



**State Public Services Federation
Group**

CPSU-SPSF response to

The Productivity Commission Draft Research Report into the
Vocational Education and Training Workforce

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Contents

- **Introduction**
 - CPSU-SPSF Group background
 - What we do
 - General principles
- **Key concerns**
 - VET Workforce
 - Funding and The Contestable Market Model
 - Industrial arrangements
- **Contact information**

Introduction

CPSU-SPSF GROUP – Background Information

The CPSU-SPSF welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Productivity Commission Draft Research Report into the Vocational Education and Training Workforce.

This submission is made by CPSU, the Community and Public Sector Union (SPSF Group) on behalf of its associated bodies: the Public Service Association and Professional Officers' Association Amalgamated Union of New South Wales (PSA NSW), the Queensland Public Sector Union of Employees (QPSU), the Civil Service Association of Western Australia (CSA WA), the Public Service Association of South Australia Incorporated (PSA SA) and the Community & Public Sector Union (SPSFT) Inc Tasmania (CPSUT) (collectively referred to as the *State Associated Bodies*).

The CPSU is one of the largest public sector unions in Australia with more than 180,000 members. The union comprises two groups: the SPSF Group and the PSU Group.

The State Public Services Federation (SPSF Group) primarily represents employees of State Governments such as State Government Administration, Education, Agriculture and Natural Resources, or their agencies like Universities, Electricity Authorities, Roads and Traffic or Water Resources bodies. We have branches in all six states.

The PSU Group's members are generally employed by the Commonwealth Government or its agencies, such as Tax, CentreLink, Defence, Immigration, and a significant number of private Telecommunications and Call Centre operators.

What we do

The Federal Union looks after nationwide industrial issues for Universities and also industrial matters that span more than one State. It handles industrial relations between other Federal unions and deals with other Peak Bodies, like the ACTU, on behalf of the rest of our Union Branches and the "Associated Bodies". Also, it coordinates any issues that interest more than one Branch. These can include training standards, rights of women members, health and safety and so on.

As a union we are concerned about training and qualifications and the ways in which they influence work and remuneration. Any changes to the skills and training system will impact on all our members, their jobs and advancement opportunities.

Our union is actively involved in the strategic oversight of VET in Australia through participation on Industry Skills Councils (ISCs). The Federal Secretary is Chair of Government Skills Australia (GSA – the Public Sector ISC) and he and other Industrial Officers are Board members of the GSA, and of the Community Services and Health ISC.

General Principles

We begin by affirming our support to those submissions made by the Australian Education Union (AEU) and the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) as well as to the ACTU's response to the Draft Report.

The TAFE sector in Australia is the key vocational education provider and thus is pivotal to the development and implementation of strategies for sustained quality vocational education nationwide. It is predominantly the TAFE sector which provides high quality, accessible and inclusive vocational education opportunities which then translate into greater workforce participation and improve the application of workplace skills.

It is therefore the TAFEs, the public providers of VET, and their workforce that are the best placed to ensure delivery of the Government's productivity agenda and its main policy goals of halving the proportion of Australians with low-level or no qualifications and doubling the number with higher qualifications by 2020.

In terms of representation of the VET Workforce, as will be seen below, we are one of the major unions representing public sector staff in the VET system.

Key concerns

In this our initial response to the Draft Research Report, we would like to focus on the following key areas of concern:

- VET Workforce – definition
- Funding and The Contestable Market Model
- Industrial arrangements

VET workforce

We note that the report recognises the diversity of the VET workforce and acknowledges that the workforce does not comprise only teachers/trainers.

The diversity of the VET workforce is manifest in a number of dimensions. First, the provision of VET requires a mix of workers with a range of skills. Some staff directly engage with students in the delivery of course material. Others are responsible for course development, review or assessment. Yet others manage, administer or contribute more generally to the operation of an education or training institution. 3.1

The report provides a practical definition of the VET workforce which apart from teachers, trainers and assessors includes:

Other VET professionals – staff who manage, support and facilitate the VET-specific services provided by trainers and assessors. This group includes: managers who oversee and provide strategic direction for the operation of VET institutions; education aides who assist practitioners in the delivery of VET; and other human resources and education professionals whose skills need to be somewhat specific to the VET industry.

