SKILLS REFORM

Improving industry engagement and reforming qualifications in vocational education

CSQ submission

This submission to the Department of Education, Skills and Employment's (DESE) Skills Reform process focuses on industry engagement. As an organisation we are passionate about industry engagement and strive to consult across our industry and its subsectors. This includes directly with building and construction workers and employers both large and small, with a range of regulators and with industry associations and unions.

Well executed industry engagement in the skills sector delivers educational and employment benefits. It provides insight into economic, social and technological changes challenging businesses and shaping industry. This in turn allows education providers and the services offered to change and adapt to emerging needs. Training that is employment focussed must reflect and create a solution to business and employer needs.

Industry engagement is the cornerstone of skills and training.

It should be noted that our responses are crafted to the questions posed. This submission was made on 1 March 2021.

Improving industry engagement and reforming qualifications in Vocational Education and Training

SUBMISSION QUESTIONS

1. Does the role of industry need to be strengthened or expanded across the VET system? Why/why not? (max 600 words)

The role of industry is critical in the Vocational Education and Training (VET) system and can be strengthened through deeper industry engagement and a renewed focus on engagement scope.

Defining industry

Well executed industry engagement delivers educational and employment benefits. Construction Skills Queensland (CSQ) defines industry based on three key groups:

1. Peak bodies
2. Employers
3. Licensing and registration bodies.

Peak bodies includes unions, professional associations and employer bodies. Peak bodies provide a consolidated policy perspective, wide reach and a holistic industry-wide view. This centralised view and input into the VET system is indispensable. Attention is needed if there are competing policy agendas, or potential conflicts with commercial RTO arms.

Employers include small, medium and large businesses operating within the industry. Employers can be difficult to reach and need a strong selection and approach methodology. The business composition of the industry should inform consultation and training end-products, for example, the needs of SMEs, not for profits, large businesses and government owned businesses vary and alter industry need. The benefits of direct employer engagement are immense and include access to a direct end-user voice that speaks directly to the quality and applicability of skills acquired through the VET system.

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Lastly are the various bodies that regulate and licence. Engagement at this level ensures an understanding of the requirements to operate or gain employment in particular industries. It is essential that the VET sector maintains strong relationships with regulators and, in doing so, protects and preserves the direct link between skills, training and employment.

Renewed focus on industry engagement scope

Effective industry engagement requires participants to have a shared understanding of the issues and outcomes. For VET this involves bringing together two industries, education and training and the participating industry.

The complexity of the VET sector means that employers and students/workers may not understand in sufficient depth, the processes, systems and qualifications on offer. As such, a core element of engagement includes a translation and information sharing component.

In addition there are 8 areas of understanding that are needed to underpin effective engagement in the VET sector:

- The policy and legislative environment
- Industry goals and objectives
- Economic and social value of the industry
- Occupational profiles and different skills needs
- Workforce supply and existing skills
- The baseline skills required to enter the industry
- The most appropriate training pathways
- How information and technology is sharping the industry.

Depth of knowledge in these 8 areas needs to be brought to the table during industry engagement to fully inform need and associated training products.

Lastly, the role of students and student needs can be muted when focusing on industry engagement. Students though are future or current workers and capturing the needs and views of users is essential. Some student focused but industry-linked considerations include type of employment (part-time, full-time, casual or subcontracting) and student or industry specific worker characteristics. This may help identify specific learning needs, challenges and supports.

In summary, CSQ supports an expanded approach to industry engagement that actively includes peak bodies, employers and licencing and registration bodies. This needs to be supplemented with consideration of student or workers needs from the system.

2. Are you aware of the current industry engagement arrangements that are in place to design and develop VET qualifications i.e. the Australian Industry and Skills Committee and the Industry Reference Committees? (Selected Response Yes/No)

Yes

3. (If yes to Question 2) How effective are the current industry engagement arrangements in VET in meeting your needs? (max 600 words)

The current industry engagement arrangements in VET largely meet the needs of the building and construction industry however improvements can be made. In addition to points made at Question 1, improvements are needed to system design and barriers to engagement.

System design

There are 6 Skills Service Organisations (SSO) updating training packages for ~65 Industry Reference Committees that in turn advise the Australian Industry Skills Committee. The ~65 IRCs greatly outnumber the 18 industries that are regularly measured by the Australian Bureau of Statistics. Synergies between IRC's

should be identified with a view to streamlining. A first step towards collaboration, improving engagement and broadening career pathways (Question 4) could involve reducing the number of discrete industries in the VET sector. This structural change would allow for a potential organic broadening that based on naturally aligned and similar industries.

It should also be noted that the location of the 6 SSO head offices is somewhat skewed toward metro areas and Melbourne – with four being located in Melbourne - as opposed to a dispersal that may better reflect the location of the underlying industries. Distribution of SSOs to better reflect economic strengths may assist with engagement through proximity to expertise. In addition the SSOs are largely administrative and could be repurposed or reshaped to suit any new industry arrangements that strengthen skills contribution and coordination.

Barriers to effective industry engagement

The current framework is complex and can be difficult for users and industry to navigate.

At the entry interface, the VET sector offers an 'intimidating range of training options' (Productivity Commission, 2021, Review of the NASWD p.12). There are 1400 qualifications delivered across 4000 Registered Training Organisations. Added to this are complex financial arrangements and incentives that vary between jurisdictions.

Efforts are underway to reduce the number of zero enrolment or low enrolment qualifications. Increased steps in this direction could yield joint benefits of a less complex array of option and freeing up the system to more quickly and efficiently engage with industry to update well-used and highly relevant qualifications and training packages.

