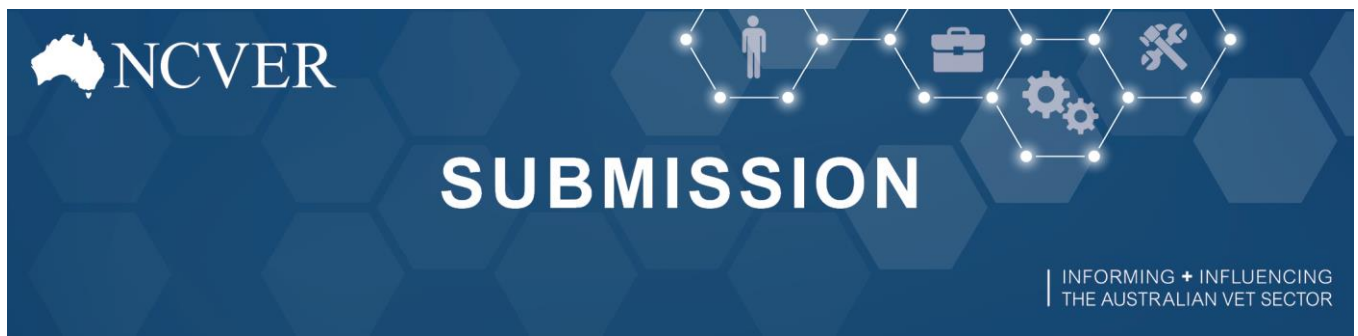




Inquiry into the perceptions and status of vocational education and training

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Overview

The National Centre for Vocational Education Research's (NCVER) submission responds broadly to Terms of Reference 1, 2 and 3 of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training's Inquiry into the Perceptions and Status of Vocational Education and Training (VET).

The submission draws on NCVER published data and research, much of which includes the voices of students – both school and VET – as well as parents/carers, teachers, employers and peak bodies. As such, it aims to provide insights on school and VET students' information needs when choosing VET, perceptions of VET and examples of employer-RTO partnerships identified by employers and stakeholder peak bodies.

Context

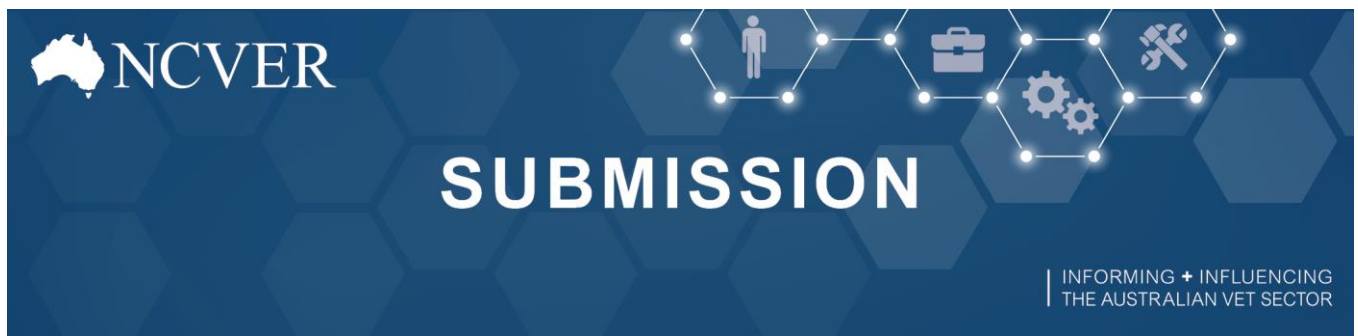
About Australia's VET sector

Vocational education and training is a tertiary education pathway that enables individuals to gain qualifications for employment. It is designed to deliver workplace-specific skills and knowledge-based competencies in a wide range of occupations and industries.

In 2021, there were 4.3 million students enrolled in nationally recognised training in Australia delivered through 3529 Registered Training Organisations (NCVER 2022).

