What do employers really want? Helping vocational learners crack the code

Final report

Prepared for the Skills and Employment Division
South Australian Department of State Development

January 2017

Kate Perkins
Australian Council for Educational Research
What do employers really want? Helping vocational learners crack the code

Executive summary

In the majority of vocational qualifications, assessment of competence incorporates a structured work placement (SWP). Increasingly, host employers are using these placements as part of recruitment strategies, particularly for entry level roles. In effect, the placement is becoming the new ‘interview’, and the new interview is morphing into an extended audition where a learner’s non-technical, ‘employability’ skills may play a critical role. But do learners know what their host employers are really looking for, and to what extent are their training programs helping them to develop and demonstrate the skills that are most likely to influence an employer’s recruitment decisions?

The study outlined in the following pages was designed to explore the degree of alignment between the employability skills valued by employers, the skills learners bring to the new work context and the skills their training programs assess and/or actively foster. It was undertaken for the SA Department of State Development (SDS) in conjunction with the City of Playford, and focused on two industry sectors, child care and aged care. It involved employers, trainers and learners associated with two training programs operating in Adelaide’s northern suburbs and funded through the SA WorkReady Program. A key feature of the study was the trialling of the Core Skills for Work developmental Framework (CSfW) to explore its potential as a systematic mapping and consultation tool.

A different methodology was used for each industry sector. In the child care component, the WorkReady program provided a case study in which the CSfW was used to identify host employer priorities and learner skills prior to the mapping of the qualification they were undertaking - the CIII in Early Childhood Education and Care. The aged care component had a broader focus, with four major South Australian employers providing detailed input regarding their employability skills priorities. In this sector, the WorkReady program provided insights into the strengths and perceived gaps of the entry-level qualification, the CIII in Individual Support, and considered the extent to which the Registered Training Organisation (RTO) was able to integrate additional training to address these gaps. It also tested the potential to develop a version of the CSfW contextualised to the industry.

Key findings

1. **Employability skills are more highly valued than technical skills, but only some are ‘mission critical’**
When making recruitment decisions, the employers interviewed placed little emphasis on technical skills, including knowledge of tasks, industry regulations and protocols. One employer captured the general feeling in both sectors when she said, ‘We can teach people what they need to know about all of that in a week’. They placed their highest priority on the skills to Connect and work with others (CSfW 2b), and a learner who could demonstrate these ‘mission critical’ skills was likely to be offered employment after work placement.
While these employers actively looked for learners on work placement who could form relationships with their direct ‘clients’, namely children or elderly residents, they also paid close attention to the ways in which learners connected and communicated with families, other employees and supervisors. In child care in particular, host employers placed a significant emphasis on a learner’s ability to ‘fit in’. When making recruitment decisions, they sought feedback on this aspect from other educators, as well as from the team leader, so making an effort to connect with other team members should be a priority for those on placement.

However, prior to hearing from the employers, the trainers placed a greater emphasis on connecting and communicating with children and working with rights, roles and protocols. Learners believed directors would be looking for many things, and initially identified nine of the ten CSfW Skill Areas as ‘mission critical.’ When pressed to narrow this down, they also gave preference to working with rights, roles and protocols and connecting and working with children. Learners welcomed the inside information about their host employers’ very reasonable expectations. They commented that it had reduced their anxiety about performing well during their auditions, focused their attention on the strengths they could bring to the new context and helped them identify an area they wanted to improve.

2. The CSfW makes it possible to pinpoint the nature and level of sophistication of mission critical skills
Without the CSfW, some employers found it challenging to articulate what they were looking for in a potential new recruit. For example, one Childcare Centre Director said, ‘I just know it when I see it’. A Human Resources manager in aged care took this even further, saying, ‘I want people with IT!’

The CSFW helped employers tease out key elements of it and IT. The descriptors made it possible to clarify, describe and compare the competencies each employer valued most and to pinpoint their expectations of a learner at the beginning and end of a work placement. In the process of using it, employers also re-examined, and, in some cases, modified their expectations.

Having a shared set of reference points also made it possible to compare stakeholder priorities within and across sectors. An interesting finding was that employers in both sectors prioritised Connect and work with others, but had different expectations about the appropriate level of sophistication expected. In child care, host employers wanted skills aligned to Stage 3, but in aged care employers wanted personal care workers with a set of skills that ranged across Stages 3 and 4. The need for skills at these levels was also borne out by empirical observation of the work contexts in each sector, and a review of demographics and trends.

3. Alignment between employer priorities and the qualifications
The mapping of the qualifications’ Performance Criteria (PCs) against the CSfW found some areas of alignment with employer priorities, and some mismatches and gaps.

• In child care, the qualification reflected employer expectations about the level of a graduate’s skills in building a rapport with children, but in the few Performance Criteria that explicitly addressed interactions with other team members, the level of sophistication was generally lower than that identified by the directors.

• In aged care, skills related to connecting and working with residents appeared to be at a lower level than those identified by employers, or needed by an industry trying to shift towards a client-directed care model. There was also limited explicit coverage of the skills required to interact with families, supervisors, health professionals, life style co-ordinators, kitchen staff and other PCWs.

The mapping in this study goes beyond the individual programs considered. It raises issues for exploration in future iterations of the training package. In each qualification, the lack of emphasis on the skills required to connect and work with other key groups, particularly co-workers, goes beyond the misalignment with participating employers’ needs, raising questions about what an entry-level qualification should be addressing.
Many of the (relatively few) PCs explicitly related to connecting and working with others were contained in Work with Diverse People, a generic unit incorporated into many Community Services qualifications. Is there an assumption that industry needs are uniform across sectors because both roles have been aligned with level 3 of the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF)? This study raises questions about this that should be explored further, particularly in light of suggestions that entry-level care qualifications could become even more generic. Not withstanding this, the PCs in this generic unit lack the level of detail that would be required to ensure consistent interpretation by trainers and assessors within a sector. It would be illuminating to find out how this is currently being handled.

Conclusions

The benefits of clarifying and aligning stakeholder expectations

In programs designed to assist people into work, stakeholders may have different ideas about the non-technical skills an individual will need to get a job. In establishing employer priorities, the key to learner skills development may well lie in moving beyond labels like ‘team player’ to drill down into the detail of what these look like in practice within an organisational and industry context.

The study demonstrated that identifying the skills that employers see as ‘mission critical’ was a basis for aligning stakeholders’ expectations and priorities. Although it was not possible to take this very far, the pilot also identified some ways in which trainers, employers and learners might focus their attention on employability skills development that would directly enhance employment outcomes.

Entry level qualifications and work readiness

While there is real value in incorporating a qualification into a pre-employment program, the inadequate coverage of ‘mission critical’ skills in the qualifications considered suggests that they may not be enough, on their own, to help a learner develop and demonstrate the skills an employer wants to see during a work placement audition. This increases the onus on the RTO to find ways of integrating relevant skills training into the existing training program, and/or of finding ways of providing additional assistance within limited timeframes and budgets.

If the findings of this study prove to reflect a broader industry situation, there could be some merit in the idea of treating these entry-level qualifications as version of the ‘White card’ used in the construction industry. The qualification would indicate that the holder has enough basic training to go onsite and start working without being a danger to themselves or others. Alternatively, is there an argument, as one employer suggested, for dispensing with relatively short ‘pressure cooker’ programs in the care sectors in favour of structured traineeships that incorporate on-and-off-the-job training over an extended period?

Whatever the future scenario, the pilot’s mapping, case studies and empirical observations raise questions about the current coverage and emphasis of these entry-level qualifications. Further consultation with a broader range of industry members would be required to establish whether the study’s findings apply more broadly. If they do, this would have implications for the next iteration of the qualifications concerned. It would also suggest that a similar exercise in other industry sectors could be beneficial. As part of on-going VET reform, it also suggests there may be a need to explore the role and coverage of any ‘entry level’ qualification, and consider the roles and responsibilities of other stakeholders. How far can a preparatory qualification actually go? What should sit with the RTO? What is an employer’s responsibility? What should a learner be expected to bring to the equation?

Developing learner skills

During their work placements, many of the learners faced challenges that tested their interpersonal skills. They responded positively to the limited range of interventions that were possible during the pilot, and might have benefited from more extensive practical sessions. The study suggests that there could be value in incorporating an explicit focus on the work placement as an audition, and linking learner goal setting, skill development activities and employer feedback directly to this. This would also provide a foundation for the development of program monitoring and reporting processes that could capture a learner’s progress.
This still leaves the challenge of finding a way to incorporate such sessions into a training program.

Notwithstanding the gaps and mismatches in coverage of relevant skills, some ‘integration points’ were identified in the two qualifications that could act as anchors for specific skills training relevant to the audition. However, even with an integrated approach, there may still need to be some adjustment made to timeframes and funding arrangements, particularly in short programs.

**The role of the CSfW**

The CSfW appeared to be an effective tool for systematically gathering and presenting stakeholder input, and for exploring their expectations. It provided a level of precision to which employers, learners and trainers could relate, and made it easy to share information between different groups. While the generic framework was adequate to the task, work with aged care employers suggests that it is possible, and potentially useful, to develop versions of the CSfW contextualised for an industry and role. The approach used during the project could be adapted for any industry/training context.

Although there is real potential for the CSfW to enhance approaches to employability skills in vocational learning, the experience of the pilot is a reminder that this will only work if employers and trainers gain a working knowledge of the CSfW, and have the opportunity to explore its applications in their own settings. In conjunction with professional development around the framework itself, trainers may also need an introduction to specific strategies to foster skills development. Experience with the Australian Core Skills Framework (ACSF) suggests that once trainers and employers start to see the benefits, the process could take on its own momentum.

**Possible next steps**

The project’s findings can only be considered preliminary, and need to be validated through broader industry consultation. However, the pilot’s processes and draft outputs could provide a solid platform for this.

The work involving the RTOs has demonstrated the importance of investing time in structured training around the CSfW itself. Even highly experienced trainers identified a need to ‘learn about’ and ‘learn how’ to use the CSfW in preparation for enhancing their focus on mission critical skills. The project has provided insights into the kinds of professional development activities that could be most useful, and the contextualised examples could become useful learning resources within the aged and child care industries.

There is also potential for application of the process in other industry contexts. Feedback from members of the disability sector suggests that this would be an obvious place to begin, but the general process is now well enough developed to be adapted to any industry sector. Career development practitioners have also expressed interest in the process and findings.
Executive Summary

1. Setting the scene 8
   1.1 Background
   1.2 Aims
   1.3 The approach
   1.4 The CSfW

2. Mission critical skills in child care 12
   2.1 Introduction
   2.2 The WorkReady program
   2.3 Mission Critical skills: employer perspectives
   2.4 Mission Critical Skills: the RTO perspective
   2.5 Communicating and connecting in child care
   2.6 Mapping the qualification
   2.7 Fostering employability skills in the broader training program
   2.8 Working with learners
   2.9 Learner case studies
   2.10 Monitoring and reporting
   2.11 Child care: observations

3. Mission critical skills in residential aged care 31
   3.1 Introduction
   3.2 The industry context
   3.3 Mission Critical skills: employer perspectives
   3.4 Communicating and connecting in residential aged care
   3.5 Mission critical skills: mapping the qualification
   3.6 Aged care: observations

4. Discussion 44
   4.1 Identifying mission critical skills
   4.2 Alignment with the qualifications
   4.3 Helping learners develop skills
   4.4 Monitoring and reporting
   4.5 Implications for the training package
   4.6 Alignment with the AQF
   4.7 The role of the CSfW

5. Conclusions 48

References 50
Tables and Figures

Table 1.1 Example of the qualification mapping process 10
Table 2.1 The Directors’ cut: cracking the code for learners in child care 15
Table 2.2 Which skills do child care employers value? 15
Table 2.3 RTO perspective on mission critical skills in child care 16
Table 2.4 Child care: Performance Criteria involving skills in communicating and interacting with others 21
Table 3.1 Aged care: PCW Stage 4 Skill Set 37
Table 3.2 Interacting with others in aged care: Where is the focus? 39
Table 3.3 Examples of Performance Criteria relevant to communicating and interacting with others in aged care 40
Table 3.4 ‘Provide individualised support’. Example of mapping results 41

Fig 1.1 Employability skills: checking for alignment 8
Fig 1.2 Research questions 9
Fig 1.3 CSfW Skill Areas 11
Fig 1.4 CSfW stages of development 11
Fig 1.5 CSfW key principles 11
Fig 2.1 Childcare: Interacting with others 17
Fig 2.2. CIII in Early Childhood Education and Care: CSfW Skill Areas 18
Fig 2.3 Interacting with others in child care: qualification emphasis 19
Fig 2.4 Facilitating skills development 22
Fig 2.5. Scenario exercise: Train wreck 26
Fig 3.1 The Customer Directed Care Continuum 32
Fig 3.2 Aged care workers 2005: Employers’ priority skill areas 32
Fig 3.3 Differentiating between Skill Areas in Cluster 2, ‘Interact with others’ 35
Fig 3.4 Aged care: Interacting with others 37
Fig 3.5 CIII in Individual Support: Analysis of Performance Criteria 38
Fig 3.6 Interacting with others: qualification emphasis 39
Fig 4.1 AQF level 3 criteria 47

Attachments

1. Employer expectations in child care: CSfW Table 2b:
2. Employer expectations in aged care: Draft Cluster 2 Skill Set

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank all those who contributed to this project. Everyone involved went far beyond expectations to grapple with conceptual issues and a multitude of logistical issues, anticipated and otherwise. My particular thanks go to Michelle Potts, Kerry Johnson, Lisa Tregenza, Yvette Williams and Ken Daniel.
1 Setting the scene

1.1 Background
In the majority of national entry level qualifications, assessment of competence incorporates a structured work placement (SWP). Increasingly, host employers are using these placements as part of their recruitment strategies. In effect, the placement is becoming the new ‘interview’.

But as vocational learners grapple with the academic requirements of their courses and try to work out how to put theory into practice, they are also undergoing far more than an interview. They are involved in an extended audition where their non-technical, ‘employability’ skills are under scrutiny.

This is challenging for anyone, but may be particularly so for learners in pre-employment programs, who are not only novices to the industry, but often to the world of work itself. Do these learners know what their host employers are looking for?

Since the early 1990’s, Australian employers have been generating lists of employability skills that are intended to help new entrants in this regard. In nationally accredited vocational qualifications, the Australian Council of Commerce and Industry/Business Council of Australia list (ACCI/BCA, 2002) has been the main reference point for many years. However, in national consultations conducted by the Ithaca Group (2011) there was strong feedback from employers and educators that lists such as these do not provide the nuanced insights that a vocational learner might need, and that these one-size-fits-all instruments are unable to reflect the highly contextualised nature of employability skills. So where does this leave entry-level vocational learners? How far are the qualifications they are undertaking preparing them for the workplace, and more specifically, how are they being prepared for the extended audition that could lead to their first job in the industry?

The study outlined in the following pages was designed to explore the degree of alignment between the skills valued by employers, the skills learners bring to the new work context and the skills their training programs assess and/or actively foster. (See Fig 1.1)

It was undertaken for the SA Department of State Development (SDS) in conjunction with the City of Playford, and focused on two industry sectors, child care and aged care. It involved employers, trainers and learners associated with two training programs operating in Adelaide’s northern suburbs and funded through the SA WorkReady Program, and several other major employers in the aged care sector.

A key feature of the project was the trialling of the Core Skills for Work developmental Framework (CSfW) (Ithaca Group, 2013) to consider its potential as a tool to provide a common language and reference points for stakeholder consultation, qualification mapping, monitoring and reporting.

