

SUBMISSION FROM TAFE DIRECTORS AUSTRALIA

DRAFT VET WORKFORCE QUALITY STRATEGY

The following submission provides feedback on the VET Workforce Quality Strategy consultation paper released by the Australian Government Department of Education, Skills and Employment (DESE) on 1 September 2021. It represents the view of TAFE Directors Australia (TDA).

INTRODUCTION

TDA is the peak national body that represents Australia's national network of publicly owned Technical and Further Education (TAFE) institutes and university TAFE divisions. Of the 28 TDA TAFE members, 10 TAFEs are higher education providers and a further six are TAFE divisions of dual sector public universities.

TAFE members offer education and skills training across VET in secondary schools, post-school VET including apprenticeships and traineeships, and higher education graduate and post-graduate programs. Australia's network of TAFE institutes is the largest and most diverse component of our national tertiary education sector, with over 550 campuses located in urban, regional, rural and remote locations¹.

As very large, complex organisations with a majority hosting greater than 10,000 students, TAFEs comprise a diverse workforce including teaching staff (trainers and assessors) and professional staff (range of professionals who support training delivery and provide corporate functions). The combination of staff is critical to high quality delivery and TAFE performance overall. In 2019 (based on headcount) there were 45,628 employees at TAFE and 200,539 employees at other registered training organisations (RTO)².

The NCVER survey showed that, trainers and assessors made up 29% of the total VET workforce, with 71 379 employees. TAFE providers had the highest number of trainers and assessors (26,688) followed by independent/private training providers (23,113). TAFE providers also had the highest proportion of their VET workforce that were trainers and assessors (58.5%). Teaching qualifications held by TAFE trainers and assessors were high, with 97.8% holding a Certificate IV in Training and Assessment or higher teaching qualification.

CONTEXT AND COMMENTS

A quality VET workforce is critical and provides a solid foundation for the delivery, assessment and design of high standard teaching and assessment. For this reason, the

¹ <https://tda.edu.au/the-power-of-tafe/tafe-locations-in-australia/>

² Knight G, White I and Granfield P, 2020, *Understanding the Australian vocational education and training workforce*, National Centre for Vocational Education Research, Adelaide
<https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/publications/all-publications/understanding-the-australian-vocational-education-and-training-workforce>

concept of a VET Workforce Quality Strategy (the Strategy) is a good one and is to be supported.

However, there are THREE issues which significantly lessen the draft Strategy's potential impact:

1. The lack of acknowledgement (and implications) of a range of systemic reforms in the national training system currently underway and their impact.
2. The narrowly focused measures which target smaller RTOs and largely ignore the vital professional staff that form the workforce.
3. The lack of acknowledgement of the employment basis of those in the TAFE workforce and the subsequent actions taken by TAFEs in terms of workforce planning, including attraction levers.

1. Need to better integrate national training system reforms

The VET workforce makes up one part of the complex national training system. Unless the draft Strategy is better integrated with, and linked to, the range of existing reforms and processes of more systemic quality reforms then it will not achieve its objectives. These reforms include:

- Qualifications reform where partnerships with industry will result in timely, relevant, new qualifications.
- New industry clusters which will be responsible for workforce planning for their industry sectors and thus the impact of that on the VET workforce as part of the supply chain.
- Review of the Training and Education (TAE) Training Package by PWC for the Education Industry Reference Committee (IRC).
- ASQA's pivot to a self-assurance approach – what does this mean for VET workforce quality?

The VET Workforce Quality Strategy needs to be better integrated into the overall national training system reform agenda as articulated by DESE, ASQA and skills ministers³. This includes considering the sequencing, timing and outputs from other quality reform processes. The draft Strategy needs to acknowledge and reference these significant processes which are highly likely to affect TAFE workforce capabilities.

TDA considers the Strategy does not recognise the possibilities that exist in the qualifications reform proposals. For example, currently underway are partnerships with industry in co-design of learning and assessment being trialled by Skills Organisations. These pilots will inform the likely transition to qualification design that requires different skill sets within the VET workforce.

³ Skills Senior Officials' Network 2021, *VET Reform Roadmap: A shared roadmap for vocational education and training system reform across the Commonwealth and states and territories*.

<https://www.dese.gov.au/expert-review-australias-vet-system/resources/vocational-education-and-training-vet-reform-roadmap-draft>

TDA has provided feedback to the qualification reform consultation that a one size fits all model for the workforce will not deliver the sorts of industry specific innovation in the future. This will therefore impact workforce organisational design. It is possible that TAFEs will move to enterprise agreements where there is a multi-tiered approach where teachers who deliver are distinguished from teachers who can design curriculum in partnership with industry. In practice it is possible there will evolve a two-tiered workforce where some TAFE teachers will be selected to develop specialised capabilities to design curriculum as well as deliver courses and assess students. This future state is not adequately addressed in the Strategy.

2. The Strategy is not an overall VET workforce strategy

The draft Strategy is more relevant to small RTOs than to TAFEs. The Strategy should be renamed to reflect this. In this context the Strategy misses an opportunity to be nationally relevant, encompassing of the entire VET workforce, and future oriented.

