

DIVERSE VOICES IN VET

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Introduction

The vocational education and training (VET) sector plays a vital role in shaping Australia's workforce by providing individuals with the knowledge, skills and qualifications needed to enter and succeed in the labour market. Including the voices and contributions of a range of stakeholders will ensure the VET sector meets the needs of a diverse population and plays a role in the development of a resilient and adaptable workforce.

This year's 'No Frills' conference, *Diverse Voices in VET*, provides a forum to reflect on and promote dialogue on the broad diversity of the VET sector – its offerings, stakeholders, training providers and student cohorts – and to foster debate on both the challenges and opportunities currently confronting the sector.

This discussion paper reflects on these issues, specifically, the diversity of the VET sector and the ways in which the voices and needs of the various stakeholders are heard, and demonstrates how stakeholder engagement can contribute to innovative policies, practices and programs that fulfil student ambitions and meet workforce skill gaps.

Diversity in VET

In the VET sector, diversity is reflected in the multiple stakeholders involved, each with unique perspectives, challenges and needs. These stakeholders can be broadly categorised as:

- the wide variety of employers participating in the sector
- the types of training providers who deliver VET
- the range of student cohorts undertaking VET.

In addition to these three key categories are industry, unions, governments, regulators, parents and communities.

Some of the stakeholders represent broader groups (for example, industries, communities, priority learners, peak bodies) and influence skills policy and training product development, while others articulate individual needs (for example, students, parents). To add to the diversity, VET also provides training for a wide range of industries and occupations, delivered in many and varied ways.

Types of employers, industries and occupations

The VET sector trains the future workforce for a diversity of employers, both in size and type, from small family-owned businesses and medium-to-large local or national enterprises, to multinational corporations. These employers operate across numerous industries, which cover over 500 occupations¹ (National Training Register, April 2025).

Types of registered training organisations

The approximately 4,035 RTOs² who deliver nationally recognised training include public providers (TAFE institutes, 24); independent or private providers (3,351); enterprise-based (130); community-based (171); school-based (345); and universities (14) (National Training Register, April 2025). The interests of RTOs are represented by peak bodies that are also key VET stakeholders.

Diverse student population

The composition of the VET student population is highly diverse. In 2023³, there were more than 5 million students (5,056, 845) in VET, many of whom belonged to a 'priority group', such as First Nations learners, those with disability, living in regional or remote areas, or of non-English speaking background (table 1).

VET students pursue a variety of outcomes from training: employment, access to further education or training, satisfying a personal interest, or increased confidence and self-esteem (NCVER 2024).

Types of training, levels and funding

The types of training offered are also characterised by their diversity and include foundational literacy, numeracy and digital skills, apprenticeships and traineeships, VET qualification pathways to further study and employment – and even VET in secondary schools. The various levels offered span accredited courses, skill sets and units of competency, some of which are essential for licensing purposes. These can be offered either online, face to face or a blend of both.

Currently, 52 training packages, representing around 1,200 VET programs (National Training Register April 2025), are being delivered across Levels 1 to 6 of the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF), along with the newly introduced vocational degree (Level 7), currently in development.

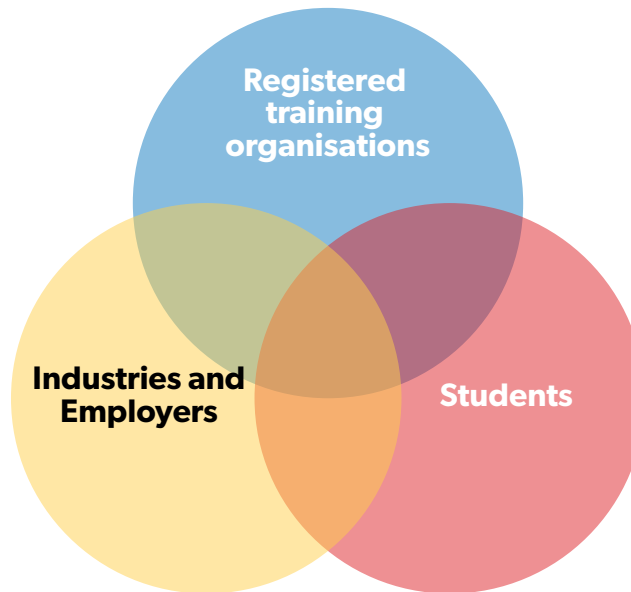
The funding sources accessed by students are also diverse, with VET available either on a fee-for-service basis or with full or partial government funding. Selected programs delivering in-demand skills may be partly subsidised by state and territory training authorities or offered free of charge by publicly funded TAFE institutions.

