Supporting pathways in learning and life

Non-accredited training within the New South Wales Adult and Community Education (ACE) program

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RIVERINA
**COMMUNITY
COLLEGE**

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FRONTISPIECE

From Dr Don Perglut, CEO, Community Colleges Australia (CCA)

This timely report summarises research into non-accredited training delivered by New South Wales adult and community education (ACE) providers as part of the NSW ACE program. The report is extremely valuable because it documents in detail that, for a large number of NSW ACE students, non-accredited training programs provide a crucial lifeline into learning, social and community engagement, and employment. This report comes at an important moment, as it outlines the vital role that non-accredited training plays in the changing environment of COVID-19, particularly the need for vulnerable and disadvantaged students to remain resilient, resourceful and engaged. The report draws on an abundance of data to reach its conclusions: qualitative data in the form of extensive interviews with NSW ACE provider staff complements quantitative data from state and national sources. The report examines the additional social value that can accrue from NSW ACE programs. It provides important recommendations aimed at tackling the challenges presented by a rapidly changing world of work for our students. As the CEO of Community Colleges Australia (CCA), the peak body for NSW community education providers, I commend this report.

From Emeritus Professor Joy Higgs AM, Charles Sturt University

Education is often seen as involving tests, exams and assessments of some form. As this report shows, whether that approach is required or not depends, to some extent, on context. For those who have been marginalised by their experience at school or who lack the confidence to engage with training, perhaps after many years away from education, this report emphasises the important role that non-accredited training can have in capturing this type of learner's imagination and attention. It also draws out the value of this type of training as a pre-cursor to more traditional VET education. Finding out about 'employability', soft skills and the vital role these are increasingly playing in the modern workplace, has also been a valuable component of this research. Non-accredited training may well emerge as an essential component in any approach to developing the types of employability attributes described here.

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1. INTRODUCTION

This year's Teaching and Leadership research project examined non-accredited training among community colleges in New South Wales (NSW) (see Appendix I), with a particular focus on training funded under the state government's Adult and Community Education (ACE) program. ACE forms part of an approach by state governments to providing lower-cost and/or fee-free training to students, particularly those from a disadvantaged background, who are interested in pursuing vocational education (see Devlin, 2020). In NSW, as well as allocating funds to more traditional vocational education, a proportion of the ACE budget is assigned, every year, to delivering non-accredited (more informal, non-certificated) training.

A. The 2020/2021 Teaching and Leadership research program

While accredited education is a mainstay of the NSW ACE sector's delivery of quality training, non-accredited programs have been playing, in recent years, an increasingly vital role within the range of courses offered by the colleges. This project investigated the potential benefits of such non-accredited training and how it impacts students in terms of their overall confidence, their engagement in the community and their employability as they transition to the working arena.

The project used four different lenses, or approaches (see Appendix II), to gather information and reach its conclusions. Firstly, it explored the current research literature base for relevant academic material. Secondly, it collated data about the sector stored with the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER)[1] and the ACE department in NSW. Thirdly, it used the resources of the Australian Social Value Bank (ASVB)[2] to calculate the social impact of NSW ACE non-accredited training – the more 'hidden', knock-on effect engaging in ACE programs can have across all aspects of students' lives. Lastly, and perhaps most significantly, it gathered together the many voices of those actually working and studying in the sector, namely the leaders, managers and students at the community colleges. Findings from these four approaches are captured in this report, which includes:

- valuable insights into the purpose of non-accredited training, the range of training available within the NSW ACE program, and its outcomes (see Sections 3 and 4)

- a detailed analysis of students' experience of non-accredited training and of the types of outcomes for students that can emerge, including not only educational outcomes but also social and broader community outcomes (see Sections 5A and 5B)

- an investigation of the multiple barriers that can impact student engagement with employment and of how the NSW ACE programs can assist students in overcoming these challenges and gain work (see Section 6)

- key findings in relation to non-accredited training within the NSW ACE sector and accompanying recommendations as to how its delivery could potentially be enhanced (see Section 7)

- recommendations for future research (see Appendix III).

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[1] See https://www.ncver.edu.au/
[2] See https://asvb.com.au/

Accompanying the research was a specific output: the development of two non-accredited training resources designed to aid students to overcome at least one psychological barrier to employment and help minimise at least one labour market obstacle. The aim in developing these resources was to aid students in better preparing for today's challenging world of employment, better access labour market opportunities and more effectively build a longer-term career. These resources are to be distributed across the college network.

B. The background of the ACE program

As stated by the NSW government, its ACE program "aims to promote access and increase vocational education and training outcomes for those who experience significant barriers to training and employment", while aiming to "advance students into pathways to get a job, advance their careers, or to overcome barriers and access training under other Smart and Skilled [3] programs" (NSW Department of Education, 2020b, p. 3). The NSW ACE program is used by people from many different backgrounds. In 2018–2019, for example, key indicators in relation to who utilised this funding show that:

- 56% of students were unemployed

- enrolment numbers were slightly weighted towards regional/remote areas (56%) rather than metropolitan areas (44%)

- more women (66%) than men (34%) participated in courses

- 14% of students identified as Indigenous, and

- 22% identified as having a disability.

- a total of 48,514 units of competency or study modules were completed, with the majority being accredited units, however

- 14% of these units were delivered in a non-accredited format, as an average across the various colleges (NSW Department of Education, 2019).

Demographically, students enrolling in non-accredited training came from all age groups, from teenagers to their sixties, with a perhaps surprising uniformity of representation across the age groups. Proportionally, students from 15–19 outweighed other age groups but, thereafter, the distribution of students in the courses by age was relatively uniform (see Figure 1).

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[3] 'Smart and Skilled' is the NSW government's initiative to provide highly subsidised vocational training to people who live and/or work in New South Wales. See https://smartandskilled.nsw.gov.au/
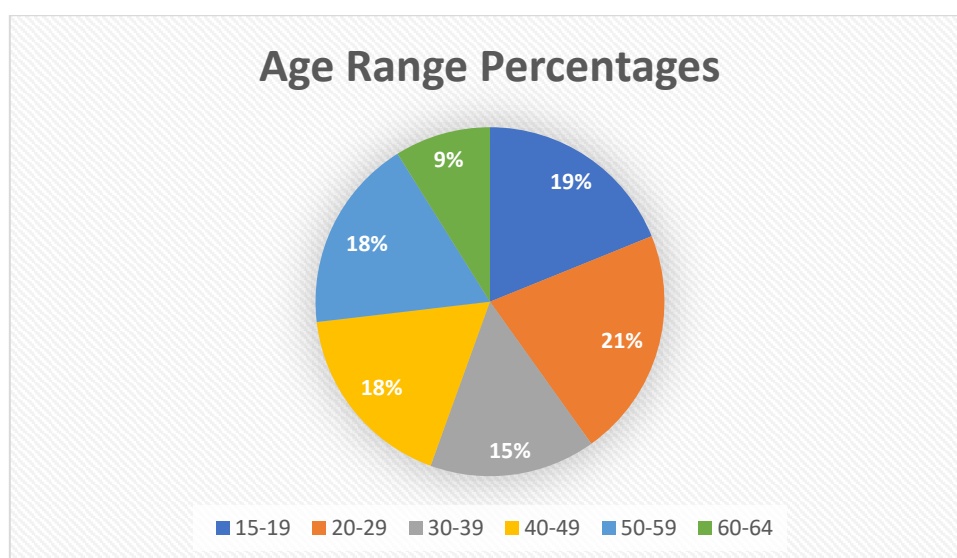
Figure 1. The demographics, by age, of non-accredited NSW ACE enrolments, 2019 (Source: NCVER – see footnote 1)

Enrolments in non-accredited training have been steadily increasing in recent years, particularly since the start of the NSW ACE-CSO (Community Service Obligation) program in 2015 (see Figure 2). However, take-up rates between the state's different community colleges can vary considerably and some colleges have sought out other sources of funding to further augment non-accredited training, boosting overall non-accredited enrolments to nearly 10,000 in 2020 (see Figure 3).
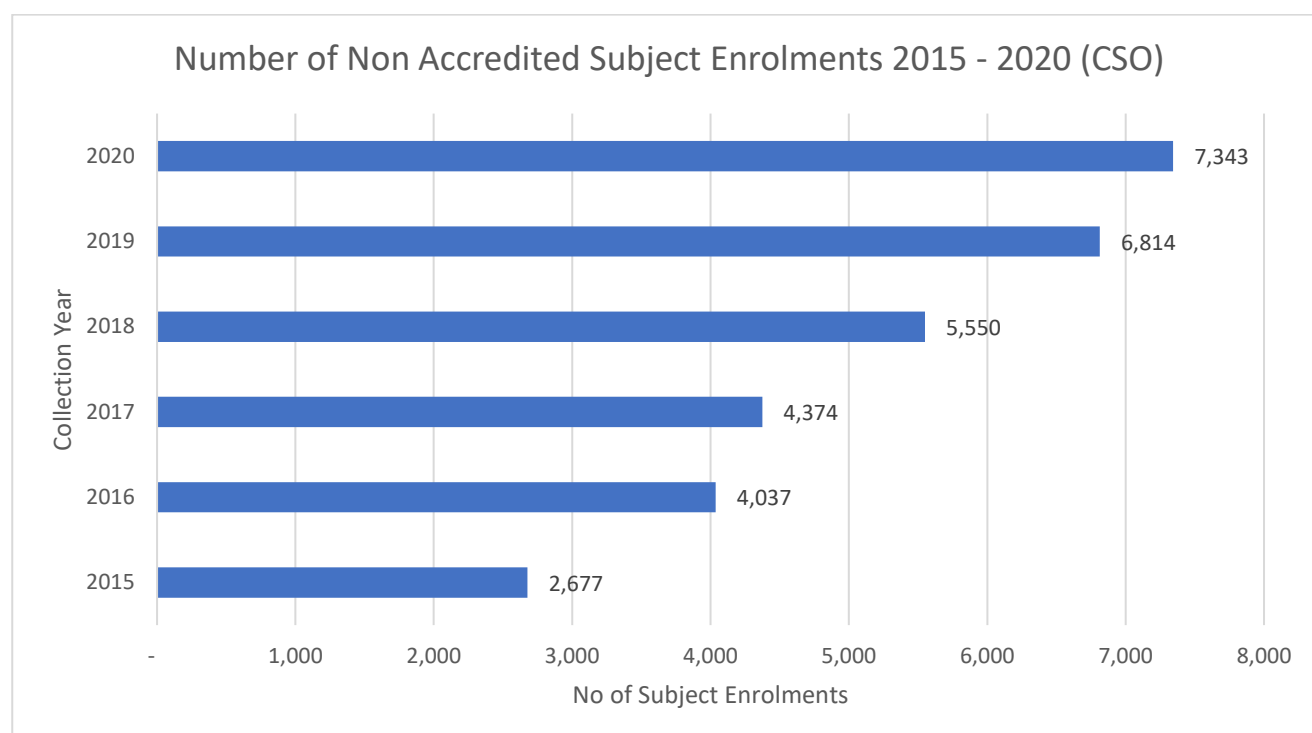
Figure 2. The number of non-accredited subject enrolments, 2015–2020, delivered by NSW community colleges through the ACE-CSO program (Source: NSW Department of Education)
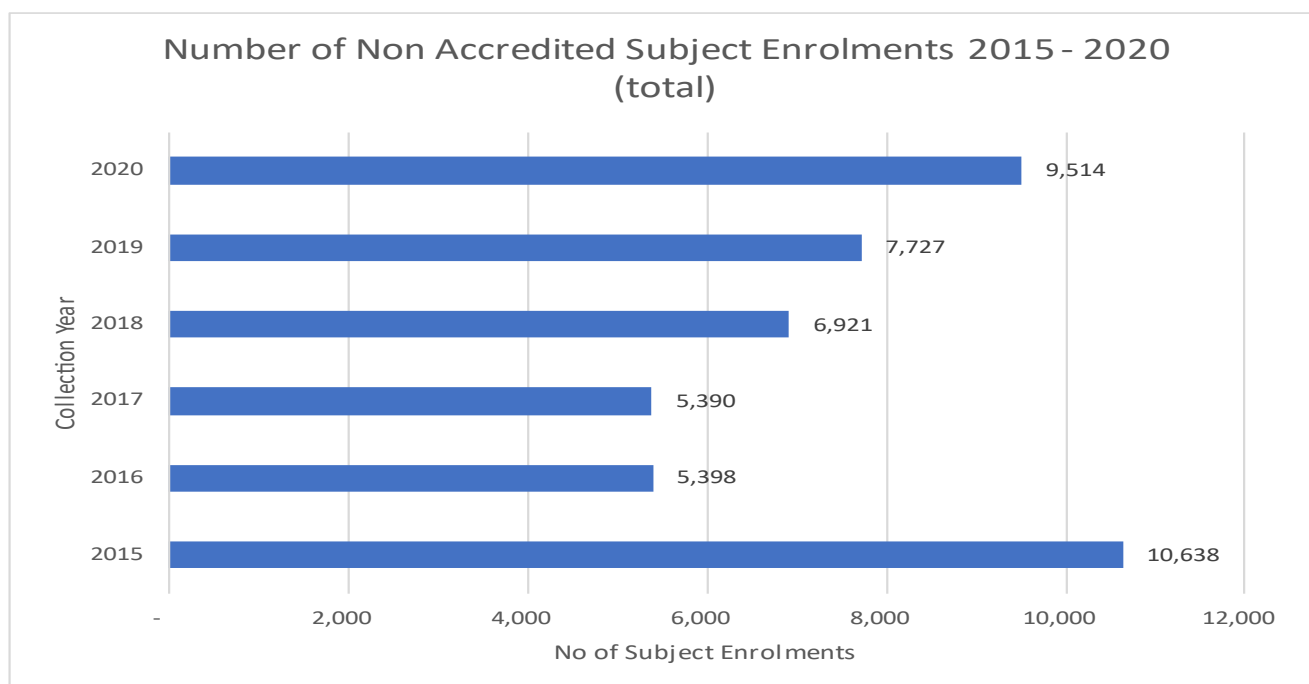
Figure 3. The number of non-accredited subject enrolments, 2015–2020, delivered by NSW community colleges, all programs (Source: NSW Department of Education)

C.   What is non-accredited training?

On the face of it, non-accredited training might appear to be easy to identify. On the one hand, we have accredited education that is measured through testing and has a credentialled qualification as the end-goal; on the other, we have non-accredited training that is delivered without any form of testing or assessment and, possibly, without any form of certification. However, it is not quite that simple when we consider that there are various ways that someone can learn – and various things that they can learn about – in a non-accredited format (see CEDEFOP [European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training], 2014, pp. 11, 99, 184). For example, the community colleges deliver a wide variety of lifestyle and leisure courses: everything from tai chi to foreign languages, to tea-making and yoga. Is this non-accredited learning? In a sense, yes, it is, in that it is a planned activity with a specific time set aside for engagement and a semi-structured environment.

For the purposes of this analysis, however, it is best to depict non-accredited learning, within the NSW ACE context, as semi-formal education designed to aid in the creation of vocational outcomes, but without the formal testing of skills and aptitudes that would normally be an integral part of such a program. Indeed, this is highlighted in the Department of Education's own guidelines to ACE, which states that non-accredited training must have vocational intent (NSW Department of Education, 2020a).

D. A changing labour market and the need for 'soft skills' development through non-accredited education

Amid a rapidly changing working arena, including all the challenges brought about by changes in circumstances due to COVID-19, a particular focus of this year's research has been on current delivery of 'employability'-related training to ACE student cohorts. Employability is a term that has been growing in importance in recent years and the project sought to establish the current – and potential future contributions – of the ACE non-accredited program to its development.

