

House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training: inquiry into the perceptions and status of vocational education and training

ACCI Submission

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Introduction

The Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCI) welcomes the opportunity to provide a response to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training inquiry into the perceptions and status of vocational education and training.

A key component of addressing the skills crisis in Australia is the federal government promoting and enhancing the reputation of vocational education and training (VET). Australia needs a robust VET system capable of delivering quality outcomes that meet the skills needs of industry, students and boost workforce participation and social inclusion. There is an ongoing critical skill shortage that can only be filled by people who have VET qualifications such as chefs, construction workers, bus drivers and mechanics. A valued VET system that is widely acknowledged for its excellence is essential to ensure these skills shortages are readily filled with highly proficient workers.

Members of ACCI place the quality of VET as one of its most important employment and skills priorities. VET is highly valued by employers due to its delivery of job skills required in modern workplaces and its critical role in delivery of the educational component for apprentices and trainees across Australia.

There have been many reviews and inquiries into the VET system in recent years, including the Prime Minister and Cabinet *Strengthening Skills: Expert Review of Australia's Vocational Education and Training System (2019)*; the Productivity Commission's Review of the *National Agreement for Skills Workforce and Development (2021)*; and the Vocational Education and Training Reform Roadmap (2021). All of these reviews provide recommendations that if implemented would have assisted in improving the status of VET.

There are many benefits to undertaking a VET qualification for a student as they are often more directly related to specific industries or occupations, which means that students can gain the skills and knowledge needed to start working in their desired field right away. VET provides settings with hands-on learning and real-world experience that enable tactile and applied skills to be developed. Many vocational programs and qualifications can be completed in a shorter amount of time than traditional degree programs, which means that students can start working and earning money sooner.

The growth in knowledge-based industries is placing greater emphasis on the importance of higher education and the acquisition of higher-level skills to meet emerging skills needs, however the focus is often on universities rather than VET. This focus helps to perpetuate the perception of VET as the lesser in the tertiary education system and one of second choice.

This submission will provide overall comment on the terms of reference and will also highlight other key areas that will further enhance the perceptions and status of vocational education and training.

Information available to students about VET qualifications and related career pathways along a student's journey, and how Commonwealth funded information for students about VET may be improved

There is a consensus that, while there is information available to students about potential VET qualifications, it is disparate and piecemeal, and varies widely between states/territories. This is further complicated by the additional layer of Commonwealth information this is often also made available. Overall, a consistent, co-ordinated approach led from the federal government with a focus on enhancing the perception of VET needs to be adopted as a good career option for potential students.

At a federal government level, the National Careers Institute (NCI) provides access to career information, resources and support for those interested in a VET qualification. already searching for the exact name. In other words, unless a person already knows what they are looking for and what they want, they are unlikely to find it.

The information on the website links with 'myskills', which provides information on courses that relies on training providers having contributed to the information, which is not always up to date. The reputation of the NCI could be greatly enhanced through an awareness campaign, while the website needs a visual makeover and better nationwide information about courses available.

At secondary school, one of the main sources of information available to students are careers counsellors who provide guidance, career planning and personalised advice on potential career paths. Few careers guidance counsellors are solely focussed on that role and the majority undertake the role as an addition to their main teaching load. The funding for the work of careers counsellors has been consistently diminishing in recent years, reducing the opportunities for students to properly plan their futures. In many high schools across Australia, the university pathway are promoted above undertaking a VET qualification. ACCI believes that university and VET qualifications should be promoted side by side and not as competing options.

It should not be one tertiary stream encouraged over the other, rather students should be provided detailed information containing career outcomes allowing them to choose the appropriate option. In 2021, the Productivity Commission found that schools and their advisers often have little experience with VET and consequently favour universities.¹ To assist careers counsellors in the delivery of their careers advice, there needs to be an education program developed, providing succinct information for careers counsellors in schools about the benefits of VET and expanding counsellors' expertise in and understanding of careers outcomes through VET.

The Grattan Institute has found that students who undertake VET in construction, engineering and commerce will more likely achieve higher incomes than many low-ATAR university graduates². It is information such as this that needs to be promoted at high schools to ensure that students are presented with an array of options when choosing their career paths.

