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Jobs and Skills Australia
Workforce Futures Branch
VET Workforce Analysis

Submitted via online portal

To the VET Workforce Analysis team

RE: VTA Submission – Building a better understanding of the VET workforce

The Victorian TAFE Association (VTA) welcomes the opportunity to provide input into the 'Building a better understanding of the VET workforce' Discussion Paper. We support the Jobs and Skills Australia (JSA) ambition to better understand the vocational education and training (VET) workforce to inform its research and advice.

The VTA is the peak that informs, supports and represents the interests of the Victorian TAFE sector, comprising 12 standalone TAFE Institutes, four dual sector universities and AMES Australia. We proudly champion public VET with a focus on sustainability, quality, and outcomes for industry, community and learners.

Our submission responds to the discussion questions with a TAFE workforce perspective and introduces three key areas for consideration below, with further detail at Attachment A.

1. Disaggregate TAFE data from broader VET workforce data

JSA research and resources should disaggregate TAFE workforce data from broader VET workforce data, recognising that the TAFE workforce profile is unique. When compared to the workforce of other VET providers (e.g. private RTOs or enterprises), TAFE staff are public sector workers that have different qualification levels, more consistent access to professional development, opportunities for progress and promotion across a different range of roles, more permanent or secure employment, and different industrial arrangements.

These factors contribute to a workforce that deserves specific and distinct consideration from the broader VET workforce. A disaggregated approach will provide a clearer understanding of specific opportunities and challenges, enabling more targeted and effective policy responses (see response to Q5).

2. Give dedicated attention to casualisation to capture the TAFE experience

JSA research should provide dedicated attention to casualisation, ensuring the experience within the Victorian TAFE sector is captured. The TAFE experience is significantly different to the broader VET sector, providing insights into its use and potential value.

The Victorian TAFE experience has shown there are benefits to moving towards permanency as the dominant employment type, while retaining the benefits of a defined casual workforce to support genuine and specific organisational priorities, personal employee flexibility, and to facilitate the employment of industry leading experts (see responses to Q10/11).

3. Clarify intended audience and outcomes of research

A better understanding of the VET workforce is valuable, but a clearer view of who this research is for in terms of its intended audience, and how this research is expected to be used, would help ensure it is effective and JSA achieves its desired outcomes.

The scope, structure, and presentation of VET workforce data will vary significantly depending on whether it is designed to inform government and associated policy makers, stakeholders within the sector, or to attract new entrants from outside the workforce. Establishing a clear and explicit audience and purpose will ensure the data is targeted, strategically framed, and capable of driving meaningful action.

Our responses to the specific discussion questions are provided in Attachment A.

We look forward to seeing the outcomes of this research.

Yours sincerely,

Alex White

Chief Executive Officer

Victorian TAFE Association

Attachments

Attachment A: VTA response to specific discussion questions

VTA response to specific discussion questions

Below provides feedback against the questions in the Discussion Paper. We have answered all questions, but the numbering is our own.

Occupational mapping

1. In your view, how would a profile and pathway-based approach to occupational mapping contribute to understanding the VET workforce?

- Creating a more comprehensive picture of the current workforce (including non-teaching staff) will give the sector the ability to identify gaps, issues and needs, as well as a long-term view of how the workforce is evolving and responding to emerging economic and social needs. This work will enhance the predictability of future trends and ability of the sector to plan with more confidence and purpose.
- The occupational mapping appears to provide a much broader and more inclusive approach to the VET workforce, beyond the often-narrow lens that focusses on teachers and trainers as the main occupational grouping. For example, the occupational profile in Victorian TAFEs demonstrates an almost equal percentage of teaching staff to non-teaching staff. This changes the perspective of who the VET workforce is, the range of occupations within it, the diversity of people needed to work in it, and the multiple pathways that lead to it.
- Ensuring occupational mapping and data collection can be adapted to different audiences will make this work even more valuable.

2. Does the VET workforce mapping presented in the VET Workforce Study (Figure 1) reflect your understanding of the current VET workforce? Could any roles be added?

- Broadly speaking the workforce occupational map is reflective of the TAFE (and wider VET) workforce. Refining that understanding further and keeping the naming of work roles flexible will assist with widening the pool of potential people attracted to working in the VET sector.
- It is essential that any data collection or mapping exercise reflects the full diversity of roles within TAFE and VET. The roles listed under each category should remain indicative only and not exhaustive, acknowledging that different sectors will use different language to describe roles, and different providers will offer more or different opportunities and pathways to roles in VET.

3. What would be most useful to know, or which resources would be beneficial to have, related to VET workforce roles and career pathways?

- Data and insights to support the development of clear, strategic workforce goals would be highly beneficial for TAFE workforce planning – helping TAFEs to attract and retain high-quality staff.
- For medium to long term planning, it would be useful to be able to identify VET workforce trends that are linked to wider trends in the economy, client expectations, technological change, a rapidly transforming labour market, and industry and government priorities.