About NCVER

NCVER is an independent, not-for-profit company owned by the Australian Government and state and territory government ministers responsible for vocational education and training (VET). NCVER collects, manages, analyses and communicates research and statistics about VET. NCVER's vision is to transform national understanding of VET.



Responses to Terms of Reference

1. **Information available to students about VET qualifications and related career pathways along a student's journey through secondary schools, vocational education, higher education, and work transitions with a focus on how this combines with other sources of advice, including informal advice, to influence student choices, and how Commonwealth funded information for students may be improved**

A unique account of how choices to undertake VET take shape is explored in *Choosing VET: investigating the VET aspirations of school students* by Gore and colleagues (2017). The study canvassed the views of more than 6000 school students from Year 3 to Year 12 in New South Wales government schools over four years, as well as the views of parents/carers and teachers. Throughout the study, TAFE was used by the students interchangeably with VET.

Information and choosing VET: school students and VET students

School students

In general, Gore and colleagues (2017) found students across all age groups had difficulty in understanding, or at least articulating, what they knew about VET and TAFE; in focus groups many students responded with general, confused, or uncertain responses. These responses were predictably most evident among younger students, with older students generally more informed about VET, providing more detailed accounts of what studying at TAFE would be like (Gore et al 2017). The intensification of careers activities over the secondary school years, particularly the latter years of high school may explain the deeper understanding of TAFE among older students (Gore et al 2017).

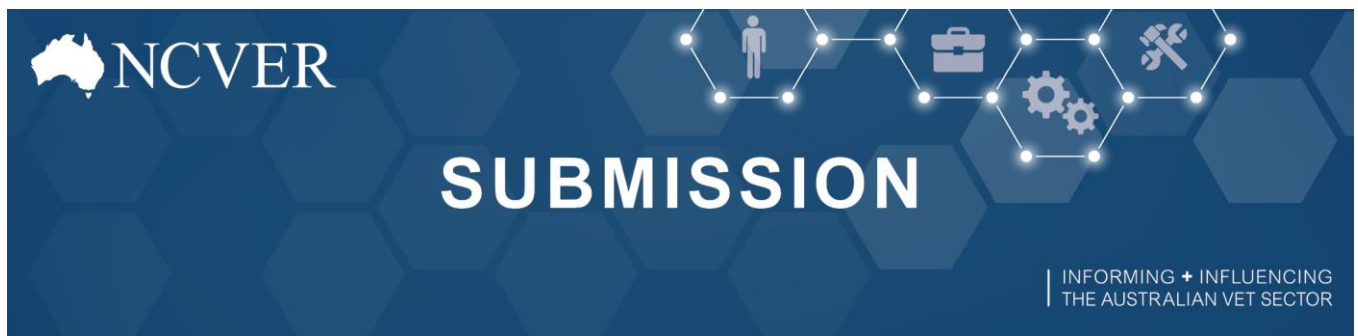
Student uncertainty about VET and TAFE is reflected in the misalignment of education and occupational aspirations and indicated that many students lacked clear, contemporary and accurate information about the VET sector despite career activities in schools (Gore et al 2017).

The authors argue that schools, both primary and secondary, play a significant role in preparing students for VET. By the later secondary school years, the study's data indicated many school students had already formed strong (sometimes negative) views of the VET sector and curtailed their aspirations in ways that limited them to considering university pathways (Gore et al 2017).

Increasing interest and changing perceptions of VET is likely to require concerted, coordinated efforts that highlight the breadth and depth of opportunities and pathways available to students in the VET sector, which will likely require additional investment in both TAFE outreach to schools and teacher development (whose educational experience may be limited to university). The authors also recommend these efforts use inclusive, non-stigmatising, non-deficit language (Gore et al 2017).

VET students

Findings from interviews with VET students in Victoria reveal there were an array of factors that influence how their choices regarding VET study were considered and made (Brown 2017). These include training location, those offering advice and information (trusted influencers), timetables, fees and affordability, and the perceived quality of the training provider (Brown 2017, Hargreaves & Osborne 2017).

