



National Agreement on Skills and Workforce Development Review – Interim Report

July 2020

Introduction

The Queensland Catholic Education Commission (QCEC) provides this submission on the *National Agreement for Skills and Workforce Development Review* (the NASWD Review). QCEC and Catholic School Authorities strongly support the provision of quality Vocational Education and Training (VET) that enables schools to cater for students' different talents, skills and needs and contributes to their choice of post school pathways. VET is an integral and valued part of curriculum offerings in Queensland Catholic secondary schools and this submission addresses elements of the Review that are relevant to the delivery of VET in schools.

QCEC is the peak strategic body with state-wide responsibilities for Catholic schooling in Queensland. This submission is provided on behalf of the five Diocesan Catholic school authorities and 17 Religious Institutes and other incorporated bodies which, between them, operate a total of 307 Catholic schools that educate more than 149,000 students in Queensland. Approximately 102 Catholic secondary schools offer VET opportunities to their students.

Nearly 50 percent (48.7%) of students who completed Year 12 at a Queensland Catholic secondary school in 2019 received a VET qualification. 7546 VET Certificates in total were awarded to students who completed Year 12 in 2019 at a Queensland Catholic secondary school. There were 772 students who completed Year 12 in 2019 in a Queensland Catholic School and were enrolled in a School Based Apprenticeship or Traineeships (SAT).

Catholic schools play a critical role in preparing young people for life after school, including preparing them for work and other pathways. High quality educational experiences, access to a diverse range of courses, career education and support for students during their secondary years help lay the foundation for rewarding, productive and fulfilling careers and the development of a sense of responsibility and active citizenship.

Background

The National Agreement for Skills and Workforce Development (NASWD) was agreed by the Australian, State and Territory governments in 2009 and updated in 2012. The overall objective of the Agreement is to achieve a vocational education and training (VET) system that delivers a more productive and highly skilled workforce, enabling all working age Australians to participate effectively in the labour market and contribute to Australia's economic future.

In November 2019, the Australian Government requested the Productivity Commission review the NASWD. On 22 November, the Productivity Commission released an issues paper which considered: performance and suitability of the NASWD; how well the VET system is working; funding and pricing of VET; government investment in VET; options to better coordinate and streamline initiatives; and other targeted reforms.

Whilst the focus of the NASWD is working age Australians it recognises the importance of delivery of VET in schools and provides a national specific purpose funding payment for VET in schools. Any changes to the way VET is designed and funded could have implications for the delivery of VET in schools.

In Queensland, schools deliver and assess VET qualifications and accredited courses approved by the Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA) up to Australian Quality Framework Certificate IV level (except those declared as an apprenticeship in Queensland). Schools can apply to the Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority (as a delegate for ASQA) to be registered training organisations (RTOs) and deliver the training and assessment, or they can engage third party RTOs to undertake training and assessment. Queensland school RTOs must be able to meet the *Standards for RTOs 2015* in the same way as any other RTO and school students study the same content and are assessed in the same way as any other VET student.

Response

Information Request – Role of competition on the VET market

QCEC supports the current system of competition in the Queensland VET market where non-TAFE registered training organisations (RTOs) secure a significant portion of government funding to encourage quality and cost efficiencies and protect user choice.

Delivery in regional and rural communities

QCEC considers that public and private providers should be supported by government funding to deliver high-quality courses that align with local industry and regional employment opportunities. The ability of VET to ‘reach in’ to regional areas is vital in providing equity of opportunities and to enhance and promote the employability of people in regional communities. The provision of face to face learning in regional areas has a two-fold benefit: participants get to engage with practical applications of the training; and trainers experience the challenges and opportunities regional and remote locations present. It is recommended that government funding be used to subsidise the cost of training courses delivered in regional and remote locations.

The interim report notes the favourable influence the provision of VET has in regional and rural communities citing the socio-economic and wellbeing benefits, and even contributing to reduced crime rates in rural communities¹. QCEC recommends that consideration be given to the value of these broader social benefits, which also have flow-on economic benefits, when considering investment in subsidies for delivery of high-quality VET in regional areas.

Effective measures of efficiency

QCEC suggests that effective measures of the efficiency of the VET market would still include completion rates of qualifications and include the attainment of discrete skill sets as pursuit of these become more common with workers responding to employer needs to upskill in specific areas but not necessarily to complete a full qualification.

