

## COVER STORY

# Many paths to work goal

Today's VET system may offer more chances to skill up than many realise, writes **Sue White**.

**O**ur vocational education and training (VET) system finally seems to have the numbers behind it.

About 1.7 million Australians a year take a vocational education course, 449,000 apprentices and trainees were mid-qualification last December and recent figures show graduate trades hold their own against tertiary graduates in terms of salary.

However, according to the director of National Skills Week, Brian Wexham, VET is not without its challenges.

"One of the biggest difficulties lies in getting people to understand what vocational education is all about," he says. The answer, according to Wexham, is diversity.

"People understand that trades are learnt through apprenticeships, but there is incredible diversity available in VET," he says.

From horticulturalists to health workers, Wexham says many areas of skill shortage can be addressed by encouraging Australians to undertake VET training.

"Health is one example," he says. "We need a lot more health workers, as the average age of our health workers is about 50.

"As well as the skills gap created by these retiring workers, the ageing population means we will need more people to look after us all."

Though the federal government is behind National Skills Week – with the Minister for Tertiary Education, Skills, Science and Research, Chris

Evans, officiating at the recent launch – for those in Victoria at least, encouraging students to choose VET training is difficult given there have been significant state-based budget cuts.

"From a federal government point of view, they've provided more money into the VET sector ... but [state-based cuts affecting Victorian TAFE] are a very difficult situation," Wexham says.

"I do empathise with them."

While the final fallout from the cuts to Victoria's TAFE funding is to come, those in the system remain convinced that VET is worth the investment.

Colin Wilson is one example: at 35, he re-entered the VET system to retrain as a chef after a diverse career spanning fitting and turning, engineering and even cycling.

Now, the 2011 apprentice of the year is happily running the Sweetwater Cafe at the Yarra Valley's Chateau Yering, a job he scored within a year of graduating.

"I think the combination of on-the-job training and study works really well," he says of the VET system.

"You are paid while you learn and, while going to school gives you the 'why', work gives you the 'how'."

Heading back to TAFE in his 30s worked well for Wilson.

"Coming to it a bit older, I found it easier knowing what needed to be done, and what's required, sooner," he says.

"I was also more focused."

Wilson wasn't the oldest in his



Made the cut ... 2011 apprentice of the year Colin Wilson returned to TAFE to become a chef at 35. Photo: Rodger Cummins

group. Today's VET demographic goes well beyond school-leavers preparing for traditional apprenticeships and diplomas.

In NSW, more employers are sought to take on school-based teens in programs such as the state government's Bright Future Campaign. Across the country, partnerships between TAFE institutions and universities are trending in everything from retailing to architecture, and registered training organisations (RTOs) fill the gaps.

"RTOs tend to specialise in a certain area – some specialise in media or commercial cookery and so only that," Wexham says.

But the boom in RTOs means that both they and TAFE have to work increasingly hard to attract students. "I always think choice is a good thing," Wexham says.

"But from a TAFE point of view,

they have to compete with the private sector in a way they perhaps didn't have to before. They've always provided quality outcomes [but] they've not necessarily had to promote it before."

While cuts to TAFE funding in Victoria are making RTOs even more of a threat, those within the RTO space point out it's also a competitive market in and of itself.

"It's hugely competitive," says the managing director of the RTO Leadership Success, Anthony Nash. "The challenge is separating the good from the bad."

His business focuses on leadership and uses a VET framework to train middle managers, usually within their own work environment.

"We work mainly with employees who've been promoted from the shop floor into a middle-management role," he says. "They

may have a lot of expertise in their particular skill, but not in leadership. The VET framework allows us to provide practical, work-based experience and qualifications, and to take that training internally so the assignments, tasks and learnings are all relevant."

A new focus on compliance for RTOs means staying registered is becoming more difficult.

Despite the challenges, it's a move Nash welcomes.

"Higher compliance standards are helping weed out those organisations who may have been delivering substandard outcomes," he says.

National Skills Week runs from August 27 to September 2. See [nationalskillsweek.com.au](http://nationalskillsweek.com.au). NSW employers interested in the Bright Future program should phone 1800 009 310.