

Senator Michaelia Cash:

Hi, I'm Senator Michaelia Cash, Minister for Employment, Skills, Small and Family Business. Welcome to National Skills Week 2020. And to this year's podcast series, Journeys to Success, brought to you by SkillsOne. In this podcast series, you'll hear from a number of VET alumni and Australian Training Award winners. They will share with you interesting and varied journeys they've taken due to their vocational education and training. Our VET alumni and Australian Training Award winners come from all walks of life. They have inspirational stories to share about what prompted their learning decisions, their influences, their training and work journey and why vocational education and training was the right choice for them. This podcast is a great way to learn about the success people have had in their careers and life. There is so much diversity and opportunity that a VET pathway can offer. So enjoy the podcast, be inspired and the best of luck to those who are starting on their VET journey. And if you want more information on where a vocational education and training pathway can take you, visit the National Careers Institute website at nci.dese.gov.au.

Anne:

This episode explores the experience of Cris Matkowski, who entered into the apprenticeship space in commercial cookery straight out of school. Cris was a gold medal winner at the National World Skills Competition in 2018. And he went on to represent Australia at the International World Skills Competition in Russia in 2019. Cris is also a VET Alumni member. Cris speaks of what influenced his decision to undertake an apprenticeship and his journey through the training and beyond. But the story is also about what the apprenticeship has given him, success, awards, international travel, mentoring, and guest speaking opportunities just to name a few. It's a great story of where VET can take you. We also hear from Yasmin King, CEO of SkillsIQ, on what is happening in the apprenticeship and skills training space. What are some emerging skills areas. Also provide some insights and her thoughts about why people should take up vocational education. We finish up with some insights and advice for parents, employers, career advisors, and people to get greater participation in apprenticeships and skills training. So let's welcome Cris and Yasmin. How are you?

Yasmin:

Very well. Thank you.

Cris:

Very good. Thank you.

Yasmin:

Fantastic. So I'd like to just start by setting the scene of what this podcast is about and introduce both yourself, Cris, firstly, yes, Cris, I was wondering if you could talk to us about your journey. So how did you get into the apprenticeship and what advice did you get from others?

Cris:

I first started my apprenticeship going on from high school where you take place in normal school subjects, such as hospitality and food technology, which I did in high school. And I was very, very much in love with those two subjects and I was always very good at it. Following that, I did work placements and I had a very good guidance from where I worked to follow on a career being a chef. When I did my work placement I had a very hands on experience with working in restaurant environments and I really,

really enjoyed it. And from the advice that my work placement chef gave to me, she pretty much put me on the right path of where I wanted to go within the career. Shortly after completing high school, I took on an apprenticeship at the Star Casino and from then on my mentors at the Star were able to guide me doing certain activities which would benefit me such as, just volunteering into competitions. Whereas, so for example, World Skills, they mentored me and pushed me to compete into World Skills.

Anne:

How long was your apprenticeship done in regards to the training component? Was it done through a one day a week program or was it a block release? How was that organised?

Cris:

Every three months we would... Two months we would go to TAFE for about a week

Anne:

When you did your work placement, that you got a lot of encouragement from the actual restaurant and the chef that was there. Can I ask you about how your parents influenced your decision? Did your parents want you to do the apprenticeship or not? And either way is okay. What was your parent's response?

Cris:

Yeah, to be a hundred percent honest with my family's response, to begin with, they were a little bit hesitant because I originally had the idea of wanting to go into doing a TAFE course at year 10. And actually not forwarding on with year 11, 12. But my parents were quite pushy with those as a last minute resort. If I was not to enjoy being a chef that I would have something to fall back on, such as ATAR. So I actually decided to finish my ATAR, I finished my year 12 ATAR before I actually moved into the apprenticeship, which they were very supportive of. Once I actually started working in a restaurant, and once I started working a proper job and them seeing the results I'd been producing, they were very, very much supportive, especially when it came to the time where I was competing for World Skills, where in my opinion is really the biggest point where you kind of need the most amount of support, because if you didn't have it, you would have ruined... Kind of affected me quite a lot.

