
Integrated Information Service - Response to the Productivity Commission’s “National Agreement for Skills & Workforce Development Review – interim report”

Integrated Information Service’s (IIS) submission chiefly relates to information provision and communications in the Australian Apprenticeships field.

This relates generally to various areas of the interim report, and specifically to the area: “Interim recommendation 7.3 – Improving the provision of VET information”. This submission also relates to: “Option 6.6 – Pastoral, mentoring and upfront assessment services”; and “Option 7.3 – Improving the Australian Apprenticeship Support Network”.

Announcements made by the Australian Government on July 16 2020 (after this response was completed) clearly show its intent to act in this time of crisis, which is supported by the content of this submission. The full extent of the policy announcements are not yet known, however the key points made here will remain important: policy change must be associated with the provision of good information communicated to specific audiences; provision of support for consumer choice and decision making is mandatory; and targeting future economic and social needs is essential to the effect and legacy of these initiatives.

Australian Apprenticeship and Traineeship Information Service

IIS has operated the Australian Apprenticeships and Traineeships Information Service (AATIS - www.aatis.com.au) for over 20 years, chiefly under funding from the Australian government Department of Education, Skills and Employment (DESE).

AATIS develops and publishes general or overview Australian Apprenticeship information and resources, provided across platforms and other delivery methods, to all stakeholders with an interest in Australian Apprenticeships. This funding, along with IIS’s standing as an independent company, enables AATIS to provide ‘neutral’ information that does not promote a specific service provider, sponsor or advertiser, but through which organisations can provide information about their services.

The Service is, therefore, a key hub for connecting organisations and service provider networks, such as the Australian Apprenticeships Support Network, Group Training Organisations and employment services providers, with employers, students, job hunters, and influencers such as schools and parents.

AATIS helps these groups build an understanding of Australian Apprenticeship career pathways, as well as industry-wide and occupation specific options. Its service elements continually evolve to meet the changing information needs of stakeholder groups, using the platforms on which they seek information.

A major part of the AATIS service is the Australian Apprenticeships Pathway website (aapathways.com.au). The site provides a broad range of apprenticeship and traineeship information to a wide audience recording approximately 430,000 sessions and 1.7 million page views annually. Over 300 organisations across Australia provide their clients with links to this website.

The Service gathers qualification based apprenticeship and traineeship availability data from all state and territory jurisdictions. This enables onsite searches for examples of apprenticeship and traineeship occupations available in specific states and territories. All data is actively maintained for currency. IIS shares this data with My Skills via an API.

IIS has developed information and resources in response to stakeholder needs, including: videos; industry-based job pathway charts and literacy and numeracy quizzes; a career explorer tool; a service provider search tool; and a pre-apprenticeship listing service.

Other Service elements include: the circulation of e-newsletters, a blog and podcast; a popular social media presence; and provision of information sessions and an enquiry service.

Productivity Commission Interim Report

The Productivity Commission’s interim report, along with the Joyce Review and several others over many years, rightly highlights the core issue within the VET sector as being the need for collaboration among government to deliver efficient and effective outcomes. IIS would add that there is also a need for collaboration among the various departments of education, training and employments across Australia.

The need for good information is also highlighted by the interim report. This need flows across most areas covered by the review, including decisions made by individuals and governments. Data and other information, provided in various forms, written, visual and verbal, that is relevant to stakeholder needs and available at a specific point in their decision making process, is the foundation of efficient and effective outcomes.

Good information

Good information is accurate, relevant, up-to-date, and so managed, accessible and interpreted and presented for an audience.

Good decisions are based on good information, something which is particularly important where government spending is directed by individuals choosing between options. If their decisions are based on provider marketing information or offers of inducements, as we have seen there is a significant chance of poor outcomes and an inefficient allocation of funds.

The Productivity Commission’s interim report rightfully identifies that risks arise where the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector operates as a commercial market, if consumers do not have access to independent and neutral information sources.

Good data comes from a broad range of sources, both information directly relevant to the subject as well as peripheral information that adds breadth and depth to a person’s consideration of choice. It can be gathered by government or service provider networks. As the interim report and the Joyce review state, there are obvious benefits in the collaboration of stakeholders in creating access to this data, and in the coordination of its analysis and publishing.

Collaboration across the sector would deliver a more integrated approach to data gathering, analysis and availability. The National Skills Commission (NSC) and the National Career Institute (NCI) will be key agents in achieving this, along with the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER).

IIS works at a practical level, interacting with stakeholders impacting on the ‘transaction’ of seeking or recruiting Australian Apprenticeships, as well as providing information and resources supporting careers conversations.

