

National Vocational Education and Training Completions

A report produced through the Secretariat of the National VET Completions Taskforce



We acknowledge and respect Aboriginal peoples as the state's first peoples and nations, and recognise them as traditional owners and occupants of land and waters in South Australia. Further, we acknowledge that the spiritual, social, cultural and economic practices of Aboriginal peoples come from their traditional lands and waters, that they maintain their cultural and heritage beliefs, languages and laws which are of ongoing importance, and that they have made and continue to make a unique and irreplaceable contribution to the state.

This Report was produced through the Secretariat of the National VET Completions Taskforce.

The Secretariat extends its sincere gratitude to the National VET Completions Taskforce for its valuable support throughout the course of this research. The guidance, resources, and assistance provided by the Taskforce were instrumental in shaping the direction of this study.

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Executive Summary

The Vocational Education and Training (VET) system is a critical element in the development of the Australian workforce. It is strongly linked to positive social and economic impacts, providing Australians with the skills needed to participate in a modern workforce and enabling them to react flexibly to structural change and adapt with economic transitions. Given the importance of VET to the overall economy, it is essential that learners undertaking VET complete their studies at improved rates and achieve positive outcomes for both themselves and the Australian community, which benefits from a skilled workforce.

The research undertaken to inform this National VET Completions Report (the report) provides an assessment of the state of completions in the Australian VET sector, to determine how completion rates may be improved in the future. Insights and good practice were obtained from literary sources and direct stakeholder engagement.

There are examples of good practice underway across Australia, some of which are referred to in the report as case studies or otherwise cited from literature. There is an opportunity to build on this good practice to improve VET system settings, measure completion rates, and offer support for learners and other VET stakeholders to improve completion rates nationally.

The report findings consider the learner journey with reference to the role different stakeholders can play in improving completion rates. Three key themes are explored: the purpose of study, VET system and delivery, and learner characteristics. The report proposes 17 recommendations across these themes. The research highlights the need for a collaborative effort from Australian VET stakeholders to improve completion rates. While the governance and regulatory functions of the VET sector, through a network of Australian and state and territory governments, is understood and established, it is important to acknowledge the vital roles that other stakeholders can play.

There are several intervention points throughout the learner journey that may affect the learner completing their qualification. The phases of the learner journey and their associated intervention points were considered in the development of the report's recommendations. The recommendations are mapped to the learner journey at Appendix 1, to demonstrate where they could have the greatest impact.

The report findings highlight that the varied purpose and functions of VET are central to the factors impacting upon VET completion rates. In many instances, including trade occupations in particular, full VET qualifications equip learners with the skills necessary to provide entry into an ongoing career, with significant value placed by industry on the completion of a full qualification. Poor completions in such qualifications in particular result in a loss of productivity for the industry and missed opportunities for learners. In comparison, learners whose purpose is to gain additional skills which are modular in nature, particularly in industries that traditionally do not require the completion of full qualifications for employment, or who are seeking to broaden or increase their skills base, will often complete the units of competency required to achieve their goals and purpose for study, rather than the full qualification.



The research strongly indicates that a learner's clarity on their purpose and motivations for study is of fundamental importance. Their interests, abilities, personality, social background, and family influences are major drivers of decisions about further education. The diversity of the learner cohort and the range of factors impacting upon learners' purpose and motivations for study must be acknowledged. Identifying interventions to assist with clarifying a learner's purpose and motivation for study will assist them to make more informed choices. This could have a positive impact on completions.

To improve completion rates, the VET system should consider factors that influence the learner journey, from before enrolment through to completion and beyond. Ensuring VET products are fit for purpose, adaptive and align with the needs and expectations of all stakeholders will contribute to positive outcomes for everyone involved.

The engagement and research informing this report also identified that tailored, wrap-around supports aligned to learner characteristics and needs assist learners through to completion. Early identification of those learner characteristics that may increase the risk of non-completion, coupled with good practice implementation of wrap-around supports and follow-up, will help increase completion rates for these cohorts.

The implementation of the report recommendations may assist Australian learners in completing VET qualifications that meet their needs and in successfully transitioning into the workforce. Increased VET completion rates will result in successful outcomes extending beyond the individual learner to industry, the economy and the Australian community.

Introduction

In February 2023, the South Australian Minister for Education, Training and Skills, the Hon. Blair Boyer MP, identified the urgent need for work to improve completion rates. With the support of the Skills and Workforce Ministerial Council members, Minister Boyer and the South Australian government led a project to better understand the factors affecting completion rates, with a strong focus on current good practice and opportunities to improve completion rates and learner outcomes from VET.

South Australia led a project between March and July 2023 to explore factors affecting completion rates and to identify opportunities to improve the proportion of students completing their training. The project comprised four elements to inform recommendations for improving completion rates:

National VET Completions Taskforce - including stakeholders unions, industry, providers and governments. The taskforce was formed to consider the project findings and endorse recommendations to Skills and Workforce Ministers on the potential to improve VET completions in the context of a new NSA

Engagement - trialling new approaches with key system stakeholders across Australia, to consider how completion rates could be improved

Insights and good practice - an exploration of national and international good practice models for increasing completion rates, including investigation of completions literature and submissions from stakeholders across Australia

Measurement of outcomes - collaborative data analysis between the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER), Jobs and Skills Australia (JSA), and state, territory and Australian governments, with a view to improving data collection and reporting.

This report provides 17 recommendations for consideration by Skills and Workforce Ministers, presenting a range of systemic and learner-focused approaches that could be applied across Australia to improve completion rates. It summarises the approach adopted by South Australia and the National VET Completions Taskforce in scoping the project and gathering evidence, as well as outlining the findings of primary engagement and research. The recommendations are mapped to the learner journey at Appendix 1.

Additionally, the Good Practice Guide to be developed as a next step will provide insights and suggestions to guide the implementation of the recommendations.



Problem Statement

Recent data from the NCVET show that only 47.6% of students who start a nationally recognised VET qualification will complete it.¹

Qualification completion rates are a key indicator that the VET sector is high-quality, responsive, and accessible, meeting the needs of learners, industry and society more broadly. In 2022, there were approximately 4.5 million students undertaking nationally recognised VET, with 1.3 million of these funded by government.² Increasing completion rates will increase the social and economic benefits of education and training, linking jobs to more Australians and improving return on investment for governments, individuals and industry.

Of the 4.5 million VET students, 2.1 million were enrolled in nationally recognised programs, with approximately 1.8 million enrolled in training package qualifications and approximately 360,000 in accredited qualifications, training package skill sets and accredited courses. Approximately 3.0 million students were enrolled in subject-only delivery that does not lead to nationally recognised programs.³ⁱ

When considering subject completions, NCVET data suggests that students complete around 80.4% of VET subjects they enrol in, significantly higher than the qualification completion rate of 47.6%. At the same time, skill shortages and unmet demand across hundreds of occupations continue to grow, while trade training contract commencements remain relatively static.⁴

The issues affecting completion are nuanced and can depend on the student cohort, their reason for training, and the type of training undertaken, among many other factors. According to the 2022 NCVET Student Outcomes Survey, the most common reason for qualification non-completion (accounting for almost 20% of survey respondents) was changing or commencing a new job. Other main reasons were:

- personal reasons
- training was not as the learner had expected
- training no longer related to plans
- other training was started
- the learner had completed all intended training.⁵

This highlights the possibility that many VET learners may deviate from their course for reasons that might not always warrant interventions, such as gaining other employment or pursuing further training. Many learners may also only require selected subjects to achieve intended outcomes and do not need to complete the entire qualification.

Apprentices and trainees face unique challenges in relation to completion. Completion rates tend to be slightly higher for apprentices and trainees than the broader VET learner cohort, with around 55.8% of those commencing in 2017 completing their training contract.⁶

³ⁱ These numbers will not sum to the total (4.5 million) as some students may undertake multiple types of training within a collection year.

A quality apprenticeship system and collaborative relationships between employers, apprentices, training providers and apprenticeship support services are consistently identified as important factors in improving retention. Most apprentices who do not complete their training programs will leave within the first year.⁷ Women are less likely to complete trade apprenticeships (46.2% compared to 54.3% for men in the 2018 commencements).⁸ This may be due in part to trade-based industries having male-dominated workplaces, highlighting the need for more tailored supports for employers and women in these workplaces.

There is a body of evidence exploring the learner characteristics that may affect completions as well as the reasons for non-completion. There is less evidence for what may be done to address these reasons.

The three main factors that impact learner outcomes and completion rates are the purpose of study, the VET system, and the learner's characteristics. Learner motivations such as the reason for undertaking training and the stage of the learner's career journey drive choices, with many learners being satisfied with their training and stating that they achieved their main reason for training, even if they do not complete. The VET system factors include whether the course is delivered as an apprenticeship or traineeship, the mode of delivery, and the quality of training. These factors provide opportunities for systemic interventions. Individual learners, including those facing additional barriers to completion, may require tailored supports and services to help them complete their qualifications.

This report considers the system and learner factors known to negatively impact completion rates. It identifies systemic mechanisms and enablers to improve completion rates and learner outcomes, particularly where learner and employer expectations do not align with the current VET system, and highlights opportunities to provide tailored advice and supports for those facing barriers to completion.

Scope

The National VET Completions Taskforce (the Taskforce) was convened through a tripartite arrangement, bringing together stakeholders with diverse perspectives of and interests in the Australian VET system. Its role is to consider the project outcomes and endorse the final report, based on majority agreement, acknowledging the complex and nuanced nature of completion rates.

The project drew on the extensive evidence regarding reasons for non-completions and has recommended practical solutions to improve completion rates. This report provides a summary of the key factors impacting completions identified during the project's research, as well as recommendations for interventions that can be implemented by governments and stakeholders. A Good Practice Guide, including suggested implementation strategies for each recommendation outlined in the report, will be developed.

The Taskforce included the following in-scope and out-of-scope factors in developing the recommendations in this report, using a flexible approach to developing high level recommendations. :

In-scope:

- Learner motivations
- Learner characteristics
- Systemic factors
- Stakeholders' roles
- Learner journeys.

Out of scope:

- Interrelated service systems
- Increasing overall commencement activity to drive completions
- Binding recommendations for the NSA
- Detailed prescriptive strategies
- Recommendations on the linkages between VET and higher education.

Methodology

National VET Completions Taskforce

The National Vet Completions Taskforce includes representatives from unions, industry, providers and Australian governments to provide broad industry and VET practical and policy experience. It was formed to shape advice to the Skills and Workforce Ministerial Council (SWMC) in August 2023.

Taskforce members oversaw the development of recommendations in response to the findings of the literature review and primary engagement activities. During the final phases of the project, the Taskforce reviewed the findings and helped shape this report for SWMC.

