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ARTICLE



# The expansion and contraction of the apprenticeship system in Australia, 1985-2020

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## ABSTRACT

This paper chronicles and analyses the expansion and contraction of the Australian apprenticeship system from 1985 to 2020. The system expanded from a small number of occupations, mainly in craft and manufacturing areas, to include many other occupations, notably in the different types of service sectors. The expansion was achieved primarily through a new type of apprenticeship, known as a traineeship, to augment the existing more traditional apprenticeships. Since 2012, the system has contracted considerably, and the participation rate of women has been affected disproportionately. The period of expansion of the system was book-ended by two major government-instigated documents, in 1985 and 2011. In 1985 a Parliamentary Committee of Inquiry into Labour Market Programs proposed the introduction of traineeships, and in 2011 an Expert Panel on Apprenticeships sought to reduce numbers through the application of specific criteria for government support, which primarily affected the occupations served by traineeships. Two sources of evidence are used to examine the expansion and contraction of the apprenticeship system: data from the national apprenticeship statistics collection maintained by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) and key government reports over the 35 years. A brief overview of COVID-19-related developments in 2020 is included.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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VET funding; gender issues

## Introduction

International comparisons of apprenticeships (e.g. Chankseliani, Keep, and Wilde 2017; European Commission 2012; Fazio, Fernández-Coto, and Ripani 2016) show great variations in the size of apprenticeship systems, and in the number of occupations covered by apprenticeships; however, most G20 countries seek to expand their systems (Smith, Tuck, and Chatani 2018). Hence, this paper is significant as it describes a country that seemingly deliberately reduced the size of its apprenticeship system at a time when others were seeking to expand theirs. At one time, before the year 2011, the Australian apprenticeship

system was regarded as a success story for Australian vocational education and training (VET) (Smith 2013) but this is no longer the case.

Australia currently has a population of 25.5 million (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2020a, Series 3101.0), with a diverse economy with an increasing focus on services, particularly health. Manufacturing has declined, but primary industries remain strong. In 2019 there were 273,000 apprentices in the process of being trained; this amounted to about 2.2% of the working population (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2020b Series 6202.0, National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) 2020a). Currently, numbers of apprentices are only about the same as 20 years ago (271,000 in the year 2000) (NCVER 2019), despite an increase in population of 32% over that time (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2020a). While apprenticeships are important to Australian VET, they form only a minority of the Australian VET system, albeit a substantial minority: 25.25% of students in government-funded vocational education and training in 2019 were apprentices and trainees (NCVER 2020b)

The paper seeks to answer the research questions ‘How did the numbers of participants in, and gender composition of, apprenticeships and traineeships change during the years 1985 to 2020?’ and ‘What were the main influences on those changes?’

The paper utilises two main sources of evidence: a detailed analysis of key government documents over the 35 year period, including two major reports which radically affected apprenticeships in Australia (Kirby 1985;; Commonwealth of Australia 2011), and analysis of data from the national apprenticeship statistics collection maintained by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) on behalf of the national (Commonwealth) and State governments. The paper uses these to examine the policy initiatives behind the expansion and contraction of the apprenticeship system and the potential motives of the stakeholders responsible for the decline.

## **Background and literature**

In this section, themes in the international literature on apprenticeship systems are summarised, followed by a brief discussion of four specific themes including issues associated with expansion of apprenticeship systems. The section concludes with an overview of the Australian apprenticeship system, to provide context for the findings which follow.

### ***Apprenticeship as a field of practice and study***

Apprenticeship systems vary greatly around the world, and develop according to countries’ histories and their economic and cultural contexts (Deissinger, Smith, and Pickersgill 2006). They are generally understood to involve the

apprentice being employed in, or at least being engaged in, a workplace; the understanding of a certain time period for the apprenticeship; and an active program of training and learning for the apprentice. Developing countries may have informal apprenticeship systems instead of, or as well as, formal apprenticeships (Smith and Brennan Kemmis 2013). Countries may have apprenticeships at different levels and of varying lengths; for example Turkey has two different set lengths for apprenticeships (Smith and Brennan Kemmis 2013); and several countries have introduced higher level apprenticeships, including apprenticeships incorporating university degrees (Smith, Tuck, and Chatani 2018).

Formal apprenticeships generally involve the following (Smith 2010):

- an education and training regime set up by, or with the approval of, governments;
- a combination of off- and on-the-job training;
- the assumption of responsibility by the employer for the development of the apprentice; and
- the award of a qualification and/or licence and/or some other recognition that enables an occupation to be practiced independently once the apprenticeship is successfully completed.

A number of recurring issues are commonly discussed in the apprenticeship literature. Gessler (2019), for example, refers to 'employment' and 'education' logics, which have been increasingly used to help classify apprenticeship system. In systems with an employment logic, the apprentice spends the majority of his or her time with the employer (known in some countries as the 'training company') and receives a wage, or at least a stipend; and in those with an education logic, a majority of time is spent in vocational schools. Gessler (2019) also proffers a number of other frameworks for analysing apprenticeships, with a focus primarily on underlying social questions: the preferred age group for apprentices, the quarantining of apprenticeships to 'blue collar' jobs, gender imbalances in apprenticeship, the role of apprenticeship in social inclusion, and the role of power in relationships between the social partners.

A Memorandum from INAP (the International Network on Innovative Apprenticeship, 2012) focuses primarily on structural issues, including the role of occupational profiles; the need for co-operation between learning venues, particularly between the two sites in 'dual' systems – company and 'school', the legal status of apprentices, cost-benefit analyses of apprenticeships, governance structures, and the apprenticeship curriculum.

Of these different thematic summaries of apprenticeship issues, four which have specific relevance to recent Australian apprenticeship history are now discussed in further detail. They revolve around the sociological issues raised by Gessler (2019) rather than the more structural matters discussed by INAP

(2012), as the former can be identified as the issues at play in Australia since 1985. The four themes are: the range of purposes of apprenticeship, the relationships between the social partners, access of females to apprenticeships, and the challenges of expanding apprenticeship system while maintaining quality.

The use of apprenticeships for a range of purposes including social inclusion, the first theme, is commonly recognised internationally and in Australia. Different stakeholders ascribe more importance to one or more purpose than others, often at different times. For example, in times of high youth unemployment, the employment purpose of apprenticeships is often foregrounded, while at other times, countries' economic competitiveness is seen as more important. Those countries which focus on youth employment tend to be situated within what Gessler (2019, 693) calls the 'young person paradigm'. Smith (2018) proposes five main emphases for countries' apprenticeship systems: youth employment, national skill development, enterprise skill formation, inclusivity and training for innovation, suggesting that a shift in policy towards one of the features may reduce the system's efficacy in other areas. Fuller and Unwin (2003), for example, criticise the U.K. expansion of apprenticeships from the mid-1990s for its emphasis on social inclusion, arguing that this detracts from its skill development purpose.

The importance of dialogue among the tripartite social partners – governments, employers and trade unions – in apprenticeships (Deissinger and Gonon 2015a), is the second theme. Since apprenticeships generally involve an employment relationship, industrial relations matters naturally form a major part of apprenticeship discussions both at national and company level (Wolter and Ryan 2011). Social dialogue is described by the International Labour Organization (ILO) as one of six 'quality apprenticeship building blocks' (International Labour Organization (ILO) 2017, 21). Where provision for social dialogue is inadequate, one side or another may feel excluded from relevant discussions; for example, this complaint emerged in some responses to a survey of apprenticeships in the G20 countries carried out by the ILO (Smith, Tuck, and Chatani 2018). Arguments in this area may be heated. While employers are criticised by trade unions, trade unions, primarily in traditional trade areas, have often been depicted as restricting access to apprenticeships as a form of 'occupational closure' (Bol and Weeden 2015), to maintain what may be the 'illusion' of skill in the associated occupations (Shields 1995) – skill which, others argue, is in fact socially constructed.