General staff – staff with generic skills who support the operation of VET institutions, such as accountants, librarians, IT staff and maintenance staff. The skills of these workers are not specific to the VET sector, meaning that they could be employed elsewhere in the labour force to perform similar job tasks.

Depending on the jurisdiction, our union represents the various groups comprising the VET workforce i.e. teachers, trainers and assessors as well as those groups listed above. In order to demonstrate the very broad range of roles and skills involved in the non-teaching VET workforce we list below as an example the classifications of Administrative and Support Staff Covered by the Crown Employees (NSW TAFE Commission, Administrative & Support Staff Conditions Of Employment) Award 2005 Schedule 1:

Apprentice Gardener, Greenkeeper, Nursery Person	Operations Supervisor Food School Operations Manager
Artists Model	Operations Manager Food School
Assistant Food and Beverage Controller	Publicity Officer
Assistant Operations Controller	Public Relations Officer
Assistant Operations Manager	Scientific Instrument Maker
Audio Visual Aids Technician	Senior Housekeeper
Customer Relations Manager	Steel Production Assistant
Catering Supervisor	Steel Production Supervisor
Catering Services Manager	Stores Attendant
Chief Security Controller	Stores Officer
Class Preparation Assistant	Student Association Officer
Clerk (Graded)	Technical Assistant (Various)
Clerical Officer Grade 1	Technical Officer (Engineering)
Clerical Officer Grade 1/2	Technical Officer (Scientific)
Clerical Officers Grade 3/8	
Computer Systems Officer (Graded)	
Computer Systems Officer (Trainee, Levels 1 & 2)	
Officer-in-Charge, Media Centre	
Dental Auxiliaries Assistant (Clinical)	
Dental Auxiliaries Assistant (Technical)	
Designer	
Disability Classroom Support (Non- teaching)	
Driver/General Assistant	
Duty Manager	
Assistant - Enrolled Nurses Training Program	
Food School Assistant	
Fitter Operator	
Food and Beverage Controller	
Gardening Staff	
General Assistant/Caretaker	
Guest Services Agent	
House Officer	
House Supervisor	
Kitchen Assistant	
Laboratory Attendant	
Laboratory Craftsman	
Librarian and Archivist	
Library Assistant	
Library Technician	
Operations Controller	

We note the lack of coherent data about the size of the VET workforce both TAFE and non-TAFE and support Draft Recommendation 7.1:

The Ministerial Council for Tertiary Education and Employment should engage the National Centre for Vocational Education Research to develop a comprehensive instrument with which to identify the VET workforce as soon as practicable. This instrument should focus on measuring and describing the workforce, but not unduly increase the response burden for providers.

We strongly urge any such research project to consult with the relevant unions and in particular with the CPSU-SPSF group which extensively covers public sector employees in the Other VET professionals and General Staff categories.

Such a review would also provide additional needed insight into another of concern to us: the extent of **casual employment** in the sector. We share the concerns articulated in the ACTU submission which point to the reasons to be wary of continued casualisation of the workforce and the resulting uncertainty of most casual employment, low pay and lack of standard employment rights and entitlements. We are also concerned by the apparent opportunism of those employers who continue to employ 'casual' staff for long periods. We are somewhat astonished by the Joint TAFE Associations' claim that

Casual staff are motivated to get the job done, and get the job done well, so they can market themselves better for permanent job opportunities. (Joint TAFE Associations' submission to the Productivity Commission Study into the VET workforce, p35)

implying that the estimated half of the total national TAFE workforce employed on a casual or contract basis simply hasn't been trying hard enough.

We look forward to the Commission's final report and the expected "more detailed analysis of the casual TAFE workforce".