The Taskforce comprised:

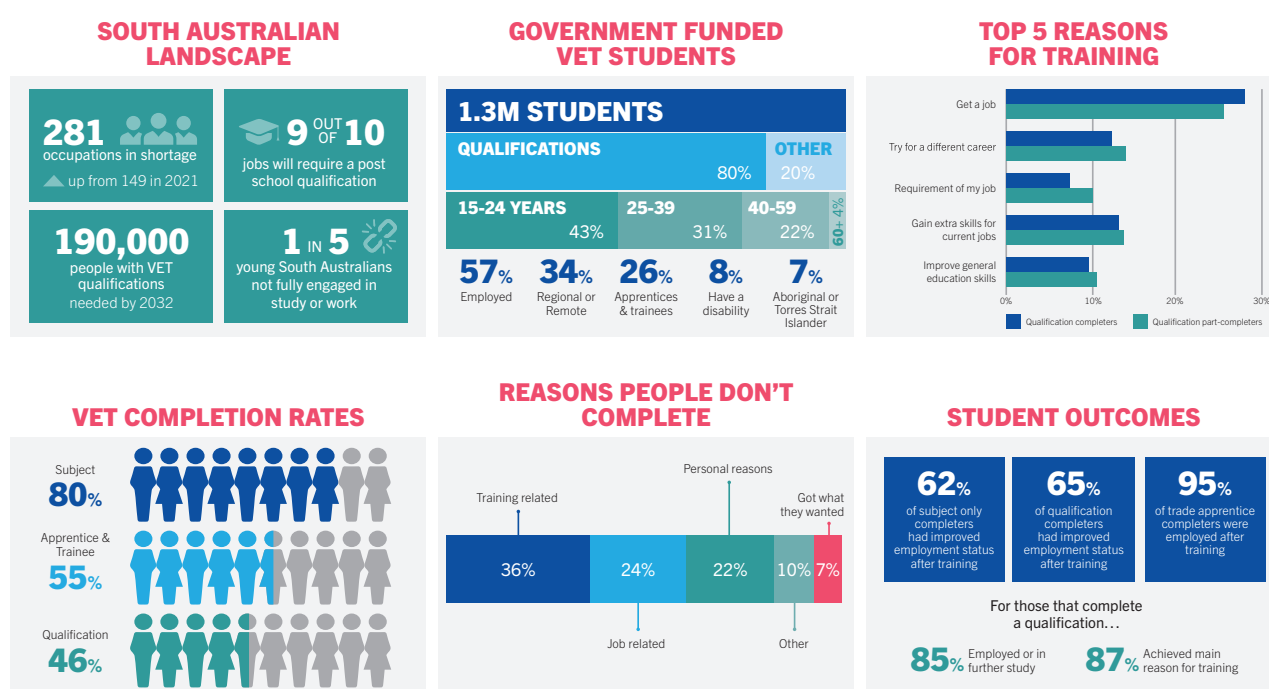
- Madeline Richardson, Deputy Chief Executive, Department for Education and Head of Skills SA (Chairperson)
- Craig Robertson, CEO, Victorian Skills Authority
- Chris Watts, Senior Policy Advisor, Australian Council of Trade Unions
- Megan Lilly, Head of Education and Training, the Australian Industry Group
- Natalie Heazlewood, Associate Director, Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry
- Jenny Dodd, CEO, TAFE Directors Australia
- Troy Williams, CEO, Independent Tertiary Education Council Australia
- Maxine Sharkey, Federal TAFE Secretary, Australian Education Union
- Professor Peter Dawkins AO, Director, Jobs and Skills Australia
- Belinda Campbell, A/g First Assistant Secretary Apprenticeship and Foundation Skills Division, Department of Employment and Workplace Relations
- Jeremy Kurucz, Executive Director, Reform and External Relations, Education and Skills Reform, NSW Department of Education
- Dr Ross Kelly, Director, Policy Planning and Research, WA Department of Training and Workforce Development.

Engagement

South Australia trialled new approaches to engaging learners, training providers and employers during face-to-face workshops on approaches to increasing completion rates. The workshops in South Australia, New South Wales (NSW) and the Northern Territory attracted 289 participants including employers and business owners; representatives of unions, registered training organisations (RTOs) and group training organisations (GTOs); and learners, apprentices, trainees and other industry stakeholders.

At the workshops, participants were provided with national data on completion rates and context on the local landscape as illustrated in Image 1, which documents the slides provided to South Australian workshop participants.

Image 1 – Slides provided to South Australian workshop participants



Participants drew on their personal experiences and presented data to consider the factors that may affect completion rates. Approaches for improvement were identified through discussions focused on:

- considering the current state of VET completions
- exploring reasons for the current state
- identifying what could improve completions, including practical examples to address the issues identified.

A video documenting the South Australian workshop was produced for Skills and Workforce Ministers. The video can be found [here](#).

In addition to the workshops, and in consultation with the taskforce, South Australia developed and distributed the 'Lifting Vocational Education and Training Completions: Case Studies' electronic national survey using Survey Monkey software. Launched in May 2023, the survey consisted of 22 questions and aimed to gather case studies of good practice examples to increase VET completions. It was intended for VET stakeholders, and particularly employers, government representatives, and training and educational organisations, and was open for responses for three weeks. A total of 207 national survey responses were received, with respondents from all states and territories. In addition, 8 submissions were provided.

Insights and good practice

A national and international literature review was undertaken to provide insights and good practice regarding completions. Additionally, good practice examples were sought through the national survey.

The literature review also provided context regarding the current state of VET completions in Australia and the complex factors contributing to current completion rates.

Measurement of outcomes

State, territory and Australian governments worked with the NCVER and JSA to analyse completion rates and identify opportunities to improve data collection and reporting. The preliminary findings of NCVER research, which were considered by all stakeholders consulted as part of the measurement of outcomes process, are outlined in the findings of this report.

While out of scope for this review, VET's complex terminology is acknowledged as contributing to the system's intricacy. This complexity was found to present a barrier to stakeholder understanding of VET and to create challenges in identifying opportunities for desired improvements in completion rates. The simplification of VET system measurement and terminology could be considered and reviewed by governments.

Findings

Stakeholders

The Australian VET system is vital to the Australian economy, providing valuable skills and knowledge for learners to participate in the workforce across a broad range of industries and occupations. The research conducted for this report strongly highlighted the importance of a collaborative effort to lift completion rates from the diverse stakeholders who interact with the VET system. The groups below have key roles in supporting improved completion rates:

- Australian, state and territory governments
- RTOs
- Industry and employers
- Unions
- Learners
- Other influencers, such as family members and schools.

While the governance, stewardship, policy, funding and regulatory functions of Australia's VET sector – through a network of Australian and state and territory governments – is established and understood, it is important to acknowledge the roles other stakeholders play in increasing completion rates.

The support from providers throughout their journeys, from enrolment to completion, as well as the quality of delivery, are crucial elements in completion rates, which are often used as a measure reflecting the quality of delivery by RTOs.⁹ In addition, industry engagement with VET, as well as partnerships between governments, industry, employers, unions and RTOs, are essential to effective VET governance and improved learner outcomes.¹⁰ Other influencers, such as family members and schools, also play critical roles, with research concluding that parents and peers are often those from whom young people, in particular, seek advice on important issues such as study choices.¹¹

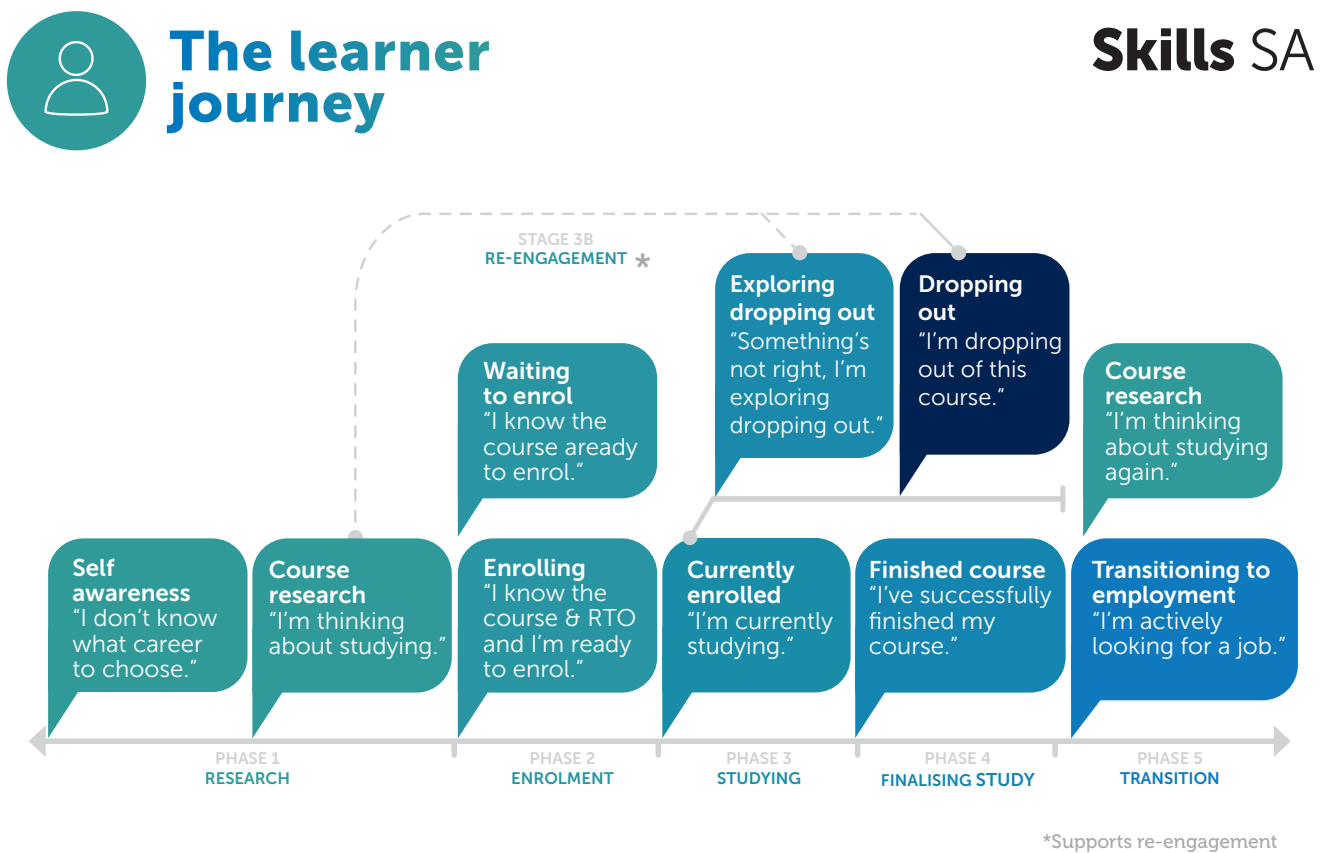
As a result, the findings, recommendations, and in particular the Good Practice Guide to be developed subsequent to this report focus on the roles of stakeholder groups in supporting improved completion rates.

The learner journey

Research and engagement undertaken for this project and additional research conducted by the South Australian Department for Education have identified that there are several intervention points throughout the learner journey that may influence whether the learner completes their qualification.

The learner journey at Image 2 is an example of the common phases VET learners, apprentices and trainees experience during their journeys: research, enrolment, studying, exploring dropping out, finalising study, and transition to employment or further study. Individual journeys may differ from the learner journey presented here.

Image 2 – The learner journey



The research conducted for this report concluded that all stages and transition phases of the learner journey influence completions and the achievement of successful learner outcomes. Therefore, the recommendations presented in this report have been mapped to the learner journey to assist in implementing the recommendations at the most impactful stage or transition phase of the learner journey (refer to Appendix 1).



Purpose of study

Student outcomes research demonstrates a strong correlation between the learner having a clear goal and motivation for training and subsequent completion.¹² A learner's interests, abilities, personality, social background and family influences have been found to be major drivers of decisions about further education.¹³ Therefore, while targeted interventions may assist in clarifying a learner's purpose for study, the diversity of the learner cohort, and the range of factors affecting their purpose and motivations for study, will create rich and complex variables and situations that underpin learners' motives for study, all of which may subsequently have an impact on completion rates.

A lack of access to and the quality and equity of career information and course counselling leads to misalignment between intent and study choices.

Alignment between the learners' intent and study choices may be improved by increased access to VET information. The national survey and the state and territory forums identified a strong need for improved information and advice on VET, both in relation to its overall perception, as well as course and program options. This feedback was received from stakeholders including learners, providers and employers.