The third theme is the extent to which apprenticeship systems facilitate access by females. Gender issues have always been associated with apprenticeships, with much greater male than female participation. Gessler (2019, 696) refers to this as the 'men paradigm'. Feminist critiques (for example, Steinberg 1990) maintain that it is mainly male trades that have had the power to construct their trades as skilled. The 'men paradigm' (Gessler 2019) has been especially prevalent in the countries where apprenticeship has been associated with a limited

range of jobs, usually in construction, artisan trades, and manufacturing; for example, in the United States (Glover et al. 2007). Other explanations are that apprenticeship systems were developed at a time when women were likely to leave work upon marriage (Rorrison 1988, 26), and that most apprentice workplaces have a masculinised nature, making them uncomfortable places for women (Hamilton 1990). In Australia, only one-quarter of apprentices in-training in Australia are female, with females only forming 12% of the traditional 'trades apprentices' area (Misko 2020), and that 12% being almost entirely in the hairdressing occupation. Misko & Wybrow (2020) reports people working with apprentices talking about 'brothers and fathers' of apprentices without consciousness of the gendered nature of their remarks. Of course, gendered occupational choices do not apply only to apprenticeships. Recent research in Germany shows that the occupational aspirations of girls and boys remain gender-stereotyped, and also that girls are less likely to choose masculinised occupations than vice versa (Malin and Jacob 2019). In recognition of this, one way to address imbalance is to add more occupations to the list of apprenticeships. A United Nations report supports this point, recommending that 'public resources in education, training, science, technology and research (should) equally benefit women and men, girls and boys' (United Nations Economic and Social Council Commission on the Status of Women 2011, 5), and that countries should 'work to eliminate occupational and sectoral segregation and the gender pay gap by recognising the value of sectors that have large numbers of women workers, such as care and other service workers (United Nations Economic and Social Council Commission on the Status of Women 2011, 9)'.

The fourth and final theme is the expansion of apprenticeship systems, which is usually seen as a laudable goal to meet the multiple purposes which apprenticeships can serve. For example, expansion was the most important action reported by the G20 countries in the apprenticeship survey carried out by the ILO which has been referred to earlier (Smith, Tuck, and Chatani 2018). Yet, the expansion of systems, which is inevitably accompanied by extra apprentice places in 'women's work' since the occupational base of apprenticeships must be broadened to achieve expansion, has been subject to robust critiques from academic and other commentators (e.g. Fuller and Unwin 2003, in the U.K.; Snell and Hart 2007, in Australia). Fuller and Unwin (2003) and Galvani (2015) refer pejoratively to apprenticeship's 'dilution', or 'stretching', from traditional trade areas into service industries. Other criticisms of expanded systems have focused on the 'deadweight' argument, that employers were seeking funding for training that would have been done anyway – although such arguments are not also applied to traditional apprenticeships. Because critics are always ready with such arguments, apprenticeship systems can become easily tarnished, and so Smith and Brennan Kemmis (2013) therefore, caution against over-rapid expansion. Expansion necessarily brings potential quality problems because of the

involvement of under-informed new employers and the introduction of apprenticeships to industries without a traditional of formal training, issues found by Schofield (1999) in a report on traineeships in Australia, and by Reegård (2017), in retail apprenticeships in Norway. Yet, Smith & Brennan Kemmis (2013) argue that these potential problems can be addressed with proper preparation, resourcing, support and, importantly, goodwill from relevant stakeholders.

### ***Overview of the Australian apprenticeship system***

This section provides a brief overview of the Australian system. Apprenticeships in manufacturing and craft trades have existed in Australia in various forms since European settlement in the late 18th century. Apprenticeships were formalised into the current system after the Second World War, with the formalisation of mandatory 'day release' for apprenticeships (Knight, 2012: 14) and the increased involvement of the Commonwealth government (Rorrison 1988, 14). The system was augmented in the late 1980s by the addition of 'traineeships'. Traineeships are a form of shorter apprenticeship (generally one year); they are generally, but not always, in newer or service sector occupations (Smith 2010). Apprenticeships existing before the 1970s, and lasting for three or four years, are generally known as 'traditional apprenticeships'.<sup>1</sup> They had not, before the 1970s, been seen as suitable for women, apart from hairdressing. Indeed, a 1954 government review of apprenticeships, the *Wright Report* (Commonwealth-State Apprenticeship Committee 1954) explicitly excluded women and the feminised occupations of hairdressing and pharmacy assistant from its deliberations.

Comparisons of countries' apprenticeship systems (e.g. Smith and Brennan Kemmis 2013; Fazio, Fernández-Coto, and Ripani 2016; Chankseliani, Keep, and Wilde 2017) have identified a number of measures by which countries' apprenticeship systems can be described and compared. Using a range of these measures, the Australian system (when including traineeships) can be described thus:

- It is a formal apprenticeship system; is relatively large on a world scale; routinely includes young people and adults, and part-time workers; includes a large range of occupations; includes a range of training lengths from one to 4 years.
- Apprentices' legal status is that they are employees, and they are paid as such;
- It provides some financial incentives and tax concessions to employers and also to apprentices (for example, tools allowances);
- It has relatively low rates of completion, but involves high rates of progression to a permanent job for those who complete;

- It includes the attainment of a qualification on the country's qualification framework; includes on the job and off the job training; the off-the-job training is usually in adult VET training providers, not in secondary schools.<sup>2</sup>

The occupational distribution of apprenticeships is explained in this paragraph using National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) (2020a) data; the NCVER maintains the national apprenticeship database, receiving annual reports from each State or Territory government. Construction is the biggest single area for apprenticeships; combined with 'electrical' it overtook 'metals and vehicle industries' as the main 'traditional apprentice' area in the early 1990s. By 2019, these two industry clusters employed 140,800 apprentices, almost 80% of all 'traditional apprentices', and 51.6% of all apprentices including trainees. Non-trade occupations are generally covered by traineeships, often in services (including diverse occupations such as retail assistant and aged care assistant), and also in newer industries such as information technology. As noted earlier, traineeships are more likely than traditional apprenticeships to be in jobs that women tend to undertake, such as health and community services, clerical and administrative work, and sales, with these occupations having apprentice commencements collectively of 57,400 in 2019 compared with 51,500 in the two main 'traditional trades' areas. Traineeships also serve the Australian Bureau of Statistics-designated occupation of 'labourer', which covers a range of industry areas, including cleaning, factory process work, agriculture and horticulture (26,200 commencements) (NCVER 2020).

As noted above, training generally takes place both on and off the job, although within some limits, formal off-the-job training may be quite limited. There is a contract between the employer, training provider, and apprentice/trainee, which is lodged with a State or Territory government. Employers have no formal or regulatory responsibility for training; and the training provider (known as 'RTO' – Registered Training Organisation) takes responsibility for all assessment. Assessment is based on to national competency standards which are developed by industry committees and gathered into qualifications, located in 'Training Packages' for particular industry areas (Smith 2010). These Training Packages are used for all VET programs, not just apprenticeships. 'Pre-apprenticeship' programs (off the job, sometimes with work experience) provide preliminary training for apprenticeships, but there is no common structure and their coverage is uneven (Dumbrell and Smith 2013).

