

Response to consultation draft of the VET Workforce Strategy

Submission to the Department of Education, Skills &
Employment
September 2021

Introduction

The Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCI) welcomes the opportunity to provide input to the Department of Education, Skills & Employment *Consultation Draft of the VET Workforce Quality Strategy*.

Members of ACCI place the quality of vocational education and training as one of its most important employment and skills priorities. We see the strategy to improve quality as multipronged, with the current reform in training product standards and development, as well as funding approaches, all having a strong role to play alongside this work relating to quality including this VET workforce strategy.

Employer satisfaction with the VET system has declined, with 72 percent of employers who have jobs that require vocational qualifications surveyed by the National Centre for Vocational Education and Research in 2019 being satisfied that vocational qualifications provide employees with the skills they need for the job, down from 85 percent in 2011.

Of the 13 percent of employers who in 2019 expressed dissatisfaction with vocational qualifications in providing employees with the skills they require for the job, (being a similar level to 2017 – 12.8 percent):

- 57 percent felt that the training was of a poor quality or low standard,
- 44 percent felt that relevant skills weren't taught and
- 42 percent felt that there was not enough focus on practical skills. This factor saw the most significant change when compared to 2017 when only 29 percent employers cited this reason.

A logical deduction from this evidence indicates that the rise in employer dissatisfaction is largely due to concerns about training delivery and also to a perceived lack of practical skills being delivered. This reinforces the importance of delivery in perceptions of quality, and that the current consultation of the VET workforce is highly relevant in any strategy to improve quality of VET.

This submission will provide some overall comments on the consultation draft but then will focus on the requirements for Trainers and in particular the adequacy, suitability or otherwise of the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment (abbreviated here as TAE).

Overall comments on draft VET workforce strategy

The discussion paper identifies five key elements of the strategy:

1. Capability frameworks and professional standards
2. Qualifications and entry pathways
3. Ongoing professional support and industry currency
4. Fostering best practice and continuous improvement
5. Workforce planning and data

It is agreed that these are all important themes, although we highlight a few aspects relating to some of them, and also identify a sixth important theme that needs to be more explicit relating to attracting suitable high-quality trainers.

Industry currency

From an industry perspective, the most important element of a high-quality VET workforce is their competence in industry skills and knowledge. As the discussion paper identifies, this is illustrated by a valuable element of the VET workforce being the prominence of dual professionals – those employed in industry as well as trainers. It is also reflected in the importance placed within the RTO standards which state in part that “training and assessment is delivered only by persons who have... current industry skills directly relevant to the training and assessment being provided”. According to the standards’ “current industry skills may be informed by consultations with industry and may include, but is not limited to:

- a) having knowledge of and/or experience using the latest techniques and processes;
- b) possessing a high level of product knowledge;
- c) understanding and knowledge of legislation relevant to the industry and to employment and workplaces;
- d) being customer/client-oriented;
- e) possessing formal industry and training qualifications; and
- f) training content that reflects current industry practice.

These requirements are an appropriate reflection of the importance that industry places on industry skills and currency.

Although the discussion paper highlights these aspects, it focuses almost exclusively on existing trainers and assessors without sufficient consideration of the barriers that exist for recruiting experienced industry professionals to become trainers.

Attracting suitable high-quality trainers

The strategy needs to be explicit about how this can be achieved including the identification of barriers to attracting experienced industry professionals to become either full or part time trainers. The most significant barrier for a person with extensive experience in their chosen occupation to becoming a VET trainer is the current requirement to complete a Certificate IV as it currently structured. To commence a qualified trainer/assessor, often the RTO has to recruit an industry qualified professional, put them through the TAE course (which takes 4-6 months and thus takes them away from their industry role) just to get them to a stage where they can be formally employed as a trainer/assessor. More on this issue is covered below in the section on trainer certification.

The strategy can also address some of the other issues relating to recruitment including how RTOs and even the industry sectors themselves promote the opportunity to become a VET trainer and how upskilling of trainers is encouraged.

Workforce planning

The draft strategy makes no reference to the proposed approach to workforce planning to be delivered by the soon to be implemented skills clusters. It is important that there is a cross-recognition here.

In that context, it would be important to consider the implications of which cluster will include the education sector, as the proposed ANZSIC grouping incorporates it within an overall “Government, Education and Public” cluster. This will be an important issue for the sector as to whether this is a best fit, as although the education sector incorporates a strong government workforce in public schools and TAFEs, has a large private sector workforce in independent schools and private tertiary institutions.

