



# **Key Issues and Future Directions in Vocational Skills for Youth:**

**A report from the National Forum  
and workshop**

**A joint initiative of  
TAFE Directors Australia  
Australian College of Educators**

## **Acknowledgements**

This report was prepared by Geof Hawke, Centre for Research in Learning and Change at the University of Technology, Sydney, on behalf of TAFE Directors Australia and the Australian College of Educators.

It draws on notes taken on the day by Berwyn Clayton and Sarah Sutcliffe of CURVE at the Canberra Institute of Technology, Gayle Jeffrey of TAFE Tasmania and George McLean of the Office for Educational Policy and Innovation, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, Victoria. Their contributions are gratefully acknowledged.

In addition, the report draws on the material presented by the keynote speakers and the discussion papers prepared by presenters in the workshop sessions.

## **Executive Summary**

The one-day Future Directions in Vocational Skills for Youth National Forum & Workshop was held on 16 April 2008 at the Hotel Grand Chancellor, Hobart.

The National Forum was initiated by TAFE Directors Australia (TDA) and the Australian College of Educators (ACE), respectively the skills and schools peak bodies, to provide a platform to review and propose excellence in vocational education and training for young people.

## **DECISIONS**

The National Forum accepted that a range of factors drove policies that were refocussing on delivering vocational skills to young people. However, there was a high degree of consensus that, to achieve this effectively, Australia needs to rethink many of its current approaches. In particular, participants indicated that:

- a) there is a need to carefully evaluate the level and quality of work placements and advice that Australian industry is able to provide;
- b) there is a need for a stronger focus on the importance of quality teaching;
- c) Skills Australia and Industry Skills Councils should seek to develop vocational education training (VET) as a shared priority of both educators and industry, rather than one led by either party;
- d) integrating literacy and numeracy in applied learning is an effective strategy;
- e) genuine partnerships between education providers and industry and young people are essential and these need to be sustained over time;
- f) institutional structures and teaching practices need to reflect the greater diversity of vocational learning needs;
- g) curriculum needs to address teaching and learning practices as well as outcomes;
- h) the new structures and arrangements needed will require sustained investment, rather than a one-off input; and that
- i) vocational learning must extend beyond specific skills training to develop judgement and critical capabilities.

## **SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER ACTION**

The key aspects of the recommendations for further action were that:

1. **TDA and ACE seek a review of the current vocational education and training provision for young people, including Australian Technical Colleges.**

### **Expected outcomes to include:**

- An audit of accredited vocational education training programs currently being undertaken by young people across the states and territories (types of programs, qualifications, numbers participating) and how funded,

- Increased recognition and awareness of the value of vocational programs for young people,
- Growth of work force development that enables teachers to offer high quality work oriented learning that meets industry standards,
- That course delivery modes take into account the diverse learning styles of young learners
- Career counsellors promote TAFE/post secondary options as the first port of call to a first class future, and
- Career counsellors be equipped with a strong understanding of contemporary TAFE and industry practices.

**2. TDA and ACE seek a review of the current funding arrangements.**

**Expected outcomes to include:**

- A new set of funding arrangements for vocational education and training arrangements for young people which addresses crucial skills shortages but also better meets skills demands relevant to State and Territory needs.
- A commonality of principles for funding between states and territories in order to better synchronise developments across State and Territory boundaries.
- A transparency of principles in funding, funds applications and funding management and reporting to enable comparisons of delivery mechanisms which are achieving best results.

**3. TDA and ACE advocates stronger focus on teaching vocational learning for young people.**

**Expected outcomes to include:**

- Stronger use of ICT (new technologies such as Moblog and Wi-Fi) to engage and support learning and assessment of young people,
- Increased participation of young people in vocational programs, and
- Increased number of young people with higher levels of skills, particularly employability skills.

**4. TDA and ACE encourage governments to include vocational skills development for young people in a wide range of policy and infrastructure contexts, including workforce participation policy, employment policy, health policy and industry policy and infrastructure projects.**

**Expected outcomes to include:**

- Greater industry involvement in skills development of young people,
- Greater participation of young people,
- More innovation in delivery of skills programs for young people,

- Higher levels of skills for young people, and
- An increased and increasing pool of skilled people available to Australian industry people.