¹ According to ANZSCO 6-digit codes in the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations' National VET Register in April 2025.

² As at April 2025, based on the National Training Register (<training.gov.au>). Includes only those RTOs with a current registration status.

³ NCVER 2024 data will be available shortly after the release of this No Frills Discussion Paper.

Key VET stakeholders



This discussion paper focuses on the voices and needs of the three key stakeholder groups highlighted earlier, the aim being to explore the current strategies for engaging with each and to identify some of the challenges in addressing their needs. These stakeholder groups are:

- *industry and employers*, who require their workforce to have relevant, up-to-date skills
- *registered training organisations*, who provide the training
- *students* with diverse training motives and aspirations, many of whom experience various barriers to learning.

Industry and employers

Seeking input from industry and employers has long been a priority in the VET sector and is seen as a means for ensuring the effectiveness, relevance and currency of nationally recognised training.

Industry peak bodies, associations, businesses and employer representatives are essential stakeholders in the VET sector as they provide insight into the changing skills and knowledge required by their respective workforces, specifically critical and emerging skill gaps. Industry partnerships and collaboration with VET providers can ensure that: training content is up to date and aligned with industry requirements and labour market needs; employment outcomes for students are increased; and employers benefit from greater workforce productivity.

Collaboration with industry and their peak bodies can foster the creation of apprenticeships and other work-based learning opportunities for students, which enable them to gain practical skills while applying theoretical knowledge in real-world settings. Such experiences enable graduates to be trained according to industry standards, making them more employable and job-ready from the outset. Work-based learning also assists learners to transition from training to employment. Group training organisations (GTOs) work closely with employers to ensure that apprentices' work-based experience aligns with the training, also supporting them to achieve successful completion and employment outcomes.

National and state/territory systems have been established to incorporate industry voices in the development of effective VET programs, thereby ensuring students are equipped with the practical skills and competencies demanded by employers. In 2023 ten national Jobs and Skills Councils (JSCs), were set up. As a network of industry-led organisations, they bring together employers and unions to work in partnership with governments and the VET sector. The role of these bodies is to inform and advise on the existing and emerging skills needs of the economy, assist with finding solutions to skills and workforce challenges, and to map student pathways across sectors, in collaboration with other agencies such as Jobs and Skills Australia (JSA) and the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER).

Similar models for industry engagement occur at the state/territory level; for example, the South Australian Industry Skills Councils and the Western Australian Industry Training Councils advise their state governments on workforce training needs and industry priorities.

An enduring challenge of the industry engagement model adopted by various governments over the years is ensuring that the concerns of small business are heard amongst those of the larger players. Given the time and resource challenges faced by small business in contributing to workforce development, it is important that peak bodies such as the Council of Small Business Organisations Australia (COSBOA) and specific industry associations represent their interests.

The inclusion of objective RTO representation in these advisory networks is a significant issue. Ensuring that the educator voice is heard in the design of training products is crucial, as is fostering an understanding among training providers and employers of the various challenges each faces in the student training relationship for collaboratively dealing with these.