Quality delivery and trainer certification

The draft strategy does not adequately canvas the issues around the options for certification required to be a trainer and assessor in VET and only identifies the solutions within a narrow frame of changes to the Certificate IV.

To address quality of delivery including the attraction of industry-experienced personnel into training, we need to have a broader conversation about whether a certificate IV qualification is appropriate in all contexts. Further, it is critically important to ensure this discussion goes ahead in advance of any detailed work in the updating of the TAE qualifications.

As the paper describes, of the 71,379 people in the workforce, 53% are full time and the remainder part time including casual/sessional staff. The latter would be inclusive of those referred to above as dual professionals. This is a strength not a weakness of the system, as is the inclusion in the full time workforce of highly experienced industry personnel.

Within the context of this workforce structure, the Certificate IV is presented as one size fits all approach as a minimum entry qualification. To test the ongoing validity of this approach, we need to look at reform options from an outcomes perspective, starting with a core list of outcomes that will assist in achieving trainers and assessors that will enhance quality training:

1. the attraction and retention of experienced and skills industry personnel to become VET trainers and assessors
2. industry currency for existing trainers and assessors
3. assessment that is designed by people trained in assessment design
4. training delivery that is undertaken by people who have demonstrated they can effectively impart the skills and knowledge needed to ensure the students become competent
5. incentives, including recognition, for continuous professional development of trainers and assessors

These outcomes can potentially be achieved through a broader range of options beyond a Certificate IV or higher educational qualification, particularly as many trainers and assessors operate in a provider where there are several skilled people who can contribute to these outcomes.

As a minimum, we agree with the comment in the discussion paper that the Certificate IV needs to “provide adequate flexibility for learners pursuing the variety of VET teaching, training and assessment job roles in the modern labour market” and also that the TAE contains “stackable skill sets”. However, the strategic question is, will updating the Cert IV be sufficient to provide the flexibility needed to attract and retain highly experienced industry people become trainers?

For many years in VET there has been a debate about the level of the TAE that fall into three camps:

1. Industry views including ITECA representing the private providers have been that there is a need to attract and retain up-to-date experienced personnel delivering the training to develop the skills for tomorrow. How to attract people who have recent experience in industry when there is a significant barrier of having to complete the TAE Qualification to be able to deliver the training. The barrier is even stronger when the person is being approached to undertake the training in addition to their career in the industry.
2. Education unions have often expressed the view that VET trainers across the board (whether TAFE/private RTOs) need to have a full university qualification to deliver training.
3. Educationalists/Academics in the VET space have the view that at the very least there needs to be a ramp up in the requirements for the TAE – resulting in it becoming more complex. This

This debate puts tension on the TAE as the minimum requirement as some stakeholders believe it is too onerous, while others believe that it is not sufficiently robust in keeping with pedagogical principles. The solution lays in not seeing changes to the Cert IV as the only mechanism to deal with this tension but to look at how the outcomes mentioned above can be achieved using all of the skills and resources available to the training provider.

Using the precedent of the current standards which allow enterprise trainers to work under supervision, the opportunity for industry-experienced people to undertake some skill sets and operate within a provider setting that ensures the other outcomes becomes a possibility. Not every trainer needs every skill to be able to train, provided they have industry experience. Perhaps some exemptions can be linked to the quantum of industry experience in the skills being taught.

Within a school setting, the opportunity for experienced education professionals to not need to do certain training units may also be possible.

The lack of industry-experience personnel that are willing to undertake the full TAE has led to a supply issue - a profound lack of trainers and assessors on the ground who are industry qualified to properly assess a student's competency. The current trainers may have the TAE qualification but not the industry qualification which poses a substantial problem. It is also out of kilter with the higher education system, where qualified professionals can teach in higher education institutions without any requirement to undertake training skill certification. There needs to be a practical approach to this anomaly.

Recommended next steps

ACCI recommends that:

- attracting an industry-experienced VET workforce be explicitly included in the workforce strategy.
- as part of finalising a VET workforce strategy and before any major work is undertaken on updating the TAE qualifications, that DESE convene a roundtable involving the employer peaks, some sector organisations, unions, and provider organisations (TDA, ITECA and independent schools) to discuss improving quality through addressing workforce issues. This roundtable should commence with the identification of what outcomes will deliver quality improvement as they relate to workforce. In this submission, we have identified five outcomes, but there will be others.

Having identified the outcomes, the discussion about how to achieve them should be broader than updating the Certificate IV and explore how a more holistic approach to attracting and skilling an industry-experienced VET workforce can be achieved. We have put forward some ideas for consideration, but again there will be others.

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