Cris:

That's where their support came most. And my grandparents were probably even more supportive than my parents, they were probably more fans than, what parents were. To begin with, before I actually started going into my apprenticeship. They were a little bit hesitant, they just wanted what's best for me.

Anne:

Yeah. I mean, that's fantastic. I can understand being a parent myself and most parents who are listening would be in agreement with that, is that most parents want the best thing for their child. So you always wanted to be a chef, it was never like, you always knew that and you stayed on that track. You worked with your parents, which is in hindsight, I'm assuming that, it sounds like you were happy with that decision to go onto year 12, and you were doing some of your vocational education or VET studies whilst you were at school to still keep going. So thank you for that.

Anne:

Yasmin, I'd like to drop over to yourself. So Cris's journey going directly from school and directly into it. Would you say that's a typical approach or is that the only approach, pathway to apprenticeship? Is there a set pathway?

Yasmin:

Look, Anne, I think that that's the traditional pathway and the whole issue that Cris mentioned of wanting to do it in year 10, but the push to keep people for longer at school, I think has also contributed, to be honest, to the decline in the number of people taking up apprenticeships. Because I think the decision as a 16 year old to work in that arrangement versus an 18 year old is a bit different.

Yasmin:

The whole issue of vocational training is one where it's available to anybody at any time. And in fact, increasingly what we see is in fact, people who've gone through a university education and then need to go and do a vocational education in order to get a job. Because in fact, what they've done at university has overqualified them and hasn't actually enabled them to have the right skills that employers are looking for. And in Australia to have a system of vocational education, that is very much, the content is driven by industry. The work that we do in terms of actually structuring the standards that are required in the various qualifications that we work with, it's all driven by industry participants who say, "These are the skills we're looking for. This is what we need the content to have." And so that's why there's a high alignment between somebody actually doing a VET course and therefore being appropriate to actually be employed.

Anne:

I wanted to talk about, first of all, the over-skilling or talking about vocational education and the skills that they're learning there, getting them ready for work versus some of the reports that have come out in regards to, university is preparing them for learning but then they haven't necessarily got the job ready skills to go straight into the workforce. Would you like to make a comment on regards to that?

Yasmin:

We did quite an extensive piece of research a year or so ago called, right skills at the right time, and found that in fact, the level of over-qualification of people basically going to university to do jobs when they actually really needed a vocational education, was basically almost one in four people were overqualified and the cost was quite significant. And I think that it's relates to perception. People have this perception that having a university education is going to net them a better job and a better income.

Yasmin:

The stats actually are that, the level of time that somebody is unemployed once they've graduated is far longer for a university graduate than it is for a vocational graduate. And I think that's going to be an increasing trend, not a decreasing one. Similarly, I think that, I mean, I love the story of a very good friend of mine relocated from the UK and he's a doctor and he was staying at a... I went to visit him at a beautiful house in Vaucluse that he was staying at. And I said to him, "Oh wow, medicine must be paying very well to be living here." And he said to me, "Oh, no, God, I can't afford this. I'm renting." And he said, "I'm renting from a hairdresser who owns five properties in the area and who basically sold the chain of hairdressing salons. And now basically is managing properties." And I just laughed because of course,

the perception would be that it would be the doctor who would be the one who would have all the money to own this fabulous real estate. And the person who did hairdressing was taking a path where it would mean they would never be financially successful.

Yasmin:

So I love that story because it just really just challenges the perceptions that people have.

Anne:

Absolutely. And thank you for that because I absolutely agree, the opportunities and what you can actually do. The pathways and the success you can get is just phenomenal in vocational education as well. We'd like to just... Cris, I will come back to you. I just wanted to ask you that question, Cris was speaking about, when he did his apprenticeship he did it in block form, which means he did it say, Monday to Friday or one month, et cetera, et cetera. Is that an emerging trend or a change that's occurring that you're seeing in regards to apprenticeships and how they're actually structured?

