

Outcomes of national research consultations

**National Vocational Education and
Training (VET) Research and
Evaluation**

**National Research Priorities
2007-2010**

Introduction

Research into Australia's vocational education and training (VET) sector is commissioned and undertaken by a variety of government agencies and non-government organisations, industry and provider bodies, academic researchers, private consultants and VET practitioners.

To give greater coordination to this research effort, national research priorities for the VET sector are determined from time to time. These priorities are determined by the Ministerial Council for Vocational and Technical Education (MCVTE), on advice from the NCVET Board.

The priorities are used to guide research commissioned under the National VET Research and Evaluation Program – managed by NCVET on behalf of the Australian and state governments – and to inform developments in Australian VET statistical collections. They also serve as a guide to NCVET's own research activities. Other agencies and organisations may also elect to frame their research activities within the national priorities.

NCVET embarked on a process for consulting with stakeholders in the VET sector in the first quarter of 2007 on what should form the sector's next set of research priorities.¹

This document sets out the policy context in which those consultations took place before describing what was learnt from the consultations and the decision arrived at by Ministers. It then outlines the next steps that NCVET will be following to give effect to the Ministerial direction.

Policy context

In February 2006, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) agreed to a new National Reform Agenda, one designed to further raise living standards and improve services by lifting the nation's productivity and workforce participation over the next decade.

COAG agreed that an outcomes framework should be used to measure progress. Outcomes that are relevant to the VET sector are to:

- increase the proportion of young people making a smooth transition from school to work or further study, and
- increase the proportion of adults who have the skills and qualifications needed to enjoy active and productive working lives.

At the same COAG meeting, a package of measures to address skills shortages through a national approach to apprenticeships, training and skills recognition was also endorsed.

¹ The previous set of priorities were set by the Ministerial Council in November 2005. These were:

- Contemporary models for employment based training
- Industry-by-industry approach to skills planning
- Higher level VET training (at certificate IV level and above)
- Flexible funding models
- Private return to VET
- Welfare to work reforms: How VET can best help
- VET workforce renewal: role of reward and recognition and information retention systems
- Matching VET offerings to regional development skills
- Initiatives for key equity groups (people with a disability and Indigenous Australians)

15 projects were commissioned by NCVET under these priorities during 2006.

The Ministerial Council for Vocational Technical Education at its last meeting set two major challenges for the national training system over the next decade:

- the need to deliver significantly more high-level qualifications to meet the skill needs of the Australian economy – growth of 2% per annum in qualifications completed at diploma level and above as a first step in meeting the projected requirement, and
- increasing education and training opportunities for adults with no formal qualifications, to improve their employment prospects.

The National Senior Officials Committee (NSOC) recently assessed the VET system and identified the need for a third wave of reform, to build on the industry led system with a focus on directly connecting skills development to economic growth and enterprise performance.

Outcomes of national stakeholder consultations

A discussion paper, *Identifying research priorities for the VET sector 2007-08*, was released by NCVET in January, 2007. The paper called for written submissions by 9 March, 2007.

Between January-April 2007, NCVET officials met with 25 primary stakeholder organisations. Written submissions were also received from 22 organisations and 7 individuals. These are detailed in Appendix A.

The consultations found widespread support for limiting the number of research priorities to no more than five, and strongly concentrating the research effort in those areas. It was also felt that the priorities should guide research activities through to 2010, so long as there was scope to deal with any new issues that might emerge.

Stakeholders wished to see research activities closely aligned with and supporting the strategic directions of the sector, especially those being progressed through the Council of Australian Governments (COAG). It was argued that research should support these national agendas by:

- identifying interventions and programs that work
- demonstrating the benefits and impact of reform
- developing a better understanding of the costs and benefits of various reform initiatives, and
- determining the impediments to reform implementation, and strategies for overcoming these impediments.

There is much interest in critically appraising many of the recent policy initiatives and reforms, the three most commonly mentioned being the proposed outcome measures to be introduced under AQTF 2007, the Commonwealth skills vouchers, and the introduction of Australian Technical Colleges. This raises a broader question about the extent to which research funds should be put to policy assessment, particularly for very recent changes.

The NCVET Board met in March to consider how to frame its advice based on the written submissions and notes from the face-to-face consultation meetings. Subsequent to this, the Board tested its advice with the National Quality Council and the National Industry Skills Committee. Following these discussions, the priority areas were refined accordingly.

The refined priorities were discussed and approved by the National Senior Officials Committee in May, 2007. Finally, the priorities were approved by the Ministerial Council for Vocational and Technical Education in June, 2007.

