

# Department of Employment and Workplace Relations: Australian Apprenticeship Services and Supports Discussion Paper

**ACCI Submission**

10 December 2022



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# 1 Introduction

The Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCI) welcomes this opportunity to provide a response to the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations discussion paper on Australian Apprenticeship Services and Supports.

The Australian Chamber is highly committed to the model of apprenticeships and traineeships in Australia, and we believe that the combination of work and study offered through an apprenticeship or traineeship gives the learner the best opportunity to learn skills. ACCI's membership includes more than 72 association and state chambers. Around 25 of these have a vested interest in apprenticeships and traineeships delivered through the Vocational Education and Training (VET) system, covering a host of sectors including plumbing, construction, surveying, air-conditioning mechanics, electrical, retail, hospitality and pharmacy. They all have one objective in mind, and that is highly trained apprentices and trainees from our VET system.

The apprenticeship/traineeship system is highly valued by our members and while we believe it does not need a complete overhaul there is room for a series of targeted improvements and changes to help the apprenticeship journey. While the rate of apprenticeship completion rate has been steady for the past decade, there are opportunities for improvement to be had for both employers and apprentices.

There needs to be a real investment in VET as higher completion rates cannot be achieved without an effective and efficient education system that teaches occupational skills at the standard required. To encourage the employer and the apprentice to undertake and complete their apprenticeship there needs to be adequate support and financial incentives.

The data used by the system needs to be better examined to ensure the correct information is being received accurately and in a timely manner to allow for an accurate assessment of completion rates. Further the non-completion of an apprenticeship or traineeship still provides the non-completer with valuable skills for the economy.

The Australian apprenticeship support services need to be fully funded in order to deliver wrap around mentoring services for both the apprentices and the employer, particularly for women, people with a disability and first nations people.

To further encourage completions the role of pre-apprenticeship courses will be a useful tool, as will an ongoing campaign for parents and career advisors of the benefits of apprenticeships.

We believe that by working with Governments of all levels, apprentice support services and with the right policy changes the system as a whole can deliver higher completion rates.

## 2 Value of Apprenticeships

The work integrated learning model that underpins apprenticeships in Australia combines theoretical, mostly off-the-job learning with on-the-job practical validation of those skills in a real work environment, within an industrial framework that provides wages and conditions for apprentices and trainees. It is widely accepted as a successful and highly valued skills development pathway for individuals and employers. Apprentices and trainees can develop work specific skills in an environment that can provide immediate contextualisation of those skills and allow for a real demonstration of the acquired knowledge, and employers can develop a skills base amongst their workforce that is directly relevant to their skills needs.

Apprenticeships and traineeships provide pathways for school- to- work transition as well as a valuable career change avenue, combining structured learning alongside work experience within a model where the student receives remuneration, and the employer has access to pay rates that reflect the work/training nature of the employment relationship. Out of all VET qualification options, apprenticeships and traineeships have the best graduate employment outcomes, and they also outperform many higher education options<sup>1</sup>. For many occupations, such as plumber or electrician, an apprenticeship is the only pathway to becoming a licensed tradesperson, reinforcing the importance of continuing to invest in apprenticeships to meet the skill demands in these areas.

Most Australian employers are satisfied (74.2%) that apprentices and trainees are obtaining the skills they require from training, and that those skills directly contribute to workplace productivity and fill existing skills gaps<sup>2</sup>. The current apprenticeship system in Australia covers a broad array of industry sectors and a range of occupations in the traditional trades as well as many non-trades occupations. Apprentice training comprises just under 10% of the total student enrolments in the Australian VET sector, but their value exceeds this proportionate contribution, and for some occupations an apprenticeship is the only pathway to becoming skilled in that occupation.

Fully qualified apprentices and trainees have high employment rates with 94.0% of trade completers and 88.4% of non-trade completers employed after training<sup>3</sup>. This compares favourably with the graduate outcomes of higher education, in the 2021 graduate outcomes survey showed 68.9% of graduates in full time employment and 84.8% in any employment<sup>4</sup>.

In March 2022 there were over 387,000<sup>5</sup> apprentices in-training across Australia with the shared ambition of gaining the requisite skills needed to secure ongoing employment in their chosen field.

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<sup>1</sup> NCVER, [Australian apprenticeships: research at a glance](#), and Department of Employment & Skills, and QILT (2021) 2021 Graduate Outcomes Survey, October 2021.