The role of high school careers counsellors, career days with VET prominently featured, and industry awareness campaigns especially created for secondary schools can all help dispel some of the myths

¹ Productivity Commission Study Report, [National Agreement for Skills and Workforce Development Review](#), 2019

² Grattan Institute, [Risks and rewards: when is vocational education a good alternative to higher education](#), 2019

that affect perceptions of VET. A student interested in VET should be presented with a personalised, clearly mapped out path with the requirements of their training and their career opportunities that may be available when they have finished study. Further, students should also be provided with 'expectations of employment' data so that they can include this in their decision making processes. This will aid the student in understanding the opportunities in the VET sector.

There is room for greater engagement with existing workers, youth, women, First Nations and unemployed Australians to encourage them to undertake and complete a VET qualification. Any promotional campaign for VET should reflect that it is much more than a training pathway for just high school students and have a targeted cohort campaign reflecting the different audiences. There should be an overarching strategy developed with a focus on raising the perceptions and status of VET and led by the federal government. For example, any marketing campaign should make use of print media, TV, radio and social media sites such as Facebook and Instagram. They should also be available in multiple languages to reflect our multicultural population.

While there is an information effort already underway in promoting VET with websites, champions and other channels, there is definitely an opportunity for a more co-ordinated and proactive campaign between states/territories and the federal government. A quick search on the information currently available for those with an interest in VET reveals a lot of duplication between state and federal levels that can quickly become confusing and overwhelming.

The annual National Skills Week is a great initiative that could be reconfigured and further harnessed to promote awareness of VET. Rather than schools and industry registering their interest, there could be a more proactive engagement with them to ensure that as many students as possible are participating.

Recommendation: The development of a co-ordinated, proactive approach to promoting VET in schools targeting career counsellors.

Recommendation: A review of all the information available to students needs to be undertaken, assessing where there are gaps, removing duplication and how best to distribute information. A co-ordinated approach with state and territory governments for the key cohorts of youth, women, First Nations and job seekers on the benefits of undertaking VET.

Perceptions and status of the VET sector, and how perceptions and status of the VET sector can be improved. International best practices in relation to VET perception and qualifications status should be examined

In Australia, there has been a keen awareness for some time that the perception and status of the VET sector is low. This lack of prestige associated with VET qualifications impacts the way young people, parents and schools view these career paths. The overall perception and status of the VET sector is that it is inferior in comparison to higher education. There has been a systematic encouragement of higher education as the preferred aspiration which at the same time ignores that it is not suited to all applicants. VET should be viewed as a high-quality qualification delivering skilled work-ready employees.

More work needs to be undertaken to highlight pathways between VET and higher education to ensure students and parents understand that VET, or higher education may be starting points in careers for young people that can cross over and between sectors, from TAFE to university and from university to TAFE. Scholarly work in Australia has previously shown that many higher education graduates turn to VET to realise a greater level of practicality in their degree qualifications to further enhance their employment aspirations. For example, degree graduates in accounting undertaking VET qualifications to learn the practicalities in accounting software.

In the VET sector, apprenticeships and traineeships account for 10 per cent of student enrolments and are a vital component of the training system and the Australian economy. Apprenticeships and traineeships provide pathways for school-to-work transition as well as a valuable career change avenue, combining structured learning alongside work experience within a model where students receive remuneration, and the employer has access to pay rates that reflect the work/training nature of the employment relationship. Out of all VET qualification options, apprenticeships and traineeships have the best graduate employment outcomes, and they also outperform many higher education options³. For many occupations, such as plumbers or electricians, an apprenticeship is the only pathway to becoming a licensed tradesperson, reinforcing the importance of highlighting both their status and continuing need to invest in apprenticeships to meet the skill demands in these areas.

A key component in enhancing the prestige of undertaking an apprenticeship or traineeship is the role of the Australian Apprenticeship Support Network Providers (AASNs). The AASNs are often the first point of contact for a prospective apprentice or trainee, providing a crucial role in the delivery of information and support. The AASNs need to be adequately resourced to deliver wrap-around mentoring services for both the apprentices and the employer, particularly for women, people with a disability and First Nations people. ACCI is aware that mentoring support services may be provided by additional bodies, so it is important that this is co-ordinated to ensure there are no duplication of services.