Yasmin:

I think there's a lot of experimentation happening by governments as to what the model needs to be going in the future, and I think that more and more there is more innovation being sought in how the model might be able to be applied. I don't think that there's any one way that necessarily works the best, but certainly with the trend to online you're going to see, I think a lot more of the knowledge component delivered online and then the application basically in a workplace, and the need for that strong relationship between whoever is delivering that knowledge component and that employer is going to become increasingly critical. Because what employers want is for somebody to learn, what they're actually, in a knowledge basis, what they're actually needing to do on the job. And I think that's the incredible value of vocational education, is that it is more than knowledge, it's application. And it's about putting all of those things together in a way that basically makes somebody who might be very young, incredibly effective as an employee, much sooner than if they were coming from a pure knowledge based course, like a university course where we really they've got so much theory in their head, but having had no real opportunity to actually put it in application.

Anne:

So they refer to that as the work-ready skills. So as soon as you're finished your learning or whilst you're undertaking your learning, you're actually having those work-ready skills embedded as you're going through. And it's not going to cost you additional, in terms of from an employer point of view, because it's happening while they're actually learning, not at the end of their course. So I'd like to go back to yourself, Cris, for a moment. Cris, I want to talk to about the cohort of people, I know you were saying that you were doing a block style training and everything, and you would have been working with other apprentices through that. Tell me what was the demographics? Was the makeup of that? Were they all your age? Were they all young people at that stage? Because you would have been 17, 18.

Cris:

There was quite a large variety actually. There was a lot of people my age, correct. But there was also a few people about, probably in their mid-thirties, early thirties that were just wanting because they want to do something different in their life. It was very good when I was actually doing my TAFE course, because you'd come into that area where you have people that are interested in the same thing as you.

Anne:

What was it like back in the school when doing the VET in school program? How was that different than the experience that you had when you moved into the actual apprenticeship?

Cris:

I would say the experience to me in high school is very, very beneficial to me, but I felt like I had a different passion to go towards into my industry than what other students would have in the same school.

Anne:

So you had probably already organised and knew where you were going while the other people were just exploring their options.

Cris:

Correct.

Anne:

And the possibilities?

Anne:

All right. So I'd like to just move that on. We'll probably talk now into talking into some of the insights in the emerging skills needs, and I'd like to go over to Yasmin for this one. So what's actually happening in the employment space, Yasmin, with apprenticeships? But also I'm happy for you to talk about just in general, what are some of the emerging skills or sectors that say in five years time, will impact on apprenticeships and traineeships and other qualifications?

Yasmin:

I think that we're really facing some really interesting dynamics given what's happened with the COVID-19, and the one really clear identified area that is going to be in extraordinary demand is going to be in the area of health and community services. You're going to see enormous demand in that, and that's as much at a vocational level as anything. So for example, aged care, and interestingly, it also has implications for roles like Cris's where what we're going to see is, I think more opportunities, for example, for chefs to work in those sectors as well. So different, using the fundamental skills they have as a chef, but basically developing more expertise in terms of working with older populations. And I mean, it's really not surprising given the extent to which Australia's population is aging, that that's going to be an extreme growth areas.

Yasmin:

Similarly with disability, people having digital literacy. I mean, that's absolutely going to be fundamental. Doesn't matter what sort of role you're going to go into. That's going to be important. So, I mean, if I look something like retail, retail is actually one of the areas where surprisingly in COVID-19 hasn't had the dramatic fall in demand for people. And the skills that you need to work in retail are becoming much, much more sophisticated. So it's digital literacy, but it's also conflict resolution. It's your ability to actually really be able to communicate well about product, know about product and understand the whole concept of customer experience rather than, "I'm just flogging something." So those sort of

things, I think we're going to see increasingly becoming strong features in the roles, not only in the service sectors but also in health and community services.

