

# **Free TAFE supporting access and equity in priority skills:**

Submission into the Inquiry into the Free TAFE Bill 2024

Victorian TAFE Association – January 2025

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## Introduction

The Victorian TAFE Association (VTA) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission into the Senate Standing Committee on Education and Employment (Legislation Committee) Inquiry into the *Free TAFE Bill 2024 [Provisions]* (the Bill).

This submission focusses on the importance of Free TAFE as an access and equity initiative for priority skills, the experience of Free TAFE in Victoria, and the importance of legislating and funding Free TAFE to ensure these benefits continue – with TAFE at the heart of the national skills and training agenda as a trusted partner to both Government and industry.

Drawing on the Victorian experience of Free TAFE<sup>1</sup> (since 2019) it is evident that there is significant benefit to guaranteeing, and legislating, Free TAFE as part of Australia's VET system – as an initiative that is successfully increasing access to priority skills and training for priority equity cohorts.

### The Victorian TAFE Association

Victoria has a unique VET provider landscape, with 12 standalone TAFE Institutes and four dual sector universities. The VTA is a not-for-profit sector peak that informs, supports and represents the interests of its members – the Victorian TAFE sector, including TAFE Institutes, dual sector universities and AMES Australia.<sup>2</sup> The VTA proudly champions public vocational education with a focus on sustainability, quality, and outcomes for industry, community and learners.

The VTA advocates for and supports the Australian and Victorian Governments' commitment to putting TAFE at the centre of the national and Victorian vocational education and training (VET) sector. The Victorian Government has made a commitment to guarantee TAFE 70 per cent of VET funding each year<sup>3</sup>, and the VTA also works with the Victorian Government – across all portfolios – to make commitments to using TAFE as the preferred provider for training delivery and skill development.

### Support for TAFE Directors Australia submission

The VTA works closely with TAFE Directors Australia (TDA) as the national peak body for TAFEs. We support TDA's submission to this Inquiry on behalf of TAFE Institutes nationally, which advocates for legislating funding for Free TAFE places as an enduring feature of Australia's VET system and affirms TAFEs as 'anchor institutions' central to sustaining a high-quality, responsive and accessible VET system.

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<sup>1</sup> Note on data accessed via the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) – The VTA acknowledges that the data were originally collected by registered training organisations and state training authorities around Australia, and that NCVER is not responsible for the correct extraction, analysis or interpretation of the data presented herein.

<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this submission the term TAFE institute includes standalone TAFEs and TAFE divisions of dual sector universities.

<sup>3</sup> Media release, *Backing TAFE for the Skills Victoria Needs*, <https://www.danandrews.com.au/news/backing-tafe-for-the-skills-victoria-needs> accessed 28 March 2024.

## Background: The power of TAFE

### TAFE delivers skilled workers and transforms lives through equitable, high-quality education

The TAFE Network is more than just a series of training providers; it is a critical social and economic asset that provides high quality and affordable access to skills and training for all Australians. It is core to TAFE's purpose, culture, and incentive structures to embody equity and support local communities and priority cohorts. It provides pathways for priority cohorts and Australians facing challenges, ensuring they are part of Australia's economic prosperity.

Government-funded students from many diverse cohorts chose TAFE over other providers. In 2023 in Victoria, 69% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, 64% of students with a disability, and 45% of female students chose TAFE over other provider types<sup>4</sup> for Government-funded VET program enrolments. This is also reflected in government-funded VET qualification completions – in 2023 in Victoria, 59% of students with a disability, 49% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and 48% of females received their qualifications at TAFE<sup>5</sup>.

As a public institution, TAFE is required to provide education, training, student and community support and is driven not by profit but by a commitment to public good. This public responsibility and community perspective allows TAFE to take on unique initiatives.

**Example:** Bendigo Kangan Institute's Build-10 Program is a specialised program for year 10 students. It aims to address and retain students who are at risk of leaving school early and leads to a CPC20220 Certificate II in Construction Pathways, providing valuable certification and skills for future employment opportunities in the construction industry.

The program integrates a weekly school-based learning component (three days) focused on improving literacy and numeracy skills which must be completed before the hands-on training and practical experience component (two days).

