

**House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment,
Education and Training**

**Inquiry into the Perceptions and Status of
Vocational Education and Training**

Submission from the Government of South Australia

February 2023



Inquiry into the Perceptions and Status of Vocational Education and Training

South Australia acknowledges the importance of the VET sector in addressing the critical skills shortage affecting the Australian workforce, and in enabling businesses and industry to thrive. South Australia is pleased to provide submission feedback to the House of Representatives Standing Committee undertaking an Inquiry into the Perceptions and Status of Vocational Education and Training (VET). Key government and industry stakeholders have been approached for comment in the development of this submission, and the themes and recommendations to the Committee (resulting from that feedback) are covered herein.

VET information available to students

In South Australia, students can access information about VET pathways through the Department for Education's Student Pathways website, which includes information on Flexible Industry Pathways which are available for students to commence whilst completing schooling and with alignment to the South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE). This site also provides information about opportunities for industry immersion and experience and school-based apprenticeships and traineeships. Students can also access information and advice via national digital platforms including *yourcareer*; *myfuture*; *myskills*; and *aapathways*.

Recent stakeholder engagement undertaken by Skills SA identified that the volume of information available to students from a broad range of sources (both government and non-government) is significant. However, given the volume of information available and the lack of streamlined accessibility, the VET sector presents as a complex space that can be challenging and overwhelming to navigate for users. The South Australian Government undertook market research between 2018 and 2021 that confirmed that strong and effective digital channels are needed to better support students in their VET journeys.

Some common issues presented with regards to accessing VET information include:

- A lack of ease of navigating the VET system;
- Large volumes and overlapping information from countless sources;
- Content design required with diverse VET cohorts in mind (i.e. school students versus older students who are upskilling or transitioning careers);
- A lack of clear connection between VET education and career goal pathways;
- A lack of effective screening tools (and associated supports) for VET applicants with regards to their aptitude to undertake and successfully complete courses;
- A lack of data and information on the uptake and impacts of key digital sites for users.

Recommendations

Establish a national digital portal jointly owned by the Commonwealth and States and Territories, for students and their families/guardians, accessible to business and industry, with information pitched to diverse audiences of the VET sector. This should include information on:

- Job openings and skills demand;
- Profiles on key sectors;
- Interactive mapping;
- Career and training options;
- Information on subsidies and supports.

Perceptions and status of the VET sector

There is a widely held and inaccurate perception that VET pathways are sub-par to university pathways for students, and work needs to be done both at the national and state and territory levels to address this. Typically, VET is often viewed by students as a career pathway that is 'hands on' and lower paid and has historically been treated as a pathway provided to students who have not demonstrated academic potential or aptitude for university. It is well documented across stakeholder feedback, that school students do not equally value VET pathways when compared with university pathways, despite VET students having stronger job outcomes and strong in-demand career opportunities requiring VET qualifications in the years ahead¹. Teachers, parents or guardians, and other support staff involved in career advisory roles may not have sufficient understanding to provide accurate support and advice and many are not aware of the high-level of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) knowledge required for many trades and vocations, for example, in electrotechnology or plumbing.

With the shifting landscape of future Australian industries and skill shortages, the demand for skilled workers will continue to increase and this presents the opportune moment for shifting that dialogue. An increasing number of occupations require entry level qualifications as opposed to university degrees and it is important to target the right audiences to fill these roles now and into the future². Clear pathways between the VET sector and universities are also paramount, so that students can understand that choosing one path over another does not need to confine their career progression, with opportunities to take on higher qualifications being clearly articulated.

The South Australian Government has embarked on significant reform to restore vocational training as a pathway valued just as much as a university qualification. South Australia has committed to building five new technical colleges with state-of-the-art facilities as a contributor to raising the state-based VET profile. Students will have the capacity to complete their school certificates whilst undertaking a VET qualification and the colleges will also provide career advice and direct connections to local industry and businesses to help maximise student outcomes. This investment in school-based VET facilities will create a persuasive platform to re-frame the perceptions of VET as a viable, strong career pathway.