QCEC also recommends School Based Apprenticeships (SBAs) be measured differently to other qualifications because these are not actually completed within the student’s time at school, and this distorts completion rates.

A clear picture of efficiency of the VET market could be informed by: measuring student satisfaction with training; measuring industry satisfaction with qualifications; course content and assessment criteria; measuring whether or not demand for courses has been met in both regional and metropolitan locations; and whether courses have been offered but there has been little or no uptake. Measuring unmet demand would be beneficial in highlighting gaps in service delivery.

One of the concerns raised in relation to some VET courses is the lack of transparency in relation to the actual costs associated with the training. A key consumer protection that QCEC would support would be to require all training providers to provide up front, transparent information about all costs associated with delivery of a qualification or skill set.

Information Request – Career Guidance for Students

Career guidance is a necessary and important element in shaping a young person's subject and pathway choices and can improve focus and commitment at school. Good careers education should be underpinned by a holistic understanding of effective career navigation strategies that extend to translating choices into achievable plans. In relation to VET, reliable advice is needed about the potential benefits of skill sets to career pathways post-school and how long-term career ambitions can be achieved through VET.

School staff play a pivotal role in ensuring school students have access to career information and advice, and as acknowledged in the *Expert Review of Australia's Vocational Education and Training System*² (the Joyce Review) they have a significant influence over students' career aspirations and subject choices. In relation to the overabundance of online career resources acknowledged by the Review, school-based careers staff report that available online resources are often of high quality but can result in conflicting recommendations for students. Students and families rely on school-based careers staff to be well informed and up to date with implications from emerging issues and trends in relation to VET (e.g. micro-credentials, changes to regulatory bodies such as the Australian Skills Quality Authority) to ensure they provide sound and informed recommendations and assist students to navigate online resources. QCEC welcomes the establishment of the National Careers Institute in accordance with recommendations of the Joyce Review and supports the intention for this to become a central careers information hub. While the full useability and impact of this resource is yet to be fully realised as it matures it is a positive step in the careers information space.

QCEC suggests that the provision of reliable and useful career information to school students could be improved through the National Careers Institute developing a specific discrete strategy/action targeting school-based careers staff. This would help to improve the quality and reliability of advice provided to students, accelerate the aims and objectives of *Future Ready: A student focused National Career Education Strategy*³ and further promote the National Careers Institute as a first point of engagement. A careers advice strategy for school-based careers staff could focus on areas such as: professional development and upskilling of school-based careers staff through subsidised training; introducing formal education for careers counsellors/advisors; developing a national template for a careers education framework; and information and resources within the National Careers Institute designed to keep school-based careers professionals informed and up to date.

Information Request – Designing a New Intergovernmental Agreement

QCEC supports the proposed principles for a new agreement and suggests reference could also be made to a principle of rigorous monitoring to safeguard the integrity of the system, given the number and diversity of RTOs.

Information Request – Simplification of Subsidy Groupings

QCEC considers the proposal to introduce consistent course subsidisation across Australia to be a positive direction in the VET sector and also strongly supports the proposal for subsidies to address higher delivery costs in some locations and in relation to certain specific skill sets, as well as to address access challenges experienced by some students.

Information Request – Implementing an Expanded Loans Scheme

The NASWD Review suggests that some degree of commonality in subsidy and loan settings across VET and higher education is needed because the current arrangements are inequitable and can inefficiently encourage students to choose a sector to which they are not best suited⁴. QCEC agrees with this finding and considers that commonality would be effective in promoting both sectors as equally valued and expanding the reach of income contingent VET Student Loans across a greater number of qualifications.

This in turn would also support a greater number of students to undertake a VET courses who would not otherwise be able to do so because of financial pressures. Queensland Catholic School Authorities report that income contingent loans are well understood by young people and are seen as an effective way for them to further their learning.

Information Request – Implementing New Support Arrangements for Trade Apprenticeships

Queensland Catholic School Authorities report that demand in schools for school-based apprenticeships often outweighs willingness from employers to take students on as apprentices. Targeting industry subsidies or incentives at this cohort could be trialled as a means of meeting demand in schools. QCEC also considers that in terms of the NASWD Review’s consideration of new policy measures to support greater interest in trade apprenticeships more broadly, increasing the range and offerings for the higher skills apprenticeship model could improve the standing of apprenticeships and compare more favourably with other post-school pathways.

