



## **VET Workforce Blueprint**

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**Submitted to:** VET Workforce Steering Group

The Independent Education Union of Australia (IEUA) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the development of the VET Workforce Blueprint.

The Federal IEUA represents our combined constitutive branches across Australia supporting educators working in a variety of training environments, ranging from private post-secondary colleges through to schools with substantial in-house VET programmes and those that make extensive or occasional use of external TAFE and private VET providers. We are the only union with coverage of principals, educational leaders, teachers, school support staff and early childhood professionals. At the time of preparing this submission, IEUA has approximately 74,800 members.

Changes in regulation and operation of the VET sector and the deregulation of VET over the last decade have had wide-ranging impacts on our members. We have consistently engaged in consultation around a variety of state and federal inquiries into, and reform of, the sector.

Our submission to the VET Workforce Steering Group is informed by our members' experiences and expertise, our collective commitment to fair pay, conditions and the economic and professional wellbeing of our members, all education and training workers and all Australian workers.

IEUA welcomes the development of the Blueprint and the Australian Government investing up to \$100 million over five years through the National Skills Agreement to strengthen the VET workforce. However, we strongly emphasise that this investment will not yield the necessary improvements in retention and attraction of educators, trainers, and assessors in the VET sector without:

- genuine, ongoing consultation with professionals through their unions
- introduction of mandatory workload impact assessments for VET teachers, trainers and apprentices, separate from but comparable to the universal workload impact assessments required under the National Teacher Workforce Action Plan
- the Federal Government assuming responsibility for ensuring VET workers have secure, stable, well-paid employment as a pre-requisite and foundation of quality education and training
- the national inquiry into TAFE and VET funding to ensure high quality delivery and accurately estimate current and future skill needs in the workforce, called for by the ACTU<sup>1</sup>

Crucially also, real action must be taken to address the two major constraints on the quality of VET, which are:

1. over-reliance on casual and short-term contracts of employment for trainers and assessors, which makes it difficult for them to deliver high quality education and training programs; and,

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<sup>1</sup> ACTU, Perception and Status of VET, 2023: <https://www.actu.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/D10-ACTU-Submission-Status-and-Perception-of-VET.pdf>.

2. a tendency for governments to respond to problems within the sector by introduction of sweeping changes. This tendency has diminished the sector's receptivity to change and contributes to a public perception of the sector as overly complex and inherently dysfunctional.

Widespread public perceptions of VET will not be improved by marketing or public relations. The quality of VET must be restored by winding back the decade of deregulation that has enabled scandal-ridden commercial RTOs to increasingly dominate the sector, and by guaranteed public funding for TAFEs commensurate with funding directed to other sectors of public education.

Our submission outlines how reforms might be better targeted to improve sector quality. We wish the Steering Group well in its consideration of these important matters.

**Do the barriers and challenges identified in this paper reflect your understanding of the issues in your organisation and experience? If not, what are the barriers and challenges you or your organisation are facing? Which barriers are most significant in your context? What do you see as the biggest challenges facing the VET workforce now and into the future?**

1. The barriers and challenges to attraction and retention identified in the consultation paper are broadly consistent with our union membership's experience as trainers, educators, and assessors in the VET sector and our submission draws attention to additional issues and workforce interests.
2. Our members report negative perceptions of the sector, particularly amongst parents. There is a perception in schools that the VET sector is a softer option than an academic or university based career. Consequently, the VET pathway is often perceived as a Plan C and therefore not valued by the young person and/or their carer. These negative perceptions have detrimental flow through effects on engagement and retention in the VET sector. Credentialling and currency requirements for teachers and assessors are also an obstacle, primarily because of the absence of paid study and/or professional development leave.
3. A major risk to the quality and future for the VET sector has been the scandal-ridden deregulation of the sector and the increasing privatisation of VET and the rise of commercial RTOs for whom quality VET and a stable workforce has proved not to be a priority. For profit operators often opt to offer streamlined and digitised online delivery because it is cheaper and therefore yields higher profits. However, online delivery is less effective at meeting the needs of diverse learners or delivering the best outcomes for students, particularly those who are or will be employed in vocational areas that are largely physical and face to face occupations.
4. For example, there is an emerging trend in the Construction industry whereby the requirement to attend TAFE one day per week is replaced with assurances and the marketing of 'on the job training' and visits by RTO specialists. The on the job training and workplace visits are rarely as promised and the apprentice or trainee

is not able to access support, quality learning and/or the full range of skills within the trade specialisation.

