. They said,

When they were walking in that room, they had to do it different because it wasn't the normal crowd of people that they had look. And I think Jeff was a pretty relatable sort of guy. So he told stories. Some of them like old dad stories, but people respected the generosity and the vulnerability and the story and got people that build that trust early and then it was able to deliver. I think, you know, they're genuine people with good values and called out, you know, called out male privilege. Pretty quick male white privilege, you know, look, I understand you know and I'm not going to get it right so just I'll give you permission to pull me up if I'm if I'm not being culturally savvy. So there was that that. Vulnerability with them, so they'll build that trust.

The program manager explained how the training had to meet the learners' needs and the needs of the organisation. They described the learners as, 'working on something that's got meaning and purpose, and they can follow it through afterwards' and the directors and managers 'see the benefit in the program itself because there's an outcome that's delivered back to the system or to the organisation. That makes it a lot easier for people to stay engaged if it's actually got a purpose.'

- Where and when the training was delivered

Formal training was delivered approximately every four to six weeks via face-to-face, full day workshops at the employer's training facilities.

The face-to-face sessions were considered critical to the program. As the program manager said, 'the face to face is where the work happens and the relational connections happen'.

Of the willingness to travel to the regional employer to deliver the face-to-face workshops, the trainer and assessor said,

I think it's one of the strengths and of [the RTO] because not a lot of RTOs want to sort of you know travel outside their patch so to speak. And so I think, in terms of that relationship in the partnership, you know we've got a, you know we can't expect like doctors and nurses and clinicians to come to us. You know, we've gotta go to them and [the RTO] has always had that kind of the mindset. If there's a need, and obviously if it's financially viable we will go to the location. There's a lot of RTOs that would just say, well, no, it's too far. And so I think, in terms of that relationship in the partnership, you know we've got a, you know we can't expect, you know, like doctors and nurses and clinicians to come to us. You know, we've gotta go to them.

The decision about where to meet was also done through co-design. The trainer and assessor further explained that they consulted with the group about where they should meet each month for the face-to-face, "everybody had a say in where we would meet."

Because of the geographical spread of the organisation, this meant long commute times of up to three hours both ways for some workers. The mental health professional said, 'So for me, the travel wasn't a huge issue because I had to come here anyway for work. Some of the other guys had lots of travel, lots more travel than what I sort of had'.

Due to COVID19, some workshops were delivered online. As the mental health professional explained,

So like everything we are affected by COVID. Everybody was kind of impacted by COVID, but the VC stuff was definitely harder than what I thought. The technology and you know all that sort of stuff at the start was definitely hard for us and the organization in learning what we needed to learn and cover the information that we needed to cover when there's sort of always that possibility of technology issues and people dropping out and just yeah, lots of different things.

The online training may have been responsible for the attrition of some of the learners. The mental health professional said, 'I think a lot of what happened in the start with VC links and things was you know people would call in from sort of the more rural and remote areas, and because we would have technology issues and things, then it just made it really difficult for people to stick with the program.'

The mental health professional felt supported to attend the training and explained, 'we were supported by Health and we were kind of covered with time in lieu and stuff like that. If we did the training and then had to work or, you know, whatever the different sort of things that people had to do.'

Between the workshops, the learners had contact with the trainer and assessor as needed via online drop-in sessions. The trainer and assessor explained,

You've got to respect their... position in terms of like... you got families and... you also got people who were not only doing our course, but they were, you know, some of the girls were still finishing off their nursing qualifications... and they're at university. So it was always pretty much like, you know, 'if you need help... rather than try to pin you down to a time, you tell me when you need the help and I'll and I'll make myself available to help you.

The clinical nurse learner valued the flexibility of this approach noting, '...so you could log in and be there for like a couple of hours or go. You could just jump in and say, [trainer and assessor], can you do this, this and this for me? You know, those sorts of things.' They also said that because these sessions were online, 'it took away the need to have to travel so much. So that's probably like a positive because all of us out here to bring us all together.'

One of the units of competency was about managing a project. Getting consensus on the project took some time.

The trainer and assessor said,

In that sort of early stages we couldn't get consensus across all of us. What was the project...? The project was... kind of the anchor of the whole thing, you know? And we just couldn't, none of us could get our bloody head around what we were going to try and achieve. In our very, very first face to face... We're throwing ideas around the room and it was [the clinical nurse] who said, because [they'd] been trying to get chair-based services, you know [for]... people with diabetes and that sort of stuff off the ground in [their] location... So [the clinical nurse]... gave a bit of a background to that, and that was how it started. So it got a nickname called the Care Chair, and all of a sudden it was like, hey, a light's gone on. So we then, we literally... just brainstormed things around all of that.

The senior manager explained, 'They had a project to do. So, one of the competencies was the project module and in the Diploma of Leadership. So, at the start they had to commence unpacking the project and it's actually a project related to their workplace now. So, it was actually real and happening and making an impact at work.'

The senior manager explained how co-design was used to select the project, 'We all looked at different projects and then as a collective group with the co-design approach, we all decided to go with the chair-based project because the more diverse workers in disciplines from all the different facilities can actually contribute better'.

The mental health professional explained that the next stage of the training is also being designed using co-design, ‘We had the discussion... [which we] started maybe two or three face-to-face meetings before the end. And you know we were able to discuss that. We really discussed what units we wanted to do, who would be keen to do it, how we would go about it, what do we need to do with health to make sure it happens? What do we need to do with the RTO to make it happen? You know that sort of stuff to work together to get that outcome.’

The senior manager described how all learners contributed to the project, ‘And there was nothing like, you know, back in the uni days where you had your group assignment in that some people don’t contribute. They were all in, doing, so we did the morning session of introducing new concepts, new leadership capabilities and then the afternoon we worked on the project together collectively.’

- Continuation of the training

Subject to securing funding, the employer planned to continue with the training which will enable the participants to complete the diploma. This would be a significant achievement for the partnership. The trainer and assessor said, ‘if we do that, that would be the first Indigenous cohort to have done it, you know, and that emulates the environment to have completed management leadership diploma, I mean that’s an enormous feather in their cap. It’s also not bad kudos for us’. The RTO also recognised that this may lead to other business. The trainer and assessor was already thinking ahead,

I would love to see it to the end because I understand the group and I understand the culture and I understand, you know, I guess the dynamics of the group. And what I would do, and I said this to [the senior manager] ages ago, I would, you know, we would, we’re bound by the rules to obviously do the workbooks and stuff like that. But I would rejig all the delivery component to almost one or two PowerPoints and build into conversations around performance management and all that kind of stuff because that’s the way we would do, we did, we did the second-half better than the first half.

The trainer and assessor said it’s all about the relationship, ‘the relationship between all of us, not just me and them, it’s just all of us. They wouldn’t do it if they didn’t think the first one was successful.’

Taking a more strategic view, the trainer and assessor believed it is a model that can be used elsewhere,

And so all of a sudden, you know, it’s a piece of business we can own. I mean, you gotta sort of have some sort of commercial hat on it. So we don’t have to go compete against, you know, Bill Jones down the road, you know. We understand the model, we understand the profile of people. Let’s make it better and deliver them something special and that’s word of mouth. And if you they can take it down to Victoria or to SA wherever they like and just replicate it.

About the learners

The training service was delivered over a period of 10 months. The learner cohort comprised 19 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workers from across the organisation including mental health, allied health, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health, nursing, paediatrics and midwifery. All learners identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islanders. The learners were recruited by the employer via an internal email asking for interest from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers.

The mental health professional remembered their excitement when they received the email, ‘the e-mail that came out to me in regards to the leadership program was just very focused on, you know, this is what we want to do. And it was just about that. And then, you know, I was like, Yep, sweet. I’m keen, you know, that sort of thing.’

Some of the participants worked shift work and the majority worked Monday to Friday during normal business hours.

Of the 19 participants who commenced, 16 completed.

Drivers and motivators

What drives the employer to partner with the RTO?

- Experience in delivering to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

When asked about what drives their organisation to partner with this RTO, the senior manager explained that it was, 'their flexibility and adaptability, but also their experience with delivering to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as well, because we really do want to meet our cultural safety aspects and our cultural support that we wrap around with those as well. So, that was strong and we haven't got partnership with any other RTO that could do that at present here'.

- The need to invest in staff

The mental health professional was clear about what drove their employer, 'it's to upskill our First Nations staff in, hopefully leading more First Nations people into leadership roles.' And also what made them a good partner for the RTO, 'I think the organisation was quite supportive of the RTO, which obviously makes it a lot easier for RTO to function when they can, you know, make collaborative partnerships.'

- Facilitating inclusivity

Meaningful inclusion was also a driver. The program manager said,

The biggest motivation was to support the workforce and their needs and that need is... And especially rural/remote, we got a shortage of workforce. And if there's opportunities for the system to see Aboriginal people in non-Aboriginal roles, which [the employer] traditionally had most of Aboriginal staff in identified roles. And to me, as an Aboriginal person, that's not representation of inclusion when you have to have a system to recognise people skills, where this is as a program that actually recognised people skills in the mainstream that they could actually rep., go and show, role model how that could happen in the workplace. So, part of it's getting the system to understand. So... there was strategy there. We had action plans that we need to meet. So, this, the levers for [the employer] to make it accredited was very much the integrity of the strategy and action plan for the workforce.

Benefits and challenges of partnerships

Here we were interested in what the perceived benefits and challenges were for both the RTO and the employer, and their staff, from being in the partnership, RTO/employer managers.

What are the main benefits for the employer and its staff?

- Learning from each other: the embracing of co-design and two-way learning

The senior manager identified the co-design and two-way learning as the main benefits. She said,

that flexibility and that co-design approach...You know it became a two-way learning process... our organisation and the participants were actually imparting knowledge, cultural knowledge in how to deal with Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander workers for the [trainer and assessor] and they [the trainer and assessor] was imparting leadership knowledge and capability with them as well. So, it was that beautiful partnership and [the trainer and assessor]...was very open and vulnerable and said look, 'I know I'm learning from you as well', and they were. It was... a bit clunky initially but became a really strong co-facilitated model.

- Growing the leaderships capability of a First Nations workforce

The mental health professional's response was that the partnership was growing a First Nations leadership workforce, which was of benefit to the local community and the broader workforce. They said,

It always helps when you know the staff that are passionate about, you know, upskilling people in and educating people and things, can really advocate for the people that they're wanting to upskill and educate. So we're lucky in that respect in here and how [the senior manager] and that are just, you know, really vocal and that around increasing the education for particularly First Nations.

The senior manager also said, 'I think we were fortunate because it's part of our Aboriginal Workforce Action Plan to support in growing the capability and you do have to advocate as well and there needs to be a strong advocate advocating for, growing in and doing a special leadership program for our staff to support.'

- Tangible improvements in services to patients

The chair-based project resulted in beneficial outcomes for the organisation, staff and patients. Chair-based services describe a collection of health interventions where patients sit in a chair to receive treatment such as dialysis or a blood transfusion. As a result of the project, the learners redesigned chair-based services to be more patient-centred.

For example, some patients were being driven 90 minutes to and from home and then sitting in a chair for three hours to receive chair-based services. The commute, the clinical nurse said was, 'three hours of stress on somebody's body that's already unwell'. Together, the learners looked at where the patients were coming from, the costs and the funding with a view to developing a better and more cost-effective process. The learners discovered that the annual cost of transporting patients was equivalent to a registered nurse's wage and redesigned the chair-based service to be delivered in the patient's home.

The clinical nurse described one patient example:

We've just had a patient come through. He was being palliatively treated for chemotherapy that he'd withdrawn from. So we gave him, over the course of about three months, packed red blood cells and platelets to keep him home with his wife until he passed away. They went to bed together, they fell asleep and he didn't wake up. And it just absolutely makes me feel like an amazing human that we can facilitate that kind of stuff. And that's all through having a little bit of insight and understanding about what people go through.

The clinical nurse also provided the example of dialysis patients,

It's the same with our dialysis patients that I look after, they're chronically unwell. You don't become a dialysis patient through good health choices, so we know that these guys are already flying behind. Taking the time to look after them, give them the best care we can. We keep them home. We keep them out of hospital and we keep them alive longer. They could be with their families for longer. They'll get a better quality of life. So these are all the things that we've achieved.

Even though the project was not directly relevant to mental health, the mental health professional saw the value of being involved in the project. They said,

the good thing about the program was it brought together so many different people from different roles within [the employer], so we had mental health covered, we had renal covered, nursing covered, allied health covered, you know, all that sort of stuff. So, at the same time that we were learning about leadership and stuff, we're also learning very much around all the different programs within [the region] and how they can, you know, support each other.

They also saw the benefit to the community saying,

I'm like, well, it's a great thing for me to be involved in because I don't know whether my friends or family are going to need that sort of stuff down the track. You know, to me, it didn't just need to be a mental health thing. It was something that was going to help a wide range of people. So yeah, we had lots of fun with that, actually.'

- A return on investment

At a business level, the program manager noted that the partnership had helped the organisation to train clinical and non-clinical staff in leadership and project management skills for a low cost per person.

The clinical nurse also commented on the return on investment of the partnership generally, saying,

To pay for the training, I think what you'll get back if it's delivered well and each person receives the information well, you'll get the value for money is going to exceed itself because you're going to have people that like their jobs that love their jobs, that want to be better at their jobs purely based off a little bit of knowledge. And that's what it is. You give me the tools, show me what it is I need to know and I can grow from that and you definitely need the partnerships.

- Personal and professional growth of learners

The learners said they benefited from the improved interpersonal skills and confidence, and increased access to leadership roles.

The mental health professional said, 'the upskilling definitely got me thinking around my inner personal kind of communications and conflict resolution and the, you know, the modules that we did definitely opened my eyes and definitely educated me.'

The clinical nurse reported that they gained confidence as a direct result of undertaking the program. They said,

...coming back and doing this program with [trainer and assessor]...wow, like I really, I actually have almost considering doing the facility manager role, that's where I'm really thinking. 'Cause I've always looked at it and thought 'No, no, no', but even just in the last 12 months after doing all of the education that I've done with [the trainer and assessor], which a lot of it you kind of already know like it's all stuff we're already doing but it really just nuts it down to, you know 'sit down and have a read of this', 'have you thought about that', being more open and more mindful of how you talk to people, of how you communicate, think about somebody else and put your eyes on them and see how they're looking back at yourself, has really changed my focus about how I am in every single aspect of my life.

The benefits also flowed through to the learners' personal lives. The clinical nurse said, 'Like even parenting, this has helped me as a mother. I am much more relaxed, our family life is, you know...with the education that had been given to me in the last 18 months, my life has changed. That's how much I really rate what they've done.'

The clinical nurse also valued the nationally recognised outcome, saying,

Yeah, it really like words don't even say how good it's been for myself. And I just hope that, you know, we keep this kind of thing happening, cause I'm all about getting degrees and stuff. I'm all about having certificates. I'm achieve. I like to tick boxes so it works for me because then I feel like I'm competent enough to seek higher roles and take my wisdom and impart it onto others and have the confidence to know that I can back myself because I'm. I've never had that.

The wider benefits were also mentioned by the trainer and assessor who said the learners, ‘because of their social circles, I mean, if they can take some things that they, you know, that they learn from this and apply them into their private life and help others in their community and things like that.’

The clinical nurse said the training gave her insight into herself and other people, and they continued to use the tools explored during the training in their day to day working life. They said,

We did the Gulliford strengths test. Amazing! I still use that daily, weekly. I refer back to that often when I'm trying to nut out how to get on with the people and work out you know where they're sitting, taking what are my strengths, which are of course it's achiever, it's my top one. One of my top five was futuristic and I never thought of that but often things that I think about it's six months later we're doing it, or...I've put my thoughts out there and said, why don't we try this? Why don't we try that? And then you wait for everyone else to come up with you and then it's happening. Another thing was that I'm an achiever I also have to be mindful of those that are not. People, just because they're not doing as much as you, doesn't make them lazy and I have to be mindful of that. So you know, like just learning...what I'm already good at and then being mindful of what others might find offensive for me. And I think that's what's really helped too like having that structure and understanding of self in leadership and self-awareness of your own person. And that's probably what we did at the start and I think that's what we brought back in and that linked in beautifully with all of the paperwork. I think if you sat down and did the paperwork by itself without that, it would be dry and boring. But doing that strength space project, that analysis first, helped me to understand what it is I'm looking for and then apply that to the information that was given to us. So all those bits and pieces that come through like emotional intelligence, understanding how you're presenting yourself, how people are perceiving you, and how you could perceive them better. Rather than, you know, if somebody comes in having a hard day, have a look, what's going on in their life, what is it? What's going on? Maybe they do need to have a mental health day. Maybe they need to not be here today, you know, and respecting that.

The new skills and insights have led to improvements in the way in which people work together and support each other in the workplace. The clinical nurse said, ‘it's helped me support my managers so I can see, you know, the bits and pieces where I can come in behind them and support them in their roles.’ The clinical nurse further added, ‘Understanding other peoples cultures as well, understanding how other people operate really makes it a lot easier to work with people and I think that's probably another take home that I've got is I can work with people much better than I ever could purely based on this training.’

The clinical nurse also said, the training helped them to respond to unexpected situations. They said,

It's very easy to steer down that negative pathway. One person comes into work and says oh, this is bugged blah, blah, blah in so many words and I just say, well, there's nothing you can do about it. We can only do the best of what we got. Let's keep this positive. Let's just focus on the good stuff. And I think taking that away from the project too and working with other people, moving away from preconceived judgments of individuals and take people on face value if they've made a mistake previously. Don't hang on to it. Don't hold them to it. They've already punished themselves enough.

What are the main benefits for the RTO and its staff?

The trainer and assessor said, ‘I've worked with and done some horrible projects where people just you know...but this is one of those, I guess special unique ones that you know. They don't come along very often. And when you and when they do it just makes it worthwhile.’

What are, or have been, the main challenges of this partnership for the employer and their staff, and for the RTO and their staff?

- COVID-19 pandemic

For both the employer and the RTO, the main challenge for the partnership was the impact of COVID-19. For the employer, they were dealing with the complexity of delivering health services during a pandemic. For the RTO, it impacted on the delivery of the training program. The senior manager explained, ‘So, we had to turn to virtual and our participants don’t learn very well virtually, they don’t like it, they like to be connected, they like to see their kin.’ The trainer and assessor remembered the struggle,

You know, I’m sitting here and I’ve got a split screen setting up beside me so I’m talking to them, you know, and that’s not good enough. That’s just not good enough. So getting that, you know, we all struggled with the connection. And one of the things that becomes and I must confess. I actually introduced zoom into [the RTO] but one of the things that I hate with a passion...I mean you can turn your camera off and you can mute yourself; you could go out, you know and go shopping...So you’re kind of trying to deliver something then you see it and then you think, OK, you’re trying to catch someone and say, ohh, what do you think? Because I can’t see you. I can’t hear you anymore. So all of a sudden we’re playing silly games and so that was a major challenge.

Other challenges included releasing staff, limited funds for travel, and competing commitments.

- Competing professional and personal commitments

The program manager spoke about the challenges for the learners, including, for example, competing family and extended family obligations that left them with very little spare time for formal learning. Also, the role of frontline health workers meant they had less spare time and more supervision than non-frontline roles who were more able to learn in their own time. These were equity barriers. The program manager said, ‘But the end goal is for them to have qualifications to be able to compete on a somewhat equal playing field, which as we know it’s not equal... but it’s just to break those equity... barriers down a bit.’

The competing demands were also mentioned by the clinical nurse who said they had been working over 100 hours a fortnight for almost a year. When asked if there could have been a better delivery model, they said,

I don’t think I could have done any other way. I don’t think if you hadn’t, I don’t actually probably wouldn’t have even showed interest if you locked me into, say, a day every week or even a day, every fortnight, I just don’t have that kind of capacity. I can find the time to get it done in my own time, but I don’t think I could have. Yeah, especially not in my shift work.

The mental health professional said, ‘you know, it was shift work or you know that sort of thing and having so many in the workforce that do shifts and may work weekends and things like that. To get them to training days where they’re not necessarily going to be paid for those training days or that sort of thing definitely makes it difficult.’

Determining success in partnerships

What qualities does the employer have that make it a good partner?

- Collaborative

One of the employer’s core values is collaboration. The senior manager explained,

the main part of this partnership is collaboration. And if a decision needs to be made, it's like not made by one, it would be all of us. It was like always working together actively, OK, always working at side by side, even down to 'what do you want the certificate to look like? Do you want any branding on them?' OK, so we had our version then we had the official certificate that we had at our graduation certificates that were official one, but they were nicely branded and things like that too.

The senior manager described the approach as 'adaptive, flexible, collaborative'. They said,

Yeah. And I'm unpacking the units of competency. Where to next is, well, very strong and the whole of the participants were included in that discussion. Where do you want to go? Just at what's involved in each unit. This is where it can take you to build on your skills. OK. And, also the project. So, we've got these tools to manage your project management, however it is up to you to use these ones. So, we're going to use these and incorporate the concepts of the learnings and the capability at that level.

- Commitment to developing their workforce

Another quality mentioned by the mental health professional was the employer's commitment to developing their workforce. They said,

I think wanting to grow its First Nations workforce, wanting to grow the leadership in the First Nations workforce and, you know, being quiet culturally appropriate. Allowing for RTO's in lots of different educators and things to come in and teach their workforce well just allows for health to connect with lots of different RTO's and this one in particular as far as our First Nations workforce'.

This quality was complemented by the RTO. The mental health professional said, 'Well, they're both wanting to educate and, you know, improve outcomes for First Nations employees. So that's probably...[how] they...do complement each other. They're definitely on the same page where that's concerned'. This obvious commitment by the RTO to the employer was also noted by the trainer and assessor, as described below.

What qualities does the RTO have that make it a good partner?

- Commitment: to the employer and to their own staff

The trainer and assessor identified the RTO's CEO commitment to the client as a key quality. They said,

I mean because at the end of the day, they've gotta make a commercial decision to say ...it's a 5 hour drive for me to get to [employer location]. I think the commitment to it and the one thing I really admire about [the CEO], if they make a commitment, you know they're, you know, unless something really, really off the charts happened, you know, they'll see it through to the end, rain, hail or shine, and they're prepared to commit to the resources...

The trainer and assessor said the CEO also understands the cost of the employer's commitment to the training,

As an RTO, and I guess if you're a potential customer looking to decide who are you going to allocate people's time because there is a cost to them even though they're getting funding from the government to the training. There still is a cost of, you know, you're working with a partner that's actually, you know, who was there committed and we're basically deliver what they saying to deliver, you know...a lot of people just employ trainers that, you know, go in, stand up, you know, deliberate walk out at the end of the day and then, you know, there's no there's no real commitment, no real drive. It's just a cash grab and get in, get out.'

The trainer and assessor also said that the RTO CEO trusted the trainer and assessor to do what is needed to deliver a quality training service. They said,

I think there's that trust in, you know I guess...people like me and others, I mean, we're not going to change it to disadvantage or create, you know, potential maybe legal or financial issues for business you know. We do it to make it right and I've got to be honest, you know, I didn't seek [the CEO's] approval to make the change...I just believed it to be, you know, in the best interest of the course and the students. And at the end of the day, we've got the outcome that we were looking for and what they were looking for. So I think again that's a strength of doing me [the CEO], you know. They employed us because that's what we said we could do and they kind of said, well, OK, get on with the job.

