

The House Standing Committee on Employment, Employment and Training has been asked to inquire into and report on the perceptions and status of vocational education and training.

Dear Committee Members

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to your inquiry. I am limiting my submission to the second point of the inquiry, namely:

perceptions and status of the VET sector and how this may be impacting student enrolment choices, employer engagement, and recruitment and retention of the VET educator workforce, and how perceptions and status of the VET sector can be improved

By way of my knowledge and experience, I have been the CEO of three TAFE Institutes (two in Australia and one in the UK) and a senior official in both the NSW and Commonwealth Governments concerned with Skills, Workforce Development and VET. I currently hold a number of adjunct appointments in vocational education at Australian universities

Critical points

A. Background and analysis

1. Reasons for the current perceived status of VET and TAFE can be confronting for supporters of the sector. But the status of VET in general and the public provider TAFE in particular can be improved as VET plays a critical role in both addressing skills shortages and enhancing the lives of Australians. Fundamentally it is not so much about having more advertising and promotion but having a system with quality delivery, student support (especially mentoring) and employer engagement. This requires funding to the same level as Australian universities and schools¹. As Gerald Burke points out funding has been problematic in real and comparative terms over many years.
2. In general, the status of educational institutions reflects the community view of the status of the occupations they train for². Even if plumbers earned more than medical practitioners many in the general public would consider plumbers to be of lower status.

¹ Burke, G 2022, *Funding vocational education in Australia: 1970 to 2020*, VET Knowledge Bank, NCVET, Adelaide, <https://www.voced.edu.au/vet-knowledge-bank-landmark-documents-funding-historical-overview>

² Billett, S, Choy, S & Hodge, S 2019, *Enhancing the status of vocational education and the occupations it serves*, Griffith University, [Brisbane]

3. University trained occupations tend to earn more, especially over a working lifetime³. This is particularly true for females. Traditional male dominated trade apprentices (electricians, plumbers etc) starting salaries initially match some university graduates. Traditional female dominated occupations like hairdressing and care earn far less than university graduates⁴. This in itself is reflective of the impacts of gender segregation in the Australian workforce.
4. Better promotion, advertising, information, and advice strategies are necessary but not nearly sufficient to improve perceptions of VET given the linkages to pay and job status. They are not “silver bullets.” Indeed VET, especially TAFE systems, have run many large and critically acclaimed advertising campaigns in the past. The late Norm Fisher, Director of Canberra Institute of Technology, ran a national project to improve the promotion of TAFE. TAFE NSW’s “Fantastic Futures” campaign in the 1990s based on a video directed by Pip Karmel won numerous awards including at the New York Film Festival and was adopted by other states. This was superseded by a campaign based on TAFE NSW being the official training provider for the Sydney 2000 Olympics⁵ which resulted in student enrolments in that system exceeding 500,000 or 15% more than the then normal.
5. VET is different to Higher Education. Around 89% of its students in 2021 were classified as part time with many attending for only a few hours over a few weeks according to the NCVER’s Total VET Activity database⁶. In contrast Universities Australia claims the majority of its students are full time. VET is sometimes seen by people who do not understand the system as simply a “watered down” or “easier to enter” university. It is not. If the typical HE student is taking a bachelor’s degree largely “full time” over three or four years, the typical TAFE/VET student is often either an employed apprentice or trainee or an employed person doing a very short course like a First Aid Certificate.
6. Given the substantial number of short or very short courses (now often called micro-credentials) as revealed in the NCVER’s Total VET Activity datasets, VET is often used to acquire a specific skill or understand a specific concept. As such progression from VET to HE is not necessarily linear or hierarchical – it is sometimes been likened to the ups and downs of the game “snakes and ladders”. This is good thing in terms of lifelong learning and should be promoted.
7. In the days of a more elite HE system, universities got their status partially from the number of people they excluded. VET and TAFE got their reputation from the number of people they included. I have called TAFE “the people’s provider.” Both systems are now largely

³ Karmel, T, Stanwick, J & Moore, J 2015, *The return to education: an occupational perspective*, NCVER, Adelaide

⁴ Lim, P 2014, *Gender pay gap in VET graduates: a review*, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Canberra, viewed 04 Dec 2022, <<https://www.pmc.gov.au/resource-centre/office-women/gender-pay-gap-vet-graduates-review>>.