5. The increasing dominance of RTO providers marked by scandals and poor quality training has done great damage to the public perception of TAFEs. RTO's behaviour over decades clearly demonstrates that their goal is profit extraction from the VET system. Deregulation of the sector has undermined public TAFEs and caused the decline of high quality training and of TAFEs' status.
6. Our union calls on the Steering Group to make recommendations for legislation to strengthen regulation of for-profit RTOs and to reverse the deregulation of the VET sector. Further, recommendations should include calling on governments to guarantee increased public funding for TAFEs in next budgets to restore TAFEs to their rightful position as Australia's main provider of VET. We support the ACTU's 2023 submission calling for a guaranteed minimum seventy per cent public funding for the TAFE, for funding commensurate with funding directed to other sectors of education, to ensure high quality training, and for a national inquiry into funding for TAFEs and VET.<sup>2</sup>
7. We also call on the Steering Group to identify and make recommendations to protect young VET Learners and apprentices from workplace exploitation. Their circumstances are particularly concerning because they are at higher risk of exploitation. VET Learners can be formally engaged as apprentices or trainees but in practice essentially used as cheap labour. There is no real accountability for employers who do not invest in training their young workers. The exploitation is not always intentional and can instead, for example, be a combination of a demanding workload and lack of employers and experienced workers with skills in training others. Severe workforce shortages result in fewer experienced workers available to supervise and transmit industry best practice.
8. In some cases, however, employing apprentices can be a very economical alternative to paying properly for labour. The low wages paid to apprentices put them at risk of exploitation. Given that the approximately 71,000 teachers, trainers and assessors in the VET workforce have a collective median age of 50 years, ten years higher than the median of 40 years for all jobs,<sup>3</sup> the Steering Group must identify and recommend action to prevent the exploitation of the young apprentices who are the future of the workforce.
9. The Government's 2024 Strategic Review of the Australian Apprenticeships Incentives System (AAIS) must bring vastly increased support for apprenticeships and traineeships if a stable, high performing future workforce is to emerge.
10. The AAIS's Review's evaluation of rates of pay, cost-of-living pressures, industry support and workplace conditions for apprentices and trainees must lead to major improvements in all factors if the crisis in entrance and completion rates and the

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<sup>2</sup> ACTU, Perception and Status of VET, 2023: <https://www.actu.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/D10-ACTU-Submission-Status-and-Perception-of-VET.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Knight, G., White, I. and Granfield, P. (2020) *Understanding the Australian Vocational Education and Training Workforce*, NCVER: <https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/publications/all-publications/understanding-the-australian-vocational-education-and-training-workforce>. See also *Developing a blueprint for the VET workforce*: <https://www.dewr.gov.au/skills-reform/resources/consultation-paper-developing-blueprint-vet-workforce>

shortage of skilled workers in some industries is to be fixed. The Steering Groups recommendations should also aim to support these outcomes

11. The biggest challenges facing the VET workforce now and into the future are poor wages and conditions and our reasons and suggestions for addressing the workforce crisis are outlined below.

**What could be done to attract and retain more VET teachers, trainers and assessors? What could be done to attract and retain other key workforce roles such as complementary education professionals? In your view, what strategies or actions would have the best impact for building capability and supporting career development and progression?**

1. Our union's findings, based on our members' experiences and our sustained qualitative and quantitative research, is that establishing a stable, highly capable, best practice VET workforce now and into the future requires addressing the factors and implementing the actions outlined as follows:
2. Poor pay and conditions cause poor workforce attraction and retention. Inadequate staffing compounds stressful and unsafe workplace conditions. The workforce shortages caused by poor pay and conditions place staff under high stress and perpetuates staff turnover in a destructive cycle that requires government intervention.
3. Qualification completion rates, job readiness and workforce retention will not be fixed until pay and conditions are fixed, including through the government introducing mandated workload impact assessments for all new and existing tasks for employees, trainers and apprentices.
4. A further factor in attrition is the very limited personal and professional support available to many VET employees, trainees and apprentices. It is often only union members who have access to support through their unions.
5. We note the investment, by a previous government, of considerable funding and resources in establishing the National Careers Institute.
6. While there is clearly a place for a single, authoritative source of careers information, this does not guarantee that those who would benefit most from the advice provided will access the information and should not be used as justification for a reduction in the quantum, and quality, of career guidance advice provided by school-based counsellors.
7. Studies of variables that affect career choice of school students have tended to focus on professions (e.g. accounting or teaching) [1-3]. These studies indicate that parental, peer and teacher influence remain key factors, as well as aptitude for subject matter and material factors such as availability of employment, prestige and social status, earning potential, cost of education and years of study.
8. In a rare study of factors that influence students to undertake VET programs, Osbourne and Circelli [4] report that:

