

Key findings from NCVER's stakeholder engagement

The National Centre for Vocational Education Research

8 June 2017



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Introduction

The National Centre for Vocational Research (NCVER) is at a pivotal stage of its evolution. The Vocational Education and Training (VET) system continues to grow and change: the market has proven to be highly sensitive to policy reform; there have been significant innovations in training delivery; and employers' expectations about the quality and relevance of training provided in the system are higher than ever.

As Australia's economy undergoes major structural change and the future of work becomes a central concern for governments, businesses, communities and families, NCVER can serve as an unparalleled source of definitive advice on the national VET system's internal dynamics, its responsiveness to external impacts, and the educational and employment outcomes that it produces.

Aware of this context – and the opportunities and challenges it presents – the Board of NCVER commissioned Nous Group to engage with the company's shareholders (the Commonwealth and State and Territory Governments) and stakeholders (industry representatives, Registered Training Organisations, researchers, regulators and others) to produce insights to inform its new strategic plan for 2017-20. The Board was keen to understand the range of perspectives – and it is quite a range – about NCVER's current role and where it needs to focus into the future.

In all, Nous conducted some 60 interviews between November 2016 and March 2017 and analysed the 537 responses to a national survey about NCVER.¹ This document summarises the main findings from the engagement process, and is offered both to add context to the new strategic plan and as a means to close the loop with those whom we consulted.

Nous would like to take this opportunity to thank all those who gave us their time by completing the survey and/or participating in interviews. We would also like to thank NCVER management and the Board for engaging with the findings in a considered way, and commend them for wanting to share the key takeaways with a wider audience.

Key findings from the consultation process

This document outlines insights from interviewees and survey respondents around NCVER's role in the system; data, research and analysis products; and its engagement approach.

Role in the system: NCVER plays a critical role in the VET system despite different interpretations of its mandate

Summary: NCVER has been a valued source of data and analysis through a period of intensive reform. It has sought to adapt to the times, but it has been hard to keep up with the changing expectations of data users. NCVER's vision is to both inform and influence players in the VET sector, but stakeholders and shareholders put different weight on these two roles and interpret them differently.

¹ We received 537 responses to the survey, 45 percent of which were supplied by RTOs, 15 percent came from universities or individual researchers and 12 percent from government officials.

NCVER's independence and its ability to influence government are central concerns.

The vast majority of stakeholders see NCVER as an important institution that provides unique insights about the sector for those working in it or with it. Many acknowledged the growing value of NCVER as the VET system becomes larger, more complex and more dynamic.

NCVER's vision is "to inform and influence vocational education and training in Australia through credible, reliable and responsive research and statistical services". Stakeholders particularly value NCVER's independence and ability to look objectively at the consequences of different policy and funding interventions. They understand that governments, as owners, are the prime drivers of NCVER's research agenda but would like to see NCVER having more impact. This often translated to a desire for NCVER to offer a distinct point of view that plays into public debates.

For shareholders, however, NCVER should not be a source of policy advice or informed opinion, but of insights that can feed into the policy-making process. For them, influence comes from anticipating policy-related questions and providing the evidence to inform the work of government.

Views differ on where NCVER's focus should be

There is a related, broader set of questions about how the company's core business ought to be defined. This lack of clarity colours how stakeholders assess whether their expectations of NCVER's performance and potential are being met. Insights from consultation included the following:

- While the data collection and analysis role is uncontested, the research role is less clear
- Some feel NCVER's role should be to better leverage its combined data and research capability
- There is interest in seeing NCVER's focus shift to serve a broader constituency, including to capture more 'demand-side' information
- In addition to wider coverage, many would like to see more depth through tailored and granular data analysis
- Some shareholders question whether NCVER must always work at the national level
- Many expect NCVER to take a stronger leadership role on data improvement and innovation

NCVER managers acknowledge the challenge of maintaining an uneasy balance between these competing interests.

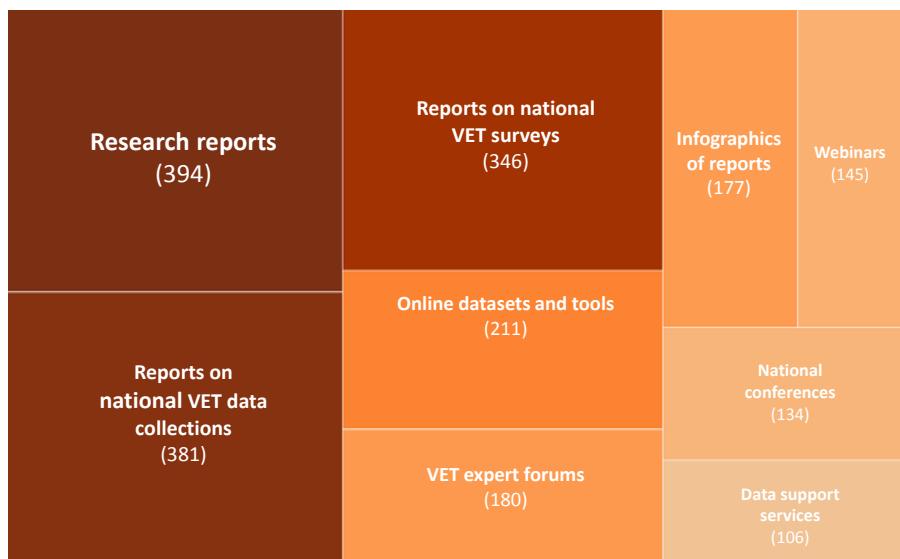
Products and services: NCVER's data, analysis and research products are valued and could be further improved

