

## FROM THE PRESIDENT

During the height of the VET-Fee-Help scandal there were reports of unscrupulous agents touring social housing estates in Western Sydney signing people up for a range of expensive VET Diplomas. The potential students were told they would not have to pay tuition fees upfront and by suggestion never pay anything. One agent was even quoted as saying that he/she targeted houses with rusty cars in the front yards as these had proven to be the best prospects, especially if the occupants were unemployed. Like most people in VET I decried this as cynical, money grubbing behaviour. But as the then Director of a TAFE institute which served these communities it did make me think what we were doing to encourage these potential students onto our far more appropriate programs and hopefully into a job or further study. Sure, we ran extensive and popular marketing campaigns featuring local celebrities like Rob Shehadie but we did not actually go 'door to door'; this might have been the most effective way of reaching these often marginalised and disengaged groups.

I was reminded of all this when I saw the excellent NCVER publication on young people in education and training 2017 (<https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/publications/all-publications/young-people-in-education-and-training-2017>). This report presented 2017 data on the education and training participation rates of 15-19-year-olds in the Australian population. Now, as one might expect, the largest participation rate was for 15-19-year-olds still at school undertaking general secondary school programs (42.9%). The next highest rate was for Higher Education students (16.1%), followed by students doing VET delivered to secondary school programs (14.3%) and those undertaking another VET course or an apprenticeship or traineeship that was not part of school-based program (9.6%). Shockingly, these rates showed that 17.2% of 15-19-year-olds were not in education or training at all; however, we should keep in mind that a small percentage of this group would have comprised students who may have been already working and had decided not to pursue education and training, or in situations that precluded them from participating in education and training.

Recently there has been a lot of debate about whether too many people are going to university when some at least would be better off in a VET

course. This is argued from the perspective of providers, individual students, and economy-wide concerns about skill shortages. Crudely put from a provider perspective the issue has been about increasing VET's market share by recruiting students from HE. This strategy may be misplaced. First, these students whether they be in VET or HE have already chosen to participate in some form of post compulsory education and training and are less at risk of disengagement than are those who are not participating at all. Second, if publicly-funded TAFE Institutes as well as those private providers receiving public funds are to be socially responsive then should they not be giving higher priority to attracting more of those not in education and training at all rather than those already pursuing a post-compulsory education pathway? The data is clear: your life chances are diminished the less education and training you experience. It also increases the cost of the government's social security budget.

**“ The data is clear: your life chances are diminished the less education and training you experience. ”**

In general, are VET and TAFE providers too concerned about competing with universities and HE providers? Looking at NCVER data, uncapped university places have had a great impact on some areas of VET – especially business and management. Fifteen years ago if you wanted to pursue a professional or para professional level career in management or finance one option was to study for a TAFE Diploma. It was harder to get accepted by Universities and the TAFE course was considerably cheaper (even if the tuition fee then had to be paid up front). Now there is an extremely good chance that you will be accepted into a reasonably local university, even though it might not be a member of the Group of Eight. In addition, you can get an income-contingent loan in both sectors which means you avoid paying an upfront fee in either. TAFE and VET Institutions find it more difficult to compete in this environment. It is also true that historically advanced VET courses have been 'hived off' to become degrees in new universities. This also happened in the late 1940s when the Diploma Courses at Sydney Technical College formed the basis of what became the University of NSW and again in the early 1970s when Sydney Technical College programs became the basis for what is now known as UTS.

In most States, however, AQF Level 5 and 6 courses, which are roughly equivalent to the early years of a university course constitute less than

### Secretariat

Jalal Muhammad

AVETRA Secretariat  
PO Box 576  
Crows Nest NSW 1585  
Ph: +61 2 9431 8690  
Fax: +61 2 9431 8677

[www.avetra.org.au](http://www.avetra.org.au)

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Editor:  
Josie Misko

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12% of total publicly-funded enrolments. The share for Victoria is higher possibly because of its larger number of cross-sectoral institutions. But the NCVET data is clear – the largest course level in VET is the Certificate 3 with 42% of all enrolments. There are other differences between publicly-funded VET and HE. VET has a higher proportion of students from low SES (social economic status), indigenous, and disability backgrounds. But the most profound difference is that, unlike university students, the vast majority of VET students are part-time. Keeping this in mind, I do not think that the large VET providers help themselves when they claim that they have more enrolments than universities. Convert these enrolments to full-time equivalents and the universities in most States are two, often nearly three times the size of publicly-funded TAFE systems.