The goal is for students to leverage this training into an apprenticeship opportunity, ideally achieving a Certificate III that will allow them to transition into a sector that is experiencing significant labour shortages. Beyond school retention and technical skills, the program focuses on nurturing positive attitudes and attributes essential for career success and personal growth.

### TAFE advances Australia's priorities and addresses key skills gaps

The TAFE Network is a government-owned training system uniquely positioned to advance Australia's economic and skills priorities while also delivering social benefits. It is a strategic and democratic public service that gives back to society and enables the Government to navigate current and future economic transitions for constituents, while uplifting a range of community outcomes including employment, income, skills and productivity.

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<sup>4</sup> VOCSTATS, NCVET. (2024). Data inputs: government-funded students and courses, VET program enrolments (2003-2023), state/territory of data submitter (Victoria), provider reporting type, Indigenous status / disability status / gender. Extracted on: 09/10/24.

<sup>5</sup> VOCSTATS, NCVET. (2024). Data inputs: government-funded students and courses, VET qualification completions (2003-2023), state/territory of data submitter (Victoria), provider reporting type, disability status / Indigenous status / gender. Extracted on: 09/10/24.

We know that by 2026, 9 in 10 new jobs will require a post-school education<sup>6</sup> and that TAFE will play a significant role in delivering this. 80% of future jobs are attainable via TAFE<sup>7</sup>, and in Victoria, 81 out of the top 100 largest growing occupations are attainable via TAFE<sup>8</sup>.

The TAFE Network gives governments greater direction over vocational education to build the skills necessary to advance Australia's priorities and address emerging challenges. As the public provider, the Government can actively incentivise enrolment in priority areas rather than relying on market forces or profit to drive supply and demand of courses.

## **Australians trust TAFE**

Recent research<sup>9</sup> reveals a clear preference among parents regarding post-secondary education pathways – 56% of Victorian parents would encourage their children to pursue a TAFE pathway compared with only 29% that would encourage exploring private providers. This significant trust premium for TAFE reflects TAFE's stronger public reputation and established position in the education landscape, bolstered by its active social mission. TAFE also surpasses both universities and private RTOs in parental associations for 10 out of 15 evaluated areas in this research, particularly excelling in accessibility, affordability, on-the-job learning, earning while learning and job readiness.

## **The Victorian experience of Free TAFE**

Since its establishment in 2019, Free TAFE has been a flagship policy of the Victorian Government, with a consistent focus on addressing state skills shortages, creating economic opportunities for all Victorians, and improving access to training across priority cohorts. This initiative breaks down access barriers and ensures all Victorians, particularly those who might otherwise be excluded, can gain valuable, in-demand skills and education.

Victorian Free TAFE has been implemented against the backdrop of uncertain global conditions and economic disruption. The COVID-19 pandemic hit Victoria hard, and the state is still recovering from the extended impact of Australia's longest and most severe restrictions and broader impacts on all industries, while also recovering from a series of severe bushfire and flood events.

The post-COVID period in Victoria has been characterised by low unemployment and high participation – and while widespread workforce shortages have eased over the period since Free TAFE was introduced, they are still acute in some key industries. Like the rest of Australia, cost of living pressures are high, with rising interest rates and high inflation.

Free TAFE has provided Victorians access to more than 80 TAFE qualifications and short courses in government priorities and areas of workforce shortage. Victorian Free TAFE offerings are linked to skill shortage areas that require full nationally recognised and accredited qualifications and high-priority short courses in areas like responding to family violence, renewable energy and mental health.

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<sup>6</sup> National Skills Commission, Employment outlook: Industry and occupation trends over the five years to November 2026, October 2022

<sup>7</sup> Australian Government, Labour Market Insights, now <https://www.jobsandskills.gov.au/data/occupation-and-industry-profiles>

<sup>8</sup> Victoria Skills Authority, Employment Forecast Dashboard, October 2023

<sup>9</sup> McCrindle Research, "The TAFE Value and Perception Challenge," Victorian TAFE Association, Melbourne, Victoria, May 2024

With five full years' worth of experience and benefits, the results of Free TAFE are perhaps more evident in Victoria than other jurisdictions that haven't been providing Free TAFE for as long. The Australian Government can learn from Victoria's extended experience delivering Free TAFE as a core access and equity initiative in the skills and training portfolio.

