

HSU RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS ON NOTICE – Fee Free TAFE Bill

What's the current number of fee-free TAFE courses out of the 600,000 that have been nursing courses?

The HSU's coverage of nursing is limited and varies state by state (e.g. enrolled nursing, mental health and psychiatric nursing) compared to over unions with broader coverage.

The [publicly available data](#) from the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations indicates that 150,985 of the 568,451 enrolments in fee-free TAFE have been in the priority sector of "Care". This comes from DEWR analysis of the data reported under the National Skills Agreement.

The Diploma in Nursing is the 3rd largest VET course with fee-free TAFE uptake, behind the Certificate III in Individual Support (the qualifying entry certificate for personal care workers and supervised disability support workers).

We therefore anticipate that a significant proportion of the 150,000+ care qualifications would be considered as "nursing courses". We do not have more precise data to answer this question.

Do you know if the total number of nursing students has increased, or has it remained static?

They have increased. The National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) provides enrolment data up to 2023, which indicates that VET enrolments in the field of education of "Nursing":

- have increased around 15% since 2019:
- In the last year of reporting alone – increased around 6%:

Year	NURSING ENROLMENTS
2019	30,655
2020	30,945
2021	33,085
2022	33,325
2023	35,185

Can you provide us with some evidence of (concerns about the quality in the RTO market, compared to TAFE)?

For clarity, the HSU's position is that it is typically easier to control for quality in the public TAFE system, compared to the private RTO system, as TAFEs are established under government statutes.

Our concerns about variable quality in the RTO market are evidenced by:

- **Recent compliance actions by ASQA:** In just November and December last year, ASQA cancelled 21,000 qualifications across four RTOs. A substantial proportion of the cancelled qualifications were delivered to health, care and support students. We have not seen this degree of compliance action in the TAFE market.

The Albanese Government has made significant strides to better regulate the RTO market, but work is very much ongoing. With such substantial work ahead in regulating the private training sector, opening up fee-free TAFE to the private training sector would be a high-risk decision.

- **Unethical private provider behaviour in the VET FEE-HELP program:** where, according to the Ombudsman, *“unethical providers or their agents enrolled students, often without their knowledge or consent, or with the promise of inducements, burdening them with VFH debts for little to no educational benefit.”*

The University of Melbourne's Centre for Studies of Higher Education details how the private RTO market specifically exploited this program in its paper [VET FEE-HELP: What went wrong?](#)

Is there specifically any evidence to say that there are better outcomes in TAFE?

The comparative advantages of TAFE are well outlined in the Australia Institute's paper [An Investment in Productivity and Inclusion: The Economic and Social Benefits of the TAFE System.](#):

Unlike for-profit providers, TAFE institutes are motivated by a commitment to ensuring access and equity in training, and to maximising the all-round social

benefits of their offerings. Public charters guide the TAFE system's activities across a range of key areas, regulating course breadth and range (even for low-demand courses, which for-profit providers would quickly jettison) and providing education and training in regional areas (which regularly experience higher youth unemployment rates). Indeed, despite heavy subsidies to private providers to establish 'markets' for VET, TAFE institutes are still the main provider of training in regional areas, due to the infeasibility of private models in smaller population centres. TAFE program completers are also more likely to represent the bottom two quintiles for socio-economic disadvantage (NCVER, 2019a), and are more likely to be of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Island descent, or to identify as having a disability, compared with students of private VET providers. By improving education and training affordability and access for these disadvantaged students, the TAFE system provides critical pathways to employment and further education. Private providers have neither the motivation nor (in most cases) the resources to provide vital tailored supports (including flexible payment plans) for students who need them.

We also refer to further research in other published papers:

- ["The TAFE Value and Perception Challenge" - Research by Mccrindle for the Victorian TAFE Association](#) - *"TAFE surpasses universities and other Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) in 10 out of the 15 options evaluated. It is acknowledged for its accessibility, affordability, on the job learning, earning while learning and job readiness."*
- [VET Workforce Study, Jobs and Skills Australia](#) *"Public sector VET teachers had higher rates of teaching qualifications than teachers at independent/private RTOs at both the Certificate IV TAE and diploma or higher qualification level (NCVER 2020).²³ For example, 19.3% of teachers in TAFE held a diploma or higher teaching qualification compared to 15.0% in private/independent RTOs."*

In 2024, NCVER data demonstrates that TAFEs recorded better outcomes in areas such as improved numeracy, employment in the same occupation as the training course, achieving employment and study-related outcomes, a better job after training, and the student recommending their training provider.

Do you know whether a nursing student or, indeed, any student across courses that your members are represented by, is less likely to graduate from a TAFE course than a not-for-profit or for-profit industry RTO?

We have looked into this question, and unfortunately we are not aware of data that provides this level of detail (in terms of VET completion rates as a percentage of course enrolments, broken down by type of training provider).