This was complemented by the RTO's understanding of the learner group. The mental health professional described the RTO as, 'Really quiet, culturally sensitive, culturally appropriate, you know, they were culturally understanding, just really kind of adaptive and willing to work with us on our level. And I guess bring us up to their level. There didn't seem to be even a sort of a struggle from the RTO to do any of that.'

The program manager identified the senior manager as a critical success factor, saying they had 'compassion, good vision' and were 'really responsive to people'. They also emphasised the support from the organisation, how it aligned well with their own strategic vision, and how it had the right levers in place to make it work:

[the senior manager] understood the needs... the purpose, the vision was there. They [the senior manager] got the support from a director. I got support from the director. It was aligned to strategic directions... It also sat in the right directorate, you know, I think organizationally, if it had have been in any other directorate, if it had have defaulted to the Aboriginal Outcomes Unit, it wouldn't have happened... And I think the other biggest thing was actually that the workforce wanted it as well. So we actually produced something that the... Aboriginal workforce wanted, that they seen was important for their own career development.

What qualities do the employer and RTO share that make them good partners?

- Being open and transparent

The trainer and assessor described the partnership as 'open and transparent'. They said,

Everything was sort of, you know, discussed openly. So from the employers perspective, they were working with an organisation and people who were saying, OK well. OK, let's give this a try. Let's see how we can integrate them and achieve what we need to achieve, you know, but let's see how we can pull it together and make it all fit together. And I mean, as an employer, I'd be pretty receptive to that kind of approach rather than sort of someone just sticking, you know, digging their heels in and saying, well, no, it doesn't work because there's plenty of others. So you know, it's my way or the highway.

The staff we interviewed from the employer also noted that the RTO had these qualities. The program manager explained,

So one thing is they were generous in coming to create a conversation... so they were very observational, they really listened, and then they went away and seen if they could deliver, so they didn't over promise. They didn't just go, 'yay, yay, yay', there was... this dialogue before they agreed to do the program, costed it out... so there was that flexibility in thinking - cognitive flexibility, to be able to take on board enough of the information and purpose and vision to be able to make informed decisions. They're an RTO, so that was a that was definitely a strength, they'd delivered a lot of training in certain other areas that they felt they could transfer the skills over into the role we wanted to achieve.

These combined qualities fostered a partnership built on trust and respect. The trainer and assessor said,

We know that they're a good partner to work with as a client and they know that we're a good provider to work with. You know, as a training provider, we've got some, we've got some skill sets and you know we've got some other, I guess personal attributes that we bring to the equation and you don't have to reinvent the world and start again.

Improvements

When asked about what elements of the RTO could be improved to make it more attractive to new industry partners, the employer said that more trainers and assessors would be helpful because the trainer and assessor was very stretched.

The clinical nurse was satisfied with the training saying, 'I don't think there's anything else you could have done differently, to be honest. I think it was all fairly well organised. It's like as far as the delivery there was, I don't, there was nothing where I went. Oh, they should have done this.'

Additional supports and capabilities that would improve the partnership

The program manager said,

This is where I'd like to see government support, and there's a lot of focus on outcomes for Aboriginal communities and I don't know if that's what this is all about, is how do we do things better in rural/remote? How do we do things better for our most vulnerable communities? How do we support organisations to deliver well needed opportunities on country?

About whether additional supports and capabilities were needed, the senior manager said,

I think for us... here at MLHD... to ensure the supervisors are aware, fully aware what the program means and how they can actually support and monitor the growth of their individual team members as well. You know, the importance of leadership development and how it can change the impact on their service. So for us, I think we've got a bit more work to do there and from the RTO perspective, no, because they gave us everything we needed.

For the first six months of the partnership, the RTO was represented by a business development manager. The business development manager (who no longer worked for the RTO), secured the employer as a client, helped access state government funding and participated in the initial co-design process. The business development manager then handed the project to the RTO's assigned trainer and assessor. The partners said that the clunky start might have been avoided if the trainer and assessor had been involved in the co-design of the program from the beginning. The trainer and assessor said, 'I guess if I was really critical I would prefer to see an RTO from our end of the equation to involve whoever's going to do the training you know, involve them in some of those initial conversations'.

The senior manager said, 'as soon as we connected with [the trainer and assessor], then we became really quite close comrades with [the trainer and assessor]'

It was the trainer and assessor's first time working with a co-design model. The manager said that the trainer and assessor, 'had been developing and running programs for a lot of years, this program, the application of the co design process being able to intertwine all the all the...units in one big project wasn't something that they would have done in the past and needed to sort of build some neuropathways in their brain to be able to make it happen'.

Supporting and sustaining partnerships

The focus of this section was on the types of supports that were useful in establishing and sustaining the partnership, along with the roles and capabilities required to support the partnership. We were also interested in what additional supports and capabilities would improve the partnership.

- Access to funding

The senior manager said that the RTO's help with accessing the funding and the actual funding were useful supports.

- Provision of wrap-around supports for the learners

While the cost of the training was minimal, the employer provided additional supports. The senior manager explained,

we always provide the wrap-around support so it was resource-heavy on our part. As well as the RTO, I did them myself or whenever and Aboriginal leadership workers in with them as well, as well as a cultural mentor. So, we provided a lot of resources to make the program a success. And they worked with facilitator and all the paperwork behind the scenes so.

The intensive support was necessary, particularly as 'the participants getting into learning again, some haven't studied for a while'. The senior manager reported that they would be continuing with a supported model when they progressed with the Diploma, but the support would be less intensive because, 'we were committed, as in like, the executive team signed off of our team here in education development, supported them through five units of competency and we haven't got capacity or resource to do the rest.'

- Being supported

The mental health professional said they felt supported: 'this is by far the best program, collaboration and stuff that I've been involved in for sure. We all felt really accomplished and supported. And you know, all that sort of stuff.'

The trainer and assessor felt well supported by the employer. They said,

I mean, most trainers think they know everything, but we know very little. But the fact that you could ring up someone and ask for something. I mean, I knew nothing about co-design. So, [the program manager] was kind of like my go-to man on all of that. And I honestly, I've worked with some employers [who] say, 'mate, that's your job'. But we didn't have that.'

The trainer and assessor also mentioned the support of an elder. 'He was in the mental health area and he was also like an elder. So, when you kind of got a little bit stuck, I mean, he played footy so we could you know, talk about footy and stuff. But I'd often ring him to see how he was going, but also to say: 'Mate, what do you reckon I should do here from an Indigenous perspective?'

The program manager said, 'once that trust is built [the trainer and assessor] could try that and he knew he could throw the questions without being judged... So maybe that's a barrier for other RTOs: if they don't have that ability to connect with people of that culture that they're delivering the program to. They've got to understand the nuances, the ideologies of that cohort.'

Supports or initiatives that would help other employers and RTOs establish and sustain effective partnerships

- Focus on building deeper relationships with current partners

The advice from the trainer and assessor was to play the long game. They said,

They gotta think beyond the dollars. I mean, you've got to think about the relationship, rather than trying to sort of, you know, go out and get new business everyday, why not try and get yourself a reputation? Get yourself a foothold with an employer or a particular industry sector, or whatever it might be. Rather than have to try and go out and drum up new business all the time look after the customers that you've got because my experience has been like, you know, RTO's, they're just looking for the next deal rather than trying to sort of foster and grow and develop [the current partnership]. OK, it may not happen immediately after this course is finished, but maintain the relationship, keep them, keep the communication going. You know, if you've done a good job once why wouldn't you get another opportunity to do the second job?

For employers looking to partner with an RTO, the senior manager advised,

don't just look at the ones that are quite restricted in what they can offer, go out to market. If one doesn't map go out to another one and be fussy with the RTO, OK and also, you know, reach out to all the Aboriginal support agencies as well because they've got a lot of mentors and support that they can throw in as well. And if you can't find the funding actually ask the RTO to.

- Ensuring clarity around roles, responsibilities and expectations of partners: a 'no assumptions' mindset

The program manager highlighted the importance of having clarity around the roles, responsibilities and expectations of the partners from the start of the partnership, 'Not just on paper, but in some sort of dialogue, you know, cause I've no doubt over the years people have signed papers and not really understood what that meant... Really clear roles and responsibilities, expectations...and really clear clarity around who we're delivering to and what's the next steps, because sometimes that gets missed.'

- Having a framework for working with particular learner cohorts

The program manager said that a framework for RTOs working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities would be useful. They said,

You don't know what you don't know, so unless you've actually got this framework to start to work towards [getting] the answers you need to deliver the service in those communities, because the biggest risk is you work in [an example location], you deliver a program down there, it's successful. So you pick that program up and go to [a different example location] and go, 'I'm going to deliver this program in [the second location]'. You're using the protocols of [the first location] to...a different community, different nuances, different histories, different ideations, different connections to land...So if there was a framework that RTOs could use when they're working with Aboriginal communities or [other] communities. [The framework could include questions such as] 'What are the protocols? What are the values of that community? What are the systems and processes in that community? and then build back from there which is that co-design sort of approach.

Case study 3: learning from each other

Describing the partners

In this case study, we explored how a large RTO and a large-size employer operating in the disability care service sector worked in partnership to provide work placements for students undertaking qualifications in the Community Services training package with the RTO, as well as upskilling staff already employed with the organisation.

The RTO was a large provider having more than 25 000 students in 2021. It employed approximately 1400 contract, casual and permanent staff across multiple metropolitan campuses. It offered more than 300 qualifications across a variety of industries, including personal care services, child and aged care, horticulture, business and management, automotive trades, building and construction.

The employer was a large size, private, metropolitan-based organisation that provided support services for people with disability. Services included supporting individuals to develop life and work-related skills to assist them in developing greater independence prepare as well as accommodation services. It was established more than 30 years ago.

Participants

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with five individuals, including three people representing the RTO and two people representing the employer.

The three RTO representatives included a portfolio manager, an advanced skills lecturer and a lecturer. The portfolio manager was responsible for managing the community services portfolio and in-house delivery and business development. They had been working with the RTO since 2007 and in their current role since 2017. The advanced skills lecturer had been working for the RTO for over ten years and was responsible for managing work placements, including organising the placements and visiting the learners on placements. The lecturer was responsible for delivering training both face to face and online and had been working for the role in the same role for six years. They had been delivering training at the employer for about 12 months.

The two employer representatives included one operations manager and one learner. The operations manager was responsible for managing training at the employer and delivering non-accredited training, had been working for the employer for four years and had been in the operations manager role for about two and a half years. The learner was a disability support worker who had been working with the employer in that role for two years.

Describing RTO-employer partnerships more generally

The portfolio manager described an RTO-employer partnership as a two-way relationship that meets each party's needs. They said:

RTO employer partnership is really based on the RTO having training products and then the industry having a need for training and then the two coming together. What does the industry need to either train unqualified staff, upskill to meet legislation, state, Commonwealth requirements. The RTO has got the training knowledge and is authorised to deliver a training product and then putting the two together to make sure that we are delivering compliant training products in multiple delivery modes

and forms and then to meet the needs of the industry and their expectations for their needs. So the two coming together forming a partnership.

The advanced skills lecturer talked about what they look for in 50employer partner, and how the employer must be a good fit for the RTO and the learners:

So some of the key things that we need to be aware of when we're developing a partnership is obviously we've got the qualification standards that we've got to meet the competencies. So, it's making sure we align our students with a workplace that can actually fulfil those competencies. We don't want somebody to go out and then just not have exposure to the experiences they need.

The learner described an RTO-employer partnership succinctly as, 'two parties working together to achieve something to the benefits. Both people both parties.'

Describing the case study partnership

Partnership establishment

The RTO portfolio manager said that the original partnership started in 2019, although the RTO had a long association with the employer prior to that in regard to student placements.

The portfolio manager described how the current iteration of the partnership developed in response to a state government initiative to fund enterprise training. They said,

Yeah. So I'm not sure if you know how it started. So if I backtrack, maybe tell you something you know, so the state government under the Department of Training and Workforce Development, which is where [the RTO] sits under over here, they're like our government body over here in [state], developed what's called an enterprise training program and that was set up in around about 2019. And the aim was to upskill certain sections in the industries and they mainly fit under mine. So disability, aged care, community services, mental health and the idea was that DTWD would fund training programs for employees who fitted under those particular study industry areas. It was aimed at small and large organisations and what they would do is the organisation would contribute 20% of the training and DTWD would then contribute to the rest. So the idea was enabling smaller industries being able to tap in to I guess, subsidised training.

It was the portfolio manager's role to engage with employers interested in upskilling, including this employer partner:

There was quite a clear business case role around that and my job was to touch base with organisations that it were interested in upskilling. We'd already had that conversation and then me going out and saying, hey, guess what, we've got this for you. The enterprise training program could not be funded individually by staff members themselves so the 20% must be paid out by the organisation. So I guess we've had very little ones where they only had five or six staff members and we've had slightly larger ones like [the case study employer], but it also was not just for qualifications, but may have been specific skill sets as well. But they had to come under the national training package umbrella.

The operations manager said that the partnership had been in place for as long as they could remember and started slowly with the employer agreeing to take a couple of RTO learners on work placement and it grew from there.

The advanced skills lecturer explained,

We've had students there all the years I've worked there, but in more recent years, probably the last three or four years, that's evolved into them taking a lot more of our students, and they've got several

group homes, and all of those group homes have a variety of clients with a variety of disabilities. So, we know that they know what competences our students need to meet so they'll rotate the students through so that the students get different experiences with a different client base.

- 'Capacity to train'

The RTO had a formal process in place to assess potential employer partners, which was also applied to this partnership. The advanced skills lecturer explained,

So when we're developing new partnerships, we'll do a "capacity to train" document which is essentially having a conversation with them verbally and ... a discussion about what our students need to get from this partnership ... and if we think that they're going to align, then we'll go out and do sort of like a site survey to make sure the students have access to equipment.

The advanced skills lecturer further explained:

the main thing is that students got to be able to meet the competencies, but we have to be mindful of people taking students because they're trying to fill a critical workforce need without actually being, you know, without them actually being able to give the right support that they need to the students. So, we have to be very, very cautious of that and make sure that we're not doing a knee-jerk reaction and "yeah, yeah, you can have students" and then the students don't get the experience. We try and stop that by having that early dialogue with the 'capacity to train'. Having partnerships is awesome for, like from an audit perspective, for us to meet the RTO audit requirements where they can be involved in validation, they can be involved in helping develop training tools. Before we put them out there, we can talk with the industry and say you know, how can we best teach this to meet the industry needs.

The advanced skills lecturer expanded on the community services context:

...so the area that I work in is age and disability, specifically in community services. So with age and disability, there's things like equipment that you need, they need access to, et cetera. So as to make sure that they're actually going to be able to get access to the client base, the equipment, and on all of those training needs. And then once we've established that they are a suitable mentor or partnership with them and that they've got suitably trained staff that can support students, so if we then decide that all of the boxes are ticked then we'll arrange and we'll send them usually a couple of students to start with, baby steps, and then if it was working out we can iron out any creases and then send more as the time goes on.

The partnership involved several services including training delivery to employer staff, work placement for other learners and work placement for RTO staff.

About the training: what, where and when

The RTO delivered the Certificate III in Individual Support to the employer's existing disability workers. The lecturer explained, 'They were all support workers, yes, working within the industry. So they had hands on experience working with clients and obviously the support for [the employer] as well.'

The course started in August 2021. In February 2022 there was a change of trainer. The lecturer interviewed for this case study was the primary trainer from February 2022 onwards.

The learners attended monthly full-day training sessions that were held sometimes at the RTO, sometimes at the employer and sometimes online. There were also regular drop-in sessions that were optional. The lecturer explained,

So each month there was...one face-to-face session with a drop-in session for that month as well. So it was sort of every two weeks that we had the students in from 8:30 in the morning till 4:30 in the

afternoon. That's where went through specific units, practicals, and questions and answers with the assessments. So then they had access to us online... so emails, phone numbers if they needed any extra work. I believe [the employer] also had a set up where they had study sessions for the students to be able to ask questions and get workbooks and observations and assessments set up.

The lecturer explained the online components. They said,

we have an online curriculum as well, so we actually do the online, but it wasn't anything relevant to [the employer]. So that was just my role, was the face-to-face delivery and online as well. But the students were doing the assessments online and submitting them online as well, so it was getting through that computer understanding for them as well, so they had to learn that. Some people can be old school where they preferred pen and paper and so that put a bit more pressure on them as well.

The employer provided learners with good exposure to job roles in the disability sector. The lecturer said,

So they had group homes and they also have lifestyle units that they were actually living in, so there might be three or four different units and the group homes... it was more like a house with four or five people living in it. And there's support workers working in there on three different types of shifts. So morning shifts, afternoon, night shifts. So it was 24/7 care. So they had exposure to, you know, the morning routines and afternoon routines. So they had quite a while to exposure to the actual industry itself.

The delivery mode was blended learning. The portfolio manager explained, 'we had some training that was at their location if needed to be we had training that might have been on campus. The RTO was well set up and then some of the training was through just what we call Blackboard collaborate. So it's what we call blended delivery.'

The portfolio manager explained how training times were arranged. They said,

So what we did was we worked with [the employer] to find a suitable time. We know, I guess the logistics and difficulties with that, and [the employer] really worked well with us. Obviously they have to put their clients first. And so if there's for some reason somebody unable to attend or provide support to a client, we realise that some students or staff may have needed to attend to that. But we just worked around that.

Assessment was conducted on campus. The learner explained,

No, because we are already working within the field and it's something to do with because we are employed through [the employer] and not through a traineeship or partnership through the [RTO], they're not able to do that. But all assessments that she would have come to do out in the workplace, we did at [the RTO] anyway. Like, we have some theory days and we had practical lessons where we learned how to bathe someone or we learned how to transfer in and out of a wheelchair or whatever the task may be, we actually did it at [the RTO] instead. And it also fell under the confidentiality and privacy issues cause we work with clients.

The learner said the facilities were suitably set up. They said, 'The lecturer that we had was amazing and they also have all the abilities that we require. They had the hoist, they had the beds, they had, you know, all the rooms that we needed to be able to do our assessments that we do in our day-to-day routine work. We didn't have to go anywhere else to do that.'

About the learners

Learners were recruited by the employer via an internal email. 26 learners enrolled in the training and were trained as a single group.

The lecturer said the number of learners attending the sessions fluctuated. They said,

On the day could fluctuate between 10 and 15 but sometimes it could be sort of eight or it would be 16 or 17. So there was twenty that were actually enrolled into the class. Couple we have... Obviously we lost a few along the way. So I'd say about 15 at that point... between 11 to 15 depending on who could come in and whatever.

The portfolio manager explained that not all learners continued with the training. They said,

We started with 26 in all delivery and training. There is a natural attrition. And the attrition we found with [the employer] was not unusual. And there are all sorts of reasons people are no longer employed, life changes, or at the end of it, we may have had people that just through sorts or it just didn't end up completing yet.

The learners were employed in direct client care support. The portfolio manager explained,

So [the employer] have a range of services that they offer and because some of the units have very clear guidelines about assessment criteria and then you've got your mandatory workplace hours... they could demonstrate or record, I guess, information if they were doing a one-on-one individual support, but generally they were collecting up evidence related to group care or group, you know, multiple clients, yeah.

Work placement of other learners

The RTO delivers Certificate III and Certificate IV qualifications from the CHC Community Services Training Package to the general public. Units of competency packaged in these qualifications required a mandatory work placement of 120 hours. The RTO was able to meet the mandatory work placement requirement through the partnership by placing these learners with the employer.

The employer accommodated up to ten learners at a time on work placement. The operations manager explained,

Our limit is the 10 per cohort, but that may be every two or three months or even longer depending on, you know, we obviously got quite strict COVID policies in place which we've had to have where they can be a bit more lenient at the moment, we have had to delay some people's work placements because of that. So we've got some high risk houses that we can't have people going backwards and forwards to. So yeah, that's been a challenge. But yeah, from my understanding it's about 10 per cohort.

The employer flexibly accommodated the learner's needs. The operations manager said, 'So they have to do 120 hours and we are pretty flexible about how that happens. So some people might do three days a week, some might actually do five days and get it over and done. But it just really depends on each student and what they can or can't do. So yeah, we're pretty flexible with being able to do that.'

The arrangement was beneficial to learners who can experience a variety of disability worker job contexts. The operations manager explained,

When the students come through to us, they'll go into our houses to do their practical assessment or practical parts of their courses. So really getting that hands on learning for what they're doing, depending on which level they're doing it at will depend on which houses they go to. So we can, you know, because we have quite a variety of houses and services that we offer, we can offer a suite of practical type components.

Drivers and motivators

What drives the employer to partner with the RTO?

- Developing a skilled workforce

For the employer, the drivers are developing a skilled workforce and the recruitment of new staff. The operations manager said,

We get to give the opportunity to our staff to be able to gain those qualifications they may not have had and would like to get. And the opposite way, it is a way for us to teach skills within the industry and then also recruitment. It is a really good recruitment way because... I wouldn't like to say the "try before you buy" because that's not what I mean. It's just, you know, we can see what skills are coming out of the [the RTO] and contribute to what actually maybe you should try and add this in and just those contributions that we can to an RTO that may just be doing textbook type stuff... it's really nice to be able to have that part, you know, to be able to shape that curriculum where, you know, we on the ground, we know it's working. We know it's not working. Let's contribute to that.

The RTO portfolio manager also saw the employer's drive to upskill in the context of the wider industry. They said, 'disability at the moment, and I'm unsure about other states, but a lot of organisations in disability are actively engaged in upskilling so that that's the overarching movement that we have here in [state].'

The learner also saw the driver as upskilling of staff. They said,

Well, they get qualified support workers. At the end of the day, and I haven't been told when this is actually going occur, but was in the next three to five years everyone working in the disability sector has to be qualified one way or another. So I was lucky enough that I was able to be employed without that. But yeah, that's not going to be able to happen soon, so [the employer] can partner up with the [the RTO] and say we'll give you work whilst you're studying. It's a win-win: they can do on the job training plus their qualification and they're like, keep their employees longer.

- Quality service and training delivery

The lecturer also pointed to the quality service that the RTO delivered, saying,

I believe we provide good information, and we're not somebody that would just pass people for the sake of it, we've got good work ethics and we got a good understanding of the industry out there. Most of the staff that work here are all industry trained, so nurses, support workers, OTAs [occupational therapy assistants] those relevant occupations. And I think that actually resonates in the community where we're working with them.

What drives the RTO to partner with the employer?

- Compliance, business development

The RTO portfolio manager explained that the RTO was driven by compliance and business development. They said,

One of them is that we do operate under the RTO standards. And the RTO standards is that we do need to engage in industry. Now, that's on multiple forms, that could be just engaging in... having industry advisory groups, it might be asking them to look at our qualification plans. But... us engaging in developing training with industry is also a reciprocal thing as well because we're engaging with them, we're finding out what's happening in industry. 'What have they got? What's the new equipment they're using? What do they want to [do]?' But at the same time, it's back to us because our lecturers are also engaging in industry, so currency, updating their skills. So... it is a true partnership where

we're both equal people of it, we both have something to bring. The other reason it drives me [is] because I am a business manager and I do need to create business. So that was just one of my key little hooks, I guess you could say, at creating business as well.