¹ VET for School Students: Repositioning VET within secondary education in South Australia (Pages 2 and 13)

<https://www.education.sa.gov.au/sites/default/files/vet-for-school-students.pdf>

² VET and Higher Education Pathways- do outcomes differ for the same occupation? National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER)

Rebuilding TAFE SA is a key priority for the South Australian Government, following years of funding reductions and government policies that had a detrimental impact on TAFE and the broader reputation of VET. Restoring courses in areas such as disability and early childhood education and care which had been cut from TAFE SA, building new TAFE infrastructure, introducing fee-free TAFE in partnership with the Commonwealth Government, and doing regular positive media and promotions on TAFE SA have all been strong actions taken by the new South Australian Government to rebuild its reputation as a high-quality vocational training provider of choice for students. The benefits of this work are already being seen, with TAFE SA reporting increased applications for 2023 after reduced enrolments in previous years.

The South Australian Skills Commission (SASC) was established to provide advice to the Minister for Education, Training and Skills on how the skills sector is performing and to engage with industry and employers to support their delivery of a skilled workforce needed for South Australia's future. As part of their role, the SASC has established seven Industry Skills Councils to provide industry led advice to government, and a recommendation from these Councils was to establish VET ambassadors from diverse backgrounds (including diversity in culture, gender and profession) to act as role models to potential students. An example of this could be to approach finalists or winners of national or South Australian training awards, to take on a promotional role of their industry and the broader skills sector in a bid to attract youth to consider these careers. There has also been interest in engaging these Industry Skills Councils to support career counselling in secondary schools, given the breadth of knowledge and experience they could bring.

A UK apprenticeships start-up company Multiverse (formerly known as WhiteHat), has adopted a strategic multifaceted approach to promoting and attracting people into apprenticeships. This approach is comprised of a digital 'marketplace' that connects candidates with opportunities; access to coaching and resources and a community that is similar to a university alumni network, to support graduates transitioning into employment. This all-inclusive approach addresses many elements of the apprenticeships 'user experience' by providing a sound base for decision making and support, in the form of a single platform.³

Training providers and industry often undertake campaigns in metropolitan and regional recruitment drives, including information sessions at schools, campus tours, webinars, and television ads. However, as part of this Inquiry it's important to consider if more can be done at the government levels with respect to consistent and powerful messaging to attract the right people into the sector. This includes addressing the stigmas attached to studying in the VET sector over a university pathway and overcoming this stigma both at the student level but also at the teacher, parent or guardian level, as advice to students from these cohorts do have significant impacts on their decision making.

Recently commissioned South Australian Government research considered the broader perceptions and attitudes towards skilled career pathways (including apprenticeships) and some common needs (by audience) were identified, as outlined below.

Student, parent/guardian or teacher/career advisor perspectives:

- A need for evidence based promotional and marketing campaigns and activities to attract talent into the VET sector and raise awareness and education on the topic and reduce pre-existing stigmas on VET versus other higher education pathways (for example, clearer messaging on VET employment outcomes);

³ [How to quickly scale a startup without everything going wrong | WIRED UK](#)
[Multiverse apprenticeships](#)

- A need for a long-term national strategy and approach to VET promotion and marketing as opposed to historically shorter-term campaigns;
- A need to better promote VET as both a career pathway in its own right, but also as a pathway into higher or advanced education with the potential for leadership or management careers;
- A wider educational campaign of the role VET will play in skilling for the future;
- A need for a modern and high-quality user journey experience (including modern facilities and modern, new ways of training delivery, and clear pathways into employment) to attract youth to the VET sector.

Industry or business perspective:

- A need to educate and also work with industry and businesses on the positive relationship between an employee's VET qualifications and the flow on transfer of skills to business needs (capability to undertake work to a high standard);
- A need to incentivise supporting apprenticeship and traineeship completions to offset business costs.

This research was used to underpin a broad-based campaign to improve perceptions of apprenticeships and traineeships under the former Skilling Australians Fund National Partnership Agreement. An evaluation of the campaign showed that case studies across diverse industries and relatable and personal success stories resonated with audiences and strengthened awareness, perceptions and the uptake of apprenticeships and traineeships. Around 75 per cent of the campaign audience felt positive about apprenticeships and skilled careers after seeing the advertising and were more confident about the pathways and their alignment to future jobs.

