

Submission from the Western Australian Department of Training and Workforce Development in response to the Productivity Commission's Issues Paper on the Vocational Education and Training Workforce

The Department of Training and Workforce Development, in addition to its training role, has broader responsibilities which include a focus on workforce planning and development to build, attract and retain a skilled workforce to meet the economic needs of Western Australia, to minimise skill shortages and maximise the State's ability to respond to new opportunities.

This submission provides comment around four main areas that are the subject of the paper. The four key areas are:

- The nature and capability of the VET sector;
- The demand;
- The supply; and
- The international dimension.

In part, this submission arises out of ideas expressed at a forum organised by the Department of Training and Workforce Development and attended by public and private providers and members of the Department. The submission also includes views taken from other submissions from within the public training sector. Such submissions are included in full as appendices to this submission.

1. THE NATURE AND CAPABILITY OF THE VET SECTOR

The vocational education and training (VET) sector is complex and is closely intertwined with the economy. Each stage of every economic cycle in all industry sectors has implications for VET and its workforce. The anticipated sustained economic growth in Western Australia will require a sustained, flexible response from the state's VET sector to meet the demands of industry.

Compounding this need is the changing nature of the workplace. Globalisation, rapid rate of change, innovation and competitiveness are features of today's world. All of these create demands and put pressure on the training system. To meet these demands, flexibility and responsiveness are required to deliver multiple and higher level skills.

In Western Australia, the attached document, *A Workforce Development Framework for VET Practitioners 2008-2013* (Department of Training and Workforce Development) provides an overview of the change drivers within the VET sector, and identifies whole of sector needs to enable the implementation of a strategic approach to workforce development and learning in Western Australia.

2. DEMAND

The key issues facing the VET practitioner today are considered to be:

Currency of skills

Right across the training sector, a recurrent issue is the balance between teaching qualifications and the levels of technical skills and experience of lecturers/trainers. It is a major concern as to how technical currency can be maintained and enhanced, particularly for lecturers who are permanent and full-time.

One of the requirements of Training Packages and the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF) is that trainers in the VET sector must “be able to demonstrate vocational competencies at least to the level of those being delivered.” In this context, vocational competency is defined as broad industry knowledge and experience, usually combined with a relevant industry qualification. This requirement for broad industry knowledge and experience in part helps explain why the average age of a VET practitioner is in the late 50’s.

Industry and other stakeholders are placing greater emphasis on increased flexibility in delivery. New skills in the use of technology and sustainability are in demand. To achieve this, the VET sector will need to be more flexible in the types of skills it provides, reflecting technological changes and shifts in the nation’s industrial base.

State and Commonwealth governments are working towards further reforms that will place additional pressure in this area.

Language, literacy and numeracy

It is very likely that demand for VET from learners from disadvantaged backgrounds will increase in the next five to ten years. The raised school leaving age requires young people to stay at school longer and many of these students will be seeking to develop employability skills through VET in Schools courses. Catering for these students with teachers skilled in industry areas as well as having teaching qualifications will be a challenge.

It is also likely that a significant proportion of these students will lack well-developed literacy and numeracy skills. This will place increasing demands on the VET teacher/lecturer workforce, some of whom would benefit from support to lift their own foundation skills levels and who perhaps have little expertise in teaching these skills to their VET students.

Within the training sector, as with schools, literacy is a major issue. The problem, however, lies not only with students. Within the VET workforce itself there are questions about the standards of literacy and numeracy of some staff. Where this is the case with lecturers, it means that they also lack the capability to assist students improve their language and literacy skills to a standard that will enable them to progress to and complete higher level qualifications.

Foundation skills

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the VET sector is now teaching many students who do not have foundation skills. This term embraces employability skills such as teamwork, initiative, planning and self-management. Such students require different kinds of support to remain in the formal learning environment. There are also concerns about the outcomes of training for Indigenous people where there is a young and growing population.

Overall, the increasing lack of foundation skills in students suggests that the VET sector will need to:

- encourage, recruit and support more Indigenous trainers;
- recruit staff with the skills to teach students who lack academic foundation skills, preferably as a component of vocational learning; and
- recruit staff able to provide 'wrap around' services to support student learning particularly to effect transition into employment.