Stakeholders and shareholders alike place great store in the national VET data collections and the analysis and research that NCVER provides. They are keen to see even more value derived from the company's work. Indeed it because there is such interest in NCVER's products and services that they often were keen to suggest areas for further improvement, building on progress to date.

The NCVER survey results showed that the majority of respondents see NCVER as providing the definitive view on VET activity and outcomes. Interviewees identified NCVER's reports and online datasets as the most used and valued products, though shareholders were occasionally critical of the former especially. (This is discussed further below.)

The survey revealed that NCVER's research reports, reports on national VET data collections, and reports on national VET surveys are the three most valued products overall. (See Figure 1 over.)

Figure 1: Response to survey question 'What NCVER products and services do you value the most? Select up to, but no more than five products from the following list'



Data: NCVER's data stewardship is core business and so cannot suffer the risks of complacency

Summary: Stakeholders and shareholders are increasingly data literate and hungry for direct access to source databases. This elevates expectations of the timeliness, quality and ease of access to the national VET datasets. There is heightened interest also in more demand-side information and RTO benchmarking data. Overall NCVER's role as a steward of the national system is valued, and many would like to see it assert its leadership to drive improvements. However this is not something that NCVER can do unilaterally.

NCVER data provides a source of truth for the VET system and users seek more and easier access

The national collection is NCVER's greatest asset and responsibility, and interviewees generally hold high regard for NCVER's ability to provide credible and reliable data. In particular, the introduction of the Total VET Activity dataset, while suffering from some early issues with quality assurance, was hailed by many as a significant achievement. RTO representatives were willing to continue to provide data, including in order to further build the collection, as long as there was scope to access the data at a level that can inform operational decisions.

Many interviewees found NCVER's databases hard to engage with and expressed a desire for a more user-friendly entry point and navigation system for its main data collections. They often want to be able to drill down further to obtain a regional or qualification or provider-type view. Some RTOs would be keen to benchmark their performance against others.

There are concerns about quality and timeliness, not all of which can be addressed by NCVER alone

Timeliness is a major concern for many as there can often be quite a lag in the process of cleaning and validating data then analysing for the purposes of producing a report. In addition to compromising the value of the information once released, the lag exacerbated a perception, already held by some, that NCVER is too 'backward-looking'.

Several interviewees questioned the quality of data made available through NCVER releases, and many expressed frustration about the timeliness of data releases. They want NCVER to reduce any time lags within its control and work assertively but collaboratively with shareholders and the provider community to accelerate the provision of reliable data. Ideally they would like access to data that provides a close-to-real-time representation of market dynamics, with some proposing automatic extraction of data from states and territories and/or through a direct upload from RTOs.

Analysis: NCVER's statistical analysis products have been reliable but more is expected of them

Summary: NCVER's statistical analysis products have been greatly valued and are generally seen as being reliable. But as with the data collection, there is appetite for deeper, more detailed analysis, delivered more quickly. Some shareholders think NCVER could more fully leverage the data for which it is responsible. Stakeholders assume the analysis is done for policy-makers, and would appreciate the needs of industry and providers being taken more into account. Most would be prepared to pay for access to bespoke analysis.

NCVER's analytics products and services are appreciated, and there is appetite for more

NCVER's statistical analytics products are generally well-regarded by stakeholders, and many find them easy to understand and digest. For time-poor interviewees, they welcomed the quick 'snapshot' as something to bring them quickly up-to-speed. In addition, a number of stakeholders and shareholders commented that NCVER staff are remarkably approachable and helpful in talking through the analysis and any findings.

Interviewees stated, however, that NCVER's analysis does not always go far enough to inform their understanding of developments in the sector. While they acknowledge that NCVER's primary purpose is to inform government decision-making, many stakeholders would like access to more timely and more penetrating analysis, with the implications of the findings made more apparent.

They also are keen to see a 'refresh' of some of the statistical products and more evidence of NCVER's use of new data analysis packages.

Many would like to see NCVER explore different avenues to tailor and 'push' its analysis

During our interviews, several ideas emerged about how to enable access to more bespoke statistical reports from NCVER. One was based around the concept of an 'online-portal' or 'dashboard' view, with key metrics and trends presented in an easy-to-read way, designed to meet the needs of a particular constituency. The portal would be automatically updated with when NCVER's data is refreshed. Others suggested a subscription service where stakeholders could pay for a higher level of service and more bespoke analytical products.