Fig 1.1. Employability skills: checking for alignment
1.2 Aims

To identify:

- the employability skills that a group of employers in aged care and child care see as ‘mission critical’ when recruiting new entrants;
- the degree to which each industry’s entry-level VET qualification reflects these employers’ priorities and supports the explicit development/demonstration of valued skills;
- other aspects of the training programs that may assist learners to develop and demonstrate these skills;

To evaluate:

- the CSfW’s usefulness as a tool to inform the development of relevant employability skills in entry-level vocational programs in aged and child care.

1.3 The approach

What did the pilot seek to find out?

Fig 1.2 outlines the four research questions that focused the study design.

Identifying and engaging with participants

Register Training Organisations (RTOs)

Four RTOs with reputations as quality training providers were approached to participate in the project. Following timing issues caused by a major change in state funding models, only two were able to proceed.

These RTOs each nominated one or two managers and an experienced trainer to participate in the process. The original plan was that they would be involved in an intensive two day program to build their understanding of the CSfW, identify the ways in which they already address the employability skills and consider ways in which they could integrate further skills’ development training as appropriate.

Timing issues made this workshop impossible to schedule, particularly in relation to one RTO where a series of unforeseen events led to the nominated trainer changing three times. In the end, each trainer only received an initial three hour briefing.

Employers

The child care RTO approached two child care directors who would be hosting learners from their program, and they participated in several one-on-one interviews conducted at their centres.

Due to delays in the identification of host employers for the aged care program, the project leader approached four aged care organisations with a reputation for Best Practice. One CEO and senior staff members responsible for clinical management, recruitment and training participated in individual interviews. The majority later participated in a half day workshop to establish their expectations of new recruits against the CSfW descriptors and explore the potential to contextualise the CSfW for their industry.

Fig 1.2 Research questions

1. Which care skills for work (CSfW) do employers value most in an entry level employee, and what level of sophistication do they expect? Do trainers and learners have the same perceptions of what is important?

2. How are these CSfW addressed within the relevant VET qualification, and in other parts of the training program?

3. How might learners’ entry level performance in these skills be identified, and progress tracked?

4. What can we learn from this pilot? What do we need to find out more about?
**Learners**

Learners in each program received an overview of the project and were invited to participate. All those in the child care program consented and, over their 20 week program, the majority took part in a self awareness exercise, a class discussion and several individual interviews. In the aged care program, the eight week time frame for the theory component made it impossible to undertake a similar range of activities. However, a small group of participants volunteered to participate in phone interviews prior to starting work placement.

**Qualification mapping**

The relevant units from the *Certificate III in Early Childhood Education and Care* and the *CIII in Individual Support* were mapped to the CSfW, with particular attention paid to those skills identified by employers as ‘mission critical’ for those undertaking a work placement.

In the qualifications, each unit of competency contains the following statement:

The Foundation Skills describe those required skills (language, literacy, numeracy and employment skills) that are essential to performance.

Foundation skills essential to performance are explicit in the performance criteria of this unit of competency.

In any VET qualification, each unit contains a small set of Elements which describe an essential outcome, i.e. something a learner should be able to demonstrate. Each Element has an associated set of Performance Criteria (PCs) that describe more specifically what a learner must be able to do (See Table 1.1).

These Elements and PCs are determined through an extensive consultation process involving industry members and, once ratified, are seen as Industry Standards. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that analysis of the PCs against the CSfW should provide a detailed picture of both the technical and non-technical skills that employers in aged and child care have deemed to be essential for individuals taking up entry level roles.

For this project, the PCs were analysed in several ways to identify the coverage and emphasis of employability skills in each qualification. There were two main aspects to the mapping process:

- In each unit, the PCs in each unit were mapped to the CSfW to identify which of the ten Skill Areas were explicitly required to achieve the PC.
- Each PC was also classified according to the whether its achievement involved an interaction with another person or group, and if so, which ones.
- The PCs involving interaction with others were further analysed to determine the CSfW stage of development that would be required.
- Information in the Companion Volume, particularly Required Knowledge, was also considered to determine whether assessors were being asked to take additional detail into account when determining competency. On occasion, the trainers also provided insights into their interpretation of the assessment requirements.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Element</th>
<th>Performance Criteria</th>
<th>interaction with</th>
<th>CSfW Skill Area</th>
<th>Estimated stage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elements define the essential outcome</td>
<td>Performance Criteria specify the level of performance required to demonstrate achievement off the element</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Gather information about the child through observation</td>
<td>1.1 Observe, listen and talk with children for sustained periods of time 1.2 Pay close attention to what the child is saying and doing 1.3 Identify their interests, ideas, knowledge and skills</td>
<td>Child</td>
<td>2a/2b</td>
<td>2/3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Child</td>
<td>2b</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Child</td>
<td>2b</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Gather information about the child from secondary sources</td>
<td>2.1 Use child records to collect information about each child 2.2 Collaborate with family and other educators to collect information about each child’s needs, interests, skills and cultural practices</td>
<td>Organisational documents</td>
<td>2a</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Family</td>
<td>2b</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Other educators</td>
<td>2b</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1.4 The CSfW

The Core Skills for Work developmental Framework (CSfW) provided the scaffolding for the project’s investigations into the nature of employability skills in aged and child care.

The CSfW describes ten non-technical Skill Areas that Australian employers value highly, and which can be learned and/or taught (See Fig 1.3).

While all are likely to play some part in a job role, employers in a particular industry may place a greater value on some skills than on others. In this project, these priority areas are referred to as Mission Critical skills.

In each Skill Area, the CSfW provides detailed descriptors of performance across five stages of development, from novice to expert (Fig 1.4). The stages are based on research that characterises performance according to an individual’s relationship to the explicit and implicit rules governing behaviour in different contexts (Fig 1.5). To progress, an individual needs hands-on experience, a lot of practice and the opportunity to reflect on what works, what doesn’t and why (Ithaca Group, 2011).

---

CSfW: Ten Skill Areas

Cluster 1: Navigate the world of work
1a. Manage career and work life
1b. Work with rights, roles and protocols

Cluster 2: Interact with others
2a. Communicate for work
2b. Connect and work with others
2c. Recognise and utilise diverse perspectives

Cluster 3: Get the work done
3a. Plan and organise
3b. Make decisions
3c. Identify and solve problems
3d. Create and innovate
3e. Work in a digital world

---

1. No-one is exempt. We all go through these stages, but may not reach expert in every part of our lives!
2. Performance is highly sensitive to context. An individual may demonstrate the same skills at a more advanced stage in highly familiar contexts than in a new context. Thus, it is misleading to suggest that these skills are directly ‘transferrable’ from one context to another. It is more useful to focus on how someone learns to adapt and apply what they have learned from other situations to the new context within which they find themselves. Perhaps ironically, various of the skills can assist with this process. The more sophisticated one’s skills, the more quickly one is likely to get back up to speed. However, the performance of any individual who changes jobs or roles will go backwards for a time!
3. We all have ‘spiky profiles’ An individual is likely to be at different stages in different Skill Areas, and even across focus areas within one Skill Area.
4. The journey is not actually a continuum The move from capable to proficient requires a leap from the concrete to the conceptual. People may require assistance to do this.
5. Performance and progress can be influenced While we all learn by doing, research suggests that the process can be enhanced when the challenges and supports provided are appropriate to the individual’s current stage of development - so it helps if a trainer knows what that is. It also helps if individuals are actively aware of their strengths, consider how they might adapt and apply their skills in a new context, and receive specific, actionable feedback and skilled debriefings that facilitate deep reflection. In many cases, performance can also be improved through the introduction of practical processes and strategies (e.g. how to ask a question that shows interest, how to manage a problem that arises with a peer, when and how to ask for help without feeling stupid).
2 Mission critical skills in child care

2.1 Introduction
This section provides:

- an overview of the WorkReady program within which the investigation took place;
- details of the processes used to identify employer and trainer perspectives on mission critical skills for those seeking to enter the industry as child care educators, and an outline of findings;
- a picture of the highest priority mission critical skill - Connect and Work with others- in action in this industry context;
- a description of the coverage and emphasis of mission critical skills in the Certificate III in Early Childhood Education and Care obtained through a mapping to the CSfW, plus examples of approaches to the development of mission critical skills within the broader training program; and
- an outline of interactions with the learners in the WorkReady Program, including two case studies.

2.2 The WorkReady program

RTO A is a small private company that focuses exclusively on childcare qualifications. It has a close and exclusive working relationship with a major SA childcare provider that has centres throughout metropolitan Adelaide, including a number in the northern suburbs. The childcare provider and the RTO have an established model in which Centre Directors play a key role in the selection of training program participants, provide work placements and feedback and, ultimately, employ many of the RTO’s graduates.

Although it involved more work for them, the directors of the child care centres saw a real benefit in hosting VET learners, because it gave them the opportunity to see how these potential employees operated under normal working conditions. As one director observed,

*To be honest, it’s not that hard to sell yourself in an interview, but if you aren’t what you say you are it will be obvious to everyone in a couple of months!*

Although new recruits were generally employed on casual contracts which allowed some flexibility regarding whether they became permanent, the Directors preferred hiring someone who had been on structured work placement largely because it was, in fact, structured. Casual staff had to go wherever they were needed on the day, but vocational learners were supernumeraries who were rotated through each of the rooms, staying long enough in each to learn the ropes and relax. The directors felt this gave the learners a genuine opportunity to show whether they could ‘fit in’.

**Selection process**

Advertising and referrals to the WorkReady program attracted 45 applicants for 15 places. Applicants were involved in a structured three hour selection process, involving a group activity, a literacy and numeracy assessment and an interview with a panel consisting of seven directors and the RTO’s general manager. This group had no formal evaluation criteria and made final selections after general discussion.

**Participant profile**

All successful applicants were female, ranging in age from 17 to late 30s, but with the majority being under 21. Most had completed year 12.

Some had qualifications or experience with direct relevance to childcare (e.g. one had worked as a School Support Officer, another volunteered at a camp for children with a disability, two were mothers wanting to return to work, two others had very young siblings).

Four had never had a paid job, but others had worked part time in hospitality or retail settings. One had been almost continuously employed in retail work since starting part time work at the age of 14.

About a third of learners had literacy issues identified through the initial test and through self disclosure.
2. CHILD CARE

The curriculum

RTO A’s WorkReady program focused on the delivery of the industry’s entry-level qualification, the CIII in Early Childhood Education and Care. By regulation, all child educators must hold, or be actively studying towards, this qualification.

Logistics

The program ran over a 20 week period. Learners attended classroom-based training for three days a week, and undertook 120 hours of structured work placement spread throughout the program.

The trainer and additional support

The program was delivered by a trainer with an extensive background in the industry and recognised training expertise. For the first time, funding had also been provided for support services. A counsellor was available several times a week to assist any learner facing issues that might affect their ability to finish the course. Initially, there was also a language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) specialist, but she got another job soon after commencement and was unable to be replaced. The trainer therefore provided additional assistance to those who needed it, including running some additional study sessions.

The ‘audition’ sites

Each learner was assigned to one of seven of the chain’s child care centres. These were spread across the northern suburbs, with some in new areas with limited public transport. Some care was taken to place trainees in centres they could access. The centres were open from Monday to Friday, from 6.30am to 6.30pm, but the trainees were not expected to undertake early shifts.

The centres were bright, busy places, with children organised by age in babies’, toddlers’ and kinda rooms. While many children were dropped off and picked up before 9am and after 5pm, a steady stream of children also arrived and left throughout the day. Each room was staffed by a small team with a designated team leader according to regulated staff:child ratios. The learners were additional to these requirements.

As they rotated between the rooms over the course of their training, learners were likely to undertake most of the tasks associated with the role of a child care educator. They also undertook specific activities related to their assessments, including formal observations of a child with behaviour issues and the design and delivery of a structured learning activity.

2.3. Mission critical skills: employer perspectives

Process

Each centre director was interviewed twice, for between 40 and 60 minutes. Interviews were conducted at their respective centres. While one director was able to withdraw to a private room, the other spoke to the project leader while also looking after the reception desk. Both interviews were punctuated by the directors’ unscheduled conversations with parents, children and team members.

A four-step process was used to establish and describe the skills the directors saw as ‘mission critical’ for child care educators in their centres.

1. Each director was asked about the processes and criteria they used when selecting from applicants who were not part of a vocational work placement program. They then discussed how these compared with their approach to evaluating a trainee on work placement.

2. They were then shown the 10 CSfW Skill Areas and asked to select the three they saw as ‘mission critical for a new entrant, and then, from these, the one they saw as most important.

3. Following a brief introduction to the full CSfW framework, the directors focused on the Skill Area they had identified as the top priority. They used the CSfW table to identify the performance descriptors and stage of development that best captured the behaviours they expected to see in a trainee by the end of a work placement. They also provided specific examples of these behaviours.

4. Finally, the directors used the CSfW tables to identify the stage of development they would expect to see in a new entrant after 6 months in their employment, and again after two years.
Findings

Step 1. Selecting applicants for educator positions

The directors regularly conducted interviews for entry level positions. Neither hired people on the basis of their technical knowledge. In fact, one director suggested that she could teach a new entrant what they needed to know ‘in a week’. This meant that the directors were happy to take on new entrants to the industry who did not have a Certificate III, as long as they were committed to studying for it.

When asked what they looked for when considering applicants, neither director had a clearly articulated set of criteria - but this did not mean they did not know what they were looking for! For one director it was all about her own intuition:

You just know if someone’s right. It’s a gut feeling. You feel a connectedness, you can see an attitude...

While she found it difficult to provide anything more specific than this, the other director went a little further:

They need to make eye contact and carry on a conversation. I know they’re nervous so I take that into account. As we chat, I try to work out how quickly we can mould them into what we need.

They had different ideas about the attitude and demeanour of the people they wanted. While one said, ‘I look for bubbly, happy people - that’s very important’, the other said,

You don’t only want people who are outgoing. It’s good to have someone who is quiet and motherly. When the children are a bit hyper, these are the people who can calm a room as soon as they walk in.

Both directors ran their selection interviews as informal chats. One also asked applicants to respond to a photo or a short written scenario she had developed. While there were no ‘right’ answers, the exercise gave her some insights into the way applicants were thinking.

‘I might show them a photo of a group of children playing with blocks. One child is off to one side, playing alone. I ask them what they would see as their role in this situation.

Most say they would try to persuade the child to join in with the others, but sometimes someone will say that it depends on what you are trying to achieve. They might say that they’d engage with him one on one if it looked like he was happy to play alone, but if he always played alone, and seemed to have trouble mixing with other children, they might try different ways to get him to join in. This is good thinking.

Step 2. Identifying mission critical Skill Areas

When asked to consider which of the ten CSfW Skill Areas they valued most when selecting a new employee (by interview or work placement) each director independently selected Cluster 2, Interact with others with Skill Areas in the following order:

1. Connect and work with others (CSfW 2a)
2. Communicate for work (2a)
3. Recognise and utilise diverse perspectives (2c)

When they looked at the detailed Performance Features for each Skill Area, they narrowed it down further, each deciding that only the speaking and listening component of 2a and the conflict resolution component of 2c were mission critical.

Step 3. Describing expectations

The CSfW descriptors proved very useful for clarifying the directors’ expectations about the level of skills sophistication they would expect of a learner by the end of 120 hours of work placement, and the associated behaviours that would influence their recruitment decisions. Most of their examples related to Stage 2 or 3 of Connect and work with others (See Table 2.1).

Although the need for someone to be ‘good with children’ was implied, the directors were more interested in how the learner interacted with other staff. As one explained, ‘We have to know if this person will fit in with us.’

This was an important piece of information in its own right and prompted a further insight. Although the directors tried to spend some time with each trainee, they had limited interaction on a daily basis. When deciding whether to recruit a trainee, they relied on feedback from team leaders and other child care educators. This informal evaluation process began almost immediately. For example, for inductions, one director always used a staff member ‘who loves doing orientations’ and whose feedback she trusts:

If she tells me that the new person asked a lot of questions I know that’s a good sign! I want to see that they show a genuine interest and aren’t afraid to ask. Any question at all is better than just nodding their head all the time.

