



AUSTRALIAN VOCATIONAL EDUCATION  
AND TRAINING RESEARCH ASSOCIATION  
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## **AVETRA Submission to the Senate Inquiry into TAFE**

The Australian Vocational Education and Training Research Association (AVETRA), welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Senate Inquiry into TAFE. AVETRA members have completed many significant research studies into the quality of VET, the VET workforce and TAFE generally. AVETRA includes a large number of VET practitioners and managers, as well as a large proportion of academics who are responsible for developing VET teachers and facilitators. The AVETRA workforce therefore includes considerable expertise in the training and development of the VET workforce, made up largely of TAFE teachers, and in understanding the issues associated with their daily practice and management.

AVETRA refers to its previous submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Employment 'Inquiry into the role of the Technical and Further Education system and its operation', and the issues we raised about the importance of a research culture in VET overall, and the need to ensure that we maintained the professionalism and qualifications of teachers who would be able to deliver vocational education to a diverse range of students. We add the following information for this inquiry.

In its submission to the Productivity Commission, AVETRA stated:

“While our community benefits greatly from a pool of committed reflective practitioners, it remains a small percentage of the total workforce. A restricted knowledge base must place the development of the VET workforce system at risk. Developing the structure of the VET workforce must include developing individuals. The aspiration of a degree-based profession should be a target for the next decade, as a basic step in underpinning any movement development of quality and AQF agendas. A professional status would also serve to attract and retain the workforce. If skill development is critical to national economic development, it should follow that those charged with such development, the VET workforce, should be encouraged to attain higher educational standards and be appropriately supported in achieving those standards, and for continuing employment within the workforce.”

TAFE, as the established publically accountable provider of vocational education and training, is critical to the economic, social, cultural and community development in Australia and to Australia's capacity to be an active contributor to the global economy and societies at large.

### **a. The Role played by TAFE in:**

#### **i) Educational linkages with secondary and higher education:**

These linkages are of critical importance to enable pathways and transition technical and further education to be provided to the majority of young people and to second chance students who have missed out on their initial educational opportunities. This may have been due to lack of support or due to the reality of disadvantaged life circumstances. In addition many young people clearly wish



to take up opportunities to pursue technical and employment skill development whilst they are still at school. TAFE is of critical importance to provide supplementary expertise to enable young people to pursue technical and circuit breaker education and training. TAFE can help to enable youth to connect and reconnect with the high school and subsequent educational pathways, especially given the raising of the school leaving age to 17 years in most states in Australia.

TAFE provides both qualifications that lead to employment and qualifications that lead to further study. Agreed and transparent pathways between TAFE and universities have been developed over some time, including with the growth of dual sector organizations. It is important that these pathways be maintained, and that they are not undermined by a competitive training market. Opportunities for TAFE and universities to work together need to be expanded so that the expertise of both sectors can be maximized.

AVETRA made the point in our earlier submission that TAFE teachers/VET practitioners, require professional teaching qualifications as well as industry currency in order to effectively deliver quality educational programs to a diverse range of students across different locations. Professor Terri Seddon, in a paper entitled, “The productivity challenge in Australia: The case for professional renewal in VET teaching”, argues “that VET reforms since the 1990s created disturbances and uncertainties in VET teachers’ and managers’ work and working lives. In particular, these reforms failed to recognise and endorse teaching expertise that sits at the heart of VET practice. Top-down reforms and funding constraints, coupled with lack of recognition of VET occupational expertise, created perverse behaviours.” She goes on to say that much innovation has not consequently been supported and is therefore not necessarily sustainable, as “new initiatives-identities cannot compete with established identities”. “This model of reform is not followed by other countries which recognise and deploy teaching expertise in productive ways to build capacities for innovation amongst young and older worker-citizens.” (IJTR, Vol. 7. 2009, p. 56) She suggests that VET teaching expertise is a productivity resource and that professional renewal can help to mobilize it. This submission suggests that increased access to research and involvement in practitioner research can also be a factor in driving these innovative changes in the VET profession and making them sustainable.