**5. TDA, in collaboration with the Australian College of Educators, seeks Australian Government support to undertake further research into pedagogy and best practice in vocational programs for young people.**

**Expected outcomes to include:**

- A substantial piece of research with a focus on pedagogical issues that relate to school retention and the success of vocational programs for young people.  
  
A feature of this research will be case studies identifying how such issues affect Indigenous students; replicable features of successful vocational colleges and a case study of a state approach to transition strategies for young people from school to further study.
- An audit to identify accredited vocational education training programs currently being undertaken by young people across the States and Territories (mapping types of programs and numbers participating).

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# The National Forum Summary Report

This was a one-day National Forum and Engaging Youth Workshop organised jointly by TAFE Directors Australia and the Australian College of Educators to initiate a debate and discussion around the delivery of vocational skills to young people.

The National Forum brought together one hundred and twenty educators from every state and territory, representing a wide range of perspectives and with representation from Commonwealth and State/Territory education and training agencies, school curriculum authorities, school principals, TAFE Directors, universities, private providers and industry.

## ***Its purpose***

The National Forum sought to develop strategic recommendations that TDA and ACE could take forward to governments in relation to enhanced collaboration between the TAFE and school sectors to improve the transition of young people between educational sectors and into employment.

The National Forum developed strategic recommendations that TDA and ACE could urge governments to adopt in achieving better education and work outcomes for young people. By enhancing collaboration between the TAFE and school sectors, to improve the transition of young people between educational sectors and into employment.

Specifically, the National Forum aimed to address issues such as:

- *the need for significant reform to administrative and funding arrangements for young people undertaking vocational skills development;*
- *the challenges for providers of applied teaching and learning practice, including work based learning; and*
- *the need for more effective and innovative delivery models — TAFE/school partnerships, school clusters and partnerships with industry.*<sup>1</sup>

## ***Its importance***

The National Forum was initiated by ACE and TDA because of the growing importance of vocational skills development for Australia's youth in an era of significant skills shortages. Both organisations recognised that the COAG response to these issues — its Human Capital Agenda — demanded new and more collaborative arrangements be developed that would involve both the schools and TAFE sectors in rethinking their approaches and areas of action.

Moreover, the organisations recognised the growing importance of vocational education within the schooling sector, an importance further enhanced by the Commonwealth's proposals to fund a significant development of Trades Training Centres in schools.

However, it was also recognised that while there are many successful cooperative arrangements between schools and TAFE operating across Australia, in both metropolitan and regional areas, current policy and funding systems don't encourage or support systemic change leading to the development of effective and efficient co-operative systems.

TDA and ACE noted that this situation was in stark contrast to the position in many OECD and European Union countries where governments have taken significant steps in building

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<sup>1</sup> ACE & TDA: promotional material advertising the National Forum.

and supporting a collaborative model that primarily addresses the needs of the young people involved.

In the current climate of a new approach to Commonwealth-State relations that appears to be developing, the organisations saw an opportunity to influence and shape the agenda and the National Forum provided an opportunity to initiate that process.

### ***How it worked***

The National Forum was arranged as “a special skills-schools initiative following the ACE National Conference” in Hobart. It was initiated by a series of plenary sessions including presentations from the Hon Brendan O’Connor MHR, Minister for Employment Participation; Emeritus Prof. Denise Bradley, President of ACE; Rebecca Cross, Department of Education, Employment & Workplace Relations; Malcolm White, Board Member, TDA; Michael Taylor, Australian Industry Group; and Peter Noonan, Peter Noonan Consulting.

As well, participants were split into three groups around one of three sub-themes. They heard presentations from a range of speakers from industry and the schools and TAFE sectors and then discussed the key issues arising and then identified proposals that TDA and ACE could take forward to governments. In particular, participants were asked to focus on “what changes would make the most difference?”

The three sub-themes were:

- Showcasing collaborative delivery of vocational skills for youth.
- What does industry need from vocational skills programmes for youth?
- How can we best meet students’ vocational learning needs?

The day was completed by a panel discussion that sought to bring the key themes of the day together.

### **What the National Forum decided**

The discussions throughout the National Forum produced a high degree of consensus about the primary issues that concerned participants and the essential features of a direction for the future.

### ***Key issues***

The National Forum accepted that the key drivers of change were the increasing and accelerating skills demands of the economy on the one hand and the extent to which the current Australian education system has produced an apparently entrenched group of young people who are disengaged from education and training and, possibly, disengaged from the society more generally.