As in many countries, two tiers of government are involved in apprenticeships in Australia. The national government (known as the Commonwealth government) oversees the apprenticeship system, while the eight State and Territory governments (hereafter referred to as 'State' governments) oversee designation of occupations as apprenticeships or traineeships in their States, and manage apprentice contracts. The State and Territory governments also disburse the funds for the apprentice training provided by RTOs, which is



undertaken by the public provider – TAFE (Technical and Further Education) – or one of the many private providers (Burke 2018). The Commonwealth government provides some targeted apprentice programs, for example for disadvantaged groups, and provides financial incentives for employers to employ apprentices. The social partners – government, trade unions and employer bodies – are involved in national discussions on the apprenticeship system, but not always, or on every issue, or in a systematic manner. The trade unions dominate discussion relating to traditional trades, as there are industrial relations implications for the relevant occupations (Knight 2012: 14; Smith and Keating 2003, 30). At both national and State level, reviews of the system have recently taken place (e.g. Phillips 2018). One national concern cited in that report is rebuilding the system from its current low levels, by attracting more potential apprentices and employers alike to the system. Completion rates are also a concern, with the lowest rates of completion (around 45%) applying to young apprentices in traditional trade apprenticeships (Hargreaves 2017).

Australia has specialist apprenticeship intermediary organisations which promote and support apprenticeships, as do other countries (Smith 2019). The major types are Group Training Organisations (GTOs), and Australian Apprenticeship Support Network providers, usually known as AASNs. Group Training Organisations employ apprentices and ‘lease’ them to host employers. The GTO is thus the legal employer of the apprentice. GTOs also provide support services to their employers and their apprentices. 8.3% of Australian apprentices and trainees were employed by GTOs in 2018; the proportion had been declining since the year 2000 (O’Dwyer and Korbel 2019). Australian Apprenticeship Support Network providers (AASNs) are contracted to, and funded by, the Commonwealth government and most are large national organisations (Ithaca Group 2018). They administer apprentice contracts and their use is compulsory; no apprentice can now commence without the involvement of an AASN. They also provide a limited range of support services. AASNs are paid a fee per apprentice on commencement, and again on completion of the contract (Ithaca Group 2018).

## Research method

The research method had two main components. The first component consisted of an analysis of four major reports on apprenticeship in the period 1985–2020, including the two major reports mentioned in the introduction (Kirby 1985; Commonwealth of Australia 2011).

The four major reports are as follows:

- Report of the Committee of Inquiry into Labour Market Programs (Kirby 1985)
- Skills Training for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (1991)

- A shared responsibility: Apprenticeships for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (2011)
- Apprenticeships reform advisory group recommendation report (2016).

The reasons why these four reports were selected for detailed analysis in this paper follow. The first two are among those noted as having special relevance to apprenticeship on a list, compiled by the National Centre of Vocational Education Research (NCVER), of 'Landmark Documents' about vocational education and training. These documents, according to the NCVER's , are 'considered by history and authoritative commentary to have influenced the development of the VET system, providing vision and/or leading to significant reforms or widespread cultural/attitudinal change'<sup>3</sup>; in other words, they have been identified, by a government agency, as seminal policy documents. The Landmark Documents series ends in 2010. The NCVER's Landmark Document list includes only one, minor, report on apprenticeship (Marshman 1996) after 1991 before the close of the Landmark Documents time period in 2010. The Marshman (1996) report has not been included as it does not have the weight of the other report which involved government-appointed committees and was restricted to apprenticeships in three occupations. And so, two later reports are also examined in this paper; they represent the only significant government-endorsed reports on apprenticeships between 2010 and 2020. The main purpose of the report analysis was to explore the second research question: the reasons for the changes in apprentice/trainee numbers and their gender composition.

A systematic analysis (Bowen 2009) was undertaken to review the documents. What Bowen (2009) refers to as a 'first pass' was carried out initially, to identify the composition of the authoring committees, the scope of the reports, and the stated intent about the expansion or contraction of the system. A second-phase analysis of the reports then proceeded to examine matters such as biases in the documents, the representativeness of the documents, and the light shed on current issues and debates (Aminzade & Laslett, in Babbie 1999, 307). This second phase analysis examined the composition of the authoring committees, what the reports saw as the purpose of the apprenticeship system and how they treated the issue of gender. As part of this analysis, the potential interest groups represented by the committee members were identified. As Bessant et al. (2006, 252) point out, policy-making is a process undertaken by people who are involved in groups and networks; but outside these immediate networks, interest groups also contribute to the formation of policy. Bessant et al. (2006, p. 261) include trade unions, business corporations and professional bodies among those involved; all of these are pertinent to apprenticeship.

The second component of the method was the analysis of national apprenticeship data from the official collection maintained by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research. Bowen (2009) maintains that information in

documents can suggest questions for research; in this study, the policy documents were examined first, and that analysis guided the approach for the statistical component. The Phase 2 analysis of the reports then followed the statistical analysis.

The statistical component addressed the first research question: changes in the numbers and gender composition of apprentices/trainees over the period of the study. Numbers in-training and numbers of commencements were extracted from the national collection, for the period 1985–2019, and are presented in [Figure 1](#). A gender breakdown of the numbers was then derived for both in-training and commencing apprentices, but only from 1995 to 2019 ([Figures 2 and 3](#)), as reliable gender-related data are not available pre-1995. The apprenticeship data were then analysed alongside Australian Bureau of Statistics employment data, to calculate the proportion of the employed population engaged in apprenticeships at certain dates during the time series. The dates were selected to show years when there were key changes or trends in the apprentice numbers. For these key dates, analysis was also undertaken by trade/non-trade occupations, the proxy for differentiation between apprentices and trainees that is used in the statistical collections.

The method for the paper is thus an educational policy analysis of key policy texts on the theme of apprenticeship covering the study's 35 years – reports that were both commissioned and endorsed by the Commonwealth government – and a quantitative analysis of national apprentice statistics for the same period. While it is more common for document analysis to be used alongside qualitative, rather than quantitative, research methods (Bowen 2009) the use of quantitative data in this study allowed for observation of the direct effects of the policy documents that were analysed. It could be argued that interviews with those who were responsible for framing the government reports, or who were involved in the negotiations and the policy implementation, would have provided additional insight; but this would be difficult except for the most recent reports, as the protagonists may be deceased or very elderly. Both practical and ethical issues would also arise, as interviewees could be reluctant to speak about what was said during private committee discussions, or might regret their openness afterwards.

As Hodder (2000) points out, document analysis requires contextualised interpretation which needs to be undertaken by an author displaying appropriate 'trustworthiness, professional credentials and status' (200: 713). This paper's author has been undertaking apprenticeship and traineeship research in Australia for more than 25 years, and, for much of that period, has been involved in policy consultations, including the consultations for the 2011 report included in the study. She has worked with the major stakeholder groups in a number of research projects and other initiatives. This experience and expertise enabled appropriate questions to be asked when examining the documents

and trustworthy conclusions to be drawn, in the same way that expertise is useful for high-level interviewing (Merriam 1988, 78).

## **Findings**

This section presents the findings of the research, with the ‘first pass’ analysis of the reports discussed first, followed by the statistical analyses and concluding with the more detailed second-phase

### **First phase analysis of key Australian government reports on apprenticeship 1985–2020**

The four reports vary in length, with the first (1985) report being 300 pages, the second 118 pages and the third 130 pages. The fourth report is only 18 pages long. In all cases the composition of the panels or committees, the rationales, conclusions and recommendations were analysed. Analysis of the remaining sections of the lengthier reports focused on the sections relating to apprentice numbers, apprentice occupations and gender composition. In the discussion in this section, ‘apprenticeship’ is taken to mean ‘apprenticeship and traineeship’ except where one or the other is specifically meant, in which case the term ‘traditional apprenticeship’ or ‘traineeship’ is used as appropriate.