AVETRA has established a Practitioner Hub as a way of supporting practitioner research. It has the following aims, to:

- \* link practitioners with a national network of teachers, trainers, consultants and others who are passionate about improving teaching and learning through research
- \* give practitioners opportunities to update and improve their research skills and to work with others
- \* explore innovative practices
- \* assist in connecting practitioners with experienced AVETRA researchers

The Hub arose from a number of forums around practitioner research at TAFE Directors Australia Conference 2013 (TDA), as part of OctoberVET 2013, and as a continuing part of AVETRA’s workplan for 2012-13. Practitioner research is sometimes referred to as a process of inquiry, and according to one of the participants in the TDA workshop “is an essential part of the VET sector’s



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core business because it creates change, innovation and improvement.” Professor Michele Simons in a paper to the TDA workshop noted that a sustainable VET profession “requires the development of specific forms of capital that are best sustained within a culture of inquiry”, and that “the policy/research/practice nexus is the poorer without the outcomes from the field.” She goes on to say that “educators face the considerable challenge of designing learning and assessment pathways for local contexts that are flexible enough to address the rapidly changing knowledge base required for work while also embracing the diversity of learners...educators need the capacity to be always deepening their understandings of learning through research and inquiry. If we are to develop workers that are capable of capacities to think critically, be flexible and creative – then educators need to possess these dispositions and model them to their learners.”

The Industry Skills Council, Innovation and Business Skills Australia (IBSA), has developed as part of its work in the education sector, a Capability Framework, to be used by individual practitioners and organizations. One of the skills identified as being required of a VET practitioner, is ‘Evidence-based practice and research’. This is described at three different levels from a starting practitioner to a specialist. The three levels are:

- \* Accesses and utilises information and research sources about VET practice and the VET sector as appropriate to teaching level and industry area.
- \* Seeks out and critically analyses information and research sources about VET practice and the VET sector, undertakes role-appropriate research into own practice and within own environment
- \* Identifies issues that need further investigation and works with others to carry out research beyond own immediate environment

To further this work in developing and supporting practitioner research, AVETRA has partnered with TAFE Directors Australia in offering a scholarship. The scholarship is described in the following way: “This initiative, commencing in 2014, aims to foster innovation in industry workforce development initiatives. Recipients will investigate innovative ways to meet new and emerging skill needs through projects in industry or community settings. The outcomes will inform new practices and/or partnerships models for TAFE and specific industry/community sectors.

TDA and AVETRA signed a Memorandum of Understanding in 2013 to enhance innovation and research capability in TAFE. The Scholarship supports TDA’s Strategic Plan to position TAFE in a competitive training market through research into producing high quality and work-ready graduates. The scholarship also supports AVETRA’s strong commitment to the development of research in vocational education and training nationally.”

AVETRA will also work with NCVER, the Industry Skills Councils and the VET Development Centre in further developing the opportunities for practitioners to learn about and engage in practitioner research.



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AVETRA seeks to emphasise the importance of this work in this submission for the following reasons:

1. it highlights what is happening around practitioner research, and how it connects with innovative teaching and learning practices
2. it highlights the need to build the professionalism of the VET workforce far beyond the competences required of a Certificate IV in Training and Assessment
3. it demonstrates that TAFE is continuing to play a key role in supporting and developing practitioner research
4. if TAFE teachers are to continue to ensure TAFE has effective links with schools and universities through pathways and partnerships, then they need to be involved in inquiry and practitioner research that develops the pedagogical practices in the VET sector, and aligns it with the other education sectors

**ii) The development of skills in the Australian economy:**

The development of skills is of critical importance given the development of the post industrial economy and society. The economy has changed enormously in the past 30 years. The economy has shifted to the tertiary service and skill requirement sector. It has shifted in employment numbers and proportions away from the Primary and Manufacturing industries. The growth in the communication, community service requirements, cultural and creative industries, environmental and financial services, all in a digital global interconnected exchange, requires educational and re-educational adaptable knowledge, attributes and skill development. TAFE has a fundamental role to play as the public VET provider, and the one able to adapt and meet the changing needs of government, industry and community.

**iii) The development of opportunities for Australians to improve themselves and increase their life, education and employment prospects:**

TAFE as an accessible quality public education provider is of critical importance to the formation and reformation of Australia's human capital and resource stock and potential. The TAFE system has a very substantial record and capability in the provision of reasonable opportunities for individuals and organisations to engage in processes of continuous improvement, which enables the realization of potential development for individuals and enterprises.

Vocational education and training is important in facilitating Australians in a holistic way to improve themselves and to increase their life, education and employment prospects through lifelong learning. TAFE has been a valued provider for all. TAFE provides hundreds of thousands of Australians with the dignity, security and self-worth that flow from successful participation in education and successful engagement with the workforce and society generally.



