

The Australian Apprenticeships Ambassadors Program

Summary

With 288 individuals¹, across all states and territories, appointed as Australian Apprenticeships Ambassadors, the Australian Apprenticeships Ambassadors Program (AAP) aims to **raise the status of Australian Apprenticeships** through profiling real national **success stories** to showcase the numerous benefits of apprenticeships and traineeships to people of ages, and business audiences².

Australian Apprenticeships Ambassadors are members of the Australian VET Alumni and know first-hand the value of investing in an Australian Apprenticeship. Ambassadors are **former and current apprentices** and/or **apprentice employers** representing a wide range of different occupational sectors - including plumbing, hospitality, electro-technology and veterinary nursing.

The AAP was initiated by the Australian Government in 2012. All Ambassadors are voluntary and have the opportunity to be invited to share their story at **event and media appearances** to promote the benefits of an apprenticeship or traineeship.

Introduction

Apprentice representation structure

In Australia, apprentices are typically represented by school / student councils when undertaking the off-the-job component of their apprenticeships. Apprentices in the workplace are typically represented by trade unions. For this case study, the AAP has been selected. Though it is not intended to directly represent apprentices, through its ambassadors, efforts are made to promote the benefits of the apprenticeship system to learners, parents and businesses.

The AAP was initiated as one response to an independent report to the Australian Government in 2011 which recommended **strategies to raise the status of apprenticeships and traineeships** amongst the identified target audiences of potential apprentices, influencers of potential apprentices, business and industry. The report indicated that negative attitudes toward apprenticeships and the traditional trades impacted the ability of the apprenticeship system to attract candidates³. The report recommended that the Australian Government make an effort to re-establish the status of apprenticeships and traineeships as a valued career pathway, with the expectation that improved status would, in the long run, increase the apprenticeship enrolment rate and also facilitate young people's access to employment⁴.

¹ Australian Department for Education and Training

²<https://www.worldskills.org.au/what-we-do/scholarships-and-pathways/australian-apprenticeships-ambassadors/>

³ McDowell, J., Oliver, D., Persson, M., Fairbrother, R., Wetzlar, S., Buchanan, J. and Shipstone, T. 2011. A Shared Responsibility, Apprenticeships for the 21st Century: Final Report of the Expert Panel. Canberra, Commonwealth of Australia.

⁴ https://unevoc.unesco.org/go.php?q=PP_Ambassador

As one response to the recommendation, in 2011 the Australian Government launched the Australian Apprenticeships Ambassadors Program to assist in boosting the image and attractiveness of Australian Apprenticeships.

Zooming-in on the initiative

Consultation and representation of apprentices

The AAAP structure includes two 'tiers' of ambassadors.

- **'Tier 1'** ambassadors are **public personalities** in Australia: well-known people who have had direct experience with apprenticeships (including television celebrities, sports stars, etc.). Their fan base allows the program to reach a wide audience.
- **'Tier 2'** ambassadors are **former apprentices or trainees** who were selected through national VET programs such as WorldSkills Australia and the Australian Training Awards, those who have received industry awards and commendations and by self-nomination. These ambassadors range in age and are from various industries and cultural backgrounds. They make up most of the ambassadors and while they are not known to the public, they are successful in their own careers and exemplify the achievements attainable through apprenticeships. Their role is to share success stories that audiences can easily relate to and promote apprenticeships as a viable option that individuals should consider when thinking about their future.

The ambassadors' public appearances and stories are **targeted at potential apprentices** (i.e. youth aged between 15 and 25) as well as at people whose opinions may influence youth in their decisions regarding taking up an apprenticeship (e.g. parents). The ambassadors challenge negative perceptions by **communicating the key benefits** of undertaking an apprenticeship or traineeship, including: greater employability, higher job security, larger earning potential and, a broader range of work options⁵.

While there is no specific timings for ambassadors to contribute to discussions relating to the Australian Apprenticeships system, since the program launched in 2012, Australian Government Ministers responsible for vocational education and training have called for two Australian Apprenticeships Roundtables at Parliament House in Australia's capital, Canberra, consult with ambassadors about the Australian Apprenticeships system. Their input out of these Roundtables has been shared with the policy development teams in the Department of Education and Training⁶.

Results

The AAAP identifies and appoints ambassadors to **promote the benefits of the apprenticeship system to learners, parents and businesses**. As of 2019 the AAAP has more than 288 ambassadors who have appeared at numerous events organised by the Department of Education and Training, as well as at local events⁷. Since the program launched in 2012, Ambassadors have attended **over 500 public events** across Australia, and overseas because of the department responding to

⁵ https://unevoc.unesco.org/go.php?q=PP_Ambassador

⁶ Australian Department for Education and Training

⁷ Australian Department for Education and Training

'book an ambassador requests' through its Australian Apprenticeships website or initiating appearances. This does not include the number of Ambassadors who initiate their own appearances at events⁸. The events are promoted via social media, and a dedicated page ('Success stories') on the Australian Apprenticeships website offers extensive profiles on the ambassadors. Data collected by the department indicate that, as of 2018, the programs' media coverage and public relations activities have reached nearly 8 million people⁹.

