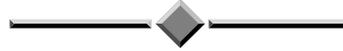


**WATER INDUSTRY WORKER PROGRAM: OUTCOMES  
FROM A TRAINING AND RECOGNITION PROGRAM  
FOR NETWORKS/RETICULATION STAFF**



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# WATER INDUSTRY WORKER PROGRAM: OUTCOMES FROM A TRAINING AND RECOGNITION PROGRAM FOR NETWORKS/RETICULATION STAFF

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## **Panel Participants:**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The Water Industry Worker (WIW) competency training journey began in South East Queensland with a pilot program including 22 staff members from the field maintenance and construction teams of Ipswich City Council, Logan City Council, Redland City Council, Brisbane City Council, Gold Coast City Council and Scenic Rim, Lockyer and Somerset Councils. This pilot program was seen as the first step of a major undertaking, effectively designing a custom industry accepted qualification, organising industry demand, and supporting the training supply market to develop an efficient model that could be replicated across other skill streams.

The strategic direction of the program proposed a journey which commenced by planning and implementing competency-based training for the field-based maintenance and construction stream – flowing on to other technical steams, para-professional, professional and potentially management roles.

In 2014, an evaluation of the WIW Program was undertaken. The purpose for this evaluation was to assess and appraise the WIW training program, to understand the impact of the program on the industry, water utilities and individual participants involved. *qldwater* has undertaken this evaluation in order to attempt to assess the return on this investment and thus provide evidence to ensure the future of the traineeship funding. In addition, the work seeks to provide a case for other service providers to consider adopting the Program, and encourage investment in other industry skilling initiatives.

A summary of the outcomes of the evaluation and a panel session with managers and supervisors directly involved in the WIW Program will form part of this workshop.

## **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

The WIW training program is focused on the formal recognition of skills and training of employees within the civil construction and maintenance field in the water industry, with a strong emphasis on on-the-job learning. Participants undertake either a Certificate II or III in Water Operations – Civil. Further stages of the program involve moving through to Certificate IV Water Operations and/or Diploma of Water Operations qualifications for supervisory staff.

The Program provides a practical approach to valuing existing skills, acknowledging that experienced staff in these roles typically had gained skills and knowledge equivalent to, or exceeding those gained through a recognised trade, without a structured learning framework or other formal qualification.

The qualifications issued through the WIW program are nationally recognised with up-to-date training and broader career paths offering opportunities for promotion and professional development. The training process includes a recognition of prior learning (RPL) component (where relevant) followed by gap training in specified areas where the participant cannot demonstrate competency.

Training costs for both Certificate II and Certificate III Water Operations were (and are still at time of publishing) generously funded through Queensland User Choice Traineeship Funding after successful lobbying by *qldwater* and key industry proponents to include both qualifications as 'Priority 1.' Training costs for the Certificate IV Water Operations and Diploma Water Operations held in 2012, 2013 and 2014 were also funded through either the *qldwater*-coordinated Strategic Investment Funding (SIF) or National Workforce Development Fund (NWDF). Both these programs have ceased, however the Certificate IV Water Operations and Diploma qualifications are now included in the Queensland Higher Level Skills funding for 2014/2015.

## 2.0 DISCUSSION

The following stakeholders involved in the WIW program were surveyed as part of the 2014 evaluation of the program.

- Supervisors and managers involved in the WIW program
- Participants who have undertaken training through the WIW program
- Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) that have provided training for the program.

### 2.1 Summary of Evaluation Outcomes

Previous anecdotal feedback on the WIW program suggested that it has been a valuable workforce development exercise for the industry and resulted in improved skills and flexibility in using those skills in the workforce. Such feedback has been reinforced by this formal evaluation which indicates that the majority of participants in the program have gained skills through the training and that these skills have been utilised by the water service providers who have been able to modify their workplace practices in a more efficient manner.

The overall feedback from the participants surveyed is very positive, with the majority stating that they were satisfied with the level of training provided and that they believed the program should become an industry standard, in particular for new employees. Further, the large majority of participants surveyed stated that they had gained skills from the program that had enabled them to improve their performance in their job. Whilst some participants felt that they did not personally gain any significant outcomes from the program (such as learning new skills), all participants surveyed stated that they would recommend the program to other employees. This bodes well for the future of the program as it demonstrates that the training has been readily accepted by the employees as beneficial and there is a positive response to the program.