The review of Senior Secondary Pathways into Work, Further Education and Training found that 63% of the young people it surveyed felt they were not provided with enough information regarding post-school options while in school.¹⁴ Improvements in the information available to potential VET learners as well as influencers such as parents and peers will assist learners in making informed choices from the onset.

The availability of career guidance in Australia compares favorably to the average of other Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries. According to the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2018 student responses, 64% and 23% of Australian students had spoken to a career advisor at or outside their school respectively by the age of 15-16, with two-thirds having spoken to an advisor either within and/or outside their school. This compares favourably to the OECD (18-country) average of 50% and 24% respectively.¹⁵ However, there still exists a perception that the support received is insufficient.

It is also recognised that socio-economic factors may affect the provision of and access to career and course information. Research suggests that the availability of course counselling varies depending on a learner's socio-economic background, ranging from 63% for those in the most disadvantaged quartile to 72% for those in the most advantaged socio-economic quartile.¹⁶ This is driven in part by variation of in-school provision.

Access to course and career counselling and advice is essential for young people to understand the breadth of study choices available to them. Research supports the need for bespoke career planning from an informed and objective person, especially for disadvantaged youth.¹⁷ Further research also suggests that 'career advice and pastoral care for young people must start well before senior secondary school and it is also important that these services are available to young people who are no longer engaged in the school system'.¹⁸

Engagement identified there is currently no formal training required to become a VET Coordinator in schools. Participants reported that [as a result of the lack of] 'appropriate counselling, education and structures, these students get shoved into courses that don't fit, simply because it is a better alternative to school'. To mitigate this, the Association of Independent Schools of South Australia (AISSA) developed the good practice strategies detailed in Case Study 1.

Case Study 1

Association of Independent Schools of South Australia (AISSA)

The Association of Independent Schools of South Australia (AISSA) is the peak body for the independent school sector in South Australia. It provides a forum for debating policy issues and plays a leadership role in providing advice and information.

In responding to the national survey, an AISSA representative identified the risk of students being counselled into courses for which they do not have the basic skills or suitability. Completion may be poor in these instances.

AISSA has also identified that VET Coordinators do not have access to specialised training or accreditation options for their own career development or to be VET leaders. This often leads to limitations in the advice they can offer students and families, which is critical to successful outcomes.

AISSA outlined new and existing programs designed to upskill those supporting and advising school students and their families on VET pathways, including:

- full-day workshops designed for 'Leaders New to VET' and supporting staff
- professional development days for VET leaders
- VET Coordinators being provided with phone, email and face-to-face support and advice from AISSA experts
- ongoing support for VET Coordinators on learner-centred approaches to providing information and advice.

Participants engaged in the AISSA programs have reported feeling more confident about their capacity to advise students and their families. Anecdotally, this targeted approach to advice and training seems to be reducing the number of students withdrawing from some courses.

Learners are unclear on their career options and how to translate learning to practice during and after study.

The engagement identified that learners were not always clear about their career options, and that career information and advice should be available to learners at all stages of their learner journey, including the research, enrolment or studying phases and after course completion. It was found that learners, in particular adults, were not always certain where to obtain independent career information agnostic of provider. Research suggests that career counselling interventions for unemployed young adults, particularly counselling approaches with life design principles incorporated, enhanced the career adaptability and employability of study participants.¹⁹

Limited exposure to workplaces prior to embarking on a course of study can lead to a lack of informed course selection.

The engagement identified that undertaking work experience before enrolling in VET supports learner decision-making by helping learners make more informed choices. Work experience provides employers with recruitment opportunities and identifies potentially suitable employees before formal training or training contracts begin.



Work experience exists in many forms, including employer outreach, job shadowing, service learning, internships and school-based apprenticeships.²⁰ International analysis of individuals 'not in education, employment or training' (NEET) at age 19 to 24 found that those who participated in career talks, enterprise competitions or work experience were significantly more likely to be employed or in training than peers who did not. The more activities an individual recalled, the less likely were they to be NEET.²¹

Case Study 2

Peter Warren Automotive

Peter Warren is a NSW automotive company that offers a range of career opportunities and has an award-winning apprenticeship program. It was the 2021 Large Employer of the Year in both the NSW and Australian Training Awards.

Historically, the company has faced challenges in finding work-ready young people and that schools tend to prioritise higher education pathways over VET.

In 2019, Peter Warren Automotive adopted a new approach to attracting suitable apprentice candidates that included:

- appointing a Group Training Manager to liaise with apprenticeship network providers, schools and training services
- promoting automotive career pathways online
- advertising avenues to engage local candidates interested in automotive work
- a rigorous phone-based pre-screening for employment candidates
- work experience placements for candidates.

The company prioritised connecting with schools as a significant supply of candidates. They found that a dedicated Group Training Manager fostered a strong rapport with the local community, which improved access to talent and supported outcomes for potential apprentices and trainees.

After implementing these initiatives, and particularly the work experience placements, Peter Warren Automotive in 2019 reported the most successful recruitment period in its history, with a 90% retention rate.²²

Recommendation 1

Career and course information



Improve the equity and quality of career and course advice for all learner cohorts at all stages of their learner journey. This could include exposure to workplaces prior to enrolling in VET to support decision making.

Learner motivations and objectives should inform enrolment practices.

Engagement identified that there is often a misalignment between learner expectations, motivations or capabilities and the course in which they have enrolled. A learner's enrolment is a critical intervention point at which providers could take the opportunity to better understand an individual's motivations and purpose for study. More research is required on the potential impacts on completions and student satisfaction of course counselling at enrolment.

The provision of bespoke information and guidance at the point of enrolment on the appropriate function of VET as well as an individual's purpose for study, may assist in ensuring learners' needs are met. The functions of VET could be explained in the following terms:

- Pre-VET - preparation qualifications for initial VET
- Initial VET – entry-level (post-school) qualifications
- Continuing VET - post initial VET
- Higher-level VET - emerging as the mix of VET and higher education.

Interventions such as foundational or bridging courses or wrap-around supports could be implemented from the onset. Receiving support and guidance focused on achieving a completion or successful outcome, even before enrolment, will result in the learner making better informed decisions on the courses in which they enrol and with the supports they require in place increase their chances of completing their program and achieving a successful outcome.

Digital tools can be used to ascertain an individual's interests and motivations for study while offering course and career information and advice, as exhibited in Case Study 3.

Case Study 3

TAFE Queensland 'Discover My Career' tool

TAFE Queensland offers a 'Discover My Career' tool for career seekers and learners to assess their suitability for chosen fields.

The 'Discover My Career' work preference questionnaire is designed to identify how an individual works and the values that drive their decisions and beliefs, taking into consideration their personality traits, to give them an understanding of the career areas they may be best suited to.

The questionnaire is available in 40 languages and measures 175 work-related traits and characteristics, including interests, work values, tasks and work environment preferences and interpersonal preferences.

It ranks more than 1000 careers according to a learner's likes and dislikes, and covers education levels from certificates and traineeships to doctorate qualifications.

In addition to a 'Career Options' report, the tool also generates 'Greatest Strengths, Career Development' and 'Career Comparison' reports, informing participants of a course's potential suitability for them, with the aim of improving learner career and course selection.²³



Enrolment is also a critical intervention point to identify appropriate supports and ensure they are implemented from the onset of study. The literature review supported the need for upfront needs assessments and testing to identify strengths and improve student decision-making in the research and decision phases of the learner journey.²⁴ South Australia currently facilitates this through the 'Upfront Assessment of Need' process, detailed in Case Study 4.

Case Study 4

South Australian 'Upfront Assessment of Need'

As part of the enrolment process for government subsidised training in South Australia, RTOs assess learner needs through an 'Upfront Assessment of Need' (UAN). The UAN recognises that each learner has different strengths and needs, and allows for equitable access to subsidised training for all learner types.

The assessment explores learner goals, foundation skills and support services. RTOs work with the learner through the enrolment process to ensure the learner has the learning and personal supports to maximise opportunities for success.

The application of the UAN tool in South Australia has identified that about 12% of learners have foundation skills gaps. Learners who have no previous educational attainment are most likely to need additional support. Most learners require one to two bridging units and many have either a literacy or numeracy strength base. About 15% are identified as needing additional support from a case manager to assist with learning or personal issues.

A learner-centric enrolment process that offers course information and advice and identifies an individual's needs will contribute to learners completing their studies and achieving successful outcomes.

Recommendation 2

Enrolment practice



Improve enrolment practices to support better alignment to student interests, motivations, capabilities and needs.

Employers may require additional assistance to better support learners in work placements and apprenticeships, including with issues such as management style, cultural competence, the psychological safety of employees and implementing training plans.

Issues resulting from the employment relationship are collectively the primary reason for non-completion of apprenticeships and traineeships across developed nations.²⁵ A 2014 NCVET study found that 60% of those who do not complete apprenticeships drop out within the first year; , of which 20% drop out within the first 6 months. Other research suggests that employers' capacity to mentor, train and support apprentices, in particular, throughout their apprenticeship, often do not align with the expectations of apprentices for fairness, varied work, on-the-job training by a skilled tradesperson with strong mentoring skills, a 'good boss' and a safe workplace free from bullying.²⁶ This research concludes that enjoyment of work and pursuing other opportunities are secondary issues to the relationship with the employer.

Management style and the ability of employers to appropriately support apprentices and trainees is a major issue affecting the employer-apprentice relationship and heavily affects completion rates for this cohort.²⁷ The engagement also identified this as a concern among learners and employers, with GTOs in some instances bridging gaps by providing additional mentoring, support and pastoral care for employers and learners engaged through group training models. Programs that encompass a training element for employers, and particularly programs that focus on cohorts with additional barriers, have been found to help learners make a successful transition to the workplace,²⁸ and provide employers with the confidence and skills to provide a positive and supportive work environment.

Providing readily accessible support to employers who may require it, or actively seek it, will assist in fostering positive employment experiences for both the employer and learner. Research indicated that this occurs in pockets, but consideration should be given to making employer support available at common intervention points such as employer registration (for those jurisdictions who have it in place) or training contract commencement. Having both the employer and learner aware of, and committing to, the training plan will also assist in ensuring the roles and responsibilities for all parties in the employment relationship are clear. The role of apprenticeship network providers is crucial in this regard.

Recommendation 3 **Employer capability**



Increase industry and employer capability to support learners (before and during training) (including training plans).



Many learners who drop out lack advice and support to find alternate pathways and transfer learning between courses.

There is inevitable course attrition, which results from a multitude of factors. However, improved advice and support for learners looking to drop out may help them find other pathways which lead to successful study and employment outcomes.

The recent interim report released by the Australian Universities Accord (the Accord) found that navigating pathways in and across the tertiary education sector is a complicated process for learners.²⁹ The Accord reported that the information available to students is spread across disparate platforms, with linkages to occupational information and careers advice inconsistent, making it difficult for students to identify study and career opportunities.³⁰ While pathways between VET and higher education are out of scope for this project, the findings as they relate to challenges for learners navigating pathways are consistent with the concerns raised by stakeholders.

The Accord reported that the information available to students is spread across disparate platforms, with linkages to occupational information and careers advice inconsistent, making it difficult for students to identify study and career opportunities.³⁰ While pathways between VET and higher education are out of scope for this project, the findings as they relate to challenges for learners navigating pathways are consistent with the concerns raised by stakeholders.

There is an opportunity to better articulate and advise learners who are considering dropping out toward alternate VET pathways. This critical intervention point in the learner journey may become obvious through the learner self-identifying as considering dropping out, by their VET practitioner's identification, or the provider's Learner Management System. Helping learners identify opportunities for further study and credit transfer, particularly when they intend to engage in further study, will assist them in making more informed decisions.