> *Employability refers to 'the skills and attributes an individual requires to identify, apply for, acquire and maintain employment as well as the skills and attributes an individual exhibits that are valued by potential or existing employers'. (Cloutman, 2020, p. 4)*

Employability, particularly through the development of soft skills (such as communication, self-confidence, resilience and resourcefulness in relation to work and building a career), has become an increasing focus in the vocational education and training (VET) sector, largely through the recognition, since the Mayer report (1992), that formal qualifications alone may not be enough to sustain someone in employment throughout the many ups and downs of a lifelong career. And this focus on creating employable students is also a core commitment within the ACE sector. In the *Ministerial Declaration on Adult Community Education* (Ministerial Council for Vocational and Technical Education, 2008), the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) committed to substantial reforms that would create circumstances which provided all working-age Australians "the opportunity to develop the skills and qualifications needed, including through a responsive training system, to enable them to be effective participants in, and contributors to, the modern labour market" (p. 4).

This increased emphasis on employability has arisen, in part, because of the multiple challenges that jobseekers may face when trying to find work. For example, firstly, employment growth in recent years has been characterised by expansion of opportunities in industry sectors that do not have well-established career structures and/or which have been offering increasingly more insecure forms of employment (e.g., contracting or casual contracts) such as ICT, media and hospitality (Brown et al., 2002; 2004). Secondly, established entry-points to the labour market for young people, such as the apprenticeship system, have been declining (Smith Family, 2014). Thirdly, the labour market itself has undergone significant transformation in the last 15 years, making it increasingly harder, particularly for students at the lower levels of the vocational training structure, to become employable. A growing demand, in a STEM-oriented economy,[4] for ever greater technical skills at higher and higher levels, means by far the greatest demand in the labour market at present is for degree-qualified professionals (see Figure 4), particularly in STEM areas, with that demand being five times as high as for those only holding foundation skills level qualifications.

In the face of these multiple challenges, it is vital to institute a number of complementary support systems, simultaneously, that can aid people to remain attached to the workforce, interested in keeping their job and advancing their skills in new working arenas. Thus, aside from a stable economy and supportive relationships and networks, a need to develop a range of 'soft skills' and employability-related attributes has been recognised in recent years (Deloitte Access Economics, 2017; Smith Family, 2014). It is these soft skills and whether they are being developed – or developed sufficiently – in the NSW ACE training system that forms a special focus of this report.

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[4] STEM stands for 'Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics'.

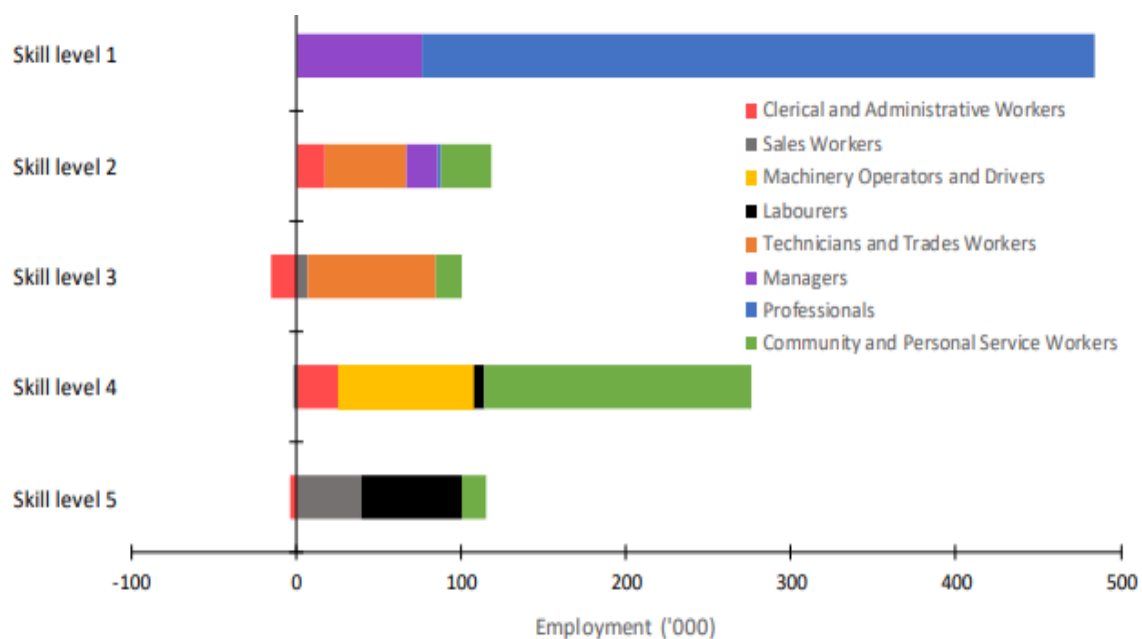**Figure 4.** Demand for newly qualified employees, by skills level (Source: Department of Employment, Skills, Small and Family Business, 2019)

Skill level 1: Bachelor's degree or higher qualification
Skill level 2: Advanced Diploma or Diploma
Skill level 3: Certificate IV or Certificate III with at least two years on-the-job training
Skill level 4: Certificate II or III
Skill level 5: Certificate I or secondary education

2. RESEARCH AIMS

Four main aims underpinned this project:

A. To examine why there is a need for non-accredited training and to determine the levels of collaboration in the development of non-accredited resources among the community colleges

Perhaps the first and most obvious question any outsider looking in would ask about non-accredited training would be, why undertake it? Why not simply deliver training through established VET-certified channels? Why the need to create what may have already been created? Most Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) benefit from the standardised delivery and scaffolded progression inherent in mainstream VET programs, with established norms around all aspects of delivery, accreditation, quality and compliance. Why, therefore, deviate from that? This question formed a key aim for the research.

Alongside this question, and in the absence of centralised planning of resources with agreed training scaffolds, we sought to understand how colleges developed their non-accredited resources and to what extent they had collaborated in their development.

B. To investigate and depict the diversity of non-accredited training

While non-accredited training has always been present within NSW ACE education programs, there has been relatively little formal research into this type of training over the last 20 years. What investigation has taken place (see, for example, Bowman, 2011, 2015) has focused largely on portraying NSW ACE training as a whole, not singling out non-accredited training as a focus of study. Relatively little investigation has taken place, historically, about the range and scope of the types of training delivered in a non-accredited format, nor information on its take-up. Outcomes for the students undertaking it have not been examined through formal research, even though there is a considerable amount of data available on these programs.[5] A key goal for the project, therefore, has been to examine and tabulate the types of non-accredited training taking place within the NSW ACE program.

C. To quantify the benefits to students, as well as broader social and community impacts, that can accrue from non-accredited training

To date, little formal research has been published with regard to the student experience of non-accredited training. The research aims, therefore, to identify and depict, as portrayed by college leaders, managers and, of course, the learners themselves, the immediate perceived value of non-accredited training to ACE students both for their studies and their employability.

Additionally, relatively little previous research has been undertaken into the social impact of the programs – the more hidden or intangible knock-on effects of this type of training. As such, a third key aim of the research was to begin to investigate these more subtle impacts, such as increases in individual and community wellbeing.

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[5] Each year colleges submit data on their ACE program delivery through the AVETMISS data submissions system (Australian Vocational Education and Training Management Information Statistical Standard). This data is collated by the NCVER. This submission provides the kind of raw quantitative data featured throughout this report in its various tables and figures; however, it does not include qualitative data or information.

D. To explore barriers that prevent students from gaining employment in this new environment, while suggesting training solutions

Students coming from a background of disadvantage often face an array of more intangible barriers that can prevent them from securing longer-term employment, particularly during the all-important school-to-work transition (Bowman, 2011). These obstacles can include:

- *psychological barriers*: such as a fundamental lack of self-esteem/self-efficacy in relation to work, low levels of motivation, poor levels of resilience and persistence (particularly in relation to the resilience that is often needed when finding work), and a lack of awareness around the importance of building a career – or a career identity – over the longer-term.[6]

- *labour market access barriers*: including, as examples, a lack of preparation around personal presentation, poor resume writing or interview skills, and low levels of knowledge about labour market opportunities as well as an inability to be innovate or entrepreneurial.

This project therefore sought to establish the extent to which NSW ACE students were affected by these barriers and, similarly, to what extent non-accredited training ameliorates some or all of these difficulties.

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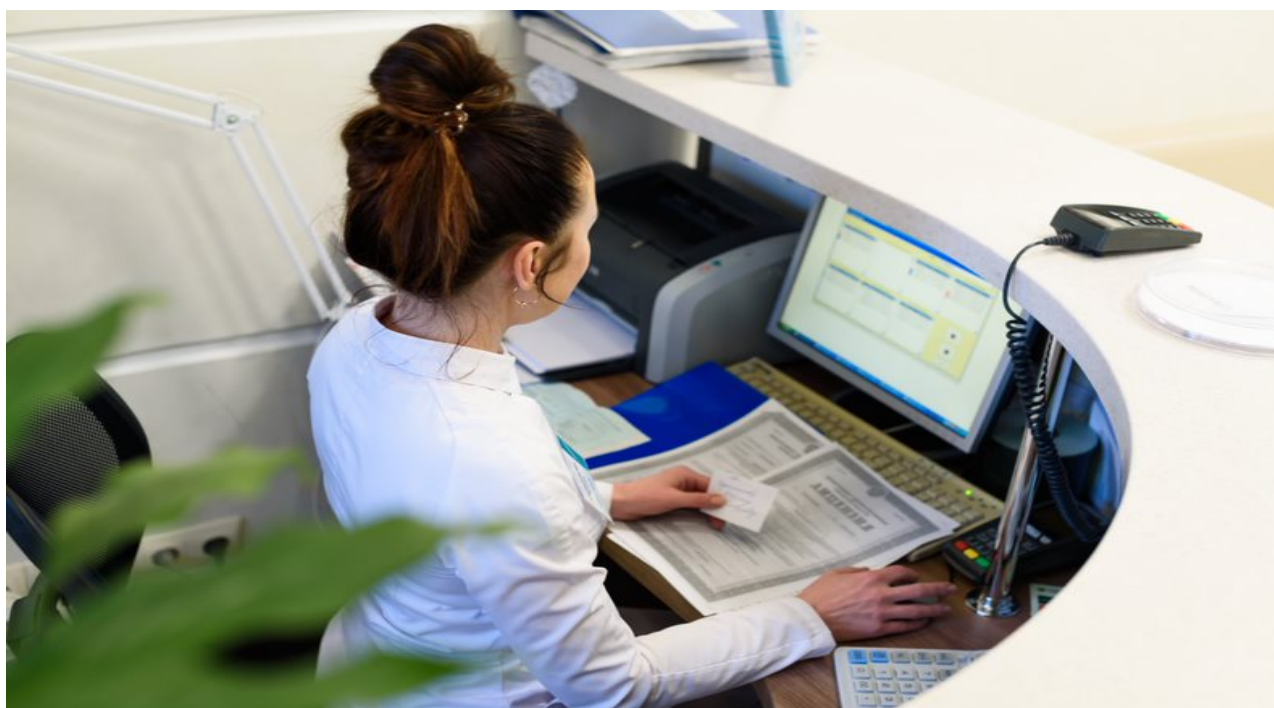
[6] The support system they are a part of may unintentionally disadvantage ACE students in this regard: the emphasis within the Job Active agency network that students are typically registered with, is on finding a job – sometimes any job – to get the jobseeker off the unemployment lines, rather than finding employment that considers longer-term career-related goals. Often, this 'quick fix' results in shorter-term employment that may result in a revolving door of contract or casual work, not just for years, but for decades (see Cloutman, 2020; Fowkes, 2011).

3. COLLEGE LEADERS SPEAK: THE PURPOSE OF NON-ACCREDITED TRAINING

In Section 3, case studies that depict how college leaders and VET managers interpreted the NSW Department of Education's call for the use of non-accredited training are (anonymously) depicted.[7] How it is utilised alongside or integrated with accredited training is also illustrated. By far the most frequently cited reason identified by these leaders and managers for providing non-accredited programs was that they formed a welcome starting point for those who had previously failed in education or had missed out on it for years at a time. Moreover, such training was identified as facilitating an approach to students' needs for holistic training that did not, at least initially, involve testing, accreditation or even necessarily formal classroom-based learning, but which (re)connected students with their surrounding community and with employment opportunities. Levels of collaboration in the development of these resources were examined.

Five different types of illustrative case studies demonstrating how NSW ACE non-accredited programs served the needs of students (summarised as A–E below) were identified in the interactions with leaders and managers and are outlined below:

A. (Re)engaging with learning

The NSW ACE sector provides a welcoming environment that seeks to meet the learning needs of its diverse cohorts of students through innovative, often custom-designed programs, particularly for those who are anxious about or not used to learning. Several interviewees identified the need for learners simply to feel comfortable in a classroom again after, in many instances, years or even decades outside of education. For example, war, famine and disasters in their own countries mean that many culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) students have missed years of traditional schooling. So, a return to education, in a second language, after many years without any form of learning can pose significant challenges that the NSW ACE program can often allay. As one college leader put it:

> *[Learning] is a by-product of being in our classrooms, with a team. Suddenly you're off 'WeChat', out of your home, out of Eastwood shopping centre … you're in a room with Koreans and Iranians, you have to talk English. Suddenly you know someone else that's in a different boat, but in the same ocean. Persistence is a big thing that I think [the students] get, with the encouragement of their teachers. No matter where you start, you're making progress. [It's about] future orientation, relief from hopelessness. I think a lot of these things are part of the mix that is led by the values of the people we employ. I think they're an outcome of engagement in learning itself, not [engagement] in assessment. (CEO:4)*

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[7] Abbreviations are used instead of names to distinguish the research participants. 'CEO' stands for Chief Executive Officer; 'VET MGR' stands for Vocational Education Manager; 'IND' stands for Industry Participant.

In other words, the very act of engaging in education, particularly non-accredited training as a 'soft' entry into learning, offers an access point for students to work on more hidden attributes that are going to be critical to their longer-term success not only in the classroom but in life. These attributes include communication, teamwork, camaraderie with others in a similar situation and the motivation to succeed, and many other outcomes that emerge from the learning process itself, more than a specific training package or assignment. Moreover, while formal, accredited training maps to competence, as one leader put it, "it doesn't map to the whole person" (CEO:2). The vital point here is that there is a broad spectrum of soft skills essential to students' progress in life and work that may lie altogether outside, or only partially within, mainstream accredited training packages. These can include employability skills and cultural, social or community engagement capabilities.