**Table 1** summarises the four reports, indicating their provenance, their relative focus on apprenticeship and their main intention with relation to the size of the system. It should be mentioned that at the time of the first report, in 1985, the only apprenticeships were ‘traditional apprenticeships’.

The main apprenticeship-related recommendations for each report and the extent to which they were implemented now follows. The 1985 Kirby report was part of what is described by the NCVET on the Landmark Document web page as a ‘golden age’ of expansion of the Australian VET system,<sup>4</sup> beginning in 1974 and lasting for 15 years. The report recommended a reorientation of then-current ‘labour market’ (employment-related) programs to training, and the introduction of a new program called ‘traineeships’, initially aimed at young people aged 16–17. It also recommended the continuation of financial assistance for existing traditional apprentice occupations, and for additional funding for women and disadvantaged groups.

The 1991 Skills training for the 21<sup>st</sup> century report extended these recommendations by proposing that apprenticeships and traineeships be integrated into one system. It proposed the introduction of formal training contracts and a formal ‘training wage’ for people in this single system; and the expansion of the system into occupational areas not previously involved, and to adults.

These two reports created the basis for the apprenticeship system that now exists: i.e. the traineeship program was introduced, and all apprenticeships were

**Table 1.** The four apprenticeship reports: An overview.

Date	Report name	Level of government	Proportion of apprenticeship content	Intention with relation to size of system
1985	Report of the Committee of Inquiry into Labour Market Programs (the 'Kirby report')	Commonwealth government-appointed committee.	Covered a broad range of labour market issues, but apprenticeships and the proposal for new 'traineeships' were foremost in recommendations.	Expansion
1991	Skills Training for the 21 <sup>st</sup> Century, A report on skills training: Apprenticeships and traineeships	Commonwealth government-standing committee of elected members of parliament.	Primarily about apprenticeships (including traineeships).	Expansion
2011	A shared responsibility: Apprenticeships for the 21 <sup>st</sup> century	Commonwealth government-appointed "Expert panel" to provide advice	Entirely about apprenticeships (including traineeships).	Contraction
2016	Apprenticeships reform advisory group recommendation report	Commonwealth government-appointed Advisory Group 'to represent the views of industry'.	Entirely about apprenticeships (including traineeships).	Rebuilding

Notes: References are as follows:

Kirby, P. (Chair) (1985). *Report of the Committee of Inquiry into Labour Market Programs*. Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service (AGPS).

House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training (House of Reps SCEET) (1991). *Skills training for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. A report on skills training: Apprenticeships and traineeships*. Canberra: AGPS.

Commonwealth of Australia (2011). *A shared responsibility: Apprenticeships for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, final report of the Expert Panel*. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.

Commonwealth of Australia (2016). *Apprenticeships Reform Advisory Group recommendation report*. Canberra: Department of Education & Training.

extended to adults. These features have continued through to 2020. The introduction of traineeships, the recommendation of the 1985 report, meant that the apprentice system covered more of the economy. Although traineeships grew slowly initially, they gathered momentum through some specific 'kick-starting' measures such as a government task force called 'NETTFORCE' which registered a substantial number of traineeship programs across Australia (Smith and Keating 2003, 90–91). An integrated 'national apprenticeship system', as recommended by the 1991 report, was established, eventually occurring in 1998, but in practice the two components – traditional apprenticeships and traineeships – continued to be differentiated in apprenticeship statistics, by use of proxy terms 'trade' and 'non-trade'. The two components are often spoken of separately in common parlance, but nevertheless both are part of the Australian apprenticeship system.

The 2011 Expert Panel report, in contrast to the two earlier reports, advocated for a reduction in apprenticeships, by recommending that support be provided only for apprenticeships in occupations on the national skills priority list and those leading to 'occupations that provided the individual with a valued

career ... and gave tangible and enduring value for ... the economy'. The national skills priority list is now known as the National Skills Needs list and is currently under review.<sup>5</sup> It was originally, in fact, a list set up for 'skilled migration' purposes (Service Skills Australia 2011) and not intended to designate apprenticeships. The Expert Panel report also proposed the establishment of a 'National Custodian' whose office would oversee the apprenticeship system, accreditation of employers of apprentices and an employer contribution scheme.

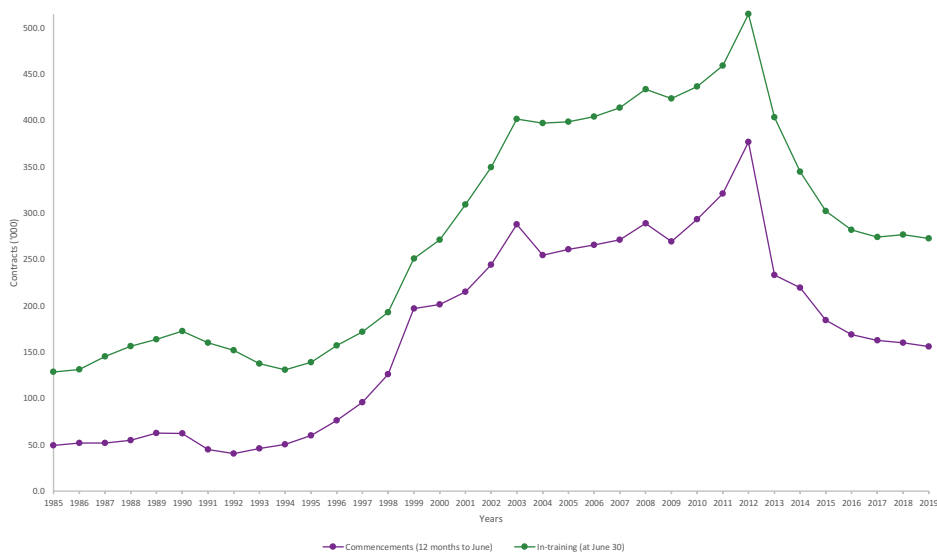
Only one recommendation, the first – the removal of support for apprenticeships in certain occupations – was implemented, to immediate and lasting effect. Within a year, the Commonwealth government removed employment incentives for employers from traineeship occupations, and also for 'existing workers', i.e. those already working for an employer before being moved on to an apprenticeship (NCVER 2018). Also, the recommendation was used by State governments to reduce funding for off-the-job training in the industry areas covered by most traineeships. In the State of Victoria, for example, funding for most traineeship occupations fell in 2013 to 1.50 USD AUD per student; and apprentice funding increased to an average of 11.00 USD AUD per student hour, citing 'public value', an echo of the Expert Panel's term 'valued career', as a determinant of funding level (Government of Victoria 2013). These Victorian funding amounts had previously been calculated on the costs of delivery. Other States introduced similar funding cuts targeted at certain occupations.

After a gap of 5 years, the Apprenticeship Reform Advisory Group (2016) was asked to advise on three areas of reform: financial incentives to employ apprentices; pre-apprenticeships; and piloting alternative models of apprenticeship delivery. In fact, the group provided broader advice, including advocating for a comprehensive review of apprenticeships and 'a more comprehensive and flexible apprenticeship policy'; the development of an information hub; and the raising of apprenticeship's profile. Since that date the government's apprenticeship web portal has been expanded, and a number of apprenticeship pilots have been carried out, mainly in higher-level apprenticeships. The report also asked for a review of the terminology used in apprenticeships, noting confusion caused by inconsistent practices in the use of the separate terms apprenticeship and traineeships. There has been no action on this matter.