A selection of Victorian Free TAFE student testimonials is provided at [Appendix A](#).

## Free TAFE boosts Victoria's skilled workforce to meet industry demand

Victoria offers more than 80 Free TAFE qualifications and short courses in high priority areas that are aligned with industry demand, without the cost of tuition fees. Victorian Government data indicates that almost 190,000 students have enrolled in Free TAFE priority courses since 2019. This total reflects the major investment of the Victorian Government into Free TAFE since 2019 and additional places made available through the Federal Government 'Fee- Free TAFE' funding arrangement from 2023.

Given the current and projected demand for VET-qualified workers, especially in high priority industries, areas of existing shortages like the care economy, and emerging skills areas like the clean economy, Free TAFE is an important measure to lift skills levels in crucial industries. This is particularly crucial while cost of living pressures may act as a deterrent.

In 2023 Free TAFE expanded to allow all Victorians to upskill for in-demand jobs regardless of their existing qualification level – and study multiple Free TAFE courses within the same priority pathway. Over 2023 and 2024, expanded eligibility enabled **more than 50,000 students** to commence government-funded training places for which they weren't otherwise eligible.

In 2023, the most popular Free TAFE courses were the Diploma of **Nursing**, Certificate IV in **Training and Assessment**, Certificate IV in **Cyber Security**, Certificate IV in **Accounting and Bookkeeping**, and Diploma of **Community Services**. Other popular courses in priority areas include the Certificate III in **Early Childhood Education and Care**, Diploma of **Building and Construction** (Building), Certificate IV in **Mental Health**, Certificate III in **Individual Support**, and Certificate IV in **Plumbing and Services**.

Since 2022, there has been a **23 per cent increase** in people starting a Free TAFE course – with Certificate IV in **Cyber Security**, Certificate IV in **Accounting and Bookkeeping**, Certificate IV in **School Based Education Support**, Certificate IV in **Training and Assessment**, and the Diploma of **Nursing** seeing the biggest spikes in enrolments.

While NCVER data does not disaggregate Free TAFE from other government funding, there has been an increase in the number of students in certain priority areas since the introduction of Free TAFE in Victoria. This includes substantial growth in Government-funded program enrolments at Victoria TAFE between 2019 and 2023, including health programs (27% growth), information technology (25% growth) and education (7.3% growth)<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> VOCSTATS, NCVER. (2024). Data inputs: government-funded students and courses, VET program enrolments (2003-2023), state/territory of data submitter (Victoria), provider reporting type, program field of education. Extracted on: 09/01/25.

## Free TAFE supports equity and access

The VTA and members support the objects of the Bill which include removing financial barriers for people experiencing economic disadvantage. Victorian Government data point to significant numbers of priority cohorts entering priority courses in particular women<sup>11</sup>, culturally and linguistically diverse students, Indigenous people and unemployed Victorians.

Free TAFE is affording these students life changing opportunities to access free training that will improve their employment outcomes and ensure Victorians have equitable access to the priority occupations and industries that will fuel our economic prosperity for years to come.

Since the introduction of Free TAFE in Victoria, **almost 190,000 students** have had the chance to get skills they need for jobs they want – while **saving \$550 million in fees**<sup>12</sup>. Free TAFE saves students an average of **over \$10,000 in tuition fees** on a full qualification, while some students are saving **more than \$30,000**. This has included more than **54,800** culturally and linguistically diverse students and more than **45,200 unemployed Victorians**.

