In April 2014, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) Industry and Skills Council agreed that the time was right to take a broad, comprehensive look at training packages and accredited courses to ensure they are still fit-for-purpose and to investigate whether they can better meet the needs of Australian industry, employers and students, now and into the future.

In October 2014, the Review of Training Packages and Accredited Courses Discussion Paper was released for public comment. It was aimed at engaging directly with a range of stakeholders to determine how well national training packages are responding to contemporary stakeholder needs.

Consultations revealed strong support for the fundamentals of the current training package system, but stakeholders also identified areas for improvement. A summary of the responses to the Discussion Paper can be found at: www.vetreform.industry.gov.au/publication/summary-national-consultations.

Following the consultation process, on 8 May 2015 the COAG Industry and Skills Council (CISC) agreed to “investigate a number of reforms designed to strengthen the system and better prepare students for changing workplaces and jobs in a modern economy, reduce complexity in the system, including rationalisation of qualifications, and place a greater focus on resolving systemic issues around the quality of assessment.”

Better preparing students for changing workplaces and jobs in a modern economy

The decision of the COAG Industry and Skills Council to investigate training package reforms that better prepare students for changing workplaces provides an opportunity to consider whether the design of qualifications is providing the most efficient match of skills with jobs. It is also timely to consider how to address any barriers to developers’ ability to design qualifications and training providers’ ability to develop learning programs which meet learner needs in relation to skills and knowledge that:

- underpin workplace competencies and effective performance in the workplace;
- provide flexibility to meet the needs of local employers, industries and labour markets; and
- enables occupational mobility at a local or regional level.

There are examples of qualifications in existing training packages which support occupational mobility and pathways within and between industry sectors. Consideration is being given to ways of encouraging broader adoption of qualification design principles which support flexible choices for learners and their employers.

Reducing complexity and improving efficiency in the system

Removing or retiring qualifications is an issue for systems where there has been a proliferation of qualifications. For example, New Zealand and the United Kingdom have implemented systematic review processes which target removal of qualifications that have experienced zero or very low uptake over a specified period of time (usually two years).

At their meeting in May 2015, the COAG Industry and Skills Council agreed that rationalisation of the number of qualifications on the National Register should be undertaken in consultation with industry and other stakeholders.

A combination of approaches to implementing the COAG Industry and Skills Council decision is being considered. Ultimately, the rationalisation of training products on the national register aims to:
minimise duplication and proliferation of qualifications and units to ensure that the national register is easier to navigate for users;

- target products on the national register that no longer reflect skills needed in the economy; and

- increase cost efficiencies, as government and industry more efficiently spend time and resources on the maintenance of skills standards which are useful to learners, graduates or industries.

Placing a greater focus on resolving systemic issues around the quality of assessment

A fundamental premise of Australia’s training system is that an individual can demonstrate vocational competence regardless of how the required skills and knowledge have been acquired. In line with this concept, training package units and qualifications focus on what is expected of a competent individual in the workplace as an outcome of (formal and/or informal) learning, rather than on the learning process itself.

In a competency based system, assessment becomes the lynchpin of quality and validates the whole learning process that comes before it, including:

- the quality of the training delivery;
- the capability of the trainers and the training providers; and
- the design of the course.

The inclusion of Assessment Requirements in the 2012 Standards for Training Packages strengthens industry’s capacity to specify requirements for assessment where a need is identified. However the Review highlighted there are ongoing concerns about the quality of training delivery and assessment.

New arrangements for development and review of content

Concurrent to the Review of Training Packages and Accredited Courses, the Australian Government has announced new arrangements for training package development which are designed to be more responsive to the needs of industry and employers, drive efficiencies, and deliver high quality training packages that are nationally endorsed and continue to be internationally regarded.

It is expected that the outcomes of the Review could complement and leverage opportunities afforded by the new contestable development arrangements, for example where there are crossovers between industry sectors in production and service structures (including access to global supply chains) giving rise to emerging industries and new skills.

Next steps

A suite of reform options are being prepared for Ministers’ consideration at the COAG Industry and Skills Committee meeting in November 2015. Further information, including the outcomes of the Review, will be available on the VET Reform website following the meeting.