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The Secretary  
House Standing Committee on Education, Employment and Training  
PO Box 6021  
Parliament House  
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Dear Sir/Madam

We are two independent researchers, who last year completed a project on applied research in vocational education. The [research](#) was commissioned by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research. We wish to address the first of your inquiry's terms of reference:

*The diversity, fragmentation and efficiency of research investment across the Australian Government, including the range of programs, guidelines and methods of assessment of grants*

Around half of the patents issued in Australia go to people who do not hold degrees (information retrieved from the Australian Inventor Survey). Yet, the vocational education and training (VET) sector is not acknowledged as part of the research sector nor is it seen as an integral part of the National Innovation and Science Agenda. Without access to the research and innovation dollar, registered training organisations cannot realise their potential as partners for industry to solve their problems and to assist in experimentation and commercialisation efforts.

There is potential for a greater applied research effort in the VET sector. To unleash this potential requires acknowledgement and nurturing of that effort. The job starts within the sector, which must name and claim its research, but will not gain momentum without training in research skills and access to research funds.

Even without further training, the VET workforce could be better used to assist in knowledge transfer within the R&D system. VET educators and other professionals already have strong links to industry and are training the people who will be using new technologies. But the system does not acknowledge eligible TAFEs in the definition of a publicly funded research organisation. This severely limits the possibilities for TAFE to become a research partner, for example in a Cooperative Research Centre, or disseminate new knowledge, let alone build its own research effort.

Much is said about the need for Australia to turn good ideas into commercial success. This depends on the uptake of those ideas in industry and the skilling of the workforce, VET- as well as university-trained. For many small and medium enterprises, collaborations with universities are daunting. SMEs need to devote resources to real-time problems and solutions. Their TAFE partners can and do help. With a more focused applied research lens, VET institutions could turn themselves into conduits for the practical application of research. Moreover, the model of work-integrated learning lends itself to a virtuous cycle: of learning, evidence-based workplace product and process improvements, leading in turn to better training. To make this happen the VET authorities needs to encourage applied research pedagogies (i.e. students being involved in applied research as part of the curriculum) and streamline the training system with a view to channeling innovation into training products in a timely fashion.

There is much to fix in VET. Incorporating applied research into the business model offers a fresh approach. We have set out these ideas, based on literature and case studies in our reports. We have drawn not only on overseas experience in Canada, Germany and the UK but also on activity within the Australian VET system. You will be familiar with some of these examples from your previous inquiry into innovation and creativity. Unfortunately, this aspect of vocational education and higher education in TAFE is still not prominent in tertiary education policy.

We have also developed a [framework](#) by which to understand individual and organisational applied research capabilities in the VET sector. This framework shows there is a solid basis on which to build.

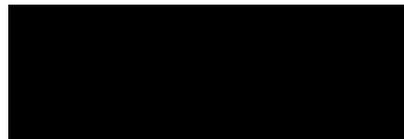
We offer two recommendations for your consideration:

- 1. That the VET sector be acknowledged as part of the research sector, including eligible TAFEs being included in the definition of publicly funded research organisations. This will enable the sector to access research funds and build its capacity.**
- 2. That this acknowledgement include greater support for and investment in applied research models and research training involving VET.**

Yours sincerely



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