Feedback from supervisors involved in the WIW program further demonstrates that the program has not only resulted in outcomes such as additional skills for the employees, but that the program has enabled the participating organisations to modify work practices more efficiently. Essentially, this means that on-call workers are now often multi-skilled and can work across both water and wastewater maintenance teams.

The supervisors stated that this increased flexibility makes it easier to plan works and on call rostering. Indeed, this multiskilling approach was one of the main drivers for the initial WIW training program pilot and enables a more flexible approach to on-call scheduling. The training program and qualification progression is also now embedded in some of the organisational Enterprise Bargaining Agreements (EBAs), providing a clear career path for employees as well as recognising that the roles require key skills.

The results for the regional WIW pilot undertaken in 2010 were unfortunately less positive than for the South East Queensland intakes, with a low completion rate for the 13 total pilot participants. There are numerous possible reasons for this including issues with communication, training delivery methods and time commitments. Further, all participants in the regional pilot were originally enrolled in a Certificate III level qualification which may have been too high an initial start base for some of the participants who had no prior qualifications. Certainly, feedback from SEQ supervisors has supported a progression approach from Certificate II to Certificate III in particular for employees with limited experience or formal qualifications.

The RTOs involved in the program have also faced their own challenges which include difficulties sourcing trainers with the appropriate skills to be able to provide the training. Certainly, it has been commented by supervisors that the quality of the training is most influenced by the competency and approach of the individual trainer. Over the course of the SEQ WIW program a number of RTOs have been trialled and working out the best possible approach to ensure a rigorous program and the most positive outcomes for the participants has been an ongoing journey. The market has significantly improved, however the lack of certainty around the capacity of RTOs remains a significant risk for employers and participants.

Overall, the feedback received through this report is very positive for the future of the program in SEQ. Many of the outcomes reflect the specific goals set at the start of the program such as multi-skilled reticulation/network teams and a clearer career path for those employees. As the program has matured, the training outcomes have become embedded in many of the organisations' industrial relations instruments and have been accepted as an established baseline training requirement for employees. A commitment to the program from management must be established from the beginning of the program and supported by workplace recognition and supervisor buy-in. Further, ongoing management support and sufficient allocation of time for training is crucial to the success of the training.

### **3.0 CONCLUSION**

Based on the feedback received, the WIW program has demonstrated positive outcomes for both the participants and organisations involved. The cross-skilling approach promoted through the program provides employers with additional flexibility with rostering and on-call arrangements. Within SEQ there is strong interest in continuing to grow the program with 2015 enrolments already starting. Unitywater has recently undertaken a competitive tendering process to determine the RTO that will be used to meet their future needs for this training.

The organisational benefits from the program are significant, if hard to quantify. WIW works, primarily through the commitment of a number of passionate supervisors represented on the technical reference group who can see the direct link these benefits. The opportunity, state-wide, is yet to be realised.

With appropriate interest, *qldwater* would look to establish another regional pilot, learning from the lessons from the original pilot and ensuring that the RTOs involved approach the training in a manner that suits the needs of the regional participants. In particular, a more ‘regional hub’ style model may work in some areas to ensure that minimum training numbers for face to face training can be met. The most likely participants for this would be the larger regional Councils that have water and sewage treatment and reticulation works undertaken by separate teams. For many other smaller regional water service providers, reticulation/network maintenance is undertaken by the same operators that run the water and wastewater/sewage treatment plants. In such circumstances their training is often more likely to be focussed on the treatment side of operations, though some reticulation/network units may prove valuable to include in the qualifications.

It is important to celebrate some of the broader, indirect benefits this program has created. WIW created the impetus which led to the establishment of traineeship funding for Cert II operations staff, which provides benefit for other “streams” including water and wastewater treatment. The experience from this project has led to *qldwater* securing other funding support for industry VET programs, an ongoing relationship with RTOs and national linkages. *qldwater* will soon produce a business case which is expected to support the introduction of mandatory certification for drinking water treatment operators in Queensland, another initiative which has borrowed heavily from WIW.

Finally, establishment of the collaboration in SEQ around WIW among many organisations pre-dated reform which saw the creation of distribution-retail entities Allconnex Water, Unitywater and Queensland Urban Utilities. Despite subsequent well documented and “painful” changes, many of those linkages remain strong and pivotal to the success of the program today.

#### **4.0 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

*qldwater* wishes to acknowledge the significant contribution of the supervisors and managers who have devoted significant time and effort to the Water Industry Worker Program.