<sup>2</sup> NCVER, [Employers' use and views of the VET system](#) 2021,

<sup>3</sup> NCVER, [Apprentice and Trainee Outcomes 2021](#), 2021.

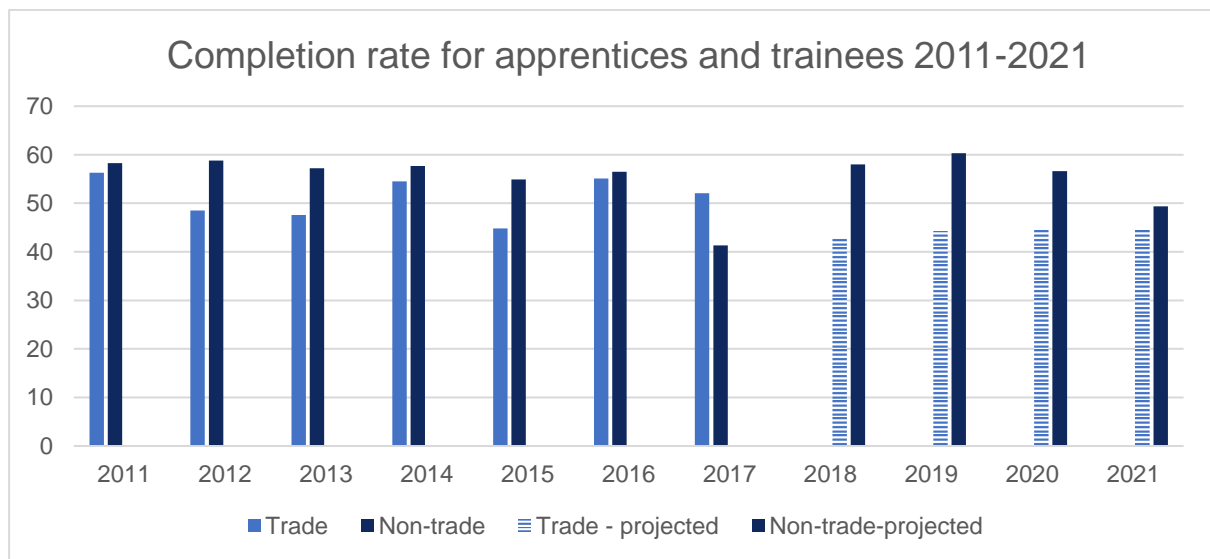
<sup>4</sup> Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching, [Graduate Outcomes Survey – Longitudinal](#), 2021

<sup>5</sup> NCVER, [Apprentices and trainees 2022: March quarter](#), 2022

### 3 Apprenticeship completions

Increasing the number of apprentices and trainees who complete their qualification is an important policy objective, however non completion is not failure, nor does it mean the system is broken. ACCI believes it is important to consider the completion rate with a series of caveats as the completion rate alone does not represent the full picture.

The duration of an apprenticeship is up to four years in one workplace; however, the average Australian employee does not remain with the one employer for that length of time. ABS data from February 2022, shows that 21% of all Australians employees have been in their job for less than a year, 34% reported that they had been in their role for 3-4 years and 17.9% for 5-9 years<sup>6</sup>. The expectations for apprentices often seem higher than the ones put on the rest of the population.



**Figure 1: Completion rates for apprentices and trainees<sup>7</sup>**

As figure 1 shows, there is a difference between trainees and trade apprentices, the higher trainee completion rates reflect the short duration of traineeships. The rate of completions has remained steady over the last decade. In relation to trade completions there is still a variation within these figures with those that are licensed or registered having a higher completion rate again. These differences highlight the complexities within the completion rates for apprentices and trainees.

A 2019 review into the reasons why apprentices do not complete found 73.1 per cent of non-completers cited employment as the main reason, 14.2 per cent personal reasons and 10.5 per cent for training related reasons<sup>8</sup>. The reasons apprentices are leaving due to employment when broken down further reveal that 11.9 per cent cited that they did not get on with their boss or workmates, 8.1 per cent did not like the work, 7.7 per cent poor working conditions and 6.7 per cent cited the pay was too low<sup>9</sup>.