The five research priority areas

I. Growing the labour supply: *by examining how VET can support greater participation in the workforce, especially for equity groups whose participation is relatively low.*

Given current patterns of labour force participation and demographic projections, the aggregate labour force participation rate is set to decline in coming years. One means of addressing this potential constraint on growth is to identify groups where current participation rates are relatively low, and examine what role vocational education and training might play in supporting greater participation. Relevant groups include Indigenous Australians, people with a disability, refugees, young people "at risk" and prime-age and older men and women with low educational attainment and literacy levels.

Key research topics under this priority include:

- What attitudes of employers or individuals act as barriers to workforce participation of groups poorly represented in the labour market?
- What strategies are successful in taking disengaged and disadvantaged groups through training to ongoing employment?
- What kind of support mechanisms are required to realise these goals?
- What are the dynamics of how people move into work? What helps them move? What skills do they need to do it?
- To what extent are (i) lack of employability skills and (ii) poor literacy and numeracy skills barriers to labour force participation?

II. Motivating individuals to participate in VET: *by understanding why people choose to, or not to, participate in VET, what drives demand for VET and what outcomes it offers participants in the medium to long term.*

A good deal is known about student participation in any given year, and also about short-term outcomes. If, however, we are to motivate individuals to participate in VET we need to effectively understand the ways in which individuals do or do not participate in VET over the course of their working lives, what drives their demand for VET, and what returns arise from it over the medium to long-term. There is most interest in tracking the transitions of young people as this time is seen as pivotal to promoting successful outcomes over the life cycle.

Key research topics under this priority area include:

- What are the determinants of student demand for VET?
- What attracts young people to participate in VET? What deters them?
- How and why do people reskill and upgrade their skills?
- What course structures and teaching and learning methods are attractive to people? Does the apprenticeship and traineeship model, for example, attract people to particular occupations?
- In what circumstances do students opt to undertake full qualifications or part qualifications (skill sets)?
- What are the private returns to VET, taking account of age, prior educational attainment and employment experience, and level and field of study?

III. Sustaining a skills base through apprenticeships and traineeships: *by identifying ways of maximising the number of people who complete their apprenticeship and traineeship.*

Skill shortages remain high on the agenda. Industry groups see traditional apprenticeships as the main way in which to provide a sustainable skills base for industries such as mining, manufacturing and construction among others. Commencements in the trades have grown in response to skill shortages, but completions have not; indeed, recent evidence shows completion rates to have fallen. There is considerable interest in identifying ways of maximising the number of completions for any given cohort of commencements, and also in strategies for increasing the training rate. There is also interest in a stocktake of where we have got to with school-based apprenticeships and traineeships.

Key research topics under this priority area include:

- Is the level of non-completion a cause for concern? What are the causes of non-completion?
- Why does non-completion vary so much from jurisdiction to jurisdiction? What lessons can be learnt from jurisdictions with high completion rates?
- What strategies can be adopted by governments to counteract the effect of high levels of non-completion?
- What outcomes are experienced by school-based apprentices and trainees? How important are these apprenticeships and traineeships in providing a pathway to ongoing employment in the field?

IV. Enhancing the productive capacity of enterprises: *by ensuring that employers are well-placed to maintain the skills of their workers and to adapt to new work practices and technologies.*

VET has a key role to play in ensuring that enterprises and their workforces are ready to adapt to new work practices and new technologies, and more broadly in fostering innovative practice in industry and promoting regional economic development. Employers adopt a range of strategies in renewing and replenishing the skills of their workforce, but these are not yet adequately understood.

Key research topics under this priority area include:

- How do employers conceptualise and meet their skill needs?
- What is good practice by employers in renewing and replenishing skills of their existing workforce?
- To what extent do employers make use of formal learning approaches in meeting their skill needs, compared with non-formal and informal approaches? From where do they source their formal learning?
- How can the motivation and capacity for enterprises to promote ongoing workforce skills development be developed?
- What role do training providers play in enabling employers to improve productivity? What role do they play in promoting innovation and regional economic development?
- To what extent are employers making use of high-level qualifications, especially in new and emerging areas?

V. Enabling VET providers to compete effectively: *by identifying the barriers VET providers face to operating effectively in a competitive environment.*

The demarcation between schools, VET and higher education has become increasingly blurred. Students can undertake VET programs in schools and in higher education institutions. Schools are moving up the AQF ladder and higher education institutions are moving down, crowding the market. Competition for students is growing. The distinctive features of the VET system – competency-based training, breadth of qualifications offered, the regulatory environment – may, in fact, make it less well-placed to be adaptive and compete than providers from other sectors. This will require measurement frameworks to assess whether providers are competing effectively and operating efficiently.

