

Training – evolution or revolution?

One of the dominant issues within the packaging industry is the lack of skilled staff, exacerbated by the low level of unemployment. In this first instalment of a three-part series, industry doyen, **Professor Harry Lovell**, reviews the origin of packaging's current training dilemma and suggests a future path.

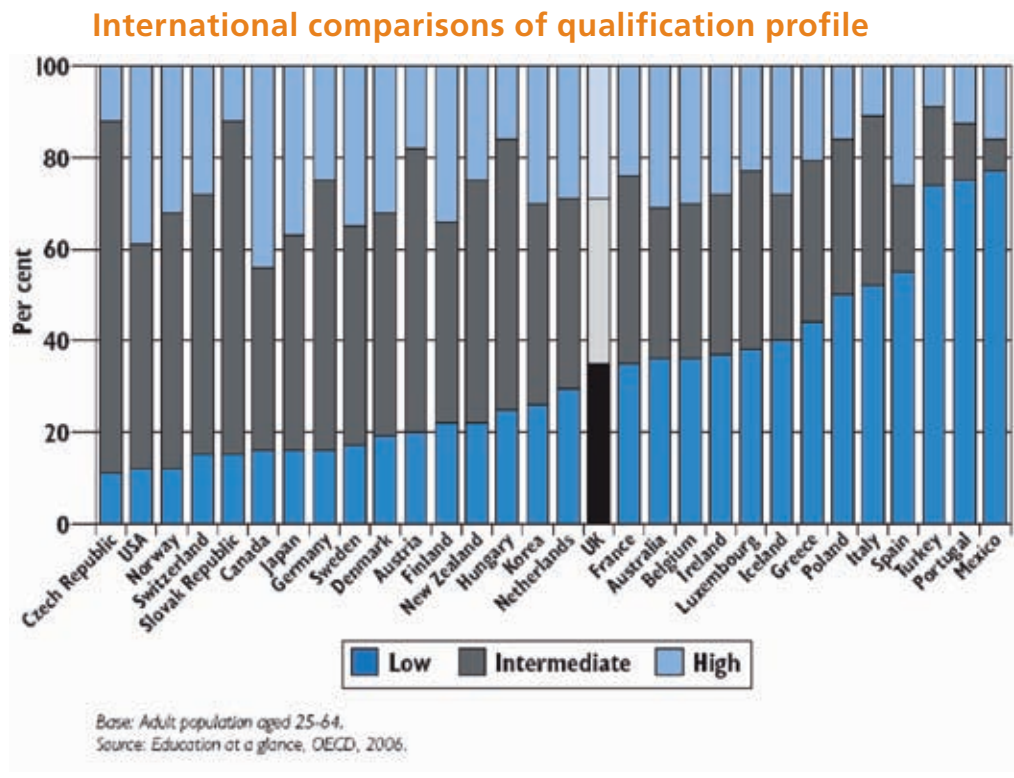
To address the skills shortage issue in the UK, the government commissioned the Lord (Sandy) Leitch report which was delivered in 2006 and examined vocational education and training in the UK, also taking into account Europe, and a wide range of countries.

Before we examine the findings of this report in comparison with the situation in Australia, it is worth recounting history to see how we have arrived at the current situation.

Nine higher education packaging-based courses in the University and former Colleges of Advanced Education (CAE) have been launched since 1981 – the year the Diploma in Packaging Technology was introduced by the Australian Institute of Packaging (AIP). In addition, a TAFE-based packaging course in Sydney, supported by the AIP, operated for a few years in the late 1980s before being closed down due to a lack of students.

None of the nine courses were successful in attracting a sufficient and continuing cohort of students and were consequently deemed not viable. Packaging was a component of food technology courses which enjoyed healthy student quotas in the 1980s and early 1990s but these same courses have experienced low entry numbers in recent years.

In 1987 John Dawkins, the Federal education minister, saw fit to bring about the amalgamation or demise of CAEs. These institutions had played an important role in providing an alternative approach to that of the universities with a focus on a combination of applied knowledge and practical skills for different industry sectors. With the merging of CAEs or their upgrade to university status the courses changed, resulting in a loss in many instances of the practical elements which prepared them for their industrial placement component. Food technology and its packaging component were victims of this unfortunate change. The end result has been some disenchantment by employers who considered that the courses – with their industrial



experience coupled to some practical appreciation of processing and packaging operations – were a prerequisite for graduates wishing to enter the industry. It is an unfortunate fact now that we are short of both food and packaging technologists and worse still are failing to attract the brightest students to those programs which are available.

The situation is no different in the UK with a recent government committee involving the Institute of Food Science and Technology investigating this same problem. One of the conclusions of the committee was that there was indeed a serious shortage which could threaten the levels of technical support required within the industry.

To return to the Leitch Report, we can see from the OECD chart (above) showing

international comparisons of qualification profiles that we parallel the UK. Our paths in education over the years have been similar in many ways. We have pursued a national policy of accreditation and course recognition and progressively raised the standards of both courses and presenters. Similarly, we have seen the introduction of Professional Development Programs by a number of professional bodies as a means of maintaining and raising standards.

The Leitch Report has now evolved into a series of initiatives involving both employers and education sectors at all levels and made it clear that the onus of responsibility rests with all participants. A series of National Academies are to be set up where particular industry sectors are deemed to have a need. These actions have been welcomed by industry, not

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least for requiring industry to interact closely with education and training specialists.

Hence the scene is set with clear direction and intent. The initiatives and the thrust to improve the skills and knowledge of individuals are things from which we can learn in Australia.

In 1996 the AIP made a submission to the Productivity Commission set up to examine the packaging and labelling industries. The submission addressed the issue of training and it was noteworthy that this had been raised in a number of submissions made from employers. In the final report the issue was acknowledged but recognised as being too difficult to address and there the matter ended. Some 10 years later we find ourselves faced with the same problem but no nearer to a comprehensive solution.

Training and education through the formal programs offered by the AIP have operated continuously since 1981. The Diploma in Packaging Technology has gone through revisions every two or three years and in the future will be supplemented further by an Advanced Packaging Diploma. However, while the industry has been able to access training and education in packaging technology the response has been patchy. Currently the AIP is enjoying a steady influx of students to the Diploma course. The new Certificate program designed specifically for those people who did not require the highest level of technical knowledge failed to get off the ground because employers were unwilling to release staff for a four-day residential program in sufficient numbers to ensure its viability. The program has been revised to offer it in a different



The learned Professor Harry Lovell.

format. This has not been an easy task because of the regulatory demands which have to be met in the accreditation process overseen by the Packaging Industry Awarding Body Company (PIABC).

(Professor Lovell will continue his discussion on this crucial issue in the March issue of *PKN*.)



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