The view that the completion data of apprentices be taken at face value detracts from the valuable outcomes non-completers have that add to the skills base and benefit the economy. In many trades which are not licensed, there can be positive financial incentives to leave early. Bricklaying, chefs and

<sup>6</sup> ABS, [Job mobility](#), 2022

<sup>7</sup> NCVER, [Completion rate for apprentices and trainees 2021](#), 2022.

<sup>8</sup> NCVER, [Apprentice and trainee experience and destinations](#), 2019

<sup>9</sup> NCVER, *Ibid.*

hairdressing are common examples, and in times of skill shortages the lure of above award opportunities can entice someone to end their apprenticeship early. When the labour market is tight, apprentices who are not aiming for a licence can be lured to financially attractive jobs, and completion rates fall.

ACCI believes one of the best ways to improve the completion rates of apprentices is by improving the data collection method. In the current system every time an apprentice or trainee moves from an employer or changes their apprenticeship this is counted as a non-completion. In our current tight job market apprentices are moving employer often for financial reasons but remaining in their training and signing new apprenticeship contracts. The Department of Workplace Relations and Employment has access to this information and could assist in providing more accurate data to the relevant bodies.

It is also important to compare our apprenticeship completion rate to similar western countries, in 2020, in the United States there were 82,397 apprentices who completed<sup>10</sup>, whereas Australia was comparably much more successful with a much smaller overall cohort had 83,747<sup>11</sup> completions. In the United Kingdom, the completion rate in 2021 was 57.7 per cent and in 2020 it was 57.5 percent<sup>12</sup>. Our rates of completions do not make us an outlier when compared to other English-speaking countries, rather it demonstrates our experiences are shared.

Furthermore, despite poor public perception of apprenticeships and traineeships completion rates, the graduate outcomes are at least as good as those of university peers. Completion rates are comparable between university and apprenticeships within a four-year period, from 2017 university commencing domestic undergraduate students, only 41.7 per cent completed<sup>13</sup> compared to 56 per cent of apprentices<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> US Department of Labor, [Registered Apprenticeship National Results Fiscal Year 2021](#), 2021

<sup>11</sup> NCVER historical data

<sup>12</sup> Statista, [Achievement rate for successful completion of an apprenticeship in England from 2011/12 to 2020/21](#), 2022

<sup>13</sup> Department of Education, [Selected Higher Education Statistics – 2020 Student data](#), 2022

<sup>14</sup> NCVER, [Completion and attrition rates for apprentices and trainees 2021](#), 2022

## 4 What changes are needed to drive up the completion rate?

To drive the rate of completions for apprentices and trainees we need a fully funded education and training system with adequate subsidies for employers and apprentices.

### 4.1 Overall approach to VET funding

The Vocational Education and Training (VET) system plays a critical role in delivery of the educational component for apprentices and trainees across Australia. VET is a key component of the completion of apprenticeships and traineeships; it is highly valued by employers due to its delivery of job skills required in modern workplaces. The level of investment in VET needs to be sufficient to enable quality delivery of education in both public and private VET providers and be responsive not just to skill shortages, but to fill the skill needs across all sectors of the economy. In assuring quality of the qualification, it is essential industry has a key role in its development to meet industry needs in capability, competencies, skills and knowledge. The new Industry Skills Clusters will have a vital ongoing role in providing this guidance for the development of qualifications.

The VET system currently suffers from significant funding differences between states for the same qualification, unacceptable changes in total funding, and cost shifting between the commonwealth and state and territory governments<sup>15</sup>. Yet, at the same time, there has been substantial increases in funding for early learning and schools, and a relatively consistent rise in higher education.

The negotiations for the new five-year National Skills Agreement provides the opportunity to put in place a long-term funding solution for VET that delivers real growth as well as greater consistency and high quality. Unfortunately, the vision statement and guiding principles agreed to by Skills Ministers and then endorsed by National Cabinet in August 2022 did not emphasise increased funding overall, a marked change from the earlier Heads of Agreement Skills Reform signed under the previous government. The vision statement also emphasises TAFE at the heart of the new agreement however 86 per cent of students choose a VET course at an independent provider<sup>16</sup>. It is vital that the student experience is placed at the heart of the VET experience. Funding to VET should be increased across the board and be tied to the student rather than the provider.

**Recommendation:** Commit long-term, consistent and real VET funding increases across state, territory and federal government levels to deliver quality training tied to students.