- Wide variety of learning opportunities and contexts

The advanced skills lecturer said the RTO was driven to partner with the employer because of the wide range of experiences available to learners. They said,

They've got a lot of group homes, they've got a real broad variety of clients that we can interact with. So...our perspective is we're looking at a place that can give our students the right kind of experiences, the right kind of exposure in a safe environment with really sound policies and procedures.

The operations manager agreed and saw their ability to expose RTO staff and learners to a variety of disability support contexts as the main reason the RTO chose to partner with them. They said,

... we're one of the bigger organisations... well, probably are the biggest organisation, so they're going to get a range of skills development that they can have and we have clients from very independent young men and ladies and children at home and then all the way up to, you know, right up to their end of life stages. So we can offer that variety.

The lecturer said,

I believe from a [the RTO] point of view is we've got industry skills, we've got staff that actually work within the industry so understand the fundamentals of what's expected... so I think we partnership quite well because we actually understand the challenges and things that they go through, and what is needed out there as an industry skill. So it's basically current and it's actually relevant to what we're actually teaching and what they're doing out there.

The RTO portfolio manager said,

We want students to come into us to do the six-month course and become qualified. They must have a mandatory work placement. We can't do this without that placement. We need organisations to take our students as volunteers. We can't make them do that, what we can do is develop a relationship, to say, "hey, let's work this out, you're short of staff, we've got a resource over here, the end goal is that our students become employed in the industry when they finish it, let's work together." And most of our aged care and disability students, in fact, probably 99% always gain employment, if not during work placement, at the end of work placement.

The learner explained what motivated them to enrol in the training. They said,

I was aware that in my industry, the NDIS is changing their requirements and within the next few years we have to be qualified to continue to work in this field. So when [the learning and development manager] brought up this e-mail and suggested that we could do it, I jumped on the opportunity to better myself and to get that qualification.

Benefits and challenges of partnerships

Here we were interested in what the perceived benefits and challenges were for both the RTO and the employer, and their staff, from being in the partnership.

What are the main benefits for the RTO and its staff?

- Industry currency

The RTO portfolio manager talked about how the partnership with the employer kept the RTO industry current. They said,

again, currency, being upskilled. I've just put in a whole heap of brand new equipment into a training simulator training programs. Now I've gone out and put all this new equipment in, but if we weren't in partnership with people like [the employer] how do we know we're putting the right equipment in?

The lecturer said, 'It keeps us current with the information that we've actually giving out there and some of the things that might change, you know, when you actually do it on a daily basis, we actually are then involved in some of those changes and we can implement changes in the delivery of the actual qualification that we give as well.'

- Work placement of RTO staff

Under the Standards for RTOs 2015, RTOs must employ skilled trainers and assessors, including persons who have current industry skills directly related to the training and assessment being provided. The partnership provided an avenue for the RTO to ensure that their staff are industry current.

The advanced skills lecturer explained,

I recently, at the end of last year, spent some time with [the employer]. I worked there on the floor and I worked through some of their houses so that I could, you know, it's good for my currency, but it also helps me to see how we can align with what we're teaching to make sure that it's current. And because they have so many of our students, it's a really good place for us to self-review and make sure that we are training real life experiences because we need to...you've got your unit of competency, your qualifications, but the industry has changed quite a bit since the last training package was written. Obviously the new one is just coming out and things have evolved. So, for currency by having this open dialogue with them and by spending physical time in there, I actually work there but also we do visits all the time. So, it means that we can align our training with what is really happening out there in industry. So, having access to those situations by immersing ourselves in with them we can see that we're aligning our real-life experiences, still meeting the units of competency and the training package needs, and the qualification needs but tailoring it so that it's actually meeting what's happening out there in industry.

- Building relationships

The advanced skills lecturer talked about how doing their own work placement at the employer had enhanced the relationship with the employer. They said,

Part of me going out there to do some of my industry currency was part of building that because it just fosters better relationships. So, I was with them for a couple of weeks. And I went to three different group homes. I'm a nurse by profession...so it keeps me current as well so I know what's happening in industry. But because I was then able to work with their staff and because some of their staff are also our students...now they're relaxed at being a student because it's scary for people to become a student when you've not studied for many years, you're already working in industry, now that industry said, yeah, now you need to get a qualification. It's a real barrier and it's scary. So that sort of fosters that relationship where it's OK...we're here to help guide you through it and nurture you through it. We're not here with a clicky pen and a clipboard going, "Didn't do that right", you know, it's about nurturing and saying, but you're already doing this. You don't realise you're doing it, but you're doing it because this situation happened and you did this, this and this. I didn't do much of that [assessing] when I went [for the two weeks] because I didn't want to be there as a trainer, I wanted to be there as somebody working on the floor. So, I tried to veer away from questions about the college, but they did crop up. But when they're in class it's mostly they go, "well, I've not done that", "well tell us what you're doing", "Well, you actually do do that. You do that when you're doing this and the

other”. And we unpack it with them a bit and it just helps them relax a lot more, and I think it’s that, I don’t want to say informality, but the less formal approach to it stops these people who haven’t been in education for maybe 30 or 40 years and are terrified of computers and of it’s just have training in general and going back to school that we’re there, we need to de-escalate the anxiety. And I think unpacking what they need to do and telling them, “But you’re actually already doing this, you just don’t know you’re doing it”, and they go, ohh, and then you see the anxiety go and they relax. And it breaks the barriers and I think that open dialogue and that communication is good for fostering that.

The learner also reflected on the benefit of working together. They said,

They get an insight into us, of actually working within the industry and we were able to sort of provide information to our lecturer about how things work, you know, in this organisation and with these people, because a lot of the lecturers only work in aged care facilities, which is very different from disability. So yeah, it never works hand-in-hand I feel. Get to learn.

- RTO reputation and potential future business

Through the partnership, the RTO can demonstrate to the broader market that they are a reputable training provider. The portfolio manager explained,

...we’ve got a lot of competition for small RTOs, in particular the South, the Mandurah area, there’s a lot of small RTOs that are popping up and they generally tend to target Cert III Comm Services or aged care or disability, or a Cert III business... they cherry pick a few little quals. The importance of our partnership is for us to demonstrate that we’re a stayer, we’re [a particular RTO] and we provide a quality product, so that’s really important for us to have a partnership.

The portfolio manager talked about how the partnership operated within a wider network of connections. They said, ‘and some of our lecturers had worked for them or had engaged through networking. So the other thing is we knew them through various different industry advisory groups, networking. So it wasn’t just us there, but we, you know, we all know each other. We’ve been around the traps, if you know what I mean.’

The portfolio manager gave an example involving the advanced skills lecturer. They said, ‘So, I’m working with another organisation at the moment and just funny enough, she used to work at an agency where [the advanced skills lecturer] used to work, so she knew [them].’

They also explained how existing business could lead to other business opportunities. They said,

We’re always thinking about future business ideas. Being a business manager, I always have to have that in the top of my head. So even if we’re contacted by an organisation and I’ll go out and visit them and it may not come to fruition, the point is they’ll remember that at least we came out. Now it could be that we’ve got nothing that we can offer them now or they’re not ready for that. But they will remember us, you know?

What are the main benefits for the employer and its staff?

- Information sharing

The operations manager reported a benefit in having RTO staff update their industry currency in their workforce. They said, ‘we had one of the lecturers come from [the RTO] at the end of last year to actually get industry experience again, which was really good. That was quite beneficial. I was on a meeting the other day that the ladies were having for some RPLs and she was saying I know what you guys do so I know you can all RPL! And that’s ultimately what it is. It does give us those opportunities to offer those things to either lecturers or anything.’

- Skill development for the industry

The operations manager said, 'I think it's skills development for the industry. So even if those students don't become part of our organisation, we know that they are getting really good training for other people in the organisation.'

- Benefits to learners

The learner said, 'I got to be with my peers and feed off them and learn with them. I didn't interrupt my working life, so I still was able to have, you know, decent income and my home life and there was a little bit of supportive, mainly from my peers that, you know, if we needed help we could do that. Yeah, I wasn't just going to a umm ... yeah, strangers.'

Mutual benefits for the RTO and the employer

The advanced skills lecturer highlighted the mutual benefits for both organisations that arose from the partnership. They said,

OK, so we've got obviously we have to send students out to work placement. It's a requirement of the qualification. Knowing that we've got somewhere that's established and we know what training our students are going to receive there, it's total transparency. We both know what the other, what the RTO and the employer, we both know what each other needs. So, it's a real collaboration of them giving our students full exposure. It also gives...we're a vocational trainer so our end goal is for students to be qualified and employed. We want them to get jobs from this. So, with working with, and collaborating with somebody that's always looking for staffing, their perspective is that you know, for want of a better phrase, try before you buy. You know they've got these people coming in [who are] trained in their policies and procedures. They already fit in with their culture and they're ready to go, they can hit the ground running. They're completely work ready for that particular workplace. So, for us, our goal is to training with the intention of them getting employment. So, if those two things can align, they want people that are trained, we want to train people that can gain employment, and they want to have quality trained staff and we want to do quality training with real life experiences in a quality establishment. So that's the collaboration. Everybody gets something from it and at the end of the day, these people that are paying for a qualification have got genuine opportunities for employment.'

The operations manager described the partnership in terms of the positive outcomes for all parties:

I think it's been fantastic for both the students from the RTO and as well as [for the employer] for a couple of reasons. We're able to share the skills that we have but also it has been a really good way for us to be able to recruit within the system because we know the quality of the people that are coming through based on that partnership that we have.

What are, or have been, the main challenges of this partnership for the employer and their staff, and for the RTO and their staff?

- COVID-19 pandemic

COVID19 was a major challenge for everyone. The operations manager explained, 'because of COVID, we have a skills crisis shortage as well, so we weren't able to employ staff to be able to let those staff be able to go off on a day for instance... And then we had a few people that were just unwell and things, you know, life happens in those times.'

The advanced skills lecturer said,

it [the course] was set up pre COVID and so we had all these dates set so we had to be fluid with our dates because sometimes the staff were just needed and we couldn't run the classes. So, we'd

readjust it, would make a new date, but that challenge wouldn't normally be a challenge because we would plan these dates a year or two in advance which we did and then they would structure their staff to be available and backfill them. But then COVID happened and it, you know, threw chaos into an otherwise streamlined and organised situation. So that was a challenge for some of the participants, they just were doing so many shifts that they couldn't, they were struggling to keep the paperwork updated because they were still working full time and extra hours. But like I say, that was an anomaly to how it would normally be, which is what it is. That was COVID.

The lecturer said, 'because of the COVID situation there was short staff so it made it really difficult for some of them to actually get to classes because people were off sick, and it put a bit more pressure on them at that point.'

It was a difficult situation for all. The lecturer explained,

They're very focused on what they do, they're respectful for the clients and also their teamwork as well. So they wouldn't want to let anybody down. But there were situations where they were getting called to say, "Can you come in this afternoon, can you do this?" So, obviously, as I say, the shortages of staff out there and COVID, it was a really hard time for them, in my opinion, to actually try and get all this done

The learner said,

The main challenges was the lack of time... Long days and we were working through the pandemic and we were lucky, you know, short of staff. So we were all getting called during our [RTO] day. Can you come to work? Can you start early? Can you do this? Can you do that? And it made it very difficult to kind of focus on what we needed to do.

The lecturer said,

It's more about understanding the industry out there as well as understanding what the support workers have to do and to be part of as well as doing the training as well as working and taking into consideration that time frame ... I found that the time constraints were really quite stressful for students and also for the service provider because what we're looking at is trying to get the people face-to-face and then what happens is we're not able to do that.

There are consequences when the learners don't turn up to training. The lecturer explained,

So the timetabling and obviously trying to get things done as quickly as we can, but still give a quality care service, but the actual content of the information that we have to provide out for the students then makes the time frame quite compact. And then if students don't turn up because they've got other commitments with work, it's hard to actually catch up, to pick up on that criteria. So I think that's the main challenge. It is making sure everybody turns up when they're supposed to.

- COVID19 and online delivery

The move to online learning was not smooth, with a lot of difficulties experienced using the platform, to the extent that it prevented completion for some students. The operations manager explained,

The platform that [the RTO] use called Blackboard was not very user friendly from my understanding. So we've got people that, you know, our mums and just haven't used the computer their whole lives type of thing trying to navigate Blackboard was near impossible and even people that were very computer savvy said it was very clunky and not able to...So not being able to release staff because we needed them for support work and also just the IT system was an issue for a lot of people. So I'd say that the IT system was quite challenging for most of the people that actually didn't complete their qualification, and that's mostly from that.

The learner described their experience. They said,

To begin with, the Blackboard program that they operate through was very un-user friendly and very hard to manage... once you kind of got your head around it, it became more easier. But some of the content was quite difficult to find ... And when you only got limited time to kind of find these answers out, it did make it very challenging.

There were also connectivity problems. The learner explained,

Our first week we're in the computer room and that was fine, but then after that we got moved rooms and the Wi-Fi was ridiculous. We could never use it. We had to hotspot from our phones. Obviously when you're taking laptops need to have accessible power points so we can charge them and they just wasn't... providing the basic facilities that you need for the training... Most of us had our own laptops, which we were happy to use and bring anyway. But, yeah, if we can't use their Wi-Fi, what's the point really?

Other approaches were tried. The operations manager explained, 'we tried different things like printing everything for everyone and them coming in and writing we tried a few things to try and assist them, but yeah, it was just a fair bit of a challenge.'

- Juggling competing demands and needs

The partners are aware that they have competing obligations that must be navigated successfully for the partnership to work. The portfolio manager said,

I guess one of the challenges is obviously we both have competing obligations. So [the employer] obviously do have a client base and they do need to provide care for their client immediately. They can't put care off to a client because they are at high quality, direct client care service program. So sometimes the competing is where they need [the] student, staff [and so they] may not be able to attend our training sessions because they need to do that. It's a competing one, but it's an understandable one if that makes sense. The other [challenge] is that we work under units of competency and so organisations may have a particular range of skills that they may need to also develop for their staff, because that's related to their particular client or their service, and sometimes aligning the two together can be difficult. Under compliance, we can't assess staff or assess students on a range of skills that aren't in units of competency...which usually leads to a further conversation and a... "How we going to work that?"

The main way in which the challenge of competing obligations was handled was through communication. The portfolio manager explained,

One of the things that we do as well is so our lecturer always would let [the learning and development manager] know if there was an issue if staff hadn't turned up. I mean, if we were advised the staff is sick, that's another thing, but keep them in the loop of the progress. You know, it's that dialogue, you know, how are students going, staff? Have they had any feedback? Are they finding something different? If they are, then let us know. Let us work that around. So open communication. But also we have to be transparent in what we can and can't do, we can't promise the world. If we don't know, because we need to check on something, such as ETP [Enterprise Training Program] guidelines or something like that, we then have to be very transparent and say I'm not sure. Let me get back to you.

The portfolio manager was also mindful that the learners had their own competing demands. They said,

You know, they are workers. They have their own competing needs in their own life, etcetera. Sometimes it's time, you know, it's all individual, you know ... the moment you commit to something, something happens in your life! This would be for most of our students, you know, you've committed to this, you need to do this, but then suddenly you need to do that because you got work ... look, it's normal, it's life.

The time constraints were difficult for the learners. The lecturer said, ‘they don’t want to let their team down and picking up extra shifts and, you know, family issues and things like that, obviously outside issues. But the main thing I think is the actual staffing and getting the assessments and things done, they found it really... that time, time constraints.’

- Shift work

Related to the challenge described above was the demands of shift work. The learner group included shift workers who often had to go to work directly after training.

The learner explained,

So, a lot of the other employees work in the accommodations sector, so they do 10 hour shifts. There are a lot of them either started at 6:00 or 7:00 in the morning. So, they’d have to do their time, come to [the RTO] for the six hours of [training] and then go back and finish their shift at work. Some of them, people worked night shifts and then they had the day to go to [the RTO]. But obviously, being up all night, they were quite tired. And then some of them, it just happened to be their day off. So it was, sort of, a bit different for all of us.

The operations manager explained, ‘that’s really got to do with the fact that we just didn’t have staff to be able to take over.’

The lecturer said, ‘It was quite stressful for them to be honest, because obviously some people were coming off night shifts and then coming into classrooms.’

Determining success in partnerships

In looking at what makes a partnership successful we were interested in learning about the qualities held by both the RTO and the employer that complemented each other and helped to strengthen the partnership.

What qualities does the employer have that make it a good partner?

Here we asked the RTO representatives to describe the qualities of the employer that made it a good organisation to partner with.

- Commitment to having high quality staff

The portfolio manager described the employer. They said,

I find them a very communicative organisation. I find them very interested in upskilling and training staff. They’re very committed to that. They’ve been having this dialogue and interaction with us for a few years now, so it’s a long term commitment...that’s really helpful for us because we’ve got a lot of organisations that touch base with us, then things change, and they’re unable to progress and there’s all sorts of reasons why, you know, organisations suddenly lose funding, client base changes, we’ve got COVID, you know, there’s all that sort of stuff in the middle. But I find that [the employer] has always come across as an organisation: this is their end goal and they’re committed to this and they’re doing it in multiple ways. So you can see that their commitment to have high quality staff either when they come on board or to upskill is very evident in any of our conversations, and there isn’t a reluctance to talk about how’ [long] it’s going to take, but there’s no short term.

- Values

The lecturer highlighted the employer’s values as a quality that made it a good partner. They said,

They have good client and mission statement. So philosophies, you know, it’s all about the client independence, making sure that they’re being included and the staff are well trained. There’s

opportunities out there outside of the normal day-to-day personal care. So there's the activities, there's social, the emotional support. And so all of the things that actually focus on that person-centred care that we all talk about and need so much.

This view of the employer's values was reiterated by the operations manager, who said,

I think by living our values, so very much around that compassion, teamwork, just ensuring that we are able to show the students what that is. So, you know, putting the people that we support at the forefront. So if we have to cancel because someone is sick, sorry, that's just what we're going to have to do and, you know, I think that's the thing we bring is that we live our values and we're very inclusive. We are very much about community and I honestly think that's how we contribute to the partnership from that point of view.

What qualities does the RTO have that make it a good partner?

- More customer focused and flexible

The portfolio manager said, 'so the importance for the partnership for [the RTO] is we need to be part of this cycle of upskilling and creating or developing a highly skilled workforce that is relevant to the industry.'

The RTO strove to be more customer focused and more flexible. The advanced skills lecturer said,

What we are constantly doing, we have industry advisory groups that we participate with and we basically ask industry, "what do you need?" so then we can arrange training schedules. So, we can do obviously the normal things like the RPL, we can do traineeships, we can do on-site training, we can do off-site training, we can do face to face or virtual. When we find out what industry needs we'll tailor training and around that. So, what we've started doing in recent semesters, actually because of COVID, it was actually what an initiated it, we've started a night class for existing staff so that it doesn't impact because some of the challenges are actually getting people to participate because they're working full-time. So, we started a night class for instance which was one night a week, over a year for people that are existing employees, so they've already got that underpinning knowledge and they're just getting the formal training side of it. So, it was like 1 evening a week for a year, which doesn't impact on their income but it also doesn't impact on backfilling for the workplace. It doesn't put the pressure on them to release their staff, so things like that, we are just training methods and modes of delivery to help industry with what they need.

This flexibility was demonstrated during the peak of COVID-19, with the RTO extending timeframes.

The learner said,

We were given longer time to answer questions and to submit assessments. They were very accommodating in that regard. That's probably the biggest one. Like we didn't sort of have finalized time where we had to hand everything in. And if it we were given a bit of leeway to kind of say, well, you guys are also working. We understand we can't get everything done.

The learner also said that the lecturer was very accommodating. They said,

She took time out of her schedule and made make-up days for us. And she would send us to the people in the class saying, I'm going be at the [RTO] between 9:00 and 4:00 on this Tuesday, if you're available, please come in; you got any questions? If you need anything answered, I'm here. I'm available. She also available to us via phone, via e-mail. Within reason, anytime that we were available to talk to her, she was really accommodating. She was really... yeah. Amazing.

Efforts were also made to support students with the connectivity challenges mentioned above. The learner talked about how the lecturer supported them.

We aired our concerns to our lecturer and she was awesome. I cannot talk about her highly enough, but that was just something out of her control because she doesn't write the program, she just facilitates it, you know. But if we said to her, you know, we can't find it, she would then go forth and find it for us or give us a hint of where it could.

- Committed to having industry currency

The lecturer talked about the importance of having industry currency to ensure the learners can easily transfer the knowledge acquired through the training into the workplace setting:

We have to make sure that we're giving the relevant and current information to the students, that's industry specific, so that when they go into the workplace and put things in place, they have to be able to interpret those and work with a different cohorts of people and there needs to be a supportive role for the RTO as well as the actual service provider.

What qualities do the employer and RTO share that make them good partners?

- Communication and collaboration

Open dialogue was central to the partnership. The portfolio manager said,

What I think is in our partnership with [the employer] - we listen and we hopefully provide a package that meets their needs as well. So in the old days and I'm talking about long, long time ago, [the RTO] was you come to class, you sit in the classroom, that's the only way you can do it. For a long time now my focus has always been that we need to create other training opportunities and partnering with [the employer] and saying, "well, what do you need? And what if we got?" and tailoring to meet their needs as well, but obviously meeting our compliance and requirements as well.

The operations manager described the qualities as, 'Openness and willing to learn and take feedback. You know, very much, partnering with our training manager to say, "you know, at this stage we can't do this, or we can do this... Hey, give us two weeks... Can you postpone by two weeks?", or something like that - just really being open to flexibility.'

The advanced skills lecturer agreed they have a good relationship, one in which they're comfortable approaching each other with questions. They noted that having worked together for a long period had helped build this kind of relationship: "because we have such good interaction together it's very easy ... we just, we just iron out any problems very, very quickly."

The portfolio manager said,

So we need quality training products. We need to know our product. We need to have the resources that are absolutely up to date. But then what we need to do is we need to know how to communicate and impart that to organisations. And we need to also have uncomfortable conversations where maybe the plan is to do this, we're part way through the plan, but it's not coming together because ultimately, yeah, we need to do that.

The lecturer also highlighted the need for good communication from the onset. They said,

I think the underlying setting up of the actual course itself, where the managers were talking, they were giving them honest and reachable goals with what we can actually do. I also feel that with [the employer] they were on board with making sure that it worked and we always had that access [to the worksite for their learners]...There was always good communication and if anything did arise, then there was always somebody [the managers] could talk to - either myself or it was my team leader. So having that sort of working together and being proactive [in dealing with] any issues that did come up, we worked out some of the problem solving for them rather than just ignoring it and "it's our way or their way".

The advanced skills lecturer said, ‘the collaboration t-iron out the creases. That open dialogue is so important and fostering those relationships where you can have that easy, I don’t want to say informal, but more casual I guess because when it’s too formal it can be a bit of a barrier and we want to break those barriers down.’

All three RTO staff interviewed were responsible for communicating directly with the employer and there appeared to be clear lines of communication and mechanisms for escalation of issues. The lecturer said, ‘the portfolio manager, she’s over the [advanced skills lecturer]. But if there were things that we could, I could organise then I would have that conversation with the [operations manager]. But if it went out of my job description or jurisdiction, then it would go to Karen. But we were all on board and we’re all on the same page.’

