

# Training Product Reform: Issues for Discussion



Victorian TAFE Association Response  
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## Introduction

The Victorian TAFE Association is the peak body for Victoria's public providers of Vocational Education and Training (VET), including 12 TAFE Institutes, four dual sector Universities and an Associate member, AMES.

The Victorian TAFE Association welcomes this opportunity to respond to Training Product Reform: Issues for Discussion.

Our response is structured according to a series of themes, including:

- Future, Foundation and Technical Skills
- Creating durable qualification: unit banks, common core units and broadening the outcome
- The teacher workforce
- Understanding and evaluating each piece of the puzzle

## Future, Foundation and Technical Skills

The Victorian TAFE Association is, in-principle, supportive of the proposal to provide learners with a spectrum of skills that comprises technical skills, foundation skills and future-work skills, and for a greater emphasis of theoretical underpinnings to be delivered in technical units. We consider these proposals will give learners the ability to meet and adapt to the increasingly changing requirements of work and life, providing learners with skills that can be transferred across work and life scenarios and maximise future employability. However, to ensure successful implementation, the Victorian TAFE Association considers that following matters be attended to:

### Defining Terms

A thorough analysis should take place to properly define what is meant by 'foundation' and 'future-work' skills, which the issues paper presents in nebulous terms. This is particularly the case for 'future-work' skills, which are loosely referred to as including "emotional intelligence, self-awareness and perseverance". To ensure the development of rigorous future-work and foundation skills units requires an 'exact' understanding of what is meant and what is hoped to be achieved by their introduction. The Victorian TAFE Association recommends that a working group comprising representatives from key stakeholder groups, including industry, training providers and experts in pedagogy be convened to further hone what is meant by these terms.

### Skills for all learners

The issues paper seems to base its proposals on a view of VET students as recent school leavers embarking on a world of work who lack the skills and experience required to navigate the learning landscape. An implication of this view is that the inexperience of such learners is such that they require a 'pastoral' approach to training and skills development: they lack the (often) basic skills required to function in work and in life, thereby necessitating the introduction of foundation and future-work skills.

Such a learner will continue to be present in the VET learner cohort and will need access to foundation and future-work units. But against this quintessential student cohort are 'lifelong learners': the adults and experienced learners who are participating in education and training

in ever greater numbers.<sup>1</sup> As the world of work evolves at an increasing pace, ongoing upskilling of existing workers will continue to make a larger call on the VET system's training resources.

But unlike the quintessential and inexperienced school-leaver, this increasingly important cohort has a wealth of life and previous study experience that may reduce the need for foundation and future-work units.

The Victorian TAFE Association considers that the proposed reforms must include some facility to take these different cohorts into account. Over prescription for a particular cohort could result in less room to adapt to individual learner needs and individual learner pathways. Related to this, it is imperative that the introduction of future-work and foundation skills occurs alongside rigorous recognition of prior learning mechanisms.

#### Serendipity

The issues paper posits two ways that training package developers could incorporate foundation and future-work units into a qualification, including:

1. that every qualification includes foundation skills units and future-work skills units;
2. alternatively, that every qualification includes foundation skills units or future work skills units, or both.

These two options imply that these skills can only be acquired through discrete foundation and future-work skill units. However, it is possible for these skills to be obtained in other ways.

While the issues paper seems to present the three kinds of skills (future-work, foundation and technical) as a strict, non-overlapping trifurcation, it is possible (and indeed probable) that foundation and future-work skills would also be imparted (sometimes implicitly) through technical units. This possibility needs to be taken into account.

It is not suggested that there is no room for discrete foundation and future-ready units, nor that such units are not desirable, but simply to recognise and allow for the possibility for future-ready and foundation skills to be acquired through technical units. Any proposals to include these three branches of units must take stock of this reality, and consideration should be given some flexibility in course design to allow for future-work and foundation skills to be provided this way.

#### Theoretical content

A common refrain heard regarding the VET sector is that it provides students with skills that can be used directly in employment and industry. VET courses have a tangible end-use in mind, usually in the form of an employment outcome and a more practical industry/trade focus than higher education courses. Imparting these 'technical skills' is the root of the competency-based VET system.