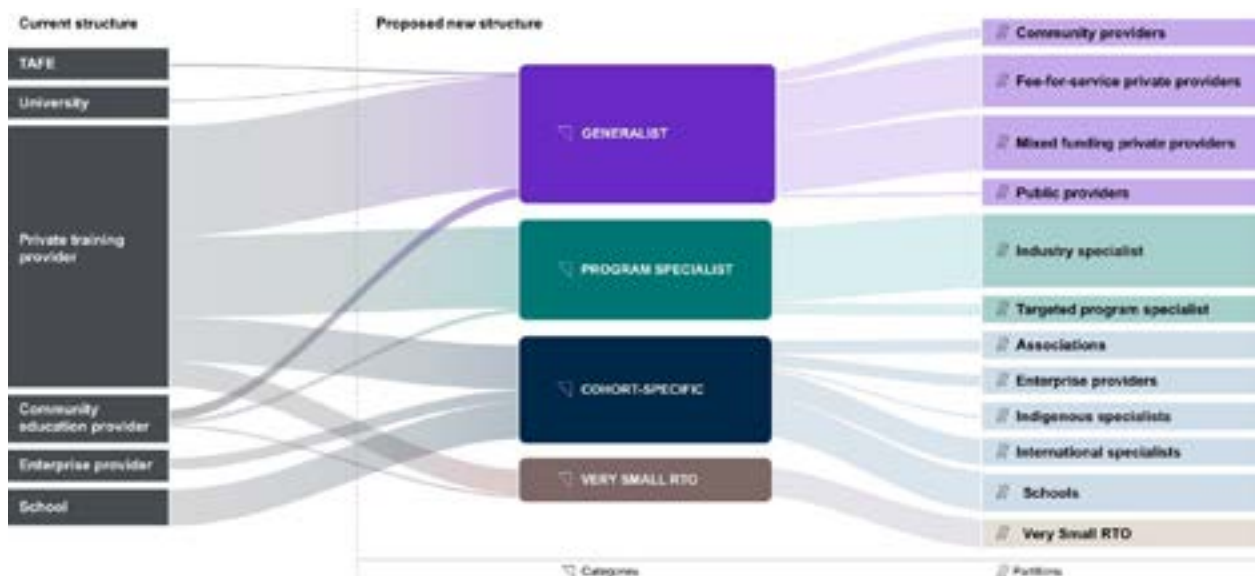
Registered training organisations

There is considerable diversity in the types of RTOs that deliver nationally recognised training, reflecting the complexity of the VET system and the diverse types of training offered and the cohorts who participate.

To enable a more detailed and nuanced analysis of the VET system and its performance, Jobs and Skills Australia (JSA) is developing an RTO typology based on student characteristics, course scope and delivery footprint. This differs from the current approach, which is based on ownership and/or funding source (Jobs and Skills Australia 2024, p.3).

Although not yet finalised, the proposed typology separates RTOs into three main categories: Generalist, Program-focused and Cohort-specific, which are divided into 12 sections, and further subdivided into 45 provider segments. Figure 1 indicates how the existing RTOs typology would be transformed under the proposed, more detailed, typology.

Figure 1 Proposed typology of RTO type



Source: Jobs and Skills Australia 2024. RTO Typology. Methodology Paper. Canberra.

Through the provision of high-quality and relevant training, responsive to current and future job market demands and particularly in-demand skills, RTOs are central to ensuring that the VET sector remains attune to the needs, motivations and career aspirations of both diverse learners and the evolving demands of industry. To achieve this, RTOs actively collaborate and form partnerships with employers, fostering trust and opening opportunities for work placements, apprenticeships and program sponsorship.



RTOs are critical to the process of translating national qualifications into practical, industry-aligned skills and their input can help to shape training design, assessment methods and the integration of new technologies and delivery modes. Ongoing dialogue between RTOs and employers/industry can involve program co-design, validation of training materials, adaptation of assessment tools and practices to meet industry standards, and improvements to course delivery.

Partnerships with businesses, industry groups, community organisations and government agencies have the potential to create sustainable training and employment pathways for students. The use of diverse and culturally sensitive communication channels, such as local media, social media, events, forums and workshops, helps to build trust and encourages industry participation.

RTOs and community-based providers also engage with local communities to understand training needs, enabling them to tailor programs that address unique skills priorities and complex challenges. This alignment enhances training relevance, supports job creation and contributes to local socioeconomic development.

Ongoing community engagement fosters trust and collaboration, improving program effectiveness, especially for marginalised groups facing access barriers. Involving community members in VET program design and delivery decisions strengthens support and ensures responsiveness to local needs while reinforcing the social and economic resilience of local communities.

Communities of practice, whether online or face to face, enable RTOs, industry experts and students to connect, collaborate and learn from one another, enabling the sharing of resources, the development of industry-specific knowledge and the exchange of best practices in vocational education. For students, these communities can provide valuable networking opportunities, mentoring and peer support, all of which enhance their educational experience and employment prospects.

Similarly, the many examples of quality teaching and learning practices among public, private, community-based and enterprise RTOs, tailored to students of varied abilities, could be shared more broadly. VET conferences, professional development workshops, seminars, forums and webinars provide avenues for this to occur.

Students

In 2023, there were over 5 million students in VET, enrolled in over 2 million qualifications (NCVER 2024a).

Students are beneficiaries of the VET sector, which makes their inclusion in training design at the RTO level critical. Listening to the experiences, needs and aspirations of all students, involving them in discussions and encouraging genuine feedback helps to ensure that VET programs are accessible, relevant and inclusive. With their input, RTOs can shape teaching practices, delivery modes and support services, fostering engagement, motivation and successful training and employment outcomes for all students.

The complex and diverse VET system offers students choice of the training provider that best suits their needs. NCVER research has revealed that students generally choose their RTO based on factors such as location, teaching mode and/or timing, fees, affordability and availability of student subsidies, perceived quality and relevance, accessible information and support services (Wibrow 2023, p.7); some students, however, are denied their choice of RTO and course, particularly in rural and remote areas (Brown 2017, p.3).