In the first five years of Free TAFE – of more than 157,500 students, more than 90,500 were women (57.5%), more than 44,500 were culturally and linguistically diverse (28.3%), 14,500 identified with a disability (9.2%) and 38,000 were unemployed (24.1%).<sup>13</sup>

While data on specific aspects of Free TAFE is not readily available to the public, the VTA has been supplied with information from individual Victorian TAFE Institutes and dual sector universities. While data varies across Institutes (all with different regional footprints and course profiles) certain priority cohorts are consistently enrolling in Free TAFE courses at higher levels than the broader student body. This includes:

- Institute A | Full year data for a TAFE Institute across the years 2019-2023 showed Free TAFE had much higher levels of **female students** (average per year of 58.5%, 16.9% higher than the all-student average for the same time period) and **unemployed students** (27%, 8.3% higher than the all-student average).
- Institute B | Full year data for regional TAFE Institute across years 2019-2024 showed Free TAFE had much higher levels of **female students** (average per year of 67.9%, 26.6% higher than the all-student average for the same time period), **students identifying with a disability** (12.9%, 5.4% higher than the all-student average) and **unemployed students** (19.1%, 9.9% higher than the all-student average).
- Institute C | Full year data for a TAFE Institute providing a small range of Free TAFE programs across the years 2019-2024, showed Free TAFE had higher levels of **students with a disability** (average per year of 12.1%, 5.3% higher than the all-student average for the same period).

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<sup>11</sup> We note that one Victorian priority area is health and aged care which are typically feminised areas of work and study, so women enrolling in this course may not represent a change in career path.

<sup>12</sup> Victorian Government submission to the Inquiry into the Free TAFE Bill 2024 [Provisions]. Available from [Submissions – Parliament of Australia](#). Accessed 08/01/2025.

<sup>13</sup> Media release: Five Years of Free TAFE has saved students millions, [240307-Five-Years-Of-Free-TAFE-Has-Saved-Students-Millions.pdf](#), Accessed 09/01/2025.



- Institute D | Full year data for a dual sector university for the period 2022-2024 showed Free TAFE attracted a higher percentage of **female students** (62.8%, 13.2% higher than the university's 2023 VET average), **mature age students** (average per year of 69.5%, 10.3% higher than average) and a marginally higher number of **students with a disability** (10.7%, 1.6% more than the average).
- Institute E | Full year data for a metropolitan TAFE Institute across the years 2019-2024 showed Free TAFE courses had much higher levels of **female students** (average per year of 49.7%, 13.6% higher than the 2024 all student average), **students with a disability** (7.2%, 2.1% higher than average) and **unemployed students** (17.3%, 5.3% higher than average).

While NCVET data does not allow for analysis of Free TAFE data specially, we can use this data to understand the proportion of students from priority cohorts in the Government-funded Victorian TAFE student body.

When considering Government-funded program enrolments in Victorian TAFE Institutes and dual sector universities<sup>14</sup>, we can see upward trends since 2019 for students with a disability (from 10.7% of total enrolments in 2019 to 11.3% in 2023) and students who speak a language other than English at home (from 24% in 2019 to 25.3% in 2023). 2023 figures for the proportion of female students and Indigenous students are similar to 2019 levels.

Longer-term trends also show a significant upward trend in Indigenous students within the same dataset, growing by 45% on 2010 levels and shifting from 1.8% of these enrolments to 3.78%. Students with a disability were only 7.67% of these enrolments in 2010 and now make up 11.3% of enrolments. Students speaking a language other than English at home made up 17.57% of enrolments in 2010 and now make up 25.28%.

While these increases may seem minor, the maintenance of priority cohorts in TAFE can be viewed as a success of Free TAFE when we know that in many cases the Free TAFE cohort is more diverse than the broader VET cohort. The data for Free TAFE cohorts highlight the positive contribution that Free TAFE makes to preventing or reversing previous declines in priority cohorts in VET, particularly during challenging economic conditions and a cost-of-living crisis, where people are less likely to be able to take time off to study, or be able to afford courses fees.

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<sup>14</sup>VOCSTATS, NCVET. (2024). Data inputs: government-funded students and courses, VET program enrolments (2003-2023), state/territory of data submitter (Victoria), provider reporting type, client attributes (disability status, language other than English spoken at home, gender, Indigenous status). Extracted on: 09/01/25.



## Recommendations

The VTA notes that:

1. there is benefit in making some VET courses free, to support increased access for priority cohorts and uptake of priority courses
2. it is appropriate and beneficial for the federal government to fund Free TAFE, and to only fund TAFE providers to deliver this
3. it is appropriate for Free TAFE to be embedded in legislation.

