Submission

to the

Senate Standing Committees on Education and Employment Inquiry into the National Vocational Education and Training Regulator (Data Streamlining) Amendment Bill 2023

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The Australian Education Union (AEU) represents more than 195,000 members employed in public primary, secondary and special schools and the early childhood, TAFE and adult education sectors as teachers, educational leaders, education assistants or support staff across Australia. As the trade union for TAFE and vocational education teachers, the AEU is thoroughly invested in ensuring that data on Australia's vocational education system is swiftly available and transparently accessible, and we welcome the opportunity to respond to this Inquiry into the *National Vocational Education and Training Regulator (Data Streamlining) Amendment Bill 2023*.

The AEU supports the intention of the Bill to ensure that data on student activity is available as soon as is practicable, and that Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) are required to collect and provide accurate student activity and qualification records to government and the regulator as soon as milestones are achieved. This is particularly important given the Commonwealth's commitment to increasing funding to TAFE the provision of 480,000 fee free TAFE places including 180,000 in 2023 (120,000 existing places made free and 60,000 new free places) as part of the interim one year National Skills Agreement.

As highlighted in the Minister's second reading speech, vocational education student activity data collection is currently published annually, which can result in a time lag of up to twenty months before the data is made publicly available. These time lags make it difficult to assess the effectiveness and impact of government interventions and make it substantially more difficult to ensure that policy interventions are having the desired effect.

Improving the efficiency of data availability is essential for assessing the effectiveness of government programs designed to boost vocational education take up. This will be particularly important for monitoring apprenticeship commencements, completions and attrition as Australia transitions from the previous Coalition Government's Boosting Apprenticeship Commencements program, which provided significantly front loaded subsidies to employers to the more sustainable and equitable New Energy Apprenticeships and Australian Skills Guarantee initiatives of the current Federal Government.

The AEU supports the intention of the Amendment to ensure that the collection and transfer of data to the National Vocational Education and Training Dataset are timely and responsive to the needs of governments, regulators, researchers, employers, unions, and all stakeholders. We also support the additional transparency that the amendment will provide to students in making decisions about their education. This is a welcome change in the level of accountability and transparency required of the sector.

The AEU wishes to acknowledge the significant work of the National Council for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) and the substantial steps the NCVER has taken in recent years to improve data access, specificity, and user accessibility, particularly through the NCVER DataBuilder tool. The AEU hopes that the increased timeliness and accuracy of data collection from RTOs through progressive submission and validation as proposed in the Amendment will allow the NCVER to further refine their data reporting and products.

We note that the Bill refers to the upgrading of essential TAFE infrastructure through the $50 million TAFE Technology Fund announced in the October 2022 Budget. Whilst this is welcome, significant additional funds for technological improvements to TAFE campuses will also be required, not only to allow TAFE institutes to provide data in the fashion required by the Amendment, but also to ensure that TAFE can accommodate the increase in student enrolments expected from the 180,000 new fee free places allocated this year and the additional 300,000 fee free places expected from 2024.

The AEU would also like to emphasise the importance of timely and accurate data collection from RTOs for the work of Jobs and Skills Australia (JSA), which will rely heavily on VET activity data to inform its advice to the Australian government on current and emerging skills and training needs in the labour market and workforce. JSA's analysis of Australia's skills requirements will extend beyond the simple reporting of occupational and industry shortage numbers and high level predictions of future demand as was favoured by the National Skills Commission. Instead, it is intended that JSA will provide clear and robust evidence for how current gaps have developed and clear recommendations on how they will be addressed at the industry and occupation level, and timely and accurate training and qualifications data will be essential for that purpose.

In conclusion, the AEU welcomes *National Vocational Education and Training Regulator (Data Streamlining) Amendment Bill 2023*, the increased transparency and accountability it requires of RTOs, and the improved timeliness of data provision it will ensure. We do, however, contend that additional funding beyond that provided in the two year $50 million TAFE Technology Fund should be made available to TAFE institutes to ensure that they are able to seamlessly transition to progressive submission and validation once the Amendment is enacted. This protection is required to ensure that funds proposed for general technological improvements to TAFE campuses through the TAFE Technology Fund are not diverted to the technological upgrades required by the Amendment.