### 4.2 Access to industry practitioners

To give apprentices and trainees the correct skills for the workplace they need to be taught by experts in their field. There is a higher risk of non-completion if students feel they are not being taught the correct skills to use in the workplace. There should be a greater emphasis on attracting industry practitioners to

<sup>15</sup> See Productivity Commission, National Agreement for Skills & Workforce Development Review and National Skills Commission (2021), Qualification Similarity Analysis, 2021

<sup>16</sup> ITECA, [State of the Sector](#), 2022



become trainers particularly those with recent industry experience. There may be a simpler method than the current Certificate IV in training and assessment for these experienced practitioners, or whether skill sets are sufficient within a provider workforce where others fully trained in delivery and assessment are available. The qualification needs to feel relevant to those experienced practitioners – at present the compulsory need to undertake the full qualification is a barrier to entry, particularly for those who remain in full or part time employment in industry. The Certificate IV is not the only mechanism to assure quality.

**Recommendation:** Review the current methods for certifying industry practitioners to become trainers to ensure pipeline of instructors with current experience.

### 4.3 Commencements equal completions

A key driver to improving the completion rate of apprentices and trainees is to increase the number of commencements. Prior to COVID, we were in the midst of an apprenticeship drought, although highly valued by employers, the business case for taking on an apprentice had been in decline. The incentive programs put in place throughout the pandemic demonstrated that improving the business case for an employer to take on an apprentice will drive an increase in commencements. As figure 2 shows, there has been 134 per cent increase in the apprenticeship commencement rates in 2022 in comparison to 2017.