In 2021, an estimated 28.2 per cent of the Australian resident population who were at school, and aged 15 to 19 years, participated in a VET in schools program⁴. While the figure represents over a quarter of school-aged students, from 2017 to 2021, the number of VET in Schools students in Australia only increased by 3.8 per cent⁵. This stable figure reflects that attitude towards VET has not changed greatly in recent years. In 2021, VET qualifications lead to excellent employment outcomes with 94 per cent of trade completers and 88.4 per cent of non-trade completers employed after training⁶. ACCI believes that enhancing the appeal of the VET sector will assist in elevating its status as a key career pathway for students.

A key component of improving the perception and status of VET is ensuring that the qualifications are of high quality and that they are delivered to a similarly high standard. Allied to this, is the importance of ensuring that students are provided with access to robust, reliable and credible information on those qualifications, the Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) that deliver them, and the pathways they offer. Information sources such as these have been available in higher education for some time, but owing to a number of factors, including the complexity of funding arrangements, this has been elusive for the VET sector to date. The relevant VET data already exists within the National

³ NCVER, Australian apprenticeships: research at a glance, and Department of Employment & Skills, and QILT (2021) 2021 Graduate Outcomes Survey, October 2021

⁴ NCVER, [VET in Schools 2021](#), 2022

⁵ Ibid

⁶ NCVER, [Apprentice and trainee outcomes 2021](#), 2022

Centre for Vocational Education Research data collection, however, a concerted effort needs to be made to ensure it is available in a readily effective and consumable source for prospective students.

Industry can assist in the promotion of the benefits of VET within their sector, aiding the growth of status of qualifications. The National Electrical and Communications Association (NECA) is an example of an industry association that has taken an active interest in the promotion of working in their sector. Many young people think they may be interested in the electrical trades but do not have the level of conviction needed to commit to a four year apprenticeship. NECA's pre-apprenticeship programs have proven to be a particularly successful means of addressing this inherent reservation as they provide program participants with a 'taste' of the industry and assist them in deciding if an electrical trade career is for them. These bi-annual pre-apprenticeship programs give participating students the necessary entry-level skills, knowledge and experience to confidently take on the apprentice recruitment process. They also provide female-only pre-apprenticeship programs. NECA offers employment opportunities within its GTO to successful graduates at completion of the course.

One of the best examples of an international highly successful VET system is in Switzerland, where VET is deeply embedded in the culture and widely respected. In Switzerland, 90 per cent of upper secondary school students are enrolled in combined school and work-based VET programs⁷. They have adopted a dual system where the student is still in high school, attending one to two days a week and undertaking work-based training at the same time typically three to four days. This prepares the student for entry into the workforce full-time. It is estimated 40 per cent of companies in Switzerland offer at least one apprenticeship and as a result they have one of the lowest levels of unemployment in the world, especially youth unemployment⁸.

In the United Kingdom (UK), the Apprenticeship Ambassador Network (AAN) has been developed to raise awareness of the benefits of the sector. In the UK they also call a traineeship an apprenticeship. The AAN consists of employers and former/current apprentices who volunteer their time as ambassadors to encourage employers and young people to consider apprenticeships. They undertake their role (on a voluntary basis) by supporting and influencing a wide range of key stakeholders including schools, colleges, local enterprise partnerships, employers and their supply chains, trade associations and employment bodies. They champion and support marketing, publicity and events to raise awareness of apprenticeships and also mentor other employers. The network consists of nine regions with both an employer and apprentice chair that deliver a regional business plan to promote apprenticeships.⁹

In Australia, there is Australian VET Alumni which aims to promote the benefits of being a VET graduate through national community of graduates, VET practitioners, registered training organisations (RTOs), secondary schools, and businesses to encourage greater participation and best practice in VET. A key difference between the Australian and the UK programs, is that in the UK the AAN has a workplan that they need to deliver on whereas in Australia it a passive model that is relatively unknown. It is up to interested parties to locate the website and then register interest in having contact with the Alumni. A more proactive approach, where they actively reach out to schools in their local areas and have a work plan, may assist the Alumni in having a greater impact. The program is part of an Australian Government strategy called *Real Skills for Real Careers*¹⁰, the

⁷ OECD, [Education at a Glance 2020: Switzerland](#), 2020

⁸EHL Insights, [Swiss vocational education training model: recipe for success?](#), 2020

⁹ UK Government, [Apprenticeship Ambassador Network](#), 2022

¹⁰ Australian Government, [My Skills: real skills for real careers strategy outline](#), 2017

strategy has laid some very solid groundwork in design but the level of general awareness appears to be low.