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) facilitates learners receiving recognition of prior study and experience. However, the RPL process was identified in the engagement as a barrier for those seeking to gain formal qualifications who are already working in an industry, as well as those looking to transfer courses or re-commence and complete their qualifications (refer also to Recommendation 7).³¹ A respondent to the survey identified that 'often, courses are superseded and replaced by non-equivalent training products, and students who return to complete are unable to do so without extensive RPL assessment and gap training, which is a huge disincentive'.

Research has found that granting RPL and having their skills formally recognised can boost an individual's self-esteem and motivation for further study.³² However, learner knowledge of RPL is limited, with those learners who are aware of it often deterred by the process.³³ Further findings pertaining to RPL delivery can be found in the VET system and delivery chapter.

Recommendation 4 Pathways advice



Improve advice on alternate pathways, recognition of prior learning and credit transfer.

VET system and delivery

The VET system and its delivery are fundamental to providing the skilled workforce Australia needs to prosper, now and in the future.³⁴ The VET system should consider factors extending beyond the studying stage to the whole learner journey and experience with VET, from before enrolment through to completion and beyond. Ensuring VET products are fit for purpose, adaptive, and align with the needs and expectations of all stakeholders will assist in achieving positive outcomes.

The quality of delivery, as well as ensuring interventions to assist learners are evidence-based and systematic, will also deliver positive outcomes.

Course materials and design

Course materials must be relevant to job roles and industry needs.

Fundamental to industry confidence in the VET system is the relevance and adaptability of course materials to job roles and industry needs. Recent data on employer satisfaction with accredited training shows that 74.3% were satisfied with vocational qualifications, 74.2% with training provided to apprentices and trainees, and 78.7% with other nationally recognised training.³⁵

While satisfaction with VET delivery is high, there remains room for improvement, particularly when the reasons for employer dissatisfaction with accredited training are considered. These include that the relevant skills were not taught, that the training was of a poor quality or low standard, and that there was not enough focus on practical skills.³⁶ This sentiment was echoed by industry and employer respondents in the primary engagement conducted for the purposes of this report.

Improvements to course design, including being responsive to industry need, would have a two-fold benefit in supporting students into relevant courses and increasing collaboration with industry and employers. Australian governments are currently undertaking industry engagement reforms, recognising that stronger industry leadership and engagement are critical if the VET sector is to respond rapidly to economic transitions, contribute to a resilient workforce and provide confidence to employers that its graduates have the right skills for jobs. These reforms aim to empower industry to drive VET reforms and ensure learners can access the right courses and skills at the right time.³⁷

Evidence suggests that incorporating experiential learning into course design can have a positive impact on completion rates. An example in England involves a community college that implemented an experiential learning activity in an accounting business course. When comparing graduation rates between experiential and non-experiential learners, the college found that experiential participants achieved better grades and were more likely to complete.³⁸



Along with better industry representation and input into course design and the VET system more broadly, it is important to ensure that course design reflects student experience data and patterns of behaviour. There are pockets of good practice where this already occurs; for example, an RTO respondent to the national survey outlined that their RTO has a 'VET Courses of Concern Strategy', '...combining completion rate data with student satisfaction data in order to identify courses where interventions may be required. The process by which this is done is if the completion rate falls below 75%, and/or satisfaction rate falls below 85%, these courses are identified for further analysis and interventions are actioned'.

Preliminary NCVER findings discussed in Recommendation 10 indicate that about half of all qualifications had completion rates below 50%. Consideration should be given to whether good practice strategies, such as the 'VET Courses of Concern Strategy' discussed above, could be adopted more broadly.

Recommendation 5 **Evidence-based course design**



Evidence-based approach to course design that draws on data of student experiences, patterns of behaviour and industry expectations.

Pathways for learners between school and VET are unclear and difficult to navigate and can result in disengagement with learning.

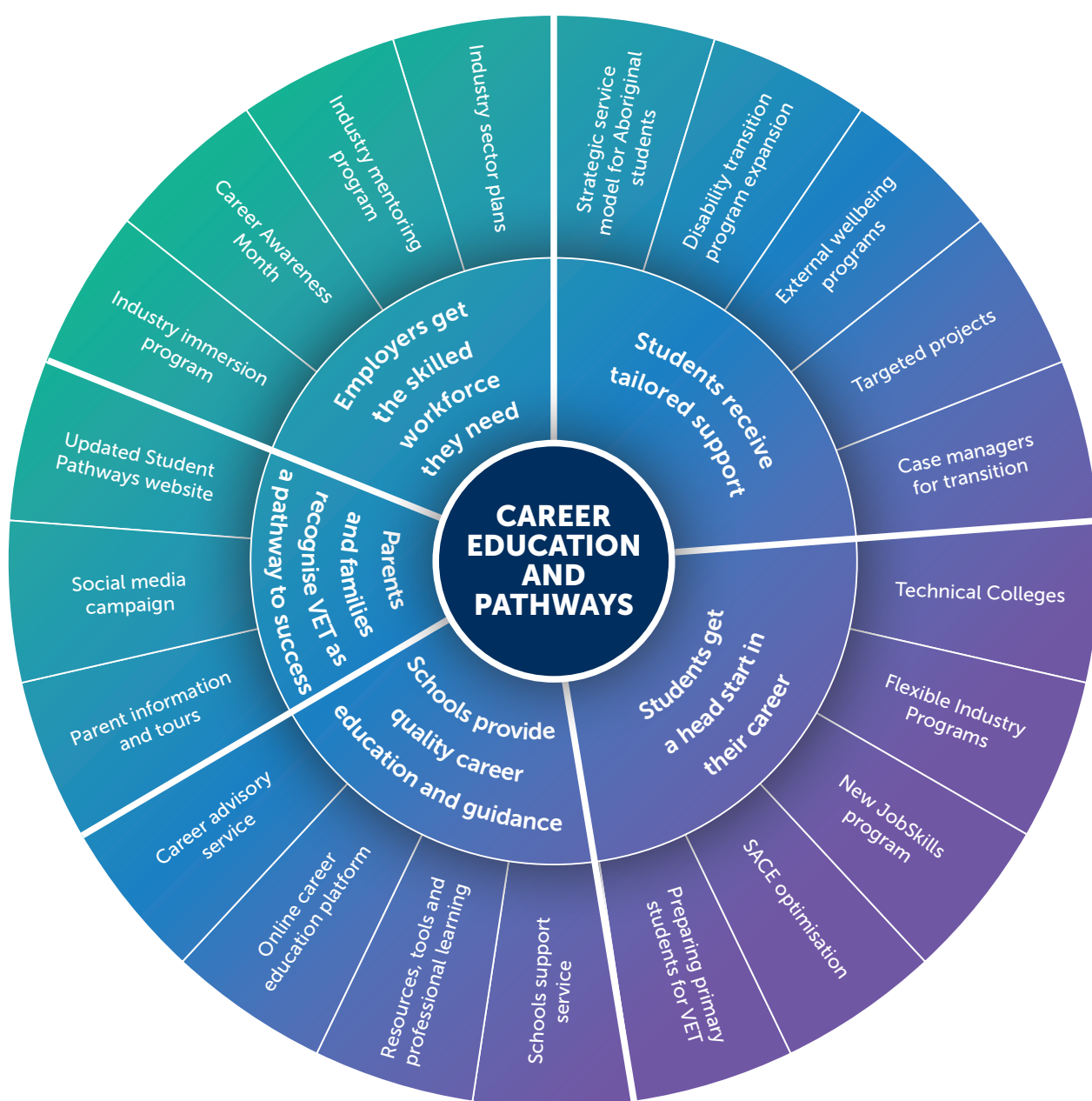
VET for School programs can play a crucial role in meeting Australia's future workforce demands. Approaches to these programs and the application of flexible learning practices differ between jurisdictions, with wide variation in the levels of partnership and engagement with industry and the capacity of individual schools to support desired outcomes.⁴⁰

VET for School programs have a broad range of aims, including increasing student retention in school, providing a 'safety net' for students at risk of dropping out, preparing students to transition to work, developing student skills, and exploring career options.⁴¹ Various entry-level VET products are offered to achieve these purposes and often constitute VET for School enrolments. Evidence suggests, however, that these programs are not effective in providing pathways into full-time, sustainable employment.⁴²

Additionally, while there is limited longitudinal research on post-school outcomes of VET for School programs, there is consensus that many elements may not be fit for purpose.⁴³ Trying to fulfil so many purposes has contributed to a poor alignment of school VET curriculum with career pathways and labour market opportunities.⁴⁴ Respondents to the national survey indicated that pathways between school, VET and workforce transition are increasingly difficult to navigate, potentially resulting in disengagement with learning and poor learner outcomes. Further research could be undertaken to better understand VET for School program completion rates and post-school outcomes.

Jurisdictions could consider reviewing the alignment between VET for School and career pathways, in addition to providing VET Coordinators and school career counsellors with specialised training to improve information and advice provision on VET pathways. Data and other evidence are also required to better understand post-school outcomes for VET for School learners and improve course design. South Australia recently released the 'Career Education and Pathways Strategy' for school students. It aims to improve the education, training, and skills outcomes of South Australian students and includes good practice initiatives as illustrated in Image 3.⁴⁵

Image 3 – Initiatives of the South Australian Career Education and Pathways Strategy



Source: Career Education and Pathways Strategy, South Australia, 2023

Schools should prioritise the completion of VET for school students by fostering strong partnerships with local industry and other training and education providers and facilitating interesting and relevant opportunities for their students.⁴⁶ Additionally, VET student respondents from the South Australian forum identified that a lack of support in balancing full-time school and VET is a barrier to completing VET studies. To help students complete their VET studies and successfully transition to further study or into the workforce, schools could provide information to support greater alignment with the students' motivations for study and future career aspirations, implement timetable flexibility and offer additional supports, such as those identified in Case Study 5.

Case Study 5

School approach to VET improves learner outcomes

Woodvale Secondary College

Some Australian schools have demonstrated good practice in improving outcomes for their students. One is Woodvale Secondary College, a co-educational, independent public school in Perth, WA. The college has a long history of quality VET program delivery, actively promoting it as an equal and valid pathway for students. It has a dedicated VET Centre and College Careers Program to help students engage with career options and learn about their individual strengths as a component of career decision making.⁴⁷ Year 11 and 12 students undertaking VET may adopt a flexible school schedule by attending a workplace each Thursday and undertaking assessments directly with employers. Two students from the college have won Beazley Medal: VET awards.⁴⁸

Hunter Trade College

In NSW, the Hunter Trade College is an independent senior school and RTO that in 2021 offered 23 nationally recognised qualifications in automotive, construction, electrotechnology and metal engineering. At that point, about 2,255 students had participated in the school's program since 2006, experiencing a blend of general, vocational and workplace learning that includes as much as 10 times the work experience required by the Higher School Certificate (HSC) industry framework.

Students can graduate with an HSC, an entry-level vocational qualification, or several units of competency required for an apprenticeship program, with many continuing to full apprenticeships or post-school employment. In 2021, the college won an Australian Training Award for its school pathways into VET training and careers.⁴⁹

Recommendation 6

School and VET alignment



Improve alignment between school curriculum and vocational pathways.



The Recognition of Prior Learning process is difficult to navigate and may deter learners with relevant experience and skills from further study.