The partners agreed that good communication was a quality the partners shared. The portfolio m’nager said,

It’s back to communication as well. We find [the employer] very, I guess, a very friendly organisation to discuss this with and we’d like to think that on the other end we also have that communication. So at the moment we’re doing emails back and forth about some future training and RPL-ing and things like that. And so it’s a dialogue. “Thank you for that all. But what about this?” So the ease with which we’re able to communicate absolutely helps. Our main point of contact is [the learning and development manager]. And so, you know, we’ve had dialogue and communication for quite a few years now and we’ve always found [the employer] very keen to listen. We’ve got something here, it may not suit them, but we’ve got it here and they’re very interested to always unpack that and have a look at it. And also both of us to have time to see how this is going to work for us. So neither party is going, “Yeah, but I need it now” because we both understand that a relationship can take time and change, you know.

- Focused on the outcome

The lecturer said,

I believe that we both have the same wishing for the outcome to have good quality staff, to make sure that they’re trained and they’re supported, we have staff that are very passionate about the industry and having people out there that are and highly qualified, highly person centred and also know what their legal and obligations are to actually provide that care for the person.

- Flexibility

While flexibility was noted as being a quality of the RTO, it was also a shared quality. The operations manager said,

They’re very similar, so we have the flexibility, they have the flexibility, we live by values of teamwork, so that includes them, you know, as part of the team. Understanding that people have other lives, so have children at school and things, so if we need to be flexible on how we offer the work placements. Yeah, that’s honestly what I think, how they complement each other.

The advanced skills lecturer said,

We’re so transparent on what our needs are, we’re very open to explain what our students need and if our students aren’t getting or don’t feel they’re getting from it what they need they’re [the employer] just flexible...It might be “this student is struggling with this client base, they can’t meet all these competencies”.” Alright, we’re going to rotate them through so that they all get lots of different experiences”. So, for us, we know that our students are going to get a really rounded real life experience which from our perspective is for a workplace that’s the main focus is that they’re

going to get lots of experiences, lots of access to different situations, so that they're completely work-ready when they're finished their course and [the employer] in particular provide all those.'

Improvements

Here we were particularly interested in what elements of the RTO could be improved to make it more attractive to new partners.

The lecturer said,

I think that we actually need to be moving forward. You know, we can't just stay static. We have to move forward as to what we can actually do out there, how we can improve our service-to-service providers, keeping everything on track and making sure that we're all well trained, we're all up to date with industry, industry currencies, the changes, what happens, and looking actually for more service providers to come on board and work with their staff as well as working with our staff, getting to know what the staff needs to be supported. You know, we all can all say about more staff out there, you know, less hours, all of those types of things, but unfortunately that's the industry - and it's something that we have to all be aware of - it's not all roses and butterflies, but being more professional and working with them so that we actually get a quality package for the staff to go out and provide that service.

The operations manager had ideas for how it could be improved to better meet learner needs. One idea was that the RTO could have delivered a workshop to the managers and team leaders on how to use the online system, then the employer could have better supported the staff. They also said,

I think if we were able to have something like an online component that was user-friendly, that people could access when they were able to. So like, videos that you could watch and then do assessments and stuff like that, I think that would be something that could improve the amount of people that would be able to get through those courses in the current environments.

The portfolio manager talked about the significant changes that have occurred over the years in the ways that RTOs offered training, and the key to succeeding in the present was flexibility. They said,

I think we have to be flexible and I think we have to look outside of the box. The world of offering vocational education and training these days is totally different from the old days. And I remember when I first started, you know, you sit in a classroom, that's your option, we have no other options (or it wasn't quite like that). We have to start looking at diverse training. We start having to look at what can people that want to engage in training are genuinely able to commit to. You know, you can't put a course on for five days a week and expect students to come into the door and be available. When working with partnerships, with industry and that, we need to be flexible in what is their business.

Supporting and sustaining partnerships

The focus of this section was on the types of supports that were useful in establishing and sustaining the partnership, along with the roles and capabilities required to support the partnership. We were also interested in what additional supports and capabilities would improve the partnership.

- Committed, engaged staff/at the employer

The operations manager was supported by a training manager who did a lot of the 'leg work'. The operations manager said,

She did a lot of the forefront work, so you know, making sure the students have - and she still continues to do that - making sure that we have work placements going out to our team leaders,

going “this is what's going to be expected, this is what we're thinking, how can you help us?” And yeah, just that communication in the beginning and then just continuing that work.

The operations manager was also supported by team leaders, which the operations manager described as being, ‘...the ones that are on the ground, observing, teaching, showing different skills, as well as obviously the other team members. But yeah, they are in the houses supervising, asking, “what is it that you need to learn? Let's show you how to do this.” Actually doing hands on type training really, mentoring and stuff.’

- Teaching and learning supports

The advanced skills lecturer talked about the training supports. They said,

So, obviously we're doing the face-to-face delivery on a monthly basis, but in between that they've got access to our LMS, which is Blackboard, they can contact us, [Lecturer] or myself but [Lecturer] was the main trainer, so they can contact her e-mail, they've got all of those connections. We've got computer rooms for them so when they were on site, they had access to all the material and access to computers. We've got training rooms so if there are any areas that they aren't exposed to in their normal workplace we can fill [in] the gaps on campus, like a role play type of situation. So those sorts of support, so you know computer backup and some people aren't very computer literate so if they were struggling with computing, we can print off the assessments and they can have a hard copy. Those sorts of supports are additional.

The portfolio manager mentioned several supports available to learners including a course that provides literacy and numeracy support to students undertaking VET qualifications and specific support services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. However, they also said that these support services may not have been accessed by learners who were existing workers. They said, ‘because students who are working and are training through their work and whatever, sometimes it's a little bit difficult to get to these supports [due to] competing obligations, needs and that sort of thing. But we're constantly improving that.’

Learner support was also offered but the learner was not sure if it was accessed. They said,

Well, it was advised that if you needed more support that you could reach out to those services. I don't know if that was utilised to my knowledge. But yeah, it definitely was talked about and it definitely was, ‘You can go down to admin or you can go to this department and they will help you or they'll do this or that or...’ so, yeah, it was definitely brought up. But I don't know if it was used.

The learner said the main supports were additional time and a supportive trainer. They said, ‘the biggest support we had was our lecturer giving us extra time, allowing us to text her, call her, e-mail her with queries, questions. And she even answered those on the weekends when she didn't have to. She was on leave or on holidays.’ They said the trainer, ‘even went into bat for us and emailed our work saying, you know, these guys need more time, they need to have, you know, not be so demanded on. But you know, when you sign a contract, that's just how it is.’

The advanced skills lecturer could not think of any other supports that were needed. They said,

I don't think so, only because when we've come up with barriers we've sort of looked at overcoming them. Some of the barriers were like COVID, so what can we do. So, [the lecturer] did some online meetings with them through Blackboard, so that took the pressure off of them being physically there every time. And like I say, it was just because of COVID. It was a very, you know, unusual time, you had to flow with it. So, some of those things that could have been a problem I think we already overcame them, but it would be interesting to see what their [the employer] feedback was to see if

they could come up with anything else, that would be nice to know. Yeah, like I say that we did have hiccups, but we looked at strategies to overcome them at the time.

The portfolio manager also mentioned a range of supports available in jobs and skills centres including job boards where employers could advertise job opportunities and café meet and greets. The portfolio manager said, ‘Yeah, look, we’re all, in the end, we’re a business, you know, in the end, [the RTO] is a business. Obviously, we’re a state government business, but you know I can’t do my job without someone at the front counter taking the enrolment. Strategic partners can’t take their business without me. You know it’s... you have to work like that. You know, you’ve got to work together.’

- Open communication/transparency between the partners

The operations manager also referred to the open communication as a source of support. They said, ‘Definitely our team leaders and also all the people at the actual [RTO] where they’re just talking, going, “Hey, this is where people are falling short. What can we do to help? Or how can you help? This is what we think you can do.” Just that openness.’

In considering the question related to what additional supports and capabilities would improve the partnership the lecturer suggested the partnership could be better supported by a dedicated team. They said,

I think we need maybe a specific team that actually work with service providers. So rather than just having the general lecturers but people that are aware of the RPL's, aware of what the other ways, modes of training and getting their competencies out there. So not just maybe the face to face, but if we had a main team that specifically worked with [the employer] and get to know what their ways are, what their requirements are, it might be of benefit to the staff and us as well... So when somebody is actually allocated to work with a service provider ... that person works with them through that whole time so that you’re not got two or three working. But I think that it should be a specific group that is aware of how the service providers work, what’s actually required from them, and then, you know, not just a specific lecturer, but more of a team... so let’s say [other lecturers] and myself and we should have somebody that’s actually always going to be there saying “well, this is how it worked last time. And this is what the shortfalls were.” So basically just having maybe a mentoring team that works with the service providers to actually make sure it’s run correctly and we don’t have to keep going over the same questions or things that actually happen.

The lecturer also suggested orientations for new people. They said,

So when somebody is actually allocated to work with a service provider ... that person works with them through that whole time so that you’re not got two or three working. But I think that it should be a specific group that is aware of how the service providers work, what’s actually required from them, and then, you know, not just a specific lecturer, but more of a team... I think maybe more time and more practical side of things when people come into the industry, I think we might need to have more of an orientation. Let them know what’s actually expected of them and maybe sort of... I know we can’t go into the industry but meet the people that are actually setting up their programs and their rosters and things so we can actually explain to them what needs to happen when we’re doing these training programs with the service providers. Does that make sense?... You know, it’s putting more guidelines into if this is happening, we need to say, “OK, well they have to have that time off.” But it’s really hard for that to happen because obviously people get sick and people go off on holiday. So it’s a real very, very fine line to say, “this is what we need”, but in a perfect world it would be a great thing that the rostering is actually involved in this as well.

- Flexibility in training provision

The operations manager would like to include ways for staff to catch up on the training when they can't attend. They said,

I think that's probably the main thing is just having the flexibility so that if we do have staff that we want to send for training that are, you know, maybe working a 70 hour fortnight and aren't able to access day classes and things, having that flexibility that they can watch the video, a recording of the class and still get that same input when they aren't able to be [physically] there... because they work 10 hour shifts and 16 hour shifts for the night staff, so it honestly doesn't really... we did look at you know, starting a bit later, starting a bit earlier, we did explore a lot of those things, it's just when we've got people working 70 hour fortnights, and then they've got families and stuff, it is really hard. And then to ensure that they are also not going into overtime and you know, just around those work, health and safety and fatigue and all that. So yeah, that was the only challenging bit from it.

Supports or initiatives that would help other employers and RTOs establish and sustain effective partnerships

- Government support and funding

The portfolio manager said,

I think any state government initiatives, definitely like the ETP [Enterprise Training Program] or that sort of thing. Any Government initiatives, so like you know how we've got the Commonwealth one, the Aged Care Support Consortium, which we're involved in with [another RTO], that's a big one. We're involved in a partnership there, NACCHO [National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation] and all those. Any of those supported programs always helped. Because we've got a lot of small partnerships and small organisations where they don't have a bucket of gold money, you know. Let's face it, since COVID or whatever that you know, people are losing funding or whatever, so any of those initiatives would always support training. Absolutely.

The advanced skills lecturer said funding helps. They said,

there's often funding available, state or Commonwealth funding for initiatives, that we can help support those. So, if people get funding, there's sometimes funding for traineeships or for RPLs. We've had funding in [state] for a payment scheme where if they take students, they get some money for it. But that's only happened for the last year or so and it's not infinite. There is a like a bucket of money that will run out. But that's helped because what that does is it gives the employer an opportunity to release their staff a bit more for mentoring because they can use that [the funding] for backfill and they can use that money for training in their own organisation, so that's good. But that, like I say, that's been happening in the last year or so, but it's not infinite, but has helped, but we can't make that a guarantee because we couldn't offer that to anyone for the future for when the bucket runs out. But that has been a good initiative. State and Commonwealth initiatives, because we're in a critical workforce requirement, there has been a lot of free training go through. So, people that have got existing employees that are unqualified, those initiatives are really good to develop and we can develop them partnerships

- Reducing the burden on the employer

The portfolio manager said,

The other thing that I think would support partnerships and that is for most industry at the moment, and I don't know what's happening over your end of town, there is a certain amount of information fatigue. You know, we've gone through COVID here. People had to, especially in aged care, disability, where things were quite dire and I know luckily over here we had long periods of time where we weren't in a lockdown or anything, but there was a certain amount of uncertainty. So programs would

come up all over the place. The problem we had is that organisations just don't have the time for that conversation or to read the information. So an example is we've got a free skill set over here at the moment called "Integrating mental health skills", totally free. You can enrol online, absolutely free, not a single cost to anybody as long as you're a resident and whatever. We can put that information out to industry. Why wouldn't you? You know it's free, but I think that organisations are tired. So I don't know if that answers your question.

The portfolio manager also said,

I think the other thing too is that, I mean while it is good to have face-to-face meetings when you're networking cause you really can network, I suppose the advantage of Teams is we can tap in really quickly. Whereas before it was it was very difficult for organisations to say, "ooh, I've got to put an hour aside." "Hang on a minute. We've got a crisis going on over here", which we understand. Also, I think it's really important for RTOs to take the initiatives and the programs and turn it into a language that's relevant to the industry. We know what a unit of competency is like. We can read through it, the double Dutch talk of a unit of competency and that the title doesn't necessarily [link] back to what's inside; training package speak - we've got that and we need to be very mindful of turning that into a consumer-friendly language. You can't sell stuff if people don't know what the hell you're talking about.

The advanced skills lecturer acknowledged that training and its administration can be a burden for employers, especially small employers, so the RTO tried to streamline their service. They said,

Other initiatives...I mean we can do train-the-trainer so we can go out there and do training and I think that helps a lot. So, we're always eager to try and set that up at the beginning so that they know exactly what they're getting and exactly what their expectations would be to mentor a student. And it's really aligning what they can get out of it because we don't want our students to be a burden. And that's sometimes a problem with places that are potentially thinking of receiving students, they think it might be too hard, especially with the paperwork that we need them to go through with students, it can be exhaustive for them, especially if they're not a big company and they haven't got many people they can release. And so, we're always looking at how we can streamline what they need, what we expect of them so it's not too exhaustive cause sometimes you can start developing a relationship with someone and then they see what your students actually need and they really didn't realise that there was that much to it. And it's that relationship between formal and informal training ... So, for instance in the home and community environment, quite often it's social support and domestic support and so they don't realise that's not enough for our students and that can be a challenge because they want students. But what we will do, we'll give them students for a part of the time, we'll say, well, you can have a student, but we'll only be able to look at these competencies because you can't meet those. And so, we'll do like a split placement.

- Supporting learners

The learner said that the learners needed to be allowed the time to do the course. They said,

... I understand that we also have to work but we're also doing a qualification that's benefiting our employer. You know, they're getting people that are now qualified and understanding the industry better, so allowing us to have time to do it. You know, if we're getting rung up on our day off saying 'can you come to work?' And we're saying, 'no, we need to study.' They need to understand that. Some of us would say 'no, we're studying or we've got [RTO] work to do' and, you know, we were getting told 'too bad, don't worry about it, come to work'. It's not... yeah beneficial on both sides in that regard.

- Opportunities to put training into practice

The learner also said that learners need to be given access to the job contexts covered by the course. They said,

And there were certain aspects that for me personally were slightly difficult because where I work is a different area to the other members of the classroom... And I had to push quite strongly to be able to get those things done. If that was part of our modules that we had to go into the homes and do the hoisting and do the showering and do certain things that my role doesn't entail and let me to do. So I struggled quite a few times to try and allow that to happen. A lot of it was out of our control, you know, due to COVID isolation, you know, we weren't doing that. But that put a lot of extra stress on me because the 20 other people in the class were doing it day-to-day. So if there was a way to make it a bit more balanced and a bit more fair across the board, that would be beneficial.

They suggested that the learners could rotate within the organisation to prepare them for the learning. They said,

Put the people in the accommodation first. That way, they get that experience and they can recall back on it and say, "oh, yeah, I remember doing that. That's definitely feasible. So that way when you are sitting in the classroom and the lecturer is talking about hoisting or, you know, medications you can recall that memory: "Ohh." You understand what she's talking about. But you know, she would talk about something. I would be like, "Never done that! Don't recall." And it would take me longer to kind of grasp the concept. You know, there's all these other people that are doing it daily had, I feel, slightly bit more advantage in that regard.

- Openness/understanding each other's expectations from the partnership

The operations manager said, 'I think really about creating that open relationship between both parties, understanding what the organisation needs from the partnership, but it's also what the [RTO] needs from the partnership. So that it's a very clear playing field and everyone can know what is expected, what they can deliver... and yeah, that's essentially that openness.'

Case study 4: addressing unmet industry needs

Describing the partners

This case study examined a small RTO and a small employer operating in the retail industry.

The RTO specialised in the areas of First Aid, Outdoor Recreation and Bicycle Mechanics. The employer was a privately-owned small business that sold, assembled and repaired bicycles. These stores had a focus on cycling experiences and, in addition to selling bikes, they offered advice on cycling routes, bike repairs and service workshops.

The partnership began in 2019, with the two organisations coming together to train store staff in retail services and/or qualify them as bike mechanics.

Participants

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with five individuals, including two people representing the RTO and three people representing the employer.

The two RTO representatives included the RTO owner and a trainer and assessor. The RTO owner established the RTO about 12 years ago, employs 10 full-time staff and several casual staff. The trainer and assessor had been working at the RTO for seven years and working on the partnership for three years. Both the RTO owner and the training and assessor travel around Australia delivering bicycle-related training and assessment in the workplace.

The three employer representatives included the business owner, a bicycle technician and a workshop manager. The business owner established the business 10 years ago and has 15 employees. Employees have access to training in retail service and bicycle mechanics is outsourced to RTOs. The bicycle technician who worked remotely conducting bicycle tours had been working for the employer for five years and had been involved in the RTO employer partnership for two years. The workshop manager had been working for the employer for about nine years and in more senior roles for about five years. They had been working in the RTO employer partnership for five years. The bicycle technician and workshop manager had participated in bicycle mechanic training with the RTO.

Describing RTO-employer partnerships more generally

In responding to the question about how they would describe an RTO-employer partnership, the RTO owner described it as needs-based. They said, ‘finding out what their needs are and then just seeing if you can come up with a package that addresses it.’

The business owner also described it as needs-based, saying, ‘from our point of view, they fill a gap in our business in having the technical skills and the training skills for specific needs that we have. So, we obviously just use them as an external resource to cover the gaps in our capacity to deliver.’

Describing the case study partnership

Partnership establishment

The RTO and the employer established their partnership in 2019. The RTO owner initiated the partnership after being approved by Skills Tasmania to offer funded courses in bicycle mechanics in the state of Tasmania.

The RTO owner said,

I set up, you know, a meeting and we had lots of invites go out and there was someone from Skills TAS came along and none of the employers. So, it was me and [Skills TAS person] sitting there talking and I thought, I've allowed two days to be down here. So, then I went and visited them all in their workplaces. So, I met and spoke with [the employer] and identified what his needs were. At the time there was funding available for existing worker traineeships. So, we started there.

The business owner remembers how it began,

[the RTO owner] may have made an approach to us. I think they were down in Tasmania, might be working with some other shops or clients and I think they touched base and we had a need at the time for the type of service they were providing and it's really just grown from there.

About the training: what, where and when

Training services delivered included the Certificate II in Bicycle Mechanical Technology and the Certificate III in Bicycle Workshop Operations.

Training consisted of two or three face to face training sessions and self-paced learning using workbooks. The bicycle technician explained,

They'd sort of send us a bunch and then we would do them at our own speed, but in most cases they could be done in a in a day or two. And then there was a delay until the next thing came.

The training was delivered in small groups. The RTO owner explained,

If it was something like a demonstration like everyone would have to look and then don't go about doing their tasks and being, you know, supported by the learning the skill.

The bicycle technician recalled the training. They said,

Well, first of all it began with phone calls and then there was some online material that was being prepared for us elsewhere, and there was one reference book which is this one [shows book], The Big Blue Book, which was like our Bible. And then there was several days in Hobart, where we met in a hall and we repaired bikes for several days.

The workshop manager explained,

Well, basically, we had [the trainer and assessor] come down and go through obviously the folders, gave us some paperwork to do, assessments to do. He'd come down, well, obviously it was COVID, so it was a bit of a delay of getting someone down physically. But obviously it was just some phone calls and assessments emailed off. That's about it, really.

About the learners

A total of 12 staff had participated in the training, consisting of four different learner cohorts:

- retail staff;
- front of shop retail staff participated in generalist mechanical training
- existing workshop mechanics. Three workshop mechanics had access to the generalist mechanical training provided to the retail staff plus more technical training. The RTO owner said, 'we did like an RPL sort of gap training pathway.' Four experienced bicycle mechanics who were employed as

bicycle mechanics but unqualified went through the RPL process. The training addressed skill gaps relevant to industry changes. The RTO owner said it was,

more of the top, the higher end sort of stuff. So we're building and not many places do that and it used to be an elected component in the qualification, but now it's a core component. And that was like identified gap, the surfacing suspension and overhaul suspension system because the technology that bikes have I suppose it's just moved along.

- remote bicycle technicians. Two remote bicycle technicians participated in the same qualification as the workshop mechanics. However, the RTO owner explained that they had a different need compared to workshop mechanics because they worked without supervision and interacted more with the public conducting bicycle tours. Therefore, a different selection of units of competency was used for these workers.

Among the 12 were five new workers who participated in a pre-apprenticeship pathway. The pre-apprenticeship pathway, involving the delivery of several units from the Certificate II in Bicycle Mechanical Technology, was designed to meet a recruitment need.

The RTO owner explained,

we identified what the barriers were to take in trainees and employing trainees was that, if they come to the workplace and, you know, zero or you know, low skills, it actually reduces the workflow capacity of the business. So, it slows them down. So, they're very reluctant to employ someone with no skills. So, we did a course which, I suppose, just... I think we delivered that in five days intensive to give them the skills to be able to do minor servicing and build bikes. And building bikes is quite a large component of the bicycle sales and repair industry. So, when they did that training, all of a sudden, they're useful and he put them on as trainees after that.

About working with and meeting the needs of both new and existing workers, the trainer and assessor explained,

we sort of had to tailor the package to work for both parties, so we could nail it all whilst we were there, if that makes sense. So that the experienced ones didn't have to replace tires and tubes as they were doing it daily and could easily demonstrate it so.. you know, you're doing one thing here and then you jump into the other side of the building with some others going, "OK we need to do this", and just trying to manage like two or three separate little micro groups, I suppose within that group.

A mixture of onsite and offsite training was used. The business owner explained.

Sometimes they'll set up on the outside, you know, a couple of times they've done it, they've actually set up a workshop in a training area offsite so they had people for a week block at that location, then the follow up stuff will be done on site with a workshop, yeah.'

The trainer and assessor explained,

What would normally happen is when I first started going to [the employer], we were just sort of setting up certain days that would work with their workshop members that we could basically close the workshop down. And I had full access to all staff members in the workshop all day for, you know, I think it was on and off over a week sort of period. Just to ensure that I had their full attention. I do find that letting them run through their daily tasks whilst trying to learn or to be taught, you don't get a lot done. They tend to have to answer phones or talk to customers. So, after that sort of setup, we decided to hire a venue. So I think we hired a place at Hobart Showgrounds. And we set up there for a week and then we hired a scout hall somewhere else. Set up for a week.

The remote bicycle technicians were located 90 minutes from the workshop and attended the face-to-face components in Hobart. The business owner organised for their positions to be backfilled while they attended the training.