In 2018, an additional method the UK government introduced to promote VET was a new law which makes it compulsory for students in secondary school to interact with vocational education providers. The law requires high schools to host at least six encounters with a provider of approved technical education qualifications or apprenticeships over the course of a student's time in secondary school¹¹. If a secondary school is found to have not provided these interactions, they risk being served with a legal directive which can include a fine from government.

Recommendation: Industry continue to develop programs to raise awareness of the benefits of undertaking a VET qualification for their sector.

Recommendation: Ensure that there is appropriate funding for the AASNs to deliver mentor services to assist apprentices and trainees to increase the level of positive interactions.

Recommendation: The Federal Government work with industry, RTOs and sector stakeholders to develop meaningful and robust mechanisms to provide timely and relevant information to prospective students that will better inform their career choices.

Recommendation: Mandate that secondary schools must host one interaction with a VET provider and student cohort for each year between years 8-11, with four in total to be delivered.

Recommendation: The Federal Government work with industry and key stakeholders to develop a VET strategy with the aim of improving the perception of the sector, working with state and territory governments with proactive workplans, i.e. the Australian VET Alumni have work plans they need to deliver on.

Successful partnerships between VET providers and employers

The Australian Industry Trade College (ATIC) in Queensland has created a very successful partnership program between students undertaking VET qualifications and employers. The ATIC is a high school for year 10-12 students who complete a trade qualification, all whilst completing their Higher School Certificate. There are six campuses across the state where students are immersed in the sector of industry of their choice where they do work experience in various trades within the industry and then they choose the pathway into a trade career supported by mentors and industry partners. The aim is to seamlessly blend senior education and vocational training to engage young people in purposeful learning experiences with real world industry relevance.

ATIC is the only school in Queensland where students spend half the term in the classroom and half the term in work experience, work placement, training, or a school-based apprenticeship or traineeship. Their program is designed to progressively develop employability skills and achieve individualised learning goals, whilst also meeting the requirements of the Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority (QCAA) and the Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA).

¹¹ [Schoolsweek.co.uk](https://www.schoolsweek.co.uk), [Provide apprenticeship careers talks or face legal action schools told](#), 2023

Within ATIC there are four specialist programs run with industry, for example the Boating Industry Association has worked with the College to create the Boat Industry Academy. The Academy is supported by nine employers who are looking to secure a sustainable pipeline of young people to undertake further qualifications in the boating and marine industries.

The AITC also has specialist programs in energy, equine and civil construction. It is through innovative initiatives that are strongly linked with industry that the best outcomes are achieved. The involvement of industry allows for students to obtain hands-on training and real-world experience, which is a great way to develop practical skills that are highly valued by employers. All the employers involved in the programs are local employers within the targeted high school area. This approach is centred on the principal that 'on-the-ground' knowledge allows for the successful development of job-ready students.

Recommendation: Increased innovation around the delivery of VET in high schools in partnership with local industry with clearly outlined programs.

Overall approach to VET funding

The level of investment in VET needs to be increased to allow it to operate at its highest capacity. This will only be capable through sustained continual investment. VET in Australia is a complex system and, due to its federated environment with many moving parts, many stakeholders, and funding is inconsistent across the states and territories and is often difficult to decipher.

The VET system currently suffers from significant funding differences between states for the same qualification, unacceptable changes in total funding, and cost shifting between the commonwealth and state and territory governments¹². A review the price ranges for the most popular Certificate III's across Australia, highlighted in Figure 1 below, demonstrate the significant price variation across states and territories within a qualification. The Certificate III in plumbing could be potentially twice as expensive depending on the student's location.