The RPL process has many benefits and can help improve completion rates. However, research indicated the current process is difficult to navigate, acting as a deterrent to both learners and providers. RPL can benefit learners by reducing the amount of formal training required to attain a qualification, enabling skill recognition for individuals with limited formal qualifications or training, re-engaging individuals who have left formal education, and improving the motivation and self-esteem of individuals who receive formal recognition of their skills.⁵⁰ Additionally, RPL benefits industry and employers by reducing the time employees are away from the workplace attending formal training.⁵¹

However, because of the time, expertise, and associated cost in conducting RPL, providers are often deterred from offering it and prefer alternative formal training processes.⁵² Other challenges cited by providers regarding the implementation of the RPL process include:

- concerns about the quality of some RPL, resulting in a lack of confidence in outcomes
- RPL assessments are bespoke to individuals, requiring assessment skills and frameworks differing from those used in traditional assessment
- some providers perceiving RPL as having higher risks than traditional training, as assessment usually occurs over a smaller period and using limited evidence sources.⁵³

Provider hesitancy is compounded by limited learner awareness of RPL and learners' concerns about its complexity.⁵⁴ Consideration should be given to conducting further research into contemporary, good practice RPL processes.

Alignment between the skills needs of learners and the design of course credentials could be improved.

Survey respondents identified that learners often enrol in study to upskill or broaden their skills to gain employment or improve employment outcomes, and may not need to complete full qualifications. The completion of units of competency, skill sets, and other short-form credentials is useful for fulfilling this purpose. Fit-for-purpose training as ascertained at the time of enrolment will assist learners to complete successfully (refer to Recommendation 2). Improved course design as discussed under Recommendation 5 will also assist in ensuring short-form credentials are created based on patterns of learner behaviour and the skills needs of industry.

Recommendation 7 **Reflect learner skills and experience**



Course design to better reflect the skills and experience of learners seeking to broaden or increase their skills.

Delivery

A lack of flexible, innovative, and bespoke delivery practices results in learners not being able to complete their studies.

A key pillar of high-quality, student-centred VET course delivery is an emphasis on teaching practices that are flexible, innovative, and bespoke. Research on quality in the VET sector shows that RTOs identified the use of '...a range of different teaching and assessment methodologies and strategies and flexible delivery options to accommodate student preferences and needs' as being an essential element of quality delivery.⁵⁵ Learner respondents in the engagement cited a lack of flexibility in delivery and the absence of support for individuals undertaking flexible delivery modes as barriers to completion.

Online learning is an increasingly valuable method of flexible delivery. It enables learners to engage with learning content at a time and pace which suits their individual needs. Research on good practice in online delivery suggests the best examples of online delivery exhibit 5 main features:

- simplicity, clarity and consistency
- the development of varied and engaging learning material
- clear communication and engagement
- flexibility
- support for learners.⁵⁶

The adoption by providers of good practice online delivery and supports will help learners access flexible learning options in a supportive environment. However, online delivery is not the only method of flexibility. Also suggested as good practice are blended interactive program models that combine online theory delivery, trainer videos, interactive tutorials and individual or group focus sessions. Other examples include offering flexibility within blocks of training and providing bespoke pathways and timeframes for slower and faster learners. Case Study 6 provides examples of delivery practices that improve training outcomes.

Case Study 6

Delivery practices improving training outcomes

Master Builders Association of Victoria

The Master Builders Association of Victoria found that the best training outcomes are achieved when courses are developed in consultation with employers and learners.

Learners identified that intensive study was difficult when balancing work and other commitments. To support quality learning outcomes and provide learners with the flexibility to manage their learning and life commitments, the diploma course was lengthened to 95 weeks, operating on alternate weeks and outside of business hours, with a portion of course work undertaken in students' own time.⁵⁷

Box Hill Institute

In 2022, the Box Hill Institute won an Australian Training Award for Innovation in VET for its construction and welding students and its Advanced Welder Training Centre, which uses augmented reality and mixed reality tools in training delivery. The centre was developed in collaboration with Weld Australia, the peak body for the welding industry in Australia. The centre and its associated programs will contribute to upskilling the Australian workforce to meet future skill shortages and allows students to master best practice systems without the environmental risks and while reducing the waste generated from the use of real materials.⁵⁸

Recommendation 8

Learning practice



Offer flexible, innovative, and bespoke training and learning practices which are learner focussed and meet learner needs.

The quality of training and support influences a learner's ability to complete.

Stakeholders are entitled to expect the delivery of VET in a manner which is inclusive, high quality, and responsive to industry standards. Despite this, little is known about how the quality of training directly affects learner drop-out rates. Measuring the quality of VET delivery is complicated by factors such as the different ways 'quality' is perceived by stakeholder groups (such as outcomes or value for money), and the external factors that may affect quality and are beyond the control of the training provider (such as policy and regulatory frameworks).⁶⁰

Additionally, research suggests that while various measures are used to evaluate the quality of delivery at national, state and VET provider levels, '...there are concerns about the extent to which these measures capture the complexity and diversity of VET delivery contexts, or reflect the important aspects of delivery quality, those that make the difference for students and employers'.⁶¹

Nevertheless, stakeholders who participated in the engagement suggested that the quality of delivery, and the responsiveness of delivery to industry needs, are important elements in increasing completion rates. Research has identified that key principles underpinning the quality of VET include:

- transformational teaching that helps students achieve
- student-centred teaching practices that support and encourage students to learn
- fit-for-purpose teaching
- evolutionary teaching that can adapt to changing stakeholder and industry needs.⁶²

Inclusive practices in enrolment and delivery for learners with additional barriers to studying is also critical to assisting these learners in completing their studies. Resources exist to support providers in adopting inclusive practices, although this is an area where further research and information may be beneficial. A good practice example is the development of the Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training (ADCET) 'Guidelines for Inclusive Enrolment Practices in Vocational Education and Training', commissioned by the Australian Government, which outlines inclusive enrolment practices for individuals with a disability, including templates for implementation.⁶³

Recommendation 9 **Quality and responsive delivery**



VET offerings are delivered in a manner which is inclusive, high-quality, and responsive to industry standards.

System settings and measurement of outcomes

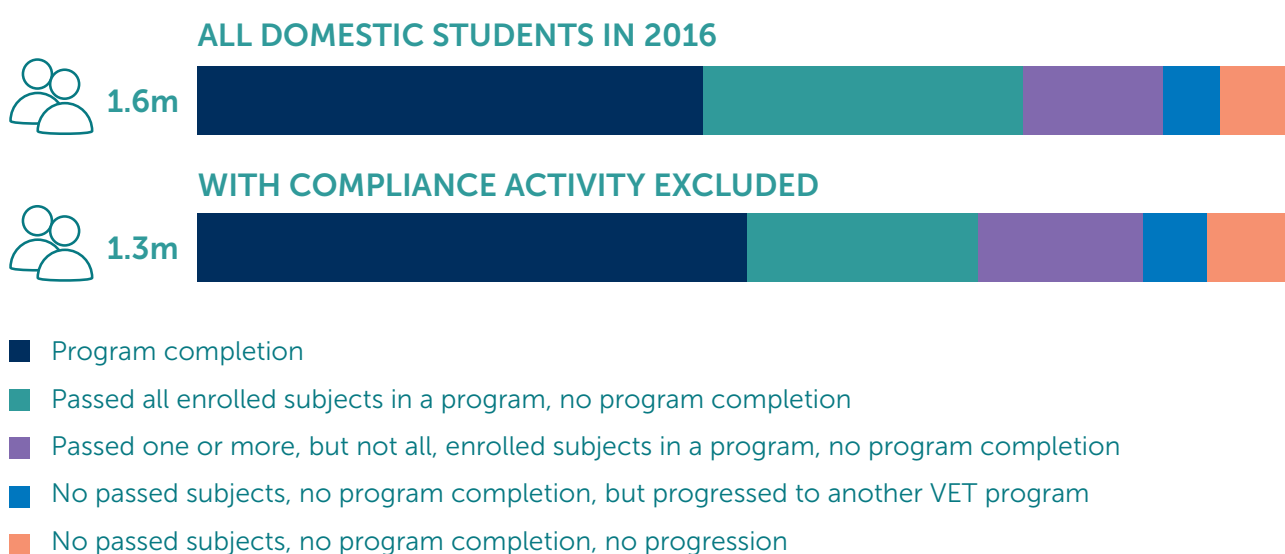
System settings significantly affect learner choice and provider enrolment behaviour.

Preliminary investigations undertaken by the NCVER and governments revealed that compliance activity, ie where people need to gain or update their skills for regulatory requirements, is potentially having an impact on completion rates. As evidenced in green by Graph 1 below, a high proportion of learners (approximately 30% of the 1.6 million domestic students who commenced VET programs in 2016) passed all the subjects of the program in which they were enrolled, but did not achieve completion of that program.

Further preliminary investigations found that when compliance activity is removed the proportion of 1.3 million learners with program completions (dark blue) increases while the proportion who passed all enrolled subjects with no program completion (green) decreases.

This suggests some students may be enrolling in full programs for the sole purpose of completing selected compliance activity only, which combined with data quality issues is potentially affecting program completion rates.

Graph 1 – Impact of compliance activity on completion rates



Source: NCVER, total VET activity 2016-2021 (preliminary findings)

Table 1 outlines popular subject bundles for part-completers. Preliminary findings support the hypothesis that some part-completers are likely enrolling in programs with the intent of only completing a particular subject or bundle of subjects. This highlights a need to better understand the enrolment patterns and motivations of program part-completers and improve the measurement of short-course completion accordingly.

Table 1 – Popular subjects for part-completers

SUBJECTS/BUNDLES	#PROGRAMS	PROGRAMS (>=5% OF TOTAL ENROLMENTS IN THIS BUNDLE)
Prepare to Work Safely in the Construction Industry (CPCCWHS1001)	54	Certificate I in Construction (CPC10120) - 93%
Safely access the rail corridor (TLIF0020)	7	Certificate II in Track Protection (TLI21921) - 65% Certificate II in Rail Infrastructure (TLI27121) - 31%
Provide responsible service of alcohol (SITHFAB002)	25	Skillset - Responsible Service of Alcohol (SITSS00055) - 48% Certificate II in Hospitality (SIT20316) - 20%
Work safely at heights (RIIWH5204E)	24	Certificate II in Civil Construction Plant Operations (RII30820) - 45% Certificate II in Surface Extraction Operations (RII20220) - 27%
Licence to operate a forklift truck (TLILIC0003)	34	Certificate III in Supply Chain Operations (TLI30321) - 35% Certificate III in Dogging (CPC30511) - 16%
Provide First Aid (HLTAID011)	124	Certificate III in Individual Support (CHC33015) - 10% Certificate III in Surface Extraction Operations (RII30120) - 9%

Source: NCVET, Total VET Activity 2016-2021 (preliminary findings)

In addition, preliminary analysis of short-course part-completion data (training package skill sets and accredited courses) suggests that many learners selected as short course part-completers in the NCVET National Student Outcomes Survey (2022, preliminary) reported that they had completed their courses. NCVET analysed the training.gov.au website for 'units of competency' requirements for each of these short courses and then merged data to determine the actual course 'completion' status of these survey respondents. This analysis found that about 85% of individuals who claimed to have completed their short courses had indeed completed all the subjects that comprised that course. This suggests that some providers may not be reporting short-course program completions accurately. Table 2 summarises the top 10 short courses where under-reporting of completions is high.