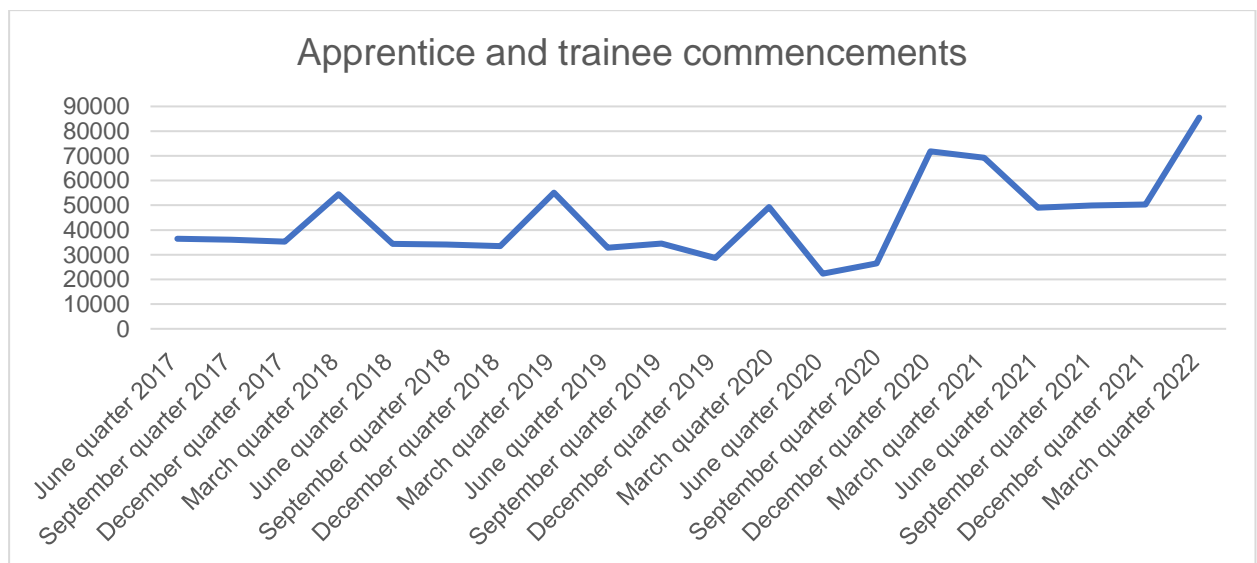


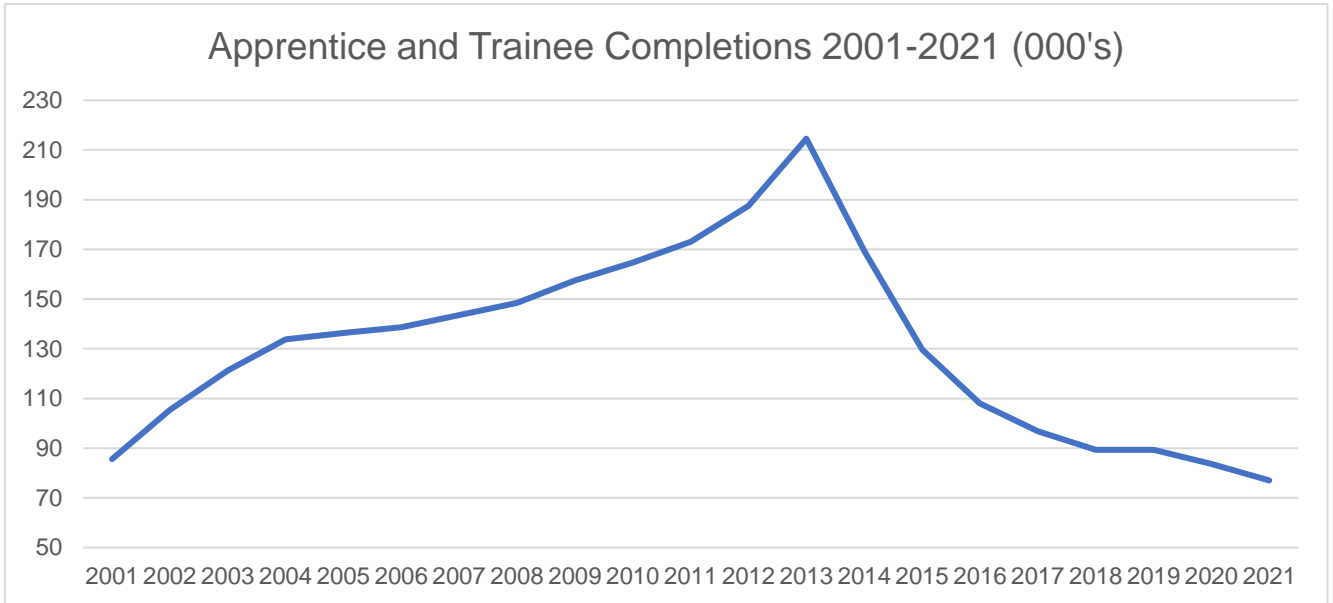
Figure 2: NCVER, [Apprentices and trainees 2022: March Quarter](#), 2022

In order to see an increase in the number of apprentices commencing there needs to be a commitment to provide wage subsidies of 30 per cent in the first year of all apprenticeships/traineeships this funding helps the business case for the employer become more financially viable. When a business takes on an apprentice/trainee it requires a higher level of supervision resulting in a cost to business. This additional cost is most notable in the first year of training and less necessary as time progresses.

In figure 3, it shows that the completion rate began to drop off in 2013, with a steady decline from that point. The reasons for the decline largely relate to the withdrawal of incentives and the ending of the Australian Accelerated Apprenticeships Initiative Program<sup>17</sup>. To further aid the increase in completion

<sup>17</sup> NCVER, [Issues in apprenticeships and traineeships](#), 2021

rates there should be a fixed monetary completion incentive of \$2,500 to employers to further assist in retention. There should also be financial support available to all apprentices and traineeships throughout the duration of their training of up to \$5,000 to assist in their completion.



**Figure 3:** NCVER, Government-funded VET students and courses 2018 - Historical time series of government-funded vocational education and training in Australia, from 1981 to 2021, 2022

**Recommendation:** Wage subsidies of 30% in the first year of apprenticeships/traineeships, without limitation by any list, will provide certainty for employers, reinstatement of \$2,500 to employers for completion incentives, \$5,000 to all apprentices and traineeships to assist in the completion of their training.

## 5 How can the services delivered better encourage and support apprentices from diverse backgrounds?

With Australia facing the most severe labour and skills shortage of a generation, encouraging and supporting apprentices from diverse backgrounds must be a priority. This will not only provide meaningful opportunities for those looking for work, but also ensures businesses can reap the benefits of a diverse workforce. However, we would like stress that wrap around, and mentoring services should be used for all apprentices and trainees as they will support and encourage more students to complete.