B. Building learners' confidence through a holistic training approach

NSW ACE leaders and managers saw non-accredited training as a means to engage students who had been left out of, or alienated by, traditional schooling. Mental health issues, negative previous experiences with school, low self-esteem in a learning context and significant socio-economic hardship were all identified as factors creating a need among vulnerable people, particularly younger (under 25) learners, to build up learners' confidence in their abilities without frightening or demoralising them. As the college leaders outlined:

> *The first step is getting people back into the classroom and a social environment. … getting them over that first hurdle of re-building their self-esteem, their confidence and even having a belief in themselves. That's the first hurdle. Often, using non-accredited training can get them over those barriers … we've used non-accredited training to boost the skills of engaging with the community and being able to host an event. There were people who, at the beginning of it, were afraid to walk in the door and didn't think they would last a day in a class. They lasted for six months, because they just loved it and felt engaged and [improved] their ability to connect with other people and see a bit more value in life… (VET MGR:1)*

I think that … the non-accredited units give them a good taster ... which allows a student to gain confidence, allows them to feel successful … its main purpose is to bring people confidence, make them feel like they have achieved something. [The ACE program] acknowledges that the growth of an individual who is disadvantaged is slower but isn't necessarily unachievable. [Non-accredited training] allows them to see that they have the capability to either go on to a full qualification or something higher, or they've got those job skills that allow them to gain the confidence to go out and actually get a job. **(IND:5)**

The importance of non-accredited training [is] building that resilience, so that people who keep getting knocked down have got the resilience to say 'OK, try again, start again, let's get that resume together, let's go and knock on the next door'. **(VET MGR:2)**

Without non-accredited training, we wouldn't get very far! Especially the ladies who had come to us who had the anxiety disorders. Their Jobactive provider [originally] wanted them to get a qualification, because the whole idea was to put them back into the workforce. They would come to class happily, they would learn happily [but] as soon as we said, 'we have to get the assessments from you', they'd disappear for days on end because they would panic.
It's not that they couldn't do the work, they'd been doing the work in class, and they'd even been doing it using the formal books. But, while they were having fun and doing it, there was no pressure on them; as soon as you put the pressure on them [through assessments], they just couldn't cope.
They hadn't made the jump from here [learning as fun] to here [formal learning]. To get them there, to go into the workforce, we had to get through this whole range in the middle. It's the assessments that freak them out. Some of the people I'm talking about [from non-English speaking backgrounds] don't even understand that concept. **(CEO:4)**

For many students, whether they had or did not have an accredited outcome was often somewhat irrelevant. For many, simply participating and completing an educational experience was an accomplishment in and of itself, with soft skills emerging almost as a by-product of the training:

I think all of them ... the feedback is ... they all enjoy it; they all get a sense of achievement out of it at the end; that they've come out with something. Because of where they've come from, they're not really bothered with if it's accredited or non-accredited. [Rather] it is, 'I've learnt a skill, and I've got something on a bit of paper, and I can now go and try and get a job'. That's where they're coming from.
It's about creating projects that bring them all together. We do a lot of [training] projects. They don't realise that while they're doing that project, they're building resilience, they're building self-esteem. So, it's all about building projects to get them to work on without them knowing what's really happening. Can I give a really good example? We work in a domestic violence shelter in Newcastle, 'Got Your Back Sister' You might have heard of them. We'd just done a retail part-qualification. I went to the graduation, and one of the girls at the start said, 'I never thought I'd be standing up in front of a couple hundred people, it was not in my wildest dreams'. She had also been successful in getting a job at Dan Murphy's. So, I think the skills they're learning through projects – they were being made to do interview skills, they were being made to work together to get some presentation experience and some public speaking experience. I think they're learning those skills without even knowing it … and it's along with the training. **(VET MGR:3)**

The clear message in these quotes is that there are often deep psychological factors holding back students from having confidence that they can succeed in any type of test or exam, typically connected to intergenerational unemployment, poor experiences at school, low self-esteem or low levels of confidence in a new cultural environment. As one leader put it, "even though accredited training is [only] 'competent' or 'not yet competent', they (the students) still see it as the old 'pass' or 'fail'. They don't want to put themselves out there so they can't fail. It's a security thing!" (CEO:3).

C. Engaging with community

Non-accredited programs can offer a lifeline that allows students the opportunity to re-group on a personal level, as well as access to, and participation in, a community of learners and a path away from alienation. Often their classroom experience is a first stepping-stone to engaging in the broader community of which they form a part. They engage with others, they make friends, and they realise that there are others with the same challenges as them and that, together, and with the guidance of the program staff, they can connect, integrate into their broader community and succeed.

This is, perhaps, one of the more subtle or hidden aspects of the NSW ACE program. It would be inaccurate to portray the colleges solely as 'training providers' in the sense that they simply offer access to pre-formatted training packages. On the contrary, the community colleges liaise, often in great depth, with their surrounding communities. As one leader put it, the colleges are "really good at working within our communities and delivering services that are relevant and are what the community needs" (IND:5). This is a process that begins, for the colleges, with listening closely to community needs and what vulnerable people in the community are needing, and then utilising the expertise of the trainers within the college to build courses that align to those needs.

As one leader put it:

> So, the central thing is that we take customer requirements, on this side over here, and then we have customer satisfaction over here. We have a community and customers, and we have teachers, trainers and assessors. When those two axes intercept, courses exist.
>
> You start with the awareness of the possibility of learning. You research that awareness, you make a decision, you act on your decision, you experience your decision, you reflect, you go back again. So, awareness is promotion. Decision is enrolment. Starting and experience is organising the class. Participating is delivering the program. We evaluate and then we develop. We feed in from up here … [to the] business sector, community sector, government, public, into the development process.
>
> You only arrive at care through association; it's the association in the classroom that makes the difference. Our job is not to put on classes; our job is to manage a process in the community where we create connections, and the community educates itself. **(CEO:1)**

D. Providing training that cannot, typically, be delivered in an accredited format

Within **t**he range of programs delivered through NSW ACE, there are several instances of training that could not, typically, be delivered through an accredited unit. As VET MGR:10 put it, "community college providers work with multiple different groups. We regularly engage with community organisations and wrap-around service providers and deliver outside the box solutions to meet specific needs that don't fit neatly into accredited training boxes". In other words, NSW ACE is used to respond, actively and organically (Wright, 2005), to community needs. "Timeliness, flexibility, agility, suitability, creativity. All of that nimble, agility stuff. We use [the program] to increase our ability to be nimble and agile" (CEO:4).

One example of this would be Lismore Community College's program in the knowledge component of the driving test. The course targets Indigenous learners and is one step on the path to their gaining a driving licence and having greater access to employment. In addition, Sydney Community College provides a career-planning course that includes guest speakers talking about work opportunities and further learning opportunities at TAFE as well as volunteering opportunities to gain work experience. Alongside this, the college provides units in discovering what type of learning would best be suited to the student's wishes and needs:

For our current ACE cohort [migrants, refugees and humanitarian visa holders], the non-accredited unit is a learner-centred unit, allowing the student to seek out information and come to a conclusion about their learning which does not have to be right or wrong/competent or not yet competent … it is a gentle way of them identifying where more training is needed beyond the ACE program. (VET MGR:5)

E. Aiding entrepreneurialism

College leaders also highlighted other ways through which non-accredited training could assist with the development of work-related skills. Non-accredited training can be utilised in the Targeted Skills for Business component of the NSW ACE program, reaching out to workers already in employment, or those considering starting a business of their own. Busy employees frequently do not have the time to engage in accredited training or commit to the longer-term class schedule that often comes with it, while, in contrast, non-accredited training provides a means to facilitate programs that meet local small businesses' needs without the time constraints, which are often prescribed, of formal VET training. Accredited training "can often be prohibitive in time and cost to a small business" (VET MGR:10) and non-accredited training can often circumvent these issues. A short, focused course on an aspect of work that they need help with can provide a valuable means to improve job-related skills.

Additionally, students can be aided in setting up their own business. Many over-55s, for example, may be at the stage of their career where establishing their own business is a realistic possibility. Central Coast Community College, for example, caters to a large cohort of 'tree-changers' who have moved up the coast from Sydney and are seeking to establish their own small business. Non-accredited education provides an ideal medium to foster entrepreneurial skills and facilitate short, intense training in the various aspects of setting up a small business.

SECTION 3 SUMMARY

With regard to the purpose of non-accredited training and levels of collaboration among the community colleges in the development of common resources we can conclude:

1. The NSW ACE non-accredited program provides colleges with the latitude to recognise that the whole of a program (or a person) is not contained within competency-based training and with the ability to respond according to needs – whether individual or community based – locally, organically and on the ground.

2. The flexibility, shorter duration and the 'fun factor' in non-accredited training are ideal ways for learners to avoid the nervousness or anxiety that can arise when considering a return to education, particularly in relation to assessment. The fear of failure in an accredited format, for these disadvantaged learners, can be so strong that they would rather not participate at all than participate and fail.

   Non-accredited training offers a lifeline to people who may otherwise slip further and further back into depression, anxiety and alienation, providing them with a readily available alternative to giving up, entrapment in underemployment and, potentially, a steady decline into longer-term unemployment.

3. Tangentially, learners are absorbing many of the soft skills they will require in the workplace, often without even realising they are learning them. This can include working as a team, communication, community awareness and engagement, and many other more intangible attributes.

4. Non-accredited training can be utilised to help students identify which subject-matter area and/or level of accredited training they are most suited to.

5. Non-accredited training is often ideally suited to upskilling those already in the workforce who, largely through time-pressures, cannot commit to the rigour of an accredited program.

6. With regard to collaboration in developing non-accredited resources, we observed a lot of examples of enthusiastic and useful ad hoc, informal or semi-formal collaboration among the colleges, particularly around literacy and numeracy. We would like to point out, however, that there does not appear to have been any sustained, collective, network-wide attempt to equip the colleges as a whole with a wide range of resources that could be used by all.

   While we acknowledge the impetus to respond to local needs, and to develop resources organically, there is, at the same time, considerable commonality or uniformity in the target cohorts being assisted, and a network-wide approach to resource development would be beneficial. There also appears to be a lack of network-wide, ongoing professional development in the full potential range of non-accredited training that the colleges could be delivering.

   Distance, lack of funding and lack of time/opportunity to collaborate appear to have prevented colleges from collectively designing and utilising common resources across a suite of potential non-accredited programs (such as those listed in Table 1 in Section 4), or even 'template'-type training resources that could be adapted to local demand.

4. TRENDS AND PATTERNS IN NSW ACE NON-ACCREDITED TRAINING

Section 4 investigates the trends within non-accredited training among the various community colleges. While colleges in the ACE-NSW network deliver thousands of units to hundreds of students, many with special needs, it is possible, based on the information provided by colleges surveyed, to begin to group these many units into four overall clusters. These four clusters, depicted here in sub-sections A to D, largely reflect the community and learner needs detailed in this report by college leaders, students and industry.

A. Preparatory programs to build self-confidence

Several colleges are providing 'entry-level', foundation skills type programs that are designed to re-familiarise learners with learning and/or prepare them for learning by removing barriers that may stand in the way of re-engaging with education. Programs include such approaches as 'life skills for disability students', 'art therapy' and 'cooking therapy', all with the intent of teaching the basic life skill of re-connecting with others and learning in a group, as an essential precursor to more formal, class-based learning. As an excellent example of how non-accredited training can be used to boost interest in, and preparedness for, further study in the VET system, Newcastle Community College facilitates a one-day module for their ACE learners in 'study skills', in how to be successful in studies for those who did not do well at school or who have not studied in a while.

B. Literacy and digital literacy

Foundation-level programs to familiarise students with the literacy, numeracy and digital literacy that they are going to need to succeed in life and in work form another core group of units delivered by colleges. Examples of such courses include 'basic computing', 'cooking with English for CALD mothers', 'English intermediate for CALD', 'reading and writing for people with mild intellectual disability' and 'interact with social and mixed media'. Language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) is often delivered, therefore, in a non-accredited format in tandem with other wrap-around training in areas such as cooking, computing or art.

C. Employability and soft skills

The need for employers to have students who present with a range of soft skills – from punctuality to adaptability and commonsense in a work situation – was clearly outlined. Many of the participants interviewed for this project asserted that employers, depending on the industry sector involved, did not specifically want or require accredited training. Many businesses preferred students who had learnt the basics in non-accredited programs and could be taught the rest of what they needed to work effectively by the employers themselves. As the quote below illustrates, while trainers and educators might believe that specific industry skills are important, many employers seem, rather, to emphasise the basics of good behaviour in a work context and, to these ends, non-accredited training aids greatly:

> *We have people from different businesses coming saying what their expectations are. Timeliness is one of the big things: people seem to have lost that 'I have to start at 7:30' or 'I have to start at 9:00' … not everyone … but a large percentage don't seem to have that timeliness … [and] you can't assume that someone has the commonsense [to know it].* **(CEO:3)**

Thus, many of the colleges facilitate non-accredited training in the core skills that students need for success in the workplace. These types of courses range, as examples, from 'dress for success' to 'personal grooming' and 'succeed with video interviewing'. Several colleges train students using the 'core skills for work' framework (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2013): a foundation-level course that was developed by the Department of Employment about a decade ago to foster employability skills such as how to build and manage a career, interact with others in the workplace and effectively communicate and use literacy skills in a workplace context. Other programs include 'basic safety in the workplace' and 'how to deal with difficult people'.

D. Preparation for specific industries and jobs

In tandem with developing employability skills, NSW ACE colleges use non-accredited training to develop skills for specific industries and industry sectors. Training is often delivered not only as a specific unit in a classroom context but also as part of an overall project to familiarise students with an industry sector and the way that people work in that sector. For example: 'introduction to the hotel sector' includes trips and worksite visits to hotels; 'mini hospitality and retail project' includes building a stall at the local food market – including sourcing the food, pricing it and interacting with clients; 'hosting an event' involves having students prepare for a large-scale lunch or dinner with table-setting, greeting guests and serving food; while 'introduction to barista' familiarises students with barista skills in a friendly and supportive environment.

E. Meeting the needs of mature age learners

While there are clearly a wide range of programs delivered in a non-accredited format, one area appears to be missing in current delivery. While more mature students (defined here as over 50) attend classes in the colleges and some colleges have designed courses (such as Central Coast's program for entrepreneurs) with mature age students in mind, the colleges, collectively, do not appear to have undertaken any extensive examination of the learning needs and preferences of the over-50s.

There is considerable evidence in the education research literature that the learning requirements of the over-50s are markedly different to younger participants (Maurer, 2001, 2007). For example, there could be a need to develop a 'second stage' career plan. This might include collating evidence of someone's skills and experience over and above a resume: for example, creating a portfolio of evidence for recognition of prior learning (RPL) that would speed up learning and engagement with VET. It could also include assessing realistic opportunities in the labour market for older workers: i.e., learning about which industry sectors are more likely to hire older employees. In other words, there are a range of learning possibilities that the colleges could provide to more mature learners that are not currently being facilitated. One industry leader, when asked about non-accredited training and the types of training that could work with more mature students, responded as follows:

> *Well obviously, [there's] the digital thing, but I've already said that, across all generations. I think the adaptability factor, possibly. I think that's an age thing. And maybe I'm allowed to say [one thing] because of the age that I am, that you do tend to have less ability to just jump from one thing to another, if you have to. I used to have no problem juggling a lot of projects all in one go and be clear of where everything was at. Now it's like 'Hang on, hang on, where's that?', 'What's going on with that?' And, 'oh no, please don't'. Do you know what I mean?*
> I know exactly what you mean.
> *I think things change so rapidly, I think for the older student, it is about being able to change, and respond to change, really quickly.*
> Is that [adaptability] teachable?
> *I don't know, again I learn by experiencing stuff, so I think if you drop people in it, they could.* **(IND:5)**

Other industry leaders commented as follows:

…the other challenge with that [more mature] cohort, is all around mindset … that they 'can't' do another job now because they have been doing a certain job their whole life. **(IND:1)**

They've gone from a 25-year job … [and are in] a very dynamic marketplace, which was never a part of their ecosystem. What we're seeking to do with them, then, is to build that growth mindset, and ability to pivot those life skills that they've currently got into other roles. The 'how to' part [of the job] is the bit they can do by themselves but it's the cynical part of themselves that is the biggest barrier to break down. **(IND:2)**

Table 1. A sample of the range of programs delivered through ACE non-accredited training

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TRENDS IN NON-ACCREDITED ACE TRAINING DELIVERY

PSYCHOLOGICAL PROGRAMS SUCH AS BOOSTING SELF-CONFIDENCE (FOR STUDY OR WORK)
1. **'Study skills':** a one-day program in how to be successful in your studies in the ACE program
2. **'Life skills for disability groups'**
3. **'Art therapy'**
4. **'Cooking therapy'**

WRAP-AROUND PROGRAMS IN LITERACY AND DIGITAL LITERACY
1. **'Interact with social media and mixed media'**
2. **'Reading and writing for people with mild intellectual disability'**
3. **'English intermediate for CALD'**
4. **'Cooking, with English, for CALD groups'**
5. **'Reading with young children, for CALD mothers'**
6. **'Basic computing'**

DEVELOPING EMPLOYABILITY FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING OF THE WORKFORCE
1. **'Dress for success':** understanding what interview-ready clothes and hairstyles look like
2. **'Personal grooming':** a one-day program in personal grooming/hair/make-up for interview readiness
3. **'Introduction to video-conferencing:** including video interviewing
4. **'Career pathways':** a one-day program of exploration around career
5. **'Employability skills from the core skills for work framework'**: a Foundation Skills Training (FSK) level program in soft skills originally developed by the Department of Employment
6. **'Basic safety in the workplace':** taught by delivering a Work Health and Safety (WHS) unit without the accreditation
7. **'Communication and teamwork'**
8. **'How to deal with difficult people'**
9. **'Be COVID safe'**
10. **'Driving licence' (knowledge component)**

PREPARATION FOR SPECIFIC INDUSTRIES AND JOBS
1. **'Introduction to the hotel sector':** including worksite visits to hotels
2. **'Entrepreneurial skills':** oriented towards mature-aged workers seeking to set up their own business
3. **'Mini hospitality and retail project':** building a stall at the local food market – including sourcing the food, pricing it and interacting with clients
4. **'Mini pop-up café project':** creating a simulated coffee shop environment within the college
5. **'Intro to barista'**: a one-day program to familiarise students with barista skills and give them confidence in coffee making, without accreditation
6. **'Prepare for work in childcare' for CALD groups:** familiarisation with the industry sector and English vocabulary used in this type of work

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SECTION 4 SUMMARY

There is an array of non-accredited initiatives taking place across the colleges and readers are referred to the individual websites of the various colleges for more information (see list of colleges in Appendix I), as well as to the portrayals of such programs in various reports produced by NSW ACE and others in recent years (see *Who's Doing What in CSO?* [Cooperative Learning Ltd, 2016], as well as *Engaging Young People in Education and Training* [Bowman, 2011]). To summarise the findings in this section:

1. Four main trends within non-accredited training can be identified. These are: programs with a psychological purpose, designed to boost students' self-confidence; language, literacy and numeracy (LLN); employability preparation, i.e., developing awareness of the workplace and the skills and attitudes required to successfully navigate it; and preparation for specific industries and jobs.