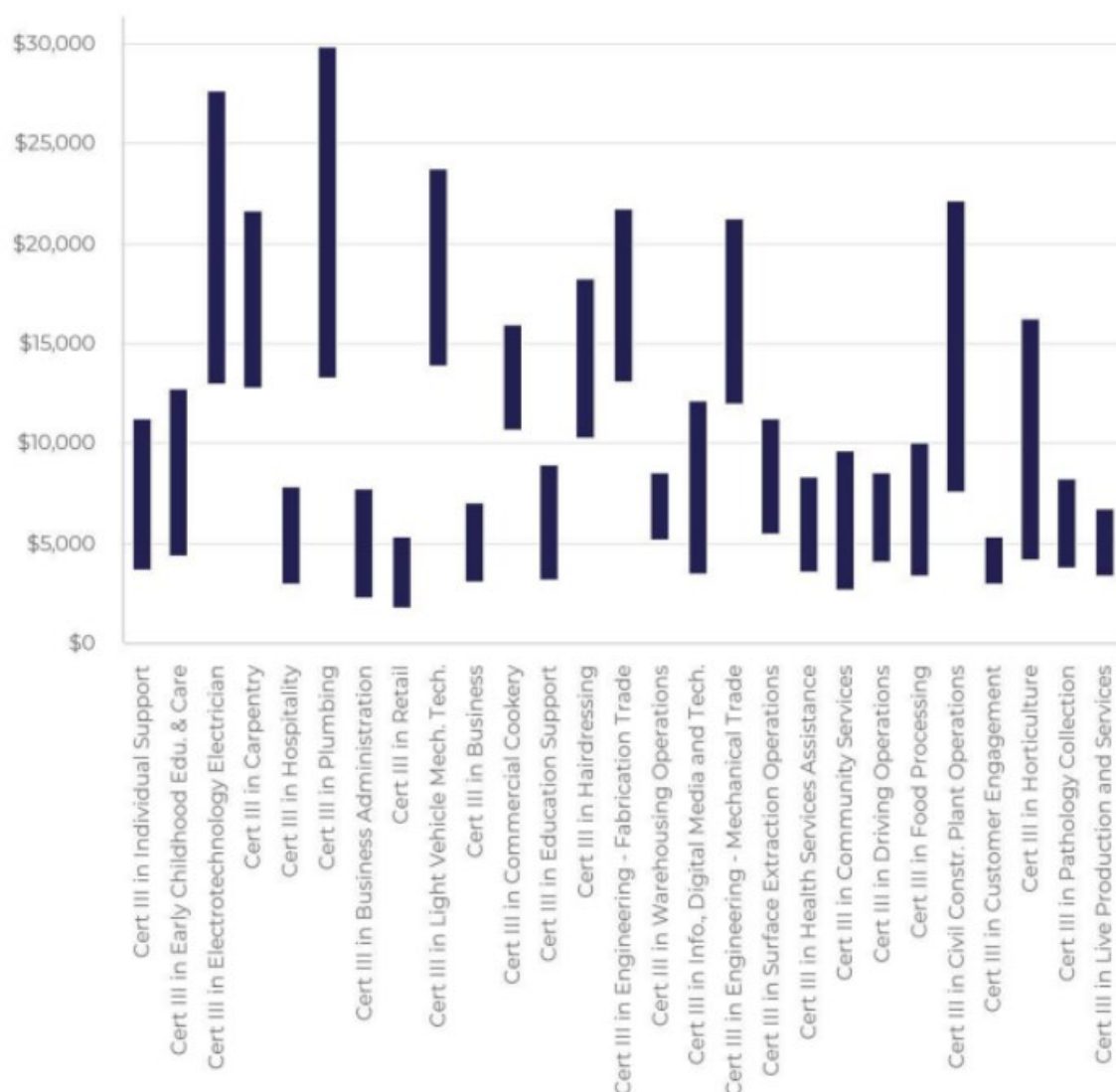


Figure 1 National Skills Commission [Average Price Benchmarking Report](#)

¹² Productivity Commission, National Agreement for Skills & Workforce Development Review and National Skills Commission (2021), Qualification Similarity Analysis, 2021

These funding differences are difficult for students and parents to understand when compared with higher education, where costs are arranged in bands but the same at all universities for domestic students, particularly in a context where all domestic higher education students are eligible for an income-contingent loan meaning there are not up-front tuition fees for their degree.

