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Dear Professor Wheelahan

Thank you for your recent presentation to the Skills Australia Board on your research into the quality of teaching in VET. Board members appreciated the opportunity to discuss the options paper with you directly.

The Board welcomes the current focus on the VET workforce, noting the work of the Productivity Commission as well as that of the L.H. Martin Institute. We consider the quality of teaching in VET to be critical to developing Australia's VET sector so it can meet the considerable challenges of the future. In particular it is essential that the VET sector has the capacity to address the learning needs of an increasingly diverse student cohort, including more mature learners, lifting language, literacy and numeracy skills and enabling disadvantaged students to achieve their potential. We also see a broadening scope for VET practitioners to work in partnership with enterprises and communities to support workforce development and build social inclusion.

As you are aware, Skills Australia is currently developing a discussion paper on future directions for vocational education and training in Australia. One of the issues we will be canvassing is the future role of VET practitioners and how to ensure consistent standards of quality teaching and learning throughout the sector. Without wishing to pre-empt any findings that may arise from our proposed consultations the Board wishes to make to following comments on the *Quality of teaching VET: options paper*.

Key issues of concern to the Board are the need for continuing professional development and industry currency and we make further comment on this below. We therefore support the emphasis on these issues in the Options paper. In general, the diagrammatic representation in table 1 provides a helpful overview of the various elements considered to have a potential impact on quality teaching.

#### *VET teacher qualifications*

The Board recognises the value of a teaching qualification structure that supports the development of differing levels of expertise or specialisation throughout a career as a VET practitioner. This may be an attractive optional pathway for VET professionals.

While supporting the value of higher level qualifications the Board is not at this stage convinced of the need to *mandate* higher level qualifications for certain categories of teachers as proposed in the paper.

The Board considers industry currency and expertise to be the key priority for VET teachers. In this context Skills Australia is keen to ensure that an extended teacher education qualifications structure as proposed in the *Options paper* does not discourage experienced staff from industry becoming VET practitioners. This should not mean 'lowering the bar', but rather making sure that there are flexible options and support for those making the transition from industry professional to entry level VET practitioner.



Additional research that investigates the impact on VET student outcomes of various teacher attributes, including teachers with higher level teaching qualifications, would be a valuable contribution to this debate. The work of Professor Linda Darling Hammond<sup>1</sup> in the USA on teacher education and teaching quality is an example of an approach that could be applied in Australian VET to further inform discussion of this issue. Identifying the distinguishing features of a successful VET teacher, including consideration of whether these features differ from other kinds of successful teachers, would be a valuable contribution to policy development in this area.

We are aware there is a view that the Certificate IV in Training and Education may be adequate for practitioners who are beginning their career or identify more as trainers rather than teachers, but inadequate for full-time teachers. The rigour and depth of the Certificate IV is important in preparing new practitioners – especially in the fundamentals of teaching and learning practice

We are concerned that the qualification is taught to an appropriate standard and consider there should be greater focus on this issue. The results of the National Quality Council's recent national strategic audit of the TAA40104 Certificate IV in Training and Assessment indicate there may be some substance to this concern<sup>2</sup>. There may be a case for further tightening the standards required of RTOs delivering the Certificate IV.

The Board is especially concerned about the teaching of literacy and numeracy in VET as there is a clear need to lift these skills in the workforce. Skills Australia notes that training in language, literacy and numeracy is only an elective unit in the Certificate IV in Training and Education. This may need to be revisited in order to ensure that all VET trainers and teachers are equipped to support improved outcomes for learners. This is particularly pertinent given the COAG targets for higher participation rates and higher levels of attainment, especially for low SES students.

#### *Professional development*

Skills Australia endorses a strong focus on continuing professional development (CPD). We consider it essential that VET practitioners continually update their industry knowledge, educational expertise and develop their ability to respond to new and emerging technologies and challenges, such as incorporating 'green skills.'

Current work by Skills Australia also identifies the need for VET practitioners to develop the entrepreneurial skills to work in partnership with businesses and social enterprises.

The increased emphasis on foundation skills and language, literacy and numeracy requirements of many students also requires practitioners to have skills in supporting students' individual learning needs, especially disaffected and disengaged students.

Skills Australia is cognisant of the highly casualised VET workforce and views it as both a strength and a weakness. To the extent that it reflects a workforce characterised by teachers and trainers whose primary job is in the industry area in which they teach, it could reflect strength of the system. Use of casual employment also affords providers a level of flexibility to engage and deploy teachers who have the relevant skills to meet student demand. In addition, the option for a less than full-time workload could be attractive to teachers who might otherwise retire from the workforce. However, a key issue of concern, particularly in terms of the quality of teaching practice, is that casual teachers may have less access to support from other VET staff and to professional development opportunities.

<sup>1</sup> <http://epaa.asu.edu/ojs/article/view/392>

<sup>2</sup> TVET Australia Newsletter, September 2010 p3

We would therefore like to see more specific attention paid to the professional development needs of casual staff.

*Industry currency*

Skills Australia views the industry currency of VET practitioners as a vital part of their connection to the world of work. Research sighted in the *Options paper* suggests that VET practitioners working on industry led projects are more effective in maintaining teachers' industry currency than the traditional return-to-industry ventures. Skills Australia supports this new direction particularly when these projects are mutually beneficial, operating as an information exchange between industry, VET practitioners and RTOs.

*Partnerships with industry*

Skills Australia considers VET practitioners need to be supported to work proactively with employers to understand their needs and enable customisation of services to the enterprise. This may require a more diverse and specialised pathway requiring the development of entrepreneurial skills. The initiative suggested in the *Options paper* of providing a funding stream incorporated into the continuing professional development (CPD) program could provide VET practitioners with opportunities to access the latest technology and build partnerships with industry.

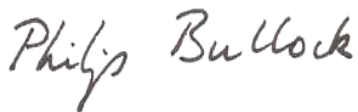
*Registration and accreditation options*

Skills Australia is open to the concept of a professional association for VET practitioners as this could promote practitioner networks, provide CPD opportunities, promote research and foster professionalism. However a role in regulation and accreditation of qualifications is less compelling.

Skills Australia observes that where such bodies exist they include public and private sector members, employers, academic specialists in education and others, in some cases working from elected and appointed membership. Skills Australia would wish to see that any professional body has the highest level of expertise, including industry experts, so that there is no 'dilution' of VET's professional connections to the real needs of the workplace. Any potential duplication with other standards and regulatory bodies should be avoided.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this important area of research.

Yours sincerely



Philip Bullock  
Chair  
Skills Australia  
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