
Communiqué for the COAG Industry and Skills Council Meetings
8 May 2015

The Council of Australia Governments (COAG) Industry and Skills Council met in Melbourne on 8 May for its third meeting. The Council held separate industry and skills sessions. The industry session was chaired by the Hon Ian Macfarlane MP, Australian Government Minister for Industry and Science. The skills session was chaired by the Hon Simon Birmingham, Australian Government Assistant Minister for Education and Training. State and territory jurisdictions were represented by ministers with portfolio responsibility for industry and skills. The Government of New Zealand is also a member of the Council.

Industry Session

Industry Forum

Ministers engaged with stakeholders regarding key industry issues, actions taken by the Australian Government and matters of concern to business. A short presentation was made by Mr Peter Schutz, Chair of the Food and Agribusiness Growth Centre, where he discussed the importance of working collaboratively and building networks with state and territory governments.

Country of Origin Food Labelling

Ministers discussed the Australian Government's commitment to making country of origin labelling easier to understand without unduly increasing costs for business or consumers while remaining consistent with Australia's international trade obligations. Ministers noted the extensive consultation being undertaken with consumers, industry stakeholders, and the states and territories, including through industry roundtables in both metropolitan and regional centres.

Industry Growth Centres Initiative Update

Minister Macfarlane provided information to ministers on the progress of the Industry Growth Centres Initiative and sought commitment from his state and territory counterparts to collaborate further to deliver services to industry. The Industry Growth Centres Initiative is focused on boosting competitiveness and productivity in key growth sectors of the Australian economy. These activities will complement rather than duplicate existing services and programmes. Growth Centres will be nationally focused and not restricted to a physical location.

Chairs of four of the five Industry Growth Centres are currently undertaking engagement and facilitation activities in preparation for the development and submission of their Growth Centre proposals for approval by the Commonwealth. The engagement activities will include key individuals and organisations in their sector, including state and territory government representatives. State and Territory governments welcomed the opportunity to engage with Growth Centre Chairs as they develop proposals which will be the basis of ongoing cooperative action in key growth sectors.

Industry Science and Entrepreneurship

Ministers noted that the Australian Government is putting science at the centre of industry policy, recognising that it underpins productivity and competitiveness. Steps have been taken to achieve

this through the Australian Government's Industry Innovation and Competitiveness Agenda. Ministers committed to work together to develop a science, technology, engineering and mathematics policy as Australia's productivity and competitiveness increasingly depends on scientific and technological advances.

Skills Session

Forum

At the start of the meeting, Assistant Minister Birmingham chaired a forum with members of the business community, peak industry and training bodies and students. The forum focussed on consumer information and Ministers with responsibility for skills welcomed the opportunity to hear views on the information needed by consumers of training to help them make informed decisions about their training needs.

Industry and vocational education and training (VET) sector representatives welcomed the focus of the discussion and expressed the view that initiatives in this area need to recognise the range of information people take into account in making decisions. In a sector with many providers and numerous courses the focus ought to be on the value of the training to meet the aspirations of the individual, whether that is a job or career change, a specific course or skills set or full qualification. The role of support organisations was highlighted as another element to help people select the right course and provider.

Skills Ministers

Assistant Minister Birmingham chaired a meeting of skills Ministers focussing on the VET reform priorities previously agreed by the Council in April 2014, which aim to support the current and future skills needs of Australian businesses. Ministers agreed the importance of vocational education and training to Australia's economic growth, to business productivity and to employment outcomes for individuals.

Supporting quality training and employment outcomes through efficient government funding

Ministers discussed recent developments in the training market and issues of improved efficacy and transparency in funding, ensuring that investments by governments are geared to the needs of students and employers. Recent experiences with the implementation of the student entitlement by states and territories and VET-FEE HELP by the Commonwealth were discussed and ideas shared on ways to further improve outcomes from public funding. Several jurisdictions are implementing initiatives or undertaking reviews to consider strategies to improve outcomes from training.

Ministers agreed to undertake a review of the National Partnership agreement, with the detailed terms of reference and process to be settled out of session.

Industry advisory arrangements and the role of the Australian Industry and Skills Committee

Ministers noted the new arrangements for the development of training products announced on 21 April 2015, including the role of the Australian Industry and Skills Committee (the Committee). The new model places industry at the centre of the training product development process. This

approach will ensure that future and emerging skills needs of industry are met, and that the training system is more responsive to industry needs.

Ministers noted the important role of the Committee in considering priorities for the renewal of training products, and industry intelligence gathering. Ministers emphasised the importance of the continued role of state and territory engagement through the training product development process, and to assist in understanding the emerging priorities in their jurisdictions which can impact on training requirements.

Ministers agreed to watch the emerging model closely to ensure it meets the needs of the national training system and for progress to be considered at the next meeting of ministers.

The Review of Training Packages and Accredited Courses

Consultations on the review of training packages and accredited courses found strong stakeholder support for the current system of industry-informed skills standards. Ministers agreed to investigate a number of reforms designed to strengthen the system and better prepare students for changing workplaces and jobs in a modern economy, reduce complexity in the system, including rationalisation of qualifications, and place a greater focus on resolving systemic issues around the quality of assessment.

Supporting quality through stronger, more responsive regulation

Ministers noted that the recent amendments to the *National Vocational Education and Training Regulator Act 2011* have been well received; in particular the introduction of a Quality Standard for quickly addressing emerging issues and managing risks to students, employers and the sector. These amendments will provide benefit to all jurisdictions collectively and Ministers agreed to protocols to work together in developing and implementing any Quality Standard.

Ministers welcomed the Commonwealth Government's VET FEE-HELP scheme reforms, aimed at improving the quality of training, protecting vulnerable students and taxpayers and the reputation of Australia's high quality VET system.

Improving consumer information and measurement of the outcomes of training

Ministers focused on the need for better information to help students make informed choices about the training they undertake and for employers to select the best training to meet workforce needs. Consumers often need to consult a range of sources to develop a complete picture of price, quality and government support, especially to get a picture of the value of the job prospects from the training to meet their job and career opportunities. Ministers also noted that the information consumers require to make sound selections would also help governments understand the performance of the system.

Ministers agreed to work together to improve existing surveys and data collections about student outcomes, and streamline the compliance burden on providers and students of collecting this information that contributes to high quality training.

Improving outcomes for Indigenous Students

Council members agreed to share information about ways in which VET reform could support improved outcomes for Indigenous students and to prepare a short report for the Prime Minister.

Ministers agreed to hold the next meeting in November 2015 in Hobart alongside the Australian Training Awards.