

Inquiry into the factors driving educational attainment

Submission to the House of Representatives
Standing Committee on Education

Introduction

The National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) welcomes the opportunity to contribute a short submission to this inquiry.

NCVER is responsible for collecting, managing, analysing and communicating research and statistics on the Australian vocational education and training (VET) system. It is a not-for-profit company owned by Commonwealth, state and territory governments.

NCVER is the custodian of Australia's national VET data collections, which provide information on nationally accredited training. The VET data is also linked with other datasets to enable analysis of student pathways and outcomes.

NCVER conducts regular national surveys of VET student outcomes and employer views on the VET system. This year NCVER will conclude the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY), offering unique insights into young people's transitions from education into the workforce.

NCVER works closely with governments, industry, training providers and other agencies like Jobs and Skills Australia and the Australian Tertiary Education Commission.

Participation in VET

Participation in VET is shaped by a combination of labour market, policy, institutional and learner-level factors.

Labour market demand for occupational skills is a key driver, with trade apprenticeship pathways most strongly linked to employer business cycles.

Policy settings also influence participation through funding arrangements, subsidised training, and the availability of entitlement-based systems that affect both the accessibility and attractiveness of VET relative to other post-school options.

VET participation is enabled by its flexibility and applied learning orientation, which can be particularly attractive to learners seeking work-integrated pathways or alternative routes to senior secondary or tertiary study.

Participation patterns are associated with prior educational attainment, socioeconomic background and geographic location, with VET often playing a stronger role for early school leavers, regional populations and disadvantaged cohorts.

These factors interact with institutional delivery models to shape overall participation patterns across the system.

Qualification attainment

NCVER measures and reports the number of students who complete a VET qualification, which is one important indicator of training outcomes.

NCVER data indicate that the overall VET qualification completion rate at the national level is around 50%. Apprenticeship and traineeship completion rates are higher, with trade occupations having a completion rate of 58.2% and non-trade occupations a completion rate of 57% (measured 6 years after commencement).

This completion rate applies to qualifications spanning diverse VET settings, objectives, and cohorts. Completion rates vary considerably across qualifications, qualification levels, industries and student cohorts (Table 1).

Table 1: Latest VET and Apprenticeship Completion Rates (Selected Measures)

Measure	Breakdown Category	Subgroup / Level	Completion Rate
VET Qualification Completion Rate (4-year, 2020 cohort)	49.0%		
	Select student cohorts	With a disability	40.9%
		Females	51.4%
		Indigenous	35.4%
		Regional and remote	44.1%
		Low SES area	44.8%
		Unemployed	45.8%
	Qualification level	Certificate I	40.4%
		Certificate III	47.2%
		Diploma and above	55.5%
Apprenticeships & Traineeships (6-year, 2018 cohort)			57.6%
	Occupation	Trade	58.2%
		Non-trade	57.0%

VET qualification completion rates vary across groups, with lower completion rates commonly observed among learners in lower-level qualifications, First Nations students, people with disability, women in some trades, and learners facing structural barriers such as regional or remote location, low socio-economic background, no prior attainment, part-time study patterns, and language or cultural barriers.

Drivers of attainment

NCVER and broader national research, including work from the National VET Completions Taskforce, indicate that qualification completion is influenced by a combination of interrelated learner, system and external factors:

1. Learner purpose and motivation is the primary reason for training (e.g. job-focused vs exploratory)
2. Training system factors
 - delivery mode (apprenticeship vs classroom)
 - course quality and flexibility.
3. Learner characteristics
 - age, socioeconomic status, prior education, disadvantage.
4. Employer engagement (for work-based training)
5. Quality of career advice and course selection
6. Access to support services (mentoring, wellbeing, academic support)
7. Flexibility of delivery (online, modular, part-time)
8. Financial and time pressures
9. Alignment between training and employment outcomes
10. System navigation and pathways clarity

The Taskforce found that completion is mainly shaped by three things:

- why the learner is studying
- how the VET system is designed and delivered
- the learner's personal circumstances.

Evidence from the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) indicates that educational attainment is shaped by a combination of student aspirations, prior academic achievement, family background, socioeconomic circumstances and school experiences.

Educational aspirations have a strong influence on outcomes, with intentions to complete Year 12 and undertake tertiary study associated with substantially higher levels of attainment, though these aspirations are themselves influenced by academic performance, parental expectations and peer effects.

Family background is also important, with young people from non-English speaking migrant backgrounds and those with highly educated or highly skilled parents more likely to continue in education, reflecting the role of parental expectations and access to information about post-school pathways.

Prior academic achievement is a strong predictor of both senior secondary completion and tertiary entrance performance, while positive school experiences,

including school engagement and a sense of belonging, are associated with higher levels of educational attainment. Socioeconomic disadvantage can shape educational and occupational aspirations, even among academically capable students, while overall variation in outcomes is largely attributable to student-level characteristics rather than school-level factors.

Student outcomes

Evidence from the 2025 National Student Outcomes Survey (SOS) demonstrates that completing a VET qualification is associated with strong labour market and further study benefits.

- 75.7% of VET qualification graduates are employed after training
- A higher proportion (86.7%) reported achieving their main reason for training.
- 62.4% of VET qualification graduates reported an improved employment status after their training.
- Almost one-third (32.6%) of VET qualification graduates go on to further study, demonstrating the role of VET as a pathway to ongoing learning and career progression.

Longitudinal insights from LSAY suggest that completing post-school qualifications is generally associated with more favourable labour market outcomes, particularly compared to early school leavers or those with incomplete qualifications.

Evidence from Jobs and Skills Australia using linked data shows that completing VET qualifications are associated with positive employment, economic, and social outcomes, including improved earnings and reduced welfare dependency.

Partial attainment

Evidence has long shown that non- or partial completion of VET qualifications is associated with strong outcomes for many students. Focusing only on qualification attainment can underestimate the value that VET delivers, including for those students whose main goal is employment.

NCVER research highlights that students leave qualifications for a range of reasons, including gaining employment before finishing, achieving their learning goals early, facing personal or financial challenges, or deciding the course was not the right fit.

Evidence from the 2025 National Student Outcomes Survey (SOS) demonstrates that many learners are satisfied and still benefit from training despite not completing the qualification, although benefits on average are lower than for completing students.

- 76.2% of students that partially completed a qualification achieved their main reason for undertaking the training.
- 69.5% of students that partially completed a qualification were employed after training.
- 53.1% of students that partially completed a qualification reported an improved employment status.

This survey evidence is supported by LSAY and linked data.

Personal reasons were the most common reason for discontinuing training. The most cited personal reasons were illness or health related, having too many pressures on their time, and family reasons. Nearly a tenth of students discontinued their training as they got what they wanted from it.

For those undertaking an apprenticeship or traineeship, non-completion also does not necessarily indicate poor outcomes, as many non-completers remain in or quickly transition into employment. NCVER data indicates that approximately 70–80% of non-completing apprentices are employed after training, with a substantial proportion remaining with the same employer or in the same industry.

Conclusions

The evidence supports a balanced and learner-centred approach to improving attainment in VET. Policy should aim to lift completion rates, particularly for critical qualifications and priority groups, while recognising that success is broader than completing a qualification and learners often know what's best for them.

The system should continue to strengthen measures of success that capture employment outcomes and skills gained, including for partial completers. Incorporating longitudinal and linked datasets would strengthen this approach by providing insight into long-term outcomes, including career progression, sustained employment and further education pathways.

A learner-centred approach that values participation, completion and outcomes will ensure the VET system delivers stronger economic and social returns, while better meeting the needs of individuals, industry, and communities.



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