So these basic facts of course level, student demographics and student numbers should indicate that publicly-funded VET institutions and universities or other HE providers are somewhat different in more than name. So why put the emphasis of competition with HE for their students when we know there are many disadvantaged young people out there not in education and training for whom VET is ideally suited? We need to attract these individuals to VET – as the unscrupulous agents did for a short time for all the wrong reasons. I am all in favour of student choice and many students may well be suited to either sector. I just think publicly-funded VET providers perhaps need to reflect on who they are and what their priorities should be. After all, as researchers and practitioners, we all need to work off data and facts – not what we might like to think about who we are and what we might be.

Discussion on what the priorities for VET should be – also featured last year in a series of articles published in the online magazine, 'The Conversation'. Several of the authors are on the AVETRA executive. These articles are reproduced in this edition of Research Today.

Have a happy and productive New Year and I hope to see at our AVETRA conferences and events. ■



**Robin Shreeve**  
President,  
AVETRA

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## THE CONVERSATION

# Teachers and trainers are vital to the quality of the VET sector, and to the success of its learners

**Erica Smith**  
Professor of Vocational  
Education and Training,  
Federation University Australia

This article is part of a series on the **Future of VET exploring issues within the sector and how to improve the decline in enrolments and shortages of qualified people in vocational jobs. Read the other articles in the series [here](#).**

Vocational Education and Training (VET) is an important part of the education sector and trains people of all ages for occupations vital across all sectors of the economy. It also makes a major contribution to social inclusion.

Australia endlessly debates the ATAR level needed even to enter teacher-training programs for school teaching.

**READ MORE: [Viewpoints: should universities raise the ATAR required for entrance into teaching degrees?](#)**

But it doesn't seem to care about the qualifications of those who teach our young people, workers and citizens in VET. For the last 20 years, VET teachers have only been required to have a Certificate IV level qualification in VET teaching, and the industry qualification at the level at which they are teaching people.

Teacher preparation has been identified as a key factor in the quality of education, so to improve the quality of the VET sector, we need to ensure teachers and trainers are getting the right training themselves. Other factors – such as funding – affect VET quality and student success.

But, in the school sector, it has been shown teachers make the most difference, so the same is likely to be

true of VET. Teaching in any sector is a highly skilled activity and VET, especially, has such a range of learners that diverse teaching strategies are needed.

### Who are these teachers and trainers?

VET teachers work in TAFE (the public provider) private registered training organisations (RTOs), community colleges or enterprise RTOs (providing qualifications to their workforces). They may teach full-time, have a portfolio of jobs across several providers, or may still work in their industry while they teach part-time.

They are “dual professionals”, needing to keep up with changes in industry, the economy and society, and developing their teaching skills to deal with increasingly complex learner groups and teaching environments.

Until 1997, all full-time TAFE teachers nationally were helped to get degrees in VET teacher training after recruitment, or graduate diplomas if they already had a degree in another area. They studied part-time while teaching.

**READ MORE: [Expert panel: what makes a good teacher](#)**

In 1998, the minimum qualification – the Certificate IV level – was introduced for all VET teachers and trainers. States and territory TAFE systems gradually stopped requiring higher-level qualifications. The Certificate IV floor became a ceiling.

While some teachers undertake higher-level study, they are now the minority. Yet, those who undertake higher level qualifications can clearly point to their value.

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## Where's the evidence these qualifications benefit teachers?

Our national [study](#), conducted from 2015 to 2017, looked at whether and how VET teachers' qualifications made a difference. The project had seven phases of qualitative and quantitative research over three years, with 1,255 participants from the sector, from all types of training provider and industry areas. We had good numbers of teacher participants at all qualification levels.

In TAFE and RTO case studies for this project, we interviewed supervisors, managers, professional development staff and students as well as teachers.

Based on detailed survey responses and our case study results, we found:

1. higher level qualifications, either in VET teaching practice or another discipline improve teaching approaches, confidence and ability
2. higher level qualifications in VET teaching specifically make a significant difference to VET teachers' confidence in teaching a diversity of learners
3. the qualification level that makes the most difference is a degree.