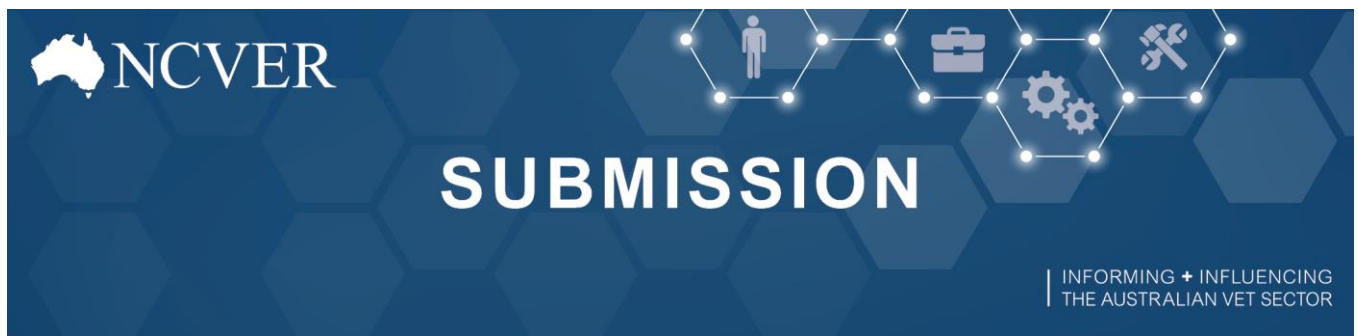


The process of choosing VET study appears to involve weighing up a number of different measures, as well as accessing information from a range of sources (Brown 2017). The measures broadly fall into one of three categories: content; sources; and customisation.

Content focuses on the relevance, influence, and informative qualities of different types of information, for example labour market information, provider and course quality, location and transport, and the experiences of others, especially peers (Brown 2017). Brown's research (2017) indicates the main types of information students used to select VET courses were generally location, cost and training. A recurring response was that students sought actual and total costs, rather than estimates and partial costs, as well as firm indications of start and completion dates (Brown 2017).

Source focuses on the preferred 'messenger' for accessing information and the channels or mechanisms used to communicate or present to students (Brown 2017). Across all student groups it was clear that Google was the default search strategy (Brown 2017). From there, students considered the information on RTO websites, course guides, Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre (VTAC) guides, and to a lesser extent government training information sites (Brown 2017). Word of mouth from people (for example, family, friends and peers) and local intelligence appeared to play a vitally important role in decision-making (Brown 2017). Students also valued attending open days and meeting the trainers (Brown 2017).

Customisation focuses on the need to ensure relevant and accessible information is sufficiently customised; that is, it is not generic, jargonistic or beyond the comprehension of users. The research found no one mechanism met the needs of all VET students but rather equipping students with the skills and knowledge to navigate, access and interpret information at the course level (across registered training organisations) and at the course and RTO level (within specific RTOs) to support making informed decisions (Brown 2017).

