

IEUA-QNT SUBMISSION

17 August 2023

Submission: Discussion Paper – Development of a Queensland Vocational Education and Training Strategy

The Independent Education Union – Queensland and Northern Territory Branch (IEUA-QNT) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback regarding the Queensland Government’s Discussion Paper – Development of a Queensland Vocational Education and Training Strategy.

About IEUA-QNT

IEUA-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 industrial and education debate at both state and national levels through its Education and Industrial Committees 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 (Registered Training Organisations or RTOs) through to schools with substantial in-house VET programmes and those that make extensive or occasional use of external (TAFE and private) VET providers.

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

1. An over-reliance on casual and short-term contracts of employment for trainers and assessors creates precarious employment in VET and undermines the delivery of 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.

While we acknowledge that many of the regulatory bodies and processes for the VET sector operate at a federal level, we would argue that it is important for any Queensland VET Strategy to do all that is possible to attend to these central problems in order to enhance quality within the sector and improve student outcomes.

Responses to Discussion Questions

Discussion Question 1: What opportunities have you been able to experience through VET?

1. In responding to this discussion question, we would indicate that VET options are a vital element of post-compulsory education both in terms of ensuring that students have an

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opportunity to engage with skills-based training and in offering a more direct pathway to employment than academic programs.

2. In a study of factors that influence students to undertake VET programs, Osbourne and Circelli [1] report that, 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.
3. Despite this, students actually have a higher interest in VET-related jobs than in VET post-school pathways [1], indicating a misalignment between occupational and educational aspirations, with misunderstandings about the role of vocational education.
4. We would suggest that at least some of this misalignment and misunderstanding is related to the fact that quality of VET options tends to be more variable than for academic programs.
5. A key contributing factor in this variability is the working conditions of those engaged to deliver VET programs.
6. This is particularly acute for those employed outside of the schooling and TAFE sectors (i.e. those delivering VET programs in private RTOs), where large numbers of staff are employed on casual and short-term contracts of employment, which makes it difficult for them to deliver high quality education and training programs.

Discussion Question 2: What gaps or challenges have you experienced with VET?

7. As noted in response to Discussion Question 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 [1].
8. 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.
9. Investment consistent with the provision of quality VET must include initiatives that will improve working conditions for trainers and assessors.

Discussion Question 3: What is the one thing you would do to improve the VET experience?

10. There is, at present, a dominance of employer interests in the VET sector which is clearly 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).
11. While the representation of industries and employers (both industry employers and VET employers) is clearly important, and we acknowledge that the composition of many regulatory bodies is not a decision for the Queensland Government to make, it is problematic when practitioner voice is not given the same prominence and we would urge State Government representatives to lobby for change at a federal level.
12. This advocacy should make it clear that exclusion of practitioner voice has made the sector vulnerable to the imposition of policy and practice that does not pay adequate attention to

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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.

13. This is supported by research from NCVET [2], 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.
14. A restoration of practitioner voice is essential to ensure that partnerships with industry deliver meaningful, long-term benefits to all partners.

Discussion Question 4: How has TAFE supported you, your industry and/or your community?

15. As noted in our introductory comments, 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.
16. Each of these operations has a role to play in ensuring that VET students from a variety of backgrounds are able to access quality VET and achieve their education and employment goals.
17. A Queensland VET Strategy must focus on reforms that will enhance the quality of VET on offer in schools, TAFE and private RTOs.

Discussion Question 5: What are the barriers to accessing or delivering quality training and skills for:

- **a student**
 - **an apprentice or trainee**
 - **an employer**
 - **a registered training organisation**
 - **other groups? (e.g. peak bodies, unions, community organisations)**
18. The single most effective way to ensure delivery of high-quality VET is to provide trainers and assessors with professional pay and conditions.
 19. 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. Precarious employment practices undermine the quality of education and training experienced by students, with high turnover of staff, little investment in professional development for long-term staff and little incentive to build higher skills and better knowledge.
 20. Professional conditions should also include systematic approaches to teacher preparation, mentorship support and opportunities for continuing professional development [3].

Discussion Question 6: What is the one thing you would do to improve access to quality training and skills for you, your industry and/or your community?

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Discussion Question 7: What is one thing government could do differently to improve employer and industry input to training that meets workforce needs and delivers student outcomes?

21. As noted in the response to the preceding discussion questions, our union would suggest that the most effective way of improving access to quality training and skills would be to focus on what the State Government might do to encourage VET providers to invest in the working conditions of their staff.
22. In the context of reporting requirements, we would raise concerns that trainers and assessors working in the private sector are, at times, pressured to meet Key Performance Indicators phrased in terms of student completion rates. When expressed in this form, such indicators can generate pressure to grade individuals as having demonstrated competency when they have not done so. Such practices are clearly unethical and further undermine perceptions of the sector.
23. This issue is compounded by employers' use of sham contracting where they require trainers and assessors to have their own Australian Business Number, rather than hiring them as employees.
24. We would suggest that achieving professional working conditions for trainers and assessors might be facilitated by requiring providers to report on numbers of staff in specific roles (e.g. Trainers, Assessors, Student Support Staff and Administrative Staff), their employment status (full-time/part-time, permanent/contract/casual) and student-staff ratios for each category of employee.
25. Further reporting options could include collection of student outcomes data, although it should be noted that collection and analysis of this data might best be managed by an external body, rather than relying on the RTO to report.

Discussion Question 8: How can we support you to access the training you need to set you up for success if you are:

- **a secondary student**
- **a job seeker**
- **a worker**
- **an employer?**

22. 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.
24. 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.
25. 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 [2, 4].

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Concluding Comments

IEUA-QNT thanks the Queensland Government for the opportunity to provide feedback regarding the development of its Vocational Education and Training Strategy.

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.

While we acknowledge that much of the regulatory architecture for the VET sector is determined at a federal level, we believe there are steps the Queensland government could take to ensure that the voice of VET practitioners is represented in stakeholder consultations, and to encourage employers to offer trainers and assessors wages and conditions that are conducive to the provision of quality teaching and learning experiences.

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss these matters in further detail, as the Queensland Vocational Education and Training Strategy is developed.



Terry Burke
Branch Secretary
Independent Education Union of Australia -Queensland and Northern Territory Branch
Thursday 17 August 2023

References

1. Osborne, K. and M. Circelli, *From school to VET: choices, experiences and outcomes*. 2018, National Centre for Vocational Education Research: Adelaide.
2. Siekmann, G. and M. Circelli, *Industry's role in VET governance – using international insights to inform new practices*. 2021, National Centre for Vocational Education Research: Adelaide.
3. Misko, J., *Building capability and quality in VET teaching: opportunities and challenges*. 2020, National Centre for Vocational Education Research Adelaide.
4. Misko, J. and P. Korbel, *Do course durations matter to training quality and outcomes?* 2019, National Centre for Vocational Education Research: Adelaide.