In addition, with respect to considering new policy measures and strengthening pastoral care and mentoring support, QCEC advocates for increased funding to support the provision of these important wellbeing measures as part of VET in schools. Increased funding to provide school-based trainees with these important supports could encourage greater uptake of VET qualifications, particularly in areas of skill shortage such as information technology, business and health services. Increased funding would also enable schools to improve monitoring and tracking of school-based apprentices and school-based trainees in terms of progress and more frequently liaise with industry mentors. Schools are best placed to support student’s wellbeing and an increased connection with schools and employers would achieve smoother transitions to the workplace and other post-school destinations by ensuring work readiness skills are identified and developed.

Information Request – Employer Incentives Targeting Disadvantaged Groups

QCEC considers that students facing disadvantage should be supported to access training courses across all qualification levels, so they have choice and opportunity to commence new learning or to extend existing learning. QCEC does not see any benefit to targeting support at specific qualification levels.

Information Request – Flexibility Allowed by Training Packages

The NASWD Review reports that recent initiatives have reduced the number of training products and further reforms are planned to streamline the development and updating of content in training packages. It is also noteworthy that the NASWD reports that the Australian Government will be developing guidelines to facilitate the recognition of shorter-form credentials and the VET Reform Roadmap⁵ commits to developing a framework for recognising micro-credentials. QCEC considers these developments to be positive ones for VET. QCEC is supportive of the recommendation for Industry Reference Committees to be delegated power to commission changes or approve updates to training packages in limited circumstances.

Information Request – Pathways and Transitions

The NASWD Review suggests that the effectiveness of VET in schools as a pathway to employment is questionable⁶. QCEC does not consider this to be a well-informed statement because current available data does not adequately enable the long-term pathway of students who undertake VET in schools to be fully assessed. QCEC would also bring to the attention of the Review that the provision of VET in schools has a much broader purpose than just being a pathway to employment. VET in schools provides pathways for all young people, including those seeking further education and training and those seeking work ready, employment skills, and can help to prevent young people from disengaging from learning. VET in schools is a critical pathway for many students in their lifelong learning journey.

VET offerings in schools provide opportunities to meet the needs of young people by contributing to a holistic and engaging education. Catholic schools report that students who undertake VET courses are highly engaged and for students at risk of dis-engaging from learning, schools report that these students can find renewed enthusiasm for school subjects as a result of their engagement in VET courses. Catholic schools also report that local industry and employers they engage with are very supportive of the VET

programs schools offer and they are impressed with the knowledge and skills students bring to the workplace as a result of their engagement with VET.

QCEC disagrees with the suggestion in the Review that schools and advisors often have little experience with VET, favour universities and mistakenly see VET as only offering trade qualifications⁷. There are many examples where this is not the case and Catholic School Authorities report that Catholic schools that choose to include VET offerings in their secondary curriculum choices are well-informed with regards to the range of VET offerings and give careful consideration to the training courses made available to students. Schools often offer a variety of VET options including school-based apprenticeships and school-based traineeships. However, the concerns over the effectiveness of VET in Schools is acknowledged and should be further explored through the Review. A careful appraisal of VET in Schools, taking into consideration State differences across Australia may also be beneficial. If aspects of VET in schools are found to be inadequate these should be identified and improved upon.

QCEC would argue that VET in schools is and can be a very effective strategy in developing early work ready skills in young people. QCEC considers there would be benefit in improving communications with employer and industry groups to develop a shared and balanced understanding of young people's capabilities and maturity post-school (e.g. Workcover Queensland's *Young Worker Safety Toolkit*⁸ is an example of such a resource). There would also be benefit in supporting schools to strengthen partnerships with industry as an effective way of improving how VET in schools develops work ready skills. A model the Review could look at when considering the effectiveness of VET in schools is the *Queensland Gateway to Industry Schools program*⁹ (GISP). The GISP supports school and industry partnerships to enable young people to acquire knowledge, skills and attributes relevant to the workplace, delivering outcomes for students, local communities and businesses. Programs like GISP could also enable schools to access industry support to develop foundational skills for students with learning challenges.