Step 4. Expectations about stages of development

Within six to twelve months of employment, the directors expected a new entrant to have progressed to Stage 3 in mission critical areas. At this point they would consider offering permanent employment if they had a place available (See Table 2.2).
### Table 2.1. The Directors’ Cut: cracking the code for learners in child care

#### The audition: what did employers look for?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mission critical skill area</th>
<th>Interaction with children</th>
<th>Interaction with other staff</th>
<th>Interaction with parents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>2b</strong> Connect and work with others</td>
<td>Do children appear to like them? Do they know children’s names? Can they identify each child’s interests and engage with them?</td>
<td>Do they fit in? Are other educators comfortable to work with them? Are they forming effective relationships? Do they make an effort to get on with everybody?</td>
<td>Are they always friendly? Do they introduce themselves to parents they haven’t met? Do they quickly learn to recognise whose parents are whose? Can they have a general conversation with a parent? Do they initiate the conversation?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2a</strong> Communicate for work</td>
<td>Are they cuddly and nurturing with babies? Do they pick up a crying baby and make an effort to soothe him/her? Do they have some strategies to distract a child who is upset? (Do they have to be asked to do this?)</td>
<td>Are they comfortable to lead group activities? Can they answer the phone in their room, give the right information and/or follow up appropriately?</td>
<td>Do parents appear to like them? Have any parents provided positive feedback?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>1b</strong> Work with rights, roles and protocols</td>
<td>Even though they may prefer one age group, can they connect with babies, toddlers and pre-schoolers?</td>
<td>Are they comfortable to speak to the Director to share information, ask questions or discuss issues?</td>
<td>Advanced (NOT expected of a learner) Can they pick up signs that a parent has had a bad day (and perhaps ask ‘Are you OK?’)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3d.</strong> Create and innovate</td>
<td>Are they comfortable to initiate activities with individual children?</td>
<td>Do they ask questions? Do they volunteer to try new things?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Are they comfortable to ask for help? ‘Can you show me…’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 2.2: Which skills do child care employers value?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skill Area</th>
<th>What it covers</th>
<th>Learner</th>
<th>6 mths</th>
<th>12 mths</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>2b. Connect and work with others</strong></td>
<td>Skills to cooperate and collaborate with others in order to get the work done, including those we need to manage our own behaviour, be sensitive to the needs of others and work as a member of a team.</td>
<td>CSfW Stage 2/3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2a Communicate for work</strong></td>
<td>The transactional communication skills we need to get work done, including listening and understanding and getting our messages across to others.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2/3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2c Recognise and utilise diverse perspectives – conflict resolution</strong></td>
<td>Skills to recognise, respect and build on the different perspectives and behaviours that people bring to work situations including skills to avoid or manage conflict.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2.4 Mission Critical skills: the RTO perspective

Process
Prior to the employer interviews, the RTO’s trainer and general manager were introduced to the CSfW as part of the preparatory three hour workshop. Like the directors, they used it to:

- select the three Skill Areas they saw as ‘mission critical’; and
- identify the Performance Features and stages of development that they believed best captured the behaviours they expected of learners by the end of the program.

Findings
The two RTO representatives initially found it difficult to narrow mission critical requirements down to three Skill Areas. They selected six, arguing that it was essential for a new entrant to:

- understand and follow the regulations and organisational protocols under which child care was conducted, and follow the child care centre’s specific procedures (1b);
- quickly build relationships with children, establish connections with parents and work effectively with other educators and the team leader (2b);
- plan and organise tasks generally, organise specific activities to run with the children and plan and organise their study commitments (3a);
- make ‘901 decisions every day’ (3b);
- solve many (small) problems, and refer more complex issues to their supervisor (3c); and
- be creative (3d).

When gently pressured to place these in priority order, they suggested having three sets of mission critical skills - one for working with children, one for working as a member of a child care centre and one for participation in the class-based component of the program. Using the CSfW descriptors as a guide, they then identified the stages they thought were appropriate by the end of the program. As Table 2.3 illustrates:

- they saw differences across the three areas, in terms of the priorities themselves, their order of importance and the level of sophistication required;
- Connect and work with others was the only Skill Area that figured under all three headings;
- Communicate for Work was seen as a feature of working with children and in class, but was not in the top three for working as a member of a child care centre.

Thus, there was common ground between the RTO’s perceptions of priorities and those of the Centre directors. However, in the child centre context, the RTO placed much greater emphasis on the skills and knowledge associated with working with rights, roles and protocols. The RTO also highlighted problem solving and creativity, where these had been only minor considerations for the directors.

Although the original intention had been to focus on discussing and developing three mission critical skill areas with learners, the RTO sensibly suggested that it would be more manageable to place the emphasis on the directors’ highest priority Skill Area, Connect and work with others.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Priority</th>
<th>Child focus</th>
<th>Child care centre focus</th>
<th>Class/study focus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Connect and work with others (children/family) Stage 3</td>
<td>Work with rights, roles and protocols Stage 2</td>
<td>Plan and organise Stage 2/3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Create and innovate Stage 2/3</td>
<td>Connect and work with others (educators, team leader, director) Stage 3</td>
<td>Communicate for work/study Stage 2/3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Communicate for work Stage 2</td>
<td>Identify and solve problems Stage 2</td>
<td>Connect and work with others Stage 3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2.5 Communicating and connecting in child care

The input from the directors was supplemented by observation and information from other stakeholders about the context within child care educators work.

An educator interacts regularly with members of four key groups:

- the children in their care;
- the children’s parents/caregivers and other family members;
- other child care educators; and
- line managers - mainly team leaders and the centre’s Director (See Fig 2.1).

Educators interact with children almost continuously. Although there are a number of scheduled activities, including lunch, other activity is free-form, depending on the mood of the room, the behaviour of individual children, the interests and skills of educators and the weather. In the toddler and ‘kinda’ rooms, educators might prepare and take responsibility for structured learning activities or simply take advantage of opportunities to teach children as these arise.

When children are uncooperative or unhappy, it sometimes requires skill and insight to work out what is wrong, and when children do not get on with each other, educators need skills to defuse conflict while teaching and modelling desired behaviours.

Educators might chat informally with parents during handover or pick up, or there might be a more formal exchange of information about a child’s behaviour or health. At some point, most parents are worried about their child’s well being and want reassurance that their children are coping with/enjoying child care. Sometimes parents are running late, and are stressed after a long day at work. Educators need the awareness and skills to provide the information and reassurance that will allay a parent’s fears, and the judgement to recognise when to involve their team leader.

A key feature of work in child care is the almost continuous, and often subtle, interaction within teams as members work out who will do what, when and how. This can be challenging for new entrants, especially when they find themselves working with different combinations of people on each shift.

While team leaders may make a direct request for someone to take responsibility for a task, educators are also expected to take the initiative, stepping in to take on a role or following another’s lead, moving to intervene in a potential problem between children or to clean up a mess. Daily team interaction is generally informal, but teams also have short planning meetings.

Due to the many demands on a director’s time, he or she may have brief conversations with educators in passing, but more in-depth interactions are likely to occur during arranged meetings.

Fig 2.1 Child care: Interacting with others
2.6 Mapping the qualification

This WorkReady program revolved around delivery of ten core units and four electives from the Certificate III in Early Childhood Education and Care. The units were analysed according to the process outlined on p.12.

Overview of findings

Classification against the CSfW list

While seven of the ten CSFW Skill Areas received some coverage, nearly 80 percent of the Performance Criteria (PCs) related to Cluster 2, Interact with others. Over half of this set related to 2b Connect and work with others. There were very few references to Plan and organise, Identify and solve problems or Create and innovate, and no explicit mention of situations involving decision making skills, or requiring the skills and knowledge to work in a digital world (See Fig 2.2).

Thus, at this superficial level of analysis, the qualification appears to reflect the centre directors’ priorities. However, closer examination tells a somewhat different story.

Interaction with whom?

As Fig 2.3. illustrates, when each PC was classified according to whether it involved interaction with children, family members, team leaders, other educators or self it emerged that approximately:

- 50 percent involved interaction with children;
- 15 percent related to interactions with family and/or community members;
- 20 percent involved transactional communication with supervisors (e.g. managers or team leaders);
- 7 percent involved interaction with other childcare educators;
- 7 percent involved self reflection.

---

*Fig 2.2. CIII in Early Childhood Education and Care: Coverage of CSfW Skill Areas*

- 1b. Work with rights, roles & protocols
- 2a. Communicate for work
- 2b. Connect & work with others
- 2c. Identify & utilise diverse perspectives
- 3a. Plan & organise
- 3b. Identify & solve problems
- 3c. Create & innovate
Zooming in: What the CSfW can tell us

While it was useful to classify and quantify PCs as described, the real picture only emerged once the analysis was conducted at the level of the CSfW Performance Features.

Connecting and working with children

Not surprisingly, half of the PCs in the CIII focus on the skills involved in building and maintaining close relationships with children. These PCs make explicit reference to behaviours that align with CSfW 2b Stage 3, e.g.

- Develops nurturing, securely attached relationships with three babies/toddlers (CHCECE005)
- Creates a positive, relaxed environment during meals (CHCECE004)
- Communicates positively and respectfully and interacts effectively with at least three children (CHCECE007)

Thus, there appears to be a strong alignment between the qualification and the directors’ expectations of a trainee’s performance at the end of a training program.

Connecting and working with family/extended community

15 percent of the PCs involve interaction with parents/caregivers and community members. The majority for these focus on transactional exchanges of information related to 2a Communicate for work, e.g.

- Communicates daily with families about their child and his/her food and drink intake and experiences.

As written, it would be possible for most of these PCs to be satisfied by someone operating at Stage 1 or 2 of CSfW 2b Connect and Work with others.

Although relationship building of the kind described in 2b could be inferred, it is seldom explicit. Thus, it would be possible to meet assessment requirements, as currently written, without establishing the sense of connection that is central to building a parent’s trust.

The analysis also identified a potential gap in the qualification’s coverage. Educators often interact with various parents throughout the day. The way they go about this can influence a parent’s perceptions of the whole centre, positively or negatively. However, there is no reference in the PCs to an educator’s role as a front line representative of their organisation. Interestingly, trainees in the child care chain involved in this project were not expected or encouraged to engage closely with parents, partly for this reason. As soon as they became employees, parental engagement became part of their role, but, at the centres involved in this project, they did not receive any additional training in how to go about this.
2. Child Care

Interacting with supervisors

Nearly 20 percent of PCs related to interaction with a team leader, with almost all involving transactional exchanges associated with *Communicate for work*. However, none focus on skills in asking the kinds of questions that would help a trainee clarify a team leader’s expectations. Nor is there any reference in the Required Knowledge section to (for example, a set of questions to ask the supervisor that show interest in the job, attentiveness etc).

There are only a handful of PCs that relate to connecting and working with team leaders. None refer explicitly to the skills needed to start building a rapport, even though this could be a critical factor in whether someone gets a job offer - or not.

Understanding self

The importance of self awareness to an individual’s ability to build and maintain relationships, communicate effectively and manage conflict is recognised in the CSfW. ‘Understanding self’ is one of the three focus areas of *Connect and work with others*, and is seen as the foundation upon which skills in this area are developed. Awareness of one’s own, and others’ values and beliefs is also a critical component of 2c Recognise and utilise diverse perspectives.

In the child care qualification, 7.5 percent of PCs involved some potential for self reflection. Most of these focused on gathering information directly relevant to increasing one’s understanding of others, particularly people from other cultural backgrounds. As written, these suggest skills at Stage 2 in both 2b and 2c. However, some PCs within the generic Community Services unit CHCDIV001 reflect Stage 3 expectations, e.g.

- Use reflection to support own ability to work inclusively and with understanding of others
- Identify and act on ways to improve own self and social awareness.

Interacting with other team members

Less than 7 percent of PCs refer explicitly to interactions with other team members. Of these almost all describe someone assisting someone else as if they are working in parallel, e.g.

- **Assist in** ensuring furniture/utensils are suitable;
- **Assist in** developing and maintaining food safety procedures (author’s italics).

While providing assistance is more likely to be effective if an educator makes an effort to build a rapport with co-workers, this is not explicitly described, and may not therefore be explicitly assessed. Of the PCs related to working alongside peers, many could be achieved by someone with Stage 1 skills in *Connect and work with others*.

Others are at Stage 2 e.g.

- **Collaborate with family and other educators to collect information about each child’s needs, interests, skills and cultural practices** (CHCECE013)

Those PCs that describe skills at a higher level are almost all found in ‘Work with diverse people’ (CHCDIV001), a generic unit used across many Community Services qualifications.

Within this unit, there is one PC that appears to encapsulate all of the directors’ requirements and, as written suggests Stage 4 skills.

- Use verbal and non-verbal communication constructively to establish, develop and maintain effective relationships, mutual trust and confidence

There is one other PC that would require highly sophisticated skills. When contributing to workplace improvement, a learner should be able to:

- Proactively share feedback with colleagues and supervisors CHCCS400C

Without Stage 4 skills, a new entrant who actually tries to do this could find themselves alienating everyone!

It may be that trainers and assessors are addressing the areas discussed above in ways that are not apparent from a reading of the qualification. Further consultation with trainers and assessors would be required to determine the level of sophistication assessors expect to see in order to deem a learner ‘competent’ in this regard, and the extent to which trainers explicitly teach strategies to help learners develop these skills. If conducted in conjunction with a more extensive industry consultation with employers, an accurate picture of alignments and gaps could be developed.

Possible integration points

In delivering this qualification, RTOs may integrate the elements and PCs in ‘Work with Diverse People’ into other units. For example, when assisting others to ‘assist in providing children with natural and recycled materials (CHCECE012) does the learner also demonstrate the skills in verbal and non-verbal communication that are needed to ‘establish, develop and maintain effective relationships,
mutual trust and confidence?’ In such a process there is a danger that important aspects could be subsumed by other priorities. The lack of precision of this all encompassing second PC could also lead to many different interpretations by trainers and assessors.

If the industry and/or RTOs were to decide that a greater focus on skills to connect and work with others was required, ‘Work with diverse people’ would provide the assessment legitimacy for the introduction of practical strategies to help learners develop the skills that will help them in their auditions, and beyond.

However, considering it through the lens of the CSfW this unit could benefit from a revision to provide greater specificity regarding levels of skills sophistication. This could raise some interesting challenges for a generic unit, given that this project’s work in aged care suggests that personal care workers need more sophisticated skills in this area than child care educators (See Section 3).