- a. while VET is positively seen as offering practical and work-related learning to students, a negative view of VET exists at the primary and secondary school levels in relation to its value, prestige and importance.
  - b. students have a higher interest in VET-related jobs than in VET post-school pathways, indicating a misalignment between their occupational and educational aspirations, with misunderstandings about the role of vocational education.
  - c. choosing a VET course may involve the consideration of location, with many students lacking local study options.
  - d. concerns over how to pay up-front fees for the course and support themselves during study are common among young people.
  - e. research has shown that those with peers of higher academic ability are more likely to choose non-vocational education post-school and that this is likely tied to perceptions that VET is for those of low academic ability (Hedges & Speckesser 2017).
  - f. Gender stereotyping influences students' ideas about their futures, particularly with regard to career choice.
9. This suggests that the mere provision of government advice is unlikely to have any substantial impact on student career choice.
  10. We would also suggest that the provision of advice is secondary to the provision of high-quality VET.
  11. Decades of destabilising reform of the VET sector has created a situation where skilled and experienced vocational educators work under conditions that are not conducive to the delivery of high-quality, high-equity vocational education.
  12. A recent NCVET study has identified four key principles of high-quality VET delivery:
    - a. That it delivers in terms of student achievement
    - b. That it supports and encourages students to learn
    - c. That it is fit for purpose in that it meets the needs and purposes of all stakeholders
    - d. That it evolves in response to changing stakeholder and workplace needs.
  13. Rather than focussing on peripheral factors such as the provision of career advice (but without diminishing the provision of such advice), government should focus on reforms that will provide trainers and assessors with appropriate, professional pay and conditions, as a pre-requisite to ensuring that these principles are enacted, in both large and small RTOs.
  14. There is a persistent perception of VET pathways as inferior to academic programs, despite evidence that VET pathways may align more appropriately with the career aspirations of many students.
  15. Investing in initiatives to address the negative perception is unlikely to deliver the returns that would be achieved if the investment were instead directed into the actual provision of quality VET.

16. Investment consistent with the provision of quality VET must include initiatives that will improve working conditions for trainers and assessors.
17. Our union notes the investment, by government, of considerable funding and resources in establishment of Jobs and Skills Australia (JSA) to support longer term assessment and planning of industry needs.
18. Without a complementary investment in the actual provision of VET however, it is unlikely that working conditions of trainers and assessors will support the delivery of the high-quality education and training required to attract students to VET pathways.
19. While there is clearly a role for partnerships between VET providers and particular employers, and the establishment of JSA provides an opportunity to identify industries and regions where these will offer significant opportunities for jobseekers, it is essential that these are genuine partnerships rather than employer-dominated initiatives.
20. The dominance of employer interests in the VET sector is evident in the composition of various executive and advisory bodies, including the Industry Reference Committees and the inclusion of various VET employer groups (e.g. Independent Tertiary Education Council Australia) in stakeholder consultation processes.
21. While the representation of industries and employers (both industry employers and VET employers) is clearly important, it is problematic when practitioner voice is not given the same prominence.
22. The exclusion of practitioner voice has made the sector vulnerable to the imposition of policy and practice that does not pay adequate attention to the crucial role of trainers and assessors as frontline workers whose daily activities are primarily concerned with the delivery of high-quality, high-equity education programs.
23. This is supported by research from NCVET, which indicates that social partnerships negotiated between governments, employers, unions and training providers, where each partner is highly valued and willing to take responsibility for their component, are key to effective VET governance and, ultimately, improved outcomes for learners.
24. A restoration of practitioner voice is therefore essential to ensure that partnerships with industry deliver meaningful, long-term benefits to all partners.

**If there was one immediate goal that could be worked towards to relieve the current pressures on the VET workforce, what would that be?**

1. The single most effective way to ensure delivery of high-quality VET is to provide trainers and assessors with professional pay and conditions.
2. The present over-reliance on casual and short-term contracts of employment for trainers and assessors prioritises the needs of employers over the needs of those delivering VET programs and, in doing so, devalues the quality of education and training experienced by students.

3. Professional conditions should also include systematic approaches to teacher preparation, mentorship support and opportunities for continuing professional development.
4. Return on investment in the VET sector should be defined in terms of the transition of VET students to stable, meaningful employment. This employment may not always be, at least in the long-term, in the original field of training, but it will always be enabled by the provision of high-quality teaching and learning.
5. Philanthropic investment is unlikely to provide the quantum of funding required to revitalise the VET sector.
6. Employer/industry funding has the capacity to supplement government funds, but it would more effectively do so if it were invested in a direct improvement in pay and conditions for trainers and assessors.
7. An additional point that should be noted is the importance of trainers and assessors being able to provide students with quality work placements, to support the development of practical skills.

## Concluding Comments

IEU thanks the Steering Group for the opportunity to comment on the development of the VET Workforce Blueprint.

While our union acknowledges that the representation of industries and employers (both industry employers and VET employers) in conversations around VET reform is clearly important, a long-term tendency to exclude practitioner voice has made the sector vulnerable to the imposition of policy and practice that does not pay adequate attention to the crucial role of trainers and assessors as frontline workers whose daily activities are primarily concerned with the delivery of high-quality, high-equity education programs.

Rather than focussing on initiatives that might address the consequent perception among students and the broader population of VET as a low-value undertaking, we would suggest that investment should be directed toward reforms that would facilitate the actual provision of quality VET.

This must, necessarily, include provision of appropriate, professional pay and conditions for trainers and assessors.

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