Students make training choices according to other factors such as to obtain employment, gain extra skills for their current job, get a promotion, improve general skills, start a business, obtain an occupational license, train for a different career, or follow a pathway to gain entry to higher education (NCVER 2024b). These diverse reasons for training mean that not all students intend to complete their qualification.

In order to make informed choices, students benefit from access to 'independent (and trusted), relevant and customised' course information and careers advice, tailored to their needs and circumstances, especially for those of diverse backgrounds (Brown 2017, p.42). This might occur during schooling with advice from teachers, career counsellors and family members, or when making enquiries with an RTO. An assessment of student learning needs at enrolment helps to identify and address potential learning barriers, ensuring that training programs are customised to meet the diverse needs of all learners and establishing appropriate supports for improving retention and completion rates.

Students from various backgrounds, including those from First Nations, regional, rural and remote areas, culturally and linguistically diverse communities and those from low socioeconomic backgrounds, or with disability, mental health issues or learning difficulties can encounter unique barriers to accessing education and achieving success. Learners facing multiple barriers to learning require additional assistance, for example, those of low socioeconomic status, or with a disability, or unemployed. Other students may also have special needs but are not identified as priority cohorts, such as early school leavers, older workers, men and women training for non-traditional roles, people in custody, those with low literacy skills, the neurodiverse and mature-age learners.

The challenge for VET teachers is how to cater for such immense diversity, which they generally do by adapting their training practices, resources and support services. Although training approaches relating to specific student cohorts and equity groups have been developed, there is also a need to provide training that is customised to the needs and preferences of individual students.

In the context of the diverse student population, another key challenge for the VET sector as a whole is how the VET student voice can be heard, given that no cohesive state, territory national VET student peak body exists. Many secondary schools have a student-elected student representative council (SRC) to advocate for change in their school. Some states also have a student body, such as the Victorian Student Representative Council (Vic SRC). In the higher education sector, Student Voice Australasia (SVA)⁴ is a network of staff and students from higher education institutions, who have partnered to foster 'meaningful and inclusive student engagement' in institutional decision-making (2025).

Since the VET sector lacks an equivalent student representative body, the SVA has established a VET chapter for TAFE staff and students; however, VET students in non-TAFE RTOs have no access to a collective representative voice. Currently, some individual non-TAFE RTOs have established a student representative body within their

4 <<https://studentvoiceaustralasia.com/>>.

institution. Nonetheless, RTOs seek feedback from their students in a variety of ways to ensure that training is improving constantly and accommodates student needs.

Survey tools, online discussion boards and feedback forms enable students to share their experiences and suggest improvements in real time. This ongoing feedback loop ensures that the VET sector remains responsive to the evolving needs of its diverse student body, and that all learners, regardless of their background or learning challenges, receive the support they need to succeed.

Priority student cohorts

The prioritisation of the training needs of those who have been loosely termed 'equity' groups of learners, dates back to the 1974 Kangan Report, in which one of the two functions of VET were 'primarily ... the needs of individuals', while industry workforce development needs were to provide the 'context for courses' (Australian Committee on Technical and Further Education 1974, vol.1, p.xxiii). Given that equity has always been a priority in education and training at all levels, strategies to support priority student cohorts continue to be implemented and strengthened.

In September 2024, the National Skills Agreement (NSA) was signed. The agreement articulated a commitment to achieving wellbeing, inclusion and resilience for all Australians, including priority groups, to enable them to build the skills needed for well-paid, secure work and to adapt to future work requirements (Department of Employment and Workplace Relations 2024a, p.5). In addition, the National Skills Plan (2024–2028) established priorities specifically for gender equality and for supporting genuine partnerships with First Nations Peoples for Closing the Gap (Department of Employment and Workplace Relations 2024b, p.6).

The National VET Regulator (Australian Skills Quality Authority) released its Diversity and inclusion practice guide to support RTOs in meeting Standard 2.5, which defines a safe, inclusive learning environment (Australian Skills Quality Authority 2025). Also in 2025, Jobs and Skills Australia produced a national Gender Framework (figure 2). The framework, comprising five principles, was established in recognition of the importance of analysing labour market and skills systems through gendered and intersectional lenses (Jobs and Skills Australia 2025, p.4).