Table 2 - Top 10 short courses where under-reporting of completions is high

TYPE OF TRAINING	PROGRAM	SUBJECTS IN PROGRAM
Accredited course	Course in the management of asthma risks and emergencies in the workplace	1
Training package skill set	Infection control skill set	1
Training package skill set	Responsible service of alcohol	1
Training package skill set	Agricultural chemical skill set	2
Accredited course	Course in asbestos awareness	1
Accredited course	Course in the Australasian inter-service incident management system	1
Training package skill set	Food safety supervision	2
Training package skill set	Infection control skill set (retail)	1
Training package skill set	Food handling	1
Training package skill set	Perform CPR	1

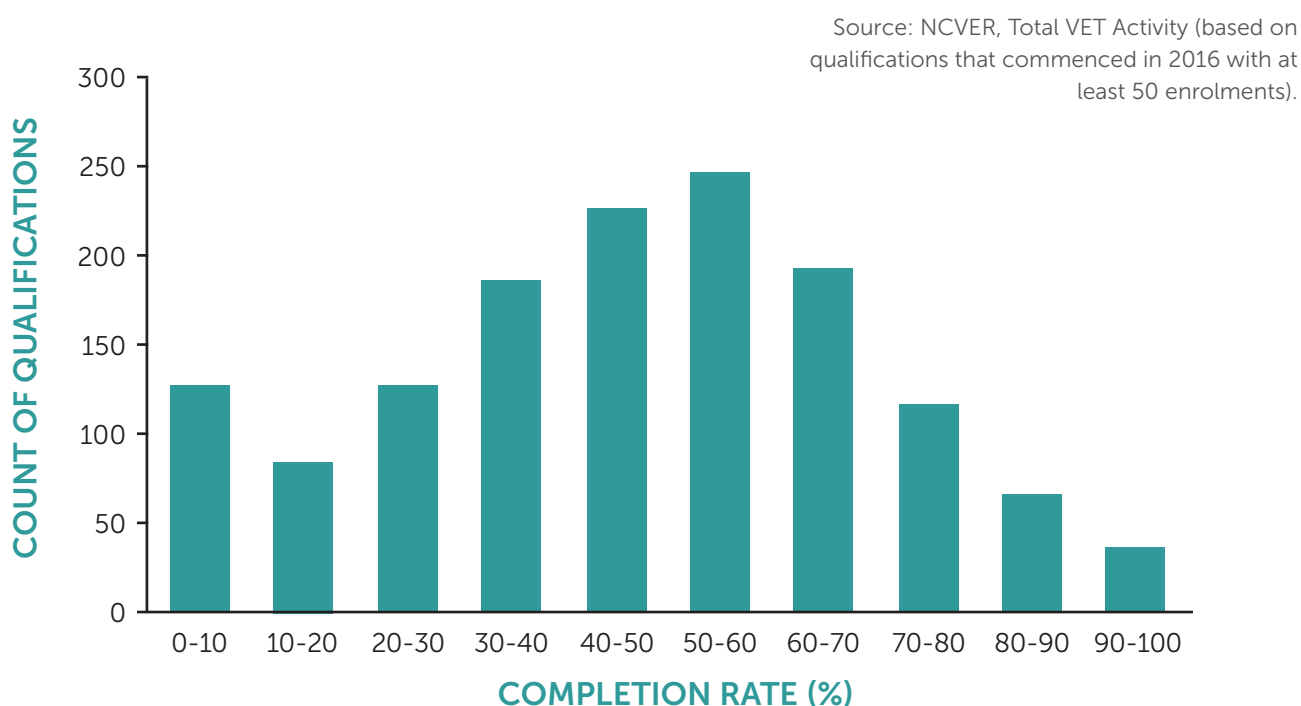
Source: NCVET, Student Outcomes 2022 (preliminary)

Data collection on completions and outcomes provides an incomplete and potentially skewed picture.

These findings indicate a need to improve data on short-course completions. The NCVET is currently investigating options for reporting short-course completions based on subject completion, with the aim of publishing these findings in the second half of 2024 (the Good Practice Guide to be developed will provide further detail).

Substantial discrepancies in completion rates across qualifications have also been identified. Graph 2 illustrates that about half of all qualifications started in 2016 had a completion rate below 50%. Further investigation could be conducted, particularly in qualifications in the lowest and highest percentiles, to ascertain likely causes for associated completion rates. Alternatively, a 'VET Courses of Concern Strategy', as discussed in Recommendation 5, could be employed to identify courses where interventions may be required.

Graph 2 – Completion rates across qualifications



While these preliminary findings are insightful, there is an overall need to improve understanding of program part-completers to determine and target appropriate policy interventions. A range of data projects have been proposed, all of which will be referenced accordingly in the Good Practice Guide under Recommendation 10.

The measurement of apprentice and trainee completion rates follows contracts rather than individuals.

An analysis of apprenticeship and traineeship completion rates was undertaken to explore opportunities to report on outcomes of individual learners, rather than the current approach of reporting on contracts of training. This approach would more accurately reflect student outcomes and reduce over-reporting of cancellations when an individual moves from one employer to another.

The NCVER provides quarterly data releases on apprentice and trainee completion rates based on contracts of training. As Graph 3 illustrates, there are instances where contract completion rates and individual completion rates vary by as much as 3 percentage points. It was concluded that the use of the Unique Student Identifier (USI) would be more accurate in measuring completion rates. It was also identified that there would be merit in conducting an examination of specific cohorts, such as occupations with high contract attrition rates and high numbers of contract recommencements, particularly among trade and community and personal service occupations.

Graph 3 – Discrepancy of apprentice and trainee completion rates



Source: NCVER, Completion Rates for Apprentices and Trainees 2021 (2016 and 2017 commencements)

While these preliminary findings suggest mechanisms that could improve the accuracy of completion rate measurement in the short term, it is acknowledged that other approaches could be adopted in the medium to long term, such as a greater focus on the measurement of learner outcomes and transitions between courses and education sectors to better aid in the understanding of VET. These could include wages, career trajectory and other VET learner longitudinal studies, to be detailed further in the Good Practice Guide.

Recommendation 10 System settings



Ensure system settings enhance learner experience with training, and align with the needs of industry and the economy more broadly.

Recommendation 11 Measuring outcomes



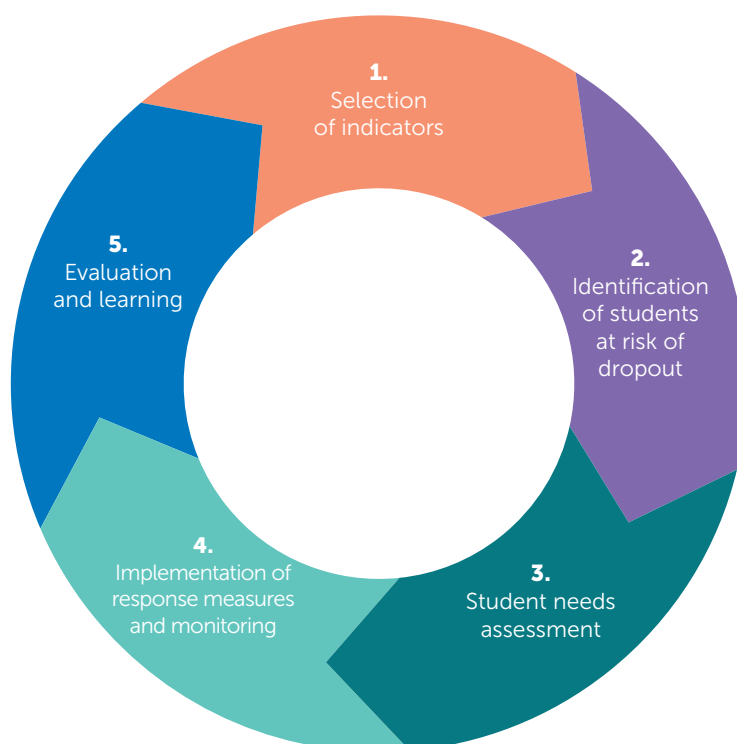
Improve approaches to capturing and measuring completion rates and understanding of learner outcomes, including career trajectory and wages.

Limited data on student behaviour hampers providers' capacity to identify and support learners at risk of dropping out.

Data on student behaviour during the studying phase of the learner journey can be lacking, often making it difficult for providers to identify learners in need of support or at risk of dropping out. While there exists many pockets of good practice in this area, the successful identification of learners requiring support or at risk of dropping out varies by provider. The method in which this is done is often not automated, with the VET workforce often required to attempt to identify these students and put in place any necessary interventions to assist the learner in continuing their studies through to completion.

Provider Learner Management Systems (LMS) are an increasingly valuable tool for capturing learner data, informing providers' decision-making and contributing to evidence-based strategies and interventions to enhance the quality of learning and teaching. LMS could help with the implementation of 'early warning systems', like those used in schools, whereby providers select indicators to identify students at risk of dropping out, conduct a student needs assessment, implement response measures while monitoring progress, and evaluate.⁶⁴ This process is depicted in Image 4.

Image 4 – Early warning systems



Source: UNICEF, Early Warning Systems for Students at Risk of Dropping Out, 2017

The good practice example from TAFE Queensland in Case Study 7 illustrates how an LMS can contribute to identifying learners at risk of dropping out so that interventions may be considered and implemented to assist the learner through to completion.

Case Study 7

TAFE Queensland's Learner Management System

TAFE Queensland has implemented an 'Academically "at risk" Student System' that uses data to inform a live dashboard to track individual students and cohort groups in real time, to improve completions and student outcomes.

The dashboard provides an alert function for educators to become promptly aware of learners who may need intervention strategies. The system allows for issues to be addressed quickly and improves the chances of learners remaining on track with their learning and completing their courses.

The dashboard system includes information relating to:

- individual student profiles
- disability status and related supports
- learners under age 18
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) learners
- language, literacy and numeracy benchmarks
- learner completion of online orientation
- learner interactions with the LMS
- learner interactions with the course content
- assessment status (on time or late).

Learners requiring specialised support are referred to appropriate internal support services including:

- referrals to internal disability services (availability of tailored learning, and other support aids)
- Aboriginal Student Support Officers (for cultural and other support)
- teaching resources for at-risk learners
- learning support available to those with low language, literacy, numeracy skills
- tailored learning for under 18 learners
- how to engage with learners who are not accessing course content or actioning assessments, to identify the reasons and apply relevant supports.

Feedback on the program suggests educators have better awareness of student need and information to support learners, as well as being able to better identify their own knowledge gaps to upskill appropriately. Future analysis will be undertaken to overlay data and outcomes from the dashboard system with local completion rates.

Recommendation 12

Identify at-risk learners



Improve identification of learners at risk of non-completion based on known risk factors.

Learner characteristics

The need for bespoke and targeted learner supports at all stages of the learner journey, recognising diverse learner characteristics and needs, emerged strongly in the primary engagement. Stakeholders suggested that tailored, wrap-around supports are crucial to addressing a wide spectrum of learner barriers, including for those who face additional barriers or have complex needs. The early identification of these characteristics, coupled with good practice implementation of wrap-around supports and follow-up, will assist in increasing completion rates for these learners. The implementation of these supports should extend into the employment relationship.

Certain learner characteristics increase the risk of non-completion.

The need for an inclusive approach and for support for cohorts who may face additional barriers was apparent in the engagement and the literature. Stakeholders emphasised the need for customised and culturally sensitive approaches to address the challenges often faced by learners in these cohorts. VET completions literature and data highlight that some learners are at increased risk for non-completion,⁶⁵ including:

- First Nations learners
- learners from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds
- learners with a disability or facing mental health challenges
- learners from low socioeconomic backgrounds
- learners in regional or remote areas
- learners who do not initially intend to complete training to achieve identified outcomes
- learners' whose course expectations misalign with actual experiences
- learners who face foundation skills barriers (language, literacy, numeracy and digital skills).

While some interventions may be suitable for all learners, others may target specific learner characteristics, such as the type of learner, individual reasons for learning, and the learner's place within a priority student cohort as described in Table 3 below (noting there may be instances where a combination or learner types and/or priority cohorts may be present).

Table 3 – Learner characteristics

LEARNER TYPES		
School students	Apprentices and trainees	Adult learners
PRIORITY COHORTS		
First Nations people	Initial VET qualification	Young people not engaged in education, employment or training
People with a disability	People from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds	Those in non-traditional fields of study
People with mental health challenges	Regional or remote learners	

Learners may not be identified as being at risk of non-completion.