Table 2.4 Child care: Performance Criteria involving skills in communicating and interacting with others

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2a Communicate for work</th>
<th>2b Connect and work with others</th>
<th>2c Recognise and utilise diverse perspectives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Child</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observe, listen and talk with children for sustained periods of time CHCECE012 Identify their interests, ideas, knowledge and skills CHCECE012 Establish expectations for children’s behaviour in line with work role (also involves 1b) CHCECE006</td>
<td>Pay close attention to what the child is saying and doing CHCECE012 Use positive language, gestures, facial expressions and tone of voice when redirecting or discussing children’s behaviour with them CHCECE007</td>
<td>Respect children’s needs for privacy during any toileting and dressing and undressing times CHCECE005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Parent</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicate daily with families about their child and his/her food and drink intake and experiences Get feedback on menu from families/children CHCECE004</td>
<td>Collaborate with family and other educators to collect information about each child’s needs, interests, skills and cultural practices CHCECE013</td>
<td>Reach agreement with families on how sleep/rest will occur CHCECE005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Team members</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contribute to a WHS meeting Explain work safe features to a new employee HLTWHS001</td>
<td>Assist in providing children with natural and recycled materials CHCECE012 Collaborate with family and other educators CHCECE013 Proactively share feedback with colleagues and supervisors CHCCS400C</td>
<td>No specific references</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Team leader/ supervisor</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discuss routines and rituals for settling babies into care with team leader Evaluate strategies in consultation with supervisor CHCECE012</td>
<td>Identify areas of concern for discussion with supervisor CHCECE006 (NB A relationship with a degree of trust is implied)</td>
<td>No specific references</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Self</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Use reflection to support own ability to work inclusively and with understanding of others CHCDIV001 Identify and act on ways to improve own self and social awareness CHCDIV001</td>
<td>Recognise own personal values and attitudes and take into account to ensure non-judgemental practice CHCCS400C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>General</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ensure information collected through observation and secondary sources is discussed with relevant people and recorded accurately in accordance with service requirements CHCECE013</td>
<td>Encourage adults and children to participate in the sustainable practices of the service CHCECE007 Use verbal and non-verbal communication constructively to establish, develop and maintain effective relationships, mutual trust and confidence CHCDIV001</td>
<td>Show respect for diversity in communication with all people Make an effort to sensitively resolve differences, taking account of diversity considerations CHCDIV001 Recognise potential ethical dilemmas and discuss with appropriate person CHCCS400C</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2.7 Fostering employability skills in the broader training program

A review of research suggests that there are a set of strategies that may assist someone entering a new context to adapt, apply and further develop their non-technical skills (See Fig 2.4). The general approach adopted by the trainer addressed several of these directly. This study also identified areas with the potential to be developed further as an integral part of the existing program. These are discussed below.

Work placement preparation and debriefings (Steps 1 and 7)

The trainer discussed a range of topics with learners before they attended their first work placement, covering issues such as how to contact the director to make arrangements, how to act, don’t be afraid to ask questions etc. She also conducted regular debriefings. She reported that the first of these was particularly important because learners usually came back with all sorts of concerns.

A key problem for many was that the reality of the child care centre did not match the theory they had been learning e.g. the staff:child ratio was not strictly maintained at all times. Issues related to interacting with children might be addressed through demonstrating ways of speaking and acting but those involving an unhelpful team leader or difficulties with another staff member were more likely to be discussed only, often one on one.

Active listening and questioning techniques (Step 3)

Learners were taught active listening and questioning techniques for use with children. These skills are central to connecting and working with anyone, but, as the interview with one of the learners demonstrates (see ‘Annie’, p.26), it is not enough to assume that learners will automatically adapt and apply the strategies they are learning to use with children to other situations.

Although Annie was unconsciously starting to use similar techniques with her friends, she had not been aware of it. Once her attention was drawn to the potential to use the same techniques in different situations, she became excited about the possibilities.

It would not take a lot of additional time to focus on ways of using questioning and listening techniques with colleagues, parents and team leaders. These skills would not only be invaluable during the audition period, but throughout life.

How to approach parents (Step 3)

One of the assignments involved identifying a child with behavioural issues and approaching their parent for permission to undertake a formal observation. The trainer spent some time talking to the group about how they might do this, but in interviews with the project leader, the learners were very worried about how they were going to tackle this assignment.

---

We are more likely to be able to adapt and apply skills and knowledge learned in one context in another when we:

1. have a clear idea of the demands and expectations of the new context;
2. recognise the strengths we can build on and areas we may need to develop further;
3. learn practical strategies to develop ‘mission critical’ or high priority skills;
4. practice the skills and strategies we will need before we move into the new context;
5. have opportunities to put the skills into action in the new situation, with appropriate challenges and support;
6. receive specific, actionable feedback on what we do;
7. reflect on what’s working, what isn’t and why; and
8. have another go...get more feedback, reflect... try again... get feedback, reflect... preferably in a systematic, action learning approach.
One of the problems was that they were uncomfortable that they had chosen the child because he or she was badly behaved. When asked to think about what they would actually say to the parent of the child they had identified, the learners became tongue tied and even more anxious.

One of the most effective ways to get someone through this kind of block is to get them to practice it - maybe several times - as part of a role play. However, the trainer said she never used role plays, ‘because people don’t like them’.

This raises a broader issue about the specialised skills trainers will need if they are to actively assist learners to develop effective Cluster 2 skills. These should include the skills to run effective role plays, (including ways to engage people who initially want to back out!). Unfortunately these may not have been part of their Certificate IV or of subsequent professional development activities.

**Receive specific, actionable feedback (Step 6)**

The learners received high quality feedback from their trainer throughout the course. They also got informal feedback from their team leaders during work placements. This tended to be general in nature and usually very positive (She said I was doing a great job!). The learners valued this because it made them feel they were on the right track, but it did not give them any real idea of what they were doing well so they could keep doing it. None of those interviewed had the confidence to ask their team leader for more detail.

Specific, actionable feedback is critical to the learning process, and asking for, receiving and acting on feedback involves a set of skills and understandings that do not necessarily come naturally.

There is one Performance Criterion in the program units that touches on this area, albeit obliquely.

**Proactively share feedback with colleagues (CHCSS400C).**

The statement on its own is ambiguous. Does it mean you should give colleagues feedback on their performance or should you tell colleagues about feedback you have received? Assuming the former, giving feedback without offending someone is a potential minefield, particularly for someone on work placement. However, a trainer could use this PC as part of a broader discussion around giving and receiving feedback. This in turn could lead into the teaching of specific concepts and skills that would be invaluable in work, study and personal contexts.

Some trainers may already be investing time in this area, but others may never have been exposed to these specialised concepts and skills. Professional development activities for trainers around giving and receiving feedback could be very powerful, not only in regard to developing learners’ Cluster 2 skills, but also as part of enhancing trainers’ skills in providing genuinely useful formative feedback.

**Reflect on what’s working, what isn’t and why (Step 7)**

Self-reflection was a general feature of the program. It was encouraged during discussions and built into many of the assignments. The interviews that formed part of the pilot took this even further because they created a moment in time when the learner could focus more deeply on one aspect of their performance. Several learners commented on how much they had enjoyed this, and of how helpful it had been.

**Teaching points within the qualification**

Even though it would appear that the qualification does not address a number of areas that would help learners during work placement and in the early stages of their careers, the reality is that, for the foreseeable future, trainers must work with the qualification as it stands.

Therefore, if there is to be a greater emphasis on helping learners develop the mission critical skills they need, trainers must either find additional time to introduce relevant skills training as a ‘value add’ or identify ways to link such training to required knowledge and assessment requirements. (We called these ‘integration points’).

It was beyond the scope of this pilot to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the ways in which the current qualification is being used by a range of trainers. Nor was it possible to consider in detail how it could be used to actively foster mission critical skills development. However, PCs such as those discussed earlier in this section, could provide legitimate (as in assessment-oriented) ways of incorporating practical training in strategies to connect and work with others.

There would be value in exploring this further with a representative group of experienced trainers who know the industry and are adept at delivering the entry-level qualification.
2.8 Working with learners

Process

Program participants were introduced to the project in Week 3. Some learners had already spent one or two days on work placement sessions at this point, but others had yet to begin.

In the introductory sessions with the project leader, the learners;

• talked about the work placement as an audition;
• briefly explored the Dreyfus’ Model of Skills Acquisition (1985);
• identified the CSfW Skill Areas they believed to be mission critical for their role, and for the audition, before being given the centre directors’ perspective;
• discussed what Connect and work with others might look like in practice, before considering the more detailed examples the directors had supplied;
• completed a trial version of a self-assessment questionnaire of their skills in connecting and working with others in familiar non-child care contexts. This was used to help each learner set a rough benchmark against which to measure themselves. It was also intended to help build a shared language and understanding.

During the program, the project leader interviewed each learner several times for up to 30 minutes, discussing their work placement experiences with an emphasis in the way in which they were connecting and working with the director, team leaders and other educators. Facilitative questioning techniques were used to help them identify the strengths they brought to the audition, consider how they might adapt and apply them, and identify ways in which they could show their centre director and other team members that they had ‘the right stuff’ for the job. Each learner identified one area they wanted to work on during their placement, and set a personal goal. In subsequent interviews, they reflected on their progress, discussed the strategies they had used and considered what had worked/not worked and why.

The project leader also ran a group session in which learners responded to multiple choice questions arising from a progressive scenario set in a child care centre (See Fig 2.6). The possible answers reflected behaviours that could be mapped back to different stages of development in CSfW 2b.

Findings

Novice to expert

Most of the program participants identified themselves as novices in the child care industry, and over half identified as novices or advanced beginners in the world of work as well. However, each identified other areas of their lives where they felt they met the criteria for capable or proficient. They were hesitant to see themselves as experts in any area.

Mission Critical skills

Between them, group members initially identified most of the ten Skill Areas as ‘mission critical’. There was, however, a strong focus on:

• 1b Work with rights, roles and protocols;
• 3c Identify and solve problems;
• 2a Communicate for work; and
• 2b Connect and work with others.

While they could understand the importance of connecting and working with others, as novices they were still very concerned about learning and following ‘the rules’. They wanted to show the directors they could get on with the children, do the tasks and apply the regulations. During a later interview, one commented that she thought that as long as she was a hard worker she would get offered a job. It shouldn’t matter if she wasn’t friends with everyone at work.

Connect and work with others

When making suggestions about the sorts of behaviours the directors might be looking for in regard to 2b, the examples from those who had not been in a workplace or on work placement were mainly to do with helping other people undertake various tasks. Those with previous work experience were more likely to provide examples the involved actively introducing themselves, showing an interest in a colleague’s pets or children etc.

Not surprisingly, the learners welcomed the information about what the directors were really looking for. Several commented that these were realistic, and achievable, and some learners were confident in their ability to meet the directors’ expectations.
During the interviews, those with less self-belief were able, with prompting, to provide examples of times when they had done the sorts of things required in other contexts. There was some evidence to suggest that this had an impact on what they did on work placement. Several reported that the directors’ information had ‘forced’ or ‘pushed’ them to overcome their shyness so they could ask questions, or initiate a conversation with their own director. Remembering a time when they had done something similar successfully helped them overcome their fears.

Some learners were quick to set a goal directly related to connecting and working with others, but others needed a lot of coaching. It proved to be more effective to ask these learners to identify a more general objective (apart from passing the course or getting a job!). Once they had identified something they really did want to do (e.g. be more creative in the way I play with children, or learn all the main routines) it was easier for them to identify ways in which connecting and working with others might help them to do this (e.g. by identifying someone to ask for advice or feedback). Interestingly, the learners who responded to this approach were also those who felt they should be able to work everything out on their own, and did not like asking others for help because it showed they were ‘stupid’.

2b: Evaluating a learner’s stage of development

The original project plan had included the use of the trial Foundation Skills Assessment Tool (FSAT) as part of the self-assessment regime, but by the time the project went ahead, this was no longer available. It was replaced by a trial self-awareness questionnaire referenced to CSFW 2a, 2b and 2c. Although imperfect, the questionnaire proved to be useful as a discussion starter and frame of reference. It also informed a rough benchmarking process, where the project leader drew on the questionnaire and the initial interview to make a professional judgement about a learner’s skill stage.

When responding to the questionnaire, most learners chose to assess their skills within their own families, where the majority of learners rated themselves at Stage 3 or 4. During the interviews, they were asked questions about their family interactions, but also about interactions in other workplaces, at school and with different friendship and community groups. Their responses suggested that most were operating within Stages 2 and/or 3 in these contexts.

The scenario

In one of the two class session run by the project leader, she introduced the ‘train wreck’ scenario (Fig 2.6) in which the multiple-choice answers reflect the kinds of responses someone would make depending on their stage of development in CSFW 2b.

Discussion about the ‘right’ course of action was lively, and raised some interesting dilemmas. It also gave the project leader further insights into the range of levels of skills sophistication within the group.

The activity also prompted a learner who had not contributed much before to share her experience of work placement with the group. Her real-life issue was far more powerful that the scenario, and led to a discussion of some fundamental issues, such as how to deal with peer behaviours that you believe to be unacceptable without being seen as a tattle-tale, and what behaviours are, in fact, unacceptable when working with young children.

The trainer was surprised at some of the learners’ responses to these questions, but their naivety was a clear indicator that they were unable to discern what was important and what was not in a child care context. In an area that seemed obvious to the expert, they were indeed novices needing explicit rules and clear guidelines.

The trainer commented on the effectiveness of the session, and requested a copy of the original scenario. The learner who had told her story thanked the project leader for giving her the opportunity to finally unburden herself. Several other learners commented on how interesting they had found the activity, saying it had made them think differently about how they talked to other educators, and about how they themselves should behave when children were in the room.
Fig 2.5 Scenario exercise: Train wreck*

You’ve just graduated with a CIII in Early Childhood Education and Care, and you’ve got yourself a job at Woolly Wombat Child Care Centre. You’ve been there for a week and you’ve put most of your energy into making sure you’ve learned the basic routines. You’ve found it challenging. You’ve said hello to a few people, but there has not been much time to chat.

For the last half an hour, you’ve been in the Kinda room with two other educators - Mel and Jess. Before today, you haven’t had much to do with Mel, but Jess seems friendly and has smiled in your direction. She hasn’t said anything to you today though, because she and Mel have been deep in conversation since you arrived. Actually, you’re starting to wonder if they are ignoring you on purpose.

Lynn, the team leader, has asked you stay with a group of children who are enthusiastically building a train with boxes and chairs. Jess and Mel are in a corner, talking in low voices. They don’t seem to be paying much attention to their groups at all. You look around, wondering why Lynn has not said anything to them, and see that she has left the room. At the same moment, something is happening in your group...

‘I’m the driver!’
‘NO, I THE DRIVER! IT’S MY TRAIN!’
‘NO, MYYY TRAIN!’

And it looks like trouble is also breaking out on the other side of the room. You recognise the children involved because you played with them yesterday. As if in slow motion,

...Max hits Jamal on the knee with a plastic hammer....
...Jamal burst into tears....
...Max lifts the hammer again.... and it is moving towards Jamal’s head!

You expect Jess and Mel to rush in, but they just keep talking. Meanwhile, right under your own nose, there are now four children fighting to drive the train.

What do you do?

A. Try to sort out the train fight and the hammer attack and hope Jess and Mel will see what you are doing and come to help.
B. Focus on the problem in the train group because it isn’t your job to organise the rest of the room.
C. Call out, ‘Hey Max, why don’t you come here and play trains with us!’
D. Call out, ‘Hey Mel, could you please sort out the boys over there, if it isn’t tooo much trouble?’
E. Call out, ‘Hey Jess. I’ll fix the train if you’ll fix the hammer!’

Before you can do anything at all, Lynn comes back. She seems to take in the whole scene immediately. She picks Max up in one arm and gives Jamal a quick cuddle with the other. As she moves towards the train group, you realise that Mel has also sprung into action, but not in the way you’d expected. Suddenly, she’s standing next to you, saying loudly, ‘Look Annie, I know you wanted to try this on your own, but I really think you should let me help you or this train will never leave the station!’

You didn’t even think she knew your name, but now here she is, making you look stupid in front of the team leader.

What do you do?

A. Say, ‘Oh thanks Mel, but I think things are under control!’
B. Say, ‘Thanks Mel, I’m doing fine, but don’t you think you should be sorting things out on your side of the room?’
C. Say nothing and hope Lynn realises what really happened.
D. Say nothing and decide to have a few words with Mel about her behaviour when Lynn isn’t around.
E. Say nothing and go and see Lynn later to explain what really happened so she doesn’t think it was your fault.
F. Smile and say, ‘Thanks Mel, it’s always good to have some help.’
2.9 Learner case studies

Annie’s story

Annie said she had always wanted to work with children. She felt she was ‘pretty good with kids’, and had learned a lot from looking after her a 2 year old foster sister. She did not think she needed to develop interpersonal skills because she could ‘get on with anybody’. ‘I’m already Facebook friends with three people and I’ve only been at the centre twice!’