The Australian Apprenticeship Support Network Providers (AASNs) are often the first point of contact for a perspective apprentice or trainee and needs to be adequately resourced to provide more support services.

### 5.1 Women

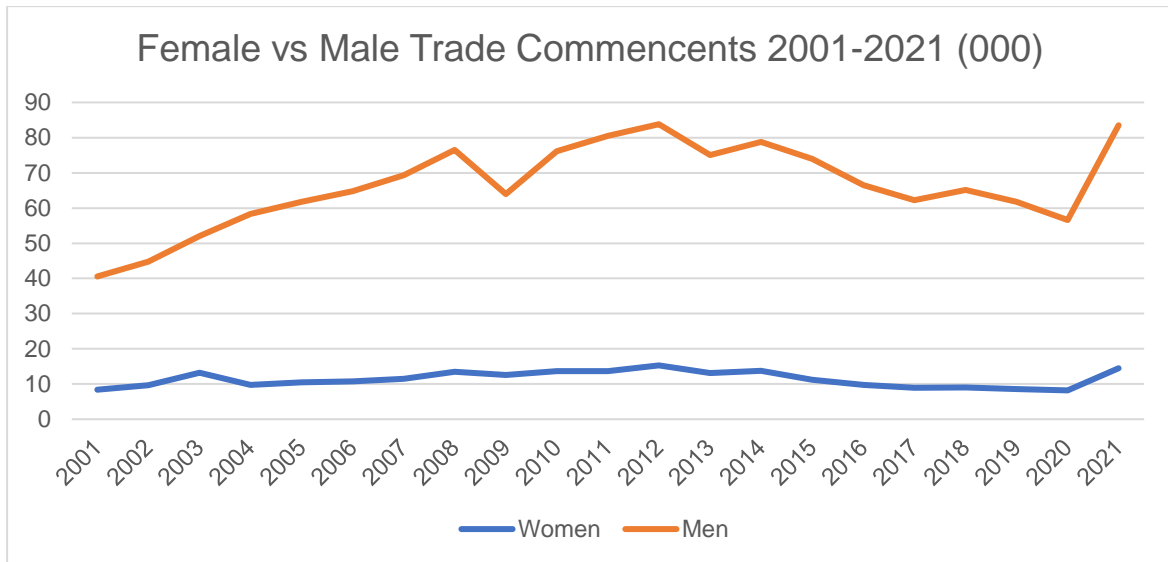
While women represent over 50 per cent of the population, they represent only a small percentage of the trades' workforce. Figure 4 demonstrates that commencements in trades by men have been gradually increasing, with a large uptick from COVID incentives measures, however, the same cannot be said for women. To see an increase in completions among women, there needs to be an overall increase in the commencements.

We are aware of some industry led programs that have had an outstanding success in supporting women as through the use of mentoring and support as they undertake their apprenticeships. As an example Master Plumbers, both a registered training organisation (RTO) and a group training organisation (GTO), have developed an extremely successful program in partnership with the Victorian Government targeted at women where they use female field officers who are plumbers to mentor and support apprentices, networking events, peer to peer mentoring and referral programs for those in need to assist the completion rates<sup>18</sup>. In order to increase completion rates widely across the VET sector for female trades there is a need for appropriate support services either within the AASN or GTO with regular contact points.

There needs to be better support networks to encourage women to remain in trades and to connect them to women and mentors that are already in industry. The Federal Government has announced funding to encourage more women to undertake apprenticeships in non-traditional roles, the funding could be used to support women during their apprenticeships and help address barriers facing them as they move towards completion. It would be helpful to undertake a survey of women in trades to better understand the non-financial barriers they encounter such as childcare issues in order to put in place the proper support systems.

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<sup>18</sup> Master Plumbers, [Women in Plumbing](#) 2022



**Figure 4:** NCVET, Government-funded VET students and courses 2018 - Historical time series of government-funded vocational education and training in Australia, from 1981 to 2021, 2022

**Recommendation:** Fully funded appropriate support services from either AASN, GTO or Industry Body with regular contact points. The development of support networks to encourage women to remain in trades and to connect them to women and mentors that are already in industry

## 5.2 People with Disability

There is room for reforms for people with disability that could see a significant increase in apprenticeship/traineeship participation rates. A key element of this is continuing to work with stakeholders to expedite the development of the new disability employment services model. As part of any reforms to the Disability Employment Service, it is essential that more employers are aware of, and access the employment services that aim to assist people with disability to find work. The Disability Employment Service should be reintegrated into the core employment system, to create a more effective single contact service for employers and to maximise the value of the reforms being made to the core employment services. It should also support employers to recruit and retain people with disability, including targeted guidance about capacity for work, available support, and navigating legal obligations.