### **Statistical analysis of apprenticeship data 1985–2019**

The data extracted and analysed for the study relate to the time period of 1985–2019, as 2020 data were not available at the time of writing.

Figure 1 shows a slow but steady growth of apprenticeship numbers during the period from the Kirby report until the late 1990s, albeit with a dip in the early 1990s due to an economic recession. Numbers began to move upwards during



**Figure 1.** Apprentice contracts commencing and in-training: Australia 1985–2019. *Source for Figures 1–3: Derived from National Apprentice and Trainee Collection no.101 (September 2019 estimates).*

the late 1990s and early 2000s, with a rapid rise commencing towards the end of the 2000s. But then a sharp decline is apparent from 2012 to 2013, with numbers of apprentices in-training in Australia falling from just over 500,000 in 2012 to 403,000 in 2013. After 2013 the decline continued, albeit at a lower rate, with a small increase in 2018 but a further dip to 273,000 in 2019 (NCVER 2020). The combined effect of Commonwealth and State funding measures mentioned in the previous section is readily discernible in these figures; there was no period of economic recession in the years 2012 to 2019 to account for decline in apprentice numbers.

Figure 1 indicates that ‘in-training’ numbers and ‘commencements’ generally mirror each other closely. It is worth re-iterating at this point that the differences in magnitude between the two figures relate to the relative proportions of traditional apprentices and trainees. Traditional apprenticeships last for 3 to 4 years, and traineeships generally for 1 year. Thus, each traditional apprentice who remains in his or her contract appears in apprenticeship figures for 3 or 4 years. To complicate matters, apprentices move employers fairly frequently, about one quarter doing so at least once (Bednartz 2014, 9), and if they do, they appear as a new contract commencement with their new employer. This is why the Figures refer to ‘contracts’ and not to ‘apprentices’.

The apprenticeship data were then compared with Australian Bureau of Statistics employment and population data. Table 2 shows apprentices as a proportion of the employed workforce and of the total Australian population for a number of key years covered in Figure 1. As explained in the note beneath the tables, the two distinct ‘spikes’ in the graph (2003 and 2012) were not used

**Table 2.** Apprenticeship (including traineeship) numbers as proportion of employed persons and population.

Date	Apprentices as % of employed persons		Apprentices as % of total population	
	Commencements	In-Training	Commencements	In-Training
1985	Not available	Not available	0.31%	0.82%
1993	0.58%	1.76%	0.26%	0.78%
2000	2.25%	3.30%	1.06%	1.42%
2002*	2.62%	3.75%	1.23%	1.78%
2011*	2.80%	4.10%	1.42%	2.14%
2013	2.01%	3.48%	1.01%	1.75%
2019 (Sept)	1.20%	2.17%	0.61%	1.07%

\*The years 2003 and 2012 showed unusual 'spikes' in numbers. These years have not been included as they appear to be anomalies in the trends. Instead the year before the spike has been selected, in each instance (i.e. 2002 and 2011) as better reflecting the trend. For 2004, figures were 2.64% and 4.12%

Sources: Derived from Australian Bureau of Statistics collection 6202.0 (Labour Force) and 3101.0 (Population) series, respectively; and National Apprentice and Trainee Collection no.101 (September 2019 estimates)

for this analysis as these were considered to be unusual years. It is generally acknowledged, for example, that the 2012 spike in apprentice numbers was because of the impending cuts in funding, which were announced in advance, which may have encouraged employers to 'bring forward' their recruitment of apprentices.

Figure 1 shows that in-training apprentice numbers were, in 2019, approximately equal to those in the year 2000. This might appear unexceptional if the Australian population and labour force were constant, but the numbers are equal only in absolute terms. Table 2 shows that, as a proportion of the rapidly growing population and workforce, the decline has been great. For commencements, for example, apprenticeships rose as a proportion of the employed workforce from 0.58% to 2.25% in 2000, and then to 2.80% in 2011, but fell to 1.20% in 2019. Apprentices in training rose from 1.76% of the employed population to 3.30% in 2000, with a peak of 4.10% in 2011, falling to 2.17% in 2019. Table 2 shows not only that participation rates dropped immediately when traineeship funding was reduced from 2012, but that they have continued to decline since then, rendering the Australian system much reduced in size. Participation in the system (i.e. apprentices as % of total population) is still greater than in 1985 and 1993; but at that time apprenticeships were available in only a small number of occupations.

Table 2 shows, perhaps more clearly than Figure 1, the differences between numbers in training and numbers of commencements. In 1985 and 1993, numbers in training were approximately three times the numbers of commencements, as the system consisted almost entirely of 3 year 'traditional apprenticeships' (Misko & Wybrow, 2020), but since then numbers in training have declined to around one and a half times commencing numbers, due to the entry of traineeships with their shorter term.

One difficulty with the Australian data is that because the apprenticeship system is one integrated system, data are not produced separately for traditional apprenticeships versus traineeships; this is one of the terminology difficulties flagged in the 2016 *Apprenticeships reform* report. Some of the national statistics



**Table 3.** Trade/non-trade apprentices in-training for key years.

Date	Trade (000s)	Non-trade (000s)	Total (000s)
1985	128.6	0.0	128.6
1993	122.7	14.9	137.6
2000	132.7	138.4	271.2
2002	136.5	213.1	349.6
2006	182.9	221.4	404.2
2011	214.0	245.2	459.2
2013	208.6	195.0	403.7
2019	177.7	95.2	272.9

Source: National Apprenticeship and Trainee Collection, Historical time series, NCVET.

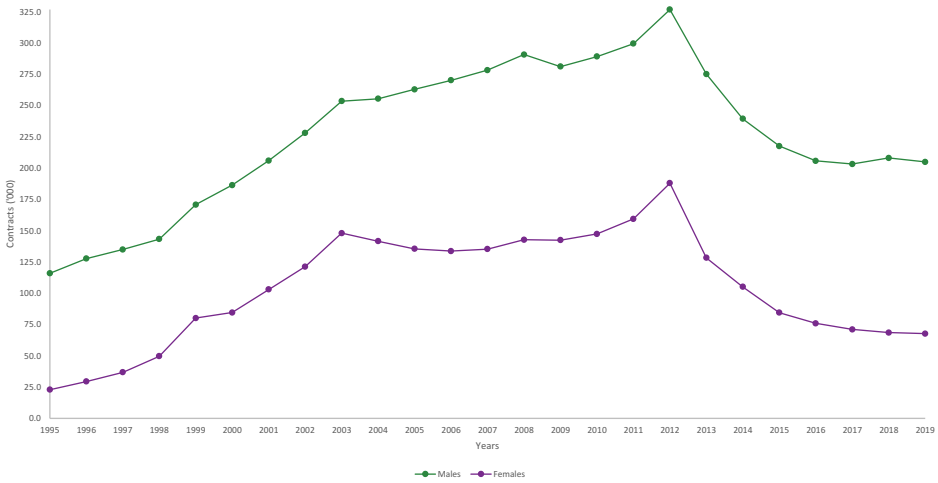
are available for 'trade/non-trade' occupations, which are a proxy for the two types of apprenticeships. [Table 3](#) shows data for the same years as [Table 2](#), with 2006 added in order to illustrate a year when trade apprenticeship numbers were roughly comparable to 2019.