To address these drivers, the participants acknowledged that all students now need to develop both specific and generic skills that will allow them to engage in the full spectrum of social and economic activity. Achieving this goal will require that both TAFE and schools continue to evolve, and the participants expressed a high level of optimism that the present climate for change provided an opportunity to take important steps forward.

Moreover, the National Forum participants agreed that there were a range of specific goals and strategies that could be adopted to facilitate this evolution. These were that:

1. Policy makers and providers' approaches to vocational learning need to extend beyond the current focus on competencies to include a stronger concern with the teaching and learning practices that facilitate sound vocational skills development.
2. High quality teaching is a critical component. The participants did not see this as merely repeating the obvious. Rather, it arose from their concern that the importance of teaching skill had been devalued in recent years, especially in the field of vocational education where the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment has become the entry-level qualification. Vocational learning requires the same high levels of teaching competence as does History or English.
3. Institutional, teaching and learning practices need to adapt to the diversity of learners and their needs. Importantly, the new learning approaches that best fit the needs of the contemporary youth population will both appeal and win youth ownership. This includes, but is not limited to, the greater use of new information and communications technologies. Some features of these new approaches might include asynchronous and just-in-time learning.
4. Consequently, our aim should be to produce effective practitioners who make informed judgements and have the capacity to keep learning. This requires an educational process that goes beyond training only in specific vocational skills towards one based upon the development of critical faculties and an awareness of the ideas and principles that underlie practice.
5. Partnerships across the community need to be a greater part of our future strategy. These include: partnerships between different educational providers to share components of the total curriculum; partnerships with the community to share responsibility for raising the child; partnerships with employers that involve them in making real and substantial contributions to developing effective vocational practitioners.

Importantly, the National Forum recognised that these partnerships need to be genuine and durable over time. We need to think about timeframes of 10-15 years rather than ones based on the current initiative and funding period.

These partnerships need to recognise, value and build on the different expertise of the people and groups involved rather than seek to find a common, but simplistic, basis of agreement.

6. There is ample evidence from the programs discussed at the National Forum and many others that integrating literacy and numeracy skill development with applied learning is an effective way, not only of enhancing these skills, but also of maintaining the engagement of young people who might otherwise leave.
7. Policy makers need to see the development of vocational learning in specific areas as a partnership between educators and relevant sections of industry and business, rather than continuing the "industry-led" approach of recent times. The complexity of vocational learning, referred to above, requires that the contribution of both is made throughout the development, and the role of the teacher is not left to being concerned with delivery alone.
8. There is a need to carefully evaluate the capacity of industry to contribute to the provision of quality work placements. Many National Forum participants reported that, while there were many instances of employers who go beyond the requirements in producing good vocational learning opportunities for students, the rapid growth in demand for placements is straining the system.
9. We will need significant and sustained investment, therefore, to allow for the growth of the new structures and arrangements that are required. This may include the

development of centres of excellence, fundamental changes to funding arrangements and a more diverse institutional architecture.

## ***Recommendations for further action***

Participants were asked to identify some priority areas in which TDA and ACE could progress the agenda. The proposals were that:

1. **TDA and ACE seek a review of the current VET in Schools model.**

The current model is not being consistently adopted across States and Territories and is being overtaken by individual initiatives such as school-based apprenticeships and traineeships and trades school programs in NSW and other states.

The present terminology also needs to be reconsidered as VETiS is not attractive or meaningful to employers.

This should also include an examination of the capacity of industry to support work placements and to contribute more generally to vocational skills development.

2. **TDA and ACE seek a review of the current funding arrangements.**

Existing institutional funding arrangements are often framing the structure of proposals, whereas it is the needs of learners - and structures which will engage and motivate them - which are paramount. Presently, funding is a disincentive to many of the changes and practices proposed by the National Forum.

3. **TDA and ACE lobby for the reinvigoration of teaching and learning as central features of an effective system for vocational learning for young people.**

This would include action on the VET workforce, the inclusion of educational representation in vocational curriculum development (including Training Packages) and recognition by governments and industry of the value teachers add to the process.

4. **TDA and ACE encourage governments to see vocational skills development for young people in a wider context that involves workforce participation policy, employment policy, health policy and industry policy.**

**This “whole of government” approach has long been advocated but is rarely implemented.**

This could include considering government purchasing policies to include requirements for defined levels of apprenticeship, introduction of requirements for government agencies to take on trainees and a range of similar actions.