Looking down the list of behaviours the Directors had identified, she laughed at the idea that she would ever ask for help, explaining that she liked to work things out for herself. Several probing questions later, she observed that her major reason for not asking for help was actually a fear that people would think she was stupid.

Annie set out to see if she could overcome this barrier. At a later meeting, she described an issue she’d had and how difficult it had been to approach the team leader to admit that she didn’t know what to do. But she did it, and was genuinely amazed that no one seemed think less of her. ‘I might even do it again.’ Towards the end of the program, she also talked about how what she had learned had changed the way she interacted with her foster sister. ‘I ask a lot of open questions now’. When asked if she did this with adults as well, she stopped and thought and a smile spread over her face.

‘Yes! I didn’t realise it till you said anything, but I’m asking my friends more open questions too, and listening to what they say instead of just talking. Wow, that’s amazing! I could do that more couldn’t I?’

Mission Critical skills development

At the start of the program, Annie demonstrated a number of strengths at Stage 3 which gave her an immediate advantage on work placement. Initially, the director was quite sure Annie would fit in well with the team, and that her bubbly personality would work well with the children. However, part way through, she observed that Annie did not appear to be making as much progress as some of the other learners. Left to her own devices, Annie did not appear to invest much time in self reflection, but she responded quickly and enthusiastically to deeper questioning during the project interviews, suggesting that this could be a useful strategy to help her to capitalise on her sunny personality and complete lack of fear about interactions with people she has never met before.

Bianca’s story

Bianca was a young mother with a wealth of experience in the workplace gained through almost continual employment from the age of 14. She had always dreamed of going into child care, and had given up a job as a retail manager to study full time. She was friendly and open and appeared to have highly developed interpersonal skills, honed through many years of customer service. Using the self assessment questionnaire, she had identified her skills as being at Stage 4 in interacting with adults.

However, she commented that she was not confident about some of her skills in connecting and working with children. Responding to further questioning, she decided that the real issue she wanted to address was how to be more creative when working with children. She seemed hesitant to approach the trainer for advice, and revealed a strong belief that she should be able to work things out for herself. In this case though she did not have any ideas on where to start.

When the project leader asked her to identify two possible next steps, she looked at the ‘connect and work with others’ map and suggested that she could watch what other team members were doing and ask someone whose work she admired if she could team up with them. However, she was quite challenged by the thought of revealing what she saw as a weakness to someone she did not know well. The interview became a coaching session as she reflected on which person she might approach, and on how she could adapt and apply what she had learnt in other parts of her life in order to build a rapport and lay the foundations for trust.
At the end of this session, Bianca seemed quite excited about the possibilities, but several weeks later, she was in tears, saying that she might have to leave the program. She was completely disenchanted with the culture of the centre where she was doing work placement. She felt that no-one made an effort to design structured programs (creative or otherwise) for the children. The director provided no direction and relied heavily on one of the team leaders, who was a close personal friend. Bianca observed that this team leader traded on the connection and acted as if she herself was in charge. According to Bianca, the Director made it worse by giving her far too much power, and letting her ‘get away with’ poor behaviour that set the tone for the centre.

The mismatch between Bianca’s values and beliefs and those she perceived to be influencing the operation of the centre was making her physically and emotionally ill, but she was adamant that no-one at the centre had an inkling of this. She observed that she had long ago learned how to mask her own feelings, so ‘no-one can ever tell what I really feel about them’.

It would appear that she had been successful in this case, because the Director had made very positive comments about her and offered her a casual appointment. Bianca could not take this job, but she wanted to work within the child centre chain where there were much better centres, including the one attended by her own children. But, given the close relationships between directors across the organisation, how could she decline politely without prejudicing her chances of getting a position in another centre? The only solution she could see at that moment was to leave the WorkReady program and give up her dreams.

Bianca’s story shows the complexity of issues that may face someone on placement and undermine their potential to gain work. Even though she had well developed interpersonal skills in some respects, she had not developed the skills required to navigate this minefield without assistance - and she was so reluctant to ask for help that leaving the program seemed preferable. On reflection, she identified this sort of running away as a long term issue that had influenced a number of her career decisions. Fortunately, in this case, once she was prepared to share her dilemma, the trainer and the RTO’s general manager stepped in and were able to help her steer a course that saved her from taking a drastic step.

**Mission Critical skills development**

Initially, Bianca demonstrated a number of behaviours characteristic of Stage 3/4 in ‘Connect and work with others’. Under pressure and in a new environment in which she had a lot invested, she maintained her ability to build superficial relationships, and appeared to be an effective team player who would ‘fit in’ so she certainly had the skills to manage the audition on this level. However, she did this at great personal cost, suggesting that she is operating at Stage 3 rather than 4.

She had highly developed customer service skills and could keep a smile on her face no matter what was being thrown at her, but when faced with an issue that might require some manoeuvring behind the scenes she was at a loss. She appeared to be operating at Stage 2 in **Identify and solve problems**. She had found it difficult to identify alternative options, in other circumstances and in this more difficult situation, she could see no way forward once the obvious pathway appeared blocked.

To move beyond this, she could benefit from assistance to build her capacity to ask for help before a situation becomes overwhelming. She could also benefit from learning some practical strategies to identify problems and develop skills in deliberately identifying and evaluating alternative options to address them. Ironically perhaps, such strategies are also the basis for developing the creative thinking skills Bianca had originally identified as a need.
2.10 Monitoring and reporting

Research Question 3 asked, ‘How might learners’ entry-level performance in mission critical skills be identified and progress tracked’.

This was intended to inform further exploration of ways in which tools based on the CSfW might be used to monitor and report on program impacts in regard to employability skills development.

The pilot considered several ways in which this might be done:

- by tracking and reporting on learners’ progress from one stage of the CSfW to the next;
- by tracking and reporting on a learner’s progress against their individual goal.

**Monitoring against the CSfW stages**

The original intention was that there would be an explicit focus on the employer-identified mission critical skills throughout the program. The trainer would identify existing areas that could be emphasised, and introduce explicit skills training activities where appropriate. However, timing issues made it impossible for the trainer to undertake the critical preparatory professional development required. Therefore, although initial benchmarks were established for each learner, no direct correlations could be drawn between the program and any progress they might make.

Even if the original plan had been followed, there would have been some problems with trying to do this. There has been no research specifically related to the time it might take for someone to progress from one CSfW stage to the next, but on the basis of research in similar areas, it would be foolish to assume that an individual should move from *advanced beginner* to *capable* or *capable* to *proficient* as a result of a 20 week program.

Research around the Dreyfus’ Model of Skills Acquisition suggests that it can take up to two years for an individual to reach the *capable* stage (e.g. See Benner 1984). It also suggests that the performance of someone moving into a new context will go backwards for a time, and that skills development requires extensive practice, in context, over time, accompanied by deep reflection. Is 120 hours of work placement enough time for a learner to go backwards, practice, reflect and move forwards to a point where they are operating at their full potential? The simple answer is no.

However, could they show progress against one or two Performance Features? Quite possibly.

**Establishing ‘benchmarks’**

There could also be problems if benchmarking exercises are used for summative assessment of progress.

Self-assessment exercises such as the questionnaire used in the pilot are useful for raising self awareness, setting goals and self monitoring of progress. However they do not provide an accurate basis for benchmarking progress for summative assessment purposes. The interview process can provide further insights, but if it is to be part of a summative assessment process, it should form part of a broader process conducted over time.

Any monitoring process should also take into account the nature and complexity of external challenges faced by each learner. Bianca’s story (p. 27) is a case in point. The other learners did not find themselves in a similarly challenging situation so it was not possible to see how they would have respond.

Bianca’s dilemma would rank as a major challenge by anyone’s standards, but for another learner it was just as hard to overcome her anxiety in order walk into the staff room and introduce herself to another team member.

**Monitoring against individual goals**

The goal setting process shows potential as a way of focusing an individual learner’s attention and energy on one area where they want to enhance their performance. Using the CSfW, they can identify the Performance Features that best describe their current performance and the performance they aspire to, and then embark on a action learning process punctuated by formal debriefings to assist reflection. Progress and pitfalls could be tracked systematically, and reported on as part of the program outputs. In the WorkReady program, this would elicit more detailed information than the current student Exit form.
2.11 Child care: observations

Alignment

1. While the *CIII in Early Childhood Education and Care* provided strong coverage of the skills a learner required to connect and work with children, it did not explicitly support the development of key skills that the learners in this WorkReady program needed during their audition process. There was little coverage of skills associated with connecting and working with three other key groups - parents, peers and supervisors - yet this pilot suggests that these may be the very areas a potential employer will focus on when making recruitment decisions. There was also a mismatch between the qualification and the employers’ expectations about the stage of performance at which a new entrant should be operating.

2. Although the project was not designed to see whether the directors’ input was representative of the priorities of employers across the industry, empirical observation of child care centres suggests that the entry-level qualification has gaps in regard to its coverage of areas related to connecting and working with others. These areas are an integral part of working in the industry, and lack of the necessary skills is likely to affect the performance of new entrants across a range of areas.

3. Thus, it could be argued that the qualification on its own does not address the range of skills a new entrant needs in order to gain a job in the industry.

4. While the qualification is not currently designed to address the mission critical skills a new entrant may need, it should be noted that there was real value in building this WorkReady program around a formal qualification. The participants needed it if they were to keep a job in the industry, and it is unlikely that the majority would have passed without the high quality training and support they received from the RTO.

5. Input into entry-level training from host employers is potentially very powerful, but needs to be as specific as possible. The CSfW appears to make it easier for employers to revisit and articulate their expectations so that they can be shared with learners in an accessible form.

6. With some initial training, individual RTOs and host employers could use the CSfW within their own contexts. Once mission critical skills are clarified and described, other parts of a targeted program to address them should fall into place.

Training approaches

7. There are a range of strategies that can help people develop their interpersonal skills. While talking about concepts or discussing and reflecting on past experience are part of ‘learning how’, simulations, scenarios and role-plays are also essential components.

8. While an RTO can choose to ‘value-add’ and provide additional training in skills to connect and work with others, time and financial constraints limit this possibility. However, there are some parts of the current qualification that could be used as anchors/integration points for explicit teaching tied directly to assessment requirements.

9. It should not be assumed that all trainers have the knowledge, skills or confidence to foster learners’ Cluster 2 skills in these ways.

Application of the CSfW

10. The CSfW proved to be an effective framework for establishing what employers really wanted (mission critical skills) and for identifying and aligning stakeholder priorities.

11. The CSfW also made it possible to drill down into the qualification itself, in order to demonstrate the coverage and emphasis of the Performance Criteria and knowledge requirements, and compare the employers’ expectations about the level of sophistication of skills required with those of the training package developers. Until now, there has not been a tool suitable for this.

12. Although it was beyond the scope of this project to consider this in detail, there may be options beyond the delivery of the qualification itself that would support mission critical skills development within WorkReady programs. The program in this pilot had provision for two support people - one for Foundation skills (LLN) and one to help learners address issues that might stop them from completing. Either or both of these people could have been trained to undertake the interviews, goal setting etc involved in this project, while the trainer focused on skills training via the integration points in the qualification.
3. Mission critical skills in residential aged care

3.1 Introduction

Although it was not possible to conduct the same range of activities and interviews with learners as for the child care component of this project, the aged care component provided an opportunity to gather comprehensive information from a broader range of employers, and to explore the potential to develop a version of the CSfW contextualised for Personal Care Workers (PCWs) in residential aged care. The WorkReady program provided insights into the issues facing trainers preparing learners for this industry and the issues facing learners seeking to enter the industry.

This section begins with a brief discussion of key features of the industry context that have a particular bearing on the employability skills of PCWs, drawing on industry input and the findings of several other research studies involving employer consultation on skills needs. Findings from this pilot study are then outlined and discussed. These include employer identification of mission critical skills for PCWs and a mapping of the entry-level qualification to the CSfW.

3.2 The industry context

Changing client and workforce profiles

Over the past ten years, the number of people in residential aged care has increased significantly. The profile of clients in residential care is also changing. With the emergence of new philosophies and the implementation of policies such as ‘Ageing in Place’, an increasing percentage of elderly people receive support that enables them to remain in their own homes for many years. Thus, those entering aged care facilities are more likely to be older and/or to have increasingly complex needs, including dementia. The clientele is also becoming increasingly multi-cultural. These trends are expected to continue, with an associated need for an increasing number of entry-level PCWs who have the skills and knowledge to work with older people from a diverse range of backgrounds and with complex physical and mental health needs.

The current aged care workforce is predominantly female, with a significant percentage of employees in all roles aged 40 and over. While the majority of workers are employed on a permanent part time basis, there is a trend towards full time employment. There has also been a significant increase in the numbers of workers from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) backgrounds. The industry has a relatively high rate of churn, particularly amongst PCWs, with some moving on to new organisations, others gaining new qualifications and moving ‘up’, and others leaving the industry altogether.

Changing philosophies and practices

Until recently, residents of aged care homes were expected to conform to the requirements of the facility, but new philosophies reflected in government policy and organisational mission statements have the potential to bring about transformational change to the industry, and to the care worker role.

The concept of Consumer Directed Care (CDC) is central to this. It has been described as:

...both a philosophy and an orientation to service delivery where consumers can choose and control the services they get, to the extent that they are capable and wish to do so (KPMG, 2015).

The CDC approach aligns with the philosophy underpinning the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), and has recently been introduced into the provision of aged care in community settings. The Australian Government has signalled that a similar approach will be implemented in residential care. No start date has been announced, perhaps at least partly because a government-commissioned independent report (KPMG, 2015) found few genuine examples of residential aged care facilities that were already operating in ways that reflected a CDC approach.
However, the study did find a strong commitment to ‘person-centred care’, which the authors suggest is a critical stage, and a key enabler, in a journey towards CDC (See Fig 3.1).

Person-centred care is, ‘often equated to relationship-centred or relationship-based care, in contrast to traditional task-based ways of working’, and places an emphasis on care workers ‘getting to know residents as individuals, and understanding their preferences and needs’ (KPMG, 2015, p.12). However, while the study found a high level of support for person-centred approaches in theory, once again there were fewer examples of effective practice.

Reviewing experience in other countries, KPMG found that the transformation from provider-direction to resident-direction requires, amongst other things, the empowerment of residents and also of care staff. PCWs have a daily responsibility to enact the philosophy, and can only do so it they have an appropriate degree of autonomy. However, studies have found that entrenched cultures and practices work against this, and are likely to act as significant barriers to change.

Another emerging philosophy closely linked to person-centred care and CDC concerns healthy ageing, where the focus is on providing whole-of-system support to maximise clients’ independence and sense of autonomy by helping them maintain, or regain, physical function (NACA, 2014). This approach is being implemented by several major South Australian aged care providers, such as ACH and Southern Cross Homes.

**Skill requirements: what the literature says**

Although entry-level aged care workers are only required to hold, or be studying towards, a qualification at Australian Qualification Framework (AQF) level III, and receive relatively low wages, it should not be assumed that they undertake a low skilled job. It has long been recognised that aged care workers need a sophisticated set of skills. For example, in 2005, aged care managers identified a need for:

‘...a fluid, multi-skilled workforce with flexible, broadly applicable skills which equip them to work effectively in multi-disciplinary and/or multi-cultural teams where the focus is on prevention and early intervention.’ (Booth et al, 2005)

They wanted aged care workers with a good understanding of accreditation practices, of the role the aged care worker played in maintaining quality services, and of the boundaries of that role. If the industry was to be provide quality care in a changing environment, those surveyed believed that generic ‘employability skills’ were vital.