[Table 3](#) shows that throughout the 2000s, there were more 'non-trade' than 'trade' apprentices in training. The year 2000 was the first time that this occurred. 'Trade' apprentices have maintained numbers comparatively well since the peak of 2011, although there has nevertheless been a decline of 17% from the peak year of 2011 to 2019. 'Non-trade' apprenticeships, however, have declined dramatically, with a fall of 150,000 (61%) in training from 2011.

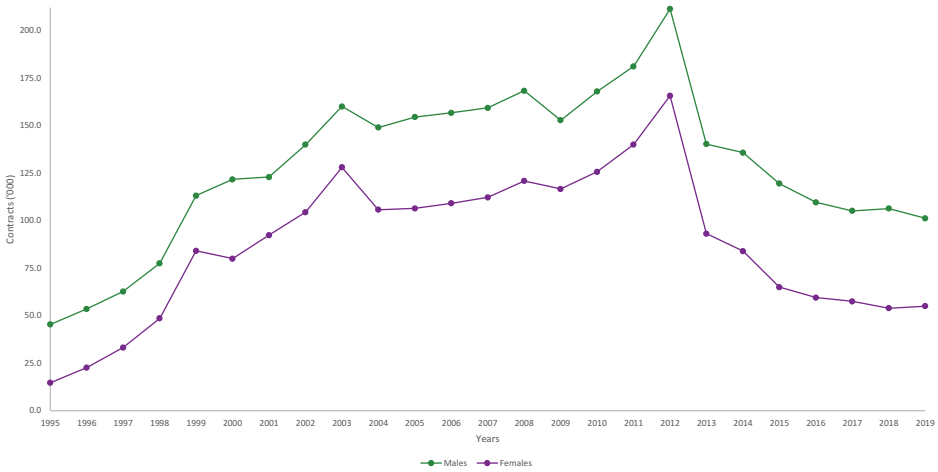
Other funding matters, apart from those covered in the reports that were analysed, have also affected apprentice numbers. Funding matters are generally enacted through Budget announcements rather than through policy documents. The rise in apprentice numbers from 1998 may be attributed partly to the implementation of the 'user choice' policy which enabled employers to select their own preferred training provider for their apprentices and trainees, rather than using the nearest TAFE college (Goozee 2013, 413–415), with funding flowing from the government to the training provider. This encouraged competition among RTOs. The later sharp rise, towards the end of the 2000s, may be influenced by decisions of State governments (encouraged by the Commonwealth government) to allow private providers of VET ('private RTOs') to access normal (non-apprentice) State government funds for training (Burke 2018), leading to a growth in provider numbers. The growth in RTO numbers was likely to have encouraged 'marketing' of apprenticeships to employers.

The gender composition of the apprenticeships is now examined. [Figures 2 and 3](#) show numbers of apprentices each year in-training and numbers of apprentices commencing, between 1995 and 2019, by gender. Unfortunately, figures are not available for the whole period from 1985, as gender data are not consistently available pre-1995.

The decline in 'non-trade' apprenticeships, a proxy for traineeships, might be expected to have affected female participation disproportionately, since



**Figure 2.** Apprentice contracts, in-training 1995–2019 by gender.



**Figure 3.** Apprentice contracts commencements 1995–2019 by gender. *Source: Derived from the National Apprentice and Trainee Collection no.101 (September 2019 estimates)*

traditional trade apprenticeships are, in Australia, overwhelmingly undertaken by men but traineeships are more likely to be in feminised occupations, as explained earlier. The relative decline in female participation is clear in [Figures 2 and 3](#). There were always far more men than women in apprenticeships throughout the period. But [Figure 2](#) shows that for over a decade, from 2001 to 2012, females attained half or more of the in-training figures of men each year (apart from a slight dip in 2006–2008 when the numbers dipped to around 48–49%). Since 2012, the gender gap has widened again, with female in-training numbers less than a third of male numbers from 2013 onwards.

Figure 3 shows that there was more gender equity in commencements than in in-training numbers, reflecting women's greater participation in shorter traineeships. The proportion of female commencements has not fallen below 50% of the male commencements since 1996. Thus in absolute numbers, men outnumber women by only two to one in terms of 'throughput', while they outnumber women by three to one in terms of numbers of people engaged in the apprenticeship system at any one time.

If Figure 2 is considered alongside Table 3, which separates out 'trade' from 'non-trade' occupations, women seem to have generally undertaken about two-thirds of traineeships, although firm data are not available to confirm this. Women's involvement in the apprenticeship system, and their position vis-a-vis males, was higher in the period when numbers were higher in traineeships, i.e. in 'non-trade' occupations.

### **Second phase analysis of key Australian government reports on apprenticeship 1985–2020**

The final part of the findings section addresses the study's second research question through the second phase analysis of the four government reports. The four issues identified in the literature review section are used to frame the discussion: the espoused and enacted purposes of apprenticeship systems, the relationship among social partners, gender issues, and expansionary risks. Table 4 summarises the attention paid by the four reports to the first three issues; the first issue was described in Table 1.

**Purpose of apprenticeship:** Table 4 shows that the emphases of the reports moved from a concern with providing good jobs for young people, and including unemployed and disadvantaged people, through a stated concern with national skill formation, to a focus on enterprise skill formation in the Apprenticeship Reform Advisory Group report. The two later reports were not, however, entirely lacking in other concerns. The 2011 Expert Panel report recommended extra support for disadvantaged apprentices and trainees (for people who were indigenous, who had a disability or literacy and numeracy challenges, or who lived in rural and remote areas); the 2016 Apprenticeships Reform report proposed a new approach to pre-apprenticeship programs to develop work readiness, especially for school-leavers.

**Gender:** While the gender composition of all of the panels and committees were predominantly male, there were considerable differences in their treatment of gender. In his report, Kirby used the figures that 96% of apprentices were male to argue for greater access for women. Both the Kirby Report and the 1991 Skills Training for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century reports were firm in their insistence that access of women to apprenticeships should increase (see Table 4). The Expert Panel, in contrast, consisting of people from masculinised industries, recommended withdrawal of Commonwealth government funding (employer

**Table 4.** Analysis of reports by composition of committee and panel, main issues and gender treatment.

Date	Report name	Composition of committee/ panel (i) <i>Issues: Involvement of social partners, gender</i>	Apprenticeship aspect fore-grounded: <i>Issue: Purpose of system</i>	Treatment of gender <i>Issue: Gender</i>
1985	Report of the Committee of Inquiry into Labour Market Programs	5 members: 4 men and 1 woman. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A senior official in the Education Department of Victoria (chair).</li> <li>• An industrial relations academic;</li> <li>• President of Queensland’s peak trade union body;</li> <li>• Head of the women’s unit in NSW TAFE;</li> <li>• Manager in manufacturing company.</li> </ul>	Youth employment; inclusivity.	Proposed equal access for traineeships and other programs for females. The report noted that 96% of trade apprentices were men, and that the shift of nursing from hospitals to colleges would reduce opportunities for females.
1991	Skills Training for the 21 <sup>st</sup> Century, A report on skills training: Apprenticeships and traineeships	12 members: 10 men, 2 women. All members of Parliament.	Youth employment; inclusivity.	Principles included enhanced access of women to trade areas and in ‘extending structured training to traditionally female occupations’.
2011	A shared responsibility: apprenticeships for the 21 <sup>st</sup> century	Seven members: 5 men, two women. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Three senior industry managers- construction, mining and aerospace.</li> <li>• Two senior trade union figures: head of the national manufacturing workers’ union and an officer of the national peak union body.</li> <li>• A former senior manager in a State TAFE system,</li> <li>• An industrial relations academic.</li> </ul>	National skill development.	Admits that its proposal to end apprenticeships and traineeships in some occupations will ‘substantially’ reduce female commencements. Suggests that more women can be attracted to traditional trade areas to compensate.
2016	Apprenticeships reform advisory group – recommendation report	Six members apart from the Chair who was a Member of Parliament: 4 men, two women, <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Two managers of Group Training Organisations.</li> <li>• A senior manager, mining industry.</li> <li>• An education and training official of an industry peak body.</li> <li>• A CEO of a 3D manufacturing industry association &amp; lobby group,</li> </ul>	Enterprise skill formation.	No mention of gender.

