



# National Apprenticeship Employment Network

Submission to the  
House Standing Committee on Employment, Education  
and Training

Inquiry into the Perceptions and Status of Vocational  
Education and Training

March 2023

## **About the National Apprenticeship Employment Network**

The National Apprenticeship Employment Network (NAEN) is Australia's largest employer network of apprentices and trainees. Across metropolitan, rural, regional and remote Australia, the network employs some 25,000 apprentices and trainees in a diverse range of industries.

The employer network is unique, as it represents the practice of group training under which group training organisations (GTOs) directly employ apprentices and trainees and place them with host businesses.

Under this arrangement, GTOs are responsible for selecting and recruiting apprentices and trainees, matching them to host businesses, meeting all employer obligations including paying wages and entitlements, and arranging formal training and assessment.

Importantly, apprentices and trainees may be rotated across host businesses when, for example, work has finished with one host, or new skills are needed by the apprentice or trainee. This agile response to managing apprenticeships and traineeships provides continuity and quality of training and assessment, and provides the flexibility that is increasingly demanded by industry.

Predominantly not-for-profit GTOs have been undertaking this skills development and job generating role for some 40 years, equipping an estimated one million apprentices and trainees with vital employment skills.

While some GTOs specialise in particular industries such as the traditional trades or hospitality, others cater to entire regions and cover a range of industries. GTOs have come to occupy a pivotal role in many communities through their links with enterprises, training providers and schools, as well as in Indigenous and remote communities where they play a central role in careers and training.

GTOs have played a significant part in promoting women in non-traditional trades, and creating jobs and training for First Nations people through partnerships with local communities, employers and training providers.

NAEN is pleased to provide this submission in relation to perceptions and status of vocational education and training.

## **What has changed?**

Australia has made some headway in addressing negative perceptions about vocational education and training (VET).

For many years, the idea of a VET career was largely associated with those who had dropped out of school, performed poorly, or who were not suited or capable of further study at a university.

This stereotype has both underestimated the capacity of many who have chosen VET pathways, and also the flexibility and utility of the VET system in delivering multi-faceted jobs and careers.

A 2019 report by Year13, and YouthSense, 'The TAFE Report: Changing Young People's Perceptions of TAFE and Vocational Education' found that more than a quarter (28 per cent) of young Australians felt deterred from studying TAFE/VET courses due to a 'stigma' being attached to it.

Over the last decade, or so, considerable effort has been invested by governments, employer organisations, training providers and groups such as NAEN in shifting negative perceptions about VET.

There are a host of developments that have contributed to this shift – the Australian Training Awards, state and territory awards, the work of bodies such as the National Careers Institute, and more recently, Jobs and Skills Australia.

State and territory governments invest considerable effort in programs that promote the value and diversity of VET careers.

NAEN has taken significant steps to raise the status of VET. One initiative is the 'Today's Skills: Tomorrow's Leaders' (TSTL) program. TSTL identifies the leading apprentices and trainees from the group training network who are invited to participate in a week-long residential professional development program to help develop their careers and leadership potential.

All of the above initiatives have had an impact.

Many graduates of the Australian Training Awards, state and territory training awards, and initiatives such as TSTL go on to be outstanding ambassadors and advocates for the benefits of the VET system, speaking regularly to students, teachers and parents.

However, it is hard to escape the fact that VET is still seen by some as an inferior choice for many students.

While inroads have been made, more needs to be done to address this.

## **The way we talk about VET matters**

The language that is used to describe VET has an impact on the way it is viewed by many who are making decisions about future careers.

The use of the term 'higher education' as an abbreviated reference to university education is itself a symptom of the lingering stratification of the tertiary education sector that sees VET, by implication, regarded by many as 'lower education'.

It suits many universities to categorise their offerings in this way. It fits with the marketing and promotion; the glossy pamphlets and multi-page, colour newspaper inserts that feature annually to attract school leavers.

It neatly frames a vision of university at the apex of post-school education and learning.

For all the discussion within academic circles about the need for an integrated tertiary education sector, there seems a reluctance by some universities and peak bodies to genuinely follow words with actions.

It is encouraging that the recent Australian Universities Accord Panel Discussion Paper specifically canvasses the need for a more integrated tertiary education sector, encompassing both VET and universities.

As the paper observes, over the last two decades, innovation and growth in both systems has led to increasing “interactions and overlaps”.