Perceptions of VET are impacted by learner outcomes, provider capacity and capability and by reporting on provider behavior in the media. Design of a policy and regulatory framework that is fit-for-purpose, leads to high-quality outcomes for learners, and enables RTOs to deliver flexibly and innovatively will have a significant impact on enhancing the quality of the VET sector, and on lifting perceptions of VET by learners and employers.

When considering perceptions, the reputational perceptions of institutions is an important component. Consideration could be given to approaches that are embedded in the higher education sector where information on universities is publicly available and used by consumers as an important contribution to make informed choices. Further, media reporting over time has highlighted quality issues in RTOs, efforts raise the profile of VET could be supported by positive media coverage highlighting quality outcomes, career pathways and showcasing excellence.

TAFE's as the public providers of VET can play a leadership role in the broader perceptions of the sector. Lifting the status and capability of TAFE is central to lifting the status of the VET sector as a whole. There is an opportunity to consider the central role of TAFE through the new long term National Skills Agreement.

A more responsive skills system is important in improving the perceptions and status of VET. In addition to quality, the sector continues to be improved through other reforms, including through the establishment of Jobs and Skills Councils, to provide industry with a stronger, more strategic voice in ensuring Australia's VET sector delivers stronger outcomes for learners and employers, and through qualifications reform.

Recommendations

- Conduct an audit on current activities funded by Commonwealth and state governments funds to raise the profile of VET to better understand their impact (including but not limited to: National Skills Week;

Australian Training Awards; the uptake and usability of all national digital VET portals including Education Services Australia- myfuture; and marketing campaigns on subsidised VET courses).

- Consider links between VET sector perceptions and corresponding completion rates of courses.
- Develop a coordinated national approach to lift the profile of VET and leverage existing initiatives.
- Establish a network of VET ambassadors who are in high profile, well-paid and rewarding roles so that career progression and success can be visualised and resonate with prospective students.
- Continue the work underway nationally to put TAFE at the centre to lift the quality and relevance of VET, including through the next National Skills Agreement.

Successful VET Partnerships

Skills SA supports partnerships between employers, training providers and students through Training Priority Projects (TPP) which supports innovative approaches to skilling and workforce development to drive productivity and participation improvements through skills for sectors, regions and communities. TPP enables education providers and community-based organisations to work with regional, sector or industry level partners to address unmet or regionally specific and emerging skilling needs.

TPP are tailored, locally developed responses involving workforce planning, accredited training, non-accredited training and project management to provide relevant services or additional supports for participants. With its strong emphasis on responding to unmet skills needs, delivering speed to market and connecting to opportunities to develop state-specific training products, TPP focus on practical solutions to meeting the skill needs of industries and participants across South Australia.

Skills SA also supports partnerships between employers, training providers and students through programs such as:

- Master Builders SA Born to Build outreach program, which provides opportunities to strengthen pathways between secondary school and VET into the building and construction industry, including a focus on women and Aboriginal people.
- The Motor Trade Association Automotive Trades Mentoring Program, which provides additional support to automotive apprentices and trainees to successfully complete their training.

The South Australian Department for Education has developed strong partnerships between schools and its students and VET providers and employers. As part of the South Australian Government's commitment to raising the VET profile, its VET for Schools program allows students to learn about the value of pursuing careers in this sector. This allows students to learn industry skills, gain credit towards a nationally recognised qualification whilst completing their schooling.

In 2020-21, Industry Skills Councils partnered with the South Australian Department for Education in the implementation of the VET for School Students policy, by co-designing content for the Flexible Industry Pathways program. The South Australian Flexible Industry Pathways initiative works in parallel to the VET for Schools initiative, allowing students to undertake a program of learning (including VET courses, industry specific requirements, and other customised SACE subjects) which leads to entry level employment, endorsed by South Australian industry.

As part of this partnership program, industry and employers can engage with schools and promote the VET sector as follows:

- Guest speakers invited into schools;
- Career mentoring for students;
- Attending career information events;
- Organising vocational work placements or work experience;
- Taking on apprentices or trainees;
- Providing VET resources for dissemination in schools.

These partnerships allow school students to explore their career options in the VET sector, gain industry immersion opportunities for better contextual decision making, and to commence VET qualifications whilst simultaneously completing their final year(s) of school.