A review of the funding level to higher education by the federal government under the Commonwealth Grant Scheme (CGS) again highlights the disparity between it and VET. Although funding to higher education comes from a range of sources, the CGS is the most important of these and directly reflects the number of government funded students in higher education. As Figure 2 indicates, the scheme has shown a consistent increase, rising rapidly with the introduction of the uncapped demand-driven system. The funding of VET has declined over the past decade; the injection of funding due to COVID artificially inflates investment, viewing government expenditure in 2019 it was \$969 million¹³ for VET. This compares with 2012 when government funding was at its peak of \$7.9 billion.

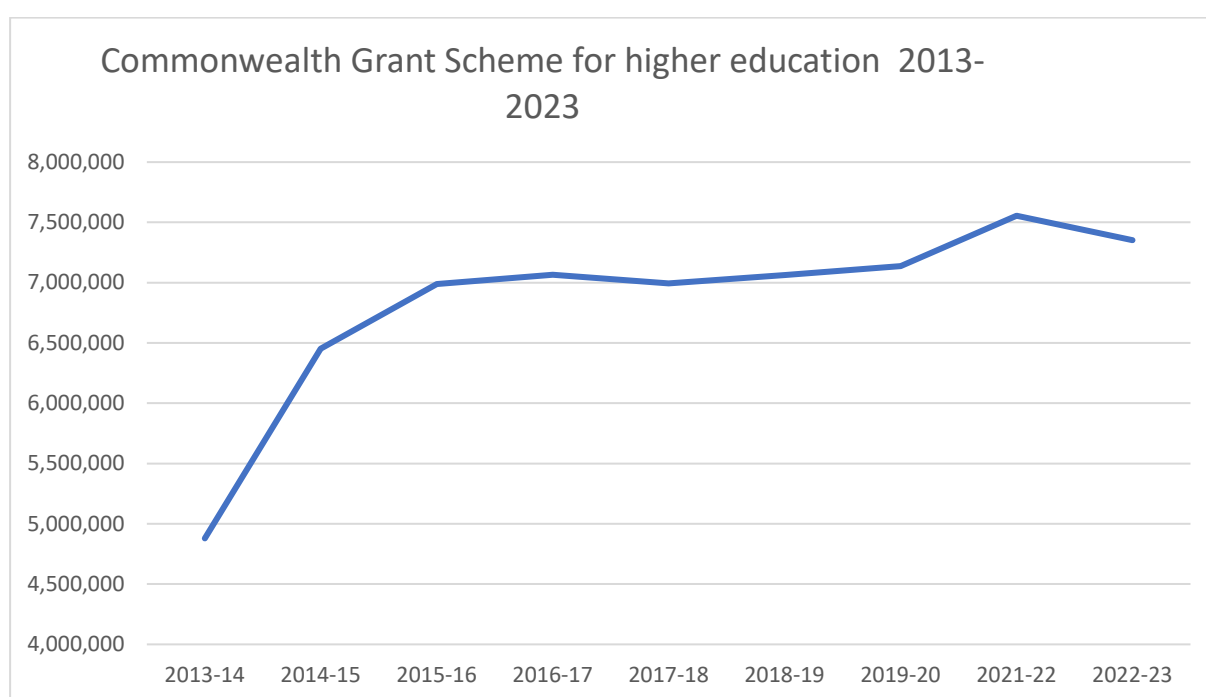


Figure 2 Commonwealth Grant Scheme funding, Source: federal portfolio budget statements

The disparity between VET and higher education funding has been led partially by government decision making. The most recent National Skills Agreement did not require states to match the federal government investment. As Figure 3 illustrates, since the peak of 1.54 million government-funded students in 2012, in 2020 the numbers fell to 1.19 million students. This resulting decrease in funding has resulted in 300,000 less students undertaking a VET qualification annually, while we note that student numbers have increased partially since 2020, this is due to short term injections from COVID funding programs rather than long term or structural funding changes. A long-term funding agreement which secures the future of VET is urgently required.