Anne:

I had to agree with you. I think your comment in regards to COVID-19 and some of the dramatic shifts in the requirements, we can't discount. We understand that it's an incredibly difficult time for so many people, for the majority of people, but if we have to take something good out of it, it could be the recognition of some of the other great skills that come in as foundational to move us forward.

Yasmin:

And no question, I mean, to be blunt, if you look at where they've looked at, what have been the people that have been in desperate need during this pandemic, they're all by and large, apart from health professionals, they're all people who basically work in the service sectors and would be from a background of vocational training.

Anne:

Absolutely. Fantastic. Yasmin, I'd love to just ask you one more question. Why do you think there has been a move away from apprenticeships and traineeships? There is these statistics about a decline in apprenticeships and traineeships. And my understanding from the reports is that a lot of that is actually the traineeship area. Why do you think that this is happening?

Yasmin:

I'm an economist by training and I always think it's quite interesting that analysis never takes into account all the lost opportunity, when you're at university and you're paying significant fees to be there and you're not earning money, whereas you might earn less money in a traineeship or an apprenticeship, but you are earning money from the very, very start. And if you were to do an analysis of what that is over to, I'd suggest that it's probably not as, I mean, so sure people talk about starting salaries, but I go back to my hairdresser example where somebody who started working and basically earned income and wisely invested early on before waiting, before they hit their straps and having a professional opportunity, has clearly done extraordinarily well. And I think that a lot of parents think, "Oh, going and taking that pathway for my child is a lesser opportunity." Rather than in fact, the fact that it's an opportunity for someone to probably, from a very young age, own their own business. Because they're following their passion to be able to really have a much bigger impact on what their future directions are.

Yasmin:

I think there's lots of very negative perceptions about it. And it's interesting because it's not just in Australia, it's in many countries. We do work internationally and that same thing of parents saying, "No, you must go to university because that's very prestigious." And then finding that they struggle to get a job is not only happening here, that happens in many, many, many places. And I think we also need to change this whole concept of, we do something and then that's forever. I'm sure, Anne if we were to have a conversation about where we've ended up in our careers and said, "What did that look like when you were leaving school?" It probably... There's absolutely no resemblance, and as I like to say, it's not a straight path. I mean, careers are basically jungle gyms, you move in all different directions. And so we really need to... For the people to make those decisions, not thinking about, "This is the most important decision, and is going to set me up for life", but rather it's all about opportunity to build.

Anne:

So there was a few things out of that, I mean, they talked about, and there were some recent reports in regards to that we'll probably have 17 jobs. Now we will probably have 17 jobs and that will be over possibly five to six different sectors. But what is the constant is those underpinning foundational skills that are developed in those initial things, the communication, the teamwork, the ability to work in part of a team. And I have to say through these interviews and throughout my whole life and my journey as well, that one constant has been, is that technical skills we can teach. And if someone's passionate like Cris, you can do that. But those foundational employability skills, those underpinning foundational skills, are the skills that will allow you to move, to grow, to move sideways, to go whatever. And that's what the employers are looking for. So that gives you, gives us all hope.

Anne:

Cris, I wanted to spend some little bit of time in talking about some of your work and you personally, and I wanted to have a look about what success looks like for you. We have to talk about some of the outstanding things that have happening to you in the last few years that you've engaged in as part of your training or your work.

Cris:

Yeah, definitely. A lot of my more memorable times of being part of those competitions, for example, World Skills, where it all started from even just getting my gold medal in the nationals. From then on, it was getting my silver medal in our Global Skills Challenge. As soon as the Global Skills Challenge happened you have that mentality of, hang on, I'm going to Russia now. And just furthering on from that was just more and more memorable moments of competing in Russia. And having just the awe of being one of the top in Australia in your category. And it's like, "Yeah, I've made it. I've made it to this point." And then getting the chance to go to Vietnam and talk about your story and actually show people what you've learnt and them being so interested and what to take all that info back. It's quite amazing.