Note: (i) All committee members are named in the reports. Where job roles were not provided, they were found via internet searches and confirmed with a former policy official .

incentives) from occupations in industries such as retail and hospitality which women are more likely than men to undertake. The Expert Panel was open in stating that women would lose apprenticeship places if traineeships were no longer funded. Service Skills Australia, the then Industry Skills Council for the service industries, described the report's 'valued career' provision, which specifically singled out hospitality and sales workers among other occupations, as 'fundamentally insulting.' (Service Skills Australia 2011, 10); As Service Skills Australia (2011) put it, 'Recommendation five strikes at the heart of highly feminised workforces'. While the *Expert Panel Report* stated that women could be encouraged to take up traditional apprenticeships to compensate, this has not occurred, as shown earlier in this paper (Misko 2020) and is unlikely to occur, since occupational choices are generally gendered (Malin and Jacob 2019).

Role of the social partners: Table 4 shows the variable nature of the sectional interests in the panels and committees. There were wide variations. The Skills Training for the 21<sup>st</sup> century report (1991) consisted entirely of Members of Parliament. The 1985 Kirby report's five committee members, included representation from government, industry, trade unions, TAFE (a women's unit head) and an expert academic. The Expert Panel (2011) had a somewhat narrower base, with no government representation and a weighting towards industry and trade unions, with two trade union representatives and three companies represented. An expert academic was also on this panel. Table 4 shows that all three companies sitting on the Expert Panel were in masculinised industries, and one of the two trade union representatives was from a strong and militant union in a masculinised industry; the other as from the Australian trade unions' peak body. The base of the Apprenticeships Reform Advisory Group was narrower still, with one company representative, two industry associations, and two managers of Group Training Associations. There was no representation from government or TAFE, nor any expert academics.

Expansion of the system: The focus of the first two reports was clearly on expansion of the apprenticeship system, with firstly the recommendation for a new traineeship system (1985 report) and secondly the extension to more occupational areas (1991 report). The 2011 Expert Panel report did not specifically advocate for the in size of the system, but its preference for lower numbers is evidence in its recommendation for a 'discerning and strategic approach to Australian Government financial investment'. As part of this argument the report referred to it being a time of fiscal restraint, which was not in fact the case at that time. A recommendation for strategies to raise the status of apprenticeships and traineeships, however, (p. 15) indicates that there was a desire to increase the number of applicants. The 2016 report did not specifically discuss expansion or contraction of the system, but a desire for expansion may be implicit in its recommendations for an apprenticeship information hub, better careers advice for school-leavers about apprenticeships, and the raising of apprenticeship's profile. The reports which advocated for expansion did not

specifically address quality issues that might arise. The Kirby (1985: 22) report recommended that traineeships should be 'appropriately accredited and ... provide avenues to further accredited education, training and employment' and also proposed (p. 22) a national centre for TAFE teacher-training, TAFE at that time being the sole training provider but these measures are only loose proxy measures for ensuring quality in the new system.

## Discussion

The research questions for this paper were 'How did the participation rate in, and gender composition of, apprenticeships and traineeships change during the years 1985 to 2020?' and 'What were the main influences on those changes?'

The data presented in the previous section (specifically [Figure 2](#) and [Table 2](#)) shows that apprentice (including traineeship) numbers in training were around the same in 2019 (273,000) as in the year 2000 (271,000). Numbers had risen to a peak in 2012 of just over half a million people. Even discounting that artificially inflated year, in 2011 there were 459,000 apprentices. These large numbers, particularly the quarter of a million people in non-trade apprenticeships ([Table 3](#)) represent the realisation of the aims of the *Kirby report* and the *Skills Training for the 21<sup>st</sup> century report*. In 2011, 321,000 people commenced an apprenticeship. The rapid decline after 2012 and the continued decline to 2019 could be seen as the achievement of the aim of the *Expert Panel report*, which was to reduce participation.

While the Expert Panel (2011) set out to reduce the number of traineeships, since traineeship occupations were not on the national skills priority list, the Panel also sought to maintain and strengthen traditional apprenticeships. But this aim has not been achieved. [Table 3](#) indicates that traditional apprenticeships benefited from the general rise in participation to 2011, but then fell away to only 178,000 in training in 2019, representing, during the years 2006–2019 when numbers in-training were similar, a decline of 25% in the participation rate relative to population in only 13 years.

Over many decades, men have received training, a job and a qualification via apprenticeships if they worked in a traditional trade, and the creation of traineeships has meant that women have more access to these benefits through the work through they do. The data show that both women and men benefitted from the gradual, and then accelerating, increase in apprenticeship numbers up until 2012, with the gap between men's and women's participation rates closing but still significant, with women only reaching 50% of male numbers even in 2011–12 when numbers were greatest. However, because more women were in the shorter traineeships, female commencements were consistently reaching two-thirds of male commencements during the 2000s, as has been shown in this study.

Nevertheless, the analysis shows that female participation in the apprenticeship system has increased from around 5% at the time of the Kirby Report (1985), to 16% in 1995, to around 25% in 2019. Women accounted for 35% of 2019 commencements. Thus although women's participation has fallen since 2012, they have made permanent gains over the 35-year period. They are however, no better represented in traditional apprenticeships than they were in 1985. Were it not for traineeships, the relative position of women would not have changed.

The relative roles of the social partners provide, perhaps, the clearest explanation of the deliberate 'downsizing' of the apprenticeship system and its effects on women and feminised occupations. Bessant et al. (2006, 261) refer to the role of interest groups in making policy. The analysis in Table 1 indicates that certain interest groups dominated the committees writing the 2011 and 2016 reports. No government representatives were included in either of these committees; and no current representatives of the VET sector. Interest groups were free as Bessant puts it, 'battle it out' (p. 260) without moderating influences. The composition of the later committees may also explain why the two later reports lacked the emphasis on the social and employment aspects of apprenticeships that had been strong in the 1985 and 1991 reports.

An explanation for the differences between the 1985 and 2011 reports lies also in the broader political climates of the times. Although Labor (progressive) governments, which have always had a close relationship to trade unions (Humphrys 2018), were in power at both times, the two periods had different approaches to social partnership. In 1985 an 'Accord' was in place involving consensus among the social partners on economic and social issues (Humphrys 2018) which represented a European-style social partnership model. Trade unions agreed to moderate their demands and all parties agreed to focus on social as well as economic policy (Humphrys 2018). By contrast, in 2011, the Accord had ceased and there was a less consensual approach, so the trade unions had far greater influence on Labor policies than employers, with the building and metals unions dominant; in particular the AMWU had aligned itself very closely with the Labor government (Humphrys 2018, 172). This helps to explain the composition of the Expert Panel and the tone of the report. The industrial relations focus of the 2011 report is apparent in, for example, the detailed discussion of problems in 'modern awards' (national industrial relations agreements) (p.9). While these awards are linked to apprenticeships, they are not the concern of the apprenticeship system.