It is important to understand that a 'one size fits all' set of measures of delivery quality may not serve all purposes.⁴ While TDA acknowledges that the draft Strategy is meant to complement existing workforce development activities and programs in states and territories, the measures in Attachment A mainly provide a series of assets/resources for smaller private providers.

The Strategy does not include measures that would assist TAFEs. For example, the draft Strategy recognises that larger VET providers produce capability frameworks for use within their own organisation and this is the case for many TAFEs. Capability frameworks work best when internally constructed and are based on the unique needs of the organisation. Many TAFEs have prepared their own capability frameworks and associated professional development and associated performance management procedures to meet the specific context and regional factors that the TAFE operates in.

Although mentioned in the consultation paper the uptake of any capability framework would be voluntary. It would be misguided to see the capability framework used as a prescriptive tool. This sentiment is echoed in recent research from the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER). 'There is strong support for using teacher capability frameworks and/or professional standards as diagnostic tools and guidelines for teacher self-evaluation and reflection. Nonetheless, limited appetite exists for a nationally prescribed VET teacher capability framework due to the diversity of the VET sector.'⁵ Additionally, as mentioned imposed capability frameworks rarely work; they are best developed from within the organisation.

⁴ Guthrie H & Waters M 2021, *Unpacking the quality of VET delivery*, Occasional paper, NCVER, Adelaide <https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/publications/all-publications/unpacking-the-quality-of-vet-delivery>

⁵ Misko J, Guthrie H & Waters M, 2021, *Building capability and quality in VET teaching: opportunities and challenges*, NCVER, Adelaide

Finally, the proposals are focused on trainer/teacher part of the VET workforce. They fail to recognise the role of professional staff. This is critical in any overall strategy and the current transition to online learning has required significant investment in technical staff to support online platforms as well as professional staff who are able to design materials for online use. TAFEs also have invested heavily in the last two years in digital strategy development for student support professionals, such as student counsellors.

If this is to be a VET workforce, the professional workforce must feature. The integrated role of professional staff in student enrolment, quality oversight and student awarding should be referenced.

3. Employment arrangements for TAFE staff and attraction strategies

TAFE employees are public servants and as such are required to adhere to State or Territory codes of conduct and industrial awards. In many cases this means there are professional development expectations embedded in their enterprise agreements, which is a positive aspect. However, there can also be barriers due to the state-based whole of public service context.

While retention of the VET workforce is mentioned in the draft Strategy, attraction is not. This is an important issue for many TAFEs especially those in regional and rural areas. There is an opportunity to address this issue nationally with measures that support VET workforce attraction.

An example of an innovative solution to the lack of qualified industry teachers, developed by TasTAFE, was the introduction of the Teacher Under Supervision model. This model aimed to attract industry professionals into the TAFE teaching. It is a cadetship-like model where the industry professional must attain the required presenter skill set from the TAE and can then deliver training while assessment is conducted by a qualified teacher. This model had many layers of negotiation with the Tasmanian Government prior to being able to be introduced as it sat outside any state industrial award. However, the point of the example is many TAFEs have a problem in attracting staff, need to work within their state ownership arrangements, and therefore this aspect must be considered in a quality workforce strategy.

A second example of specific state solutions, also from Tasmania, is the Regional Development of VET Teaching Capability Pilot (TasTAFE, Tasmania). This pilot program is part of the Tasmanian Government's Workforce Development Program which aims to build VET teaching capacity for industries of regional priority in western Tasmania. Delivered through a partnership between West Coast Council and TasTAFE, this program aims to attract industry professionals into VET teaching in areas of skill need, and support them to achieve the Certificate IV in TAE through a blended learning approach⁶.

⁶ Misko J, Guthrie H & Waters M, 2021, *Building capability and quality in VET teaching: opportunities and challenges*, NCVET, Adelaide

Maintaining industry currency for VET staff can also be challenging for many RTOs. TAFEs have invested in developing industry currency through a range of solutions including solving real world problems. This approach in TAFEs is variously known as practice-based innovation or applied research collaboration. Many TAFEs partner with local businesses to find solutions to technical and workforce problems. There are several benefits of this approach - one being enhanced industry currency⁷. TDA suggests the draft Strategy should more explicitly deal with industry currency by encouraging innovation-based practice with industry partners as a way of incorporating new, relevant industry skills and knowledge into teaching.

CONCLUSION

Currently, the Australian TAFE network is collaborating to support those in the public provider workforce to deliver quality outcomes. For example, TDA coordinates the National VET Educator Development Network (NVEDN) which is developing professional standards for TAFE educators that may inform their workforce development. The TAFE workforce has moved substantially in the last few years to work together to ensure workforce quality outcomes are supported, shared and applicable in the context of being a public provider.

⁷ TAFE Directors Australia, 2020, *SMEs and TAFEs collaborating through applied research for growth* <https://tda.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/2020-10-19-SMEs and TAFEs Collaborating Through Applied Research for Growth-003.pdf>