Learners who contributed to the engagement reported that the identification of and follow-up with learners requiring support is an area for improvement. They noted that the lack of support is a key barrier to completion, recommending that more logistical support, guidance about where to obtain advice, and assistance with individual needs such as boosting literacy and numeracy skills would be beneficial.

This reinforces the value of upfront needs assessments and testing to identify strengths, to improve student decision-making in the research and decision phases of the learner journey.⁶⁶ As outlined in Recommendation 2, the identification of these needs at the time of enrolment, as is the process in South Australia through the 'Upfront Assessment of Need', is critical (see Case Study 4). Data demonstrates that learners who enrol in foundation skills programs concurrently with other VET programs are more likely to complete nationally recognised VET programs than those who enrol in foundation skills programs only (before enrolling in a recognised VET program).⁶⁷

Improvements to tailored supports will contribute to higher completion rates.

The learners' feedback emphasises supports should be customised to the needs of the individual learner. NCVET research indicates that learners strongly believe that '...support services have an important impact on their success in learning and in enabling them to overcome obstacles to learning'.⁶⁸ VET teachers also reported that '... increased retention rates and completion rates were the direct result of the provision of appropriate support to learners'.⁶⁹ The research concluded that key indicators of effective learner support are:

- evidence that learners are valued
- having the right individuals in key positions
- a planned, systematic and funded approach to learner support
- support for learners in training
- a formal induction/orientation process
- support from senior management
- incentives for learners
- an open system with access for all
- everyone seen as a learner and a trainer
- a critical ratio of experienced people to foster learning
- organisational support for trainers
- embedding learner support in training
- a flexible learner-centred approach
- a clear single communication point
- co-operative partnerships between trainers and workplace staff.⁷⁰

Research suggests that supporting learners who experience additional barriers is successful when it is an institution-wide commitment.⁷¹ This indicates that providers with defined processes and initiatives, rather than those relying on ad-hoc practices, will likely have more success in supporting cohorts with additional barriers. This research also concludes that while customised support is necessary for learners in a wide range of cohorts, CALD learners and learners with low levels of prior educational attainment are particularly in need of bespoke support.⁷²

There are already many areas of good practice to draw upon in relation to learner support. A participant at the South Australian forum cited an instance where a young apprentice in engineering was experiencing difficulties adapting to a noisy workplace environment due to an autism spectrum disorder. The employer worked with this learner to find an alternative placement in an ICT-related field and assisted them to pursue a diploma level qualification in ICT. Case study 8 outlines another good practice example of how an individual with additional barriers was supported during their learning.

Case Study 8

TAFE NSW – Learner engagement

TAFE NSW provides services to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and communities to access and participate in VET by providing learning experiences that are culturally appropriate and connected to cultural values, relationship, and knowledge. Services include pre-training and post-enrolment support, facilitating pathways to employment by preparing students to be job ready and mentoring and case management.

In one example, individual learner support provided to an Aboriginal student enrolled in a barbering course has greatly assisted the student to remain engaged and progress in their course. The teacher identified that the learner was behind on assessments and, while excelling at the practical components, had difficulty completing the theory components of the course. In consultation with the Aboriginal Student Support Officer and teacher, TAFE NSW implemented adjustments to reduce the number of assessments completed online by providing knowledge assessments in a paper-based format. An Educational Support Officer helped with theory content in class and TAFE NSW liaised with the employer to facilitate allocation of time to complete assessments. This resulted in the learner successfully completing four assessments.

TAFE NSW provided further support through additional visits from the Aboriginal Student Support Officer and the learner has been made aware of TAFE NSW counselling services and services available in the wider community.

Mentoring and pastoral care arrangements are not applied across the broader VET sector.

Mentoring and pastoral care arrangements are useful support arrangements which provide additional and ongoing support for learners. The provision of this additional and ongoing support has been found to have a positive effect on apprentice and trainee completion rates in particular.⁷³ However, mentoring and pastoral care approaches are not applied consistently across the broader VET sector. The ability for learners, particularly those not engaged in workplace learning models, to access mentoring from industry professionals and pastoral care from their providers should be considered in the context of good practice to increase completion rates given the positive impact it has upon apprenticeship and traineeship models.

Recommendation 13

Wrap around support



Improve identification and implementation of wrap-around student supports.

Maintaining a positive employment relationship, built on mutual understanding of obligations, is critical to completion.

Creating and maintaining a positive, collaborative, and engaging employment relationship, built on mutual understanding of stakeholder obligations, is of fundamental importance to retention and completion in employment-based training models. As outlined in Recommendation 3, issues that emerge from the employment relationship are together the primary reason for non-completion of apprenticeships and traineeships across developed nations.⁷⁴ Research suggests that learners in employment-based training models are more likely to develop a positive employment relationship if the following elements are present:

- varied, meaningful and increasingly challenging work
- on-the-job training provided by a skilled and experienced staff member who can mentor the learner through skills acquisition
- adequate supervision, with increasing flexibility and autonomy
- competency-based pay and progression based on skills and work performance and recognition for achievements and contributions
- an employer and superiors who treat the learner as a valued employee
- regular and transparent communications between the learner, employer, colleagues and the provider
- a positive workplace culture that prevents bullying and ensures safety.⁷⁵

Case studies 9 and 10 demonstrate how good practice can be adopted by a range of employers and within a single organisation.

Case Study 9

Housing Industry Association

The Housing Industry Association (HIA) developed a program to improve the retention of apprentices within its industries and support them to completion.

HIA offered support and encouragement to the participating apprentices, providing advice and information about pathways, career and skill options, and support to overcome barriers and issues.

HIA employed more than 30 mentors across Australian states and territories to provide mentoring services to participating apprentices.

Each participant entered into an Individual Mentoring Program with the provider and the Australian Government, receiving an average 6 mentoring support hours.

Introductory sessions built trust and explained program offerings, and within time further details were added to participants' mentoring plans about information, topics and goals.

HIA reported that the 2-year program was highly successful, achieving a retention rate of 84% for 3773 apprentices mentored during that time. In addition to this retention achievement, the program has provided insight into the thoughts of apprentices, in particular young people, transitioning to mainstream work environments and post-school training.

Case Study 10

BAE Systems

BAE Systems provides career and education opportunities including work experience, internships and apprenticeships/traineeships.

Factors supporting high completion rates identified by BAE Systems include:

- taking a learner-centred approach and providing clarity on roles and responsibilities
- a holistic support approach placing apprentice welfare and progress at the centre (including effective skills coaching on a personal basis)
- apprenticeship program plans to ensure apprentices nearing completion are prepared, mandatory qualifications are completed, and timelines are understood
- effective relationships with external providers
- adopting a continuous improvement approach, with learnings considered from each program cycle and improvements identified for future cycles
- regular engagement with apprentices and mechanisms for facilitating the apprentice voice.

Regular engagement with apprentices and mechanisms for facilitating the apprentice voice.

Training plans also provide useful mechanisms to ensure all parties to the employment relationship are aware of their responsibilities. Research suggests that stricter implementation of training plans leads to higher-quality training and learning outcomes.⁷⁶ Research demonstrated that training plans facilitate increased communication between parties, particularly in relation to training and assessment.⁷⁷

Other studies revealed a common mismatch in shared knowledge and explicit obligations between parties to the training plan, including '...their knowledge of the training plan's contents and how it works, the rights of the apprentice to equity in negotiating the training plan content, and the rights of the apprentice to early release from their training contract through the provision of competency-based completion'.⁷⁸

Recommendation 14

Employment relationship



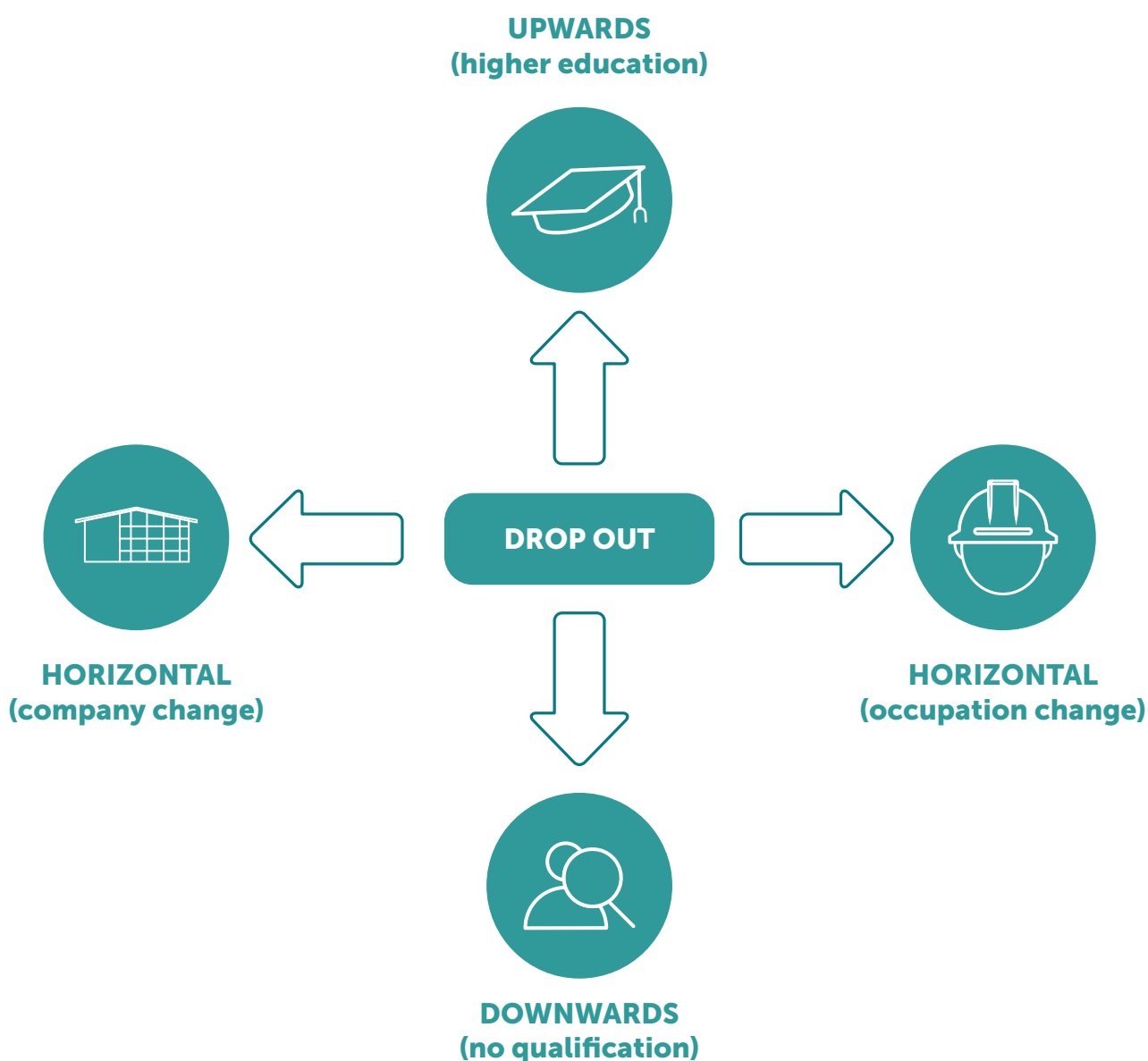
Ensure regular communication, engagement, and support for all parties of the employment relationship (including improvements to training plans).

Support for learners at risk of dropping out can be enhanced.