Figure 2 The five principles of the JSA framework



Source: JSA, 2025. Gender Framework. JSA, Canberra. (p.4)

The principles in figure 2 are significant, in that they can support RTOs and other organisations to apply inclusive practices for any equity or 'priority group'.

The composition of VET priority student cohorts enrolled in VET qualifications are shown in table 1, with the data demonstrating that while overall student numbers have increased between 2019 and 2023, enrolment trends vary across priority cohorts, with some showing growth (LOTE, female and SEIFA⁵ students), and others declining over this period (remote, Indigenous learners, and those with disability).

⁵ LOTE = Language other than English; SEIFA = Socio-economic Indexes for Areas.

Table 1 – Priority students enrolled in VET qualifications (%)

<i>Priority student cohorts</i>	<i>Proportion of students in 2023</i>	<i>Percentage change in the number of students from 2019</i>
All students	100.0	6.4
Females	47.5	6.2
With a disability	5.2	-5.0
Indigenous	4.6	-1.1
Remote & very remote	1.8	-11.0
Most socio-economically disadvantaged (SEIFA)	19.0	8.2
Language other than English (LOTE)	20.9	9.6

Source: NCVER, Total VET students and courses.

One might infer from the data that, while various initiatives have been implemented to support priority student cohorts, actively engaging with learners themselves – those who best understand their own needs – is equally important, as is working collaboratively to identify practical, tailored solutions to support meaningful training experiences and outcomes.

The following section outlines the challenges associated with inclusion for the various categories of priority student and the strategies developed to address them.

First Nations learners

Historical and systemic issues, such as limited access to quality education, cultural dislocation and discrimination, have created significant barriers to First Nations Learners in gaining successful outcomes from VET participation. Engaging Indigenous communities and organisations in the design and delivery of culturally relevant, accessible, and inclusive VET programs is essential to improving VET outcomes for Indigenous students.

Incorporating Indigenous perspectives and knowledge into the VET sector can help to ensure that training programs reflect and respect their cultures and ways of knowing, an approach that supports Indigenous students and enriches the broader learning environment by fostering cultural diversity and mutual respect. Similarly, adopting place-based perspectives where possible can help to foster respect, trust and understanding. Additionally, creating pathways for Indigenous people into vocational education help to promote economic participation and self-determination, supporting the broader goal of reconciliation in Australia.

Ensuring that the VET sector is inclusive requires cultural competency and sensitivity, particularly when working with First Nations peoples. This involves training staff and educators in cultural awareness and ensuring that programs are flexible and responsive. The provision of incentives and funding to increase the number of Indigenous VET practitioners and the range of occupations in which training is delivered are essential strategies for addressing the needs of First Nations learners.

Learners with disability

Learners with disability, whether physical, sensory, cognitive or mental, face distinct challenges in accessing education and training, including discrimination and exclusion. While traditional education settings often do not fully accommodate these learners, technology and innovation have the power to create more inclusive and accessible environments.

The 2005 Disability Standards for Education require RTOs to provide VET learners with information about the educational and support services available to them, along with their rights and the providers' obligations. In addition to determining their responsibilities under the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (for example, reasonable adjustment of the learning environment), RTOs can access information through the National Disability Insurance Scheme (2025) on their obligations and the funded supports available for students with disability.

In 2020, a review of the 2005 Disability Standards for Education recommended that Skills Ministers work through the Agreement for Skills Reform to 'identify opportunities to strengthen delivery of vocational education and training for students with disability' (Department of Education 2020, p. viii). 'Strengthened delivery' would involve, for example, empowering and supporting students with disability and their families and embedding accountability for the Disability Standards in the VET system.

For the VET sector to effectively support students with disability to achieve their educational and employment goals, advocacy groups and disability service providers, and the learners themselves, need to be included in the design and delivery of appropriate and accessible training. Inclusive education in the VET sector requires removing barriers, providing tailored support services and ensuring that training environments are accessible to all students.

Online and blended learning for those facing barriers to attending classes in person can make training more accessible and affordable. Equally, virtual work placements and simulations enable students with mobility challenges to gain the necessary work experience. The increasing use of smartphones and tablets enables students to access learning materials anytime, anywhere. Assistive technologies, such as screen readers, adaptive keyboards, voice recognition and text-to-speech software and the provision of audio versions of written content, along with alternative input devices, such as eye-tracking technology or voice commands, which interact with computers and complete assessments, allow students with disability to access learning materials and participate readily in training.

By listening to people with disability and recognising their needs, the VET sector can implement strategies that enhance educational outcomes, as well as promote the broader inclusion of people with disability in the workforce.