2. Courses are, generally speaking, precursors to almost any type of accredited program or can be mixed alongside almost any type of foundation-level accredited program, and are often mixed and matched by the colleges relative to local industry needs.

3. What could be construed as a weak point in the provision of non-accredited training at present is that not all colleges utilise all of the potential programs that could be delivered (see Table 1). While it is true that colleges are responding to local needs, it is also possibly equally true that there has been a lack of focus in developing a central cache of training material that would allow colleges the opportunity to deliver across this wide range of potential programs and to collectively tap into network-wide experience and resources.

4. While it is certainly the case that non-accredited training is used by the colleges as a springboard to further study, it is unclear which approach, among the many types of non-accredited training being utilised, is the most effective to stimulating further, higher-level study or even if there is a 'best' approach. Ascertaining this would require an extensive, college network-wide study of techniques, outcomes and trajectories that is beyond this project's capacity. Given the importance of this topic, this could well form a key focus for future research (see Appendix III).

5. There is a difference between having more mature students attend classes that have been developed generically, and proactively developing resources and support for mature age students. There is a great deal of evidence to suggest that mature age students (say, over 50), need different approaches in training and want to focus on different types of skills development (Adair & Temple, 2012; Chomik & Piggott, 2012). Generally speaking, we saw little in the way of proactive planning to meet the specific needs of this age cohort through non-accredited training and this could be a significant area for evaluation in future planning for the colleges.

5A. THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE: NSW ACE LEARNERS EVALUATE THE PROGRAM

One of the most important cohorts to listen to in relation to this research is the students themselves. Section 5A summarises both qualitative research, conducted with students during this project, as well as quantitative data related to NSW ACE training.[8] Additionally, in Section 5B, the case is put forward that not all student outcomes are tangible or quantifiable through the normal channels of evaluation (such as student opinion surveys, certification or credentialing). Rather, there is a raft of more intangible social outcomes that ensue from engagement in ACE programs, including non-accredited training, and this section seeks to outline some of these outcomes.

A. The students speak: Research program survey

Students were surveyed (see Appendix II), as part of this research project, to ascertain their opinions about the NSW ACE non-accredited program. Six questions were put to the students on a variety of topics. Questions 1 and 2 asked for a rating (from zero to five) on whether the course had been helpful and whether it aided the student in gaining confidence about finding work and interviewing. Questions 3, 4 and 5 asked for written feedback on a series of issues related to the courses, including whether any element of the course was unhelpful, whether the trainer was well-prepared and if the training material was adequate or could have been improved. Lastly, Question 6 asked the students to rate their interest in a range of topics that could be taught through ACE non-accredited training, but which are not widely delivered at present across the college network.

Question 1: Overall, how useful was this program on a scale of zero (not helpful) to five (extremely helpful)?
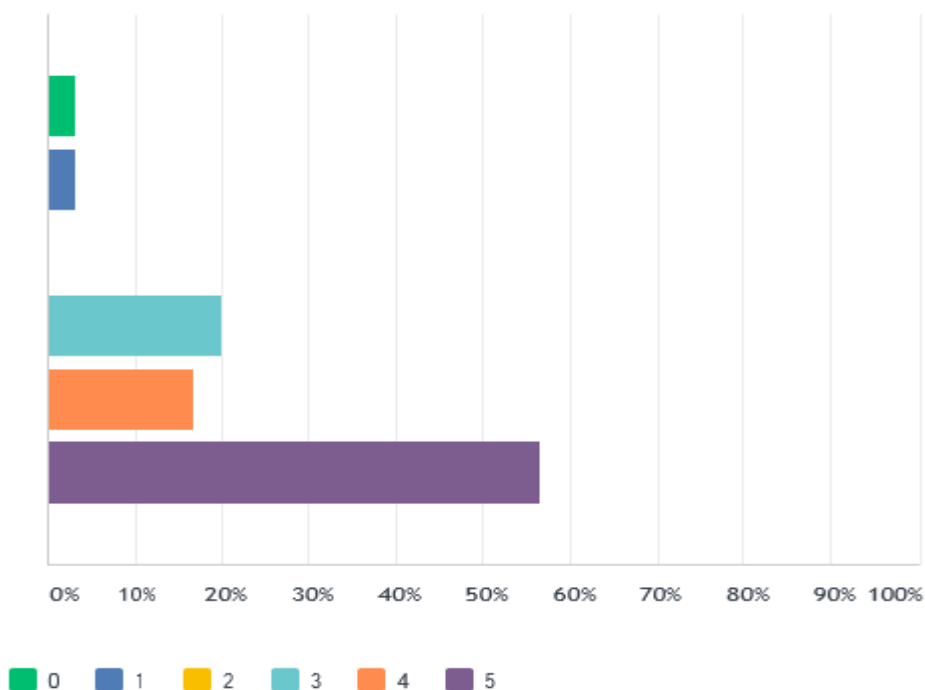
The response to Question 1 shows that the majority of students found the non-accredited programs they participated in either extremely helpful (56.7%) or helpful (16.67%). 20% of students found the courses 'somewhat' helpful and only 6.7% found them either of no or very little value.

Question 2: Do you think the program helped boost your confidence to search for work and interview with employers? Please answer from zero (no impact) to five (greatly increased my confidence).
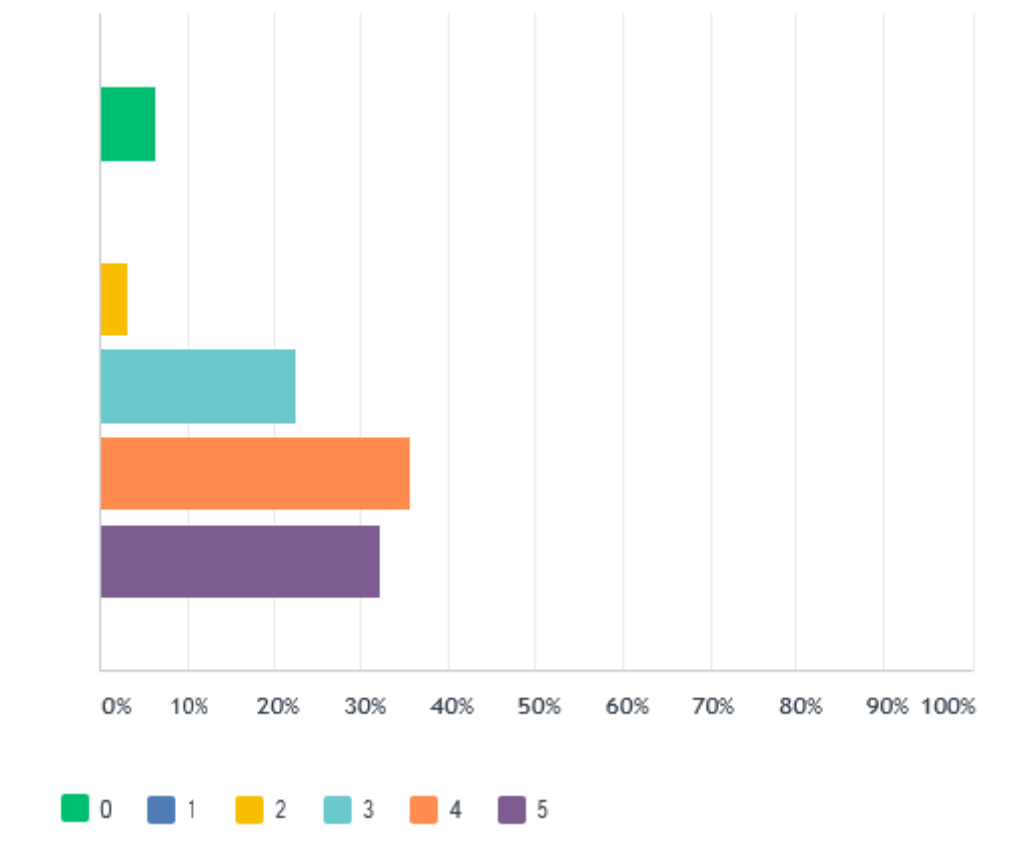
The response to this second question shows that a marked majority of students found the non-accredited programs either extremely helpful or helpful in boosting their confidence to search for work and engage with employers (67.74%), with a further 22.38% finding it somewhat helpful. Only 6.45% found the course of no value.

Question 3: Was there any element of this program that was not particularly helpful?

The majority (77%) of the respondents found everything in the course to be helpful, with 7% finding it neither helpful nor unhelpful. 16% of respondents found various things lacking in the course. These varied greatly (with comments on everything from the computer systems being used, to COVID cutting the course short).

Question 4: Do you think the trainer was well prepared to train this course?

Here, there was very little doubt that the trainers engaged in the programs were highly suitable. 87% of the students expressed satisfaction with the trainers with comments such as 'fabulous', 'well prepared and friendly' and 'conducted the course in a professional but friendly, easy-to-learn way'. 10% of students said that the trainer was somewhat prepared and only 3% said that they were not.

Question 5: Do you think the training material could have been improved?

With regard to the training material, opinions were more mixed. 55% of the students surveyed found the training material to be adequate and suitable. 45% thought it could be improved, with comments such as 'students got lost, hard to focus', 'needed more practical help using computers, not being read to from a book', 'an overhead projector would have been helpful so students can follow step by step', and 'needed more examples of resumes'.

As the survey was sent to hundreds of students across multiple courses, it is difficult to pin these responses down to specifics, but a negative response rate of nearly half indicates that there appear to be issues in general around training material and/or the resourcing of the programs in the classroom.

Question 6: Please tick next to the following topics if you feel that training in these topics could have helped you prepare for and find work more effectively and efficiently. Typically, they would be/could be one-day workshops.
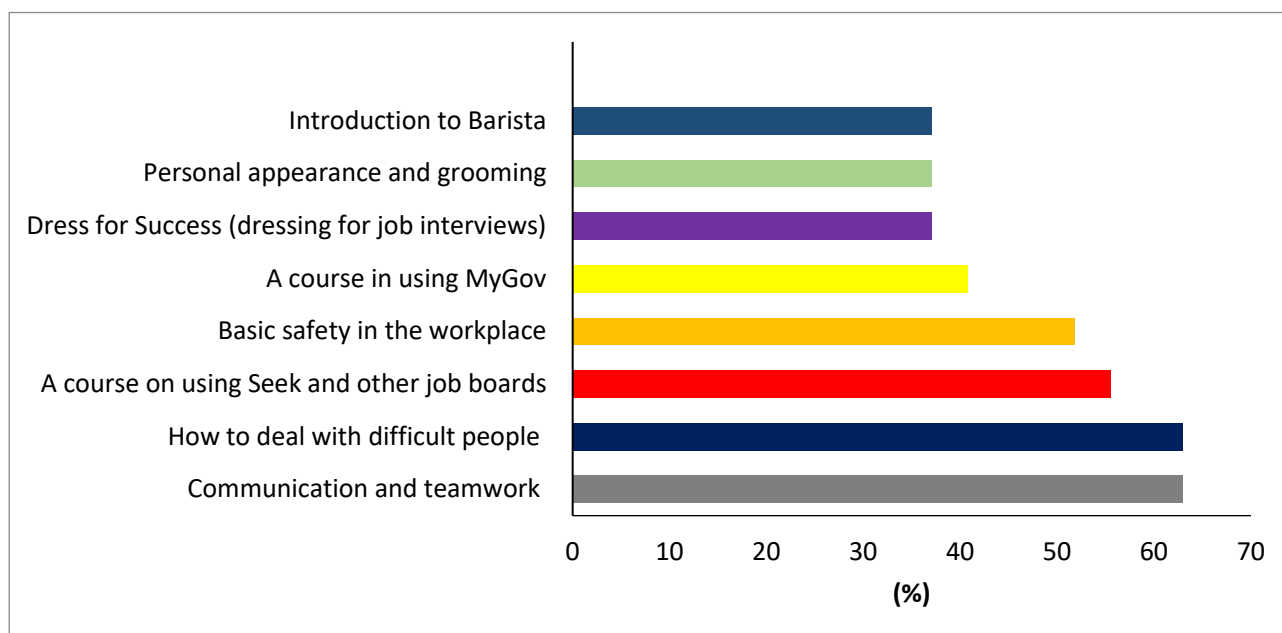
Responses to Question 6 would tend to indicate that the topics that are uppermost in students' minds relate to interpersonal communication (dealing with difficult people, teamwork [at 63%]), as well as finding work through job boards (at 56%). Courses that trainers and college leaders might consider of high value (such as personal appearance for interviews) are not such high priorities in the students' own minds (at 37%).

B. The students speak: What NCVER data reveals

Every year, students are surveyed by the colleges with regard to their feedback on the NSW ACE program and the non-accredited components of the program and this data is collected by the NCVER.[9] Using this data, we were able to ascertain what the students thought about the programs from various points of view and from perspectives that differed from those in the survey used in this project. In particular, we were able to compare students' opinions about non-accredited training with their experiences in accredited training. Four areas of evaluation were contrasted:

- **Relevance of training to job** (see Figure 5)
  No major differences between accredited and non-accredited training were noted, with only a modest variation in that non-accredited training was seen as somewhat more relevant to a future job by 24% of students, compared to 18% with accredited training.

- **Satisfaction with support services** (see Figure 6)
  Only minor differences were noted.

- **Satisfaction with teaching** (see Figure 7)
  There were few differences regarding overall satisfaction, with both forms of training evaluated as at high levels. There was minor variation with regard to dissatisfaction, with 8% of students dissatisfied with accredited training compared to just 1% dissatisfied with non-accredited delivery.