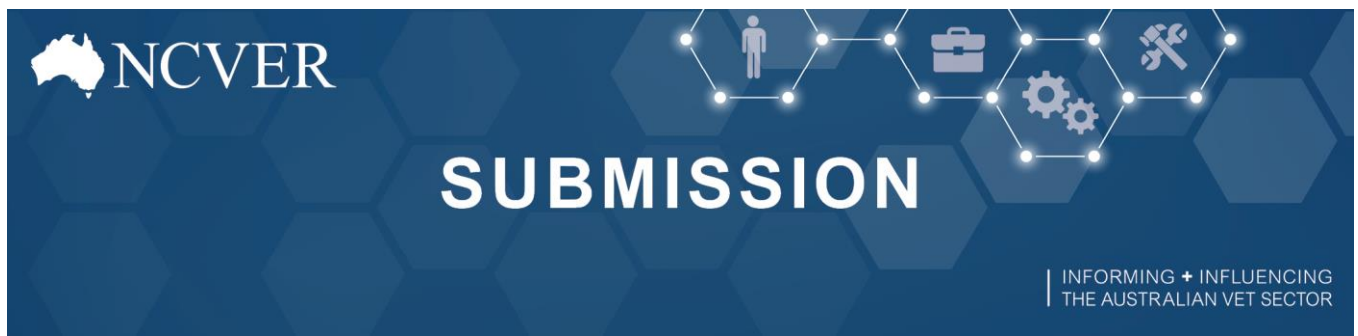


2. Perceptions and status of the VET sector and how this may be impacting student enrolment choices, employer engagement, recruitment and retention of the VET educator workforce, and how perceptions and status of the VET sector can be improved. International best practices in relation to VET perception and qualifications status should be examined

Perceptions of VET

Four major themes emerged in the Gore et al (2017) study about how students, parents/carers and teachers perceive VET; these were:

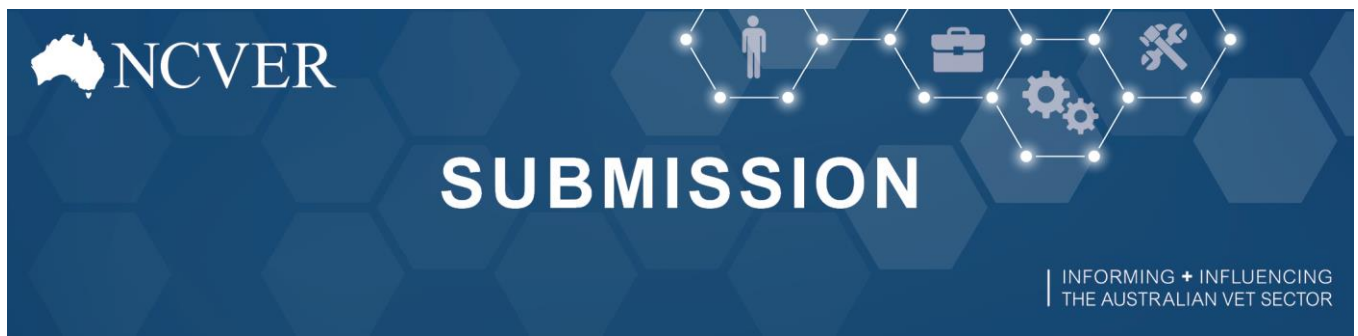
- VET is a place of practical learning
 - Students stated they valued or enjoyed the practical nature of TAFE, which was often informed by the experiences of other family members or through participation in VET in Schools programs
 - Some students spoke of the practical benefits of TAFE, in terms of accessibility and affordability
 - Many students talked about TAFE in terms of being a practical alternative to university
 - Some teachers, especially in provincial areas, spoke of TAFE as an option for their students, promoting the practical nature of TAFE
 - Parents/carers of students interested in VET also appreciated the practical nature of TAFE and the skills their children would gain, thus setting them up for successful futures (Gore et al 2017).
- VET as an opportunity
 - Many students spoke of TAFE positively, questioned the emphasis in schools on university education, and viewed TAFE as a back-up plan, or as providing opportunities for disengaged students
 - Older metropolitan students in particular spoke of TAFE as a pathway to tertiary study, however responses from metropolitan students contrasted with responses from regional, rural and remote students of a similar age who did not express an awareness of any pathways to tertiary study
 - Some parents/carers stated TAFE is sometimes 'definitely the better option' and 'more suited' to some students and their abilities. Parents/carers also said their perceptions of TAFE had changed, describing it as a good alternative to university
 - Teachers spoke of the opportunities VET pathways afford, especially for students who were less engaged in school (Gore et al 2017).
- VET as lacking prestige
 - Students often described VET institutions and/or those attending them as lacking in some way, although some students acknowledged the negative discourse but disagreed
 - Some students worried that TAFE would be unable to provide them with a competitive edge
 - In many focus groups, students compared TAFE with university, and often ranked TAFE and other VET options as secondary to higher education. A few students mentioned their parents/carers as influencing them to go to university rather than TAFE