## **What the National Forum heard**

Eighteen different presenters provided participants with ideas and information that focused their attention on the key issues and led the National Forum to frame their decisions. This section summarises those presentations.

## **Keynote presentations**

Emeritus Professor Denise Bradley opened the National Forum by outlining the reasons that had led the two organisations, TDA and ACE, to initiate the National Forum. In particular she identified “the vicious cycle of cumulative disadvantage” that was undermining the capacity of many young people to be active participants in the Australian community. She emphasised that it was of great importance that we address this issue and that inter-sectoral collaboration was a key to achieving that goal.

Both the Minister for Employment Participation, the Hon Brendan O’Connor MHR and Rebecca Cross outlined the many different initiatives that have been introduced by the new Commonwealth government. The Minister’s address focussed on the importance of renewed co-operation between the Commonwealth and the States/Territories as a key means to tackle the long-standing difficulties involved in engaging many groups, including some youths and Indigenous groups, in education and training. He emphasised that their strategy involved both economic and social inclusion and recognised that there needed to be a re-investment in the area including new places at university level, the government’s program for trades training centres for schools and the need to address the issues facing the teaching workforce both in schools and in TAFE.

Rebecca Cross provided both a broad overview of the new approach being taken by the Commonwealth but also spoke in detail about the Trade Training Centres program. She noted that the Federal Government has established a number of key targets in areas such as school completion rates and literacy achievements. Significantly, she noted that the issue of school completion had been extended to recognise achievement of a similar level achieved through vocational training.

A key feature of her presentation was information that DEEWR was not anticipating that all Trades Training Centres would necessarily be located **in** schools but proposed that they were developed in locations and in ways that made them easily accessible to school students.

She put the Trades Training Centres program into the bigger picture of the Commonwealth’s strategy to achieve an “Education Revolution”. This includes a fundamental reshaping of education and learning. The Commonwealth intends, she said, to change thinking about teaching and learning in order to achieve “quality, world class outcomes” for young people. In their view, the focus must be on production and participation to drive a reform agenda that includes:

- developing National Curriculum
- “Job ready” certificates
- Using the digital education revolution as the vehicle for change
- Establishing a system of mentors for students

Michael White is the Chief Executive of TAFE Tasmania and a board member of TDA. He spoke of the importance of recognising “the enormous dignity in skills” and the necessity of changing community perceptions of applied learning.

He emphasised engaging young people in developing vocational skills as early as is possible and having a framework of meaningful qualification pathways in which this occurred. In this context, TAFE’s strong focus on vocational skills did not always provide a framework for the pastoral care many younger people needed. This, he felt, was a vital area to develop as self-esteem and confidence were central to the needs of many disengaged youth.

Michael Taylor, from the Australian Industry Group (AIG), provided a perspective from one of the major peak employer bodies. He noted, in particular, the poor performance of Australia in recent years when compared to other OECD countries in school retention rates and the maintenance of a skilled workforce. In Australia, he said, approximately 15% of young people are not engaged in education or employment and this figure has not changed for 15

years. AIG are concerned that disengagement of this kind is becoming entrenched among young people.

Literacy and numeracy were key priorities because having significant skills in these areas was increasingly important to all workers in the emerging high skills, high technology workplace.

Peter Noonan looked at the issue of funding and noted that a key issue in developing a funding approach was that the separate history of funding for schools and TAFEs now makes the creation of a fair, consistent and efficient approach for both very complex. He proposed a model for funding that has been developed within one jurisdiction and that appears to meet some of the needs. The model is based upon “funding the outcome, not the pathway” recognises that base funding for administration and delivery are essential regardless of the. Funding, then, needs to consider individual variations including distance, learner disability and the like.

## **Working sessions**

Each of the three working sessions was addressed by a number of presenters and this section briefly summarises their contributions. Further detail can be found in the papers produced by the speakers and available from the TDA website <<http://www.tda.edu.au/NationalForumapril08.htm>>.

## **Showcasing collaborative delivery**

This session heard presentations from Maria Peters (Chisholm Institute of TAFE, Vic), Steve Dunn (Metropolitan South Institute of TAFE, Qld), Don Zoellner (Charles Darwin University, NT) and Mark Primmer (Hunter Institute, NSW).