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<sup>1</sup> Indeed, 63 per cent of the VET sector's students are 25 and older, while those who are 45 and older represent about a quarter of the student body. See Australian vocational education and training statistics: total VET students and courses 2015 — data slicer, National Centre for Vocational Education Research

As Training Product Reform: what is the case for change? notes, a consequence of this view is that “some training products have a focus on technical skills without including the underpinning theoretical knowledge”.<sup>2</sup>

The Victorian TAFE Association welcomes the proposal to include theoretical underpinnings into technical units. The Victorian TAFE Association considers that this will provide learners with a broader educational experience, arming them with knowledge that can be used and adopted in multitude work and life scenarios and provide the means to better contextualise the technical skills obtained to diverse industry and life settings.

To ensure robust development, the Victorian TAFE Association recommends that educational experts be involved in guiding the development of technical units. The inclusion of these experts will ensure that the theoretical content has strong pedagogical underpinnings.

The key element of the competency-based system is that a person is deemed to have obtained pre-stated competencies once he/she can demonstrate this. This should form the crux of any assessment approach. One way this could occur is by questioning the learner while observing him/her completing tasks. Indeed, there are many existing units that already include underpinning knowledge and theory in their design, which the Victorian TAFE Association considers would be a useful starting point for the development of any future assessment processes.

### Creating resilient qualifications

The Victorian TAFE Association considers that proposals to create unit banks, specify common core units and broaden the vocational outcome are well worth exploring. We consider that these proposals will lengthen the durability or resilience of qualifications, provide a better learning experience, and give industry greater confidence and knowledge of the skills that imparted in the training package.

The proposal to require a minimum number of core units and electives would help to ensure that learners develop skills that are transferrable and adaptable across different industry and life settings. A minimum number of core units would enable easier comparison of qualifications. It would enable prospective learners to gain a better understanding of what skills they will acquire and shift from industry to industry without penalty, while employers would have a better understanding of the skills that the qualification has imparted to prospective employees. Mandating the number of common core units in a qualification would also make monitoring and amending qualifications a simpler proposition than would be the case with more specialised and diverse courses.

Similarly, the Victorian TAFE Association welcomes the proposal to develop banks of units of competency. These ‘banks’ will strengthen the ability of training providers to share and jointly develop resources. While the number of units of competency within the training system is likely to reduce, the greater focus of fewer units will help to ensure an increase in their quality and relevance. The proposal will strengthen the ability of training providers to share and jointly develop resources, ensuring greater exchange of information and ideas

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<sup>2</sup> Department of Education and Training (November 2017), *Training Product Reform: what is the case for change?*, page 8.

that will support and facilitate the development of units with rigorous pedagogic underpinnings.

A key ingredient to the wealth and prosperity of any society is continued growth in productivity. In a rapidly changing world and with concomitant change in the workforce, the future growth of productivity and prosperity will depend on workers possessing skills that are resilient and adaptable to ever changing needs. The Victorian TAFE Association considers that the proposal to broaden the vocational outcome would do much to meet this challenge.

A hallmark of the VET sector is its ability to meet and satiate the skill needs of industries and employers. In this, there may be occasions where more specialist or niche training requirements need to be met. Therefore, while the Victorian TAFE Association applauds these proposals, there must be some scope for flexibility in the design of qualifications that allows for targeted and niche specialist needs to be met.

The easier management of training packages, the increased ease of comparison between products and a relatively simple process to update qualification resulting from these proposals would help to make qualifications more sustainable into the longer term and increase their durability/resilience.

### The teacher workforce

The realisation of any policy intervention can only occur if those who are charged with its implementation possess the necessary skills and experience. For a human capital-intensive industry like the VET sector, this means ensuring that the teacher workforce possesses the skills that are needed to deliver the best possible training experience. The Victorian TAFE Association considers that this key element must be addressed to ensure that the policy aims of any reform to training packages can be realised.