- Other students conveyed strong views about VET institutions as being for certain kinds of people and some students, who saw themselves as inferior, viewed TAFE as their only option
- Parents/carers and teachers tended to emphasise TAFE as a pathway exclusively for the students they described as 'less academic'
- Some teachers, and career advisers particularly, from schools with high numbers of students from low SES-backgrounds tended to focus more heavily on VET and were strong advocates of TAFE and VET in Schools
- Others spoke about VET options as more exclusively for students who were not likely to succeed at university, whereas others TAFE was viewed as an alternative pathway for those unsuccessful in gaining a place at university (Gore et al 2017).

It is worth noting that parity of esteem between VET and higher education is an enduring issue (Beddie 2014).

- uncertainty about VET
 - Students' confusion about VET emerged as a strong theme from the qualitative and the quantitative data. This confusion was demonstrated in the misalignment between students' occupational aspirations and their educational intentions. Some students intended to study at university although they aspired to an occupation requiring VET study, and vice versa. In general, students across all age groups had difficulty articulating what they know about VET and TAFE. When asked what they knew about TAFE, many students responded with general, confused, or uncertain responses, and predictably this was most evident among younger students. Understandings about TAFE did tend to become more accurate among older students, likely as a result of increased exposure to careers activities, educational experiences and other forms of socialisation (Gore et al 2017).



3. Successful partnerships between VET providers and employers that have demonstrably created career pathways and secure employment opportunities for students, considering the best practice elements of these successful partnerships, and how more partnering may be encouraged among VET providers and employers

Close collaboration between employers and RTOs was identified by employers and stakeholder peak bodies in several examples of what they consider to be good practice in nationally recognised formal training in *Engaging more employers in nationally recognised training to develop their workforce* (Bowman & Callan 2021).

Most interviewees noted that, for individual employers, RTOs are a major source of knowledge about nationally recognised training (Bowman & Callan 2021). As such, the authors state that a RTO's role needs to continue to evolve to that of 'navigator' instead of 'informant'. This shift requires RTOs to build their skills in working collaboratively with employers rather than a focus on selling, in the aim of identifying the employers' needs and then putting forward new ways of meeting them (Bowman & Callan 2021).

Specifically, RTOs need to be encouraged to undertake more outreach with local employers and industry experts, as it is crucial in ensuring both sound and tailored curriculum development and delivery (Bowman & Callan 2021). While the outreach may not lead to immediate business for the RTO, it can help to develop and grow an ongoing and interdependent relationship (Bowman & Callan 2021).

Support, through financial incentives for employers and RTOs to work together, was raised with the previous National Workforce Development Fund and the Industry Skills Funds frequently mentioned (Bowman & Callan 2021). Both initiatives were judged as good examples that facilitated employers partnering with RTOs to undertake workforce planning and implementing tailored nationally recognised training (Bowman & Callan 2021).

Interview responses also elicited the need for more special industry-RTO partnerships, with employers seeking more personal contract with registered providers, with a view to promoting increased flexibility and responsiveness in RTOs, and to work more intensively with business-orientated training providers (Bowman & Callan 2021). Examples provided of such included the Siemens and Swinburne digitalisation and engineering alliance, Rail WA's METRONET, Rio Tinto's rail-automation project, BHP FutureFit Academy, the Victorian Government-funded Digital ICT Apprenticeships program and the P-TECH program (Bowman & Callan 2021). The creation of applied research partnerships to further build engagement between employers and RTOs were also cited (Bowman & Callan 2021).

The study also considers more effective engagement with small businesses, which are less likely to engage in formal nationally recognised training than medium to large enterprises. While the ideas offered by interview respondents focused on encouraging the use of formal nationally recognised training, they may also support employer-RTO partnerships. A key and often repeated idea was the appointment of local brokers, such as employer associations or regional development organisations, to work between small business and RTOs to facilitate connections in more meaningful ways (Bowman & Callan 2021). Another view supported RTOs to lead relationship-building with employers (Bowman & Callan 2021).

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