- **Satisfaction with training quality** (see Figure 8)
  Only very minor differences were noted between accredited and non-accredited training.

Figure 5. A comparison of non-accredited outcomes with VET outcomes in the community education sector in NSW: Relevance of training to job

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9   See https://www.ncver.edu.au/

Figure 6. A comparison of non-accredited outcomes with VET outcomes in the community education sector in NSW: Satisfaction with support services

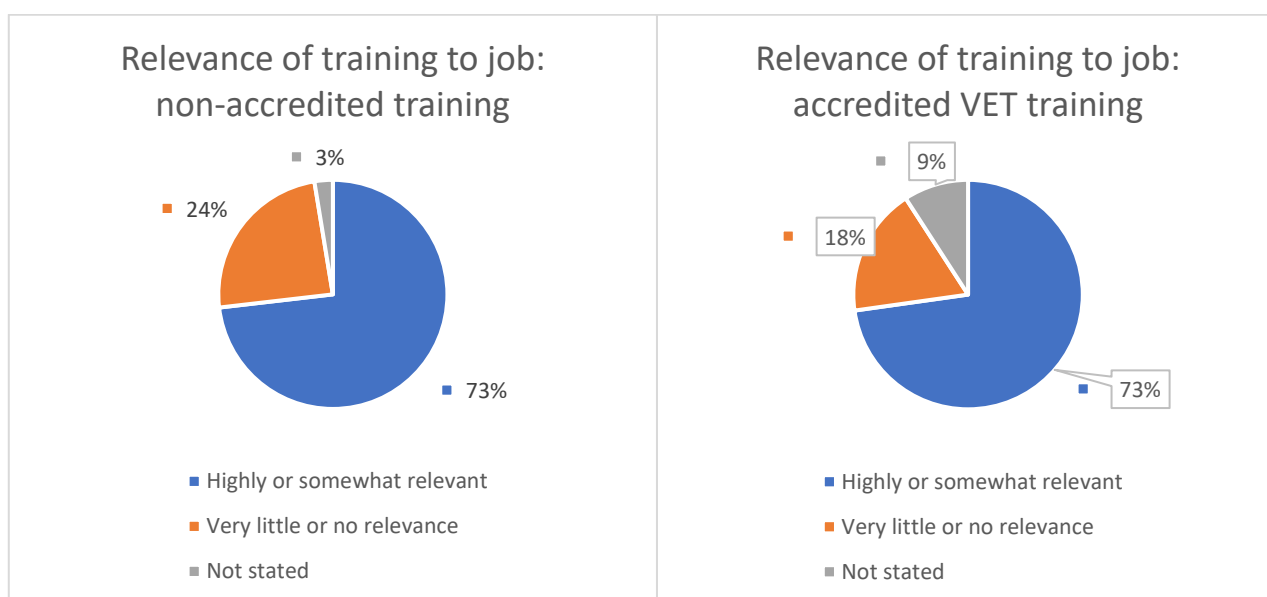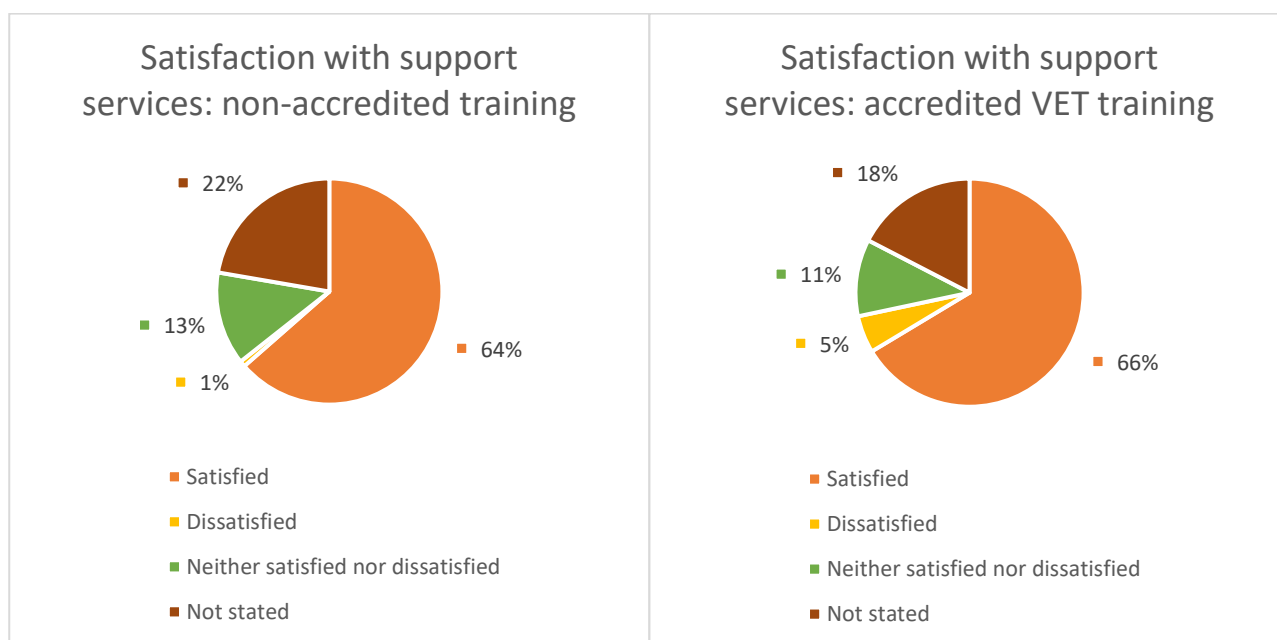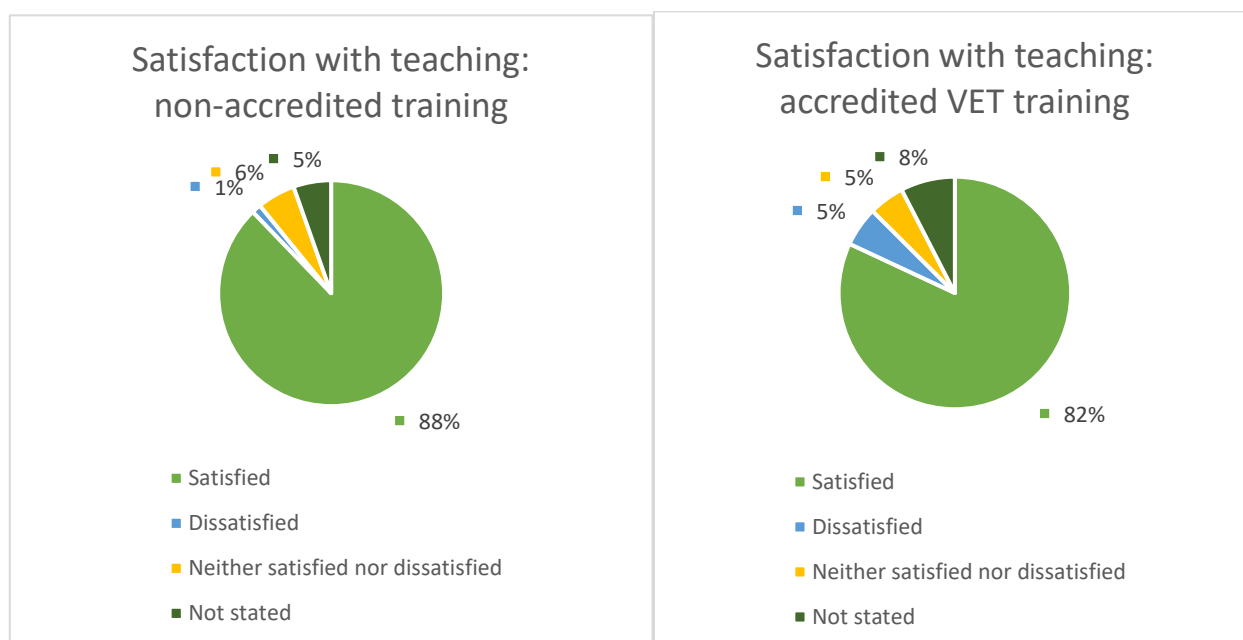**Figure 7.** A comparison of non-accredited outcomes with VET outcomes in the community education sector in NSW: Satisfaction with teaching
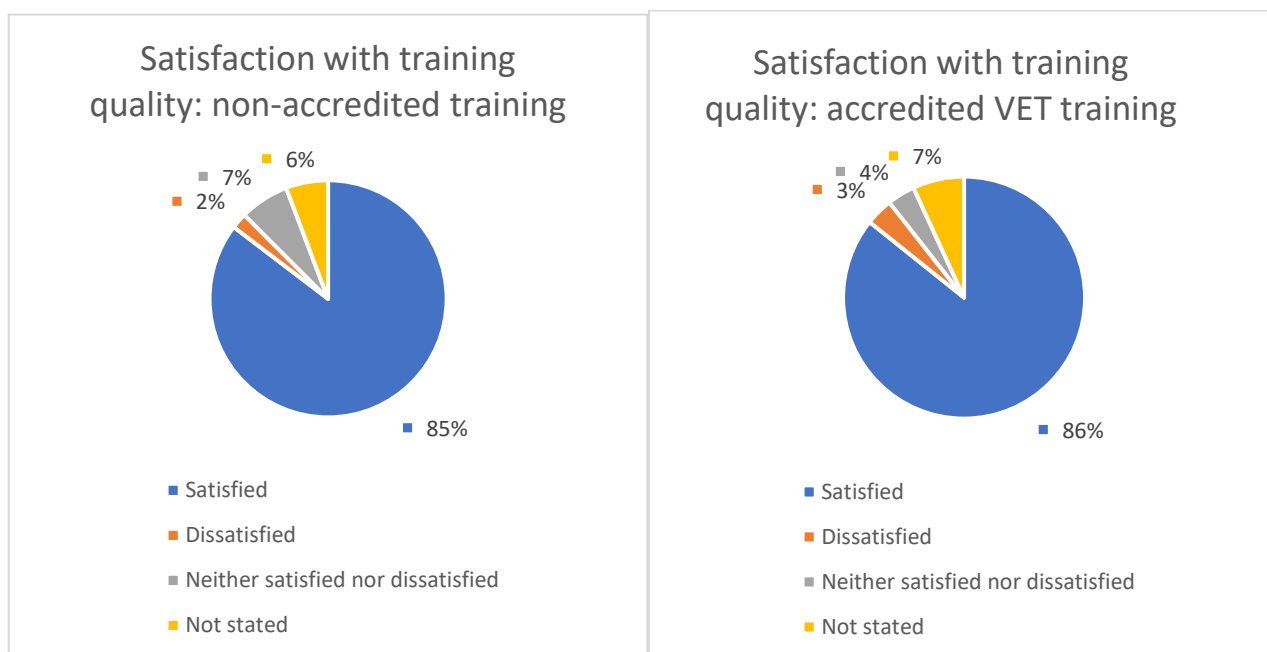
Figure 8. A comparison of non-accredited outcomes with VET outcomes in the community education sector in NSW: Satisfaction with training quality

(SOURCE FOR FIGURES 5–8: NCVER DATA SETS, 2020, see https://www.ncver.edu.au/)

5B. THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE: THE HIDDEN BENEFITS AND SOCIAL VALUE OF NON-ACCREDITED EDUCATION

A significant factor standing in the way of comprehensively evaluating students' experiences, and the outcomes emerging from those experiences, is that this very term – 'outcome' – can elude easy interpretation, particularly in relation to non-accredited learning. While accredited training outcomes are typically defined in very precise, data-driven terms (completion, certification, etc.), exactly what constitutes an outcome in learning when it is not going to be tested and certified? As one college leader pointed out, evaluating outcomes, in the context of non-accredited programs, can mean a variety of different things. For example, establishing what the student's expectations were coming into the program and establishing whether these were fulfilled: did the college deliver what the student thought he/she was going to experience; was the program meaningful; were there more intangible results in and around the student feeling more a part of their community?

Given these broader implications for the ACE program and its non-accredited components, this section explores and evaluates not only the range of 'unintended' but, nevertheless, beneficial consequences of students' participating in these types of classes, but, also, the consequences of *not* participating in such programs. In other words, there is a cost to society of the students *not* being trained in this manner and potentially burdening government and society with additional costs such as welfare payments, healthcare costs and other support costs.

A. A broader range of outcomes than just a qualification

Previous research has identified a range of benefits accruing from participation in ACE programs beyond the immediate advantage of acquiring new knowledge or a qualification. Birch et al., in 2003, found that ACE programs generated, through the strong community links of the providers, 'social capital' for the students: a means to engage with their community more deeply through better communication, volunteering, a stronger sense of being a part of a neighbourhood and an enhanced sense of wellbeing. Other benefits include intergenerational benefits (a higher educational achievement in one generation impacts on the trajectories, educationally, of the next generation) and familiarity with technology (which has a knock-on effect on all aspects of modern life), civic participation and health, with a stronger focus on remaining healthy reducing both the costs to society of unhealthy living and the spread of infectious disease (Allen Consulting Group, 2008). Other benefits can include a reduction in welfare payments and even, potentially, in the costs of policing and incarceration (Western Research Institute in collaboration with Western College, 2012).

A report for the Victorian Department of Education and Training (2019) into VIC ACE learning found, for example:

> *Improved health and wellbeing, increased social capital, efficient household management, higher rates of giving and volunteerism for the community, decreased crime and intergenerational benefits. Community-based learning provides 'bridging social capital'; that is, engagement with people socially, culturally and economically. (p. 2)*

Moreover, the social benefits of ACE participation have been estimated to be as large as, or larger than, the immediate market benefits such as engagement with the workforce (Allen Consulting Group, 2008; Birch et al., 2003). As two college leaders observed:

> There's a whole lot of social costs as well as costs to government because these people aren't coping. The cost to society … if you think about it … [for example] [if] you had 10 people, who never came to training, never made those social connections, who just sat at home and continued to draw their money from the government for disability support pensions. They will get worse because they're not getting the social interaction, their mental health issues are only going to get worse and worse. Which would then have an impact on their families and society as well. They are not participating in the community. So, if, out of all those 10, they came, they learnt interaction, they made social contact, and maybe made a new friend, maybe got out of the house more, did things, became part of the community. If out of those 10, you got maybe two or three that made it all the way through and got a job, they totally come off benefits, their families' lives change … then you've got a few in the middle … they might decide 'I can go back part time', which would reduce costs on the social service system. But out of all of that group, 50% may reduce the medication they may have to take, they may get more self-esteem. They may be able to go 'this is now what I want to do'. Or make plans to go and do something different now that they've got the courage to go out and do something. *(CEO:3)*

> Somewhere along the line you've got to move from the quasi-scientific experimental model, with defined variables and measurement, to the more open-ended, action research, qualitative models that understand the narrative history.
> How do I evaluate the non-accredited? It's not about evaluating for competence, because the purpose of the program is not competence, the purpose of the program is the endpoints. So, if you talk about retention rates … but even then, they're meaningless. I have the narrative of a woman who comes, enrols, leaves … but she has a back condition, she's a worker's comp person, she can't sit for a full program. From that narrow lens, she is an incompletion, a non-completion. We've in effect failed, it puts us below the line.
> What that system doesn't capture, is that she's had long conversations with people out in the office, [and] she is now in [a new course], the office skills set, which is three units of competence, in and around IT, that will reinforce and build her ability to get a job somewhere, in a way that she can.
> So, success or not success? How does a data-driven system capture that? Because it can't, because it doesn't have the narrative. The challenging thing is to say, 'dump it'. Let's talk about community, networks, narrative, lifelong, life-wide, employers who are looking for a person. *(CEO:1)*

B. Difficulties in measuring more intangible student outcomes

There are, however, considerable challenges involved in estimating such 'hidden' outcomes, particularly when it comes to assigning a dollar value to them. Firstly, whose definition of social value do you adhere to? Over 30 different models for measuring social impact have been put forward (see Liket & Maas, 2011), including such approaches as the 'public value scorecard', the 'OASIS' approach (ongoing assessment of social impacts) and the 'balanced scorecard' approach. Variations in measurement scales and methods typically come down to how attribution is accounted for, i.e., on whether it is reasonable to assume that, for example, a NSW ACE course really did evoke a particular change in an individual or whether it was something else (or both) – as well as on how long you reasonably assume that the impact lasts, because, as time passes, it is harder and harder to attribute social impact to one specific event. Moreover, impact is likely to be felt differently according to age, gender, location and other demographic influences, not to mention differences in subjective definitions of terms such as 'wellbeing' and 'success'.