IIS supports the NSCs and NCIs role in sourcing and analysing data and make it more accessible. This will provide initiatives such as AATIS with enhanced tools with which it can develop content and resources to meet client driven needs. AATIS, for example, interprets and presents information in different ways to different persona groups: students; job hunters; employers; and also for staff in service provider networks.

Data can also become the backbone of tools which add a dimension to careers conversations, for example resources that provide people with an indication of their suitability to an occupation based on factors identified in aggregated data. These avenues need to be investigated by the NSC and NCI, in collaboration with organisations with the expertise in the technology and the knowledge of stakeholder needs.

More industry-driven career information is needed to help people researching career options. This information needs to be current and reveal emerging trends within specific industry sectors. An obvious but underutilised source for this information is Industry Reference Committees. The reasons behind IRC development of qualifications or micro-credentials are highly relevant to people looking to inform themselves about occupations and industry needs.

The role of Service Organisations and the NSC covers this field, however, the information should be made available with consistent branding guidelines to establish its position within the range of careers data and information gathered by the NSC and NCI.

Consistent product definitions, messaging and presentation adds coherence to Australian Apprenticeship promotion and communications, delivering greater effect to these efforts. Flexibility is required to allow organisations serving clients and client groups to address different audiences. So, for example, presentation guidelines could be established, in the manner of the ‘Real Skills, Real Careers’ campaign. This balances the need in marketing and communications for consistency and ‘brand recognition’ and targeting audiences.

Delivery structures

IIS believes that structures that simplify Australian Apprenticeships information and communications will be a major benefit to its work with Australian Apprenticeships stakeholders, and to building a general understanding of Australian Apprenticeship career pathways.

Consistency in messaging, and brand, is particularly important as the internet drives multiple entry points to information seeking. Each organisation working in the sector must have a presence across platforms, especially if they are working in a competitive environment. It is not plausible that the ‘one stop shop’ for information is achievable.

However, establishing the NSC and NCI as a central point of authoritative and managed data and information resources, would underpin a broad range of client-facing services which would act like a distribution network.

Additionally, through this authority, and the support of all governments, the NSC and NCI could also establish and promote service standards that become accepted across the Australian Apprenticeships and VET sector as a mark of a quality service. Such an approach would require clear standards and consistent auditing. If done well, this ‘award’ could be promoted to parents, schools and others looking for reassurance of the status to the service provider and the sector.

Quality and standards for the Careers Practitioner profession have been established by the Career Industry Council of Australia, however more trained and qualified professionals are needed to expand the availability of quality counselling and advice. Acknowledgement of these skills and their application will also build the status of the role, and this again could be used to help students, parents and schools identify where quality services are offered.

Professional Development connects Careers Practitioners to the ever-changing world of initiatives, policy and the employment market. The NCI’s collaboration with key careers associations and training organisations delivering ‘PD’, for example by circulating up-to-date industry-based data, will help engage and inform practitioners.

The reality of the provision of career advice is that it may be provided by experts or people not trained in the role. This situation must be addressed by providing information, resources and support to people providing advice who have little or no background in doing so. Consolidating skills in the essentials of career decision making, career conversations, locating essential resources and expert support where needed, is an essential initiative for the NCI. Such a project will positively impact on an advice environment that isn’t optimal, but is a fact.

AATIS has developed general information for this group of ‘non-expert’ advisers, including ‘how to research Australian Apprenticeship careers’ flowcharts and webinars orientating them to Australian Apprenticeships resources. The Australian Apprenticeships Pathways website is used in schools as a basis for discussing career pathway options and for testing basic ‘likes/dislikes’ of students, allowing them to develop more refined preferences which help inform their next career conversation. AATIS will continue to work with the NCI, careers associations and governments to involve and inform in this group.

Delivering services to clients means addressing the needs of individuals, their communication preferences and their capabilities to research and analyse information. Some people use services, such as those provided by AATIS, independently while some require support to gather and compare information and to make decisions.

AATIS works to enable people to use managed information and resources, to encouraging career conversations in school or in the home, and to connect with service provider networks to progress their interest in Australian Apprenticeships.

Information and outputs in the marketplace

A marketplace for information and education products exists, but as with all markets it is a mix of commercial activity and government led interventions to help deliver quality and direct use of resources and effort to specific needs or outcomes.

For employers, people researching careers and those making job choices, the complexity of the recruitment or career decision requires not only good information, the information must also be provided in a way that supports a decision making process, and there must be access to support services. These are all matters of importance to the NCI.