The appropriateness of VET in Schools for meeting industry needs

The widespread adoption of VET in Schools raises issues regarding the nature of the qualifications, skills and experience required to deliver training in this environment. On the one hand it is suggested that teaching skills are the foremost requirement for this segment of the VET workforce; on the other, many would say that current, relevant technical expertise, is the more important. Like most training issues it is too simplistic to reduce the argument to these two positions, particularly as there is a broader question to be addressed, namely what is and should be the role of VET in Schools as a means of meeting industry training needs?

3. SUPPLY

There are complex and interwoven factors affecting the VET sector's capacity to maintain a quality workforce that will meet future demands.

The key factors relate to the ageing workforce and the growing need for skilled workers due to severe skill shortages driven by changes in the economy. For lecturing staff in particular, the requirement for lecturers to hold qualifications in teaching and industry competence mean that 'suitably' qualified workers are difficult to find, and are typically in an older age range. This means that much of the current workforce may have retired within the next 10 years. There is a high incidence of part time employment in the training sector and this is attractive for workers seeking phased retirement options.

Attracting highly-skilled workers into the public VET sector is challenging. Public RTOs' capacity to pay market rates, particularly in times of skill shortage is severely hampered by the inflexibility of industrial frameworks, with only some limited options available to match market rates. Also, the job application requirements of Government, while strong on fairness and process, are onerous on the applicants and are a disincentive to people who are deciding whether to work in the public or private training sectors. These processes, because of the time taken to complete them, also limit public RTOs' ability to compete with the private sector for staff. A capacity to streamline these while maintaining a fair process would be welcomed. In summary, public providers have more constraints than private providers in selecting and employing staff.

The public VET sector has a large permanent workforce, but this does not provide the flexibility the sector needs to ensure it is able to respond quickly to meet short-term and delivery on-demand scenarios that may develop in response to industry requirements. The challenge for the sector is to maintain the optimal number, type and mix of permanent lecturers to meet mainstream training demand, and a non-permanent workforce to meet training-on-demand contingencies, which can be reduced during economic down turns.

An ongoing characteristic of the VET workforce is that the training sector competes with the industries it serves for skilled workers. There is evidence of workers moving back to industry where the industry is suffering extreme demand for workers. In general, staff

from VET are particularly attractive to industry because of their professional expertise and training and people management skills.

The level of remuneration and quality of conditions within the VET workforce varies depending on the type of industry. In some areas such as beauty therapy, hairdressing, childcare and other low paying industries, these are attractive. The opposite is the case as regards areas such as mining, electrical trades and engineering.

On the positive side, VET allows for reduced hours of work for older staff, those with family responsibilities or those who want to maintain professional associations or operate businesses within their field of expertise. There is also flexibility in how and where work is to be performed, which also makes lecturing work attractive.

These can be important factors in the decision to enter or remain in the VET workforce. The conditions such as flexibility, ability to use professional expertise for lecturing as well as continuing to work in their industry are important to VET employees.

4. THE INTERNATIONAL DIMENSION

International education is Australia's third largest export. It is expected to grow as demand from emerging BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India, China) economies continue to expand. In the future, delivery to international students and opportunities for staff to work offshore will be a constant for many VET institutions.

However, success in this area will require staff trained to understand and appreciate the particular needs of this student cohort. VET lecturers need to understand and be sensitive to cultural differences of the various nationalities of their international students and how this impacts on the learning styles of students.

In times of increasing competitiveness, it is possible that course offerings may well be less predictable and more reactive to short term financial or demand imperatives. College course offerings will be demand driven (reactive) and the resulting lack of predictability of course offerings may be of concern in international marketing due to the longer lead times for international students' study plans.

APPENDICES

1. *A Workforce Development Framework for VET Practitioners 2008-2013*, Department of Training and Workforce Development, Western Australia
2. Submission by the Polytechnic of Western Australia, June 2010
3. Submission by Central Institute of Technology, Western Australia, July 2010