## How many VET teacher are qualified at different levels?

There is no national source of information on how many VET teachers are qualified at different levels. In our main survey, twice as many VET teachers had degrees in their industry area (37%) as had degrees in VET teaching (19%). Some 27% had qualifications only at Certificate III or Certificate IV in their industry area, and 64% had only a Certificate IV qualification in VET teaching.

By far, the greatest proportion of teachers sat in the lowest qualification combination (sub-degree qualification in their industry area and Certificate IV in VET teaching).

Only 11.9% had qualifications at degree level or above in both their industry area and in VET teaching.

But our study showed teachers with degree-level knowledge in teaching and their industry area were the most confident in passing on knowledge and skills to their students. Some teachers with lower qualification levels did show the characteristics of excellent teaching, but these were more common in highly-qualified teachers.

## What's stopping VET teachers from qualifying themselves?

Perhaps the existence of a mandated minimum VET teaching qualification may provide an excuse not to progress further than the minimum. Some people think professional development can act as a substitute for qualifications – but our study found people with lower level qualifications undertake less professional development.

In most jobs, professional development supplements rather than replaces initial qualifications. Perhaps resourcing is an issue. TAFE teachers [may expect](#) their study to be supported by employer funding and a workload allowance, neither of which may be possible.

Some people imagine to get a university qualification in VET teaching, people must give up their jobs and go to university for three years. This could, of course, be difficult if it were true – [but it isn't](#).

All [VET teacher-training courses](#) at universities are part-time and offered flexibly, as most students are working full-time in VET or in industry and may live at a distance. Universities work closely with individual TAFE and other providers in making their VET teacher-training courses relevant.

## What could help VET teachers become more qualified?

Already, a higher level qualification in adult education (the Diploma of VET or

university degree) is recognised by the VET regulator, the [Australian Skills Quality Authority](#) (ASQA), as an alternative to the Certificate IV. VET teachers must now show continuous professional development in VET as well as in industry. Undertaking a VET teaching qualification can meet this requirement.

A more open attitude from some in the VET sector – allowing teachers to attain higher-level qualifications rather than the sector insisting only on educating its own – would help. Ambassadors, such as graduates of higher level courses, could spread the word about what they've gained from their studies, personally and in their careers.

Federal and state government could introduce policy provisions to improve teacher/trainer qualification levels, as they do with [school teaching](#) and have done with [early childhood education](#).

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**READ MORE:** [Teach for Australia: a small part of the solution to a serious problem](#)

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Finally, a "Teach VET for Australia" program, similar to [Teach for Australia](#) would be useful. The idea of taking adults with life experience and training them as teachers is what VET teacher-training has done for decades. A named and targeted program could demonstrate the benefits of higher-level qualifications.

*The author would like to thank Keiko Yasukawa, Roger Harris, Jackie Tuck, Patrick Korbel and Hugh Guthrie who were researchers on the ARC-funded project, and Steven Hodge who was involved in an earlier project.*

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**This article is available online at:**  
<https://theconversation.com/teachers-and-trainers-are-vital-to-the-quality-of-the-vet-sector-and-to-the-success-of-its-learners-101384>



# The vocational education sector needs a plan and action, not more talk

**Ruth Schubert**  
Senior Fellow, LH Martin Institute  
University of Melbourne

**Leo Goedegebuure**  
Director, LH Martin Institute  
University of Melbourne

This article is part of a series on the Future of VET exploring issues within the sector and how to improve the decline in enrolments and shortages of qualified people in vocational jobs. Read the other articles in the series [here](#).

Some 20 years ago, the Australian vocational education system was regarded as world class. Sadly, this is [no longer the case](#) when compared to systems in places such as Canada, the Netherlands, Germany and even China.

Australia's vocational education system [has been bedevilled](#) by competing jurisdiction control, political ideology, chronic under-funding, piecemeal reforms, rampant rorting by a small number of corporate private providers, and a disappointing and surprisingly high level of policy confusion.

In February this year, Labor [announced](#) it would commit to a generational review of the VET sector in Australia if elected at the next election.

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**READ MORE: [Learning from Victoria's TAFE mistakes](#)**

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There is already a substantial list of research reports, reviews and inquiries into issues within the sector. A well-crafted plan can be distilled from this, which, combined with proactive leadership and action, is what the sector needs. Not yet another all-encompassing, long-winded review that will inevitably run aground due to the short-term federal political cycle.