Once a Liberal (conservative) government was returned to power, in 2013, the trade unions lost their power; thus the Apprenticeships Reform Advisory Group in 2016 consisted only of industry representatives, including Group Training Organisations, which are also employers, as explained earlier. All of these bodies had been consistently arguing for the restoration of employment incentives to pre-2011 levels.

In other words, the Kirby report brought the social partners to one table in a spirit of co-operation and time of social progress; the Expert Panel report was dominated by industry interests shared by employers and trade unions; and the 2016 report represented only employers.

There are further reasons why employers and unions alike might favour a move back towards a pre-Kirby (1985) status quo. A comparative advantage, had been enjoyed by certain heavily unionised industries; the Kirby report (1985, 133) had shown that apprentice employment subsidies at that time were high, with a minimum of 2,600 USD and a maximum of 3,800 USD in the construction industry, amounting to 10% to 12% of apprentice wages over the four year training period; and three times that amount was provided by State governments for training the apprentice through TAFE systems. Employers and employees alike in industries serviced by traditional apprenticeships, then, benefited from the pre-Kirby system.

The fourth theme of the study is the expansion of the apprenticeship system. As noted earlier, the two reports advocating expansion of the system, in 1985 and 1991 did not anticipate quality problems that might arise. While it may be understandable that quality problems were not anticipated, it is more surprising that the 2011 and 2016 reports did not mention them, although they were widely known. There was evidence of some employers and training providers alike not providing proper quality training, having been attracted by employment incentives. Schofield (1999), who had been a member of the Kirby committee, documented these quality issues in the State of Queensland, in her highly influential report. Moreover, the funding of apprenticeships, particularly for State governments who provided funding for the off-the-job training involved, became expensive because of the large numbers involved. Even the relatively minor Commonwealth employment incentives amounted to more than 10 million AUD per year. Yet the Expert Panel report did not explicitly mention these issues, and neither did the 2016 report. These problems may be inferred to lie behind governments' rapid adoption of the Expert Panel's suggestions for reducing the size of the system, in an illustration of Smith and Brennan Kemmis (2013) assertion that over-hasty expansion can make apprentice systems vulnerable to attack.

An alternative way of addressing the issue would have been to acknowledge the problems and bring the stakeholders, including government and training providers together to discuss them, in a genuine social dialogue (International Labour Organization (ILO) 2017). Instead, trade unions and employers provided sequential input into policy. Phillips (2018, 23), reporting on a series of national consultations on apprenticeships have noted the 'entrenched stakeholder interests' and argued that 'that a substantial effort will be required to reach a new settlement between the various social parties'. Instead, this study has shown that neither employers nor trade unions seemed willing to discuss the



difficulties openly and honestly and that governments did not seem able to address the issues.

## Conclusions

The paper has presented and analysed data about the rise and fall of apprenticeship numbers and of female participation in the Australian system, in recent history. While women's position has improved compared to the situation in 1985, females have fallen behind in the share of apprenticeships they had achieved in the 2000s, due to the deliberate winding-back of traineeships.

The analysis of the government reports has indicated the power of strong interest groups when social dialogue is weak – i.e. when the social partners are not involved in continuous discussions but are brought together only occasionally, and for the last decade, barely at all. In apprentice systems, women are explicitly disadvantaged by those wishing to narrow apprenticeship systems. Thus the privilege of apprenticeship in Australia has been guarded by male interest groups from particular industries (see [Table 4](#)), who have influence on key events. It may be inferred that these interest groups have not wanted privileges and funding to flow to occupations that are feminised; occupations have been, in effect, competing for funding.

The attack on traineeships, however, seems to have left apprenticeships in general vulnerable, so that they are also in relative decline. There could, however, be other reasons for the continuing decline in the system after the initial impact of the Expert Panel report. For example, Australia will only allow citizens to undertake apprenticeships. This contrasts with policies in other countries, for example Germany, where migrants and refugees are allowed to undertake apprenticeships (Smith, Tuck, and Chatani 2018). The process of needing to sign apprentice contracts through an AASN intermediary organisation could be discouraging companies, especially small employers in traditional trades, which is where decline has been noted; Misko & Wybrow (2020) reports employer confusion on this matter, and Smith and Foley (2019) report the difficulty for all parties to an apprenticeship contract in accessing an AASN provider. It is also argued by some that apprenticeships are affected by the growth in numbers of young people wishing to attend university, which is a debating point in many countries (e.g. Deissinger and Gonon 2015b).

The change in apprentice numbers over the period 1985–2000 and the changing female participation rate illustrate the intersection of three of the themes introduced at the beginning of the paper: the role of social dialogue, access of females to apprenticeships, and the challenges of expanding apprenticeship systems while maintaining quality. The history of this period illustrates the potential of strong interest groups and ill-executed expansion measures to undermine what could otherwise have been steady increase in female participation through a measured and high quality introduction of apprenticeships or traineeships into

feminised occupations. An ill-advised marketisation of the VET system in Australia (Zoellner 2020) has also had a dysfunctional effect upon apprenticeships.

What could change? Perhaps as part of efforts to increase apprenticeship numbers, the focus could be shifted towards women and towards traineeships, as demand is clearly present. Rather than trying to persuade young women to undertake masculinised jobs, it is much more likely that women would want to continue to work in jobs they aspire to, and that training should be brought to those occupations (United Nations Economic and Social Council Commission on the Status of Women 2011). However, this must be done with the involvement and agreement of all of the social partners, as advocated by Phillips (2018), and with attention to quality, so that the expanded system has credibility (Smith and Brennan Kemmis 2013).

The paper was intended to include the year 2020. However, due to the Coronavirus, 2020 was an exceptional case, where the main apprenticeship-related concern became the preservation of apprenticeship jobs, along with the maintenance of off-the-job training from the VET system (OECD 2020). In Australia, the Commonwealth government's national response included an 'Apprentice and Trainee Re-Engagement Register' connecting displaced apprentices and trainees with employers and the 'Supporting Apprentices and Trainees' initiative which enabled employers with fewer than 20 employees to receive a 50% wage subsidy when retaining a displaced apprentice or trainee, or employing a displaced one (National Apprenticeship Employment Network 2020). Later in 2020, the Commonwealth government introduced a 'Boosting Apprenticeship Commencements' wage subsidy. The June 2020 apprentice statistics showed a decrease of 3.9% for the quarter to June 2019, with only 266,000 apprentices in training, the lowest number since 1999; commencements decreased by 14.2% on the June 2019 figures. It will be interesting to see how the post-pandemic economy recovery, assuming there is one, will influence the numbers of apprentices and the participation of women in the system; and whether the social partners are willing to work together on the rebuilding of the system.

## Notes

1. The exact meaning of the frequently-used term 'traditional apprenticeship' is unclear. The NCVER apprenticeship data collection uses the following definition: '[The term] "trade" is used for occupations under ANZSCO major group 3'-technicians and grade workers; and non-trades as all other apprenticeships and traineeships.' Misko (2020) in a paper on three traditional apprenticeships, refers to differences in usage among the State and Territories, and so for that report she constructed her own definition: 'We have compiled our own scope for the trades that we judge to represent the traditional trades.' (Misko 2020, 10).
2. There are, however, 'school-based apprenticeships', with special arrangements, occurring in generalist secondary schools (Klatt, Clarke, and Dulfer 2017).
3. <https://www.voced.edu.au/vet-knowledge-bank-landmark-documents>

4. <https://www.voced.edu.au/vet-knowledge-bank-landmark-documents>
5. <https://www.dese.gov.au/review-australian-apprenticeships-national-skills-needs-list>

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