Non-English speaking background learners

The Australian Government's 2023 Migration Strategy aims to address critical workforce skill gaps, thereby enhancing productivity and national prosperity, while sustaining a commercial and cultural 'bridge' to other countries (Department of Home Affairs 2023, p.8). Although a range of programs have been specifically designed to support access to training for new migrants, RTOs are faced with increasing numbers of recent arrivals in their classes. This necessitates a review of pedagogical approaches, supports and individualised approaches to ensure that both formal and workplace training are accessible and inclusive, and that barriers are reduced.

Non-English-speaking background learners (NESB), who include migrants, asylum seekers, refugees, international students and people with limited literacy and numeracy, can face significant challenges undertaking training due to their limited English language proficiency, cultural misunderstandings and the need to obtain recognition for their existing skills and qualifications. Moreover, some migrants and refugees may have experienced torture or trauma, requiring sensitivity and understanding from VET practitioners and potential referral to specialised services.

In the context of fewer English as a Second Language (ESL) teaching specialists, the additional core unit, Address adult language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) skills, was added to the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment (TAE) in 2016. Nonetheless, cultural awareness, cultural competence and sensitivity of VET practitioners in understanding and navigating the different issues held by migrants remain important considerations.

Regional, rural and remote learners

VET students in regional, rural and remote locations encounter many obstacles in accessing VET, including limited local training offerings, severe shortages of VET practitioners, difficulty securing work placements, scarce training pathways beyond about certificate IV (Halsey 2018) and, ultimately, few job opportunities.

Similarly, RTOs experience difficulties in providing training to learners in regional locations due to the excessive cost of delivery and lack of infrastructure, technology, work placements and resources. Online delivery, blended learning, virtual work placements and simulations can remove geographical barriers for students in remote areas, access to tailored learning experiences while reducing travel time and cost. However, this can be challenging in cases of intermittent internet access or limited digital literacy (Griffin 2023).

The work of the federal Regional Education Commissioner⁶ is dedicated to ensuring the voice of regional students, communities, industry and institutions are heard in overcoming the barriers created by distance. Nevertheless, consultation with local stakeholders ensures a greater understanding of local needs, while flexibility in addressing these, increased cooperation and coordination among training providers and employers, as well as the establishment of strong partnerships and adequate resourcing to meet the true costs of regional delivery can contribute to successful outcomes (Griffin 2023).

Gender equity

Expanding gender diversity and equity in the VET sector is a multifaceted challenge that requires addressing both structural and cultural barriers, particularly for entry to non-traditional trades. Promoting inclusivity and equal opportunities for all genders in VET can benefit individuals, the education system and, by delivering a wider pool of talent, the economy.

While the federal government's National Strategy for Gender Equality offers a comprehensive approach for working towards greater equity for women in the workplace, the voices of both men and women need to be heard in framing appropriate strategies for meeting their specific training needs, particularly for entry to and success in non-traditional roles. Numerous strategies have already been implemented, with some success, for example, targeted awareness campaigns to encourage participation in non-traditional trades; a focus on role models; and scholarships, subsidies and mentorship programs.

Some campaigns foster RTO, business and industry partnerships to promote gender-diverse work placements, apprenticeships, internships and eventual employment. To ensure their effectiveness, employers might provide training that encourages inclusivity, challenges gender bias and stereotyping, and promotes an environment of respect and support.

For their part, VET training programs might adopt the use of non-gendered language and focus on gender equity. Similarly, guidance to students on course choice and career options would ideally be framed in non-gendered terminology. VET trainers could benefit from professional development on gender sensitivity, inclusive teaching practices and unconscious bias, the aim being the deliberate promotion of a gender-diverse, supportive and inclusive learning environment.

In terms of delivery, flexible learning options can be helpful, such as online or blended delivery, part-time study, and evening classes, to accommodate caregiving responsibilities. These can be accompanied by support networks, accessible, inclusive facilities, safe spaces, and zero tolerance for discrimination and harassment, with clear channels for students to report issues and obtain support.

Above all, RTOs and employers are encouraged to lead by example in their own behaviour and by promoting best practices in gender equity in their organisation. Real gender diversity and equity in the VET sector and employment requires a coordinated approach, one that combines policy change, cultural shifts, and practical interventions at the institutional, industry and community levels. The key is to create an environment where people of all genders feel equally valued, supported and encouraged to pursue the career paths of their choice, regardless of traditional gender norms.