The AASNs could also be better linked in with the Disability Employment Service to see what avenues they could peruse to create better linkages between employers and disabled people.

**Recommendation:** Expedite the development of the new disability employment services model with consideration given to how to best link AASNs with employers and disabled people.

## 5.3 First Nations People

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population is much younger than the broader population on average, with 56% of the Indigenous population aged less than 25 years old. Additionally, the Indigenous population is growing much faster than the non-Indigenous population. There is a need for greater

partnerships between industry, government and the Indigenous communities to assist the apprenticeship journey.

There are currently provisions under the AASN that allow for additional support of indigenous students however they need to be deemed 'at-risk', and even then, there needs to be additional steps undertaken. An Apprenticeship Maintenance Plan (AMP) must be developed and a complex issue identified that is beyond the Australian Apprentice's or Employer's control or makes it difficult for the Australian Apprentice or Employer to complete the requirements of their on-the-job and/or off-the-job training. Rather than apprentices being deemed at risk, they should be engaged with in a positive manner and automatically qualify for a culturally appropriate mentoring program within the AASNs or GTOs for the duration of the apprenticeship/traineeship program to assist in completion rates.

**Recommendation:** Additional funding for mentoring and support services for all First Nations apprentices/trainees.

## 6 How can the support services be optimised to meet the current and future needs of apprentice and employers?

There are a range of methods that should be deployed to optimise the role of support services to meet the current and future needs of apprentices and employers.

The current support services space for apprentices and employers is littered with stakeholders from Commonwealth, states/territories, RTOs, GTOs to ASSNs. All of which do provide various levels of information that are not necessarily coordinated, resulting in a system that is difficult to navigate and find answers and support. A better level of coordination between them would be helpful to both apprentices and employers as they seek information to try and remove confusion.

A key component of an apprenticeship or traineeship is receiving on the job training however often the employer or supervisor responsible has not received training themselves in how to teach or supervise. It is understandable that issues arise in this type of setting and highlights the importance of developing guides on good and best practice for small business owners to help them take the apprentice from commencement to completion. These resources should be available to those who wish to access them and set out the role of the employer with helpful factsheets and information that have been developed with industry input, for example highlight how important it is for an apprentice to undertake a diversity of tasks in the workplace while studying to properly equip them post-study.

**Recommendation:** Improved coordination of information delivery and the development of information and guides on best practice to assist small business owners to transition a commencement to a completion.

## 7 Pre-Apprenticeships

The process before a prospective apprentice signs a contract for an apprenticeship is vital to ensuring that the best possible match occurs between the employer and apprentice, helping to improve completion rates.

Attracting young people to apprenticeships is an ongoing challenge. A pre-apprenticeship allows a prospective apprentice to try out the field they are interested in before committing to an apprenticeship. They play a critical role in helping a student decide what suits them best. It is important that pre-apprenticeships prepare an individual for the formal training aspects of an apprenticeship by providing simulated or real work experience, occupational health and safety training relevant to the occupation, and the opportunity to engage with representatives from industry. The pre-apprenticeship should provide a measure of foundation skills, such as employability skills, literacy and numeracy skills.

The National Electrical and Communications Association (NECA) has stable completion rates of 90 per cent, some 30 per cent higher than the trade completion average. NECA run pre-apprenticeship programs twice a year for male and female students. These pre-apprenticeship programs give the students the necessary entry-level skills, knowledge, and experience to confidently take on the Apprentice recruitment process. NECA offers employment opportunities with its GTO to successful graduates at completion of the course. They also run female-only pre-apprenticeship programs and offer employment opportunities with their GTO to successful graduates at completion of the course.

In general, a better system around pre-apprenticeships programs should be developed to allow for easier access to apprenticeships. There is not a one-size-fits-all occupations approach to pre-apprenticeships, and industries place differing value on them. A national industry apprenticeship advisory board should be established reporting to Jobs and Skills Australia that would provide all governments with much needed advice on how to provide the best pathways into occupations. This board could be used to provide advice to support services to ensure the pre-apprenticeship has been suitable for industry and will in help to provide a match between apprentice and employer.

