

# IEUA-QNT SUBMISSION

[28 February 2023]

## Submission: Inquiry into the perceptions and status of vocational education and training

The Independent Education Union – Queensland and Northern Territory Branch (IEU-QNT) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback regarding the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training's *Inquiry into the perceptions and status of vocational education and training (VET) in Australia*.

### About IEU-QNT

IEU-QNT represents ~16,000 teachers, support staff and ancillary staff in non-government education institutions in Queensland and the Northern Territory and consistently engages in debate concerning industrial issues through Industrial Committee and through its national counterpart, the Independent Education Union of Australia, which receives input from teachers in all States and Territories.

In relation to the VET sector, IEUA-QNT represents educators working in a variety of training environments, ranging from private post-secondary colleges through to schools with substantial in-house VET programmes and those that make extensive or occasional use of external (TAFE and private) VET providers.

In this context, changes in regulation and operation of the VET sector have wide-ranging impacts on our members and, for this reason, we have previously made submissions and engaged in consultation around a variety of state and federal inquiries into, and reform of, the VET sector.

For the purposes of this submission, we recognise that the Terms of Reference for this inquiry are primarily focussed on post-secondary VET and have therefore chosen to focus on the impact of proposed changes on IEUA-QNT members working in private vocational training institutes or Registered Training Organisations (RTOs).

As a general introduction, we would note two major constraints on the quality of VET:

1. An over-reliance on casual and short-term contracts of employment for trainers and assessors, which makes it difficult for them to deliver high quality education and training programs and;
2. A tendency for governments to respond to problems within the sector by introduction of sweeping changes. This has made the sector change-weary and contributes to a public perception that the sector is both overly complex and inherently dysfunctional.

The Committee will note that, in responding to each of the requests for information, we repeatedly return to these two central points and offer suggestions as to how reforms might be better targeted to improve quality within the sector.

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### Response to the Committee's Terms of Reference

**TOR 1. Information available to students about VET qualifications and related career pathways along a student's journey through secondary schools, vocational education, higher education, and work, transitions, with a focus on how this combines with other sources of advice, including informal advice, to influence student choices, and how Commonwealth funded information for students about VET may be improved.**

1. Our union notes the investment, by a previous government, of considerable funding and resources in establishment the National Careers Institute.
2. While there is clearly a place for a single, authoritative source of careers information, this does not guarantee that those who would benefit most from the advice provided will access the information and should not be used as justification for a reduction in the quantum, and quality, of career guidance advice provided by school-based counsellors.
3. Studies of variables that affect career choice of school students have tended to focus on professions (e.g. accounting or teaching) [1-3]. These studies indicate that parental, peer and teacher influence remain key factors, as well as aptitude for subject matter and material factors such as availability of employment, prestige and social status, earning potential, cost of education and years of study.
4. In a rare study of factors that influence students to undertake VET programs, Osbourne and Circelli [4] report that:
  - a. while VET is positively seen as offering practical and work-related learning to students, a negative view of VET exists at the primary and secondary school levels in relation to its value, prestige and importance.
  - b. students have a higher interest in VET-related jobs than in VET post-school pathways, indicating a misalignment between their occupational and educational aspirations, with misunderstandings about the role of vocational education.
  - c. choosing a VET course may involve the consideration of location, with many students lacking local study options.
  - d. concerns over how to pay up-front fees for the course and support themselves during study are common among young people.
  - e. research has shown that those with peers of higher academic ability are more likely to choose non-vocational education post-school and that this is likely tied to perceptions that VET is for those of low academic ability (Hedges & Speckesser 2017).
  - f. Gender stereotyping influences students' ideas about their futures, particularly with regard to career choice.
5. This suggests that the mere provision of government advice is unlikely to have any substantial impact on student career choice.

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6. We would also suggest that the provision of advice is secondary to the provision of high-quality VET.
7. Decades of destabilising reform of the VET sector has created a situation where skilled and experienced vocational educators work under conditions that are not conducive to the delivery of high-quality, high-equity vocational education.
8. A recent NCVET study [5] has identified four key principles of high-quality VET delivery:
  - a. That it delivers in terms of student achievement
  - b. That it supports and encourages students to learn
  - c. That it is fit for purpose in that it meets the needs and purposes of all stakeholders
  - d. That it evolves in response to changing stakeholder and workplace needs.
9. Rather than focussing on peripheral factors such as the provision of career advice (but without diminishing the provision of such advice), government should focus on reforms that will provide trainers and assessors with appropriate, professional pay and conditions, as a prerequisite to ensuring that these principles are enacted, in both large and small RTOs.