The language adopted by the sector can be difficult to understand and not readily understood by industry. Although common across the VET landscape the language of training packages, skills sets and competencies is dense at does not easily align with language used in other education and training settings or industry. Efforts should be made to increase the accessibility in the language and terminology of the VET sector.

4. What can be done to drive greater collaboration across industries to broaden career pathways for VET graduates and maximise the workforce available to employers? (max 600 words)

CSQ strongly supports the current vocational focus of the sector. Emphasis within the VET sector should be arranged as a hierarchy that sees: employment as the first priority; skills and skill sets as the second priority; and qualifications as the third priority. Policy and funding settings need to reinforce and support VET having a direct relationship with employment, or to a job that needs to be performed in the economy.

Current policy discussions around broadening career pathways imply an opening of the competencies or skill sets that make up qualifications and training packages from different industries. This is a potentially fraught. For regulated and licenced industries, such as building and construction, it is paramount that our training products remain focused on the specific, well established and detailed needs of our industry. If this focus is diluted there may be significant, potentially negative, impact on employment outcomes.

5. Are qualifications fit-for-purpose in meeting the needs of industry and learners now and into the future? Why/why not? (max 600 words)

Building and construction is a high risk industry with serious safety overlays. This results in a mix of qualifications, competencies and skill sets leading to licensed, regulated or site required outcomes. The question for the building and construction industry is nuanced as follows:

- Do full qualifications meet the needs of industry and learners?
- Do skills sets and competencies meet the needs of industry learners?

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Overall the qualifications offered by the VET sector are fit-for-purpose however improvements are needed. An associated change in emphasis and associated funding and measurement is also needed. Qualifications represent the accumulation of a suite of competencies and skills sets in certain areas. Workers and businesses in our industry do not always need full qualifications, but they do need to be safe and able to gain employment. Our answer endeavours to draw out this distinction.

Full qualifications

In building and construction there are two employment outcomes associated full qualifications that clearly meet the needs of both industry and students:

- Licensed trades – plumbers, electricians and refrigeration mechanics are three examples of licensed trades. The VET system provides the qualifications that prepare individuals for or meet the licensing requirements for these trades.
- Builder licensing and regulation. In Queensland, it is the Queensland Building and Construction Commission, but each state has a building regulator. Qualifications in the VET sector (for example the Certificate IV in Building and Construction (Building)) provide the pipeline of qualified, registered and regulated builders in residential construction.

These qualifications meet the needs of industry.

Skill sets

In building and construction there are employment outcomes that are essential and required by the industry and workers alike. The emphasis on full qualifications, and the need to enrol in a full qualification, obscures the importance of individual competencies and skill sets. As noted earlier, our industry has very specific safety requirements and workers are required to hold certain tickets or licences before working onsite. Some examples include working at heights, working in confined spaces or White Cards. Each is a competency or skills set. A full qualification is not needed. Focussing on and measuring qualifications creates noise in VET sector data around student completions and enrolment intention.

A full qualification is not needed for workers seeking specific skills to achieve a mandated safety outcome or those seeking or needing a specific extension to their existing skill and knowledge base. As interest grows in microcredentials the VET sector should look to elevating the role of skill sets, particularly where they lead to a defined employment outcome and make it easier to find skill sets and enrol in skills sets.

Trade and non-trade pathways

Lastly, the VET sector also provides our industry with qualified trades, the vast majority at Certificate III level but also at Certificate II or IV. Typically achieved through an apprenticeship these qualifications can also be achieved, for certain trades, through a non-apprenticeship pathway. Either option needs a high degree of time 'on-the-tools' and experience onsite, and in the relevant subsector (residential, civil or commercial).

These trade and non-trade pathways qualifications meet the needs of industry.

6. Are there any further issues in relation to improving industry engagement in the VET sector that you would like to provide feedback on? (max 600 words)

There are three key further issues we will touch on. Firstly, the importance of teacher-trainers and secondly, the importance of responding to local need and lastly the need for innovation and change.

Teacher-trainers

Teacher-trainers in the VET sector provide a vital link between the needs of industry and the needs of students or workers. The quality and enthusiasm of the teacher-trainer and their skills and knowledge of industry makes a critical difference to skills transfer and student experience. As noted in an earlier answer, the VET sector is always the bringing together of two industries – the education and training sector and the participating industry.

Avenues for teacher-trainer input into training package development is needed to ensure that diverse learner needs are met. It may also better identify common challenges to learning and skill acquisition. In building and construction the teacher-trainers are by definition former tradespeople – it is important that the VET sector tap into the wealth of experience and expertise these individuals hold in both the trade but also the ability and capacity to impart skills.

Local need

The architecture of the national system aims to create transferable, recognisable qualifications across Australia. Its processes provide rigour and governance. However the system also needs the flexibility to respond to local and emerging needs in a timely manner. Increased use of VET self-accreditation, with a related process to national qualification accreditation, should be considered for RTOs with deep expertise in certain industry areas or with expertise in an emerging, innovative area. This would help avoid the complex and lengthy delays associated with getting new content into the national training package framework. It would also help suitable, vetted RTOs, with deep local connections work with industry to respond to local and emerging conditions.

Innovation and change

The VET sector can be difficult to navigate and understand. It has dense language, a long history, diverse stakeholders and has been subject to multiple significant reform rounds. Change does not always equal innovation. Innovation will come through the opening of opportunities for new voices in the sector. We encourage the seeking of diverse industry expertise in representative bodies in the VET sector.

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