Other priority learners

Other learners who face barriers to participation in the VET sector include the unemployed and the homeless, those from low socioeconomic backgrounds (SEIFA), individuals with limited access to information technologies, learners with limited literacy and numeracy and those with learning difficulties. Groups such as these may be subject to financial constraints, have family commitments, encounter discrimination, or experience difficulty gaining entry to training or are unable to cope with course demands.

It is vital to engage individuals, communities and advocacy organisations in the development of VET practices that enable participation by these learners in VET. By fostering inclusive policies, providing financial support and offering flexible learning options, including online delivery, the VET sector can assist all individuals, regardless of background or circumstances, to access high-quality vocational education and training.

⁶ <<https://www.education.gov.au/regional-education-commissioner>>.



Outcomes for priority student cohorts

The post-training outcomes of priority cohort survey respondents who completed a VET qualification in 2024 are shown in table 2 (NCVER 2024b). The data indicate that their post-training outcomes are mixed (NCVER 2024b), likely reflecting the diverse motivations for undertaking training but also external factors such as labour market conditions, the availability of job opportunities, industry demand and individual circumstances. Most achieved their reason for training (except for LOTE learners and those with disability), a large majority commenced further training or study (except for a small proportion of LOTE learners), and most also obtained at least one job-related benefit (except for those with disability). A key concern is that, despite VET qualification completion, almost all reported not achieving an improved employment status, with the exception of remote learners.

Table 2 – Outcomes for qualification completers by priority VET cohort, 2024 (%)

	<i>Improved employment status</i>	<i>Achieved main reason for training</i>	<i>At least one job-related benefit (employed after training)</i>	<i>Commenced further study or training</i>
All qualification completers	64.4	87.4	80.4	33.3
With a disability	47.7 (-18.6)	81.3 (-6.5)	75.6 (-5.2)	40.9 (+8.0)
Indigenous	60.0 (-4.5)	87.4	82.1 (+2.1)	35.3 (+1.6)
Most disadvantaged quintile (SEIFA)	60.4 (-5.2)	87.2	81.9 (+1.8)	33.0
Remote and very remote	68.7 (+4.3)	90.2 (+2.9)	82.7 (+2.3)	32.5
Language other than English	59.4 (-6.6)	86.6 (-1.1)	85.0 (+5.0)	33.0 (-0.8)

Green = significantly higher than the comparison group (i.e. students not from a priority cohort).

Red = significantly lower than the comparison group (i.e. students not from a priority cohort).

(+/-) = percentage point difference from comparison group.

Source: NCVER (2024b).

It is clear that more needs to be done to bridge the gap for some priority student cohorts, particularly for learners with disability, which is acknowledged in the National Skills Agreement and the National Skills Plan (2024–2028). Also significant is the need to support learners post-training to achieve improved employment outcomes.

Nonetheless, qualification completion and employment outcomes are not the only benefits that learners seek to obtain from VET. NCVER's 2024 Student Outcomes Survey reveals that some students undertake VET for reasons other than employment, such as to improve general education skills, increase self-esteem, gain entry to other training or higher education, start a business or for recreational reasons (NCVER SOS, 2024).

Enhancing the voices of key VET stakeholders

An inclusive VET system requires the active engagement of a diverse array of stakeholders, which can be achieved by creating effective structural mechanisms and platforms for meaningful dialogue. Ideally, consultation with stakeholders is inclusive, collaborative and ongoing, ensuring that all voices are heard and respected. Regular forums, roundtable discussions and working groups can provide opportunities for stakeholders to share their perspectives, identify challenges and collaborate on solutions.

Technology can play a useful role in some circumstances to facilitate engagement by creating virtual spaces, where stakeholders can interact, share insights and collaborate on initiatives. To assure the best outcomes, consultation forums would be structured to ensure all voices are heard, particularly those from marginalised and underrepresented groups.

Collaboration among stakeholders and peak bodies can lead to innovative solutions for complex challenges. For example, joint initiatives between RTOs and industry help to bridge the gap between training and employment, while partnerships with community organisations ensure that VET programs are tailored to the needs of priority groups and local communities.

Effective engagement ensures that the VET sector's diverse stakeholders will recognise their vital role and work collaboratively towards their shared goals:

- the assurance of quality and maintenance of standards in VET
- meaningful VET policy and delivery, which align with industry and community needs
- strategic approaches to addressing systemic barriers to training to enable all Australians to benefit from VET
- sound targeting and prioritisation of funding for meeting workforce skill gaps
- sound teaching practices and appropriate training delivery to specific student cohorts
- collaboration to address shared challenges, to benefit students, communities and employers.