British Aerospace Engineering (BAE) Systems also partnered with the South Australian Department for Education on a program that saw 18 students across 10 South Australian high schools undertake a school-based Engineering Production Employee traineeship aligned to Certificate II in Engineering and upon completion, they transitioned into full-time Engineering Tradesperson (Fabrication) apprenticeships. This program was then further broadened to include mechanical and electrotechnology trades. Examples such as these partnerships could be leveraged for industries with the highest demands, marketed as an exclusive opportunity to attract the best talent to the training and ultimately employment.

TAFESA being the largest training provider in the state, also has a variety of its own local partnerships for attracting and supporting students (including those from disadvantaged cohorts) to undertake training and opportunities with direct links to employment opportunities. Some recent partnership examples are as follows:

- Bridgeport Hotel build (Murray Bridge) – assisting long-term unemployed participants to train in hospitality and run the hotel, many of whom are still employed on an ongoing basis;
- Aboriginal Access Centre- providing a variety of training opportunities for Aboriginal candidates, including a mining employment program with real life experiences on a remote mining site, providing supports during training, interview phase and also at the commencement of employment;

These programs and projects support partnerships locally and could be expanded to support VET outcomes for learners and employers and build a more responsive VET sector which will improve perceptions.

Recommendations

- Explore case studies of large-scale partnerships that led to successful outcomes in uptake of participants, completed training and employment security, to inform principles of best practice with regards to partnership success.
- Incentivise partnerships between governments, VET providers and employers that lead to career pathways and employment, especially for target cohorts (i.e. industries in dire need for skilled workers; and disadvantaged cohorts that may need additional supports to succeed in training and employment).

Commonwealth Programs

Recent South Australian stakeholder feedback highlighted the need for stronger partnerships between Commonwealth programs and state and territory-based initiatives through increased collaboration and more effective information sharing.

The Commonwealth Government manages broad based websites aimed at providing information to prospective and current school and VET students including myfuture, and myskills. There are also useful resources for prospective students on other commonwealth sites such as the Nowcast of Employment by Region and Occupation (NERO) on the National Skills Commission website. Stronger connections and integration between these sites and state-based sites such as the South Australian Student Pathways and Skills SA websites would enable students and industry to access relevant and timely information on growth sectors and occupations, career pathways and advice and training opportunities including supports and subsidies through both the Commonwealth and states and territories.

The Commonwealth contracts Apprenticeship Network Providers (ANPs) to provide advice and help with recruiting, training and retaining Australian Apprentices that can share local program offerings with employers and students to support uptake and completion of apprenticeships. A recent submission provided by the South Australian Government to the Commonwealth Department of Employment and Workplace Relations highlights challenges with this service delivery model and identifies opportunities for improving the service delivery system in relation to:

- Apprentice mental health and wellbeing
- Increasing completion rates
- Increasing collaboration and information sharing between ANPs and state regulators
- Supports for supervisors of apprentices and trainees, especially those supervising disadvantaged cohorts.

Recommendations

- Improve connections between Commonwealth web-based platforms and integration with state and territory sites and information
- Consider the outcomes of the current review of Australian Apprenticeship services and supports, including opportunities to improve service provision and outcomes from Commonwealth programs

Conclusion

There is a plethora of information available on the VET sector for prospective and current students and industry, however the lack of coordination and integration of this leads to confusion and complexity, impacts perceptions of VET and detracts from the outcomes that can be achieved through VET pathways. A revamped marketing strategy and effective marketing messaging, led nationally and complemented by states and territories are important considerations for raising the VET profile. This is especially important from a digital perspective. With respect to VET partnerships, the Inquiry should examine case studies of partnerships with successful uptake of participants, including completion of training through to secure employment outcomes and consider the principles that make them successful, so that such principles could be built into future requirements of Commonwealth funded partnerships.

The VET system will improve outcomes for students and employers if perceptions are lifted and VET is a valued pathway. To lift perceptions and status of VET, focus should be placed on building a more responsive skills system and on lifting the quality of all RTOs. This must be underpinned by a policy and regulatory framework that is fit-for-purpose, leads to high-quality outcomes for learners, and enables RTOs to deliver flexibly and innovatively.