## The workforce is changing fast

Our society and economy rely on the vocational system to be highly effective and responsive. After all, [just over 24%](#) of our population aged between 15 and 64 years is actively engaged with vocational education every year. This figure is even higher for young people – 46% of 15 to

19-year-olds are involved with vocational education. It's a system geared to cater for mass and equitable participation.

This is a good thing.

The speed of change for those in the workforce is rapid. This will remain a constant for the foreseeable future. We only have to look to the [World Economic Forum](#) and reports from the [Foundation for Young Australians](#) for independent advice on the kind of skills our workforce and enterprises will need in coming months and years.

These reports suggest a new focus on technical and enterprise skills as being of equal importance. This is neatly captured by the idea of the "[T-shaped graduate](#)". This is a term commonly used in Europe to capture the idea of a graduate having both specific technical skills and knowledge, and the enterprise skills of collaboration, digital literacy, critical thinking, complex problem solving and creativity.

Australia needs a workforce with a new set of skills and the flexibility and capacity to adapt to even more change. Vocational education can deliver this workforce, but for this to happen the sector needs to be given autonomy and political trust. Trying to change the system piece by piece will result in a camel instead of the thoroughbred Australia needs.

## What change is most urgently needed?

First, [identify](#) the mature, comprehensive, low-risk providers and give them a new status, independence from government control, and operational autonomy so they can [lead the change](#) we need.

This new category could include many TAFEs or TAFE divisions of dual sector universities (which provide vocational and higher education, such as RMIT and Swinburne), a number of not-for-profit providers, and a smaller number of private registered training organisations (RTOs). This classification of provider should be highly prized, not awarded lightly, or in great numbers.

Victoria is fortunate to have a number of mature TAFEs ready to be recognised in this category. These include [Holmesglen](#), [Box Hill Institute](#) and [Chisholm Institute](#), to name a few. Arguably, a number of the whole-of-state TAFEs, such as TAFE QLD,

should also be recognised in this category. These TAFEs already deliver across the gap between vocational education and higher education.

Second, the group of providers should be given long-term equitable funding, based on an agreed framework with clear and measurable performance outcomes, as well as self-accrediting status to respond quickly to the changes in skills required of new and existing employees.

Performance outcomes would include student participation, progression and completion targets, and be tailored to institutional missions. Those outcomes should also include specific regional innovation and development targets, with a clear focus on small and medium sized enterprises. Australia is largely a small and medium enterprise nation. Small to medium enterprises are a natural fit with highly responsive higher vocational education institutions.

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**READ MORE: [Not all vocational training providers are stacking up](#)**

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It's this group of providers that will change the system and provide the service that business, communities and students need. Creating this new status of provider will enable education that delivers educational services across an increasingly blurry and arguably artificial divide between vocational education and higher education, with a focus on applied and work-integrated learning, and problem solving.

While we applaud the federal Opposition for committing to [a generational review](#), they're not the government (at least not yet), and we already know where the issues lie. Reports from the [Mitchell Institute](#) have provided compelling evidence of the need to restore funding for vocational education. Industry bodies such as the [Business Council](#) have called for a reinstatement of TAFE as a central part of the vocational system.

We don't need more temperature-taking. We need to begin work on the actual implementation plan and action. This can begin now – not in three or four years' time.

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**This article is available online at: <https://theconversation.com/the-vocational-education-sector-needs-a-plan-and-action-not-more-talk-102770>**

# We need to change negative views of the jobs VET serves to make it a good post-school option

**Stephen Billett**  
Professor of Adult and Vocational Education, Griffith University

This article is part of a series on the future of vocational education and training, exploring issues within the sector and how to improve the decline in enrolments and shortages of qualified people in vocational jobs. Read the other articles in the series [here](#).

The low status of vocational education and training (VET) is a growing problem. Many young Australians and their parents don't consider VET as a potential post-school pathway, even if it might be more suitable for them than university.

In an era of high aspiration, VET is [often seen](#) as an option only for those unable to gain university entry. This undermines VET as a viable and effective post-school pathway – the one most frequently trod by young people in countries such as [Britain](#), [Germany](#) and [Switzerland](#).

It's also fuelling a growing mismatch between the skills young people are leaving tertiary education with and employment opportunities in their preferred jobs. It can also [lead to](#) increasingly lengthy, costly and roundabout post-school pathways to employment for young people.