Training was delivered during normal working hours. The business manager explained,

That works with the guys. When the off-site stuff's happening, that then just keeps them away from distractions and that's probably more efficient for everyone.

The business owner scheduled the training to be conducted in Winter, a quieter time of the when the workers had more availability. The trainer and assessor explained,

normally Winter is going to be the slowest season for the bike shops, but it all depends what shop you are and where you are, I suppose as well. I mean, Hobart, I don't think they had many bike shops from memory. And I mean the amount of trails, etcetera that are built in Tasmania is far exceeding the bike shops so they're probably busy all year round, but yeah, like ideally sort of Winter time's when you sort of get to relax a little bit and go OK, we don't have 10 jobs each to get done today. But COVID definitely changed that as well.

The business owner explained that it wasn't difficult to release groups of staff, 'Not if we've planned, like we know in advance and we can... it's a bit, it's a more effective way to do it.'

The trainer and assessor travelled from interstate to deliver the training. The RTO owner explained,

we'd send...our trainer down there, and he'd be there like, you know, three days at a time and working with them, like with the current jobs that they're getting through, like upskilling, recording or so like a combination, so I blocked him, blocked three or four days.

The business owner explained,

so [the RTO owner]'s been able to bring people down from Sydney to do the work on site. And it works well for us because it's in a quite tight block, so, we'll do it in within a week or two-week period that's pretty focused and then they work with individuals. Obviously, people move in a bit different paces and they'll work then with the individuals to close it out over a period of time.

Of the five interviewees, only the RTO owner said that they had been involved in other RTO employer partnerships.

Drivers and motivators

What drives the employer to partner with the RTO?

- Addressing skilled labour shortages

The business owner said,

It was, like, there's a big gap in the market in the moment or demand for mechanically trained people. I think you could talk to any bike shop. It's the biggest issue over the last few years ... And this is just a way we can see to resolve it to our satisfaction, or partial satisfaction, at least. Interestingly, I don't think the employment gap in the industry at the moment is actually recognised through the federal government programs and I think the bike traineeship sort of thing disappeared out of their subsidised programs. Don't know how they come up with them, but at the moment there is quite a demand out there. There is a shortfall.

- Obtaining nationally recognised training outcomes

The workshop manager said that the training was essential for the business. They said,

Moving forward and obviously to get accreditation on mechanics obviously with no [RTO] courses around, people wonder where you get your experience from. And also it's just, you know, obviously word of mouth and how long you've been [in the game], I've been in the game for nearly 20 years, and that's where you get your training, I suppose from some people, but I've had a lot of customers ask, "where do you get your accreditations from?" So, I think it's something that you need in this industry, it can be quite dangerous where if something's not tied on your bike so...

The workshop manager elaborated further on how the training contributed to the professionalism of the business. They said,

Accreditation. You know, making the business more professional, you know that you don't have any old Joe Blow just thinking you can service a bike. You know, people know that they need to have guys that know what they're doing and are experienced in that field. So yeah, it's crucial you... like anything, you don't go to Google for a doctor, you know? So yeah, that's the way I see it, and I thought it was good that Wayne got on board with that.

- Developing a skilled workforce

The bicycle technician said,

It's just the intention that [the business owner] has that all his staff be as capable as possible. So for example, with Maria Island, it is a 1 1/2 hours' drive. So if there's a problem with the bike and it had to go to Hobart. Someone lost at least three hours of their day to pick up a bike, and then it sits in the queue in the workshop in Hobart until I can get to it. So to be able to leave 99% of that in the hands of the staff on the island so that we repair the bikes, it's hugely efficient for [the employer].

The RTO owner said,

they're very keen for their staff to get qualified and receive the training and get more skills and, in the bicycle industry in particular that I think if you look back to the old school bicycle mechanic used to be someone that used to ride bikes and race bikes and then when they retired they got a bike shop and they work by maybe having one person on board and they would train them their way. So, I suppose it's not a real training culture in the bicycle sales and repair industry, but you know, [the employer] can certainly see the benefits of us training staff.

- On-site delivery

One of the drivers was having an onsite trainer and assessor. The RTO owner said

for [the employer] to send their staff to the mainland to do, like, not accredited training, it's expensive. And it leaves the mechanics from the workshop that have to pay airfare and accommodation. To have someone to come down and deliver the training there it's probably a bit like Uber eats - just makes it a bit easy.

What drives the RTO to partner with the employer?

- To sustain their business/income

Asked about what drives the RTO to partner with the employer, the business owner said, 'They want work. That's what they do'.

- To fill an identified gap in the industry

The bicycle technician said,

I think they're pretty keen on bike training. Getting people upskilled as bike mechanics around Australia and also there's a huge gap in the market as well. In Tasmania for example, it is close to

impossible to do a cert II in bike maintenance. It is definitely impossible to do a cert III... So yeah, they found the gap in the market and [the employer] was very happy to use them.

The workshop manager said,

Probably to get more accreditation for mechanics. I think a lot of, like I said, there's no [RTO] courses, there's no degrees or anything, you know, for this industry in the 20 years that I've been around, so to start getting mechanics with credentials onto resumes so that they can apply it. And obviously different employers will understand. "Oh yeah, they've done this course, or they've done that course. They must know what they're doing."

Benefits and challenges of partnerships

Here we were interested in what the perceived benefits and challenges were for both the RTO and the employer, and their staff, from being in the partnership, RTO/employer managers:

What are the main benefits for the employer and its staff?

- Access to training

The learners had not previously had access to nationally recognised training. The bicycle technician said this was a benefit. They said, 'Just to provide training where there was none before, but no official training, no official qualification'. The workshop manager agreed. They said, 'Yeah, it's nice. Rather than having nothing, you know, like a trade ticket, you've got something, you know.'

The trainer and assessor said,

there's a massive lack of skill in this industry. And when we've got an old generation trying to talk to the younger generation there's a lot getting lost in translation or there's a lot of secrets that want to be kept, you know, "like no, no, that's not how you do it. You have to do it this way." But not explaining why do we have to do it this way?'... what I'm finding when I'm training whether it be the older generation or the younger generation there's a series of steps that you have to follow, and if you don't follow on, the outcome will never be the same. And once it all clicks in, the light bulb turns on, it's great. It's fantastic to see. I mean I just ran an 8 day class here and we had one person that he couldn't change a tube on Day One... I would say, OK, if you're signing up to a bicycle mechanics class, you would have some basic skills on bicycles. But he arrived with nothing. But in eight days he was able to strip absolutely any bike I gave him and completely rebuild it, all due to just following the steps. And that's just something that's just been lost'

- Increased skills

The bicycle technician said,

Well, the main thing is that the worker is going to get their chance to improve their skills at things that they actually do need to improve that. Some professional development in my experience is of no use it at all, but this one has been incredibly useful.

The bicycle technician said,

And I suppose when I came to do the training I knew, let's say 75% of what we were taught. But some of it was, like, we worked it out ourselves. And it was really nice to have someone go, "Yes, you are doing it the right way", or in some cases showing us alternative ways.

- Refresher training

The workshop manager said,

some of it was pretty... I wouldn't say basic, but when you've been in the game long enough it is. It's a refresher. There was some things that I wasn't experienced in. For one, I didn't see a need for it. I thought it's easier to, you know, buy a wheel and get it in for a customer rather than spending hours losing labour and, you know, cost the business and learning to build it. So that was one thing I had to learn.

The workshop manager went on to describe how the training offered an important level of upskilling too, as companies have changed business practice, especially since COVID started.

- Nationally recognised outcomes

The business owner explained,

it's called an apprenticeship or traineeship. It's one of those things that's never, the industry's never really got their heads around, and there's a glaring gap there for a more formally based apprenticeship I believe. But yeah, that's something they do. And it's, from their personal point of view, gives them a piece of paper to demonstrate their skills elsewhere when they need. But it's a bit of a gap in the whole industry, to be honest.

The workshop manager said,

... it's just having that accreditation... 20 years ago, no one really cared as long as their bike was fixed. But having someone that's been through a training course, I think that would set them apart from someone else when they go do a Google search on your business, you know. "Oh these guys have done an accreditation, a course." Other businesses, other bike shops haven't, so that's what stands out for me when we went through this, that we've actually got, it's the accreditation... it's, like having a hospitality, you know, bar course under your belt. You can go and travel anywhere. You know we've just got a guy here now that's come from England. You know, he's very experienced. I'm going to lose him soon, which I'm disappointed about, but it's just having that that experience and accreditation.

- Skilled additional resource

The business owner said,

Just having access to skilled resources through that. We can rely on, you know, their delivery with blokes that know what they're doing. It's just an effective way for us. And, I suppose it takes a load off having our senior guys spending time training people. These guys will get them to certain stage and they're effective in the workshop and it just makes the whole business function more efficiently.

Having the skilled trainer in the workplace also supported productivity improvements. The RTO owner said,

... if you go for a service procedure and you don't do one of the early steps you may or may not get the result you want at the end and then having to repeat the procedure because you skipped one of those steps. Well, it's not time efficient for the workshop so ... suddenly we're able to change some of their service ... to make them more efficient.

The trainer and assessor said,

... having at least one experienced mechanic there changes the whole you know onset of... the shops morale I suppose as well. So having somebody you can talk to or ask a question to and actually get a solid answer is always positive, but there are lots of shops where there's lack of experience, which then leads them to learning something their own way, and then not wanting to change. You know, they're like, "oh, no, this is this is how we do it... And we sort of go, like, "let me just show you another way. And you know, we're not here to change how you're doing it. We just want you to be aware of that... Try this way", and all of a sudden they're like, "oh, that's so much easier."

What are the main benefits for the RTO and its staff?

While this question was asked of participants representing both the RTO and the employer, there was not a lot specifically said in response. Both the RTO owner and the employer noted the benefit to the industry, and to individuals, of getting people qualified.

What are, or have been, the main challenges of this partnership for the employer and their staff, and for the RTO and their staff?

- COVID-19 pandemic

The RTO owner said the COVID-19 pandemic was a challenge. They said,

I suppose the main thing was we had COVID and that's very difficult for us to get down and service the industry there because it was pretty much closed... more than two years. So, then we had to develop some more online support material that was going to supplement their training... But it never really is as good... like the Zoom and that sort of thing is never as good as someone seeing it in 3D.

The workshop manager also identified COVID-19 as a challenge. They said,

I suppose COVID, not being able to get people down. I think there probably needs to be a few more onsite visits. It just helps. Obviously you can write, you can be good theoretically, but it's the practical hands on that you need to be... I'm probably better at. And that consistency of doing it regularly obviously improves your skills in that area. Like I said, just reading it from a book is completely different to having a bike in front of you. 'Oh, OK what does this do? What does that do?'... You know, a lot of mechanic work as well is hearing and you can't hear that in a book when you're tuning gears and things like that. So yeah.

Training shifted to online during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns and the initial online components and associated requirements were not very user-friendly or engaging. The workshop manager said,

you'd have to submit... you'd get paperwork through emails, and you'd have to submit that. It's changed a little bit when we've had another couple of guys doing it, they've had a bit more online, more videos, more photos of what they've been doing for their assessments.

- Distance between the RTO and the employer

The business owner said that distance was a challenge. They said,

it's a bit of the tyranny of distance. It would be nice to have people who are actually based in Tasmania more regularly, but you can't do that if the demand's not there. What they do is really responsive and whenever we needed something we've got it sorted pretty quickly, so, yeah, I would like to have someone on the back doorstep, but... that's just not reality economically.

Despite the distance, the RTO was responsive to business needs. The business owner gave an example. They said,

We had, like, I've got a group of guys who work on, in a hire business off the East coast on an island and I needed to get three or four of them up to speed to be able to operate pretty independently, pretty quickly. So, we're able to put together the course and get it in place, you know, in a timeframe that worked for both of us, you know, efficiently. And the guys, they support well over the phone. Like, it's not as though they just do the drop, deliver the course and drop. You know the follow-up is good if we have a specific gap or need. We're pretty well to get it solved. Quickly for us.

The bicycle technician said,

The fact that they actually came to Tasmania was a big thing. The alternative was we got on planes and flew to Sydney... And that would have almost certainly stopped it happening.

The RTO owner said,

I suppose the things that [the business owner] liked about that is that we were able to come to the workplace, not interfere with, I suppose, the production line too much. Sort of like value add to the skills that the employees already had.

- Logistics delivering interstate

The trainer and assessor said the logistics of delivering a training service interstate were challenging but manageable. They said,

The only challenges we ran across was logistic wise, trying to organize X amount of tooling and bicycles to cover what we needed to cover. So we ended up with a storage shed at Launceston that I think we're still hiring, and I still think we've got about \$15,000 worth of tools in there, just in case something in the future was going to happen. And it's got a few bikes in there as well. So just logistics was the only thing like trying to transport X amount of tools. Apart from that - and it's just finding a venue - but I don't think that was anything difficult. So a couple of phone calls and you know, yes, we've got a scout hall available and you know we just booked it... we decided just to hire a van when we got to Launceston. Pick up the tools, pick up the bikes and then just drive over to Hobart.

The RTO owner said,

We set up as a training facility to, I suppose, just to have something local. And now we've moved to a different model where we have a storage facility there. And if we need to do any training, we've got like all the equipment in the storage facility and we'll hire a van, go and collect it, then go and set up, yeah, in some suitable space that we just hire for the duration of the training, and then return it to the storage unit.

Not everything went to plan, and the trainer and assessor had to be flexible. The trainer and assessor said,

Well, all improvements would have just been on our end as far as, you know, having the correct tools, bicycles, etcetera. Apart from that it's pretty straightforward. It's just when you first rock up to somewhere and you've got this game plan, you just need to forget one tool for half that game plan to not go as planned, which I did find. So yeah.... It went smoothly, but it could have gone a little bit smoother had I had the right tools arrive when they said they were going to arrive. So I got a lot of tools shipped direct from a wholesaler's straight to our storage shed. And that was like 3 weeks prior to showing up to Tassie, only to get there and not have them be arrived yet. Which that just meant sort of grab the bikes, grab half the tools, go to Hobart, set up, do all of that sort of stuff, and then of a night time, once I got delivery drive back to Launceston, pick up the rest of the tools and come back.... So Tasmanian people don't like to drive more than 10 minutes... So when you say "I've just got to drive to Launceston" and they're like, "that's two hours away," you're like, "it's like Sydney traffic of an afternoon, it's nothing." And they're like, "oh, you've got to, like, pack a lunch" and you know, so. But no....

The RTO tried to make it easy on the employer. The trainer and assessor said,

Yeah, try to minimise any stress on the employer side. So they just have to, you know, send their employees, they show up and ideally we're self-sustained. We've got everything we need. Well, that was the plan... I don't think there was that many challenges whatsoever. I mean, ideally everything was either done in house or in that area. So providing they could spare the employees at the time they... I don't think there was anything there.

The bicycle technician was aware of the challenging logistics for the RTO. They said, “So getting to Tasmania with all the equipment or having the staff available at the right time and then finding a place to do it. I think that was a bit of a problem for them, which they eventually sorted.”

The workshop manager was also aware of this challenge. They said,

It's just more probably obviously being in Tassie it's a bit harder. You got to get someone down here. You can't just, you know, drive. It's a flight. But I think just seeing more of the 5 Star people down here would be good. Whether it's over a week or a couple of days, I know it's hard because you know at the moment we're booked out for weeks, so to try and get that work training balance right, so that we're not losing money and customers, that's a challenge. So whether you have two guys on one day and two guys the following day, that's just a hard juggle, especially for Wayne being the business owner. He doesn't want all mechanics disappearing for a day, that's, you know, wages and loss of income.

- Pace of training

The bicycle technician said the training took longer than they expected. They said,

It was for me... It was too slow... It took two years when really I was expecting six months. I could have done it in six months. But in the end it was... there was no chance of it being slower.... And I could have done faster, yeah.

They further stated,

The main thing is just to find a qualification that people really want and need. And then have it... I would say at a slightly brisker pace, because it did have the feeling that there was a lot of paper shuffling in the beginning. And we were kind of waiting, waiting, waiting to start. Though to be fair, COVID was happening as well so that caused problems. And just making sure there are no predictable obstacles, such as, you're supposed to go to training and you're supposed to go to work on the same day.

- Self-paced learning

The RTO owner noted that self-paced training was more challenging for the workers. They said,

I suppose the longer-term traineeship thing is probably a bit more difficult to manage. The stuff that's focused in a one-week block, I suppose, they'll probably always go to the back burner if it's just in the background. So, you know, getting the more structured traineeship thing, keeping that regular ... cause people will just always respond to the immediate demand of work. So, if they've got other jobs on their plate, that's the priority, and that's probably the right thing. But, you know, overall you probably like to push them a bit more to do the training work as a priority... How you achieve that is always a bit of a challenge.

The RTO owner suggested that some online resources might help in the future. They said,

...like it's preserving the ability they've got to deliver economically, like, they get support obviously to deliver programs and making sure that's there. Look, I don't know, we could probably talk to them about getting some online stuff that might be useful... there's maybe some programs that could be delivered with some YouTube material or just some online stuff that might be more readily accessible for people and sort of keep things ticking over a bit more... Maybe the more, the more technical stuff.

Determining success in partnerships

What qualities does the employer have that make it a good partner?

Here we asked the RTO representatives to describe the qualities of the employer that make it a good organisation to partner with.

- Owner commitment

The commitment of the business owner was a success determinant. The workshop manager said,

It's sort of driven through [the business owner] and his passion to help everyone get involved in the cycling community. We've built a good reputation. So having that reputation in this industry allows people to, you know, come back and join in, be involved.

What qualities does the RTO have that make it a good partner?

Here we asked the employer representatives to describe the qualities of the RTO that made it a good organisation to partner with.

- Providing a needed service

That the training meets an identified need was identified by the business owner. They said

I suppose you've just got to, we got to, we appreciate the services. Like, at the end of the day, it's a value to us. So, something that we want to do...want to do. It's not, not a nice 'to have'; it's 'important to have' for us.

- Good quality trainers

The business owner said the RTO has good quality trainers and assessors. They said,

They've just got guys who can deliver training effectively, you know and at the right level. You can be dealing with very academic people, people with tertiary degrees down to guys who have probably barely got through Year 7... But, I suppose the easy thing is, all the people they're dealing with have got a strong interest in bikes. So, it's a bit of passion there that helps. But they're able to deliver to a pretty broad spectrum of backgrounds.

- Removing obstacles

The bicycle manager identified the RTO's willingness to make it happen. They said,

They were just really keen to make it happen, and keen to remove the obstacles... and having a place to go to do it. And also the fact that the island is open, usually seven days a week. So someone's got to be there and they replaced us. So it just became very easy. And our accommodation was paid for. Well, that kind of stuff.

What qualities do the employer and RTO share that make them good partners?

- Working together

The bicycle technician said the RTO was supportive. They said, 'They were always really approachable and keen and helpful with the work they did with us.'

The RTO owner said,

Things that always go according to plan and there's often a bit of a story and I think as long as you're like, just communicate like and let each other know what's going on, you know, you can work through the, you know, some of the issues that. And they collect on address like could be called problem. So

we're both in the I suppose communicating with each other and just being sort of like pretty open about what we can and can't do and. The. So I think it's like work.

The business owner said,

It all, it all works. You're not dragging people to be trained. So, the people have got an interest in being trained. The guys got the skills to deliver that sort of work, it does.

The bicycle technician said,

I think they're both on that wavelength of let's do what we can to make it easy for people to be better qualified.

The trainer and assessor said,

You know, [the business owner] was just, Yep. Cool. Let's just do it. Let's just lock in these four days. Let's close the workshop. Let's just do what needs to be done to cover the gaps, etcetera. Yeah. They were great.

Improvements

Here we were particularly interested in what elements of the RTO could be improved to make it more attractive to new partners.

The workshop manager suggested follow up services the RTO could provide. They said,

Probably refresher courses on those things would be good. So it's not just done and forgotten about. The bike industry's forever changing, so...now it's almost like we have to be auto electricians because of so many e-bikes, so the e-bike side of things is probably going to come into the training and a lot of that's computer based. So that's probably something from their end. Start looking into that.

Supporting and sustaining partnerships

The focus of this section was on the types of supports that were useful in establishing and sustaining the partnership, along with the roles and capabilities required to support the partnership. We were also interested in what additional supports and capabilities would improve the partnership.

- Government funding

The RTO owner and the business owner both said that the funding was a helpful support.

The business owner said,

Well, it is no doubt that whatever the state or federal government programs that they managed to leverage off were really valuable and anything else... and a lot of the stuff we did was at a time... economically, where things really bit more difficult. So yeah, that was invaluable... At the end of the day it just comes down to money more often than not. And that's really useful. But they've got, yeah, they can do this stuff in some regional areas economically. I don't know how many other shops around the state avail themselves of it, but I've encouraged two... I think the economics would drive it.

- Additional trainer and assessor

About a year ago, the RTO took on an additional trainer to share the load. The trainer and assessor said,

So we took [name redacted] on about a year ago to start looking after purely that side of it, as I was just too swamped with work as far as general courses we are running at our venue. So we needed somebody else to manage the trainees ... so Dan is now doing a lot of traveling and talking to trainees on a daily basis, keeping them in check, making sure their paperwork's done, and gathering evidence.

- Paperwork

The business owner said the paperwork was not onerous and additional supports were not needed. They said,

Oh look, it's not a lot, they do it pretty well. [The RTO owner's] got a good understanding of the business. And yeah, the imposition of it... there is not a lot of administration involved in it at all, like the paperwork side of it, it's all pretty seamless to us... typically with government programs, my history has been I'd rather not involve myself because inevitably they cost you more than they give you; just administration and nonsense you have to deal with. So, this is one case where that's all really seamless to us.

The RTO owner also said there was no need for additional supports and capabilities. They said

... the partnership worked well, like, there's nothing glaring that was needing fixing. Yeah, nothing comes to mind like that. And like... we may or may not do things differently, but at the time it all sort of worked well and everyone was happy. And you know, they would review the course well, the students thought it was great, they got learning from it.

Supports or initiatives that would help other employers and RTOs establish and sustain effective partnerships

Many employers in the industry are even smaller businesses employing four or less staff and the business owner suggested that they could be grouped together for training. They explained,

it's a pretty loose industry and that's the problem like there's not probably an effective industry body to latch onto it and push it a bit. You can always, you know, talk to people and let them know that you think it works and see how they go. We've got the benefit of, I suppose, in our business, of scale. Like, we're a small business but we have got some scale with 15 people. Where a lot of shops are two or three or four people and that's a lot more difficult probably to organise cause, as I said, I can put together a block of five people that's economic for [the RTO] and it works for us and you got that group atmosphere going. Where it's often harder if you've...got a small business where losing one or two people over the business for a week. So, I think we're probably at a threshold where it can be done effectively. I think you get a different response probably from someone with a two or three or four-person business and how they do it.

Case study 5: a pathway to real employment

Describing the partners

The organisations in focus in this case study were a medium sized public RTO and a medium size employer, operating in the building and construction sector. These two organisations worked together to provide VET skills to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners to enable them employment opportunities in the construction industry.

The RTO was a large provider situated across two main campuses and had learning centres in a number of remote locations. The majority of students enrolled in VET with the provider identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. In terms of its VET offerings, the RTO provided preparatory courses through to VET certificate and diploma level qualifications across a variety of industries, including building and construction, health care, early childhood education and care, and the creative industries.