The Productivity Commission identified the screening of apprentices to ensure they are matched to their career goals will improve completion rates, something that already occurs in South Australia, it also identified mentoring and pastoral care and better coordination from Governments for apprenticeship support services through the AASNs<sup>19</sup>. ACCI has long called for improving the practices around hiring to ensure better pre-screening of apprentices. There is also a role here for industry in this process, for example we are aware that NECA deploys a robust recruitment practice to ensure the best possible match between apprentice and employer.

We are aware of alternative programs that are also having very successful results in preparing students for apprenticeships such as, the Australian Industry Trade College (ATIC) for year 10-12 students, all whilst completing their High School Certificate. Students who attend the College are immersed in the sector of industry of their choice where they do work experience in various trades within the industry and then they choose the pathway into a trade career supported by mentors and industry partners. The aim is to seamlessly blend senior education and vocational training to engage young people in purposeful learning experiences with real world industry relevance. The Boating Industry Association is currently working with the College to deliver a sustainable pipeline for young people to prepare for, experience, be mentored and choose an apprenticeship pathway in collaboration with industry.

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<sup>19</sup> Productivity Commission, [National Agreement for Skills and Workforce Development Review](#), 2022

AITC is the only school in Queensland where students spend half the term in the classroom and half the term in work experience, work placement, training or a school-based apprenticeship or traineeship. Their program is designed to progressively develop employability skills and achieve individualised learning goals, whilst also meeting the requirements of the Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority (QCAA) and the Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA). It is through innovative initiatives rather than a one size fits all approach that we will be able to provide different options to prospective apprentices to ensure they are best prepared to undertake an apprenticeship.

**Recommendation:** A better system around pre-apprenticeships programs should be developed to allow for easier access to apprenticeships, this should be through using industry experience to deliver the best results.

## 8 Pre-Commencement Career Advice

There is a consensus that more needs to be done to promote apprenticeships and traineeships as a good career option for both high school students and job seekers. ACCI supports the need for greater promotion, although any promotion needs to be concurrent with action on improving the business case for employers.

ACCI recommends that the government work with industry to better promote apprenticeship pathways as a high value employment opportunity to both parents and school students. There needs to be improved information to careers advisers in schools about the benefit of an apprenticeship linked to the career education strategy. Fewer young people are choosing an apprenticeship as their primary option because of fewer schools and careers advisors promoting apprenticeships as preferred pathways. For example, there could be programs that allow for industry representatives to visit local high schools to provide presentations on careers.

Prior to signing a contract an apprentice should be presented with a clear mapped out path with the requirements of their training and their career opportunities when they have finalised. This will aid the apprentice in understanding what they have signed up to complete.

Any promotional campaign needs to reflect that apprenticeships are much more than a training pathway for just high school students, by acknowledging that many employers actively seek older apprentices. There is room for a greater engagement with existing workers and unemployed Australians to encourage them to undertake and complete an apprenticeship.

While there is national effort already underway in promoting apprenticeships with websites, champions and other channels for promotion, there is definitely an opportunity for a more coordinated campaign to promote apprenticeships and traineeships.

**Recommendation:** The development of a coordinate approach to promoting apprenticeships in both schools and those looking for a career change. Ensuring each apprentice is presented with a clear program of requirements for the apprenticeship and the potential career outcomes once completed.





## About ACCI

The Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry represents hundreds of thousands of businesses in every state and territory and across all industries. Ranging from small and medium enterprises to the largest companies, our network employs millions of people.

ACCI strives to make Australia the best place in the world to do business – so that Australians have the jobs, living standards and opportunities to which they aspire.

We seek to create an environment in which businesspeople, employees and independent contractors can achieve their potential as part of a dynamic private sector. We encourage entrepreneurship and innovation to achieve prosperity, economic growth and jobs.

We focus on issues that impact on business, including economics, trade, workplace relations, work health and safety, and employment, education and training.

We advocate for Australian business in public debate and to policy decision-makers, including ministers, shadow ministers, other members of parliament, ministerial policy advisors, public servants, regulators and other national agencies. We represent Australian business in international forums.

We represent the broad interests of the private sector rather than individual clients or a narrow sectional interest.

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