The VET sector attracts disproportionately more disadvantaged learners than any other educational sector. From Skills Australia 2011, this table compares the proportion of disadvantaged students in VET and higher education:

|                               | VET sector<br>(%) | Higher education sector<br>(%) |
|-------------------------------|-------------------|--------------------------------|
| Indigenous                    | 4.3               | 0.8                            |
| Non-English speaking home     | 12.1              | 3.8                            |
| People with disability        | 5.9               | 4.1                            |
| Low socio-economic background | 29.2              | 15.0                           |

TAFE is the key provider of quality effective education and training, and teaches and supports a diverse group of students. These include:

- equity groups, mature aged students needing to upgrade their skills due to changing workforce demands, young people, people with complex needs requiring expert support to achieve potential which can lead to greater financial independence and other public benefits
- apprentices and trainees, some 25% of TAFE students, enormously important in providing the skills and trades this country needs into the future
- those seeking second chance education which can provide pathways to university education, having previously missed out
- TAFE itself offers higher education degrees generally in niche areas not catered for by universities, or in partnership with universities capitalising on the expertise of the individual educational sectors

**iv) The delivery of services and programs to support regions, communities and disadvantaged individuals to access training and skills and through them a pathway to employment:**

Australia is a very rich nation which has over 40% of its population coming from multicultural backgrounds. It also has a very rich and diverse Indigenous mix of Australia's first people. Our cultural mix and resettlement requires that we provide inclusive and active programs to support regions, communities and pathways to education programs for the good of social cohesion and economic opportunity for all of our people. This in turn provides strength and returns to Australia in relation to the global economy, scientific, social, environmental and democratic development.

TAFE is widely recognized as the VET provider that enables students to take life-changing pathways as a result of TAFE qualifications. TAFE students frequently tell stories of how the knowledge, skills and confidence gained through a TAFE course changed their lives and helped them embark on new careers. TAFE's social responsibility and community service obligations, are generally not shared by private for-profit providers. It is important that TAFE continues to be supported and funded in this role.



**b. The effect of a competitive training market on TAFE:**

The notion of open competition is a destructive ideology and one that is not applicable to education. It fails to recognize the value of collaboration, continuity, capacity building and consolidation advantages which emerge from a well resourced TAFE. It is important that government funding ensures that TAFE has the capacity to deliver skills and knowledge in a good measure for the Australian economy and society. Competition and innovation have parts to play in skills development and the TAFE system ... however there needs to be a managed and monitored process to ensure that the overall balance between public and private provision is well maintained in a dynamic and sustainable manner and mix.

**c. What public funding is adequate to ensure TAFEs remain in a strong and sustainable position to carry out their aims:**

TAFE funding needs to be provided in ample portions. TAFE is a collaborative and counter-cyclical contributor to the human capital development and over all contributor to the economic and social development of Australia in a global context. Funding of TAFE needs to recognize that individual students contribute substantial financial and in-kind resources, which provide great capabilities and returns to the Australian economy and society. The returns need to be seen as returns on investment to commercial, public and social enterprises and in turn to the global economy. Consequently AVETRA does not support moves to transfer the costs of vocational education and training from government to students. TAFE should remain accessible, and TAFE student fees appropriate for both the course and the student.

**d) What factors affect the affordability and accessibility of TAFE to students and business:**

Many students languish in situations of multiple disadvantage and need additional support to engage and sustain their participation in TAFE and the VET sector. Many small business owners are dependent on TAFE providing a skilled workforce and new skills to enable their businesses to be established, survive and thrive in economic, regulatory, digital, environmental and socially changing times.

Increasing TAFE fees affect both students and employers. Many students do not want to take on student debts through FEE-Help, nor do they have the capital to pay enormous fees upfront. It is a government responsibility to ensure that TAFE as the public provider remains accessible financially, and that it continues to offer a range of courses in a range of locations.

**e) Different mechanisms used by state and governments to allocate funding:**



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TAFE needs to have a wide range of resources to enable reasonable adjustment to be equitably provided as part of a social and economic contract which keeps Australia at the forefront of world social, environmental and economic development.

Some scope needs to be provided to ensure that TAFE and VET development is done in a manner which ensures some consistency and comparability of provision across and between state jurisdictions and also has the ability to meet diverse needs and circumstances. This requires accountable and developmental support to ensure the overall integrity of the VET and TAFE quality of provision.

The question is often asked, if VET is a national system with national qualifications and standards, then why are funding mechanisms different between states and territories. Governments have promised to clarify a role for TAFE over many years. This is even more critical as the VET sector goes through further changes.

AVETRA is in the position with its access to extensive research and the support of expert researchers to assist government in developing this role for TAFE within the VET sector.

**f) The application and effect of additional charges to TAFE students:**

TAFE and VET reach across the widest cross section of society and educational areas. The impact of current trends towards the user pays, will render TAFE and VET beyond the reach and range of many of the 25% of high need members of our society. The economic situation is becoming increasingly divided in a digital age, resulting in an increase in mental health and disadvantage. It is important that governments ensure that access to TAFE to embark on a career, gain new skills and knowledge and to have the chance to take that life-changing step, remains available to those who need it.



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