### **Free TAFE supports equity and access to priority courses**

The Victorian experience – documented above – demonstrates the impact of Free TAFE as an access and equity initiative, particularly for women, students with a disability and unemployed Victorians. This is crucial in the context of the participation targets in the Universities Accord, with a target of 80% participation in tertiary education pathways by 2050. These pathways need to be made accessible to learners who would not have otherwise taken them – and Free TAFE is a core initiative in making this possible. We will not reach these targets without equity and access initiatives like Free TAFE.

We also know that investment in VET reduces reliance on income support, confirmed by the recent work of Jobs and Skills Australia<sup>15</sup> which examined the income support exit rate for students within two years of completing their VET qualification. This study found that of the students that were on income support prior to study, 39% were no longer on income support two years after the completion of their VET course. By investing in Free TAFE and supporting access to priority courses for students that may be otherwise excluded from the VET system, the Government can support industry's priority needs while also supporting economic participation across the population.

Legislating a commitment to Free TAFE to support uptake of priority courses, particularly for students in priority cohorts, should continue to sit at the heart of an equitable VET system.

### **Free TAFE requires an ongoing financial commitment**

We note that the Bill is for an Act relating to financial assistance to the States, the Australian Capital Territory and the Northern Territory in connection with the provision of Free TAFE and VET places, with payments administered under the *Federal Financial Relations Act*.

The VTA supports financial assistance being provided by the federal government to state and territory governments to provide Free TAFE. As Free TAFE is contributing actively to national economic priorities and workforce development pipelines it should continue to have a federal funding component. Sustained funding for TAFE (and Free TAFE) is not just an investment in education – it is an investment in equity, opportunity, business growth and Australia.

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<sup>15</sup> Jobs and Skills Australia (November, 2024), Better Together: The Jobs and Skills Report 2024. Australian Government. Available: <https://www.jobsandskills.gov.au/engage/about/better-together-jobs-and-skills-report-2024>

There is an immense opportunity for TAFE to continue expanding its economic, social, and democratic impact, and sustainable funding will protect and grow the public benefits of Free TAFE. To deliver on this public purpose and ensure the VET system always has institutions driven by public good, we need funding models that support and sustain this public impact.

Free TAFE will be a continued success if all parties – governments, providers, industry and students – have certainty that Free TAFE is here to stay and can be relied on for high quality, in-demand skills.

#### A note on additional costs

We note that Free TAFE courses can still come with other costs (e.g. uniform and materials) and that course fees are not the only financial barrier (e.g. foregone work to study) as well as other factors that may deter potential students (e.g. lack of access to childcare, culture in profession). Additional costs have been cited as reasons for students dropping out of courses – this includes costs associated with travel to campus, being able to afford to buy food etc., or costs associated with printing their course materials.

This is one reason why comprehensive student support services are so important in supporting Free TAFE students (see next section). Student services and supports are crucial to Free TAFE completion rates and more broad and holistic measures of student success.

#### **Free TAFE should be delivered by public providers**

There are compelling reasons to prioritise TAFE as the provider of Free TAFE, as the only providers placed to fill this crucial role:

- **Quality assurance:** TAFEs are government-owned and heavily regulated through a range of Federal and State requirements. This ensures consistent, high-quality training aligned with industry standards. Private providers may vary more in quality.
- **Addressing skills shortages:** TAFEs are more responsive to government-identified skills shortages, tailoring courses to meet specific workforce needs (in Victoria this occurs in response to the Victorian Skills Plan). This targeted approach maximises the effectiveness of Free TAFE in filling critical roles.
- **Investment in public education:** Focusing Free TAFE funding on public institutions strengthens the overall VET and TAFE system. This ensures long-term capacity to deliver vocational training, rather than fragmenting resources across various potentially thousands of providers.
- **Equity and access:** TAFEs have a broad focus on social inclusion, offering support services and accessibility measures that may not be prioritised by all private providers.
- **Regional footprint embedded with communities:** In Victoria, TAFEs have extensive footprint across the state and are embedded in their communities.
- **Range of programs:** TAFEs can provide advice and support to students in the context of a full range of Free TAFE and other programs that could not be made available by other private providers who typically deliver a narrow range of courses.
- **Preventing "rorting":** History shows that unregulated private training markets can be susceptible to misuse of funds and low-quality training. Limiting Free TAFE to established TAFE providers reduces this risk.