The employer was a medium-size, privately-owned company that manufactured transportable and demountable buildings for the residential, commercial and civil sectors. It had been in operation for nearly 25 years.

Participants

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with five individuals: two from the RTO and three from the employer.

The two RTO representatives included a senior lecturer responsible for organising the trainers, recruiting the learners and coordinating with the employer, and a lecturer responsible for training delivery. Both were involved in training delivery at the employer, had been working with the RTO for several years and had been working in the partnership with the employer for two years.

The three employer representatives included two managers and one learner. The managers included a senior manager who had been working in the partnership with the RTO since its inception, and a site manager responsible for day-to-day site operations who had been employed for a few months. The learner was Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, and a recent graduate who had been employed for about a month in a general labouring role as a trades assistant.

Describing RTO-employer partnerships more generally

The senior lecturer described an RTO-employer partnership more generally as meeting the needs of the employer and the learners. They said, ‘just means working with another company. In my area, construction, so I’ll be working with a construction company. And it could be various means of training, whether they want training on site or they want training at [the RTO] or they want training in the community. They all seem to vary.’

Describing the case study partnership

Reflecting on the case study partnership, the operations manager said it was the first RTO-employer partnership they’d been involved in and described it as, ‘just two parties coming together with the same direction or the same end goal of educating and training young kids and trying to get more people into a trade-based workforce.’

Partnership establishment

The employer participated in a government-funded program which involved the building of housing in modular format for remote communities. The houses were built in one location and then transported to regional or remote areas. A requirement of this program was for employers to have a minimum of 40% Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people employed to deliver the work.

The employer and the RTO had been in partnership for around 2.5 years. The senior manager said that for the employer, the partnership helped train more local people, in particular, more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. This led to a greater pool of potential workers, helping to fill work and skill shortages.

About the training: what, where and when

The RTO delivered the Certificate II in Construction, including white card, and the required training for a forklift licence and a scaffolding licence.

Training was delivered Monday to Friday between 8 am and 5 pm over 12 weeks. Delivery generally involved two days of theory and three days practical working alongside the skilled tradespeople.

Three courses were run each year with generally around 12 to 15 learners in each course, although numbers were down to only seven for the most recent course (at the time of the interview). The RTO had 20 enrolments for the next course.

The training content was contextualised to the job tasks. The senior lecturer explained, 'Yeah, it works. Hand-in-hand. They probably actually learn a bit more on the job site than what's in the course.'

During social distancing periods of the COVID-19 pandemic, when face to face was not possible, the course did not run. The senior lecturer explained, 'It's actually very difficult to run online stuff up here in especially with the communities or even at [the employer]. So we didn't run anything.'

About the learners

The learners were unemployed and recruited by the RTO from job organisations. Approximately 95% of the learners were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

In some cases, the learners found out via word of mouth. The learner said, 'Believe it or not, my sister found out about it and then I like she gave me the word and like, she's not really into like, all that office work she wanted to, you know, try to come and do this. And yeah, me and her come and did it together.'

Drivers and motivators

What drives the employer to partner with the RTO?

For the employer, the drivers were: building the broader construction workforce, recruiting new workers and meeting their Indigenous participation requirements. The senior manager said,

I guess there's a few things. I mean, we're a legitimate contributor to [the state/territory's] development in training, particularly in the construction industry. We have a shortfall in skilled trades, particularly carpentry. So, whatever we can do to enhance that, we're definitely on board. We've got about 12 apprentices ourselves and we select staff out of this training and pick them. So, we picked the best couple or one each time and we've seen them operate and we go from there. So we end up with a couple of good staff each time and an added bonus to that, it ticks a box to our

Indigenous participation. We've got a 40% requirement to contractually meet and so it helps us enormously in that field, yeah.

The targets were an initial driver, but the partnership has delivered more. The senior manager said, 'we needed to work out how we're going to meet our Indigenous numbers initially. But then it turned into more of a benefit for us in the community as well, yeah.'

The learner agrees,

Well, I reckon it's just better, you know, for anybody wanting to look into construction and just bettering a lot of people's futures, you know... you know, I think that's a good idea what they've done because we not only did work on the houses we got to build scaffolding, we got to operate forklifts and stuff you know. Like, this is amazing what they've done and how they've collabed like this... it's really good, yeah.

Describing how the partners work with each other, the site manager said, 'we're here to help in every way that we can. But at the end of the day, a lot of the onus falls back on [the RTO]. We've given them the facility, we've given them the space. You know, you guys rock up and do your thing and it'll be happy days.'

What drives the RTO to partner with the employer?

- Providing opportunities for employment

For the RTO the main driver was access to providing real employment opportunities. The senior lecturer said, 'Opportunities for jobs...Yep, and it gives them skills and confidence. So that's what drives us.'

The lecturer said,

we like to see real outcomes. We like people to be able to get the skills, get the confidence to, you know, to make themselves better, I suppose, to contribute, you know, and you see it in there, you see it in a lot of our students. They come in, they're a bit hesitant, they're a bit nervous and then by generally by the 7th week, 8th week, the confidence is lifted and they're actually asking for employment.

Benefits and challenges of partnerships

Here we were interested in what the perceived benefits and challenges were for both the RTO and the employer, and their staff, from being in the partnership.

What are the main benefits for the employer and its staff?

- Giving back to the community

The site manager said,

That we get a chance to give back to the community, I suppose in a way. All of these kids are local kids, so we get to help out with their training and their education. So that sort of means a lot for us as well. There was a high Indigenous population in the last group of kids that came around. So giving back to that community as well.

The site manager elaborated further,

Everyone needs a head start. Like I said, if some of these kids haven't had such a great experience through schooling or in in the education circle, a lot of the time, kids like that are the ones that will thrive in an apprenticeship or a trade-based skill. So it's great to see kids come through that might be distracted otherwise in a tertiary education setting, come through here and thrive. And you know, it's

not like a traditional classroom. You can get along. You have jokes, laughs, you know, at the end of the day, they're young adults really. The age varies a little bit, but most of them are in that, like teens, early 20s sort of age bracket. So yeah, if we can give back and help out wherever we can.

Representatives from both parties were proud of what they were doing together and how they were benefiting the community. The lecturer expressed satisfaction and pride in being involved in the partnership. They said,

I'm Indigenous myself, so I love training and I love seeing my people, I suppose, better themselves. And, so, for a personal thing for me, I'd just like to help people. And if it means...you know I have had ex-students that have continued on and gone to other communities but they haven't stopped working since doing the course. So that's what I'm after.

- Potential employment pool

The partnership also gives the employer a competitive edge when it comes to recruitment, enabling them to identify potential employees. The site manager said, 'it's a no brainer for us. We get first pick of the bunch I suppose in a world where there's an ever-dying trade shortage, we're trying to get more and more people into the industry. And Darwin especially is a very competitive environment. There's huge labour shortages up here. So, it's a win-win all around.'

Just recently, the employer had employed three of the trainees, one full-time and the other two as casual. This may lead to apprenticeships in carpentry. The site manager said,

And they've all expressed interest in starting an apprenticeship. It's just a case of working out having them here for a couple of months, seeing how their attendance goes, commitment to it, and seeing if they do have the passion and the drive by the end of, you know, a couple of months and see if it's still something that they want to pursue, but then also figuring out internally in the business because obviously for apprenticeship, you need to have capacity of trades on wages, full time and whatnot. So it's just sort of considering and balancing act.

The lecturer said,

You know they build these dongas or those transportable homes in [location], but then they transport them out to remote communities. I know it's a part of their contract to employ local Indigenous people as well. So, I mean, everyone sort of gains from it in my eyes. They meet their requirements, they're happy to upskill, they're happy to engage. I didn't have any issues. Neither did the trainees with any of the [employer] staff. I thought that was really great.

The site manager highlighted the value of the Certificate II in Construction, which was run like a pre-employment program with a pathway into real employment at the employer as a trades assistant, with the potential for an apprenticeship. He noted the edge a pre-apprenticeship can give an individual in a competitive job market, 'if you're putting someone on as an apprentice, and they have that pre-apprenticeship beforehand, you can tell that they've gone out of their way to do some private education in that field. That then gives them good direction for the future.' In the most recent course (around the time this case study was undertaken), five out of the seven learners had gained employment. The site manager further explained,

Some of the kids just sort of struggle with schooling type stuff. So yeah, [the lecturer]'s helped them through that stage and sort of on the last day they came in and said thank you. And there was only a handful that sort of handed in resumes ultimately. So, I guess the others sort of, wasn't for them or they're going pursue different avenues, which is fine. So, they came in and handed over resumes and we sort of reviewed them and we see them around the yard and we take their attendance into consideration as well, just to make sure, because I suppose if you're giving someone a job, you want to make sure they're going to be rocking up.

The training also opened up employment opportunities with other employers. The site manager explained,

So there's sort of two high risk work licenses that just give them that foot in the door I suppose for any site, whether it's going to be carpentry or labouring or even factory working... They go into those industries with a scaffolding license and a forklift license which is invaluable. And then they've got the Certificate II. So it gives them a bit of a taste of what's going to be involved in the construction industry.

What are the main benefits for the RTO and its staff?

- Teaching and learning undertaken in a real-world context, that is safe and offers employment possibilities for learners

Manufacturing modular buildings involves working with steel framing, flooring, windows and doors, cladding and roofing. While not the same as a standard house, these components and how they come together gave trainees exposure to the range of job tasks performed by a qualified carpenter, equipping them to make informed decisions about whether they want to take on a carpentry apprenticeship. The lecturer explained,

It's basically a live construction site ... You couldn't get any more a real workplace experience, you know, you're working alongside the carpenters, you're working alongside all the people that are on site. Anyone from wall framers, window installations, painting, the electrician sometimes ... It's an all-round experience for them.

The learner agreed,

Yeah. Like we did the course and would go do theory, you know. And then some days would come out and do prac, you know? And like just screwing off sheet walls and just helping like it was good experience. You know, like, I never thought I'd get an experience like that, doing a course like that, but you get out and you do a lot of hands on like, you learn a lot of stuff that most people wouldn't think they would learn doing a course in a cert 2 construction.

The employer provides the infrastructure which the RTO can use. The senior lecturer explained, 'They supply us with the classroom and a smoko room. And then, so when they're [the learners] not in the classroom, they're doing work experience onsite.'

The site manager from the employer described the resources they provide,

We've got a few older buildings or spare buildings floating around. So we actually set up a classroom for them here. I'm talking a fully air-conditioned classroom with power, Internet and whatnot and then we share sort of restrooms and the working yard which sort of consists of nine sets of rails, what we call, which is basically nine houses getting built at any one time.

Having access to the facility was a cost saving for the RTO. That the facility is in town means that the RTO trained the learners in a location where there are jobs. The senior lecturer explained,

For our organisation it saves us having to pay for a facility in town ... because we usually do a lot of remote students, it allows me to actually teach a lot of local based students and my personal opinion is that most of the opportunities [are] in town anyway, you know, like they can train and get a job. Whereas out there it's, they might train them, they might have a job for three months and that's it.

The learning site was a working construction environment but it was also a safe environment for the learners. The senior manager explained,

We've got the perfect platform for it on that particular project where every house is exactly the same. There's all different stages of construction. It's a controlled environment. It's a very safe

environment as well for the students and they were able to see all the different trades working all at the same time. So, it's just a unique environment. I guess it's perfect for the program.

The senior manager was fully committed to providing a real work environment for the learners. They said,

there has to be a consistent workflow. They need at least 10 weeks of work in front of them to be able to do what they've got to do. So, the steady flow of orders from the NT government for this particular project is key, to keep the project, to keep the relationship alive. We couldn't do it in our facility here because it's rapidly changing, it's got a higher level of risk. So, we've got a couple of different manufacturing facilities, but that particular facility that they're working in, it's a low risk for safety, and there's plenty of room for them to move and see what's going on. And it's got its generic aspect, but the only motivator is having a big enough job for them to execute, what they've got to execute... so we're not giving them half a platform, doing the wrong thing, under-committing.

- Cost savings

The site manager said,

I think it's a perfect setup, really [the RTO], obviously, save on their overheads, cause we've already got a facility set up here. We get a little bit of added labour. You know that they're not contributing that much to the construction of the houses really. But at the same time, everyone needs a hand lifting something or screwing something in, so they get a taste, a bit of experience. The easier tasks, sure we've set them up a few times. [The RTO] have a trailer full of tools that they're allowed to use as well.

What are, or have been, the main challenges of this partnership for the employer and their staff, and for the RTO and their staff?

- Planning and logistics

The main challenge for the RTO was uncertainty around planning. The senior lecturer explained,

The main challenge sometimes is, because you're working with a different company ... I'm guided by, like, their timetable, if that makes sense. Like that's one of the difficulties for me. You know, like you, you plan for three courses there and then two don't happen or something. That's probably the biggest difficulty we have.

The lecturer mentioned that the logistics could be challenging. They said,

People don't have vehicles. A lot of our students you know, their home environments play a bit part of it. But a lot of it just takes getting people up in the morning, being able to help them or hopefully get them to work on time. Sometimes we even supply a bus and I'll meet them at the main bus stop in Palmerston, which is where I am. So, I'll have six or eight students as long as I can get on the bus from their area, get up to the main bus stop, I'm happy to pick them up from there. So, it just puts a bit of onus on them too. And then I'll transport them to the site from there, you know, and same in the afternoon, I'll drop them back off. Then they can go from there. But most of our stuff is logistics.

- Limited exposure to full range of construction tasks and contexts

As the learners are undertaking their training at only one site and working on the same type of building construction, their learning experiences are somewhat limited. The lecturer explained,

I think they get a lot more experience doing a lot more different various skills on site... because they build like a demountable, so it includes everything basically. And they build them [demountables] like... one after another. So the students get a good idea of doing the floor and walls and the roof and

where the wires go in. Whereas, if you go to another construction site remote, they might have a build over a year. And if you go there at the start of the job, they might only be there for the concreting.

- Site safety

While the employer ensured a safe learning environment, at times the learners may not appreciate the need for site safety. The senior manager raised this as a challenge with having learners on site saying, 'They're not behaving themselves properly on the workforce. They're not listening to our safety instructions. Yeah, we'll certainly let [the RTO] know that they need to be dealt with and they do, yeah.'

- Attendance

The main challenge according to the site manager was attendance. They said,

At the start of the program it was a little bit difficult again with that attendance. That's why it's one of the things that we look at, but they ended up putting a deadline on it or that if you're not enrolled by [date] that's it, you miss out and you got to wait till next year and from then on they were constant. So, I know they had one or two people start a couple of weeks earlier and then there was one or two that started probably about a month later for good reason ... So, other than that, I don't think [the lecturer] had any issues really. Just mainly that attendance.

- Literacy and numeracy skills

Literacy and numeracy can also be a challenge for the learners. The lecturer said,

Unfortunately, a lot of them have reading and writing issues, but like I said, I'm Indigenous. I grew up around Katherine which is a small township, I've worked around a lot of the communities, have a lot of friends and family from there. So, I try, when I explain a workbook to them, an assessment tool, I'll read it from the book, and then I'll break it down as well until I can see that they understand that as well. A lot of our stuff is verbal and if you can break down what's in a textbook into a verbal communication, a lot of the times they will understand you better.

- Weather conditions

The learner said working in the hot weather took some getting used to. They said,

... some of the people weren't working for, like, over years. And you know, for me, I wasn't working for over 12 months. And I did this course. And yeah, like the heat, you know, it did you make you feel it. You start to get cold when it's really hot, because you're not drinking enough water. But yeah, I reckon just the heat, but... you just keep your fluids up and you'll be right.

Determining success in partnerships

What qualities does the RTO have that make it a good partner?

- Having 'local' and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander training staff

The senior lecturer said that being local and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander helped the team of trainers to understand and relate to the cohort and navigate the community. They said, 'I have an understanding of where these students actually come from and what they deal with. And it creates relatedness and I think that's what actually makes us successful.'

The lecturer agreed.

... they see someone from their background, an Indigenous person who's been through it, who's moved up, and then it also, and I know how to drop down to their level in the sense. But it also shows them

what's required to go out into the workforce yourself, you know. And [the employer] have been really great at understanding that balance. We do get a lot of things going on up here in the community, deaths and things like that, and people have to take time off what we call Sorry Business up here and [the employer] have been great in understanding that.

The senior lecturer also talked about the importance of being a local. Talking about the one lecturer who was not a local, they said,

I think it might have been hard for him when he first started, but he's been at [the RTO] longer than me, like 10 years now and his relationship with communities is quite amazing now ... Like he's got the experience behind him, so that's alright. But if we just hired someone from NSW, I think they'd have no idea for a good year or two if that makes sense. It's completely different way of connecting with these guys, I think.

The lecturer also talked about recognising differences and addressing learner needs. They said,

I suppose, we've been around and we've worked with a lot of different communities and every community is different, and every site's different, but, again, it's more about understanding what their differences are, their levels in regards to education, and what they can and can't do in numeracy and literacy. I think it's just being able to recognise when people are struggling and working out a way to help them to get through the course.

Sometimes addressing learner needs goes beyond the training role. They said, 'We're not just trainers and assessors here. We get phone calls in the middle of the night with some of our students from present or past courses and they're just looking for help sometimes or just somebody to listen to them, you know, and we take that on. It's just what we do.'

What qualities does the employer have that make it a good partner?

- Depth of experience in the construction industry

The site manager highlighted the employer's experience. They said,

Oh look, [the employer] has been in [location] for quite a while now. And we're probably one of the leaders, if not the leader in our field of sort of what we're doing here, in particular, in this home build program where we're definitely the biggest in [location]... So yeah, it's just that that age-old experience level. We've got anywhere from 15 to 30 tradesmen full-time working for us in this specific yard where [the RTO] will be involved and then all the subcontractors as well. There's a fair network... and there's always stuff ticking along. So, the experience is invaluable, I feel, what we can give back to them. Now we can't put an old head on young shoulders, but we'll try.

- Provides a supportive work and learning environment

The senior manager identified several qualities the employer brings to the partnership, including a safe working environment suitable for the trainees. They said,

Well, we've got the room, we've got the space, we've got a big property up there that that we've set this up on... we're a modular building company, so we've got a modular classroom that they can occupy at no cost. It's no skin off our nose. And it has to be a safe environment. A building site is not a safe environment when you're working out on site so to speak. But in that particular controlled environment it's suitable for students that have no experience at all, that we can mitigate risk.

The senior lecturer described the employer as

pretty easy to get along with, they're helpful. They do provide the opportunities for the students to work on site and they work with tradies so they supply the trades and all that sort of stuff. And all the trades are aware that these guys are all learning, so they actually take the time with them rather

than rushing like some other places are just too busy to actually train the boys properly. Yeah. So they understand the importance of it.

The lecturer said it was a good place to work. They said,

The work site itself is awesome. You couldn't get anything better. The managers there and the project managers are great. The workforce is from all around Australia. They get a lot of contractors and carpenters that drive up from Victoria, NSW, wherever it might be but what I found really was that people sort of respect each other. If one of my students doesn't show up and they were needed on the day, I might have a carpenter who's a Victorian or something to come up and ask me why they're not there and I'll explain it and there's never any negativity. It's just what it is. I understand that you know. So again, it's a really good balance on the boys, or the students I should say, it's not just boys we do have like ladies that show up too and come to our courses, but they do understand the requirement: work needs to be done, there's a time frame and you can relax when it's smoko time and they understand all that but when they're out there to help other people on site they know what's required.

What qualities do the employer and RTO share that make them good partners?

When asked how the two organisations complement each other, the senior manager said, 'we're doing the right thing for the community, for growth of the employment pool that we need to move forward so we can grow as a company and to meet our contractual obligations'.

The site manager recognised the RTO's support of young people. They said,

Just training up young kids, trying to get them into the classroom, get them doing something, get them pursuing something. Trying to venture out, I suppose, and open their mindset to different avenues, different career paths. And yeah, just helping out the youth to get a foot in the door somewhere and a head start.

The senior lecturer agreed that this was a shared quality. Speaking about the partnership between the RTO and the employer, they said, 'I think I just think we have an understanding that, you know, we need to develop, develop the youth for skills and give them confidence and also patience and training with them I think is why it works so well. You know, not a lot of companies give this opportunity.'

The senior manager described the partnership as positive and generally 'hassle free'.

We really haven't had to do a lot except provide that you know the platform for them to train on and without that we probably wouldn't be interested. You know, we haven't got a lot of time up our sleeve. They've got the train trainer. They find the staff, you know and we put them to work. We set them up but at the end of the day they're actually working. So we probably making some sort of contribution for the time that we spend training them or showing them how to do something.

The lecturer was also very positive about the partnership. They said,

For me personally, and the way I see it, it's two different cultural, I suppose, not just cultural...how would you say it...work sites in a sense that are completely different but they understand that there's an end goal that's in regards to upskilling, employment for local Indigenous people. And like I said, I've never had any issues in regards to being on site there with any of the staff. They've been great. Yes, people get a bit chirpy in regards to...it's more missing days and things like that. When they're on site I've never had any kick back. The people have said you guys are doing great, you know. So I think it's just meshing together and understanding the end goal at the end of the day is to get these students upskilled and to hopefully get them to contribute. And not just that, it's also about self-bettering themselves and gaining the skills and the confidence to go out and do it yourself.

The site manager talked about the camaraderie between the learners. They said,

I think, if you were able to see it, the sort of camaraderie that forms pretty quickly with the new bunch of kids. It's pretty impressive to see. To see them out there. But potentially, we do have probably a pretty young workforce. We've got a couple of older guys, but not really. So, everyone's young, jovial, upbeat and there to work and you know, again, show people different skills, different mindsets, and yeah, it just sticks.

- Having good communication between the RTO and employer; understanding expectations

Open communication was key to establishing and sustaining an effective the partnership. The senior lecturer said, 'I just think that the general first conversation will pretty straightforward with each other. What we expected from each other and we just set the guidelines and the rules and it was just went from there. It was actually very easy, you know.' They also said:

I think the most important things are open communication and making sure you both understand each other before you start something and you also have to be flexible with each other, you know, like I have targets or what do you call it like not goals but requirements that we have to teach, you know, and that the student has to know before they walk out the door and they need to understand that too, you know. And then we have to understand that they're working construction company and they got WHS to meet themselves. I think that's important.

The lecturer talked about how their close proximity supported good communication. They said,

The biggest thing in regards to that is just communication, you know. The office where we do our classes and basically the main office is just up 50 meters away. So I'm actually checking every morning. I participate in their toolbox meetings every morning. Then I pull the project managers aside and, like I said, some days I might have to stop class for the day because they need to get a roof on before trucks come to pick up the transportable. So biggest thing with us is communication and if it's open communication, just makes it so much easier.

The site manager also explained,

So [the lecturer] was the last trainer that we had. He poked his head in every day and say goodbye. And then throughout the course of different programs, you know where they're working in different spots, we would help them out there by setting up an area or we isolate a forklift for them for the day when they're doing their forklift testing. Give them a section of the yard down the back where they set up ... and do the testing. ... then when it comes time for that practical experience it's just more so liaising with each other, walking around the yard, sort of splitting up the teams a little bit so that everyone's not in the same spot standing on top of each other ... and then rotating them around really so they all get a taste of every aspect of the building industry.