⁵ 'Emotion recollected in tranquillity', 2000, *Training Agenda*, vol.8, no.4, pp.26–27.

⁶ See: <https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/collections/students-and-courses-collection/total-vet-students-and-courses>

vocational. The notion of universities being largely “islands of sainted scholars” as envisaged by scholars such as Cardinal Newman or Mark Pattison belong to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries⁷

8. Some argue that TAFE and VET systems status would be improved if they offered more Higher Education level courses at the Diploma and possibly Degree levels. I believe this would be ineffective. Skill Level 2 occupations (Diploma) has been impacted by the growth in degree graduates and by many former Skill Level 2 jobs such as engineering drawing officer staff having been replaced by automation like CAD programs. Tom Karmel at the Mckenzie Research Institute has shown that enrolments in government funded VET Diplomas have practically halved since 2002⁸. As the NCVET Total Vet Activity Dataset⁹ shows, the two largest programs in VET are Certificate 3s and 4s in trades, personal services, and care as well as short courses (micro-credentials) in the care and service industries. I think VET should build on its strengths in areas where there are skill shortages and huge growth potential. VET and TAFE Degree numbers are tiny. It is difficult to compete with established and well resourced university providers.
9. Given these differences the promotion of VET or TAFE should not be messaging about comparing VET to HE but rather about the experiences people will enjoy, what valuable skills they will acquire and the careers their education and training will lead to.
10. If VET and TAFE are to attract more post school leavers at the beginning of their working lives, a lot of resources need to be put into the VET training experience and support. Few VET or TAFE institutions have adequate social, recreational, or sporting facilities able to compete with universities and few have adequate or accessible counselling, information, guidance, and formal mentoring capabilities. Mentoring is critical for the success of many apprentices and VET students¹⁰. This is particularly important given the higher number of disadvantaged students in TAFE and VET. Years of neglect of VET/TAFE have resulted in far weaker support and delivery systems than found in most Australian universities.

⁷ Newman, J H 1891, *The Idea of a University*, London

⁸ See: <https://holmesglen.edu.au/Industry/Mackenzie-Research-Institute/Position-papers/Discussion-papers/What-about-Diplomas/>

⁹ <https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/collections/students-and-courses-collection/total-vet-students-and-courses>

¹⁰ Guest, W, Brown, M [2017], *Pastoral care within a college setting: customising individual apprenticeship support towards lifting participation and completion rates*, in R I Lerman & E A Okoli (eds), *Modern apprenticeships: widening their scope, sustaining their quality: proceedings of the seventh research conference of the International Network for Innovative Apprenticeships*, [International Network on Innovative Apprenticeship], [Washington], viewed 08 Dec 2022, <http://www.inap.uni-bremen.de/dl/inap_conference_proceedings_2017.pdf#page=49>.

11. VET and TAFE teachers are expected to be “dual professionals” – expert in both teaching and their industry areas. Strategies must be put in place to enhance both.¹¹ Since the demise of ANTA (Australian National Training Authority), national projects in staff development have been curtailed. VET teachers must be able to spend time in industry to maintain their currency.
12. It is ironic that reports on Government Services sometimes praise states for how much they spend on each individual school student, but also praise states for how little they comparatively spend per student contact teaching hour in VET.
13. The National Training Reform Agenda for VET that started in the 1990’s has been less successful than hoped. Its key philosophies were industry leadership and marketisation often defined as “user choice.” Marketisation¹² led to the “VET Fee Help” scandal that cost billions of dollars and had a direct impact on perceptions of VET. Though clearly vocational education must be related to the world of work, 30 years of industry leadership has not resulted in a lack of criticism by enterprises. As the Joyce Review found, industry sees the system as slow, cumbersome, and over-engineered¹³. If the people delivering the training, the educationalists, had not been deliberately excluded by bodies such as ANTA (Australian National Training Authority) a simpler and more fit for purpose system may have evolved.