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But much of the low status of VET compared to university is shaped by negative societal perceptions of the jobs it trains people for. This is particularly true for those seen as dead-end (such as dental assistants), those requiring manual work, involve getting dirty (such as mechanics) or seen to be servile (such as waitressing). Changing those views is necessary to address the low status of VET and present it as a good option for school-leavers and their parents to consider.

## The status of vocational education

Young people and their parents are faced with difficult decision-making when considering post-school educational pathways. Most vocational and university programs have specific occupational

focuses. So, decisions about these pathways have to focus on the jobs young people and their parents aspire to be in.

Unsurprisingly, jobs seen to be personally interesting, socially-desirable, clean, well-paid and offering stable employment are the most attractive. These include law, speech pathology and journalism.

A university education is the usual pathway to this kind of work. This is despite jobs in these industries becoming [increasingly scarce](#) due to an [oversupply of students](#) now being prepared for these types of jobs.

Australia is far from alone here. Long-standing societal sentiments about occupations, exacerbated currently by growing aspirations among young people and parents is a [common concern globally](#). This is the case not only in countries with advanced industrial economies, but [also those with developing economies](#) – for instance Nigeria, Ethiopia, Kenya, Palestine, Lebanon, Egypt and Jordan.

## Societal investment in funding

When perceived to be low standing, societal investment (such as those from governments) in VET dwindles, as has long been the case in Australia. This perpetuates a cycle of under-funding and marketisation policies that reinforces its unattractiveness to young people, and further reduces societal investment.

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As a consequence, VET is not being optimised as a post-school pathway to meet the needs of young Australians, the national economy, the viability of Australian businesses or the community. The risk for young people is they will spend their time and money on an educational pathway that may fail to secure them the kinds of jobs they aspire to, and limit their employment options.

So, the recent introduction in Victoria of [subsidised VET programs](#) for certain occupations is a positive example of societal investment in VET. But this initiative needs to progress alongside measures that promote these occupations as being worthwhile and worthy for young people.

## What needs to happen?

Measures are now being put forward by governments to address this problem. [These include](#) having higher level vocational education programs, including degree-level apprenticeships, and changing the name of vocational education institutions to make them more attractive. All of these are worth considering, but these measures risk being short-term fixes.

Not long ago, vocational education institutions change their name from “colleges” to “institutes” to make them more attractive, particularly to overseas students. Equally, requiring high levels of certification has not necessarily enhanced the status of occupations – such as travel agents.

In countries such as Germany, technical and trade occupations are held in higher esteem. There, it's common to find young people who have university entrance but prefer to engage in apprenticeships.

Australia needs high quality technical, trade and service workers whose skills develop through effective occupational preparation. But these outcomes are most likely to be realised when jobs are valued by society. Education needs to acknowledge and addresses the complexities of the jobs and have educational goals that help students graduate with the necessary skills.

Ultimately, addressing societal views of jobs such as plumbers, electricians or concreters cannot be realised through the education system alone. Public perceptions need to change, including those of parents and teachers.

This can be done through informing the public about them, being open about what this work requires of the worker and what they need to know to be competent in them. Government should lead the charge in this effort, and industry should support and sponsor.

## Three actions are required

Firstly, a public education campaign needs to be undertaken to inform the community (particularly parents) about VET as a viable post-school option. It should be supported by industry and enacted by government, through public education and social marketing via electronic media.

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Secondly, schools should better inform young people about VET as a post-school option and include entrance into VET as an important performance indicator. Schools should take action such as organising visits to schools by young people championing the work in VET fields.

Thirdly, federal and state government along with industry need to ensure the VET provision is organised, ordered and resourced in ways that provides students with the appropriate educational experiences to prepare them for the job they choose.

This article is available online at: <https://theconversation.com/we-need-to-change-negative-views-of-the-jobs-vet-serves-to-make-it-a-good-post-school-option-101388>

## VET needs support to rebuild its role in getting disadvantaged groups into education and work

**Linda Simon**  
Teacher in adult and vocational education, Charles Sturt University

This article is part of a series on the **Future of VET** exploring issues within the sector and how to overcome the decline in enrolments and shortages of qualified people in vocational jobs. Read the other articles in the series [here](#).