Key research topics under this priority area include:

- What barriers do VET providers face in operating in a competitive but highly regulated environment, noting that VET providers are competing in some cases with providers from other education sectors?
- How strong and effective are the current articulation and credit transfer arrangements between VET and higher education?
- Are current conceptions of competency working for learners and employers? What alternative models might be considered, and what would be their impact on training packages, qualifications, assessment, and teaching and learning approaches? How does the system ensure industry confidence in the competency of VET graduates?
- How well does the structure of VET qualifications in the Australian Qualifications Framework meet the needs of learners and employers?
- What capabilities do RTOs need to identify opportunities and compete effectively?
- How do we judge whether RTOs are competing effectively and operating efficiently? What measures might assist these judgments?

There are two areas in the priority areas with significant implications for the statistical program. For work to be undertaken on tracking student pathways and outcomes would require a serious investment in developing new longitudinal data sources or in creating synthetic longitudinal data sets. In addition, there is considerable support for an apprentice and trainee tracking survey. These are both matters to be taken up by the National Training Statistics Committee.

Ministers also:

- noted that mechanisms exist for undertaking work in newly emerging areas, and
- requested an annual report from the NCVET Board on progress in each of the priority areas

Where to next?

In 2007 NCVET will seek proposals from research centres or consortia to provide a three year program of research aligned with one or more of the five national research priority areas.

Funding rounds for a range of individual targeted research projects aligned with the five national research priorities will be advertised in March and September 2008.

Appendix A

Meetings with primary stakeholder organisations

Name of stakeholder	Location	Date
Adult Learning Australia	Canberra	26 February
Australian Bureau of Statistics	Canberra	15 February
Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry	Melbourne	21 February
Australian Council for Independent Vocational Colleges	Sydney	23 February
Australian Council of Trade Unions	Melbourne	21 February
Australian Education Union	Canberra	13 January
Australian Industry Group	Melbourne	13 February
Australian VET Research Association Executive	Sydney	5 March
Business Council of Australia	Melbourne	12 February
Disability Advisory Taskforce	Sydney	6 March
Council of Small Business Organisations Australia	Canberra	27 February
Department of Education (Tas)	Hobart	28 February
Department of Industry and Regional Development – OTTE (Vic)	Melbourne	6 February
Department of Education and Training (ACT)	Canberra	2 March
Department of Education and Training (NSW)	Sydney	5 March
Department of Education and Training (WA)	Perth	8 March
Department of Education, Training and the Arts (Qld)	Brisbane	19 February
Department of Education, Science and Training	Canberra	26 February
Department of Employment, Education and Training (NT)	Darwin	8 February
Department of Further Education, Employment, Science & Technology (SA)	Adelaide	13 February
Group Training Australia	Melbourne	12 February
Industry Skills Councils CEOs	Canberra	8 March
National Industry Skills Committee	Melbourne	12 April
National Quality Council	Melbourne	29 March
Reframing the Future	Adelaide	20 February
TAFE Directors Australia	Melbourne	26 February
TVET Australia	Melbourne	6 February

Submissions received from individuals and organisations

Submissions by Individuals (7)
Bartlett, Raelene (Carrick Institute of Education)
Howard, Damien (Phoenix Consulting)
Rushbrook, Peter; Brennan Kemmis, Ros; Smith, Erica; Timma, Hilary and Green, Annette (VET Team at Charles Sturt University)
Smith, Andrew (Charles Sturt University)
Smith, Peter and Blake, Damian (Deakin University)
Tratter, Renate (Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation)
Watson, Bruce (Heads Together)
Submissions by Organisations (22)
Aboriginal Education and Training Council (WA)
Aboriginal Education Union
Australian Council of Adult Literacy
Australian Vocation Education and Training Research Association
Bendigo Regional Institute of TAFE
Business SA
Department of Education (Tas)
Department of Education, Science and Training
Department of Education and Training (NSW)
Department of Education, Training and the Arts (Qld)
Department of Employment, Education and Training (NT)
Department of Further Education, Employment, Science and Technology (SA)
Equity Research Centre
Flexible Learning Advisory Group
Group Training Australia
Industry Skills Councils
Office of Small Business
Office of the Registrar of Aboriginal Corporations
RMIT University
Training and Employment Recognition Council (Qld)
Victorian Council of Adult Literacy and Basic Education
Victorian TAFE Association
Total: 29 submissions