An illustrative anecdote of the scale of the issues.

As a senior TAFE Executive, a new Director-General in the NSW Department of Education and Training Managing Director seconded me to the school’s division. I knew little and wanted to know more about the oversubscribed selective High Schools. As part of my induction, I was fortunate enough to visit Sir George Girls High School. This is an academically selective school in southern Sydney. It provided a wonderful education with some highly talented and gifted students, many of whom were of East Asian heritage. The Principal kindly allowed me to meet for an open, general

¹¹ Schmidt, T 2019, 'Industry currency and vocational teachers in Australia: what is the impact of contemporary policy and practice on their professional development?', *Research in Post-compulsory Education*, vol.24, no.1, pp.1–19.

¹² Shreeve, R, Palser, J 2018, *Marketisation of VET: the New South Wales response 1990s-2017*, LH Martin Institute, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, viewed 04 Dec 2022, <https://web.archive.org/web/20220305123259/https://melbourne-cshe.unimelb.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0008/2845781/Robin-Shreeve-and-Jo-Palser.pdf>.

¹³ Joyce, S 2019, *Strengthening skills: expert review of Australia’s vocational education and training system [Joyce review]*, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Canberra, viewed 06 Dec 2022, <<https://pmc.gov.au/resource-centre/domestic-policy/vet-review/strengthening-skills-expert-review-australias-vocational-education-and-training-system>>.

discussion with a group of Year 12 girls. I asked one of the girls if she felt pressured. She said she felt she was being compared to her siblings, her wider family and indeed the whole local Chinese Community. She was expected to do well at school and, at weekends, help in the family's restaurant. She said her mother was ambitious for her, so ambitious the young lady said that her mother would not allow her to apply to UTS as it was "once a TAFE." She had no idea what my background was, and I did not have the heart to tell her so was UNSW which shared the same motto as Sydney Technical College, "manu et mente" or "hand and mind."

B. Suggested strategies

1. Fund TAFE and VET properly. This is not just about more course places but also institutional strengthening and renewal. The last time this happened properly was after the inspirational Kangan Report of the early 1970's.¹⁴
2. TAFE and VET need to be renowned not just for the quality of their teaching (which also currently needs strengthening itself through better teacher training and less casualisation) but also with quality and appropriate student support, counselling, mentoring and recreational services that match those found in Australian universities.
3. Promotional strategies are important, but they cannot on their own alter perceptions of VET/TAFE.
4. Strategies should not concentrate on comparing VET to Higher Education. Rather they should concentrate on the outcomes and prospects after completing a VET/TAFE program, the quality and reach of VET delivery and facilities and the currency of its industry expertise.
5. VET should prioritise to and expand its core business of Certificate 3 and 4 programs and micro-credentials in the trades, personal service, and care industries. There are skills shortages and huge growth potential in these areas. Where appropriate, VET providers should meet local and specialist industry course needs in all areas at an appropriate level. It should not seek to expand its higher education programs where there are established and well-resourced existing providers.
6. VET and TAFE should be seen and promoted as a universal provider – not limited to a particular age group or people with a certain educational background. It is where you go to acquire specific skills and knowledge. It is truly life-long learning.

¹⁴ Schofield, K 1994, 'The clash of the Titans', in P Kearns & W C Hall (eds), *Kangan: 20 years on*, NCVER, Adelaide, pp.57–77.

7. Fundamentally the status of VET and TAFE can be improved by it being perceived as a quality and accessible provider. Quality must extend to its delivery, its students support mechanisms and the depth and relevance of its relationships with industry.
8. This cannot be achieved unless the funding of VET at least matches the funding of schools and universities.
9. Like University Vice Chancellors and School Principals, more VET and TAFE executives need to have developed an in depth knowledge of the system and how it works, rather than being parachuted in from being generalist managers. VET is a business, but it is also an educational sector.

Thank you for considering this submission

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