Research: Stakeholders value NCVER's research products and identified some areas for improvement

Summary: Stakeholders value NCVER's research products as a reflection of its independence and ability to 'hold up a mirror' to government policy, and would like to have more input into the research program. Shareholders seek insights to inform policy and would welcome a chance to review reports before publication. They are also interested in research that relates to a sub-set of jurisdictional interests. Generally there is an appetite among shareholders and stakeholders for more forward-looking analysis and research based on more recent data.

NCVER's research reports are highly valued, though there is room for improvement

Stakeholders generally assess the quality of NCVER's research products to be high, though it is a mixed picture. Interviewees praised NCVER's researchers for the detail and rigour of their reports. Many attribute this to the depth of expertise in NCVER about the VET system and appreciate the opportunity to discuss the research in NCVER-convened forums.

Several interviewees said they had observed a marked improvement in the readability of NCVER's research reports in recent years, with a more accessible, less academic tone and useful summaries. However, the survey revealed that some saw room to strengthen the 'credibility' and 'relevance' of NCVER's research. Also we heard feedback from some who said they found the reports to be too academic. Business and RTO stakeholders in particular would welcome more use of plain English.

Many would like to see a more 'forward-looking' research agenda

When asked about research priorities, industry representatives were most interested in research on apprenticeships and traineeships (including as separate cohorts). They also wanted more on:

- Quality – its dimensions and how it is assessed
- Different models of training
- How industry works in relation to entitlements and to training produces
- Connections between higher education and VET, and use of qualifications and the lower and upper ends
- Differences in funding for qualifications in different states and territories

RTOs nominated many of these priorities as well – notably concerning apprenticeships and quality considerations. Meanwhile, jurisdictions highlighted such topics as: student pathways and outcomes, including on the usefulness and adaptability of qualifications; international students; and offshore VET provision.

Across the board there was interest in seeing NCVER's focus pivot from explaining the past to analysing current trends in order to inform future decision-making.

NCVER's could better promote its research, and sharpen its timeliness and relevance

Many interviewees were unaware of NCVER's research prospectus and generally shared a desire to have input. In terms of gaining more traction from the research reports, several suggested it would be useful to have summary findings tailored to the interests of different stakeholder groups, so that operational or policy implications were immediately apparent. It would help also if the reports could be issued more quickly after the relevant data is released.

In many cases, the desire for richer, more relevant research has led to direct commissions from NCVER and some thought the quality of NCVER's research would benefit from greater exposure to competition.

Shareholders noted that NCVER would achieve more impact and more productive relationships with governments if it were prepared to share draft reports prior to their finalisation – not to influence the findings but to ensure accuracy and to avoid unwelcome surprises. They advocated a more efficient management of commissioned research projects, and would like to see more 'joined-up' thinking and use of the data collections. Linking the statistical analysis to research work would enable NCVER to extract full value from its assets and produce reports that achieve greater impact.

Engagement with stakeholders: interviewees enjoy their engagement with NCVER and would like more of it

Summary: NCVER's efforts to improve engagement with stakeholders have been appreciated. Stakeholders particularly commend NCVER staff for their assistance in helping to access and interpret data. There is room for more proactive and well-calibrated engagement, with a focus on how NCVER can be an enabler and problem-solver.

NCVER should seek to raise its profile

NCVER has stepped up its outreach to stakeholders, and NCVER's conferences and webinars provide important opportunities for engagement. Nevertheless, many stakeholders believe that NCVER could promote its insights and products better. Several commented that there was insufficient awareness among their own constituencies about NCVER and what it can offer.

This was borne out by the survey results (noting that they were weighted more towards stakeholders rather than shareholders). Only 39% of survey respondents indicated that they agreed or strongly agreed with the statement 'I/my colleagues understand well what NCVER has to offer'.

Stakeholders were particularly interested in the idea of a more differentiated approach to relaying information. For example, they would like to see summary insights from NCVER's data releases or research reports tailored to the respective interests of providers, industry and government (as in "what this means for...") Ideally the product itself might take a different form depending on the main audience. Such an approach, they argued, would increase NCVER's influence.

There are aspects of its engagement approach that could be improved

For government, a particular challenge was identified in building NCVER capability to engage with policy-makers on the evolving agenda. This challenge has been made more difficult with NCVER having been excluded from some key intergovernmental forums but this is being addressed.

Related to this, there is a perception by some that NCVER can be too rigid in its interpretation of what is possible and unwilling to engage in collaborative problem-solving. This is souring some interactions, and the atmosphere is not being helped by a formal approach to consultation. Governments therefore suggested it would be helpful to see less formal engagement by NCVER managers, informed by a better understanding of government and by a disposition to offer up new ideas. In the words of one shareholder, "they're the data experts – they should be telling me what would be most useful".

In most cases shareholders and stakeholders alike acknowledged that engagement is a two-way street and that it was incumbent on all parties to be both proactive and responsive in their dealings with each other.