

National Industry Skills Initiative

Food Trades Working Group Report “*A Recipe for Change - the Future of Commercial Cookery in Australia*” July 2001

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Commercial Cookery in Australia helps epitomise the nation's 21st maturity. It spurred a recent comment from a sophisticated international visitor that “London seems rather provincial” compared to one of Australia's capital cities. In the light of the professionalism implied by this comment, we have replaced the old term ‘Food Trades’ with ‘Commercial Cookery’.

Commercial cookery is a vital ingredient of Australia's second biggest export – tourism. In 1998-99, tourism contributed almost \$8 billion export dollars to the Australian economy. Tourism remains a growth industry, and its place in Australia's exports can only advance. Finding solutions to skill shortages in commercial cookery is therefore a priority for the nation as well as the industry.

Commercial cookery is a very large industry. In 2000, it employed more than 100,000 commercial chefs and cooks. This includes “bakers and pastrycooks”, but not fast food cooks. Employment growth is running at about 3% per annum.

In 1999, there were nearly 30,000 people training for the industry sector. Of these, slightly more than half were apprentices, and are included in the above employment figures. Slightly less than half were undertaking VET (Vocational Education and Training) courses in commercial cookery. Three quarters of these students wanted to become career cooks or chefs, and more than 80% of them already have industry experience. These students are an important group. They symbolize the growing professionalism of commercial cookery. One employer has noted that these students have the longer term skills that are needed in the industry.

This Report recommends solutions to the skill shortages which have been a challenge in the commercial cookery sector for many years. The total current shortage is estimated at about 2000 people. This is without taking account of employment growth, which we project at 3% a year. Effective solutions are also needed to take attrition into account - the loss of workers from the industry. The industry currently experiences high attrition rates, with approximately 13% of the workforce exiting each year.

The principal objective of the Report is to overcome the skill shortages within five years, and achieve a balanced employment situation. Assuming the industry will continue to grow, there are only three ways this can happen. We recommend action on all three fronts.

The first is to recruit and train large numbers of fresh commercial cooks/chefs. We estimate that some 16,000-17,000 recruits are required per year for the next five years to overcome the

shortages, replace the attrition, and cater for growth in commercial cookery. We estimate that some 13,000-14,000 recruits are currently coming into the industry in a year.

This is occurring through training, including the New Apprenticeship schemes; and through the short term skilled migration program, which 75% of users say has enabled them to expand their business. This leaves a shortfall in excess of 3,000 recruits per year. Recruitment campaigns and targeted training programs to draw people back into the industry can make a major contribution to meeting this shortfall.

In addition to recruitment campaigns, we recommend action to reduce attrition. As part of this project, we surveyed employers and employees. The results show wide agreement on manageable ways to retain staff. For example, there is scope for better management to motivate and encourage commercial cooks and chefs to stay in the industry. Nearly 90% of employees think this is important. But currently, only 20% of employers adopt this approach. Employers are ready to learn the lesson, because over 80% of them agree they need to smarten their management skills in this area.

The third way to overcome skill shortages is for employers to innovate and operate in a way that requires fewer commercial cooks and chefs. This means embracing technology more fully. It requires employers to think through how technological innovations can be used to satisfy customers and increase efficiency. Technology has already transformed the industry, for example with the use of prepared food. History is full of stories of people adapting their habits to technology.

In recommending solutions, the drivers and underlying situation of the industry need to be understood. Commercial cookery is a demanding, high-pressure industry. It is hard, fast-moving and diffuse. There are tens of thousands of food outlets, including some 7,500 hotels, more than 22,500 cafes and restaurants, more than 16,500 institutional caterers, more than 4,500 function caterers, nearly 7,500 clubs. Commercial cookery has to adapt to changes in fashion, it has to cater to the demands of its clients, it has to be innovative and respond to the innovations and entrepreneurial efforts of new entrants.

The key role of training in commercial cookery is already widely recognised. The co-operative approach of the industry in agreeing to be involved in the National Industry Skills Initiative, with the support and at the initiative of the Minister for Education, Training and Youth Affairs, demonstrates the industry's commitment to training, and its willingness to assume major responsibility for it. Our research demonstrates the industry's recognition of the value of training, with above 90% of employers saying it increases productivity and helps retain staff, and more than 75% saying it increases profitability.

Commercial cookery has enormous potential for Australia in this Century, following astonishing development in the last half Century. We recommend a three-pronged strategy to address the major issues.

The first strategy is to produce and pursue proactive and pragmatic problem solving packages.

A strong and concerted ‘whole of industry’ approach, with appropriate Government support and backing, is required. The first step is to establish a dynamic industry taskforce, with annual action plans. Its role is to address key practical issues including:

- Marketing commercial cookery as a career which offers enormous opportunities particularly in key areas including job satisfaction and travel;
- Promoting well attended training programs, for staff and management as well as industry recruits, relating to staff retention and staff development on the one hand, and bringing people into productive employment on the other;
- Establishing training mechanisms to draw people back into the industry;
- Overcoming the confusion which currently surrounds the “cook/chef” distinction, including chef training programs and qualifications;
- Instituting accessible testing systems for chef recognition and trade testing generally;
- Emphasising competency based training, rather than time based training, especially in apprenticeships, with due attention to high level assessment;
- Developing and making available materials and programs to assist industry modernization, including ways of accessing technological developments and introducing flexible hours.

The second strategy is to Position, Profile and Publicise the Industry.

The first step in this strategy is to develop a vision or forward-looking perspective for commercial cookery. This vision statement will underpin both recruitment programs, and the design of a great deal of training. A comprehensive vision statement will also give commercial cookery a voice in proactive strategic development of the tourism industry.

The second step in implementing this strategy is to communicate to the community the industry’s vision and perception of itself. Commercial cookery clearly has a capacity to profile itself attractively and effectively.

The third strategy is to Professionalise the Industry.

This is in line with many current developments, and it provides the underlying basis for overcoming skill shortages. The major action components include:

- Developing appropriate industry standards;
- Establishing strong and systematic industry wide links with education and training institutions;
- Initiating a significant research effort to underpin the industry’s development;
- Strengthening co-operation and mutual understanding across all areas of the industry;
- Building up the self-confidence of the industry and the people in it.

In conclusion, runs on the board are needed. We recommend prioritizing the following:

- Undertaking a recruitment drive for new apprentices, VET students and partially trained personnel who wish to return to the industry;
- Creating a series of high-profile, high-quality short training programs – pre-apprentice and pre-employment programs – to bring people rapidly into productive employment at entry level and mature age level;
- Facilitating and fostering part-time employment solutions to skills shortages;
- Developing an acceptable solution which clarifies the distinction between cooks and chefs.

By initiating immediate action on these four priorities, the vital first steps will be taken in solving skill shortages. These initial successes will strengthen the overall position of commercial cookery in the employment area. They will give employers confidence that long-term solutions for this particular set of problems can be secured. They will ultimately provide a basis to reduce pressure in the industry and establish it on a fully professional footing.