### TAFE supports access in-place for regional learners and communities

TAFEs also support access to high-quality, industry relevant training in-place in regional areas. Eight of Victoria's TAFE Institutes and dual sector universities have a regional footprint and are significant anchor entities within their local economies and communities. Through their presence, regional TAFEs contribute to the wider economic and social benefit of their region, uplifting and supporting the viability and resilience of local economies and communities. They create and grow the local skilled workforce and ensure learners have access to priority courses in their region.

TAFEs are the logical provider of Free TAFE, and TAFEs strong regional presence and connection to local communities and industry – driven by public benefit obligations – ensures that regional students and communities don't miss out and can access the economic opportunities provided by Free TAFE courses.

### Supporting Free TAFE students requires the additional services that TAFE has

Delivering Free TAFE requires specific wrap-around support services for students – many of whom are returning to training for the first time since schooling or may not have had the opportunity to complete schooling. The Victoria experience has shown the need to bolster these services, to support student success – which could be broader than just completion. Studying just part of a Free TAFE qualification may support a student to achieve their goal.

More students from diverse backgrounds can precipitate additional numeracy and literacy support needs, counselling and mental health requirements. This more intensive level of support has been reflected in increased uptake of disability support services and wellbeing services at TAFEs, and increased need for teachers to provide specific or tailored attention to these students, to support their engagement with Free TAFE courses.

These services form a core part of TAFE as a public provider, while other providers do not always provide the same level of support for students. TAFE Institutes, as large and mature government-owned providers, can provide the support required for students who may need additional support navigating various systems and processes or determining whether courses are right for them – all to support their success. With full course portfolios, TAFEs are also appropriately placed to provide advice on different pathways for students, without motivations guided by a limited set of courses they may provide.

The VTA believes that the funding provided for Free TAFE should be sufficient to ensure that appropriate student services can be provided for Free TAFE students. These services are crucial to ensure that Free TAFE contributes as much as possible to pipeline of fully qualified graduates, who are also fully supported to succeed in their training.

### **Free TAFE should be legislated**

Legislating Free TAFE is crucial for establishing greater policy certainty, which benefits students, industries, and educational institutions alike. It also ensures Government priorities are advanced, and economic and social participation and equity is lifted.

The VTA and members strongly support the central role of TAFE at the core of the VET system, and how this is reflected in the Bill. This recognises the importance of the public TAFE system in advancing Australia's priorities, addressing skills gaps, and providing equitable opportunities for all Australians to reach their goals in the VET systems.

### Consistent support regardless of the post-school sector

The Government's commitment to subsidised student places for higher education through financial support in the form of Commonwealth Supported Places (CSPs), and the provision to defer these payments through a student loan, is already legislated in the *Higher Education Support ACT 2003* (the HESA Act). The HESA Act provides certainty on the types of grants available to support CSPs which allows providers and students to plan long-term based on these arrangements. The HESA Act also provides information on the extent that 'FEE-FREE Uni Ready courses' will be subsidised.

Free TAFE should be similarly legislated, so that students and TAFEs can all plan based on this assurance and Free TAFE can similarly be cemented as a tenant of Australia's education system. This shows that the federal Government is offering consistent support to Australians regardless of which post-school sector they are engaging in – ensuring all sectors are equally recognised.

### Legislating Free TAFE will provide certainty and confidence

For industries, legislative backing ensures a steady pipeline of skilled workers to address current and projected workforce shortages. By embedding Free TAFE in law, the government guarantees that training programs align with state and national priorities, such as the care economy, renewable energy, and housing construction. This alignment fosters confidence among employers that their labour needs will be met consistently over time.