The AAAP is still relatively new, and changing perceptions takes time. However, ambassadors have indicated that the responses to their presentations are positive, and that learners, parents and schools appreciate the information and insights they provide¹⁰.

Strengths

The AAAP's key strength is that it **operates based on the enthusiasm of its members** and the **general public's interest** in booking these members for appearances. It has high buy in by the apprenticeships sector – with key stakeholders viewing the AAAP as a resource to draw upon and assist with supporting their messages¹¹. Ambassadors can help make apprenticeships much **more visible in the public domain**, and whilst they are mostly selected by the Australian government to undertake the role and may not represent the broader experience of all apprentices, ambassadors can provide a positive perspective of what it is like to be an apprentice. For potential apprentices and influencers, these **real stories of success** aim to address the benefits of Australian Apprenticeships including greater employability, greater job security, higher earning potential and, for many individuals, a broader range of work options. Stories shared to these audiences also address the barriers to partaking in Australian Apprenticeships including, but not limited to rational (time, cost, effort) and emotional (confidence, empowerment) issues.

The **AAAP's website** complements the physical events that are attended by ambassadors. As not all the ambassadors are professional spokespeople, the delivery of key messages at **live forums** is supplemented by **online articles** and **videos** that convey the experiences of all the ambassadors in an accessible format. In addition, the AAAP's website features an **interactive map** that shows where the ambassadors are located, with links to articles about the ambassadors. In one click, online visitors can identify the ambassadors who live in their region, then invite them to local events. Website users can search for ambassadors by occupation, industry, state and name¹².

Ambassadors who are employers also play a role in **promoting apprenticeships to businesses** to illustrate the benefits of hiring apprentices or trainees. Therefore, promoting apprenticeships requires encouraging employers to become part of the apprenticeship system. Accordingly, ambassadors visit **business forums** and **meet employers to address any concerns** they may have about hiring an apprentice or a trainee. Within this target audience, small businesses (fewer than 50 employees) are a priority. Although they employ almost half of the workforce in the private sector

⁸ Australian Department for Education and Training

⁹ Australian Department for Education and Training

¹⁰ https://unevoc.unesco.org/go.php?q=PP_Ambassador

¹¹ Australian Department for Education and Training

¹² https://unevoc.unesco.org/go.php?q=PP_Ambassador

in Australia¹³, small businesses are often reluctant to employ an apprentice. Ambassadors who employ apprentices address their fears of trained apprentices leaving to join larger companies. Another task performed by ambassadors is to **encourage employers in male-dominated industries to hire women**, including in trades that involve demanding physical work¹⁴.

Limitations/barriers

There are risks that result from the use of publicly visible ambassadors to promote apprenticeships across Australia. One risk is the **reputation of ambassadors** themselves. There is always the possibility that the image of the Australian Apprenticeship system could be tarnished because of inappropriate conduct by the Ambassador. The AAAP closely manages this through the **careful selection** of the ambassador and **appropriate contractual requirements**¹⁵. In utilising high-profile Australians to endorse the value of Australian Apprenticeships, there is always the possibility that the ambassador could receive negative media attention after he/she has commenced as an ambassador. To that end, the AAAP conducts historical background checks on ambassadors are carried out by the Department through checking publicly available media history and profile information (primarily through internet sources). Incidents such as displeasing media around an ambassador are handled by the Department on a case-by-case basis.

Zooming-out of the initiative

Lessons learned and recommendations

The AAAP was introduced following a recognition by the Australian Government that **apprenticeships needed key representatives** to boost the perception of ambassadors in the country. The start point was not to improve apprenticeship representation, but to **improve the public image of apprenticeships**. This should therefore be considered when applying such a policy elsewhere, as it may not be necessary if apprenticeships do not have an image problem in the country concerned. This is a top-down initiative, designed to support government policy. It will therefore not be effective at helping apprentices themselves to influence and shape the decisions being made by policy makers which would require a more bottom-up representation structure.

Conclusions

The AAAP is a self-contained policy initiative involving **voluntary former apprentices, employers** and **well-known public figures**, that could be easily transferred to other countries in Europe. The issue however, is that the main objective of the AAAP is **to improve public perception of apprenticeships**, rather than to facilitate discussion and direct representation of apprentices at the policy making level. Therefore, this is only a good model to consider adopting if policy makers believe that ambassadors are needed to promote apprenticeships and improve their

¹³ Department of Industry, Innovation, Science, Research and Tertiary Education (DIISRTE). 2012. Australian Small Business: Key Statistics and Analysis. Canberra, Commonwealth of Australia.

¹⁴ Smith, E. and Smith, V. (eds). 2005. Education and Training: Apprenticeships, their role in economies and societies across the globe. Bingley, West-Yorkshire, Emerald Group Publishing.

¹⁵ Australian Department for Education and Training

image and popularity within a country, rather than to improve apprentice representation.