This site manager explained how the communication works from the employer perspective. They said,

So, me and [name redacted] who's the other fellow in the office who takes care of a lot of the stuff on site. He spends a lot of time in the office here. So, when anyone comes to us with any questions or anything, we bounce ideas off each other. And most of the time problem solve a lot of it. And, it's more so proposals that we send through and if we are having difficulties we've got people in the main office at the other yard that that do anything and everything. The owner is pretty involved as well. He's popping past regularly and putting his two cents in where he can. And, again, he thinks it's great that we're out there training up these kids.

The site manager explained, 'I dealt with [the lecturer] going through a couple of things to set it up and then sort of just ongoing involvement by both of us. Just to make sure they had enough facilities and

whatnot that they needed'. The senior lecturer credited the lecturer as the key to the partnership. They said,

My lecturer is very important because if he's not successful, then the whole thing will just become a failure and when you're a lecturer it's actually quite a lot more difficult when you got to go to a construction person's timeline. You know, you might have your class day organised or something or you might have something booked outside and then you can't do it because of something you find out maybe last minute. So you've always got to be prepared for stuff like that, because it always comes up. Always have extra stuff in the background you're ready to do. And a big thing is your relatedness and speaking to the students as well, you know, but you can't have someone out there screaming and swearing at them.

Improvements

The partners planned to sit down together to review the most recent course, to identify what could be improved and to consider additional supports, such as tool vouchers and training awards.

The lecturer thought that a support person would be helpful. They said:

A lot of people, you call them mentors, but I'd prefer support person. Just somebody that can be a mediator I suppose, in between the person they're working for and the student. A lot of our students, especially remote people, they're very shy, they're very timid and if they feel comfortable talking to their support person or their mentor, then they can then relay that information to the employer or whoever we're working with and it can go a long way in solving some issues, you know, on site or wherever it might be. Because a lot of the time it's just misunderstanding.

Supports or initiatives that would help other employers and RTOs establish and sustain effective partnerships

- Having practical, wrap-around supports

The lecture identified the bus as a key support, in that it helped get the learners to the site, and suggested meal provisions, too. They explained,

the bus, that definitely helps and [the RTO] don't have to do that, but they just do it because we asked, you know. We understand if we didn't have that bus a lot of the times, we'd actually lose students. In the last course I did, rather than pick people up at the bus stop, I told them if you can get here on time before 8:00 o'clock start, I will drop you off home at knock off time. And that worked like they were getting themselves there on time. I never had anyone really ring up saying, 'you know, or I can't make it today or I'm going to be late.' And so that worked really good. That's a big help. But when I first started with...did the course of the [company redacted] they actually provided lunch and smoko and our numbers right through the whole two-week course was high, you know. Unfortunately a lot of our students, [due to their] home life and things like that, a lot of them don't get that breakfast. Nothing worse than coming to work on an empty stomach. So I find if you can provide that it just helps, it helps hugely.

- Providing support teachers/trainers

The learner explained that the RTO also provided a support teacher,

We had a course here running here with [the employer] and we had a classroom and yeah, like, it was really good...they had a support teacher there as well with the lecturer running the class and like, yeah, it was really good. Like they understood it very well. And then, like, a perspective where, you know, most of us, like other kids, you know, could understand it and like, it was really good. Like, I'm happy I did that course.

The learner further explained,

So that was like two people from [the RTO] and you know, one that was up front in front of the White Board, you know, doing it and then like, you know, some of us couldn't, like, had struggled with spelling or, you know, like didn't understand it properly. And that's what there was another teacher there, you know, he'd come and he'd help you, you know. Yeah. Really support for, you know, like, like if there wasn't for them, you know, like I wouldn't be in this position.

- Advice to other employers

The site manager's advice to others was to

Just give it a go. There's plenty of kids out there that are unfortunate enough to get an experience and or they just looking at the wrong path and you never know where you're gonna find a diamond in the rough. So you know if you've got the facility and the time like it's not, it doesn't take up that much of our time and it's quite pleasant to see the kids are rolling in, and sometimes they got a smile on their face. Sometimes they don't. And at the end of it, when they come up to you and handing the resume and you know, very thankful and appreciative for the experience, it's pretty invaluable. So I think I think, yeah, we need more tradesmen [sic] in this world. Yeah. I just think get out there and give it a crack. You've got nothing to lose.

Case study 6: trainers identifying further training needs

Describing the partners

The organisations in this case study involved a large RTO that offered a wide range of VET training and qualifications, and a large employer in the food manufacturing industry.

The RTO offered more than 200 courses across 13 campuses, facilities and virtual spaces, and employed over 900 staff.

The partnering organisation operated in three different locations as the largest producer of freeze-dried food products. Their manufacturing facilities included ambient, chilled, and frozen storage, and involved food processing, packing, despatch, and logistics services. They created clean-label products for large clients, across retail, food service, health and wellbeing, and the pet food industries, as well as ingredients and food packaging services. They had been in operation since 2009.

Participants

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with five individuals: three people representing the RTO and two people representing the employer.

The three RTO representatives included an RTO manager, a literacy trainer and assessor and a technical trainer and assessor. The RTO manager was responsible for managing staff involved in the delivery of foundation skills programs and had been employed with the RTO in that role for four and a half years. The literacy trainer was employed as a teacher in the general education team and had been employed with the RTO and involved in industry partnerships for 25 years. The technical trainer and assessor had been working as a teacher and employed at the RTO for 25 years.

The two employer representatives included one production manager and one floor supervisor. The production manager had been working with the employer for five and a half years and held the position of production manager for two years. They had been working in the partnership with the RTO for about two and a half years and it was their first experience with working in an RTO-employer partnership. The floor supervisor had been working for the employer on and off for more than four years, originally as a factory hand and then as a floor supervisor for the last nine months responsible for supervision and equipment training.

Describing RTO-employer partnerships more generally

In responding to the question about how they would describe an RTO-employer partnership, the production manager said, 'One that benefits both parties. It's got to benefit the company itself, but it's also got to have benefits for the providing company, otherwise you won't get quality information.'

The RTO manager described RTO-employer partnerships as focusing on the needs of the learner. They said,

To me an employer-partnerships, particularly when it comes to foundation skills development, is really, really critical because there's so much stigma and shame associated with having low levels of literacy and numeracy.

It's important for any individual or employee to feel supported and understood and seen, and it normalised, I guess in a way, and that, you know, that understanding of different workplaces use

different vocabulary, jargon, terminology, that sort of thing, different numeracy skills are required, and that it's OK not to know all of that but be supported to learn that sort of stuff. And we found that unless an employer really gets on board with that idea and supports an individual, sort of on that emotional level as well around skill development, that it can be very disjointed. You really need it. I guess if you think about as wrapped around, you know, you've got the learner at the centre and if everyone's on board and supporting that individual to further their education and get some specific skills for a workplace, then you're going to have a good outcome.

The literacy trainer and assessor described an RTO-employer partnership as a collaboration. They said, 'I'd suggest it's a collaborative arrangement. Again, it's about having a shared understanding of goals and objectives and again, working together collaboratively to achieve those goals and objectives.'

The technical trainer and assessor described a process-based approach to RTO-employer partnerships, something they learned working on projects funded through the Australian Government's former Workplace English Language and Literacy (WELL) Program. They said,

I'd like to describe it the way that I've done it for 25 years, which is start with the industry, start with the job. Look at the job, then talk to them about how we might or might not do things out of Training Packages and so on and so forth. So it's always been start with the job. Look at the job and go from there. I'm sorry, I didn't say that when I first started, I was involved in WELL projects that's how I got into food processing because we were doing a WELL project 25 years ago at a little place that makes UHT product. I worked with them for over 20 years until the actual company closed. And we were doing the WELL project and our philosophy, the team that I worked with, our philosophy was get rid of the deficit model, let's look at how we can change workplace practices and documentation to make it so that people can access the documentation rather than "You can't read and you can't spell".

So we did WELL projects with that philosophy and out of that came, 'OK, well, we've got enough evidence here for Cert I in Food Processing, really, why don't we have some of these people who've got no qualifications in Food Processing'. And then they said, well, if we can do this at certificate 1, why can't we do use this methodology at certificate 2, 3, 4. And I said no reason why it's just whether or not people and the [RTO] people who were delivering it weren't willing to change their methodology: they wanted to drop off workbooks and pick them up. And so they changed teams that they actually worked with.

Also, I had also had the same outcome at an abattoir. Again, if you talk about abattoirs, you're talking generally low literacy. And we had a WELL project, this was a Halal site, so they had Muslim slaughtermen, lots of Africans working on the floor, language and literacy was a bit of an issue and we did the WELL project, but again embedded Cert I in Food Processing in the WELL project. And at the end of the WELL project, the manager said, 'well, why can't we do this with our cert twos and threes doing, you know, butchery, slaughtermen and whatever?' And I said 'well, just ask the RTO (which was us, another branch of us, another team) to change your methodology' and they didn't. So this guy said 'well, either we stay with this team or we'll go to another RTO.' So we became black sheep again, which is interesting in a slaughter house, but anyway. So again, it was about changing the methodology. So I did I think from cert two to four in all the different areas in an abattoir. And again, it was about the methodology. I'll start with the job first and build from there.

Reflecting on how this RTO-employer partnership compared with other partnerships they knew, the literacy trainer and assessor said,

Increasingly, I'm finding that this one possibly had less of a focus on individual training. So it was more of a systems process based one. Look going back to the early years, we used to deliver training package qualifications, so we used to deliver food processing and things like that on a large scale. That was accredited. So that's largely stopped now, so the accredited stuff's not happening. And I

think you can possibly put that down -- to a large extent - you can put that down to compliance and issues... All the recent stuff I'm doing is non-accredited, which means you've got a lot more flexibility in terms of being able to adapt your program to the company's needs. So you're not... It's not being, it's not built around an external curriculum that might not necessarily fit. You don't have to shoehorn stuff in, so non-accredited.

Reflecting on how this RTO-employer partnership compared with other partnerships they knew, the technical trainer and assessor said,

Yeah. Well, again, [employer] has only been fairly recent one. But as I said, my very first one was what was called Classic Foods, became Murray Goulburn, and now they're no longer at this site, but that was a relationship for over 20 years, from Cert 1 through to Cert 4 in food processing. I also did lab. We also did warehousing and transport and logistics. Also did leadership once yeah, 'frontline management' it used to be called. So I worked with that site for a long time.

And other sites have been like Fonterra, I've had had an ongoing relationship with them for 15 years or more. Mainly food processing, but again lab some transport and logistics because we're working with the industry, we're working with science, and if you're any good at reading a training package, it shouldn't matter which one it is, because they've all got a recipe that you read. So basically the partnership was about: I had the TAE and the diploma, they had the industry expertise and between it we worked out how to fit it together and where there was a gap we worked out how that would be covered and the validation was done by the on job technical experts, didn't call them 'subject matter experts', that makes me want to vomit because it's a learning sort of thing. So we deliberately called them technical experts because they were expert in their technicalities of what they did. And so that was all kosher and above board. We had mapped, you know, what their vocational expertise was, if they had qualifications, etcetera, etcetera and we were an absolute partnership, always an absolute partnership, yeah.

Describing the case study partnership

Partnership establishment

The RTO-employer partnership began about five years ago, initiated by a request for technical training. The technical trainer and assessor said,

I had a request out of the blue for somebody to come to do their Cert 3 in Food Processing. So I went and talked to the people at the factory and we went through that and while I was there, [the literacy trainer and assessor], whom you may or may not have met yet, [the literacy trainer and assessor] and I both used to work in a team together when we did the workplace based stuff and he does a lot of 26TEN projects.

While delivering the food processing training, the technical trainer and assessor identified a need for literacy support. They said,

So when I'm in a work site and I see a prime opportunity for a 26TEN, I talk to them about it, then introduce them to [the literacy trainer and assessor] and then they do the 26TEN. So I was there doing a Cert 3 in Food Processing, then [the literacy trainer and assessor] came in with a 26TEN and the Cert 3 then became four [employees?] Cert II in Food Processing: two of them completed, two of them were within one unit of completing and they left the workplace, but anyway. So again, it's about, I'd already written some of the SOP's as part of what I'm doing when I'm trying to construct up what happens in this. So again, [the literacy trainer and assessor] and I work hand-in-hand lots, so sometimes there will be a 26TEN project come out of a workplace where I'm working and sometimes

I'll get a job in a workplace where [the literacy trainer and assessor] has done the 26TEN project. So yeah...

So initially it was just for the cert 3 and then, as I said, that's what I do, I build relationships with workplaces and so on-selling's never an issue. I don't think I've had any workplace where they haven't invited me back.

The literacy trainer and assessor said,

Yes, we were delivering a little bit of food processing there. So again, most of my clients, I do pick up through networks of some description and again I know that the person delivering the food processing, she had a couple of trainees there, she said "argh! this company's got a big problem!" And they did have a big problem, as I said with the two strikes and the WHS stuff. I had a chat with them and it was just yeah, we were just able to nail down exactly what needed to be done. One of the other things I suppose where I can be helpful is I can take something like that and turn it into a literacy project. And because again, with any kind of program like this, there are guidelines and it's a question of, yeah, 1. nailing down what you need to achieve, but 2. turning that into a literacy program is the area where I also possibly would need to be, I need to be conscious of that. It needs to be framed as a literacy project.

The technical trainer and assessor said,

Initially, I think they were putting their toe in the water to see what they could get initially....So initially it was just for the cert 3 and then, as I said, that's what I do, I build relationships with workplaces and so on-selling's never an issue. I don't think I've had any workplace where they haven't invited me back. So yeah, so that's how it worked.

In relation to how the literacy training was initiated, the production manager said,

They approached us. Yeah, I think that's like part of [the literacy trainer and assessor's] job is to go out and source business as well. So yeah, he approached us and we ran with it.

The RTO manager explained,

So the projects come to us through the 26TEN employer grants. So in theory, an employer will approach 26TEN and say, you know, it'd be great for my staff, for my team to have some skills development in these areas and then 26TEN will approach whoever they think would be most appropriate workplace. And in [the employer's] case it was [the RTO]. So then once 26TEN sort of say, you know, here's this idea, this is what [the employer] are after, [the RTO] can you sort of investigate? Then we'll go from there and work closely with [the employer].

From that point on, the literacy trainer and assessor developed a successful funding application for a literacy project. They said,

I was involved in every step of that from negotiating the actual project with [the employer]. So again, that's looking at what their needs were, framing up an application for 26TEN, submitting that application again in collaboration with [the employer] and delivering it so yes, all components.

The RTO manager described the trainer and assessor's role. They said,

I've really been working closely with [the literacy trainer and assessor], who's then, I guess, the 'front man', if you like, with [the employer]. So I don't necessarily have direct contact with [the employer]. [The literacy trainer and assessor is] the person on the ground. They have formed the relationships and that all came before me.

About the training: what, where and when

The training services delivered included literacy training and technical training.

The literacy training was funded by the 26TEN program and delivered by the literacy trainer and assessor. The training focussed on business processes and delivered one-to-one to three or four learners, including the production manager. It was unaccredited training and therefore there were no national recognised outcomes.

The RTO manager explained.

We have found over several projects that because it is difficult for employers to release employees, particularly in the manufacturing world, that redesigning their documentation into plain English with lots of visuals can be a key part of what we do. For that reason, really, it's, you know, you're rostered on or you do these things in this time when you're in manufacturing. So it can be a bit tricky.

The literacy trainer and assessor explained,

Most of the focus was in supporting some of their higher level and their managers and supervisors to develop documentation. So again, you need to understand the issues facing the company and the reasons for the project... So essentially the company is a small family business that grew and grew to become a sort of, probably a mid-size business, 30 to 40 employees. Through the course of that... As I say, when companies grow like that, they don't necessarily have that specialist input. There were - going back about three years ago - a couple of fairly major WHS incidents. So there were two separate incidents. There were injuries. In both instances the company was prosecuted for safety breaches and fined significant sums of money as a result of those incidents. The main impetus for the project would have been that WHS aspect, which was that basically some of their employees - well, in both incidences there, you could have put it down to employees not having the right safety information or training in relation to the jobs they were doing.

So my role was basically to help the company get a documentation in place, which is primarily WHS related, in a format that employees could read and understand, and to support them providing that kind of basic level safety training to new workers. So yeah, it very much had a safety focus but with some literacy underpinnings there in terms of developing documentation, setting up training systems, even setting up training databases, those kind of things, but getting their management as well up to speed with using those things... it was something there that, you know, they actually had to fix it. There would have been an existential problem had they had another accident for the same reasons. So again, there were things that needed to go in place. It was again funded through a literacy program, because of the development in the documentation and things like that, even the training databases were IT digital literacy, that kind of stuff. So the skills to support them doing that were literacy based, but the primary focus was WHS and one of the reasons that probably worked very well is I work in both areas, so I'm WHS qualified plus run literacy projects, so just a happy combination.

Training was delivered weekly for about half a day on a Wednesday over a two year period. The literacy trainer and assessor described the arrangements for one of those years,

So the arrangement again, it's funded by 26TEN, so there's an awareness there that this was a grant based application. What it did was it paid for around about 400 hours over a 12 month period. So that includes admin and stuff like that, but yeah, roughly about 300, maybe about 360 hours of delivery were funded. In that time, I was either over there speaking to them, finalizing documentation, getting "What's in their heads?" on the paper, that kind of stuff. So basically 10 hours a week over 41 weeks... 41 weeks being my working year.

The production manager explained,

I've worked one-on-one with [literacy trainer and assessor] every Wednesday for several hours, probably half a day actually each time and just going through everything, every little aspect of our business and how we do our training, where we're falling short, where we're excelling, you know, analysing all that.

The technical training was funded through other grants and delivered by the technical trainer and assessor and included food handling and forklift training.

The technical training included the Certificate II in Food Processing, Certificate III in Food Processing and forklift training. The technical trainer and assessor explained,

because I work in a team, I can talk to my colleagues who are the two guys in the forestry team. So we teed up so that they have done their forklift license at this work. And in fact quite a few workplaces, as part of their Cert 2 in Food Processing, because you got people, really small workplaces don't have a warehouse and separate warehouse staff they have someone they need to hop on the forklift and do something or other, and so that's what happened here. So that was a reason to customise it absolutely to what they needed. So we did the forklift as part of that.

About the learners

The literacy training targeted learners in management and supervisory roles. The literacy trainer and assessor said,

so working mainly at the manager, maybe at the manager supervisor level. Sometimes senior operators. And that was more or less so we could verify how things were done safely. So it was really important to talk to the people that use the plant and machinery and the equipment to make sure that what we're documenting there and what we're going to train other people to do is accurate. So working with technical experts where required.

Production workers were not included in the literacy training. One reason was the high staff turnover. The literacy trainer and assessor said,

So of the people doing the manual work, the processing work, huge turnover of staff. So in the two years I worked there, in terms of the processing staff, there was maybe one out of the initial 25 of the original staff left, so a huge staff turnover...

with the original workforce, you know, teaching them how to help them out, how to read and write [and so on], it would have been absolutely pointless because most of them would be gone within six months and at the end of two years, they have entirely changed, their workforce would entirely change over and there would be no further forward. So this is about building systems to support new workers coming in to know what they need to know and do what they need to do...

... it wasn't so much a case of training individual workers. And that's not what was required. It was: put the processes and systems in place to be able to cater for the fact that you're turning over quite large volumes of staff and they all need to have this safety stuff. That's an absolute priority, necessity.

Another reason was the technical nature of the work performed by the production workers. The literacy trainer and assessor said,

one of the reasons was that most of the safety stuff was around operating plant or equipment ...I don't have the vocational competency to do that, to actually operate the machinery, but I do have the vocational competency to develop the documentation and put it into a format, so that's where the partnership comes in. They do provide the technical expertise in relation to the plant and the

equipment and the industrial processes. I support them in getting that down, recording that, getting it onto paper, or getting it into text.

The technical training was delivered to five production workers, including one at Certificate III level and four at Certificate II level.

Drivers and motivators

What drives the employer to partner with the RTO?

- Funded training service

The production manager said that the funding was a driver.

The literacy trainer and assessor said,

it's grant-based. So that's a huge difference between me working with a company under a grant-based funding model and that it's costing the company a fraction of what it would cost me if I were being commercially charged out... it's not really costing the company any cash contribution. Had they been doing it commercially it would cost them \$150.00 an hour and let's not pretend that doesn't make a difference.

- More accessible documentation

The production manager said that they had developed skills in using plain English and that,

the simplification of the SOP's [spell out] made it easier for a lot of the people to understand because unfortunately, in this industry we get staff from a lower socioeconomic base and a lot of them their literacy skills are not up to scratch.

- Building skills

The literacy trainer and assessor said,

So just their good level of understanding. They seem to get how it positively impacts on their business and their staff. So I think perhaps that's, well I'm hoping that's what drives them because they don't see the grant money, you know, they don't get money in their bank account for it. It's not about the money, it's actually about supporting their staff. So there's that real people-centred motivation behind it.

- Business need

The literacy trainer and assessor said,

probably the fact that I was able to do what they needed at the time; they needed it, purely and simply. I mean companies, all companies now they don't embark on these kind of projects unless there's a need... it has to align with those business goals objectives. If they align, and if, you know, we could provide the skills that they require in order to achieve that, then you can do business. But it only really works if we can do what they need, when they need it. Simple as.

What drives the RTO to partner with the employer?

- Engaging with a local employer that understands foundation skills

The RTO manager said,

Well I think for us it's they're really receptive, they understand what 26TEN is and does. They understand the benefits of developing foundation skills in their staff given that they have a high turnover and that you know some of their staff, perhaps English as a second language or another

language. You know, there may be people coming into entry level positions that may have left school early. So the kind of students that we work with generally from day-to-day on campus in the community, they're also represented in the workplace. So having [the employer] understand that and work with us closely has been really exciting for us. Especially because they are a large local business, they employ lots of people, they do have their challenges and you know, just things like work, health and safety is at risk for them and that organisation. So if we can help their employees understand work, health and safety better by redesigning a sign, a safety sign, then you know that that has the potential to save that employee from serious injury and the employer lots of money in compensations. You know it's, I guess, that's the key really, having an employer that really understands the importance of foundation skills and what that can do for their business as well as their staff. But you know the bottom line of the business productivity, turnover, all that sort of stuff is affected. You raise the level of skill of your staff.

- Revenue

The literacy trainer and assessor said,

I'm not sure there's any real driver there at all, to be honest. I basically go out, find the projects... it's worth \$50,000 in grant-based funding, contestable revenue. Yeah, that's probably it!... Yeah, let's say it's a business development model. Well, again, they're happy to see things like this happen because this is all positive. But, yeah, it's not... I'd say it's not a driving business model for the organisation, because it's too small. But it's certainly a useful source of contestable revenue.

The production manager said the RTO was driven by money because they are a business. The technical trainer and assessor also referred to the generation of revenue, although more as a benefit, not as a driver per se, "Well I suppose for [the RTO] it's work which is income."

Benefits and challenges of partnerships

Here we were interested in what the perceived benefits and challenges were for both the RTO and the employer, and their staff, from being in the partnership, RTO/employer managers:

What are the main benefits for the employer and its staff?

The production manager spoke of the benefits of having 'fresh eyes', "outside eyes coming in, having a look at what we're doing, highlighting our shortcomings." While the floor supervisor appreciated how working with the RTO had help simplify key workplace documents,

Main one would be the simplification of, yeah, simplifying the documents so that they were weren't overly complicated but still gave the information that that we needed to know. Yeah, that was that was probably the main thing.