C. The wellbeing valuation approach: The secondary impacts of training on society

Given the NSW ACE program's strong emphasis on education, community and individual wellbeing, for the purposes of this research project, the approach of the Australian Social Value Bank (ASVB)[10] has been selected out of the many possible approaches, based on its track record of working with Australian-based projects in areas such as education, employment, health and community. The ASVB calculation methods use best-practice approaches used by OECD countries and the Australian government's cost-benefit analysis approach (Office of Best Practice Regulation, 2020). The ASVB defines social value as "the quantification of the relative importance that people place on the changes they experience in their lives; some, but not all of this value is captured in market prices" (Fujiwara, 2021, p. 2).

The ASVB uses cost-benefit analysis to measure the impact of a social intervention on subjective improvements in individual wellbeing. However, just as importantly, it measures the secondary value to society of such outcomes, through, for example, reductions in government expenditure (on, for example, the police, incarceration or dealing with mental health issues) and increases in tax revenues (through, for example, increases in taxable incomes or expenditure on goods and services through GST). It calculates these savings by using information gathered from Australian data from local or national government sources, as well as from academic papers or published research from the non-government organisation sector.

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[10] See https://asvb.com.au/

Let's consider three examples using the ASVB approach[11] and typical programs that might take place within the ACE framework:

EXAMPLE 1

An entry-level program for 10 students in a metropolitan location for non-English speakers.

Assumptions

- All students complete the program.

- Students start with almost no knowledge of English and come out of the course with a lower-intermediate level of ability sufficient to start shopping, transacting online and undertaking a job with limited exposure to spoken English.

- Program consists of three non-accredited units and two accredited units.

- Program takes place in a capital city with learners aged 26–64.

- Government funding accounts for $21,000 of costs related to the program.

- Benefits are assumed, in this example, to last for up to 12 months, at which point it is too complex to ascertain whether ongoing benefits accrued from the course or from other factors.

Outcomes

Using the algorithms of the ASVB, the net benefits of the program are calculated to be $22,739. This represents a benefit to cost ratio of 1.84 or, in other words, the overall social value created by the course is almost twice the actual cost. The net benefit per participant is $2,274.

EXAMPLE 2

A non-accredited training program for 12 young students in a regional location undertaking three units of studies in basic computing.

Assumptions

- All students complete the program.

- Program takes place in a non-metropolitan region with learners aged 16–25.

- Government funding accounts for $15,120 of costs related to the program.

- Benefits are assumed, in this example, to last for up to 12 months.

- The program enhances existing skills in computing and encourages the students to either continue in their studies and/or utilise computers more frequently for study, work and social interaction.

Outcomes

Given the relatively high values for social impact accruing to digital skills in a regional location, the net benefits of the program are $51,264 or well over three times the investment by the government in the program. This represents a benefit cost ratio of 3.62. The net benefit per participant is $4,272.

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[11] The values used in these calculations, provided by the ASVB, are owned by Alliance Social Enterprises (www.asvb.com.au). They have been produced by Simetrica, using best practice methodology for policy evaluation. These values are used under Licence #q5dA68 with expiry date 10/07/2021.

EXAMPLE 3

A community college network-wide mixed training program for 1,000 students from varied age groups undertaking six units of studies in basic computing and English language development. Four units are non-accredited and two are accredited.

Assumptions

- All students complete the program

- Program takes place in both regional and metropolitan locations (with a distribution of 60% of students in a regional location and 40% in a metropolitan location)

- Government funding accounts for $2,520,000 of costs related to the program. However, final costs are taken to be $3,265,920, which includes opportunity cost and optimism bias, e.g., because of such factors as network-wide coordination across 33 colleges, additional marketing and admin costs.

- Benefits are assumed, in this example, to last for up to 12 months.

- The program enhances existing skills in computing and in English and encourages the students to continue in their studies and/or utilise computers more frequently for study, work and social interaction and/or pursue employment with renewed vigour.

Outcomes

Given the multiple aims of the program and its additional complexity, as well as the network-wide impact across both metropolitan and regional areas, the net benefits of the program amount to $9,534,570 (see Figure 9) or almost four times the investment in the program by government. This represents a benefit–cost ratio of 3.92. The net benefit per participant is $9,535.

Figure 9. Net social impact of a college network-wide program, calculated using ASVB data

These figures show that not only do the NSW ACE programs and their non-accredited components have immediate impacts on students' education, they have ramifications across the students' lives, including the acquisition of employment, engagement with community and the ability, with increased income levels, to participate more fully in the economy and civic life. These hidden benefits continue to ripple out into the community in terms of reduced mental health support costs, a reduction in policing and incarceration costs, and even potential decreases in domestic violence and healthcare expenses. As the examples show, the impacts vary with the type of course, location and initial investment, but it is reasonable to assume, based on these examples, that hidden return on investment (ROI) can be in the range of 1.5 to 3.5 times the initial government investment in the program.

SECTION 5A AND 5B SUMMARY

1. Students surveyed for this research project predominantly voted the non-accredited programs as helpful, and as enhancing their confidence to search for work and interview with prospective employers. The trainers within the program received praise and admiration. The only area where there appears to be the need for improvement is in relation to the training material, with nearly half the students believing that it could be improved.

2. Courses that the students themselves would like to see instituted in non-accredited formats largely revolved around using job boards and interpersonal relationships within the workplace. In a comparison, using NCVER data, of non-accredited to accredited training within the ACE sector, there were few differences at all, in terms of student perceptions, between the two modes of training. There was a modest difference in favour of non-accredited training as being relevant to a future job and a slightly higher overall rating of satisfaction with non-accredited training over accredited. Differences were, however, quite marginal.

3. NSW community colleges, at present, do not focus on the added or hidden benefits that accrue from ACE training – in whatever format it is delivered – and do not, at present, focus on the dollar value that ensues from these more intangible benefits or the knock-on effect of undertaking a course. These effects are measurable, and a monetary value can be assigned. This value varies with cohort, age, location and course undertaken. Examples above show that the hidden value of a course can be up to almost four times the investment by the government in the program. Courses in digital skills in regional areas, for example, can accrue high levels of additional benefits across all aspects of students' lives.

6. EMPLOYABILITY: TACKLING THE MANY BARRIERS TO SUSTAINABLE WORK AND CAREERS

To better understand industry's needs and wants in relation to hiring, and what types of training were of most relevance in aiding community college students gain employment, we approached and interviewed senior staff in support agencies that provided wrap-around services to students such as Group Training Organisations (GTOs),[12] Jobactive and Disability Employment Services (DES) organisations. Interviewing executives with this type of background served two purposes. First, they had considerable insight into the hiring needs of hundreds of different types of companies across multiple industry sectors. Second, they predominantly dealt with unemployed cohorts – jobseekers – and, through this work, had encountered the community colleges and worked with students from the NSW ACE programs. This phase of the research highlighted the many barriers and challenges facing the students in their search to find employment and the need, recognised by these executives, for the type of soft skills development that non-accredited training focuses on.

A.   The need to gain employment versus an unpreparedness for work

Far and away the most pronounced theme, when speaking to industry executives, was the inconsistency between, on the one hand, government initiatives, which predominantly focus on people gaining employment or undertaking training as soon as possible, and on the other hand, the NSW ACE students themselves who, in many instances, are not actually ready to work (or even train formally for work). They gave many examples of an array of barriers preventing disadvantaged groups from even believing that they could enter training or employment. Moreover, they pointed out that when someone who is not ready to enter work is forced to enter it, the result is non-sustainable employment.

> *The people [that we assist to gain employment] don't actually see any positivity in their life, nor do they see that they're good at anything. They don't know enough about appearance, health, what a good meal looks like.*
> Wouldn't they learn that from TV?
> *No, they don't watch TV. They have not been in the socio-economic sphere where that information is available, or, if they have watched it, they don't think it applies to them. They can't afford to eat properly. They can't afford to present themselves correctly, so they don't understand what work clothes look like. I don't believe that's been taught in school these days either, and I think it's a massive missing component. (IND:1)*
>
> *[So], what we did identify in our jobseekers was that there was no resilience … and where we found these statistics was our ability to get jobseekers jobs … but for them to not last more than three months. We were finding that they were [initially] on a really big high: they loved the job, they loved the money … but … all of a sudden, they couldn't sustain if for any long period of time. We were getting them the job but, what we hadn't done, was give them the tools for the different things that would come up in a workplace that they had never dealt with before.*
> So, dealing with difficult people in the workplace, for example, they'd just crumble?
> *Yes. (IND:1)*

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[12]   GTOs are focused on developing trainees and apprentices. See https://www.training.nsw.gov.au/gto/index.html

IND:2 reinforced this theme, pointing out that in his experience only about 33% of the people that he deals with are actually ready to work. Of the rest, around 15% are not really sure what they want to do and the remaining approximately 50% still need considerable support before they are ready to undertake either training or employment because of the barriers that stand in their way. These barriers can range from the sheer amount of effort and sustained self-confidence that may be involved in finding work (Côté et al., 2006; Moynihan et al., 2003) to a hiring arena where they could face discrimination (whether based on ethnicity, gender, disability or age) or digital skills challenges (Green et al., 2013).

Two industry leaders described the situations jobseekers may face as follows:

Only 32% of our trainees and apprentices actually complete [their qualification] in NSW at the moment. Why is that?

I just think … what I'm seeing … I don't necessarily think parents prepare their kids to be work-ready. And schools are back in the traditional paradigm of education – reading, writing and arithmetic – I don't think there's this concept of 'you've got to prepare them for life … and for work'. I call that the 'lifecycle' – that's my phrase.

What's stopping the 68% who don't complete? What are the top three things?

In my experience, it's drugs, mental illness/anxiety and no work ethic – like not wanting to come to work, being bored, not wanting to wake up early and work every day.

So, the three things you've just mentioned have got nothing to do with the job itself?

No.

Would it not make more sense then, at the start, to have a structured program around what's involved with work and tell them what a work ethic means?

We try to. That's what we do in our induction. In terms of drugs and alcohol, we do a test … there is no tolerance for that. In terms of mental health, we do a questionnaire. Every single [teen] that comes through here ticks that they have mental health and anxiety issues.

Seriously?

I'm serious, it's just amazing. So … we talk about how you can't be perfect, you have to make mistakes – that's how you learn – that's how you develop problem-solving skills. No one is perfect. You have to focus on resolving things, not the problem itself. It's not being taught at home, Jim! It's too hard for parents, clearly, but those are skills the parents should be teaching, not us … loyalty, work ethic, punctuality, reliability, maturity, decision making, initiative, compromise … just off the top of my head. I don't see those skills articulated as positive qualities in the education system … those are words and qualities that we don't address in society generally.

I would call the training system that we need a 'lifecycle' – and it [should] start way back in school. These qualities have to be celebrated, articulated, recognised, because [young people] are not clearly getting those values shown, demonstrated, supported [and] encouraged.

So, what about the employers, what are they looking for?

Generally speaking, most employers … want someone who's going to come to work every day, who's not going to be on their mobile phone every second of the day, who's going to do a 'good day's work for a good day's pay', who's going to learn, who's not going to argue back and respect that they're learning something, not be a know-it-all. Generally, we have some good kids out there for sure, but it's just surprising to me, the prevalence of those [negative] things that I've just said. (IND:3)

I'd like to ask you what employers are looking for over and above a technical skill.

A lot of them are looking for resilience, as a person, and in the role. In the program we've recently run, we had some mentors or trainers come in and work on confidence and resilience skills with those participants. The trainer has come from a very disadvantaged background herself, so tells her story. She came from a domestic violence background, so just her sharing that story opens up with those participants that it's okay that they've got barriers in their lives as well. It obviously provides them with a safe environment for them to share what their barriers are or their story.

So, as a collective, both with the training support from the college and our employment and mentor consultants, we can then work together and go 'Well how can we then overcome those barriers? What will make you feel safe, to feel like you can leave home every day to get to work?'. Because at the end of the day, if you can't overcome that barrier, realistically, you probably won't ever be suitable for an apprenticeship or traineeship.

I definitely think resilience is a big one. If a trainee or an apprentice had a bad day and they go 'oh my god I'm not going in tomorrow' ... so it's that resilience. I think confidence is another big one that's up there. Especially when we're talking about that cohort that come from a disadvantaged background. Most of them have no belief in themselves or think that they're [not] worthy of the opportunity. I think building those self-confidence skills is definitely something that people need. (IND:4)

So, the barriers that community college students may face can encompass mental health issues and deep-seated beliefs that they could not handle work, not just in terms of technical skills, but from the point of view of dealing with the many challenges that come from engaging with others in a workplace environment. And these various barriers can agglomerate, hampering correct decision making and engagement with meaningful, longer-term employment. As Figure 10 illustrates, only 9% of longer-term unemployed people, for example, have no barriers at all to acquiring work, while 63% have two or more major barriers (OECD, 2017).

Given these obstacles, the industry leaders we talked to all used some form of psychometric evaluation to pre-assess participants they were considering engaging with prior to undertaking any form of training or employment. This may be a key approach that the colleges, in contrast, are missing out on at present: extensive, objective, pre-course psychometric evaluation of students to ascertain if they are actually ready to engage in vocational training and, if not, to steer them towards confidence-building training such as the non-accredited programs.
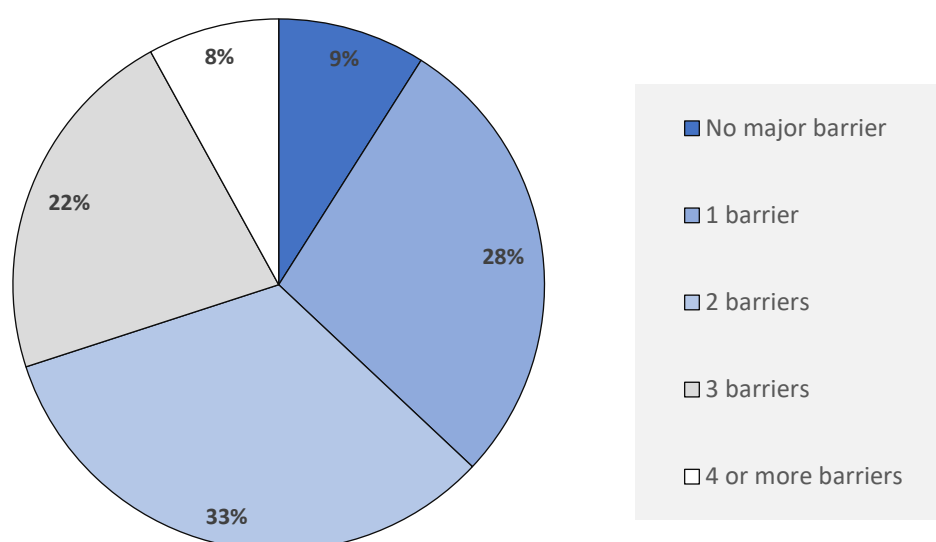

Figure 10. Number of simultaneous employment barriers for Australians with no or weak labour market attachment (as a percent of the target population), 2014 (SOURCE: OECD, 2017)

B. Structural barriers to employment

Not only do the majority of NSW ACE students seeking employment have to deal with internal barriers to employment, but they must also face a rapidly changing working arena where corporations often appear to have the upper hand. Firstly, our students must compete for an ever-dwindling supply of full-time work, making it harder to remain employable and succeed, particularly over the longer term (Forrier & Sels, 2003; Forrier et al., 2009; Guilbert et al., 2016). Forty years ago, for example, 75% of jobs were full time. This was the era of the 'golden watch' or the 'golden handshake', with our parents and grandparents often working decades with one employer and transitioning to a pleasant retirement. Today, in comparison, just 45% of jobs are full time (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2015), and this number is dwindling further as larger corporations hire through short-term project or contractual-based hiring arrangements amid a 'gig economy'.[13] These types of hiring arrangement offer little in the way of ongoing professional development or longer-term job security.

