

National Centre for Vocational Education Research

*Submission to the Australian Tertiary Education Commission (ATEC)
discussion paper: A More Joined-up Tertiary System*

Dear Commissioners,

I welcome the opportunity for the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) to contribute a short submission to ATEC's discussion paper, *A More Joined-Up Tertiary System*. In particular, we wish to outline several opportunities that might improve Australia's data and information systems to better support learner pathways and outcome measurement across vocational education and training (VET) and higher education.

As you know, NCVER is Australia's trusted custodian of national VET data and a leading provider of impartial research, analysis and insights. Our Strategic Plan 2026-30 focuses our efforts on producing uniquely valuable data and insights, while improving our products and services, modernising our systems, strengthening our capabilities, and ensuring we remain responsive to the needs of governments, providers, industry and the community.

NCVER strongly supports the continued development of an integrated data asset. Linked data allows us to move beyond simple activity and correlation reporting towards understanding effectiveness and impact. This understanding is increasingly important in a tertiary system focused on stewardship, where governments, institutions and agencies must make informed decisions about how best to invest limited resources to improve outcomes for learners, employers and the broader community.

Integrated data has the potential to support a new generation of analytical capability. Modelling can help policymakers, institutions and learners better understand and then predict what works, for whom, and under what circumstances. It can support more rigorous evaluation of policies and programs, improve understanding of learner pathways and outcomes, and predict the likely impact of possible reforms. Over time, this "windscreen view" could enable governments to measure and report the system's "value add" and target reforms to improve the return on its investment.

NCVER's Total VET Activity collection is already linked to integrated data assets, thanks to Jobs and Skills Australia and the Australian Bureau of Statistics. As improvements are made to the quality, coverage and timeliness of national VET data, such as through VET Data Streamlining and National VET Data Blueprint, those improvements flow through to linked datasets and increase their value for governments, researchers and the community.

In our view, three elements are particularly important to realising the value of integrated data.

First, we should extend the underlying data to better understand the full pathway from public investment; to participation in tertiary education; to social and economic outcomes over time. We consider that funding data and state and territory data should be considered for integration, as they are critical to understanding return on investment and broader social impact. We recognise that incorporating this data presents both technical and governance challenges and requires careful collaboration between governments. The next National Skills Agreement presents an opportunity for governments to further demonstrate their leadership of expanded and integrated data.

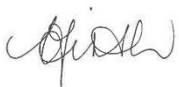
Second, we should ensure safeguards are in place and proportionate to the specific uses of integrated data. Governance, access and release protocols should be designed around clearly defined purposes, with different controls applied depending on the sensitivity of the data products, the nature of the analysis, and the decisions it will inform.

Third, we should explore practical ways to improve consistency of reporting across VET and higher education. Greater alignment of data standards, outcome indicators, and reporting practices would support more timely and reliable comparisons. There may also be opportunities, for example, to use common survey questions across the sectors to complement analytical findings on cross-cutting policy issues. With coming advances in data systems, we could develop more flexible, event-based survey capabilities that engage specific learners at relevant points in their journeys. There might also be value in supporting a coordinated research program that enables academic researchers to use integrated tertiary data to investigate critical questions across both sectors.

NCVER supports the development of a tertiary data integration roadmap grounded in practical use cases, streamlined governance and tangible value. Effective monitoring and evaluation of major cross-cutting tertiary initiatives might provide useful focal points, helping governments assess, build and apply capabilities.

NCVER looks forward to supporting ATEC and other stakeholders to build and govern a trusted evidence ecosystem that helps governments, institutions and learners better understand pathways, improve outcomes, assess the impact of investment, and strengthen stewardship across the tertiary system.

Yours sincerely



Prof. Verity Firth AM, NCVER Board Chair

June 2026