When recruiting, they looked for the range of skills outlined in Fig 3.2. As indicated in the table, these align closely with CSfW Skill Areas (developed over a decade later).

Ten years on, the Aged and Community Services Association (ACSA, 2015) continued to emphasise the need for ‘skilled, flexible workers to provide care and support for the increasing number of older Australians’. In consultations for its 2015 environmental scan, the Community Services and Health Industry Skills Council (CS&HISC, 2015, p.20) found that aged care workers, particularly in home and community settings, were increasingly expected to have, ‘a complex mix of diverse skills...including generalisable foundation skills’. These included:

- communication skills (CSfW 2a);
- cultural competence and related communication skills (CSfW 2c);
- technological knowledge and skills (CSfW 3e); and
- marketing skills (CSfW 2a, 2b, 2c).
3.3 Mission Critical skills: employer perspectives

The employers

Four leading not-for-profit aged care organisations agreed to provide input into this project. Between them, they employ a significant number of aged care staff in South Australia. Three operate multiple residential care sites, while the fourth offers care to a culturally specific group. Two offer both residential and home based care, and one is also positioning to enter the disability sector.

Interviews were conducted with a CEO, several clinical nurse managers, a human resource manager and several training managers. They provided information on industry needs, workforce profiles, recruitment and training practices. The majority also attended a half day workshop, as did a senior manager from the RTO participating in the pilot, which had training arrangements with two of the organisations.

The majority of interviewees had been in the sector for many years. They observed that a great deal had changed. For example, one respondent observed,

"It was very different ten years ago. We are now asking a lot more of our carers, who are expected to have the understandings and perform in ways that would have been part of an EN or RN role in the past. But carers’ pay is still very low – is it fair to expect so much of them?""

They reported that the workforce profile had changed dramatically, and was now dominated by people from CALD backgrounds. (In one organisation, 93 percent of employees spoke English as a second language). These employers saw many positives in employing people from other cultures, particularly those who came from backgrounds where elders were highly respected, but acknowledged that it also increased the potential for cross-cultural misunderstandings within the workforce, and with residents.

Each organisation was strongly committed to person-centred care. One was also implementing a major transformational change program to support healthy ageing, and had won a national award for its efforts. This organisation’s representative observed that their vision could not be achieved through an incremental approach.

"It means flipping everything we do!"

Each of the organisations provided extensive training for their staff, seeing this as critical, not only for maintaining quality of care, but also for supporting the development of a culture that reflected the values of their organisation.

The employers acknowledged that their organisations were wrestling with ways to make the transition to new ways of thinking and operating, and that there were still many employees, at all levels, who had yet to make the shift. This included experienced carers.

"We have a lot [of carers] who are still very task focused. It doesn’t mean they don’t care about our residents, but it does mean they prioritise the jobs they have to do over the people. It’s hard to convince them that it is more important to spend time talking with a resident than cleaning away the lunch dishes. Of course that does have to happen as well...’

They observed that experienced PCWs could play an important role in transitioning new entrants into the industry, but that this could be counter-productive if they were modelling outdated beliefs and behaviours.

Recruitment

With PCW turnover ranging from 10 to 20 percent per annum, recruitment was an on-going process in each organisation. They confirmed that there was an increasing trend for care workers to ‘move up’ having undertaken a diploma, and that this was a common pathway for people who held nursing qualifications from countries that were not recognised in Australia. It caused a dilemma for one organisation which actively encouraged and supported care workers to gain further qualifications, but then found itself with the on-going challenge of finding appropriate new staff to take their places. As one of several recruitment strategies, this organisation was piloting a training and employment program for people with Down’s Syndrome that was showing promising results.

When recruiting, these employers were not concerned about applicants’ technical knowledge and skills. As one commented, ‘Technical skills can be taught, but attitude and enthusiasm cannot’.

Due to the continual numbers of new employees required, they relied on recruitment through advertisement and interview, but were increasingly
using structured work placements as a recruitment strategy. One of the organisations was negotiating a closer arrangement with the RTO involved in this project. Its representative saw benefits in being able to closely influence the initial selection of participants and choice of electives, but also suggested that placements were an opportunity for learners to see whether they wanted to work in the organisation, or indeed, in the aged care industry.

None of the organisations had difficulty attracting applicants. With so many to choose from, when recruiting through normal channels, one organisation used its recruitment sessions as broad filters. Anyone who was even a few minutes late was turned away and applicants who looked ‘scruffy’ (including men with stubble) were unlikely to be considered.

The larger organisations used a range of screening tools, including LLN assessments and scenarios, to learn more about how applicants thought and solved problems. They expressed interest in the possibility of tools that would help them to more systematically identify people with the interpersonal skills they needed, as they had found that, despite their best efforts, a number of the people they did engage proved to be unsuitable. This was both costly and time consuming.

**Supporting new entrants**

The workshop participants stressed the importance of providing appropriate supports for new recruits. They reflected on their own universally negative experiences as new entrants to the aged care worker, nursing or teaching workforces:

*I was NOT prepared - I had the theory but no practical experience.*

*There was minimum support.*

*It’s a wonder I didn’t kill someone!*

*The supervisor was mean and horrible.*

*I have never forgotten what it was like. You have to remember to make the first day right - never let anyone else go through what you did!*

Although their organisations had a number of processes in place to assist people transitioning in, there were still issues, many of which related to the attitudes of other employees.

*We need to up-skill the rest of the workforce too. They can be very critical of novices!* They saw a role for training here:

*You can’t eliminate all the challenges, but you can teach people what to do when they encounter issues, for example how to work with someone who is direct or difficult.*

However, there was only so much employers could do to support the transition. New entrants also had to take some responsibility, and needed to come prepared to take some knocks:

*You need to be self aware, have some insight into your responses.*

*Reflection is critical and so is resilience - you need to be able to brush yourself off and start again.*

**What did these employers look for?**

All talked of the importance of finding the ‘right’ people, with the ‘right’ attitudes, values and beliefs to support the ethos of their organisations. Although they knew it when they saw it, they were looking for something it was hard to put into words:

*We look for people who’ve got ‘IT’!*  
*We want people who’ve got heart.*

They were talking about the qualities that made it possible for a PCW to connect with an older person - and saw the ability to do this as central to the role.

One respondent told the story of how she had been doing some research on the needs of people with dementia and was observing a group for an extended period. She noticed that the mood of the group changed when they had contact with a PCW. Without saying a word, some PCWs lifted the mood just by smiling, making eye contact and touching someone on the arm as they cleared the teacups, but if a care worker focused only on clearing the tables, the residents sagged in their seats. ‘That’s what I mean by IT (and not-IT)!’

Along with this somewhat elusive quality, the employers looked for people with the self awareness, empathy and resilience to work in the industry, and the skills required to work with other people in the organisation. They wanted individuals whose commitment to working with older people went beyond just looking for a job. And like most employers, they wanted people who were punctual, reliable and well presented.
Mission critical skills

When introduced to the ten skill areas of the CSfW, industry participants immediately identified the three skill areas in Cluster 2 Interact with others as ‘mission critical’. When asked to prioritise these, they initially found it challenging to separate Communicating for work (2a) from Connect and work with others (2b), arguing that effective aged care workers could not be strong in 2a unless they were strong in 2b. As one said, ‘In this industry, you have to have the person in everything you do.’

They were quite right to identify the close connection between the Skill Areas in this grouping, and to recognise that in reality the elements of this cluster operate together to influence the quality of an interaction. However, in the CSfW they are deliberately presented as separate Skill Areas (See Fig. 3.3) in order to give the tool greater precision, making it easier to identify strengths, weaknesses and gaps, and to chart ‘spiky profiles’.

Once the more transactional emphasis of Communicate for work was clarified, respondents did not hesitate to give top priority to Connect and Work with Others.

Using the CSfW Performance Features for 2a and 2b led them to identify the particular importance of care workers’ non-verbal skills. They explained that PCWs not only need to be able to communicate with people from different language backgrounds to their own, but also with older people suffering from dementia or other conditions that leave them unable to speak to communicate their needs. PCWs in memory support units in particular need highly developed skills in these areas, described by one participant as ‘a whole different tool kit’.

While the ‘speaking and listening’ aspects of the skills sought came under 2a, the empathy required for effective non-verbal communication was very much a part of 2b. They observed that it was critical that care workers be self aware in order to empathise with, and provide appropriate supports for, their clients.

These employers emphasised the need for PCWs to adopt and ‘live’ the beliefs and values that underpinned a person-centred approach to aged care provision. It was essential that they understood the central tenets of the approach and were able to put them into daily practice. However, the employers acknowledged that this was not necessarily easy. New entrants often felt they should focus on their tasks in order to show they were reliable workers. There could also be issues when new recruits who were trained in the ‘new’ ways found themselves working with experienced workers who had not made the mind-set shift that these new ways represented.

Important elements of these employer requirements actually align most closely with Identify and utilise diverse perspectives (2c) because they focus on the values and beliefs that underpin and drive behaviour. Unfortunately, in the limited time available, it was not possible to explore the detailed descriptors of this Skill Area with the employer group. However, in another workshop, the RTO’s managers and trainers gave this Skill Area equal top priority with Connect and work with others, arguing that the distinguishing feature of an effective care worker was the ability to genuinely appreciate the world from the perspective of someone who was ageing, infirm and/or suffering from dementia.

---

Fig 3.3 Differentiating between Skill Areas in CSfW Cluster 2, ‘Interact with others’

2a. Communicate for work focuses on the transactional aspects of communication. It incorporates speaking and listening, the ability to get your own message across and understand the gist of what others are trying to tell you. A lot of transactional communication occurs according to set protocols, and incorporates the skills and knowledge required to select and use designated communication channels in ways that are acceptable to the organisation.

2b. Connect and work with others focuses on an individual’s ability to build and maintain relationships and work effectively with others. Communicating verbally or non-verbally is a key component, but the emphasis is on the ability to use communication to build links, and to empathise. Performance effectiveness is strongly influenced by awareness of self.

2c. Recognise and utilise diverse perspectives focuses on the skills required to see the world from another’s perspective, appreciate different points of view and find ways to build on diversity. It also involves the skills required to manage a situation appropriately when values, beliefs and ideas are not in alignment with those of others. These skills add nuance to a person’s ability to communicate for work and connect and work with others, and are of particular importance in avoiding or defusing potential conflict situations.
Levels of sophistication: expectations

Using the CSfW descriptors for 2a and 2b, the employer group identified the levels of sophistication they might reasonably expect of someone who had been in a PCW role for two years.

2a. Communicate for work

Initially, participants believed that someone with this much experience should be at Stage 4 in Communicate for work. However, following further discussion, they identified a ‘spiky profile’ of requirements across Stages 3 and 4.

They decided that Stage 3 skills were generally appropriate in three of the four focus areas, namely:

- Respond to systems, practices and protocols;
- Understand, interpret and act; and
- Get the message across.

However, in ‘Speak and Listen’, elements of Stage 4 were required. While PCWs were not required to participate in ‘complex formal and informal conversations’, they did need to be able to:

- use active listening, observational and questioning techniques in order to identify different perspectives and confirm, clarify or revise understanding, and
- adapt content, emphasis, tone, language, vocabulary and non-verbal behaviours as required to build rapport or repair misunderstanding.

The employers reiterated the importance of sophisticated non-verbal skills, pointing out that PCWs from non-English speaking backgrounds often excelled in these areas, and that this could compensate for any lack of understanding of the nuances of spoken language.

2b. Connect and work with others

There was a similar discussion about the appropriate stage of this skill area. Participants originally opted for Stage 4 but subsequently the majority decided that while this was the ideal, Stage 3 was ‘more realistic’ for some of the focus areas.

There was agreement that ‘Understanding self’ was at the heart of effective practice. Care workers needed to be self aware, recognising their own values and beliefs and those of others, and having some insight into the impact that these have on needs, expectations and behaviours.

This was captured in Stage 3 descriptors such as:

- Identifies strengths and limitations of own interpersonal skills in work contexts and addresses areas that would benefit from further development.

However, some of the deeply reflective aspects of Stage 4 were also required, particularly:

- Reflects on personal values, beliefs and assumptions and considers how these might be perceived by others
- Identifies strengths and limitations of own interpersonal skills and addresses areas that would benefit from further development.

See Table 3.1. for the Stage 4 skill set employers wanted. Attachment 2 provides a preliminary version of a contextualised CSfW covering the Cluster 2 areas employers prioritised.

From novice to expert

The employers appreciated that everyone entering the aged care industry began as a novice and would take several years to become ‘capable/competent’ on the Dreyfus Novice to Expert scale. They also accepted that Cluster 2 skills could be taught - to an extent. They wanted new entrants who were already demonstrating these skills at a minimum of Stage 3 in other parts of their lives. They believed that this would give these novices to aged care the basis to connect with clients immediately, while providing a sound foundation for further skills development.

While they agreed on the need for Stage 4 skills in the areas they had identified, some workshop participants observed that many of the PCWs they employed did not actually have skills at this level. One also expressed concerns that Stage 4 expectations might be unreasonable, not so much in terms of the needs of the clients, but given the low rates of pay PCWs received.

One participant who argued strongly for the need for Stage 4 skills across most parts of the Cluster 2 skill set, pointed out that, while her organisation expected PCWs to develop these skills over time, they were not expected to do this without assistance. This organisation provided training from Day 1, introducing care workers to Appreciative Enquiry and other strategies to enhance the quality of their interactions with residents, reinforce the philosophical aspects of person-centred care and healthy ageing programs and assist them in recognising the signs of potential social, physical or cognitive issues to enable early intervention.
### Table 3.1 Aged care: PCW Stage 4 skill set

| Aged care workers: The Stage 4 skill set |  
|----------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 2a Communicate for work                | 2b Connect and work with others |
| *(Speak and Listen)*                   | *(Understands self)*            |
| - uses active listening, observational and questioning techniques in order to identify different perspectives and confirm, clarify or revise understanding | - Reflects on personal values, beliefs and assumptions and considers how these might be perceived by others |
| - adapts content, emphasis, tone, language, vocabulary and non-verbal behaviours as required to build rapport or repair misunderstanding. | - Identifies strengths and limitations of own interpersonal skills and addresses areas that would benefit from further development. |

### 3.4 Communicating and connecting in residential aged care

In residential aged care* the work of a PCW focuses around the needs of residents. However, to meet those needs effectively, a PCW must work closely with many other people. PCWs are also members of an organisation, with all the responsibilities, obligations and professional and personal interactions that this involves, not all of which are resident-focused.

The employers and trainers involved in this project identified a broad range of people with whom a PCW was likely to interact on a regular basis (See Fig 3.4). The qualification mapping considered the emphasis placed on communicating and connecting with five of these groups: residents; family/carers; supervisors (clinical and non-clinical); health professionals and other PCWs.

*Fig 3.4 Aged care: Interacting with others*
3.5 Mapping the aged care qualification

Due to a contractual obligation, the Aged Care WorkReady program utilised units from the recently superseded *CIII in Aged Care*. However, there was limited value in mapping a qualification that is being phased out, so the project analysed the current qualification, CHC33015, *Certificate III in Individual Support (Aged Care)*. This involved 13 units, seven core plus the six electives the RTO had originally intended to offer.

The mapping of performance criteria (PC) to the CSfW shows that seven of the ten Skill Areas receive some coverage but four of these clearly dominate (See Fig 3.5).

75 percent of PCs fall into Cluster 2, which appears to align with the employers’ initial identification of this as the key cluster, but the mapping shows a stronger emphasis on 2a: *Communicate for Work* than on 2b *Connect and Work with Others*.