In 1974, a review of the VET sector set out an agenda for the future of the vocational education and training sector. It emphasised education and social inclusion in work as key functions of the sector, rather than mainly its “manpower role”.

In the ensuing decades, this emphasis has been overturned. The vocational education and training system of today is industry-led. It is funded primarily to [achieve employment outcomes](#).

**READ MORE: [What Australia can learn from England’s plan for vocational education](#)**

VET’s role in skill development and educating those who engage in the range of occupations that contribute to Australia’s economy is critical. But we also need to strongly support the role VET plays in getting disadvantaged groups into education and work.

### Previous social inclusion policies

Social inclusion in this case reflects the federal government’s [social inclusion principles](#), established in 2010. These were created to ensure people have the resources, opportunities and capabilities they need to learn, work and have a voice.

Social inclusion initiatives are designed for groups generally identified as possibly experiencing disadvantage, who require extra support to succeed in education and work. Students with a disability, students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (CALD), Indigenous students and students from low SES backgrounds, women, and people from rural, regional or remote locations or communities are among those who might need this support.

The then Labor government established a [National VET Equity Advisory Council](#) (NVEAC) in 2009. Its task was to provide training ministers with advice on how to reform VET to ensure disadvantaged students achieved improved outcomes from participating in VET. Such outcomes include securing a job or further study.

NVEAC drafted the [Equity Blueprint](#) in 2011. This set out the advisory committee’s advice to ministers on what reforms were needed to ensure the VET system could support all learners to achieve their potential, no matter what their circumstances.

These reforms were designed to be long-term, as system-wide reform takes time. Suggested reforms included:

- a new, more sustainable funding model for VET (including increased federal investment)
- measuring and reporting on disadvantaged students’ progress and achievement to keep providers accountable
- a national framework for building the capability of VET teachers to better train and support all students
- listening to the voice of the learner so their actual needs and concerns would be addressed, including types of courses on offer, facilities and how they learn
- investment in teaching foundation skills (such as literacy and numeracy) as a priority, and to do it better
- embedding career, pathway and transition planning and advice into the VET and school systems to better support students into employment.

Unfortunately, the Equity Blueprint was not implemented. With a change of government in 2013, NVEAC was disbanded.

### Where are we now?

The VET sector has been increasingly [marketised](#). This marketisation is seen in cuts to government funding of VET and the shifting of responsibility for funding post-school vocational education onto students.

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## READ MORE: Changes to VET might be good for business, but not for students

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VET providers including TAFE, which has [traditionally provided programs](#) to meet the specific needs of disadvantaged groups, have increasingly cut access and Certificate I and II courses. It's these low-level courses that can provide the initial skills and confidence needed to enter the workforce or to progress to an industry-recognised qualification.

Despite some acknowledgement by state and territory governments in their annual planning documents that there's still a role for VET in meeting its obligation to equity and community service, funding has not fully reflected this. When restructures of the system are designed and money is tight, equity programs are often the first on the chopping block.

For example, the current restructure of [TAFE NSW](#) has cut many of the educationally qualified staff who designed and delivered [outreach](#) and support programs for students. This has meant reducing numbers of specialist staff for culturally and linguistically diverse students and those with disabilities.

Outreach programs provide opportunities for students to undertake relevant courses in their communities. This addresses both student and community needs.

## Equity groups left out

[National Centre for Vocational Education Research](#) (NCVER) figures show [a decline](#) in the participation of several equity groups in recent years. They include people from remote and very remote areas, those in the most socio-economically disadvantaged group, female students and students in the youngest age group (15 to 19).

The fact many of these equity groups were targeted in the [VET FEE-HELP scandals](#) has possibly also undermined confidence in a VET pathway for these students.

Disadvantage often reaches into many aspects of a learner's life, and that needs to be recognised and understood. Understanding issues around [motivation to learn](#) and social disadvantage is necessary.

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## READ MORE: To fix higher education funding, we also need to fix vocational education

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How motivated a student is informs how much time and effort they put into their study. Factors such as low socio-economic status, language barriers or hurdles, and competing responsibilities at home can have negative effects on motivation to learn.