The characteristics of engagement that encourage the genuine expression of preferences and needs among stakeholders can include:

- strategic partnerships and collaboration: RTOs and GTOs with employers and communities; RTOs with each other and with student cohorts
- genuine and inclusive involvement of stakeholders in the development of training for targeted customisation: employers and students in the development of relevant training content and appropriate delivery methods
- regular consultation with stakeholders by various means, in person or online, to ensure VET responds rapidly and continuously to changing needs: forums, working groups, surveys
- transparent mechanisms that capture stakeholder inputs and feed these back to contributors and the VET sector.

The points given above represent just a few of the benefits of ensuring that diverse voices contribute to the effectiveness of VET, along with some of the strategies for fostering inclusive engagement. That said, many other innovative practices have been implemented, and it is hoped that 'No Frills' participants will share these during the 2025 conference.

Numerous engagement strategies for including the voices of VET stakeholders exist across the VET sector; for example, VET regulators engage with governments, industry, students and course developers on their role in fostering quality in VET, especially with RTOs to ensure national standards are met and that regulatory requirements are clearly understood. State, territory and federal governments consult with industry to ensure VET qualifications meet evolving employer needs and address workforce challenges. Governments also liaise with RTOs and employers on issues relating to policy changes, funding initiatives and education and training priorities.

Some examples of state and territory strategies may be found in jurisdictional skills plans. The NSW Skills Plan for 2024–28, *Building skills and shaping success*, has proposed new ways of working with key VET stakeholders to deliver strategic priorities focused on longstanding skill shortages and student and industry needs. Based on outcomes-driven funding, this initiative includes the provision of improved wrap-around support, a learner-centred approach, the removal of barriers to access, and the development of flexible and diverse education pathways focused on student outcomes and completions.

Similarly, Queensland's skills strategy for 2024–28, *Good jobs, great training*, emphasises economic priorities, local needs and student outcomes to ensure that students can access good jobs more rapidly through free and subsidised training for streamlined pathways. An expanded industry engagement model facilitates industry input into priority workforce skills needs, while a new student journey survey ensures the voices of students are heard. Other states and territories have established similar inclusive engagement strategies.

Challenges to effective stakeholder participation

Despite the effective engagement practices occurring in the VET sector, described above, and many other examples not documented here, effective stakeholder participation still has many issues to resolve. The overarching challenge is to develop strategies that recognise the needs of specific student cohorts, individuals, small business and communities, while also taking account of the greater good of the nation, state or territory, key industry sectors, student cohorts and employers; that is, balancing the macro with the micro without inadvertently creating winners and losers in the process.

In this context, it is worth emphasising certain requirements that ensure particular cohorts are accommodated, specifically, the ways by which the voices of the 'lesser heard' – as opposed to the loudest or largest in number – can be guaranteed. Strategies to address these challenges include:

- developing cultural awareness and sensitivity among RTO staff and teachers
- providing safe and non-threatening channels for learners to articulate their needs and preferences
- ensuring the educator voice is also heard in the development of training products.
- providing inclusive and appropriate environments to facilitate ease of expression, particularly for diverse and marginalised cohorts.
- involving industry and employer groups to ensure the needs of small business are also accommodated.

In terms of the process of engagement with the various stakeholders, it is crucial to:

- ensure stakeholder contributions are clearly understood and actioned appropriately, where possible
- foster transparency and provide feedback on the contribution and how action will be taken, (or not)
- evaluate which engagement strategies and actions are effective or otherwise.

By fostering consultation and dialogue in which diverse stakeholder voices are incorporated, the sector will be better equipped to address the current challenges facing it, enabling the development of innovative, inclusive approaches, those that ensure equitable access, enhance learning and employment outcomes, meet career aspirations and create a workforce well prepared to address skill gaps now and into the future.

In his book, *The Rise of the Creative Class*, Richard Florida explored how diverse, creative and inclusive environments foster innovation, economic growth and productivity. Providing time and space for the diverse voices and perspectives of VET stakeholders to be heard has the potential to strengthen the sector, contribute to innovation, and enhance creative solutions to key challenges for a more resilient and adaptable Australian workforce.

The 'No Frills' conference provides an avenue for a discussion of the benefits and challenges of accommodating diverse voices in VET, with opportunities for sharing experiences and mutual learning.

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This document should be attributed as De Leo, J 2025, *Diverse voices in VET*, NCVER, Adelaide.

Stock images sourced from Getty Images.

ISBN 978-1-922801-34-0

TD/TNC 160.08

Published by NCVER, ABN 87 007 967 311
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