![Fig 3.5 CIII in Individual Support: CSfW Skill Areas](image)

**Emphasis**

As can be seen in Table 3.2, about one third of PCs involve interaction with a client/resident. There are also a handful of references to interacting with both family and resident, and a few involving interactions with family members alone.

About a third of PCs require a PCW to communicate in accordance with organisational protocols. While this may well involve reporting to a clinical or non-clinical manager, it is not usually specified.

A further 13 percent refer explicitly to interacting with a supervisor. 5.6 percent involve communicating and/or collaborating with others in the workplace and infer the involvement of other team members. Less than 3 percent of PCs explicitly refer to interactions with other PCWs. Only three PCs refer to, or infer, interactions with health professionals. Nearly 7 percent of PCs involve a learner in some level of explicit reflection.

The largest concentration of interactions with residents occur in PCs requiring skills in *connecting and working with others*. The largest concentration of organisational interactions occur in PCs associated with CSfW 1b *Work with roles rights and protocols* (See Fig 3.6).

Table 3.3 provides examples of PCs requiring interaction with various groups. These are classified against 2a, 2b or 2c. Those at Stage 3 and 3/4 are not necessarily representative of the vast majority.
Table 3.2 Interacting with others in residential aged care: Where is the focus?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PCW interaction with...</th>
<th>% of total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Client/resident</td>
<td>32.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisation</td>
<td>32.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervisors</td>
<td>13.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self</td>
<td>6.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervisor and other employees</td>
<td>5.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resident and family</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other PCWs</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resident’s family</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health professionals</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig 3.6 Interacting with others in aged care: Performance Criteria coverage by group member
## Table 3.3 Examples of Performance Criteria relevant to communicating and interacting with others in aged care

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2a Communicate for work</th>
<th>2b Connect and work with others</th>
<th>2c Recognise and utilise diverse perspectives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Resident</strong></td>
<td>Ensure the person is aware of their rights and complaints procedure (CHCCS015) Core unit Stage 2</td>
<td>Conduct interpersonal exchanges in a manner that promotes empowerment and maintains trust and goodwill (CHCAGE001) Elective Stage 3/4</td>
<td>Recognise and respect the person’s social and cultural differences Avoid imposing own values and attitudes on others and support the person to express their identify and preferences (CHCCCS023) Core Stage 2/3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Family</strong></td>
<td>Access information about a person’s reminiscences and routines with family and carers (CHCCAGE005) Elective Stage 2</td>
<td>Discuss with the person, their family and other carers the full range of issues that could have an impact on their well being (CHCCCS001) Elective Stage 4?</td>
<td>Provide support and guidance to family, carers, and or significant others where appropriate (CHCAGE005) Elective Stage 3?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Other PCWs</strong></td>
<td>Participate in workplace briefings to address individual needs (HLTWS002) Core Stage 2</td>
<td>Contribute to team discussions on support, planning and review (CHCAGE 005) Elective Stage 2</td>
<td>Contribute to the development of workplace and professional relationships based on appreciation of diversity and inclusiveness (CHCDIV001) Core Stage 2/3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Supervisor</strong></td>
<td>Raise WHS issues with designated persons according to organisational procedures (HLTWS002) Core Stage 2</td>
<td>...seek appropriate support for aspects outside scope of own knowledge, skills or job role (CHCCS015) Core Stage 2</td>
<td>Recognise potential ethical issues and dilemmas and discuss with the appropriate person (CHCLEG001) Core Stage 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Health professional</strong></td>
<td>Identify the person’s chronic disease conditions and seek information about its possible impacts on health, well being and ability to achieve maximum performance in everyday situations (CHCCS001) Elective Stage 2</td>
<td>Respond to the range of issues in an integrated way (CHCCS001) Respond to variations in the person’s needs in the context of a coordinated service approach (CHCCS001) Elective Stage 3</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Self</strong></td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Use reflection to support own ability to work inclusively and with understanding of others (CHCDIV001) Core Stage 3</td>
<td>Identify and reflect on own social and cultural biases (CHCDIV001) Core Stage 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Organisation</strong></td>
<td>Document interactions and services according to organisational policies and procedures (CHCMHS001) Elective Stage 2</td>
<td>Use verbal and nonverbal communication constructively to establish develop and maintain effective relationships, mutual trust and confidence (CHCDIV001) Core Stage 3/4?</td>
<td>Make an effort to sensitively resolve differences taking account of diversity considerations (CHCDIV001) Core Stage 3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**NB:** Examples at Stage 3 and 4 are not necessarily ‘representative’. Those listed above comprise the majority of Performance Criteria at these stages across the full program.
Levels of skill sophistication

The Elements and Performance Criteria (PCs) to be assessed in any qualification are in a sense the tip of the iceberg. They describe the behaviours that will tell an assessor that someone has achieved a particular competency. The Assessment Requirements for a unit provide an indication of the essential knowledge base that should underpin these behaviours. Both were considered when determining the stages of Cluster 2 skills development that an individual would need in order to satisfy assessment requirements.

The exercise identified a potential mismatch between the qualification and the employers’ expectations, with few of the PCs related to working with others, including residents being clearly at Stage 3 - the minimum entry level requirement of employers consulted for this project. Some PCs were classified as Stage 2/3 if their wording suggested a possibility of Stage 3 skills, but this still left the majority, which could be achieved by someone operating at Stage 2.

Table 3.4 provides an example of mapping of a typical unit.

The main concentration of Cluster 2 PCs requiring Stage 3 skills are in the core unit ‘Provide support for people living with dementia’ (CHCAGE005) and the elective ‘Deliver services using a palliative approach’ (CHCPAL001). However, employers singled out dementia and palliative care as key areas in which PCWs most needed the Stage 4 skill set they had identified.

The generic unit, ‘Work with Diverse people’ (CHCDIV001), contains statements that might be interpreted at Stage 4. One in particular could be seen as a critical component of the elusive ‘it’.

Use verbal and nonverbal communication constructively to establish develop and maintain effective relationships, mutual trust and confidence.

Further consultation with industry assessors would be required to establish the level of sophistication actually expected. The complicating factor here is that this unit is also used in child care. Is it supposed to be interpreted at a different level in each?

Gaps

On occasion, PCWs must provide assistance to emotional, and sometimes volatile, family members with high expectations and fears about the care of their loved ones. Yet interactions with family members receive very limited coverage in any of the units. The PCs that do relate explicitly to this appear to require Stage 3 skills, but is this sufficient in complex situations? Is it assumed that PCWs will immediately hand problems over to someone with more formal responsibility? If so, perhaps there needs to be a PC demonstrating the skills required to do this without further inflaming the situation.

PCWs also need to provide appropriate backup for a range of health professionals. In the qualification, there are occasional references to responding ‘in a context of a coordinated service approach’, but little else to provide a basis for considering this area of their role.

PCWs also assist each other to ensure that residents are well looked after. It would seem appropriate for the core unit ‘Communicate and work in health or community services’ (CHCCOM005) to incorporate skills associated with the ability to build and maintain professional relationships and work as part of a team. However, it focuses almost entirely on transactional communication (2a). In other units, the few specific references to collaborating with others are made in the context of contributing to formal meetings.

In any organisation, there are likely to be times of stress and conflict, but the only PC related to conflict resolution skills does not acknowledge the complexity of the situations a PCW may encounter.

---

**Table 3.4. CHCCCS015. Mapping of ‘Provide individualised support’ to the CSfW**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skill Area</th>
<th># PCs</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>stage 1</th>
<th>stage 2</th>
<th>stage 2/3</th>
<th>stage 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1b. Work with rights, roles &amp; protocols</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2a. Communicate for work</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2b. Connect and work with others</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>16.6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2c. Recognise &amp; utilise diverse perspectives</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* *A preliminary mapping to the stages of the CSfW was conducted but further broad industry input is required before these can be validated.*
nor give any indication of the level of skills they may need in order to deal with these. It seems to assume that these skills will simply appear from somewhere, stating simply:

*Use communication skills to avoid, defuse and resolve conflict situations.*

### 3.6. Aged care: observations

**What did the employers really want?**

As discussed earlier, the employers consulted for this project looked for new entrants with:

- • well developed interpersonal skills infused with that elusive quality ‘IT’;
- • a genuine appreciation of a person-centred approach, reflected in their daily practice;
- • the empathy, communication and conflict resolution skills to work effectively with people with different cultural backgrounds and life experiences.

These employers identified a set of CSFW Stage 3 and 4 descriptors that captured their expectations.

Although there was some disagreement about how long it should take for someone to ‘get up to speed’ in all aspects of their role, the employers expected to see early evidence that someone could operate at Stage 3, particularly in connecting and working with others, with movement over time into the Stage 4 Skill set.

**What does the qualification deliver?**

The mapping of the *CIII in Individual Support* to the CSFW demonstrates that it provides coverage of some of the employers’ priority areas, particularly in regard to person-centred care, empathy and working with diverse people. However, there is a mismatch between the qualification’s emphasis on Stage 2/3 behaviours, the employers’ Stage 3/4 expectations, and the complex needs of residents. There also appear to be gaps in coverage, particularly in regard to the skills a PCW will need to connect and work with people other than residents.

**The nature and role of the qualification**

Although one employer thought the *CIII in Individual Support* was ‘roughly OK’, others were less enthusiastic:

*I don’t know which industry members they have been consulting!*

We have identified issues. If someone does a *CIII in Individual Support without the aged care electives* they don’t have the background they need for aspects of the aged care role.

It is very focused on concrete tasks.

Industry is contributing to get the ‘add ons’ the qual doesn’t cover.

The qualification can’t be expected to do it all. It’s up to the trainer, it’s all about delivery.

It should be better regulated to ensure that RTOs support learners to be aware of /develop the non-technical skills they will need.

However, on reflection, these employers began to wonder just how far entry level training could go.

*There’s only so much you can do through simulations. Learners must have real life experience.*

There was some discussion of whether the current CIII should be treated as the equivalent of the construction industry’s White Card (albeit more difficult to obtain!) It would provide a basic introduction to the industry and ensure that new entrants were able to operate safely. It was then up to the employer to provide on-going support through mentoring and training. One employer took this further, suggesting, ‘Perhaps we should be looking at 18 month traineeships rather than 8 week training to get a CIII?’

While they wanted - and needed - PCWs with a minimum of Stage 3 skills in Cluster 2 Skill Areas, one employer also wondered if there were ways to help people at Stage 2 develop these skills.

*Perhaps we need pathways for people who aren’t already at this level [in other parts of their lives]?*

**How much can be addressed within the CIII?**

Training courses in aged care are generally short - for example, the WorkReady program considered in this project was conducted over twelve weeks, with eight weeks of class-based training and 120 hours of work placement. It is difficult to see how an RTO can provide the necessary time for trainees to explore the complex areas associated with person-centred care, seeing things from different perspectives etc.

However, consultation with the RTO involved in the project suggests that, although it is a challenge, a highly skilled trainer can find ways of integrating key messages into the training. Such trainers also have the skills to recognise and take advantage of appropriate ‘teaching moments’ to encourage learners to reflect on what these messages really mean in practice.
The RTO involved in the project is to be commended for the value-adding components they routinely provide for the learners. Several of these directly address Cluster 2 skills, namely an introduction to integrated health, human rights and spiritual intelligence. The RTO also provide a two hour workshop on conflict resolution skills.

Even so, given the sheer amount that needs to be covered to meet the Performance Criteria, there are limited opportunities for learners to role play the broad range of strategies that may help them establish a rapport with residents, or to consider how they should connect and work with other key groups.

One learner commented that:

*Overall, there wasn’t much talk about dealing with people, but the workshop on conflict resolution had helpful scenarios. We wrote our responses and the lecturer’s turned out to be completely different! It was insightful.*

There were also issues related to the delivery model in which the work placement component occurred as a separate block at the end. RTO mentors did visit learners during work placements for reflective debriefings, but there was no opportunity for learners to begin to picture the application of theory within a real setting, or to apply what they were learning and return to debrief on what worked and what did not in a group setting. At the end of the study component, one learner commented:

*We really only got the theory. I enjoyed the study and found the assignments the most helpful. The research on dementia and cultural practices made me understand a lot of things better. The prac were OK too but not that realistic, but I guess we will learn all of that on the job.*

The RTO recognised that the work placement at the end was not optimal, but the logistics of scheduling placements and class time in such a short period had forced them to try this approach. They were exploring other options for future programs.

**Philosophical issues**

To understand and appreciate the underlying issues around person-centred care, learners will need to be operating at CSFW Stage 3/4 in some aspects of ‘recognising and utilising diverse perspective’. Trainers must be highly skilled to help some learners move from theory to practice in this regard.

Assuming that trainers are in fact successful in helping a learner develop the understandings required, what happens when the learner goes to a work placement only to find that the aged care facility is operating on traditional lines? This situation occurred during the WorkReady program. It was extremely confronting for the learner, who found herself in a situation where things were being done in a way that did not align with her own values, nor with what she had been taught.

Her very real dilemma brought to mind the tall story of an island nation that decided to change from driving on the left hand side of the road to driving on the right, and issued an edict announcing that the transition would be gradual - beginning on Monday with cement trucks.

This is not such a tall story in aged care. It may in fact be a likely scenario for the foreseeable future, and a potentially important issue for individual learners and for the industry. Learners trained in a person-centred approach who find themselves in a traditional facility (or in an organisation that preaches but does not yet practice the philosophy) will need highly developed Cluster 2 skills if they are to manage the attendant issues. However, there is no indication in the current qualification that there could even be an issue, and no explicit focus on the development of learner awareness and skills to manage such a situation.

The RTO involved in this project looks for placements in facilities that have a person-centred philosophy, but finds that this is not always reflected in practice. They also warn learners about what they may encounter in future work contexts. However, there is little time to do more than walk through some simple strategies to try and manage a situation where philosophies clash.
4. Discussion

4.1. Identifying ‘mission critical’ skills

A new entrant to any industry needs an appropriate foundation of technical and non-technical skills to get started, and to help them as they embark on the journey from novice to capable and beyond. These skills also appear to play a key role in helping an individual to get a job in the first place.

In this project, the employers in the child and aged care industries prioritised specific ‘mission critical’ non-technical skills over technical skills in their recruitment decisions. In both industries, employers looked for people with the skills to make connections and build relationships with children/residents, families and other staff members. A learner’s ability to demonstrate these skills during work placement strongly influenced whether they would be offered subsequent employment.

Although the employers who contributed to this project cannot be seen to speak for their industries, there is some evidence to suggest that their perspectives may indeed reflect broader industry expectations. There was strong congruence between contributing employers’ priorities within the two sectors, and the skills they identified as ‘mission critical’ reflected the findings of other studies involving industry consultation. It is also important to note that their expectations about the level of skills sophistication was supported by empirical workplace observation, and an analysis of the trends and broader issues affecting each industry.

Trainers and learners did not necessarily have the same priorities as the host employers. This suggests a need to articulate expectations and priorities early in a program. Although this might be done through discussion alone, the use of the CSfW moves the process beyond a focus on lists and onto a new plane. It appears to help employers clarify, test and describe their expectations to the degree of precision that makes the information useful and actionable for trainers and learners.

4.2 Alignment with the qualifications

There were some points of alignment between the mission critical skills identified by the employers and the coverage, nature and emphasis of the qualifications. Most notably - and quite rightly - both had a strong focus on interactions with children/residents. In child care, there was also an alignment between host employer expectations about the nature and sophistication of the interpersonal skills required to connect and work with children. In contrast, in aged care there appeared to be a mismatch between the level of skill sophistication employers expected of PCWs when interacting with residents and the generally lower skill level requirements of the qualification.

The generic Community Services unit, ‘Work with diverse people’ provided some of the few Performance Criteria that might reflect the aged care employers’ Stage 3/4 skill set, but this unit was also used in the child care qualification.