An NCVER [study](#) identified five effective strategies for supporting learners who become disengaged from study:

1. address the overall barriers and challenges experienced by students, which might include home life and socio-economic concerns as well as learning issues
2. provide appropriate teaching that meets students' specific needs, such as team teaching with professionals who have tertiary qualifications as well as experience in literacy and numeracy, or giving students additional support while studying a vocational course
3. be flexible in the delivery of programs such as outreach programs so they're delivered where students feel most comfortable, in community settings and at times that meet their parental and caring responsibilities
4. offer ongoing support beyond VET, which might include counselling, careers advice and further training in foundation skills

5. provide students with pathways to further study and/or work through VET providers, government agencies and community groups working together.

## What needs to happen now

While VET has the capacity to offer socially inclusive educational programs, for successful and sustainable outcomes the training provider must also be able to work with other agencies supporting learners. A VET course is not the end of the journey. Government agencies and community groups can provide funding to ensure the VET qualification leads to meaningful work.

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## READ MORE: Victorian TAFE chaos: a lesson in how not to reform vocational education

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But success for many students is not just measured through completions and attainment of a qualification or job. When we talk about success here, it's more in terms of less tangible outcomes such as building confidence, self-respect, life skills and engagement with their communities.

To rebuild this role, VET needs sustainable investment. Supporting disadvantaged learners is [successful](#) when it's an institution-wide commitment.

Such support requires the commitment of all levels of government, not only to ensure VET retains this capacity, but so there's an obligation of social inclusion that goes beyond the classroom. It should also build strong relationships with employers and communities.

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This article is available online at: <https://theconversation.com/vet-needs-support-to-rebuild-its-role-in-getting-disadvantaged-groups-into-education-and-work-101390>



# A new national set of priorities for VET would make great social and economic sense

**Robin Shreeve**  
Adjunct Professor,  
Federation University Australia

This article is part of a series on the Future of VET exploring issues within the sector and how to improve the decline in enrolments and shortages of qualified people in vocational jobs. Read the other articles in the series [here](#).

Attending a Vocational Education and Training (VET) graduation can be an uplifting experience. There's the 45-year-old manufacturing worker who left school at 14 getting his first-ever qualification and a new job in construction, the Indigenous single parent who started a business based on what she learnt with her Certificate III in Hospitality, the female refrigeration apprentice who won a medal representing Australia at WorldSkills, and the Sudanese refugee who is now a university law student following his English Language and Tertiary Preparation Course.

These are not just inspiring stories about individuals. They show how the vocational system can increase workforce participation through developing skills in shortage areas, especially for disadvantaged groups.

Skills Australia once calculated if we raised workforce participation from 65% to the 69% they achieve in New Zealand, it would benefit the economy through increased tax and reduced social security income to improve government operating balances by as much as [A\\$24 billion](#) a year.

The sector needs a new national set of priorities and operating principles fit for the future. To achieve this, a national review is necessary.

## The neglected middle child

Why is VET so often characterised as the problem, neglected middle child of our post-school education and training system? A lot of it has to do with conflicts over basic questions of form and function – who should run the system, how it should operate, what its primary purpose is and what its relationship with other sectors should be.

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**READ MORE: [Deregulating TAFE is a big risk to the labour market](#)**

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The last time the VET system had a largely agreed upon position on its purpose and operating framework was in 1974 following the [Kangan Review](#) of the sector. Some 44 years on, the sector desperately needs another review.

## Industry's concerns on the decline of VET

[Politicians](#) and [business leaders](#) are now showing concern about VET's decline.

One argument is we now have too many people going to university. This is a waste of public money, it will result in critical skills shortages and is bad for some students who would be better off following the VET pathway.

Typically, the example is given of an apprenticeship that can bring higher initial pay and more certain full time employment. This is true for some traditionally male apprenticeships such as electrician, but less so for traditionally female pathways such as hairdressing or care.

You also see modern versions of the [argument](#) that some people prefer practical learning by doing, rather than academic learning, and that is a key feature of VET.

## Why?

There are many aspects to this malaise. The sector is [losing funding](#) and enrolments, it's been battered by poorly thought out marketisation policies, and its students have been the victim of [loan scandals](#) by rogue providers.

VET operates in a [confused mess](#) of federal and state funding, governance and policy prescriptions. Externally, the labour market is changing with lots of professions – such as nursing – now demanding university degrees as entry qualifications.

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**READ MORE: [Changes to VET might be good for business, but not for students](#)**

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Universities have powerful alumni in business and politics. They prepare people for high-status professional careers, such

as medicine or law. Critically, they have academic freedom.