International research suggests the drop-out direction of learners may be useful in ascertaining whether a positive outcome, such as moving to further training or employment, have been achieved. However, there is limited literature regarding different dropout directions or insights on differing causes for these directions.⁷⁹

A recent study examining 562 German trainees working as industrial management assistants distinguished four different drop-out directions, summarised in Image 5.⁸⁰ An 'upwards' dropout is illustrated as attending further education outside of VET, a 'horizontal' dropout is shown as vocational reorientation, such as starting an apprenticeship in a different occupation, and a 'downwards' dropout is a final withdrawal from VET, remaining unemployed or working in unskilled jobs.⁸¹

Image 5 – Drop-out pathways



Source: M. Krotz and V. Deutscher, 'Drop-out in Dual VET: Why we Should Consider the Drop-out Direction when Analysing Drop-out', 2022



The study found that training quality, particularly the social involvement while in training, plays a role in all drop-out directions, but particularly in relation to horizontal drop-out intentions. The prior educational attainment level of the learner was found to play a decisive role in the upward and downward drop-out directions.⁸²

As discussed in Recommendations 2 and 12, the early identification of learners at risk of dropping out may enable interventions including supports to be put in place before the learners drop out. Early identification should consider how to capture and monitor these factors (such as satisfaction with the quality of training and educational attainment) to identify and support students early in their enrolment and studying journeys. Enhanced information and support upon identification of dropout may help steer learners into horizontal or upwards pathways, improving learner outcomes.

Recommendation 15

Support for at-risk learners



Enhanced advice and support for learners who are at risk of dropping out.

Access to enhanced support for learners to transition to employment can be improved.

An outcomes focus should be adopted to ensure learners who complete can transition to employment confidently and successfully. Further research and investigation in this area is warranted as there was limited contemporary literature outlining good practice in supporting VET learners to transition to employment after completion. However, longitudinal research into higher education students' transition to work outlines that graduates who could describe more competences when they graduated perceived their current jobs to correspond more to their education. In contrast, graduates who could not describe their competences experienced more challenges related to employment and were unclear of their future goals. This study also found that having diverse competences and an ability to recognise them at the time of graduation are critical for later career success and may correlate to the nature challenges graduates face in working life.⁸³ This illustrates that support in articulating the skills and knowledge obtained through formal training is valuable for learners seeking employment that aligns with their skills.

Other research suggests that work-based learning is important in assisting learners to obtain the practical skills necessary to support the transition to work,⁸⁴ finding that '...work placements can offer opportunities to gain practical skills and behaviours which would be more difficult to develop in an educational setting'. This supports Recommendation 1.⁸⁵ To ensure learners receive the skills for work transitions, such as exposure to necessary work skills, behaviours and industry specific knowledge, work placements should be clearly structured and sufficiently planned.⁸⁶

Recommendation 16 **Transition supports**



Improve the support for learners to confidently and successfully transition to employment post completion of their VET studies.



Professional development and other supporting information should be enhanced for VET system stakeholders, to assist them in supporting learners with additional and complex needs.

As identified in Recommendation 13, certain learner cohorts are at increased risk for non-completion. VET providers should make continuing professional development available to their workforces and course counsellors to assist them to confidently support learners with additional and complex needs. The diversity of providers means that no single approach will suit or meet the needs of every provider,⁸⁷ so organisations must determine how and in what form professional development may be undertaken.

Evidence is limited on the importance of the quality of the relationship between the learner and their VET teacher. However, research conducted with school teachers and students shows that this relationship and the support a student receives from their teacher do have a significant impact on student performance and completion, and that positive student-teacher relationships both lower the risk or intention of students to drop out and prevent drop out.⁸⁸ This is supported by further studies that found that after adjusting for socio-economic status, gender, prior academic achievement and ethnicity, a positive relationship with teachers in Year 10 predicted lower school dropout rates.⁸⁹

Given the importance of the employment relationship to work-based training models, employers should have the confidence and skills to successfully support learners with additional and complex needs. This was emphasised by both employer and learner respondents during the primary engagement, as was increasing industry and employer capability to support learners before and during training, as detailed in Recommendation 3 above.

Recommendation 17 **VET workforce**

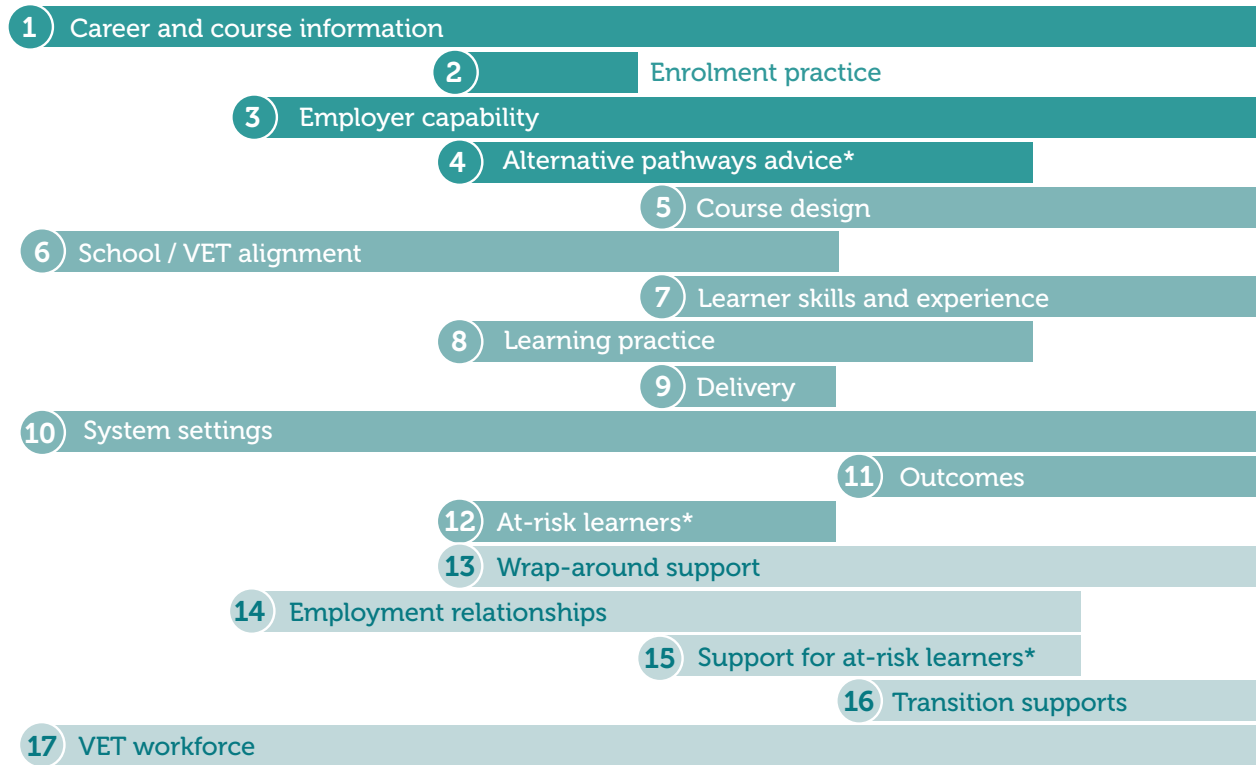
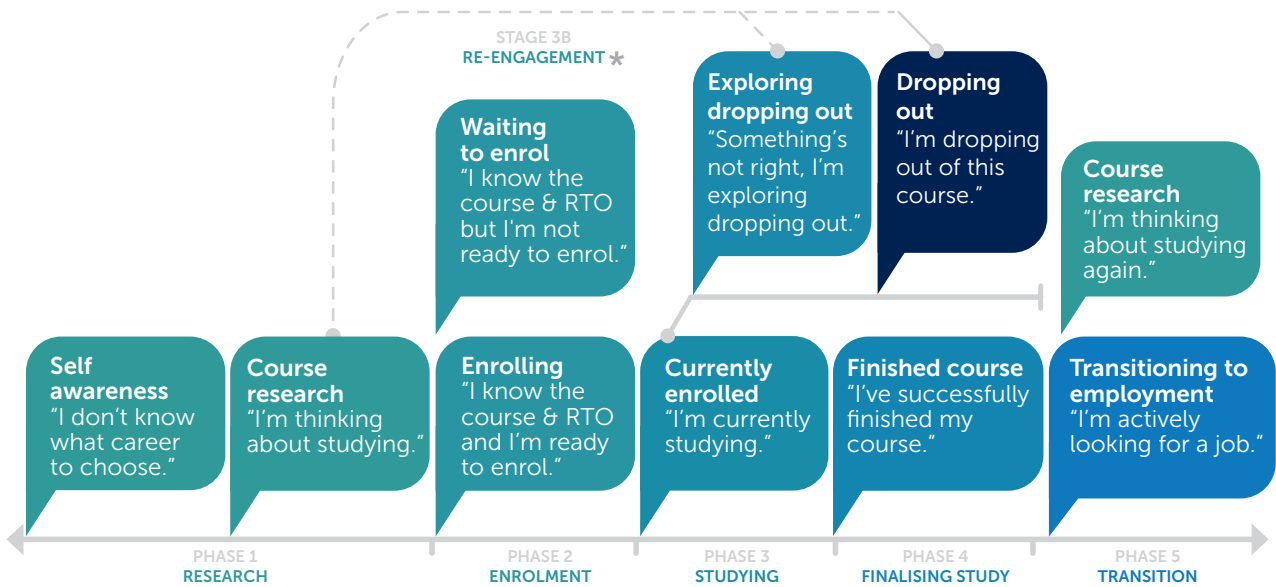


Upskill the VET workforce, course counsellors and employers to better support learners with additional and complex needs.

Appendix 1

Recommendations mapped to the learner journey

Evidence-based recommendations that consider the whole journey



Learner's purpose for studying

The VET system and delivery

Learner characteristics

*Supports re-engagement



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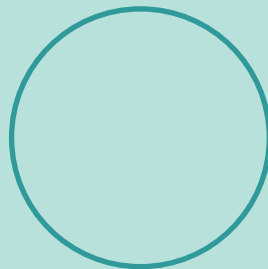
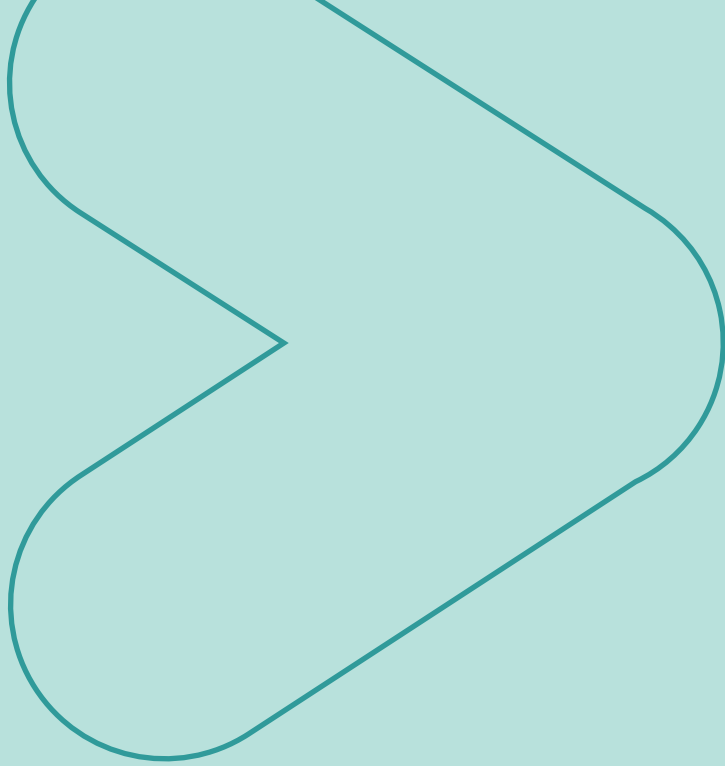
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