### **TOR 2. Perceptions and status of the VET sector and how this may be impacting student enrolment choices, employer engagement, and recruitment and retention of the VET educator workforce, and how perceptions and status of the VET sector can be improved. International best practices in relation to VET perceptions and qualifications status should be examined.**

10. Our union notes the investment, by government, of considerable funding and resources in establishment of Jobs and Skills Australia to support longer term assessment and planning of industry needs (JSA).
11. Without a complementary investment in the actual provision of VET however, it is unlikely that working conditions of trainers and assessors will support the delivery of the high-quality education and training required to attract students to VET pathways.
12. As noted in response to TOR 1, there is a persistent perception of VET pathways as inferior to academic programs, despite evidence that VET pathways may align more appropriately with the career aspirations of many students [4].
13. Investing in initiatives to address the negative perception is unlikely to deliver the returns that would be achieved if the investment were instead directed into the actual provision of quality VET.
14. Investment consistent with the provision of quality VET must include initiatives that will improve working conditions for trainers and assessors (see response to TOR 3 and 4, below).

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### **TOR 3. Successful partnerships between VET providers and employers that have demonstrably created career pathways and secure employment opportunities for students, considering the best practice elements of these successful partnerships, and how more partnering may be encouraged among VET providers and employers**

15. While there is clearly a role for partnerships between VET providers and particular employers, and the establishment of JSA provides an opportunity to identify industries and regions where these will offer significant opportunities for jobseekers, it is essential that these are genuine partnerships rather than employer-dominated initiatives.
16. The dominance of employer interests in the VET sector is evident in the composition of various executive and advisory bodies, including the Industry Reference Committees and the inclusion of various VET employer groups (e.g. Independent Tertiary Education Council Australia) in stakeholder consultation processes.
17. While the representation of industries and employers (both industry employers and VET employers) is clearly important, it is problematic when practitioner voice is not given the same prominence.
18. The exclusion of practitioner voice has made the sector vulnerable to the imposition of policy and practice that does not pay adequate attention to the crucial role of trainers and assessors as frontline workers whose daily activities are primarily concerned with the delivery of high-quality, high-equity education programs.
19. This is supported by research from NCVET [6], which indicates that social partnerships negotiated between governments, employers, unions and training providers, where each partner is highly valued and willing to take responsibility for their component, are key to effective VET governance and, ultimately, improved outcomes for learners.
20. A restoration of practitioner voice is therefore essential to ensure that partnerships with industry deliver meaningful, long-term benefits to all partners.

### **TOR 4. Commonwealth programs which could influence the above, and intersections with state and territory, industry and philanthropic efforts, including any structural barriers to improvement.**

21. The single most effective way to ensure delivery of high-quality VET is to provide trainers and assessors with professional pay and conditions.
22. The present over-reliance on casual and short-term contracts of employment for trainers and assessors prioritises the needs of employers over the needs of those delivering VET programs and, in doing so, devalues the quality of education and training experienced by students.

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23. Professional conditions should also include systematic approaches to teacher preparation, mentorship support and opportunities for continuing professional development [7].
24. Return on investment in the VET sector should be defined in terms of the transition of VET students to stable, meaningful employment. This employment may not always be, at least in the long-term, in the original field of training, but it will always be enabled by the provision of high-quality teaching and learning.
25. Philanthropic investment is unlikely to provide the quantum of funding required to revitalise the VET sector.
26. Employer/industry funding has the capacity to supplement government funds, but it would more effectively do so if it were invested in a direct improvement in pay and conditions for trainers and assessors.
27. An additional point that should be noted is the importance of trainers and assessors being able to provide students with quality work placements, to support the development of practical skills [6, 8].

### Concluding Comments

IEU-QNT thanks the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training for the opportunity to comment on the Terms of Reference for its *Inquiry into the perceptions and status of vocational education and training (VET) in Australia*.

While our union acknowledges that the representation of industries and employers (both industry employers and VET employers) in conversations around VET reform is clearly important, a long-term tendency to exclude practitioner voice has made the sector vulnerable to the imposition of policy and practice that does not pay adequate attention to the crucial role of trainers and assessors as frontline workers whose daily activities are primarily concerned with the delivery of high-quality, high-equity education programs.

Rather than focussing on initiatives that might address the consequent perception among students and the broader population of VET as a low-value undertaking, we would suggest that investment should be directed toward reforms that would facilitate the actual provision of quality VET.

This must, necessarily, include provision of appropriate, professional pay and conditions for trainers and assessors.



**Terry Burke**  
**Branch Secretary**  
**Independent Education Union of Australia -Queensland and Northern Territory Branch**  
**Tuesday 28 February 2023**

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### References

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