¹³ NCVER, [Government funding of VET 2021, 2022](#)

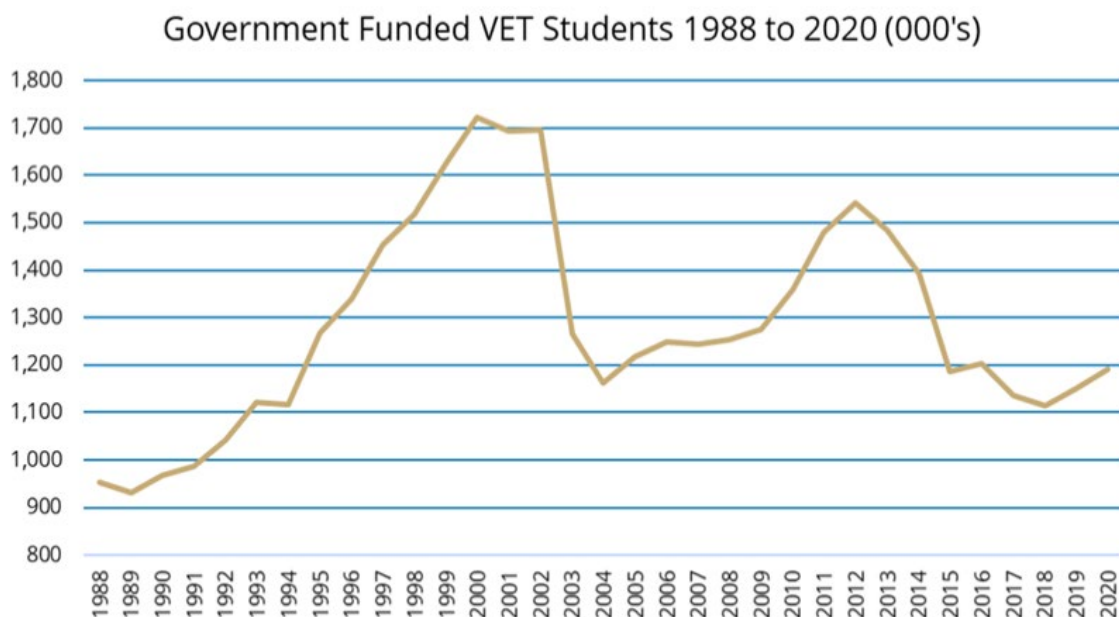


Figure 3 Government Funded VET Students, Australia 1988-2020¹⁴

The negotiations for the new five-year National Skills Agreement provides the opportunity to put in place a long-term funding solution for VET that delivers real growth as well as greater consistency and high quality. Unfortunately, the vision statement and guiding principles agreed to by Skills Ministers and then endorsed by National Cabinet in August 2022 did not emphasise increased funding overall, a marked change from the earlier Heads of Agreement Skills Reform signed under the previous government. The vision statement also emphasises TAFE at the heart of the new agreement, however more than 87 per cent of students choose to study with an independent RTO, and 55.8 per cent of apprentices/trainees in training in June 2022 were supported by an independent RTO¹⁵. It is vital that a quality student experience is placed at the heart of the VET experience, irrespective of the provider type. Funding to VET should be increased across the board and be tied to the student rather than the provider. A new national agreement should ensure that increased real funding per annum enables a return to peak student funding and beyond in the years ahead. The agreement should also be used as the vehicle for the overall development of the strategy to increase the perception of VET overall that was mentioned earlier in this submission.

Recommendation: The new National Skills Agreement commit to long-term, consistent and real VET funding increases across state, territory and federal government levels to deliver quality training tied to students' choice of training provider.

Recommendation: Align VET funding with funding levels for higher education.

¹⁴ NCVER, [Government-funded VET students and courses 2018 - Historical time series of government-funded vocational education and training in Australia, from 1981 to 2020](#), 2021.