Maria described four models where Chisholm had collaborated with schools to develop vocational skills, incorporating new technologies so learners developed individual connections with both content and approaches to learning. She noted the importance of establishing relationships of trust and respect among the staff of the various institutions but also identified the challenges that this brings in being able to sustain these relationships over time.

Importantly, she noted that collaborative approaches of this kind are especially resource intensive and need to be supported by appropriate funding systems and to have the active support of industry. This industry commitment was not always available for these programs.

Mark Primmer described a “second chance” vocationally-oriented HSC program offered through the Hunter Institute and targetting disengaged learners. He also outlined a system which helped local schools transition students from school to TAFE.

Don Zoellner described a partnership between the TAFE division of Charles Darwin University and three Alice Springs schools. He concludes that “in spite of over 15 years of moving in a very consistent policy direction, the role, place and expectations of VET for secondary school students remains contested” and argues that a new approach must consider the issue more holistically.

Steve Dunn described a program for shared delivery of a VET qualification to students as part of the Queensland Certificate of Education. He reports that key issues facing their approach included attitudes towards VET, timetabling, blended delivery and administrative linkages between the partners.

## **What does industry need?**

This session heard of two partnerships between providers and industry groups.

Di Craven, Robyn Williams and Margaret Cummins discussed the challenges and plans of the partnership between St George Private Hospital, Toyota and TAFE NSW Sydney Institute in establishing the St George Trade School in NSW. This new model has only just begun and the three partners outlined the importance of negotiating the complex web of communications involved and the importance of careful preparation in working with all the partners to identify what is needed, what each can contribute and how their goals can be best achieved.

Andrew Williamson, from the Australian Technical College in Sunshine, western Melbourne, outlined their experience in establishing a school specialising in vocational skills development. He noted that several important lessons had been learnt in this process, including: Year 11 is too late to start skills training, not all workplaces are good learning environments, industry players don't have a good understanding of educational needs and schools are "astonishingly underfunded".

## **How to best meet vocational learning needs**

Keith Miles, principal of Blaxland High School in NSW, talked of the importance of clearly understanding the precursors to vocational learning, the importance of understanding our clients and balancing the curriculum, gave examples of different models and relationships between community, schools and vocational learning in which he'd worked and emphasised the crucial importance of quality teaching.

Dr Julie Rimes, Director of the Kilburn Institute, Hobart noted that TAFE is seen as irrelevant and second rate by a majority of her students and this is a crucial limiting factor. Moreover she noted that for many students the standardised approach to both content and delivery that is believed to characterise TAFE is inappropriate for "Gen Y" learners who "expect to be encouraged and empowered learners". For this group a higher focus on on-line delivery will be important. Finally she noted the importance of providing for learners with disabilities.

Lyn Farrell from Swan TAFE in WA, also noted the importance of responding to "Gen Y" learning needs. Describing two pilot programs developed by Swan for young people deemed "at risk", she noted that critical features included locating the programs in community settings rather than within traditional institutions. Also crucial to their success was the integration or embedding of language, literacy and numeracy learning within the on-the-job development of vocational skills.

Geof Hawke, a senior VET researcher from the University of Technology, Sydney, drew on the literature and contemporary research to identify four key features characterising good vocational learning content:

- a solid foundation in the underlying concepts and principles that guide action within the field;
- a close link with contemporary industry practice in the field;
- an appropriate level of socialisation into the vocational field of practice; and
- a critical appreciation of the operational contexts in the field of practice.

Further, he identified four key requirements for good vocational teaching/learning approaches:

- vocational learning extends beyond, and cannot be defined only by, terminal outcomes;
- it is primarily concerned with the development of judgement;
- it requires an immersion in the field of practice at some stage; and
- that, contrary to the current focus solely on learning, teaching is an essential component of effective vocational learning.

All of these things he highlighted required a sophisticated and competent teaching workforce with considerable knowledge and expertise in the discipline of education.

## **Conclusion**

The National Forum brought together a very diverse range of practitioners, government and provider groups to consider the challenges facing Australia's youth in the area of vocational skills.

Participants were optimistic that the present circumstances provided an opportunity for significant change and were remarkably unanimous in identifying the major directions in which Australia should move.

This report should be read in conjunction with the other key papers produced for the National Forum. Together they provide a platform for TDA and ACE to consider the next steps in translating the Forum's ideas and energy into action.