- Trends in industry and government investment can also be good indicators of where the skills and training needs for the future are emerging and changing, and how the VET workforce will need to adapt.
- Data should include baseline data including who the current VET workforce is in terms of age, qualifications, diversity, time spent in the VET workforce, and reasons for entry in and exit out of the VET workforce.
- Data should also include patterns of change to the baseline demographic data above, drivers of change, how is it being encouraged, supported and harnessed. Analysis could include:
 - How the workforce is changing in response to student diversity and industry/occupational changes – who are the students? what are the industries? and what are their needs?
 - What do these patterns of change imply for VET work organisation and workforce development?
- Data on how VET teachers/trainers as dual professionals are maintaining their industry currency and pedagogy skills, and what successful strategies are being implemented to do this.
- How industry experts are being engaged in the VET workforce and what are the successful pathways and strategies being used to encourage them to participate.
- Easily accessible information on career pathways into all areas of the VET workforce, including salary/remuneration data for attraction and retention.
- Noting that collating, storing and standardising this data may be resource intensive, consideration should be given to providing funding to TAFEs and other institutions.

VET workforce data strategy

4. Do you believe the proposed work on VET workforce data collection and collation under consideration could contribute to building a better understanding of the VET workforce?

- The VET workforce plays a critical role in preparing the broader Australian workforce. VET graduates close workforce gaps, lift productivity, and improve the Australian economy. The VET workforce is continuously evolving due to the dynamic environment in which it operates. It is important, therefore, that the VET sector is able to plan for the future based on reliable projections of its own workforce.
- The data collection and collation proposed should assist them in this task by:
 - Ensuring reliable data and future projections and improving the understanding of the statistical information that underpins these.
 - Providing data on the 'geography' of the VET workforce, where VET workers are located, and where they will be needed into the future. For example, many of the new energy and climate related roles are likely to be needed in regional areas which may necessitate relocation or concentration of the need for training and VET delivery.

- Identifying the weaknesses and gaps in the currently available data which could impede future workforce planning.

5. Are there any alternative approaches to what is presented that you think would be important to consider as part of a VET workforce data strategy?

- It is important to recognise that the VET workforce is not homogeneous. The profile of the TAFE workforce, as employees of public sector vocational education providers, is different to other parts of the VET workforce, such as those employed by non-TAFE providers or those providing training within enterprises. For example, the TAFE workforce will have different qualification levels, more consistent access to professional development, opportunities for progress and promotion across a range of roles, more permanent employment, more secure employment, and different industrial arrangements. These factors all bring different dimensions to an understanding of the VET workforce.

6. Do you know of any particular considerations in your workforce context (e.g. regional skills mix or student cohort needs), relating to VET workforce data collection activities, that should be considered?

This study could consider:

- **The impact of Free TAFE on the TAFE workforce.**
 - Free TAFE has been a feature of the Victorian TAFE sector since 2019. The increased diversity and different needs of this cohort have resulted in the TAFE workforce needing to adapt instructional and organisational activities to support these cohorts.
 - For example, students who have been out of education for an extended period or have had interrupted educational experiences may need additional care and support. In response to this, there has been an increased focus on teaching foundation skills programs, and support staff have played an increasingly important role in assisting students.
- **How the VET workforce is using AI and new technologies.**
 - The VET workforce must consider how to adapt instructional and organisational activities to new technologies. Data on digital literacy and AI literacy, and the experience of VET staff using AI to create learning resources, to streamline administration activities and to aid productivity would be valuable in the workforce context.
- **How Industrial Relations Agreements in TAFEs are influencing the professionalisation of the workforce.**
 - For example, in Victoria over the next 3-5 years the industrial relations environment will be driving the professionalisation of the staff in order to attain the qualifications required to advance to higher remuneration classifications. This includes specific programs to encourage TAFE teachers to undertake professional development in adult education.
- **The qualifications the VET workforce has.**

- We could better project the number of qualified people in the VET workforce pipeline, and have more informed workforce planning, if we had more granular data on qualifications.
- For example, the proportion of TAFE and VET professionals holding post-school qualifications, and the number of people actively undertaking or holding the TAE qualification, the assessor only qualifications, those actively working towards a training and assessment credential and the industries/employment sectors they are coming from would enable better projections of the number of qualified people in the VET workforce pipeline and assist with workforce planning.
- **The age profile of the VET workforce.**
 - There has been ample data collection around the ageing of the current VET workforce and the challenges this poses to future workforce planning. What is less clear is the age demographic of newer entrants to the workforce, what stage they are at in their career, what roles they are filling, and what the successful strategies are that are attracting them to VET.
- **Targeted recruitment and development for specific cohorts of the workforce, to support cohorts of students.**
 - Experience in Victoria has highlighted the need to improve the learning experience and outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students by building a capable and culturally responsive workforce. This could be supported by targeted recruitment and development efforts of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander VET workforce, as well as by building the capability of the broader workforce.

VET Workforce Research Program

7. What opportunities do you foresee for the research program to embed and apply research to strengthen the VET workforce?

- The JSA research program can direct the debate about the fundamental importance of strengthening the VET workforce. JSA should position its research to:
 - support the alignment of workforce development with the needs and expectations of students and clients, and developing a workforce that can meet those needs and expectations; and
 - deliver against industry and government policies and priorities.