¹⁵ ITECA, State of the Sector, 2022

Access to quality industry practitioners

The reputation of VET is enhanced by the quality of the teachers delivering the qualification to students. Access to high quality, knowledgeable teachers will assist developing VET's reputation as a tertiary education leader providing a service taught by experts in their field. In order to assist with this reputation building there should be a greater emphasis on attracting industry practitioners to become trainers, and particularly those with recent industry experience. The timeframe it takes to undertake the Certificate IV in training and assessment can be four to six months and the cost of the course is approximately \$4,000. This is both a lengthy time requirement for people already working full-time, often on weekends, and costly. There may be a simpler method than the current Certificate IV in training and assessment for these experienced practitioners, or whether skill sets are sufficient within a provider workforce where others fully trained in delivery and assessment are available.

The qualification needs to feel relevant to those experienced practitioners – at present the compulsory need to undertake the full qualification is a barrier to entry, particularly for those who remain in full or part time employment in industry. Closer analysis should be placed on industry based trainers being provided with shorter entry requirements in order to attract and retain this vital resource for VET. The Certificate IV is not the only mechanism to assure quality.

Recommendation: Develop more holistic approach to attracting and skilling an industry-experienced VET workforce

Recommendation: Subsidise the cost of undertaking the Certificate IV in training and assessment.

Access to student loans in VET and Higher Education

There is significant discrepancy in the availability of the payment model available for students to pay for qualifications between higher education and VET. In higher education, the majority of domestic students have access to a commonwealth supported place, and all have access to an income contingent loan under the Higher Education Loan Program (HELP). This enables them to defer the upfront cost of their course until they are earning enough to meet the repayment threshold, at which there are graduated repayment rates. This is not the case in VET, with VET Student Loans being very limited in the higher-level qualifications they cover.

It is also noteworthy that students taking out a VET Student Loan in a non-subsidised place are required to pay an additional 20% loan tax on the amount they borrow for their course. Students in a subsidised place don't pay this extra tax. The same loan tax applies to students taking out a FEE-HELP loan for non-subsidised higher education; almost exclusively with independent higher education providers. These are not policies designed with students and the benefits of the skills they bring to the economy in mind.

There are strong policy benefits in supporting higher-level VET qualifications and increasing the uptake of VET across the board. VET Student Loans (VSL) provide students studying higher level VET, in principle, equivalent support to the higher education HELP program. However, in reality, the two programs are significantly different, with VSL limited in the qualifications it covers. Students are only able to access VSL for approved courses offered by approved course providers. As of June 2021, only 194 of the almost 4000 Registered Training Organisations are eligible. Loan caps are

applicable to all approved courses with three bands - \$5,358, \$10,717 and \$16,077, with limited exceptions made in the case of aviation.

Despite an extensive consultation process around the course lists and caps in 2017, the government did not address shortcomings in the caps and the program, resulting in a significant reduction in the number of higher-level VET qualifications being undertaken. Whilst there have been numerous reviews of VSL, there is a real need for action. There is sufficient rigour in the approval of VSL providers and significant costs of participation that would prevent a repeat of the VET FEE-HELP issues to enable an expansion of the coverage of the scheme to all industry training package higher level VET qualifications.

Recommendation: That the VSL caps be reviewed.

Recommendation: That all Diplomas and Advanced Diplomas that are part of Industry Training Packages be eligible for VSL as compared with the current more limited list.

About ACCI

The Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry represents hundreds of thousands of businesses in every state and territory and across all industries. Ranging from small and medium enterprises to the largest companies, our network employs millions of people.

ACCI strives to make Australia the best place in the world to do business – so that Australians have the jobs, living standards and opportunities to which they aspire.

We seek to create an environment in which businesspeople, employees and independent contractors can achieve their potential as part of a dynamic private sector. We encourage entrepreneurship and innovation to achieve prosperity, economic growth and jobs.

We focus on issues that impact on business, including economics, trade, workplace relations, work health and safety, and employment, education and training.

We advocate for Australian business in public debate and to policy decision-makers, including ministers, shadow ministers, other members of parliament, ministerial policy advisors, public servants, regulators and other national agencies. We represent Australian business in international forums.

We represent the broad interests of the private sector rather than individual clients or a narrow sectional interest.

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