The Productivity Commission’s interim report rightly raises the poor performance of the VET market of the recent past, and identifies a lack of consumer information as a key gap in that market. Auditing and quality control are other determinants of positive outcomes, also providing protection against reputational damage to both VET and Australian Apprenticeships.

AATIS is an example of a government funded initiative, in place to help build knowledge and understanding of Australian Apprenticeship career pathways and support their take-up across jurisdictions and industries. The Service interprets information and helps inform people about processes and choice in the Australian Apprenticeships field, such as around the availability of choice of Registered Training Organisation. The Service also helps navigate individuals and employers around the system, helping to connect people with service providers, for example.

The provision of good information from ‘non-market based institutions’ assists better decision-making within the VET market. A market which requires several complex choices, often made by people without highly developed experience, is less likely to deliver efficient and effective outcomes if there is no neutral information source and support structure. This intervention in a marketplace is particularly vital where individuals are spending public money or entering into a debt arrangement.

Efficient information and service delivery systems will be needed to underpin Australia’s response to the recession and the COVID-19 pandemic. A lack of focus and systemic cohesion will cost the economy and individuals dearly.

Innovation is spoken of as an essential ‘employability skill’ valued by employers in staff. Funding and policy effort should also be led by innovation when considering emerging industries, meeting changing skills needs, and considering how an economy and employers must act sustainably.

There is already innovative thought being given to where the future economy lies. Specific areas of focus for additional, targeted funding are touched on in the Joyce Review (2019) and areas for innovation are highlighted by the National COVID Coordination Committee (NCCC). These relate to preparing the economy and the VET system for the future of work, which will be impacted significantly by rapid technological change, and also to addressing environmental sustainability.

The creation of the NSC, and the NCI, are strongly supported by IIS. A cohesive national VET structure, featuring support across jurisdictions and collaboration with service providers and sector specialists, will underpin responses to the challenges created by the COVID-19 crisis.

However, the defunding of the VET sector over many years has restricted its capability to deliver on its mission, even in normal economic times. Faced with a recession, the sector will require a significant injection of funding to enable it to help drive a recovery.

A large part of funding and activity in the sector must be targeted at the development of skilled apprentices and trainees with qualifications and competences that reflect identified industrial, economic and social transformation goals. This will require collaboration between a range of social partners, industry and government, focussing on the needs of the key decision makers who make Australian Apprenticeships happen, employers and job hunters.

In summary, the infrastructure of the VET sector should create or support a market evolving through learnings, responsive to changing objectives, featuring collaboration between participants, for example where contracted service provider networks both deliver and inform policy and initiative development.

Past recessions show that policy must prioritise reducing the disequilibrium in the labour market by supporting existing businesses, or the creation of new enterprises, and assisting individuals to prepare for the workforce, for example through acquiring skills in demand, the provision of guidance on career and job choices, and supporting job hunting efforts.

Apprenticeships and traineeships have proven to be an effective tool in the transitioning of people into work or upskilling into new roles, producing benefits for both employers and employees.

Other important policy initiatives are already underway, including increasing the speed with which qualifications are updated to maintain pace with digitalisation and incorporating digital skills into the foundation skills outlined in the Australian Core Skills Framework. Aligning digital skills with the core skills forming qualifications in VET would help to drive transformations in line with the skills demands of industry.

In the shorter term, engagement of apprentices, trainees and people seeking employment is vital to help achieve a rapid rebound in the economy when that occurs.

The Mitchell Institute report into the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on apprentices and trainees (Peter Hurley, 2020) argues that there is great need to ensure apprentices and trainees remain in the education and training pipeline. This is essential to guarantee that the economy avoids a future downturn in the numbers of apprentices and trainees required to meet labour market demands in economic recovery. The author has advocated for government investment in innovative labour market programs, including ‘live work’ which is intermediate work experience that simulates the work environment, bridging the gap between education and training and the labour market, ensuring apprentices and trainees remain engaged in forms of labour market participation.

The social and economic risks confronting the Australian economy in the post-COVID-19 recovery will require significant commitments and actions throughout the economy over the next three years or more. This is a time for piloting ideas, and acting quickly to scale up approaches that show they will improve the employability of individuals and also the capability of business owners to survive then thrive over the course of the recession.

An energised and properly resourced VET system will not be tasked with returning the economy to where it was, but it will be an important agent helping to unlocking the benefits of developing new industries, powering change in existing industries, and delivering skills driven by digitisation and the need for sustainability, directions that, in the minds of many across the generational layers of the economy and society, are already beyond choice.