8. How do you think the various elements of the VET workforce research program that JSA is presenting in this discussion paper could best achieve this?

- It is critical that the VET workforce, including TAFE, is directly involved throughout all stages of the research program. JSA should ensure maximum consultation with the VET workforce and involve VET professionals as applied researchers.
- Engaging those who work within the system ensures evidence is grounded in operational realities and will ensure the full diversity of roles across the sector are reflected. Involving the workforce also helps identify practical solutions and reduces

the risk that externally designed interventions do not align with the reality of VET delivery.

9. What outputs and dissemination methods from the research program are key to maximise impact from the research?

- The JSA should produce Plain English reports with actionable outcomes and strategies to activate the research. Outputs must go beyond policy observations to include practical strategies, implementation pathways, key milestones, and tools that are clear on how providers should apply them. This will ensure research makes a meaningful difference.

JSA research into VET workforce casualisation

10. What do you consider are the main Drivers and impacts of using casual and fixed-term contract employment in the VET sector?

- Some of the important drivers of using casual and fixed-term contract employment relate to the benefits for both the employer and the employees:
 - Casualisation can support the engagement of new and existing suitably qualified teachers from industry into VET, to ensure the workforce has contemporary industry experience.
 - Given the nature of VET teaching and/or industry vocations, some roles can sometimes tend towards casualisation to allow teachers to have other industry employment at the same time, so do not want to be committed fulltime to VET teaching or contracted work.
 - All existing teachers require industry currency, and many disciplines require teachers to still be working in industry, or to return to industry for currency (e.g. nursing registration).
 - The casual hourly rate can be seen as attractive, and can be more aligned with industry salaries.
 - Providing a contingent, surge workforce of teaching, assessment and administrative staff for academic and organisational peak times.
 - Flexibility for both staff and organisations.
- Potential impacts can include:
 - If poorly managed and not mutually agreed by employees, casualisation can come at the price of staff morale, lack of loyalty, trust and insufficient investment in workforce development and planning.
 - There can be pros and cons for staff, students and organisations that impact the use of casual and fixed-term contracts (see response to Question 11).
- The VTA considers casualisation as an area that requires dedicated attention.

11. Do you see any benefits of using casual employment in VET, and have you seen examples of where casualisation has been useful for staff, providers or students?

- Casualisation has a place in the VET workforce if the circumstances are mutually beneficial to the employer and the employee, and where casual employment does not become the dominant mode of engagement. Casualisation is not beneficial or supported where it keeps staff in the 'limbo' of insecure work for long periods without the prospect of ongoing work or full employment. Outside situations where genuine surge or contingent work is needed, it is preferred that work is ongoing, regular and systematic.
- Casualisation provides flexibility and is the preferred choice of some workers e.g. industry experts, people returning to work, people needing flexible hours. Women employees are the most likely to be casuals, making up 55.2% of the casual VET teaching workforce. Even if there is a personal preference for flexible work on the part of the casual employee, casual employment contributes to systematic gender pay inequality and other structural discrimination.
- The Victorian TAFE sector has a low percentage of casual workers (12.6%), which the sector is very proud and supportive of. The Victorian TAFE Teachers Agreement caps casual employment at 20% of teaching hours per semester. This cap provides TAFE institutes with appropriate flexibility while ensuring teaching staff have job security, promoting conversion to permanent roles, ensuring adequate permanent staffing, and preventing exploitation by limiting reliance on short-term contracts. The cap allows TAFEs to engage casuals for genuine purposes, like engaging industry experts or filling short-term gaps. The cap on casual workers enables a balanced approach that allows for this flexibility without undermining overall job security.
- This position is also responsive to and reflects a broader industrial landscape and national standards that have moved towards and recognised the value of a more permanent workforce.

12. What effect do you think casualisation has on teaching quality and learner outcomes?

- Casualisation and the uncertain future it supports can have a negative effect on the morale and output of teachers who would prefer to be permanent. This is especially the case where there is unrestrained or uncapped casualisation. Casualisation has a negative impact on enhancing professional capability, as non-permanent staff with shorter tenure may have less opportunity to participate in continuous professional development, and employers have limited incentive to invest in the professional development of casual staff.
- The positive and negative impacts of casualisation are felt first by staff but can then flow on to students. When staff are supported and committed, the flow on effects for students are positive and they receive a better education and training experience. However, it is critical that the casual employment of staff, particularly teaching staff, is mutually agreed and in response to genuine surge needs. When this is not the case, there is a risk of disengagement from the teacher which may affect student learning outcomes including completion.
- Casualisation can support greater industry currency and positively impact quality of learning for students from teachers who have the most up to date industry experience. From a student perspective, with specialised unit delivery casual teachers can also bring in current knowledge and specialised understanding i.e. Family violence in Community Services.

Attachment A: VTA response



- The use of casual employment ensures the continuity of education delivery and provides stability of employment in communities, especially in regional environments. It also provides the ability to bring in casual markers for assessments at peak periods providing additional support for teachers who are at full capacity.