For students, enshrining Free TAFE in law provides long-term assurance that they can access vocational education without financial barriers. This certainty may support even greater numbers of Australians, particularly from disadvantaged cohorts, to pursue training in high-demand sectors such as healthcare, construction, and digital technology.

TAFE institutions also gain stability through legislated Free TAFE policies. TAFEs can plan and allocate resources effectively with the confidence that funding and program delivery will remain consistent. This stability enables institutions to invest in infrastructure, staff development, and innovative training methods tailored to industry demands. Additionally, the legislation reinforces the central role of TAFEs in Australia's vocational education system, ensuring their continued contribution to national skills development.

## **Considerations**

With reference to this Bill, the success of Free TAFE should not be considered in terms of whether it has solved the incredibly complex policy challenge of increased uptake of various priority skills areas – but as one policy lever to reduce the financial barriers to these courses.

The Victorian experience shows that Free TAFE is increasing access. Free TAFE has and is helping to build an inclusive and diverse skills base for Victoria. It has improved social equity, added to the state's skill base in priority areas, and increased access to employment opportunities for many Victorians.

To consider the future success of Free TAFE, Governments should consider other enablers in the system, like perceptions and broader incentives, and allow time for more Free TAFE students to flow through the system and complete their qualifications.

## **Free TAFE is only one incentive in a complex system, and it will take time to fully see and understand outcomes**

Free TAFE was intended to increase enrolments in Australian Government and state and territory government priority areas. Understanding the lasting impact of Free TAFE on these priority areas will take time and a range of metrics, as well as an understanding of the impacts of other policy and funding parameters within the complex VET system.

For example, using completion rate data as a single measure of the impact of Free TAFE will have a lag time of several years – the 2023 and 2024 completion data are not yet available as a large portion of students are still ‘in training’. This is a flawed measure of success.

To see results, Free TAFE needs to be available and funded for years to come – so that learners can plan to make decisions early based on these incentives, awareness of Free TAFE grows, and we can see more students flow through the system in these courses. The VTA also recommends that NCVER data captures whether students are studying in a Free TAFE program. This would support visibility of Free TAFE outcomes.

Free TAFE should be considered one incentive to enrol but not a silver bullet that ignores other reasons why learners choose courses and career paths.<sup>16</sup> These reasons may include potential income, workplace culture, available time, and personal reasons.

## **Consider the impact of perceptions and incentives**

Recent research published by the VTA also demonstrates the persistent perception challenges that TAFE faces, as well as the true value of TAFE which doesn’t match these perceptions. This should be taken into account when considering the success of Free TAFE and its role in contributing to the supply of VET graduates.<sup>17</sup>

For example, some critics of Free TAFE have looked to downward trends in construction commencements and used this as ‘evidence’ that Free TAFE isn’t supporting access and uptake of these qualifications. While it is true that commencements in construction have declined nationally, it is important to recognise this is a complex policy system with a range of behavioural and economic drivers. The introduction of Free TAFE may have mitigated what could have been even steeper declines – and any removal of support for Free TAFE could exacerbate declines, with financial barriers increasing.

Rather than viewing declining construction commencements as a reason to question the value of Free TAFE, the emphasis should be on the role of Free TAFE’s in stabilising enrolments, creating opportunities for people to study and creating opportunities for a recovery in priority fields such as construction. Maintaining Free TAFE is essential to avoid further declines and to support long-term workforce needs in this critical sector.

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<sup>16</sup> We note recent comments by Master Builders Deputy CEO Shaun Schmitke on the need for governments to look beyond free TAFE – see Daily Telegraph, (2025, January 6). *Building industry says decline in Aussie apprentices in training a 'concern' amid housing crisis*.

<sup>17</sup> McCrindle (2024), *The TAFE Value and Perception Challenge: Unpacking TAFE to attract the next generation of learners*. Available at: <https://vta.vic.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/TAFE-Value-and-Perception-Challenge-Research-Report.pdf>

We also know that if we are to reach workforce participation targets, we particularly need to support and attract women in the 40-55 age bracket to change roles or re-enter the workforce in priority roles and industries. The Government should consider whether Free TAFE is a sufficient incentive to support learners entering these professions, or if further work is required to increase the appeal of these qualifications and professions (e.g. marketing, culture change) or change perceptions. We understand that there is related work underway through the Strategic Review of the Australian Apprenticeships Incentive System that will inform this.