One method to achieve this could be through the introduction of VET teacher registration. In Victoria, a person can only teach in a school if he/she is registered. Registration to teach in schools is managed by the Victorian Institute of Teaching (VIT). The VIT manages standards of professional practice for entry into the teaching profession and for continuing membership of the profession and develops/maintains a framework to support and promote the continuing education and professional development of teachers.

Teachers gain registration upon demonstrating proficiency in meeting Australian Professional Standards for Teachers; their ability to maintain professional practice; and their suitability to teach. Teacher registration would give VET teachers certainty and maximise the successful implementation of reforms to training packages.

The registration of teachers is undertaken to meet an overarching purpose, namely, to ensure quality; engender confidence that teachers employed in schools meet prescribed minimum standards; ensure its continued professional development; and to guarantee teaching quality. The extension of such a program to the VET sector would do much to engender confidence in the sector's teaching practitioners and to ensure that the VET teacher workforce is properly skilled to deliver training in the most up-to-date manner.

The VET sector is currently characterised by constant changes to the minimum qualification that its teachers must hold. The impacts of these changes are compounded by their industrial relations implications for the existing workforce, as well as barriers for the

recruitment and attraction of new teachers. A teacher registration process with clearly defined and stable requirements would mitigate and help to stem many current problems.

Such a registration process is likely to require cross-jurisdictional collaboration, with the management of a register at the state level and the development of national standards and continuing professional development occurring through the COAG process.

In the development of such a registration, the Victorian TAFE Association recommends that the process be one that is not overly burdensome, or that erects barriers to the participation of highly qualified and desirable teachers. The VET sector is renowned for its industry links that make its training industry relevant. Care must be taken to ensure that any teacher registration process does not jeopardise this, and while ensuring quality, facilitates and continues to encourage the participation of teaching practitioners from industry.

### Many voices in the development of units

The VET sector is renowned as the sector that has deep, rich and sustainable links to industry. These links are lauded for their role in ensuring that the sector provides training that is relevant and desired by industry. In this, the VET sector can be said to play a pivotal role in Australia's prosperity, with the skills it provides to learners helping to ensure Australian productivity and growth.

However, while 'industry' does indeed play a part in the design and delivery of the sector's training packages, many of our members have encountered situations with industry partners who ask "who designed these"?

While it is commonplace for 'industry' to be used as a catch-all term, the reality is that industry is made up of diverse players and entities: from the large number of industry sectors that make up Australia's economy; to the diversity of firm sizes (large, medium and small). The continued relevance and resilience of training packages requires that each of these players has an ability to provide input to the design of training packages. Indeed, given the role of public education to facilitate prosperity and social and economic inclusion, it is important that community and student voices also be heard.

As such, the Victorian TAFE Association recommends that training product development and delivery arrangements be made with input from a range of stakeholders that includes a more diverse set of voices, including industry, the community, students, education providers and experts in pedagogy and training package design/assessment.

### Understanding and evaluating each piece of the puzzle

The updates proposed by this review follow an update, review and introduction of reforms in 2015. The Victorian TAFE Association considers that the introduction of any additional changes should occur only after the effectiveness of the 2015 reforms have been thoroughly evaluated. Such an evaluation should occur in partnership with training providers, industry, the community, educational experts and other key stakeholders.

The proposals that have been outlined have been couched in a manner that is seemingly incognisant of the role that training packages have in the wider tertiary education sector. There is little consideration of the interaction of training packages with other elements of the

wider tertiary education sector. The proposals lack the totality of information necessary to ensure lasting and robust and training package reform.

The Victorian TAFE Association recommends a deeper evaluation or review take place that considers training packages and their role within the wider tertiary education sector. This deeper review would enable a thorough and complete understanding of the role of training packages and the wider VET sector, consideration of the interactions between each of the tertiary sector's players; and a greater appreciation of the role of each in advancing the learning, education and training of Australians.

### Key contact

The Victorian TAFE Association welcomes the opportunity to speak further to the issues outlined above. To do so, please contact:

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