Anne:

You talk about Russia. You talk about going to Vietnam. You talk about all these wonderful experiences, traveling throughout various states, doing your World Skills. The Vietnam one was after you actually had finished all the World Skills and everything like that, and you were chosen as an Australian delegate to go to Vietnam, to showcase vocational education and training and what it can do for you from an Australian delegation. And I've seen the videos and all the pictures of you presenting in front of hundreds of people, doing mentoring and doing some skills training in Vietnam. I mean, you had just finished your apprenticeship. That is just an amazing accomplishment, how did you feel about that?

Cris:

About the whole experience. It was kind of breathtaking, when I'm looking back at photos and all that, and just, you see yourself there and you're living in the moment really, it's quite a memorable thing to have and especially because I was just out of my apprenticeship, let alone, I think I was only three weeks out of my apprenticeship, just after Russia and having the opportunity to go there. It was a one in a lifetime experience.

Anne:

And I suppose, we're not actually stating that everybody who does an apprenticeship, by the way, you're going to go on and win gold, you're going to go on and do this, you're going to be going on and representing the Australian government and everything like that. I suppose what I'm saying is the fact that it's a real individual journey and it depends on where your goals are and the opportunities that can come to you. The idea of traveling, the idea of those portability of all of those skills, however, is something that is embedded in vocational training and apprenticeships.

Anne:

But your journey that you've been on is your own journey, but other people can make some similar decisions and can choose to go through and do the competitions like, World Skills and such as well. Also to both of you, I just wanted to ask the question, how can we help get more people engaged in vocational education? What would be some of the advice that you would give to parents or school advisors, career advisors to encourage them to engage in it?

Yasmin:

My advice would be that to stop the old thinking of that, whatever you do first is going to be what you do forever, first off. So think about, particularly as it's extraordinary difficult at the age of 18 to know what you want to do for the rest of your life. I mean, that concept is just, quite frankly, ridiculous.

Yasmin:

So I think that it's that concept of, what can you do to build those enterprise skills which are going to be useful for you regardless? If you don't know what you're doing, is to pursue things that are going to basically be able to help you build those and demonstrate those. Because even if what you choose first off is not ideally going to be your forever job or your passion, you will have built and demonstrated things that you can transfer to, whatever. And certainly the research that we did in our report on, the right skills at the right time, is that someone who goes and actually works in an operational area early on, is far more likely to be a better leader later on because they've learnt foundational skills. I mean, the concept of someone at the age of 18 going and learning leadership and management skills to run teams of people when they've never actually had a job is very different from someone who's worked in an environment where they've actually worked with teams, understood what it's like to have to see how people are managed and apply those things in a real way. When they learn that theoretical knowledge to underpin it.

Yasmin:

I mean, the skills that Cris has learnt, he's got so many opportunities to apply in so many different areas, because what he's learnt will never ever be taken away from him. And they're real demonstrable and applied skills.

Cris:

Well, VET has low opportunities for students that... The percentages show that with VET students, that their employments rates are about 78% when they finished their VET courses, as well for 60% of those VET students, that they actually find that their employment status after their training is improved.

Anne:

This transcript was created on 28 August 2020

I'd just like to thank both of you for your time today and for your insights, and your ideas, and your advice. So thank you, Cris. Thank you, Yasmin.

Yasmin:

Pleasure.

Anne:

Thank you very much for joining us for this podcast. We hope that you enjoyed listening. If you want more information on vocational education and training, career pathways and your own way to succeed, check out the National Careers Institute website, you can find them at nci.dese.gov.au. This podcast was an initiative of the Australian government. We looked forward to you joining us for another episode in this podcast series, but in the meantime, please stay safe and take care.