Meanwhile, we support the suggestions made in the ACTU submission noting that the extent of casual employment is *not a sustainable way to continue*. We endorse the recommendation that casual conversion clauses be included in awards or agreements to give long-term casuals the opportunity to convert to permanent employment.

Funding and the Contestable Market Model

We concur with all the submissions which point to the inadequacy of funding by various levels of government across all political persuasions. The sustained failure of different administrations to provide the public VET system with appropriate funding combined with the imposition of contestable market principles have resulted in a fractured sector which imposes unworkable conditions on public and private providers alike.

We support the view that declining government funding for the TAFE system

which is the most important public provider of VET in Australia has had significant impacts and that no lasting and meaningful changes to improve the VET workforce can succeed without government commitment to reverse this strategy.

We believe there is a need to conduct a detailed analysis of funding arrangements and we also support the recommendations of the AEU submission which call for the restoration of Commonwealth and State funding to rebuild and sustain the TAFE system.

Draft Finding 4.1

A move towards greater managerial independence for public sector VET providers is likely to better enable them to respond to the more competitive environment they now typically face. However, the adoption of a full corporate model for public sector registered training organisations (RTOs) is unlikely to be appropriate, given the number of non-commercial objectives public providers are likely to have, and the desire for governments to retain both ownership and control.

We support the view that the “adoption of a full corporate model for public sector RTOs” would not be appropriate. The over-emphasis on commercial and competitive strategies of public sector RTOs already risks compromising their capacity to achieve broader social objectives and community service obligations. This is particularly the case in rural and regional areas and other so-called “thin markets” or “challenging markets” where the private sector providers of VET make the decision that for-profit VET is not viable in these markets.

At the same time, we do not agree with the assumption that *the new more competitive environment* is either desirable or indeed final and inevitable and unable to be reversed or modified. The recent Financial Crisis taught us that there are many questions to be raised about the prevailing economic theories and practices which have contributed significantly to the crisis. The belief that governments should devolve to the private sector financial responsibility for public-benefit initiatives is one such theory.

In their 2008 Discussion Paper on Competition, Contestability and TAFE¹, the AEU make a number of important points on this issue, not the least of which is the assertion that the move to contestability and competitive neutrality principles amounts to **the dismantling of the public TAFE system**. They claim that competition results in a demand-driven system which forces RTOs into ‘*aberrant behaviours in the delivery of VET in order to manage competition for scarce government funds*’.

Competition is presented as neutral – not ideological. However, it is based on a world view which sees monetary incentives and reward, and individual advancement as the sole driver of human behaviour. It is in many respects an anathema to education, where the activity of learning, of acquiring knowledge and skills is based on cooperation and collaboration.

¹ <http://www.aeufederal.org.au/Tafe/documents/ContDisc2008.pdf>

Industrial Arrangements

We do not agree with the assertion that there should not be jurisdiction-wide industrial agreements for the TAFE sector or that awards and agreements hamper employers' ability to adapt more 'flexible' approaches. On the contrary, industrial Awards and Agreements currently applicable at TAFEs enable the delivery of training in a variety of contexts providing options of time, place and mode (online, face to face, workplace). Our belief is that what is critical for employers is not the flexibility of awards and agreements but rather the capacity (or inclination) to pay. This is reflected in the steady drift to casualisation. The excuse of flexibility is used when in fact it is reduced cost which is the driving factor.

Improvements to wages and conditions are an essential part of the solution to counter the impact of an ageing workforce and to improve the professional status of the workforce. State-wide industrial agreements covering TAFEs provide for fair wages and working conditions. It is more likely that difficulties in offering better wages and conditions to attract and retain staff arise from funding constraints than the fact of jurisdiction-based agreements.

We are particularly concerned by the proposal at Draft Recommendation 7.3 which appears to be advocating a return to statutory individual agreements which would be in direct contravention of Australian Government policy.

We will be pleased to provide further explanation of the key concerns we have raised in our response.

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