With respect to pathways QCEC agrees with the suggestion in the Review that there could be better information about credit options and suggests that higher education institutions and tertiary admissions agencies work together to provide accessible course credit information and improved processes for obtaining credit for recognition of prior learning.

Information Request – Impacts of COVID 19

As discussed in the Review, QCEC considers the role that VET could play in augmenting the skills and employability of younger Australians would be to: increase the availability of online courses where appropriate to the learning required; build on work done during COVID-19 to develop suitable adaptive practices to gather valid evidence; increase the range of micro-credentials available; and establish a robust system of recognition of accredited skill sets. These measures would support rapid upskilling of people to fill capability gaps and improve opportunities to gain employment. This approach could be supported by a secure, digital repository for Australians to store credit from part and full completion of certificate and degree courses, industry provided training and prior learning all linked to students Unique Student Identifier. Post-COVID-19 working age Australians would benefit from being able to build a digital learning/skills account of recognised, accredited skill sets, to enable them to move flexibly and rapidly into the opportunities.

Conclusion

QCEC broadly supports all aspects of the Review and considers it to be well-timed in the context of:

- the fourth industrial revolution
- recommendations from the Joyce Review for significant changes to the VET system;
- the announcement of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) Skills Council on 9 August 2019 to replace the former COAG Industry and Skills Council
- the establishment of the new National Skills Commission (NSC) to provide high quality advice on Australia's labour market, future workforce changes and current and emerging skills;

- the establishment of the National Careers Institute to improve the quality of career development and resolve a significant amount of fragmented and difficult to use career information and services available to all Australians; and
- the release by Skills Council of the draft VET Reform Roadmap.

QCEC appreciates the opportunity to provide a submission to the Review and welcomes the focus on aspects of VET delivered in school settings and positive outcomes for students.

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¹ [National Agreement for Skills and Workforce Development Review, Interim Report](https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/current/skills-workforce-agreement/interim/skills-workforce-agreement-interim.pdf), p 122, Productivity Commission, Canberra - <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/current/skills-workforce-agreement/interim/skills-workforce-agreement-interim.pdf>

² [Strengthening Skills: Expert Review of Australia's Vocational Education and Training System](https://www.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/publications/strengthening-skills-independent-review-australia-vets_1.pdf), Joyce. S, p 85, Commonwealth of Australia, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet 2019 - https://www.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/publications/strengthening-skills-independent-review-australia-vets_1.pdf

³ [Future Ready: A Student focused National Career Education Strategy](https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/future_ready_a_student_focused_national_career_education_strategy.pdf), Australian Government Department of Education - https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/future_ready_a_student_focused_national_career_education_strategy.pdf

⁴ [National Agreement for Skills and Workforce Development Review, Interim Report](https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/current/skills-workforce-agreement/interim/skills-workforce-agreement-interim.pdf), p 30, Productivity Commission, Canberra - <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/current/skills-workforce-agreement/interim/skills-workforce-agreement-interim.pdf>

⁵ Draft [VET Reform Roadmap](#), p 3, Council of Australian Governments (COAG) Skills Council

⁶ [National Agreement for Skills and Workforce Development Review, Interim Report](https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/current/skills-workforce-agreement/interim/skills-workforce-agreement-interim.pdf), p 14, Productivity Commission, Canberra - <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/current/skills-workforce-agreement/interim/skills-workforce-agreement-interim.pdf>

⁷ [National Agreement for Skills and Workforce Development Review, Interim Report](https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/current/skills-workforce-agreement/interim/skills-workforce-agreement-interim.pdf), p 14, 98, Productivity Commission, Canberra - <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/current/skills-workforce-agreement/interim/skills-workforce-agreement-interim.pdf>

⁸ [Young Worker Safety Toolkit, Young Workers](https://www.worksafe.qld.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0003/109677/young-workers-toolkit.pdf), WorkCover Queensland, Workplace Health and Safety Electrical Safety Office Worker's Compensation Regulator -

https://www.worksafe.qld.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0003/109677/young-workers-toolkit.pdf
<https://www.worksafe.qld.gov.au/injury-prevention-safety/young-workers>

⁹ [Gateway to Industry Schools Program](https://desbt.qld.gov.au/training/employers/gateway-schools), Queensland Government Department of Employment, Small Business and Training - <https://desbt.qld.gov.au/training/employers/gateway-schools>