Secondly, there are far more unemployed – and *under*employed – people than official figures would suggest, meaning a higher degree of competitiveness in the pursuit of jobs – and particularly of what full-time employment there is available. Arriving at precise numbers in relation to unemployment is an exceptionally complex exercise. Official unemployment figures only measure those who have registered at Centrelink as working, and often lag behind the real state of the jobs market (Hanrahan, 2020; Wright, 2020). Official figures do not include those who do not qualify for benefits but who are, nevertheless, unemployed, typically because, as a couple with their partner, they earn more than the minimum considered to be the benchmark for accessing Centrelink support (see Roy Morgan Market Research Inc., 2020); nor do they measure those who are unemployed but receiving benefits other than the Newstart unemployment allowance (such as the disability pension or single parents payments within programs such as ParentsNext).[14] Taking these other cohorts into account, real unemployment in Australia, while hard to pinpoint precisely, typically trends at around 16–18%. Moreover, these numbers still do not encompass underemployment, which usually trends at around an additional 9–10% (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2020). In all, this equates to a startling reality wherein approximately one-quarter of our working population is either unemployed or struggling to find enough work.

C. Training and employers' hiring decisions

Given these many challenges, the industry executives interviewed emphasised that, in many instances, employers increasingly value the type of non-accredited, informal skills being highlighted in this report. Business owners are often happy to have students who have learned soft skills about life, self-management and the basics of their industry sector without necessarily having a formal qualification. Employers, knowing that their new employee has these basic life skills, will then frequently train the students in their own company culture and specific customer needs. As the interviewees put it:

> *I still see life skills as being [the] fundamental foundation blocks to vocational. Because, if you can't talk to someone, or work with someone, or work out how to work with someone who may not have the same views as you … you're screwed.* **(CEO:3)**

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[13] The 'gig economy' refers largely to employment opportunities that are contract-based or casual (see Holtz-Eakin et al., Manyika et al., 2015).

[14] See https://www.servicesaustralia.gov.au/individuals/services/centrelink/parentsnext

In our industry consultation with hospitality, we certainly identified that cafés and bars etc. want people to know the basics of coffee making, but they want to be able to teach them their own way of doing [things]. We also identified that the assessment needs for both of those units, the coffee, and the sandwiches one, ... the assessment requirements were so intense, that the students just find it overwhelming.

What they [the students] want is to be able to confidently go into a café and say, 'I can use a machine, I can make a latte, I can make a cappuccino': the real basics. And then the cafés themselves have said to us that they would prefer to train them further. What they want [the students] to have is the basic knowledge, to have them interact with the customers and do financial transactions and be really good on those. They [the cafés] want to teach them in their own style. (VET MGR:3)

Our jobseekers probably complete more non-accredited training than accredited. We do things like resilience training, things to do with mental health, interview preparation, resume writing, mock interviews. [These subjects] have nothing to do with a qualification but this is exactly what we've been talking about: what an employer needs is someone that is reliable and resilient, that whatever is thrown at them, they can handle it. They just want someone who is going to turn up and they can cope with whatever the day brings. Employers have gotten to the point where they're not asking for much more than that, because they don't think they can [actually] get much more than that! (IND:1)

SECTION 6 SUMMARY

1. NSW community college students frequently face a range of internal, psychological barriers and/or external structural obstacles, including a shifting, even daunting, labour market, that can prevent or hamper a smooth entry into the workforce.

2. Foremost among their internal barriers are (any of): an unpreparedness or unreadiness to study or work; lack of resilience and adaptability; lack of familiarity with workplace norms as well as lack of self-belief. These barriers can agglomerate, feeding into each other, deepening the gulf between the student's current state of mind and a study-ready or work-ready orientation. To counter this trend, we would suggest the need, quite apart from VET training, to develop soft skills and attributes: for example, to build resilience and to find ways to help people deal with stress and learn how to overcome failure, build positivity and have a growth mindset.

3. Given these potential obstacles, there appears to be a great need, from the training provider point of view, to test participants psychometrically prior to any type of formal training to ascertain whether they are truly ready to study (or work), or if the barriers mentioned above form too great an obstacle, preventing positive forward movement. The GTO and Jobactive support networks, for example, are increasingly using psychometric testing to help them assess participants' state of mind and whether they are actually ready for study or work; as yet, however, this does not appear to be an approach that NSW community colleges are utilising.

4. Employers are increasingly recognising and valuing soft skills and attributes and, in some instances, can make their hiring decisions just as readily on whether a NSW ACE student demonstrates these qualities as much as they can on whether he/she has formal qualifications.

7. KEY FINDINGS AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR NSW ACE PRACTICE

Past research reports that have investigated the NSW ACE program have recommended a range of measures be instituted in order to continuously improve delivery (see Bowman, 2011, 2015). These have largely focused on eligibility criteria, opportunities for further study and funding levels. While the focus of these previous studies has been the NSW ACE program as a whole, this current study has focused on non-accredited training and, in particular, the challenges facing our students as they pathway to further study or employment.

Key findings of this current study are outlined below as a conclusion to this research, with subsequent recommendations (see Table 2). It is hoped that the recommendations might enable college leaders and ACE non-accredited training practitioners to better assist our students to meet the variety of immediate challenges they face, better synchronise non-accredited with accredited training and further raise the value of non-accredited training, both as a stand-alone form of education, as a pathway to further study, as a means to enhance employment outcomes and as a key influence on social impact within students' communities. It is also hoped that these findings might better aid the colleges and the NSW government in quantifying the benefits of non-accredited delivery for specific disadvantaged sectors of the community, as well as in planning its future utilisation. Lastly, students themselves may hopefully benefit by gaining more resilience, greater awareness and insight.

KEY FINDING 1: Objectives and utilisation

Community colleges, along with many other support providers, are feeling pressure to pathway participants back to work. Nevertheless, even with the generous subsidies available through Smart and Skilled (see footnote 3), and, even with high-quality training and excellent resources, non-completion rates for training remain concerningly high across the VET sector. In many instances, this is less about the quality or financial cost of training than it is about the internal barriers that students face when beginning to tackle study or work. Clearly, a growing array of psychological barriers can prevent a significant number of ACE students from successfully completing VET training (or acquiring sustainable employment). Colleges may not be fully aware of the extent and range of these issues.

A critical point is, as several interviewees and respondents in this research pointed out, evaluating whether a student is genuinely interested in study or employment – or even feels the need to move away from social benefits and take a place in the workforce – is frustratingly difficult at times. As one industry participant pointed out, a significant percentage of participants can be 'non-authentic': meaning, they are saying, verbally, that they want to engage in training and find work (because that is what they believe they should be saying) whereas, in reality, they simply do not know what they want or possibly want to remain on welfare benefits.

> **RECOMMENDATIONS**
> That the community colleges consider collectively integrating the latest tools for pre-assessing potential students' level of genuine commitment to studying or to finding employment.

A range of diagnostic tools exist that can evaluate real levels of student commitment (whether to training or employment), and it would be in the colleges' best interests to investigate and evaluate them. These evaluation tools can, typically, be seamlessly integrated with non-accredited training. We could mention here

the Employment Readiness Scale being utilised by Macquarie Community College.[15] Similar systems include Esher House's cognitive behavioural therapy training and measurement systems,[16] and the testing suites of Via Character.[17] Network-wide use of such tools would not only potentially lower dropouts from training but could, in most instances, be integrated into non-accredited training programs aimed at developing a more positive orientation to life and work.

KEY FINDING 2: Effectiveness and outcomes; demographic trends

There appears to be less collective development and sharing of resources among the colleges than there optimally could be, given that the colleges share similar challenges. At present, non-accredited programs are frequently developed in isolation and delivered with only occasional communication about resources and intent across the college network. This is not universally the case, and there have been several collaborative efforts among some colleges to develop resources that need to be acknowledged here. We also need to take into account that resources may need to be developed organically, in response to local demand, as well as the many barriers that inevitably prevent busy staff, separated by distance and lacking time and financial resources, from collaborating. Nevertheless, it is clear that the colleges would greatly benefit from an ongoing, collective approach to developing resources or, alternatively (and perhaps preferably), a central point of resource development that could be shared collectively. With easy access to shared resources the colleges could have a wide variety of material to map to student demand.

We also note that a significant proportion of students are over 35 and often in the middle of their careers; yet, there doesn't appear to have been a collective attempt by the colleges to tailor products to suit the needs of this demographic.

> **RECOMMENDATIONS**
> There appears to be a need to boost a wide spectrum of non-accredited resource development. We recommend that the colleges seek out ways to collaboratively develop a suite of non-accredited resources for use across the ACE network (see Appendix III). Resource development should not be limited to younger students entering their first job but, rather, be inclusive of more mature students in the middle of their working life.

Colleges should investigate the shared development of a series of centralised training resources (perhaps along the lines of resources that are already being used, as tabulated in Table 1, but not collectively shared) that could be adapted across the various communities the colleges serve. The development of these resources would need to incorporate dialogue within the college network, with students and communities, as well as incorporate trainer and assessor feedback.

It may also be helpful to scaffold this learning material in such a way that the students themselves can see a logical progression in their studies and see how each non-accredited unit leads to further study in an accredited context. At the same time, however, the training material should also avoid the fate of being what one respondent called 'overly engineered': in other words, looking more and more like an accredited unit (lengthy, leading questions rather than explorative ones, etc.).

As an example, of particular note would be a non-accredited unit in how to study, such as that being utilised by Newcastle Community College. This is an ideal way for students who often struggled in the school system, to gain confidence and knowledge about what they are truly interested in and how far they might be able to travel in the VET system, and to learn the benefits of VET and how they can synchronise what they are

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[15]   See https://ersscale.com/
[16]   See https://esherhouse.org/about/
[17]   See https://www.viacharacter.org/

currently studying with a journey forward through the VET structure. Unfortunately, no comprehensive, network-wide, non-accredited program appears to exist among the colleges with regard to this topic at present.

The development of resources should not be limited to younger students seeking their first job; rather, it should be inclusive of more mature students (say, over 35, and particularly over 50) who also require 'refresher'-type programs in many aspects of job-hunting as well as, in some instances, re-skilling for new careers.

KEY FINDING 3: Effectiveness and outcomes; valuing social impact

While many of the non-accredited programs that the colleges deliver can have a profound effect on students' wellbeing and, at the same time, have decisive ramifications across their communities, these positive impacts have, historically, been poorly reported on and largely left unacknowledged.

With just a few exceptions, there has been little data produced, systematically and over the longer term, that maps how students themselves feel, in detail, about the impact of non-accredited courses on their mental health and overall wellbeing, separate from their educational achievement. Noteworthy exceptions are Nepean[18] and Central Coast[19] Community Colleges, that have instituted innovative tests with regard to measuring students' pre- and post-course levels of positivity and overall mental health. Nor has there been a concerted effort to map out the social impact of these types of courses. The immediate and ongoing social impact of the ACE program and its non-accredited components is an important, and complex, question that has not been completely answered in an initial report such as this and will require an ongoing, coordinated effort across several years.

> **RECOMMENDATIONS**
> There is a need to explore the array of benefits that the ACE program can have beyond merely learning outcomes. The colleges should institute more robust evaluations on the impact of ACE programs on overall student wellbeing via an approach to ACE 'outcomes' that places a greater emphasis on a broad, return-on-investment (ROI) analysis approach.

We recommend that the colleges, collectively, consider longer-term studies using, for example, the ASVB approach depicted in this report, to evoke the outcomes of programs that go beyond a certificate or an educational outcome. Through these reflective and evaluative mediums, an over-arching viewpoint could be developed that would provide a comprehensive overview of the NSW ACE program, rather than solely a vocational overview.

There are other ways of approaching this challenge. One would be along the lines recommended by Cooperative Learning Ltd (2013), involving post-program monitoring. Readers are also referred to examples such as those in the footnotes (see 18 and 19). Whatever the chosen medium, this approach should be explored collectively by the colleges, while taking, in liaison with government, a far more proactive approach to tabulating the more 'invisible' or 'unintended' consequences that training can evoke, particularly around, for example, community connectedness, reductions in crime, improvements in health or the overall enhancement of family cohesiveness.

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[18] Nepean Community College has worked with Basic Psychological Index evaluation.
[19] Central Coast Community College has instituted pre- and post-course evaluation of students using the K10 testing suite (see https://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/k10.pdf).

KEY FINDING 4: Quality standards in relation to non-accredited training

This report has emphasised the importance of learning soft skills or attributes. The development of these types of skills "is likely to become a key part of the agenda of educational providers as well as employers over the coming decades" (Hajkowicz et al., 2016, p. 51). Indeed, the Department of Employment (2016) reports that employers experience difficulty filling up to a quarter of entry-level positions due to lack of such soft skills, while Deloitte Access Economics (2017) estimates that up to two-thirds of jobs will be soft-skills intensive by 2030 and that this type of role will grow 2.5 time faster than other jobs (yet less than 1% of Australians report having any kind of soft skill on their LinkedIn profile).[20]

To meet this need, the university sector, in the last 25 years, has increasingly emphasised educating their graduates in a range of what has been termed 'employability skills' (see Bennett et al., 2017; Knight & Yorke, 2002; Pool & Sewell, 2007) and then credentialling their achievement. As a result, most universities now offer a range of (non-accredited) training that sits alongside students' mainstream learning, focusing on such areas as lifelong career development, digital skills,[21] emotional intelligence, resilience, resourcefulness, self-reflection and self-esteem. These programs, however, are largely limited to the university sector. In comparison, the VET sector, since the Mayer report (1992), has tended to emphasise the idea that integrating LLN, communication, problem solving, teamwork and communication skills into generic VET programs will support students' employability[22] (Cushnahan, 2009).

We would make the case here that, with the ever-increasing complexity of the job market and the urgency of the external challenges outlined above, the types of attributes emphasised in the university sector's approach to developing employability (such as the need for lifelong career development, self-reflection on career, emotional intelligence and resourcefulness) are increasingly required in the VET – and, by default, the ACE – sectors, even at the lower levels of the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) system, and, moreover, that non-accredited training may be a highly relevant medium through which to offer support in these areas.

Given the importance of these skills, and the fact that many are already being taught across the colleges, we question why there is no collective credentialing of these types of skills by the colleges at present. This would be not only in their own interest (as a public relations exercise) but in industry's interest (as a benchmark of quality training).