The Performance Criteria attempt to encompass a wide range of skills and nuanced understandings, that could, as written, require Cluster 2 skills at Stages 4 and even at Stage 5. However, the lack of specificity suggests that they would need a great deal of ‘unpacking’. This could lead to a very broad range of possible interpretations at trainer and assessor level within aged care. There is also potential for a different set of the interpretations with child care and other community services contexts. To address Companion Volumes would need to be explicit and trainers and assessors would need professional development. The CSfW could be used to develop clear descriptors, and would provide the basis for building a shared understanding and common reference points.

Thus, the mapping for this study goes beyond the individual programs considered. It raises issues for exploration in future iterations of the training package, particularly in light of suggestions that entry-level care qualifications could become even more generic.

In both qualifications, there were potentially significant gaps in coverage, due to the lack of emphasis on the skills required to connect and work with other key groups, particularly co-workers.

This was a particular issue in child care, where the employers consulted placed considerable emphasis on whether a learner on work placement ‘fitted in’ with other team members, and sought feedback about this from co-workers when making the decision to offer a learner a contract. Although employers consulted in aged care placed their greatest emphasis on how a
PCW interacted with residents, they also raised issues about interaction with co-workers, particularly as the aged care workforce becomes increasingly multi-cultural.

Whether it is part of a pre-employment program or not, any training program focused on an entry level qualification is presumably intended to improve a learner’s potential to gain employment in the relevant industry. However, neither of the qualifications reviewed addressed the very areas that the employers consulted identified as ‘mission critical’ for that purpose.

Although it is not possible to extrapolate from this study to all employers in the two industries, it is possible to report that the respective qualifications did not address the interpersonal skill areas valued by the employers involved in these WorkReady programs. Thus it could be argued that the qualifications on their own were not well designed to help a learner become ‘work ready’ for the industries involved.

In the programs concerned, the development of mission critical skills occurred largely as an additional component. Although the trainers went to some lengths to provide additional supports, they were driven - quite rightly - by assessment and auditing requirements which focused on the Performance Criteria. Within such tight timeframes, it was difficult to address mission critical skills, to the degree required by some learners, within funded hours.

This is not to suggest that the programs should not incorporate the relevant qualifications, even in their present state. The qualifications are a requirement for anyone wishing to enter these industries, and although they can be studied on-line, after hours by someone already in the industry, it was clear from the interviews that the majority of learners in the WorkReady programs would have found this daunting, and would not have had the study and literacy skills to manage without assistance. The WorkReady programs also gave them access to work placements with the potential to lead to employment. It is at this point that each qualification’s limitations as a preparation for work in the respective industries becomes manifest.

4.3 Helping learners develop skills

Cluster 2 mission critical skills cannot be learned from a text book, and it is not enough to expect a learner to develop them simply by undertaking a work placement. Whatever their initial skill levels, novices to an industry are likely to benefit from modelling and practice in class, with application during placement followed by feedback and reflection.

The pilot’s focus on the work placement as an audition could be a useful way of ‘packaging’ this work, providing a potentially compelling frame of reference for a range of activities, discussions, and debriefings.

In terms of specific approaches, the scenario exercise demonstrated the power of real-life examples. Because the multiple-choice responses reflected CSfW stages, it also provided insights into individual learner’s skill levels. It was interesting to see that the activity provided a safe context within which one learner felt able to raise a work placement issue that had been causing her great concern, and that this led to a deeply reflective group discussion that resonated with all involved.

In the current qualifications, some aspects of skills development work could be linked to ‘integration points’, the name we gave to Performance Criteria that aligned with employers’ mission critical skills. Because these areas are explicitly assessed, there is a legitimacy to investing additional time in skills practice. However, while this integrated approach to skills development has much to recommend it, some time and funding allowances would still need to be made to support instruction, practical activities and reflection.

It cannot be assumed that the majority of trainers will necessarily have the skills, knowledge and confidence required to foster mission critical skills. Processes, findings and examples from this study could be used to inform the development of tailored professional development activities to raise awareness and skills in this regard.

4.4 Monitoring and reporting

One aspect of this study involved exploration of the potential to use the CSfW to benchmark, monitor and report on learner progress at program level.

The study suggests that it would not be useful to adopt an empirically-based summative approach but that a formative approach, tracking progress against each learner’s personal goals, could provide useful insights for learners, employers, trainers and funding bodies.

There are a number of factors that mitigate against using assessment tools based on the CSfW to establish an empirical baseline to monitor learner progress from one full CSfW stage to the next. For example, learners start a training program with skills
at different levels, and something that is a challenge for one learner may hardly register for another. There is no uniformity of experience across work placements, even when these are undertaken in the same place, and learner skills will therefore be tested in very different ways. Another very pragmatic reason is that tools to ‘measure’ core skills for work are still in their infancy, so there is, as yet, no empirical data bank that could be used to establish agreed cut-off points for performance within a stage, and within a context.

As discussed in more detail in 2.10, a monitoring and reporting process focused on mission critical skills is more likely to be valuable if it focuses on monitoring each learner’s progress against a personal goal related to one key Skill Area.

The project suggests that tools based on the CSfW could be used at the beginning of a program to raise learner awareness and inform the goal setting process. Although fairly rudimentary, the self-evaluation tool used with child care learners helped them focus on their strengths and provided a springboard for discussions about how they might adapt these to their new work situations. Although subsequent interviews suggested that some learners may have over- or under-estimated their skill levels, at this early point in the program, it was more important to raise awareness and build confidence than to provide an accurate analysis of strengths and weaknesses. This approach appeared to do that.

An on-line ‘FSAT style’ process combining the best of the self assessment and scenario exercises could be a very powerful learning tool. It could be based around a mix of generic and contextualised scenarios and incorporate an area for learners to record their goals in CSfW terms and reflect on their progress.

Even without such a tool, the pilot suggests that it should be possible to develop a simple system to capture an individual’s initial goal and provide a means of recording progress in CSfW terms. Over the course of a program, employers could provide specific feedback on how well each learner was tracking towards their individual goal. This in itself could also facilitate the provision of specific and actionable feedback.

Given the relatively short time involved in many programs, there should be no expectation that a learner would necessarily progress to the next CSfW stage, but it should be possible to collect evidence to show an improvement in one or two descriptors. A final report combining learner, employer and trainer observations (mapped to the CSfW) could form part of the program’s formal reporting to the funding body.

As the priority of the whole process should be to facilitate teaching and learning, monitoring and reporting processes would need to be managed with a light touch. However, if learners can see the close connection between this aspect of the program and gaining employment, it could become a positive feature of their experience, as well as a way for an RTO to demonstrate a broader range of program impacts than has been possible to date. Involving employers in the process could also enhance many aspects of the work placement process.

4.5 Implications for Training Packages

While the C III in Early Childhood Education and Care and the C III in Individual Support both claim to incorporate employability skills, this project suggests that potentially critical skill areas are not explicitly or implicitly identified or assessed.

Until quite recently, a similar situation existed in regard to the language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) requirements of training package qualifications. Mapping to the Australian Core Skills Framework (ACSF) provided a systematic approach to the identification of strengths, gaps and needs, and has driven a major rethink in regard to the ways in which LLN requirements are represented in qualifications and addressed in training programs.

This project’s mapping of the qualifications’ Performance Criteria to the CSfW illustrates the potential for a similar rethink in relation to employability skills. It also highlights the importance of identifying and focusing on the skills that are mission critical to a context and role, rather than trying to cover an extended list of employability skills (as has occurred in the past).

To be useful to trainers and learners, the identification of mission critical skills should move beyond the level of the list and focus on establishing expectations about the level of sophistication required and expected. Employer input is clearly critical, and will be far more useful if it is gained through processes that encourage exploration, reflection and, on occasion, recalibration of expectations.

Final determinations of mission critical skill areas should also be informed by workplace observation in combination with environmental scanning regarding predicted future needs and trends.
4.6 Alignment with the AQF

The certificates mapped to the CSfW for this project were at AQF level III:

AQF levels and the AQF levels criteria are an indication of the relative complexity and/or depth of achievement and the autonomy required to demonstrate that achievement (Australian Qualifications Framework http://www.aqf.edu.au).

Fig 4.1 contains the criteria for all Level 3 qualifications, but this study suggests that Cluster 2 Skill Areas do not necessarily align with AQF levels or expectations.

Although employers in aged care and child care both identified the same employability skills as mission critical, these skills manifested themselves in different ways and at a different level of sophistication. In their stated job role, PCWs may only ‘take limited responsibility in known and stable contexts within established parameters’, but in their interactions with individual residents, they still need a relatively sophisticated non-technical skill set. The skills to operate effectively within a ‘coordinated service approach’ also require a nuanced understanding of stated roles and responsibilities, politics and human dynamics that may go beyond CSfW Stage 3.

This raises questions about how much the Training Package writing process is influenced by the AQF construct? What happens when this does not reflect reality?

An increased focus on employability skills in training packages using another framework - in this case the CSfW - could provide a different lens through which anomalies could be identified and the implications for vocational qualifications considered.

4.7 The role of the CSfW

The pilot’s findings offer proof of concept in regard to the benefits of using the CSfW to provide a common language and reference points for the identification and discussion of non-technical skills in vocational training.

Throughout the project, the framework provided:

- the language and reference points that helped different stakeholders articulate their expectations and priorities and better understand those of others;
- the scaffolding to gather detailed input from a number of employers and share it with learners and trainers;
- a means for employers to explore, confirm and, in some cases, question and change their expectations of vocational learners/new entrants;
- the basis for the development of self-assessment and teaching tools; and
- the basis for the development of a draft version of Connect and work with others contextualised for the residential aged care industry.

Importantly, the CSfW provided a way of pinpointing common ground and mismatches between employer and workplace needs and the coverage and emphasis of the qualifications in question. Until now, there has been no tool available to facilitate this process.

Fig 4.1 AQF level 3 criteria

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) level 3 criteria</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Skills</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduates at this level will have a range of cognitive, technical and communication skills to select and apply a specialised range of methods, tools, materials and information to:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• complete routine activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• provide and transmit solutions to predictable and sometimes unpredictable problems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Application of knowledge and skills</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduates at this level will apply knowledge and skills to demonstrate autonomy and judgement and to take limited responsibility in known and stable contexts within established parameters.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Australian Qualifications Framework http://www.aqf.edu.au
5. Conclusions

5.1 The benefits of aligning stakeholder expectations

In programs designed to assist people into work, employers providing work placements, trainers delivering qualifications, RTOs making decisions about where to add value, and the learners themselves, may all have different ideas about the non-technical skills an individual will need to get a job. This study suggests that focusing on those skills that employers see as ‘mission critical’ simplifies the process and makes it possible to align stakeholders’ expectations and priorities.

Although it is a necessary starting point, it is not enough to ask participating employers for a list of priorities (e.g. a good communicator, a team player). They need to drill down into the detail of what these labels mean within their own organisational and industry contexts, so that novices to the industry (and possibly to the workplace) have concrete examples of the behaviours that are expected of them during work placement. The CSfW provided a means of teasing out what this meant in practice so that the information could be shared with trainers and learners. The process itself also provided an opportunity for employers to clarify, explore and sometimes adjust, their expectations.

Letting everyone in on the ‘secrets’ behind recruitment decisions has a number of benefits. It helps learners:

- focus on the areas that matter most to their host employers;
- identify the strengths they can bring to the work placement and address specific areas that might otherwise act as barriers to their ultimate recruitment;
- build self-belief and self confidence.

This approach can help those on work placement ‘get up to speed’ more quickly, which is also of benefit to the host employer, and it expands the pool of potential employees from which they can choose. This is an important consideration in growth industries such as aged care and child care.

5.2 Work-readiness

There is real value in incorporating a qualification into a pre-employment program, but the inadequate coverage of ‘mission critical’ skills in the qualifications considered suggests that they may not be enough, on their own, to help a learner develop and demonstrate the skills an employer wants to see during a work placement ‘audition’.

This increases the onus on the RTO to find ways of integrating relevant skills training into the existing training program, and/or of finding ways to provide additional assistance within limited timeframes and budgets.

At a higher level, it also raises questions about the role and coverage of other ‘entry level’ qualifications, and about the roles and responsibilities of other stakeholders. How far can a preparatory qualification actually go? What is an employer’s responsibility? What should an RTO be doing to help learners, even when the qualification is not enough?

As mentioned earlier, perhaps entry-level qualifications could be seen as a version of a construction ‘White card’ indicating that the holder has enough basic training to go onsite and start working without being a danger to themselves or others. Alternatively, is there an argument, as one employer suggested, for dispensing with relatively short ‘pressure cooker’ programs in the care sectors, in favour of traineeship incorporating on and off the job training over an extended period?

Whatever the future scenario, the findings of this study raise questions about the coverage and emphasis of entry-level qualifications in two industries. Mapping and empirical observation suggest that there are gaps in coverage. Further consultation with industry members, using the CSfW as the scaffolding, could establish an agreed set of mission critical skills, while further consultation with a range of trainers could identify current good practice and areas in which they need and would welcome additional supports, including professional development.
5.3 Developing learner skills

During their work placements, learners faced challenges that tested their interpersonal skills. They responded positively to the limited range of interventions that were possible during the pilot, and might have benefited from more extensive practical sessions focused on interpersonal skills.

Not withstanding the qualifications’ gaps and mismatches in coverage of these skills, some ‘integration points’ were identified that could act as anchors for specific skills training relevant to the audition. However, to take advantage of these, trainers may need professional development, including an introduction to the CSfW and practical strategies for developing the skills it describes.

The pilot suggests there could be value in incorporating an explicit focus on the work placement as an audition, and linking learner goal setting, skills development activities and employer feedback directly to this. This would also provide a foundation for the development of program monitoring and reporting processes that could capture a learner’s progress. The project methodology could be utilised to develop this idea further. The potential for utilising additional specialist personnel to support aspects of mission critical skills’ development could also be explored.

5.4 The role of the CSfW

The CSfW appears to be an effective tool for systematically gathering and presenting stakeholder input, and for confirming and challenging perceptions about expectations. In this study, it provided a level of precision to which employers, learners and trainers could relate, and made it relatively easy to share information between different groups.

While the generic framework was adequate to the task, work with aged care employers suggests that it is possible, and potentially useful, to develop versions of the CSfW contextualised for an industry, and a role. The approach used during the project could be adapted for any industry/training context.

Although there is real potential for the CSfW to enhance approaches to non-technical skills development in vocational learning, the experience of the pilot is a reminder that this will only work if employers and trainers gain a working knowledge of the CSfW, and have the opportunity to explore its applications in their own settings.

In conjunction with professional development around the framework itself, trainers may also need an introduction to specific strategies to foster skills development. The ACSF experience suggests that once trainers and employers start to see the benefits, the process could take on its own momentum.

5.5 Possible next steps

The project’s findings can only be considered preliminary in relation to whole-of-industry perspectives. However, the consultation processes and draft outputs, such as the version of Connect and work with others contextualised for residential aged care, could provide a solid platform for broader industry consultation.

The work involving the RTOs has demonstrated the importance of investing time in structured training around the CSfW itself. Even highly experienced trainers identified a need to ‘learn about’ and ‘learn how’ to use the CSfW in preparation for enhancing their focus on mission critical skills. The project has provided insights into the kinds of professional development activities that could be most useful, and the contextualised examples could become powerful learning resources, with application within the aged and child care industries.

There is also potential for application of the process in other contexts. Feedback from members of the disability sector suggests that this would be an obvious place to begin, but the general process is now well enough developed to be adapted to any industry context. Career development practitioners have also expressed interest in the process and findings.
References


Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Business Council of Australia, 2002. ‘Employability Skills for the Future’, Canberra, Department of Science, Education and Technology