## Conclusion

The VTA supports legislating Free TAFE federally and providing a financial contribution to states and territories to support delivery. Legislating Free TAFE ensures this is an enduring feature of the VET system, providing certainty for students in the pipeline and a critical public service. It is vital to the Australian economy and to achieving the participation targets set out in the Universities Accord. The Bill centres Free TAFE's focus on ensuring training is accessible for Australians who experience social and economic exclusion and the VTA strongly supports this objective.

Free TAFE won't remove all barriers to training – but it will help reduce the financial barrier to attending TAFE in priority courses that lead to employment in areas of priority skill need, and in specific regions, building on the five years of Free TAFE experience in Victoria.



## Appendix A – Free TAFE Success Stories and Testimonies

### **Student A:** Graduated with a Diploma of Community Services at Bendigo TAFE

'Student A' started volunteering and studying Diploma of Community Services to follow her passion for community work. She ultimately went on to be awarded Bendigo TAFE's 2022 Student of the Year and was a finalist for the 2023 Victorian Training Awards Vocational Student of the Year.

*"If it wasn't for Free TAFE, I wouldn't have the opportunity to study," she said. "When I studied at Bendigo TAFE, it was more about what I really enjoyed doing and out of my life experiences, what I really wanted to do in terms of my passion. Bendigo TAFE having quite a lot of connections in this field, enabled me to follow that path. It was fantastic to do what I wanted rather than what was expected of me."*

The course has expanded career opportunities for her, including working as a Redress Advocate to reduce barriers to service accessibility experienced by people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

*"When I first decided to study community services, all I had in my mind was to help people, particularly migrant women," she said. "I am able to help people now. I am able to apply my life experience in a positive and productive way. I am happy now and I hope I can make others happy."*

### **Student B:** Currently studying the Diploma of Nursing at Kangan Institute

After 30 years of experience in office administration, 'Student B' wanted a change and decided to pursue her childhood passion of working in health care. Free TAFE gave her the opportunity, and the means, to take a leap, starting with a qualification in aged care, which led to her current job in residential aged care.

*"It's changed me as a person. Free TAFE has given me the opportunity to push myself and to realise I got skills I didn't think I had. The learning capability. Being able to learn again and know that I can do it," she said.*

Her love for supporting others has continued to flourish, with the 59-year-old now enrolled in the Free TAFE Diploma of Nursing at Kangan Institute to expand her career options.

*"There's a couple of areas I would like to try and get into. I'm hoping I could get to do a grad year through one of the hospitals. I also had a day in a day surgery unit which I really enjoyed; that's one aspect I wouldn't mind," she said. "I enjoy, like with my aged care work, just being there for people when they need somebody. Whether it's just a hold hand, a nice smile through to helping them get better."*

The option to study part-time further enabled her to find the perfect balance between work and studies, with the aspiring nurse citing teachers as the best part of her journey at Kangan Institute.

*"You cannot fault the teachers. Each teacher is just brilliant. If you could have every single teacher with their enthusiasm and teaching capacity, it would just be wonderful," she said.*



**Student C:** Studied a Certificate III in Hospitality at the William Angliss Institute and worked at the Melbourne Food and Wine Festival

William Angliss Institute Certificate III Hospitality student 'Student C' expressed her delight in working alongside renowned Melbourne chefs and event specialists, to oversee the event's service.

*"I love the fact that my course gives me so much industry experience, including the experience of working at a large-scale event like the Melbourne Food and Wine Festival. It was a wonderful opportunity and a great day to celebrate Australia's diverse culture and delicious food."*

For Student C, the experience taught her how to be even more patient and keep calm under high pressure situations.

*"I will take these learning experiences on board and implement them into my training. This should help me when I move on to study the Certificate III in Patisserie, which will further support my dream of working for a prestigious restaurant in Paris one day."*

*"For anyone thinking about studying at TAFE, I would say that it's a really good way to learn more about what you're passionate about," explained Student C.*