Another key point to consider is professional development in non-accredited training. To date, there has been no concerted effort to evaluate quality in the delivery of non-accredited ACE programs across the colleges. As VET MGR:5 pointed out, since the tacit value placed on these courses and their credibility, by both the training community and government, is not equal to that placed on accredited training, few resources have traditionally been available to provide any kind of quality audit. Nevertheless, given the importance of this type of training highlighted by this report, perhaps it is time to consider implementing a more uniform approach to professional practice among non-accredited trainers. At present, many colleges follow the logic that if a trainer is capable of facilitating the accredited portion of a course, he/she must automatically be competent to provide non-accredited training. This may be true in many cases, but it is also equally the case, as this report has illustrated, that the facilitation of courses in soft skills is increasingly important to work and life outcomes. Not many of these types of skills are currently embedded in VET training packages, so simply to assume that trainers are capable of facilitating programs in them without any prior professional development may not be an optimal approach.

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[20] For further information on soft skills, see Eby et al. (2003); Fugate & Kinicki (2008); McArdle et al. (2007).

[21] Also termed '21st century skills' (see Boston Consulting Group, 2015; Griffin, 2019).

[22] For example, the approaches expounded in the 'Mayer competencies' (Mayer, 1992), or the ACCI/BCI (2002) employability skills framework.

There is still a great deal of work to be done around crafting courses that meet the many demands from employers for soft skills. VET practitioners may well point out that a variety of accredited programs address these issues (such as teamwork, communication skills and problem solving), but we would make the case here that not all the soft skills unearthed by this research are necessarily taught in VET packages. Moreover, these skills are so necessary in today's workplace that preliminary, non-accredited programs addressing them would go a long way to giving confidence and resilience to our students.

It is conceivable that the colleges, collectively, could develop their own innovative solutions to industry demand for these skills, along with a college-wide system of credentialling. With the advent of electronic credentialling systems such as Credly[23] and the ease with which credentials can be electronically stored, it is entirely possible not only that the colleges develop their own system of soft-skill training, but create a recognition system for these credentials that gives the sector and its programs recognition and esteem among employers. Alongside this credentialling system, new forms of professional development should be considered that aid trainers in facilitating programs in these skills.

KEY FINDING 5: Overcoming system-related barriers; greater flexibility in the use of non-accredited training

Usage of the non-accredited training cap varies greatly across the college network. There are many reasons for these variations, yet the approach of the NSW Department of Education has remained one of placing a fixed cap on non-accredited training. For example, the NSW ACE program, in recent years, has stipulated that "no more than 20%" (25% in the last year) of training can be delivered through non-accredited means. However, the take-up of this opportunity has differed among the colleges, with some delivering little non-accredited training and some asking for far more non-accredited delivery. There are many reasons for this, including the availability and suitability of trainers, challenges related to COVID-19, and levels of student and industry demand for accredited training. Nevertheless, it remains the case that come colleges have an overwhelming demand for non-accredited training that cannot be met by current allocation mechanisms.

Rather than focus on a percentage of overall training that should be allocated to a non-accredited format across the college network, perhaps it would be better to explore some kind of college-by-college system for the allocation of non-accredited training. Any final allocation of non-accredited training could be left, within set parameters, up to the experience of each college's senior staff. Thus, rather than a percentage of overall training being allocated to non-accredited training for all colleges (i.e., no more than 20%), perhaps a more productive means of allocation would be for NSW colleges to have the option to flexibly apply for a percentage of their ACE delivery to be non-accredited based on circumstances and history. This could be

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23   See https://info.credly.com/

evaluated by the department on a case-by-case basis, dependent on a sound rationale being provided by a college seeking to tap into a greater allocation, and on a strong track record of ongoing utilisation of this means of delivery.

KEY FINDING 6: Overcoming system-related barriers; investing in the opportunities inherent in non-accredited training

It is clear that the NSW community colleges display abundant enthusiasm, talent, expertise and experience in addressing the needs of their target cohorts, and the recommendations outlined above are designed to ensure that this level of commitment and professionalism continues. That being said, there is very little point in making recommendations if there simply isn't the time, money or resources, in an educational sector that is already, at times, overstretched, to implement them.

It is equally clear – and an underlying theme throughout this report – that we are emerging into what has been called the 'fourth industrial revolution' (Schwab, 2017) and leaving old workplaces and work practices behind. Given this transformation, it is essential that we prepare our students to be employable in this new environment. The many voices quoted or paraphrased throughout this report point to training in soft or employability skills being a key part of what must be delivered to our student body. Equally, these voices emphasise the need for this training to be delivered in, predominantly, a non-accredited format outside of accredited education or traditional VET practices.

However, to meet this new and urgent need by asking an already, at times, overextended group of colleges to collaboratively discuss, design, develop, distribute, test and implement a comprehensive suite of non-accredited resources, without additional aid, is quite probably unrealistic. It is, therefore, going to take a change in perspective, on both the part of the NSW government and the colleges themselves, to achieve what has been outlined in the above recommendations. In this regard, we suggest three simultaneous undertakings be considered:

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. It is going to require funding, over and above what is currently distributed to the colleges through existing programs and projects, to achieve the goals outlined here. It is recommended that the NSW government consider a specialised funding allocation to enact Recommendations 2 and 4, in relation to resource development and professional development regarding these new resources.

2. At the same time, it is recommended that the colleges themselves undertake a shift in thinking towards enacting a centralised point of non-accredited training product development (rather than each college going it largely alone).

3. The NSW community colleges should also seek their own funding to bolster and support whatever additional funding the government is prepared to commit (see Appendix III). As well as aiding in developing resources, this external funding could be utilised to institute Recommendation 1 (psychometric testing) and integrate it with non-accredited training, as well as Recommendation 3 (developing capabilities related to mapping out the social impact that college programs engender).

Table 2. Summary of key findings and recommendations

KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

KEY FINDING 1: OBJECTIVES AND UTILISATION
We recommend that the community colleges consider collectively integrating the latest tools for pre-assessing potential students' level of genuine commitment to studying or to finding employment.

KEY FINDING 2: EFFECTIVENESS AND OUTCOMES; DEMOGRAPHIC TRENDS
We recommend that the colleges seek out ways to collaboratively develop a suite of non-accredited resources for use across the ACE network (see Appendix III). Resource development should not be limited to younger students entering their first job but, rather, be inclusive of more mature students in the middle of their working life.

KEY FINDING 3: EFFECTIVENESS AND OUTCOMES; VALUING SOCIAL IMPACT
We propose continued exploration of the array of benefits that the ACE program can have beyond merely learning outcomes. The colleges should institute more robust evaluations on the impact of ACE programs on overall student wellbeing via an approach to ACE 'outcomes' that places a greater emphasis on a broad, return-on-investment (ROI) analysis approach.

KEY FINDING 4: QUALITY STANDARDS IN RELATION TO NON-ACCREDITED TRAINING
We suggest that the suite of resources suggested in Recommendation 2 include carefully crafted, non-accredited training programs in the types of work-related soft skills highlighted throughout this report. Moreover, a recognisable system of quality training in soft skills should be established by the colleges themselves and electronically credentialled. Professional development in non-accredited training, particularly in how to deliver programs in these types of skills, should be a key area of focus.

KEY FINDING 5: OVERCOMING SYSTEM-RELATED BARRIERS; GREATER FLEXIBILITY IN THE USE OF NON-ACCREDITED TRAINING
Greater flexibility in the allocation of non-accredited learning would be beneficial. The NSW Department of Education should consider an approach in the allocation of non-accredited training across its ACE network that better reflects colleges' varying needs and priorities.

KEY FINDING 6: OVERCOMING SYSTEM-RELATED BARRIERS; INVESTING IN THE OPPORTUNITIES INHERENT IN NON-ACCREDITED TRAINING
1. It is going to require funding, over and above what is currently distributed to the colleges through existing programs and projects, to achieve the goals outlined here. It is recommended that the NSW government consider a specialised funding allocation to enact Recommendations 2 and 4, in relation to resource development and professional development regarding these new resources.

2. At the same time, it is recommended that the colleges themselves undertake a shift in thinking towards enacting a centralised point of non-accredited training product development (rather than each college going it largely alone).

3. The NSW community colleges should also seek their own funding to bolster and support whatever additional funding the government is prepared to commit (see Appendix III). As well as aiding in developing resources, this external funding could be utilised to institute Recommendation 1 (psychometric testing) and integrate it with non-accredited training, as well as Recommendation 3 (developing capabilities related to mapping out the social impact that college programs engender).

8. CONCLUSIONS

The research summarised in this report set out to examine why there was a need for non-accredited training among the community colleges, to determine the levels of collaboration across the NSW ACE sector in its development, to discover the array of programs delivered in a non-accredited way, and to quantify the benefits – both immediate and more hidden benefits – to students of this type of training. It also set out to explore barriers that prevent students from gaining employment.

This report portrays a NSW ACE sector responding well to community needs, particularly those related to helping our most disadvantaged students gain a foothold in life and transition to gainful employment. It depicts a community college sector that undertakes its work with passion, dedication and a marked sense of purpose, often in the face of a rapidly changing working arena whose demands are constantly evolving. The ACE colleges have developed a range of innovative and enjoyable programs that go some way to meeting the changing needs of industry and society, and these programs have a 'domino' effect that goes well beyond an educational outcome, reverberating out across communities and benefiting both the students and those around them in a variety of ways.

Nevertheless, one consistent message from the colleges throughout this research project has been that, at least historically, non-accredited training has been see, by government, as a kind of 'poor cousin' to accredited training, and that the overall attitude has been one of only partial acceptance. In that regard, this research has gone some of the way towards showing that, certainly on the part of students, there is in their minds very little difference between the two training styles and non-accredited training is often the preferred medium. The research has also shown that, in many cases, industry is looking for demonstrated soft skills among their employees and has no particular preference on the training style utilised to achieve them.

That being said, considering the investment that state and federal governments have injected into improving the national VET system, it is understandable that governments would wish to see that investment reap a return and, given those expectations, exhibit a degree of scepticism about the value of non-accredited training. Might it not also be the case, therefore, that it is, to some extent at least, incumbent upon the colleges to demonstrate that non-accredited education is a vital part of their training mix through improved collaboration on its development, through broader utilisation of a suite of quality resources, through improved evaluation of student readiness for accredited training and through ongoing evaluation of the impact of non-accredited programs in broader society? We strongly urge the ACE college network to consider using these approaches as techniques to augment and enhance non-accredited training and its place in the suite of training approaches that colleges can utilise. Unless the colleges, collectively, are going to champion the value of non-accredited training, its stature and utility may, unfortunately, remain in question.

At the same time, we would urge the NSW government to allow the colleges to grow the capability to champion non-accredited training by re-evaluating its approach to the allocation of non-accredited units, and by investing funds into the development of new and in-demand non-accredited training resources that will aid the colleges to meet the needs of a changing world.

APPENDIX I: The NSW Community Colleges

METROPOLITAN AREAS (Sydney, Newcastle, Wollongong)

RTO Number	ACE Provider	Head Office Location
90304	Central Coast Community College	Ourimbah
90269	City East Community College Inc.	Bondi Junction
90232	Hornsby Ku-ring-gai Community College Inc.	Hornsby
6860	Macarthur Community College Inc.	Cartwright
90033	Macquarie Community College	Carlingford
1223	Nepean Community College Inc.	Penrith
90113	Northern Beaches Community College Inc.	North Narrabeen
90187	Penrith Skills for Jobs Ltd	Penrith
7091	St George & Sutherland Community College Inc.	Jannali
90054	Sydney Community College Ltd	Rozelle
41243	The Deaf Society of New South Wales	Parramatta
90276	The Parramatta College Inc.	Parramatta
90381	Tuggerah Lakes Community College Inc.	Tuggerah
90020	Workers' Educational Association Hunter	Newcastle
90297	Workers' Educational Association Illawarra	Wollongong

REGIONAL AND REMOTE AREAS

RTO Number	ACE Provider	Head Office Location
90032	ACE Community Colleges Ltd	Lismore
3732	Albury Wodonga Community College Ltd	Albury Wodonga
90013	Byron Region Community College Inc.	Mullumbimby
90018	Camden Haven Community College Inc.	Laurieton
90834	Coffs Coast Community College Inc.	Coffs Harbour
90027	Community College-Northern Inland Inc.	Barraba
90145	Guyra Adult Learning Association Inc.	Guyra
90087	Kiama Community College Inc.	Kiama
90044	Murwillumbah Adult Education Centre Inc.	Murwillumbah
90029	North Coast Community College Inc.	Alstonville
90315	Port Macquarie Community College Inc.	Port Macquarie
90133	Riverina Community College Ltd	Wagga Wagga
90449	Robinson Education Centre Ltd	Broken Hill
90095	Tamworth Community College Inc.	Tamworth
6558	The Eurobodalla Adult Education Centre Inc.	Batemans Bay
90348	Tomaree Community college Inc.	Nelson Bay
6971	VERTO Ltd	Bathurst
1252	Western Riverina Community College Inc.	Griffith

APPENDIX II: Research methodologies

The research has utilised these approaches:

1. A review of the most relevant material in the research literature of VET, ACE training, non-accredited training, employability, career development and the social impact of non-accredited studies. Much of this material is cited at the end of this report.

2. Extensive interviews with stakeholders. Ten college and industry leaders were interviewed face-to-face, with these interviews being transcribed and quoted extensively in this report. Additionally, all NSW ACE colleges' VET or Training Managers were surveyed through an email questionnaire. The insights and experience shared by these individuals is greatly appreciated.

3. Data from both ACE and the NCVER, as referenced in the report.

4. A student online survey, that was distributed to 1,042 students.

5. Analysis of social impact through the use of the ASVB social impact valuation system.

APPENDIX III: Suggestions for future research/future research directions

It has been suggested in this report that the colleges collectively develop training material, engage in collaborative professional development around this material and consider a college network-wide electronic credentialling system. Initiating any – or all – of these innovations will take time, resources and funding. And there may well be objections to these suggestions on this basis. As a potential solution to these objections, we suggest that the colleges consider utilising funding from other sources for these purposes (such as philanthropic funding or federal government research grants), while integrating research as a key component of these projects. Suggested avenues for future research include:

1. Soft skills, employability and context

While this project has identified a great need for employability skills among students, there is still further research required in identifying *which* skills and attributes are most beneficial in terms of helping students smoothly transition to employment or between employment contexts, or on which ones most influence employers' hiring decisions. As one college leader also identified, such skills are frequently only valid in specific contexts: change the context and the skill could evaporate. If that is the case, how to train students to flexibly apply a range of skills across a complex mixture of workplace environments becomes a key area of focus and needs considerably more research to ascertain answers.

2. A comparison between ACE non-accredited delivery across state borders

While ACE is organised somewhat differently across the various states (Foley, 2005), relatively little research has been undertaken to explore the various ways that the programs are delivered in different states. The research base would be strengthened by comparative studies that illustrated how delivery in NSW differs compared to other states and territories, and the advantages and disadvantages of these various approaches.

3. Ongoing study into the social impact of the NSW ACE non-accredited program

This project has offered insight into the broader social impact of non-accredited training and the various unintended or unforeseen outcomes that may accrue from engagement in a training program. A comprehensive study would need to follow a group of students across a prolonged timeline (say, at least 2 years) while comprehensively detailing their lifestyle, state of mind and approaches to education – not only before any training ensued but at regular points during the training program and for a prolonged period afterwards. This kind of intricate project should be an aspirational goal for future research.

4. Age-appropriate non-accredited training for mature learners

This is possibly one of the largest areas still to be explored, namely, the needs and learning requirements of the over-50s, as opposed to younger learners. Specific data on which among the range of non-accredited training programs is taken up by specific age groups was difficult to access in the current project due to privacy issues around ACE data and due to the generic reporting of non-accredited training within the NCVER system. It would be of value to the colleges to be able to access more specific data within the NSW ACE data set, to be able to see the range of courses studied by older students in order to evaluate their learning preferences and then, alongside the research in the literature base that refers to older learners, enhance resources specifically for the colleges' more mature students.

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