What are the main benefits for the RTO and its staff?

- Building foundation skills

The RTO manager said,

Well, we're passionate about foundation skills development and it is another way that [the RTO] can contribute to the community and build foundation skills. So yes, we deliver on campus, we deliver in local libraries and neighbourhood centres, but to also be able to get into the workplace and support people while they're working it's what it's all about, you know. We're a vocational education environment, we want people to gain meaningful employment and be safe and enjoy it, and if we can help them do that by building up their reading, writing, numeracy skills and that's what we love to do.

- Other business opportunities

The literacy trainer and assessor said,

Well, this specific one, potentially there could have been had we been doing large scale food processing training or things like that, there may have been the possibility to align other things. I suppose what we did as a result of this training, that the production manager did - WHS training with [the RTO], so sometimes there are spin offs there where it highlights the need for skills development in other areas, and then they are more inclined to come to you with that need because yo've got the connection and the relationship. So building relationships through this kind of project may have spin offs to that extent.

The technical trainer and assessor said,

tha's what we always do. W're looking for, 'a', opportunities for the rest of [the RTO], but 'b' opportunities for the workplace because ther's a genuine partnership. 'm not there to take from them, w're there to give as well.

What are, or have been, the main challenges of this partnership for the employer and their staff, and for the RTO and their staff?

- COVID-19

During COVID-19 restrictions, the disruption was minimal. The literacy trainer and assessor explained what happened when they couldn't visit the workplace,

in that interim period, because i's documentation, because I work in food processing, I work in manufacturing and the general safety stuff is actually transferable ... So even though I was't necessarily on site, because 've got the background in the industry there, I can bring information in and i's largely transferable to other businesses. So tha's one of the bonuses of doing what I do and going between different businesses: I can take some of that stuff and that significantly streamlines the process of getting all this kind of safety stuff in place.

The production manager said, "we did do some online, but we generally met face-to-face and just more face masks and took the necessary precautions."

- Finding time

The production manager said about their own time,

I didn't see any challenges as such other than trying to fit it into my schedule that that was probably the biggest challenge for me. I don't get much time to sit down here like I am now. You know, I finished on the floor about 30 seconds before we connected and I've be working flat out since 6:15 this morning to just to try to make it in time so. Yeah, time constraints is the hardest part for me.

- Staff release

The production manager said,

Yeah, there were challenges pulling them off their workstations because we don't have excess staff standing around. And if we've got a workstation that needs 5 people and all of a sudden we've got to pull one or two off to send them in for training, well then yeah, that does present some challenges there, but that's a small price to pay.

The technical trainer and assessor said,

Well, the main challenge is always that four letter word called time. That's the main challenge. These guys weren't 12-hour shift people but they were 'you start the job at whatever time and you keep on

going to the job is finished for the day'. So sometimes the shifts are a bit longer, you know. They're eight hour shifts basically but maybe a little bit longer, a bit shorter. And again, tried to make it so there were projects around what they were doing. So if they were doing something with the project, the forklift licence was then getting time because we did it so they did their training on the job by a licensed forklift driver on the job, on their equipment and our assessor came to their workplace and assessed them under their conditions, in their workplace to meet the requirements. So that was great, but it was just a matter, for them, was a matter of getting time to get enough hours up on the forklift around work and stuff like that. So they were staying after hours, which sometimes made it be difficult for them. However, it was better than having three days off and doing a forklift licence where you move around empty pallets and there's no consequence for what you do. So at least they were in a food environment with all the structures and all the limitations of the food environment has as opposed to other things, yeah.

- Flexibility

The literacy trainer and assessor said,

There's always that thing if you're working in enterprises, especially those kind of small, medium-sized ones, they're quite often day-to-day, so you know there were days when you'd rock up and something had broken down or a big order had come in. You need to be absolutely conscious at all times that, you know, production is a priority because that's where the revenue comes from. If they can't put product out the door then it becomes... a serious problem, so you just need to be aware that you have to be flexible and responsive to those kind of business needs because [...] meeting orders, getting stuff out the door on time, managing the little dramas and breakdowns and absences and sick days and all that kind of stuff, you just need to work around it. So if you go in there with a dead set plan, "today I'm going to do this and this and this and then tomorrow it will be in", you know like that kind of rigidly scheduled project or program - that's not going to work.

- Finding business solutions

The literacy trainer and assessor said,

It was something they had to fit around what they already did so at the end of the day, they are a manufacturing plant, they need to get product out the door...I understand that kind of ethos that drives these businesses and the actual commercial realities here. So, when we develop things, and we did it collaboratively, what we did make sure is... we tried to make systems processes lean. So we were not just looking for the best way of doing things, we are looking for the best, most efficient, cost effective ways to do things, and that's where you know you need to have that understanding. It would have been quite easy to do what they needed by...developing really, really complex systems and processes, but the reality is you need to be able to put something in place that enables them to still do their core business. That is always a challenge with the business. It's ...about coming up with a way of doing things that will work for them in their context. And that's the collaboration stuff - without actually being there on the ground, talking to them every week, that doesn't happen.

- Discontinued business model

The technical trainer and assessor said that the RTO was no longer offering training in the workplace. They said,

And the methodology is such that I don't think it will benefit [the RTO] because they won't be doing it anymore, because they're not interested in doing. In the team that [the literacy trainer and assessor] and I used to belong to about eight years ago, we used to do quite a few food places, with WELL projects as well as qualifications and stuff, but that's gradually been chiselled away, and as I said, I'm the last standing dinosaur that still does that. But I was told last year, beginning last year, I was not

allowed to enrol any more lab people, so there would be no more on-job lab stuff and basically it was to finish off this and then it was like, OK, well, at some stage I've got to go and when I go, I've got to hand over what I've got and there's no one to hand it over to, so I might as well finish off what I've got because there's no one else wanting to do it.

- Staff resources

The literacy trainer and assessor said, "I used to be part of a bigger team. I'm doing this kind of stuff. But essentially, I mean, occasionally I bring people in to do smaller components, but on the whole I'm it right now doing these projects, which is unfortunate."

The RTO manager said,

But what we have been doing is, I've been working closely with [the literacy trainer and assessor] to bring other teachers within [the RTO] into that world that he works in predominantly for [the RTO] to help them understand what we do in that space and for him to be able to sort of help transfer some of his knowledge and skills across and broaden that understanding within our teaching community. So I guess that's one of the other things that have come out of this for [the RTO] as an organisation, an RTO, is that we're deepening knowledge and skills of our teaching team as well.

- Compliance

The technical trainer and assessor said,

My job is to be able to read and work out what we need.... So I start with their job, their procedures, read that, work out how I can map that to the training package, that's totally customized it. So there's not been any challenges as far as I'm concerned. But basically my challenge has always been come audit time convincing people that it's not an issue that I don't have Cert III in Food Processing because if I got it in a packing room at a chip place, then what the hell's that got to do with fish food or making butter or whatever. Just having a qualification is...I've got lots of vocational experience, even though I've never run any machine. But again, what would you run? Where do you get your vocational experience? Could you can only have it in one or two, maybe. Like Fonterra in Tasmania, there's a site here where I live in Wynard, that makes cheese and whey powder and they have another site about 100 kilometres away that does butter and powdered milk. And the guys from this factory can't go to that one and just suddenly work in the factory. The only thing I have in common is they pasteurize milk before you use it. That's only process they do in common. So even in the same company on two different sites they don't walk into the other one vocationally competent. They have some vocational competence, but they're not competent. If that makes sense, yeah.

Determining success in partnerships

What qualities does the employer have that make it a good partner?

- Diverse work

The production manager said,

The diverse range of work that we do. It gives a lot of people a broad knowledge of food handling, so we're ideal for a training organisation to help upskill people. Which you know, one role is to make money, the other is to upskill people...

The production manager said upskilling can lead to staff turnover, "which is always at risk for a business if you upskill people, they suddenly become more valuable to other people."

- A successful business

The literacy trainer and assessor said,

Well, put it this way, they are a small business that have grown over the years. They do what they do extremely well. If they didn't do what they were doing extremely well, they wouldn't be in business. So I'm kind of lucky there in terms of, you know, if I work with somebody, it's very rarely do you work with someone who's on their last legs. You're generally working... if you're working with a successful business, you have to respect the fact that they very probably do what they do quite well. And again, that's about them having the right people in place to manage their production, their quality, all of those kind of things... Basically if they've got their act together, you can pretty well assume that they've got quality people in the right positions.

What qualities does the RTO have that make it a good partner?

- Quality trainers and assessors

The production manager was highly complimentary of the RTO trainers and assessors, saying

the level of dedication from [the technical trainer and assessor] and [the literacy trainer and assessor] were second to none. You know, they had genuine compassion and empathy for people and they work very hard to achieve results.

The RTO manager said,

Look I think we offer an individual such as [the literacy trainer and assessor], who again he understands workplace, he's worked with a number of manufacturing businesses in Tasmania on projects such as this, so he gets it as well. So you've got two individual parties: an education provider and a business, an employer, and they understand each side and having that partnership really makes it so successful. So I've said to [the literacy trainer and assessor] a number of times, if we could clone him, that would be wonderful!

The technical trainer and assessor said,

And again...I think it's about the relationships that are to do with the people rather than the RTO itself. As [the literacy trainer and assessor] is a 26TEN person, is brilliant, I'd never hesitate anywhere in any workplace to recommend that I know a guy that'll do a great 26TEN project: you don't know what you want yet, but he'll work it out! And for especially small companies, they don't have an HR person, they don't have a training person, they don't have these roles. And so procedures don't get written because no one has the time to do it. So that's a huge plus for them, 'a' for their audits, but 'b' to streamline their training that that they can do that sort of stuff."

- Quality methodology

The technical trainer and assessor said,

I'll talk within the confines of the team that I work with. Our previous team leader was very much, we are there to work with the industry experts. That was always, you know, we will be led by what they want and our role is to unpack, dreadful wanky word, but you know, just go in and have a look at what they're doing. They are making product that has food. You know that the quality assurance is actually there because it has to be there. So there's no issue about the quality assurance because they can't sell it if it's not up to speed.... These guys are working within a really tight parameters of food safety, food quality and so there was no issue about it not being up to speed ... they were very happy with the service they got because we came to them...so where are you going to go to learn except on that job with that equipment, that's the only place you're going to learn it, yeah.

- Delivery strategies

The RTO manager said,

Look, it's just such an interesting environment and every workplace is a little bit different. So I think for [the RTO] to be working in workplaces like [the literacy trainer and assessor] does in this way, it's really important for teachers to have, you know, those really underpinning understandings of how to develop a person's literacy and numeracy. So teaching strategies, delivery strategies. And to give them the skills and understanding so that they can teach those things explicitly and give that explicit instruction. I think those things are critical and a real opportunity for us in the workplace to provide that. This is one way that you can spell this word, and this is syllables is and this is what letter patterns are, and these are all the ways you can spell the sound, for example. So that explicit instruction I think is really key for a learner to understand why they might be having literacy challenges but also to give them the strategies that they can use every day to develop skills.

- Flexible and responsive

The production manager spoke of the RTO's "willingness to help, their flexibility and lack of cost."

The technical trainer and assessor said,

I don't disrupt work, I try to fit around work as much as possible, you know, go in and cap up, gown up. I go into the production area, they don't come out and explain to me, I go in and watch them. So it's the limited disruptions. There was one of the guys who didn't quite complete because he left beforehand, he had a reasonably significant literacy issue. The fact that all the questions are verbal, sorry they have the option of having them verbal and I can tell you in manufacturing, 80% of people choose to do questions verbally rather than write their answers. They don't have access to personal computer on the job, they can't have their phone in the work site because of food safety issues. So you're standing beside them, going through the questions with them while they're actually running the machine. It's fairly comfortable for people. And I might have stood beside them previously and actually written a standard operating procedure with them. So I was asking them questions about what was going on and so you build the relationship and then it's just not an issue.

The literacy trainer and assessor said,

Basically, I'm the only one that's really having any contact with them here. Again, it's having the right skill set. So you being able to do, having the skills/knowledge etcetera that they need. So you need to be able to align those two things. You need to have flexibility. So that ability to, as I say, respond to the fact that it's a functioning operational business and there will be... priorities will shift and change, so that flexibility there around how you schedule and do things...

Unusual situation here in that there probably wasn't a great deal that could have been done without actually pulling people off jobs. As I say the limitation quite often is time. Always time. So when you're dealing with people like production managers, these are really busy, busy people, if you pull people, even the operators... When you're pulling people off lines, there's a cost associated with that, and you could always spend more time with people and the more time you spend with people, the more you could do. But the reality of it is, as I say, you're working in a manufacturing context and manufacturing environment. What you do is you make sure you maximize the time that you have to achieve the most that you can. I mean that's possibly something that needs more emphasis. You just need to be really, really conscious that time is money and then when you're there what you do. You may not spend a lot of time, but you just make sure it's very, very focused on what you need to do and achieve, so that component of it is really important to understand.

What qualities do the employer and RTO share that make them good partners?

- Willingness to work together

The RTO manager said,

This one has been really positive because [the employer] have really been on board with making change and working with [the literacy trainer and assessor]...who has so much experience and knowledge in this space and obviously [the employer] see that and embrace the opportunity to have someone like [the literacy trainer and assessor] in their workplace. So that has made working with [the employer] productive and in some ways, easy is not the right word, but a collaboration, I guess if you'd like between us and [the employer]. And I guess the evidence of that being really positive is that they've asked us to come back again and they're looking for us to do another project with them when they open up their new site. So that's been a really successful and long-standing partnership and that's happened with other organisations.

But for some employer partnerships with us, it's been very challenging, and one example is in the aged care sector over COVID. Clearly that's a really challenging time for that sector and they were, I guess, just trying to get enough staff on the ground to cover the day-to-day running of the place. So really needing to push literacy and numeracy skills development down the priority list. People were doing double shifts and you know managers doing night nursing shifts and things like that. So I guess it's, you know, it depends on what's happening at the time for an industry and also what's possible for the employer to take up with us at any given moment, given what's happening for them?

- Mutual respect

The literacy trainer and assessor said,

Again, it's having the relationships in place with their people, having that mutual respect and that common understanding about what you're trying to achieve is absolutely important. I think those are probably the core ones, to be honest.

- Complementary content knowledge

The literacy trainer and assessor said,

... their business is advanced manufacturing...We know nothing about that. They had a...serious issue there in that their systems and processes, especially in the WHS side, were not up to speed. We do that. So, and again, this is one of those scenarios where you can't separate the two...you can't put a WHS system in place about how you operate equipment safely without knowing how that equipment operates. So it's one of those things that, yeah... they have the technical aspects, the manufacturing know-how and we in this case have the WHS and the know-how to provide the systems and the documentation, that aspect.

- A good fit

The production manager said,

We complemented the training organisation because we have so many facets to our business and they bounced off that. And then [the literacy trainer and assessor] contacted [the technical trainer and assessor] and said 'hey listen, we can roll out training here, here and here'. And yeah, instead of just going down one line, we just branched off everywhere.

Improvements

Here we were particularly interested in what elements of the RTO could be improved to make it more attractive to new partners.

- More staff

The RTO manager said,

Look, I think for [the RTO] it's similar to my response to the last question, we need more people with [the literacy trainer and assessor]'s level of knowledge and skills and understanding on the ground and if we had that, I think we'd be able to have a broader impact across the business community for Tasmania. So it would really be about if we could build our capacity to do more of this and funded to do more of this then that benefits the community generally...

And we can help people who are in work to better their skills and that has a ripple effect. And you know, we all know that if someone in a family unit improves their literacy skills and there's that ripple effect and it just keeps spreading. So if we could do more and more of [the literacy trainer and assessor] or, you know, repeat, and have [the literacy trainer and assessor] share his knowledge and skills further, I think, and for [the RTO] I think it will benefit more business as well. So I think we could do that a little bit better.

- Contextualise training and assessment for workplace delivery

The technical trainer and assessor held concerns about RTOs being able to deliver training for the specific workplace needs of employers, saying,

...I wrote an assessment tool, it was a cert 1 unit in cert 2, they make fish food at this particular place, and it was called 'operate basic equipment', which basically is start, stop and you know two variations. Anyway, I sent it off to our quality team so we could use it to add it to our scope and the answer I got back was these questions are too specific to one work site and to one piece of machinery: 'You haven't made them general enough'. [But employers] don't want them to be general, they want them to be specific. And so I just got sick of fighting so I just used another unit.

Supporting and sustaining partnerships

The focus of this section was on the types of supports that were useful in establishing and sustaining the partnership, along with the roles and capabilities required to support the partnership. We were also interested in what additional supports and capabilities would improve the partnership.

- Employer support

The literacy trainer and assessor said,

I don't know if there were too many external ones. I mean, I think the company were always very, very supportive of it. So their owners again were very much willing to make this a priority because they knew they absolutely needed it. It was not negotiable, they had to get this stuff in place. So freeing up their production manager and their other managers to participate in the project was a core thing. Apart from that, I mean, obviously I've that support in the organisation there around you know, I have pool vehicles, I have laptops, I have the things I need, the tools to do my job, but essentially the supports are what you make them through your relationships, and the mutual understanding that you have about how that project, how that partnership works. It's an organic thing. I tend to think it's not a structural thing. And again, it does depend a lot on the relationships.

- Good communication

The production manager said it was, "good communication from [the literacy trainer and assessor] and actually it was mostly [the literacy trainer and assessor] all the communication came from, but he was always in contact with us, always available. And the amount of work he did to establish that relationship was really good."

- Management and administrative support

The RTO manager said,

I guess feedback from [the literacy trainer and assessor] is that it's been important for him that I work closely with him in this space, so he has the support of his line manager.

The technical trainer and assessor said,

So our team, making sure that all resulting is done correctly so the admin in our team, the team I'm in, is really good. My manager is really good so that what needs to go out as far as accounts and all sorts of stuff that's done in a timely manner. Reporting so that he has an update of where I'm at in projects and stuff like that. So there's not a formal, you must do it at 3:00 o'clock on a Tuesday afternoon. But there's a, you know, catch up here and there and stuff like that so that's all supported within the team. It's as I said, I'm an anomaly in [the RTO], so there's not a whole stack of this goes on across the rest of the organisation in other areas, sadly.

Supports or initiatives that would help other employers and RTOs establish and sustain effective partnerships

- Funding body support

The RTO Manager said,

and also bringing 26TEN into the fold as well and having them as a partner as we progress in the project has been really positive. And not just seeing them as a funding body because they have a lot of, you know, local knowledge and skills as well that we've been able to draw in and they have thoughts and ideas about how we can work businesses with all their experiences as well. So really drawing on those things, making sure in my job, I support my teacher, being [the literacy trainer and assessor], with whatever he needs to feel like he can do the best job that he can do.

The literacy trainer and assessor said,

in terms of say developing the project applications there... No, that's basically me. 26TEN, the funding body, are also kind of helpful to the extent that I would generally bounce something off them if I was unsure about something, if it was going to fit within program guidelines, those kind of things. But yeah, it's basically...it's basically having been in the job for quite a while and knowing how to navigate all of this.

The RTO Manager also said it was important for the employer in the partnership to fully understand why the funding body was providing the support,

I think if they go down this avenue of an employer grant, they really need to be able to understand what 26TEN is and why the government has funded 26TEN, what they're remit is and how 26TEN can support them as an organisation. And I think if they can again understand what are foundation skills, why are they important and how they can help their business then that's going to go a long way.

... employers generally do understand that foundation skills are important, that it does impact on their business, that it does impact on their employees' morale, their productivity, their quality to manage change, all of those sorts of things. So on some level there is that understanding out there, but I think if 26TEN can continue to champion the importance of these and then we, as an RTO, can come in and deliver what people need then, you know, ultimately, eventually we're going to be able to turn the dial and literacy in Tasmania.

- Trainer autonomy

The technical trainer and assessor said,

I was just plonked into this team. And I can say that I didn't get any blocks at all from my direct manager, but I basically created my own job. That's what I do. I create my own job, I don't wait for

people to come through our marketing or all that sort of stuff. It's basically go and find it yourself, yeah.

- Alignment of roles and skills

The technical trainer and assessor said,

I think that partnerships happen because, well, if people do their job, as in your administrative people do the administrative stuff and that you know that stuff is sent out and resulting is done. And again, we've gone to the one-size-fits-all so that everybody does everything. But I really like to see, you know, sort of admin done by admin people because they do it three times as quickly and at half the cost. And teaching and development done by people in that area, not the other way around. So I see no reason why I would sit and go on to our clunky system and put results in when people who do it all the time do that. I do hard copy hand it into the office, they do their bit and then everything's done. So that works well.

- Skills and experience valued by the employer

The literacy trainer and assessor said,

I think you need to have people that can go into those enterprises that again have the skills and experience that those enterprises value. If you don't have that you're sort of... you're not really bringing an awful lot to the table. So you really need to have people with the expertise and skills, experience that those businesses need.

- Workplace delivery skills and experience

The literacy trainer and assessor said,

Those people that go into those businesses need to have that understanding of how those businesses operate. Being a good classroom teacher does not necessarily make you a good operator in a workplace context. I mean most of my training... when it happened up at [the employer] was done in the lunchroom, sometimes a little bit in the boardroom, a lot of it spent walking through the factory, gowned up with hair nets and face masks and gum boots and those kind of things... It's not your traditional learning environment, so you need to have people that are comfortable in that industry context and cognisant of what they are doing and what they need to be able to achieve. It's not for a teacher that's used to being able to control their context and environment and their classroom, they have to lose that when they walk into a business and then understand, right, this is not an educational institution, this is a workplace and there are differences.

- Contextualised delivery

The technical trainer and assessor said,

Probably starting with listening is where you'd go. I think that the way that training is going now, not just in our own organisations but in others as well, where it's becoming this online "paint by number" stuff, people aren't interested in that in workplaces. The whole thing about learning styles, I do a lot of trainer training, the whole thing about... in manufacturing, I can almost guarantee that 70% of your people in manufacturing are hands-on learners. That's why they're in manufacturing. That's why they're not at Uni. That's why they're not in management and that's why they're not the health and safety person, et cetera, et cetera. They're not people who enjoy sitting down and reading something out of a book or online. They want to do it and they want to learn by doing, which I don't think is necessarily an issue, in fact it's not.

My take is that training packages might start going backwards because industries are going to be saying we're not getting enough value out of this qualification because it's this generic thing that they can go on Wikipedia and look up the answer for and drop it in to their thingo and that doesn't help us

tomorrow when that smell was there and that thing did that over there, 'Why didn't you notice that?' 'Ohh yeah it wasn't part of my job'. 'Yes it is sunshine.'

I've been involved in training package since the 98 food training package, so my sadness is it's almost gone full circle and industry's going to go back to training within industry again and saying we're not interested in training packages particularly because you're giving them a qualification and what does that mean? It doesn't mean enough. We've lost the competency out of competency-based. We're doing their curriculum based rather than competency based.

... you've got to have people as part of the process, learning's got to be with people not with books and so on, certainly not with online stuff. It's not enough. It's OK for some people. Yeah, it's fine for some people, but in manufacturing it's not going to meet the needs of what people need.

- More public information about funding

The production manager said,

More information [needs] to be out in the public space as to what's available. If we hadn't been approached by [the literacy trainer and assessor], we would never have known about it.