In contrast the public VET provider, TAFE, is often treated like a government department. VET professionals are not free to comment publicly on government policy lest their views conflict with political positions or challenge direct ministerial control.

## VET's own culture wars

Various stakeholders have different views of VET priorities. Crudely put, VET is seen by different people as primarily:

1. an industry trainer, similar to BHPs training department
2. an alternative to university in specialities such as fashion design and child care
3. a provider of foundation, "second chance" and initial vocational programs for disengaged adults and young people, similar to the [Brotherhood of St Laurence](#).

For the last 30 years, VET has been experiencing its own "culture war". On the one hand there are some who work in the VET sector who like to look back to the "golden age" following the Kangan Report of 1974. The review emphasised life-long learning and educating the whole person, not just in technical skills. TAFE teachers needed graduate level qualifications in teaching to complement their industry qualifications and experience.

This vision lost out from 1990 onwards to a more instrumental one promoted by industry and trade unions which said VET's purpose was to provide industry with workers who were skilled for specific jobs.

The demonstration of specific industry-defined competencies became the key factor in gaining a credential, with less testing of understanding theory and knowledge. Graduate teacher qualifications were no longer necessary in this world of [Competency Based Training](#) – just a [VET Certificate IV](#) in Training and Assessment.

Besides advocating a competency approach, the new leaders of the system wanted "choice". This led us through poor implementation and inadequate regulation to the [VET FEE-HELP scandals](#) we are now familiar with.

*Continued on following page >*



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**READ MORE: VET FEE-HELP reforms will merely paper over the cracks of a system prone to abuse**

This competency-based approach is now being [challenged](#). In an age where we're told many of tomorrow's jobs don't exist yet, it seems odd to prepare people solely with highly specific occupational skills. Especially because industry says it values generic skills such as communication, presentation, analysis and teamwork. Many VET graduates [already never work](#) post-study, or work for a very short time in the exact occupation they gained their credentials in.

### The way forward

VET needs a new national settlement with a set of priorities and operating principles that are fit for the future. Achieving this will not be easy as it involves resetting federal-state relationships and balancing the sometimes competing priorities of students and industry groups.

It will take a new national review similar to Kangan. The review may need to cover the entire post-secondary system. But if it does, we can't forget VET is about educating people for the changing world of work, *especially* the disadvantaged. This not only makes good educational and social sense, but the pay off in increased workforce participation makes very good economic sense as well.

**This article is available online at:**  
<https://theconversation.com/a-new-national-set-of-priorities-for-vet-would-make-great-social-and-economic-sense-101516>

## The 22nd Annual Conference of the Australasian Vocational Education and Training Research Association (AVETRA)

**Initial announcement:**  
**SAVE THE DATE!**

**Monday – Tuesday**  
**17 – 18 June 2019**  
**Parramatta, Sydney**

The conference is being held at the state-of-the-art, 'vertical campus' of Western Sydney University and University College (RTO) next to Parramatta Railway Station.

**It is less than 40 minutes by rail from Sydney Airport.**

It is well-recognised that current rapid economic and industrial developments, as well as changes in society, are affecting the demands placed upon VET systems both in Australia and elsewhere. As well, the Australian VET system has had internal challenges which need addressing. To meet all of these challenges, and to plan strategically for the future, a strong research base is needed. This AVETRA conference will bring together VET researchers and those interested in using research to inform policy and practice, to discuss and debate these vital matters.

The conference will commence with a range of researcher capability workshops including workshops for emerging, mid-career and established VET researchers, on the morning of 17 June; with the remainder of the conference devoted to keynote and plenary sessions, and parallel sessions of research-based papers.

### Abstract submissions

The call for research-based papers will be made soon. Topic streams (to be confirmed) will be: The other 'E' in VET (equity, social justice and marginalised learners); Teaching, Learning and Curriculum; Theorising VET; The ongoing debate about CBT; Industry and workplace training; Regulation, governance and policy-making; VET for industry 4.0, for new forms of employment, and for a globalised labour market.

**See AVETRA website for updates:** [www.avetra.org.au](http://www.avetra.org.au)

**Information will continue to be disseminated via normal means. Initial enquiries may be sent to** [avetra@theassociationspecialists.com.au](mailto:avetra@theassociationspecialists.com.au)

