

Project works on **safety culture**

A NATIONAL industry, government and research team has interviewed managers and site workers from 14 leading Australian construction companies in an effort to lower the fatality rate within the industry and implement a national safety culture on work sites.

The research was conducted for CRC for Construction Innovation, a Federal Government Co-operative Research Centre.

The centre has its headquarters at the Queensland University of Technology.

Dr Herbert Biggs and project officer Vaughn Sheahan, from QUT's School of Psychology and Counselling, were part of the research team.

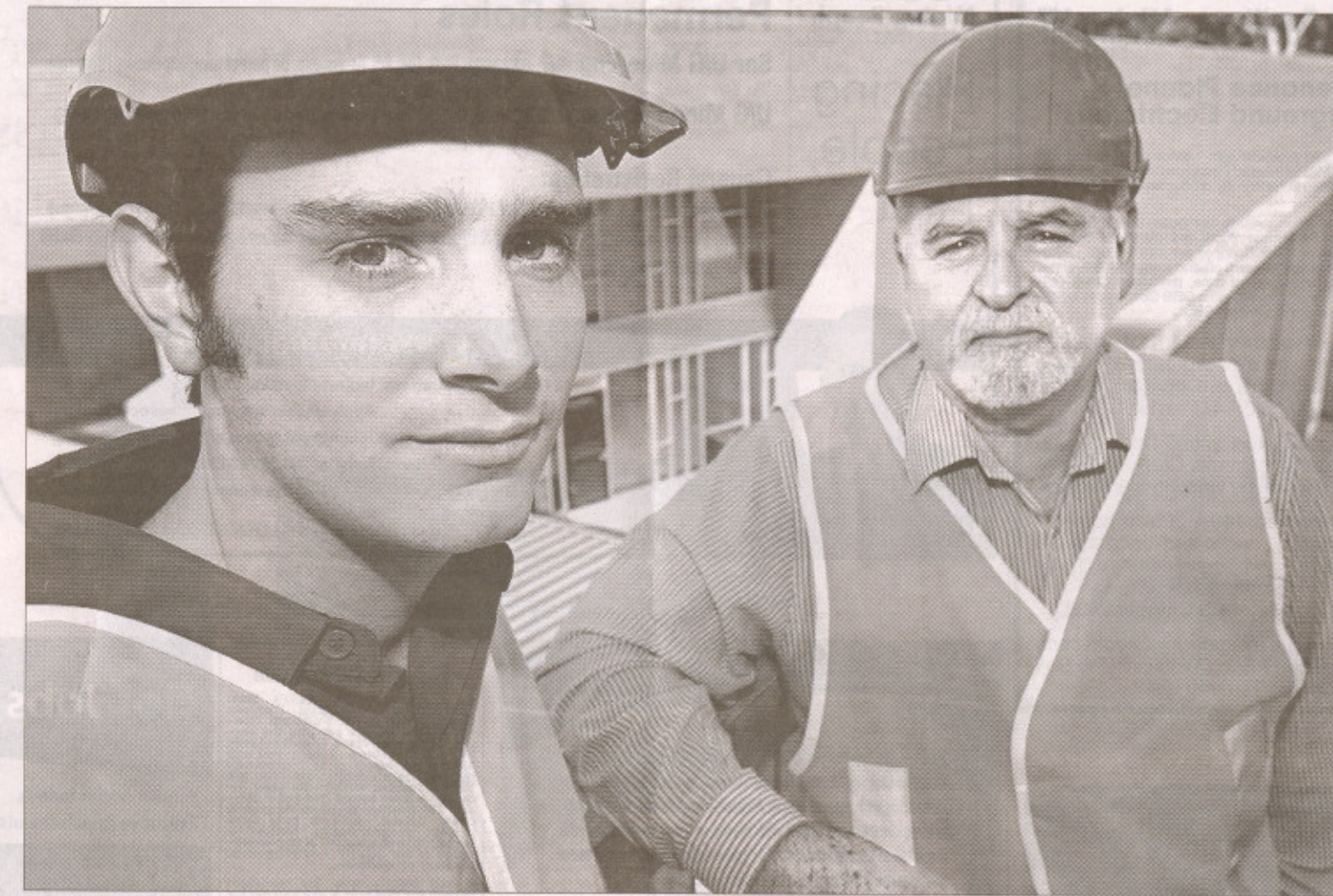
Mr Sheahan said the research had led to the development of A Construction Safety Competency Framework: improving occupational health and safety performance by creating and maintaining a safety culture.

The framework was launched recently by the Federal Department of Employment and Workplace Relations Minister Kevin Andrews.

Mr Sheahan said it was Australia's first competency framework aimed at enabling managers and supervisors to create an effective, consistent safety culture across Australia's largest construction companies.

"On average one person dies a week on Australia's construction sites and thousands more suffer serious injuries each year," Mr Sheahan said.

"This indicates that current on-site safety initiatives, such as 'toolbox talks', need to be further developed to build a site



QUT research assistant Vaughn Sheahan, left, and Dr Herbert Biggs, both are from the School of Psychology and Counselling, have completed a study into the safety culture of construction sites.

safety culture," he said.

Mr Sheahan said workers gained an understanding of which behaviours would be rewarded, tolerated or sanctioned by an organisation from their perception of the organisation's values and beliefs about safety.

He said these values and beliefs were represented by the safety culture of the organisation.

One of the main challenges to implementing a consistent

safety culture across work sites was the high mobility of construction workers, with as many as 80 per cent of workers being subcontractors or sub-subcontractors.

Mr Sheahan said the movement of workers between companies, projects and sites made it almost impossible for attitudes and behaviours that formed the basis of a safety culture to be influenced by one company.

"By setting management and

supervisor competency standards, we can improve the consistency and quality of the safety message across the largest contractors and so change attitudes and behaviours within the workforce," Mr Sheahan said.

He said critical positions for the maintenance of a safety culture were identified by the framework.

These included senior managers, engineers and site OH&S advisers.

The framework provided a detailed outline of the knowledge, skills and behaviours required in order for those individuals to complete safety tasks competently.

Dr Biggs said that, traditionally, communication and leadership had not been recognised as being essential to safety competency.

He said the research contributed something original by addressing these areas.

"The research has enabled

the practical application of these complex concepts into a format that the industry can understand and work with," Dr Biggs said.

CRC for Construction Innovation chief executive officer Keith Hampson said one in six Australians was employed in the construction industry.

He said it was vital that safety issues be addressed in order to improve productivity levels and ensure the sustainability of the industry.