Training for building

The apprenticeship system has been part of New Zealand's building industry since the middle of the 19th century, boosting the labour supply in boom times and training our future tradespeople.

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Although many trained craftsmen came to the new colony (see *Build* 126 October/November 2011, pages 107–108) training of the young was not ignored. On 1 August 1846, Alfred Boon was advertising for sale from his Auckland business both 'a large supply of earthenware' and his need for 'a respectable lad wanted as an indoor apprentice to the carpentry, joinery, cabinet and upholstery business'.

Apprenticeships an ancient practice

Apprenticeship, which dates back to ancient Egypt and Babylonia, offers a method by which a trainee – usually young – works for an employer at a lower wage to gain specialist skills.

Traditionally, it was domiciliary, with the youth living in with the employer. On-the-job training might be complemented with off-the-job training in an educational institute. The apprenticeship system limited the supply of skilled craftsmen and provided a way for highly trained and expensive craftsmen to reduce costs by employing cheaper semi-skilled apprentices.

Early apprentices often destitute children

The first New Zealand legislation dealing with apprenticeship, the Master and Apprentice Act 1865, was an extension of the English law but adapted from Australian legislation. Dealing mainly with apprenticing destitute children, it permitted any 'householder tradesman farmer or other person exercising any trade art or manual occupation' to take an apprentice older than 12 years for a period of not more than 5 years or until the person reached age 19 or, if female, married.

The recession starting in 1879 and lasting into the 1890s resulted in employers cutting costs and in increasing poverty. Along with the increased employment of women and children, apprenticeships were used to employ youths

State house building site with a sign 'State houses built entirely by govt carpentry trainees'. (Source: Alexander Turnbull Library Ref: 1/2-092041-F.)

who could be dismissed when they had served their time.

As New Zealand moved from settlement to the beginnings of an industrialised society, the 1865 Act became outdated. From 1894, apprenticeships were regulated on an award-by-award basis, becoming part of the system of compulsory arbitration until the specialist Apprenticeship Act was passed in 1923. The training provisions of the new Act encouraged attendance at technical schools.

Back to the school room

Technical classes started at the Wellington Technical School, now Wellington High School, with 20 pupils in the first carpentry class in 1885. Technical classes also opened in other centres – the School of Engineering at Canterbury College may have opened in 1887, but its early years were concerned with mechanics, draughtsmen, apprentices and others who attended evening classes.

Although private legislation dealing with technical training had been put forward in 1889, 1890 and 1893, it was shelved until 1895 when the Manual and Technical Elementary Instruction Act was passed. It permitted education boards to provide classes in the practical handling of tools and construction of models in wood, metal, clay or other material, as well as to charge fees.

In August 1895, the Auckland Technical School had 162 people enrolled in all of its classes, with the first carpentry and plumbing classes oversubscribed. By the late 1890s, technical classes were also held in smaller centres. Carpentry and joinery were taught at Balclutha, while in Invercargill in 1894, the Southland Education Board built a small brick building for woodwork classes.

Explosion from 1901

The coverage of the 1895 Act was amended and expanded in the Manual and Technical Institution Act 1900. This gave every education board, state secondary school and university college as well as public association or corporation, the opportunity to provide technical instruction. By the end of 1901, its first full year, there were 425 recognised manual and technical classes, in 1902, there were 980 classes, and a year later, 2,227 – although the majority were for handwork in primary or secondary schools.

Two inspectors were appointed – MH Brown and EC Isaac – but they found progress hindered by a lack of competent instructors, buildings, plant and apparatus. They considered that many classes were not designed to teach the underlying principles. This was a particular problem for carpentry and joinery, and plumbing. Isaac later authored the 1902 *Handwork for Schools,* providing a suitable textbook.

Interest low in passing exams

Until 1928, only the London City and Guilds examinations were used, but then the Education Department established examinations for a range of trades including plumbing, carpentry, joinery and building construction, cabinet-making, and painting and decorating. Few candidates took these exams in the early years –

for example, in 1938, there were 539 plumbers and 933 woodworkers attending part-time classes, but only 20 passed the plumbing and 32 the cabinetmaking or carpentry exams. Only one person passed the final examination in building construction.

World War II saw major changes due to the numbers who went to war and a lack of focus on ensuring the remaining apprentices achieved the required levels. In 1941, for example, only 40% of electrical apprentices sat and passed their final examination.

Post-war boom boosts numbers

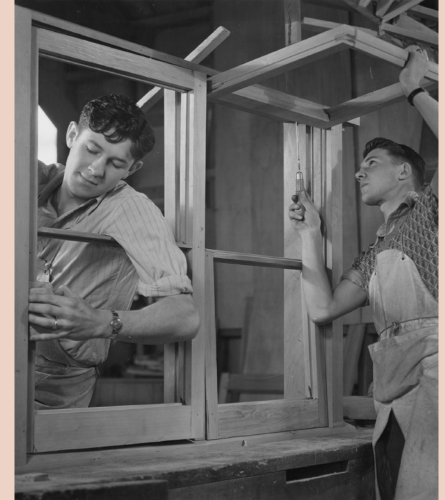
Following the war, full employment, a booming construction industry and large government departments led to about 30% of male school leavers taking up apprenticeships. Technical education was an essential part of apprenticeship and, along with the apprentice numbers, it grew.

By 1953, there was a shortage of apprentices, and the National Housing Conference resolved that 'the full quota of apprentices' be taken on in the building industry, and this should take into account both the number of apprentices available and also the 'manpower position of the trade concerned'. Even so, it was recommended that the government (through the Labour Department) should 'continue to pursue an active policy to obtain skilled craftsmen from overseas, especially in the plastering, bricklaying, plumbing and painting trades'.

At the more practical level, although returning servicemen became rehabilitation trainees, young apprentices were still required. Daylight rather than night school technical classes became popular, with 40% of all apprentices attending daylight classes in 1954.

The strong economy and full employment was a feature of New Zealand life until the recession of 1967–68. Technological changes, the need for increasing skill in some occupations and decreasing skills in others led to major changes in apprenticeships, with a greater emphasis on technical education. The Commission of Inquiry into Vocational Training 1965 – known as the Tyndall Commission – suggested incremental changes rather than radical shifts. These included reducing the minimum apprenticeship hours – for carpentry, falling from 10,000 hours to 9,000 hours after 1965.

Other changes were to take place in the 1970s, but that is a story for another time.



Government carpentry trainees working on a window frame for a New Zealand state house during the 1940s. (Source: Alexander Turnbull Library Ref: PAColl-4161-01-207-10.)