It expresses the wish that, finally, we might be getting nearer to the goal: “A focus on building the connection in occupations that span both VET and higher education qualifications, integrating digital platforms, and leveraging existing initiatives such as the newly created Jobs and Skills Australia, could be early steps towards a more harmonised system.”

Another related action might be to start considering (and referring) to the post-secondary school system as “tertiary education”, reflecting the diversity of options across VET and university, through which learners can progress, transfer, and, increasingly, dip in and out for skill sets and microcredentials.

### **Schools set lasting impressions**

The way that VET is promoted at the school level has a significant impact on the choices that students make about future courses and jobs.

There are many secondary schools with strong VET credentials, and many that offer vocational subjects as part of the curriculum. Such schools are supported by teachers, trainers and careers advisers who bring a passion and understanding for VET.

These schools develop some outstanding VET graduates in a range of areas, including the traditional trades, hospitality, and business traineeships. Graduates go on to rewarding careers, to further study at TAFE or university, having gained practical experience and an interest that can be further developed.

The best of these schools emphasise that it is not an “either-or” choice between VET or university – that in a dynamic labour market, people will increasingly engage in both the VET and university systems over a lifetime of learning and work.

The point that these schools make is that each sector – VET and university – has its own advantages. An engineer who starts at university and gains the theoretical knowledge may find it useful to take a VET course to learn new practical skills needed for a particular project or, say, new digital building technologies.

A student who starts out at TAFE in a business traineeship may go on to further study in areas such as accounting, finance or economics at a university.

This approach is one that makes the best use of the full spectrum of tertiary education and provides the flexibility to suit varying career trajectories and career changes. At an individual level, it is centred firmly on the needs of the student – not on the preconceptions of peers, parents and others who may set unrealistic expectations based on outmoded ways of thinking about work and life values.

It is critically important that teachers, principals and careers advisers embrace these notions. That is not always the case. Schools that have a sole focus on academic results may not be inclined to look more broadly to the range of attributes and choices needed to succeed in the modern workplace.

### **Increasing participation by women**

Negative perceptions of VET are routinely cited for the low level of female participation in certain segments of VET, most notably the traditional trades.

In construction for example, women make up only 13.5 per cent of the workforce. But women make up only 4.9 per cent of apprentices in construction, significantly below the 29.5 per cent of apprentices across all industries who are women.

Perceptions of a career in the trades undoubtedly plays a part in both the low level of women in construction and the even lower level of women in construction related apprenticeships.

Anecdotally, NAEN hears from parents, students and even some in the industry who are reluctant for themselves, their daughters or female partners to enter the industry due to the treatment of women.

The group training network addresses this in a number of ways.

GTOs run programs to promote women-in-trades, including through pre-apprenticeships that give women exposure to trade career as well as information that can inform both themselves and their parents. A pre-apprenticeship program targeted to women run by one GTO has seen 50 per cent of participants going on to an apprenticeship.

Women-in-trades programs can be co-ordinated across GTOs, so that there is a connected peer network able to share information and deliver support through specialised mentoring and role models. This can be an effective way to create a safe and connected network so that women gain confidence to follow a trades career.

Field officers engaged by GTOs have a strong focus on women-in-trades and work with apprentices, supervisors and employers. Field officers ensure that employers are aware of their responsibilities in regard to facilities on-site, physical safety, and health and wellbeing.

The GTO network has a zero-tolerance approach to gender-based discrimination and works to ensure respectful language and attitudes toward women. It is one of the reasons that GTOs have become attractive to women in trades and why it is seeing above average representation and completion rates by women.

Recognition of the achievements of qualified tradeswomen occurs through programs such as the 'Today's Skills: Tomorrow's Leaders'. GTOs play an active part in helping women to enter industry through apprenticeships and traineeships and have both higher representation by women and higher completion rates compared with direct employment.

**What more can the VET sector do?**

One of the important steps to reducing negative perceptions of VET and raising its status will be through a better integrated tertiary education sector.

The bifurcation of tertiary education has created a gulf between VET and the university sector that feeds into marketing, recruitment and careers advice. It entrenches the idea that VET is a second best option.

A truly integrated tertiary education sector would establish a seamless learning pathway, with entry and exit points that would allow learners to engage with both VET-related and university offerings as their careers progress and their learning needs evolve.

There have been a number of recommendations for this, including the Joyce Review, the Australian Qualifications Framework Review, both in 2019, and most recently, the Australian Universities Accord Panel Discussion Paper.

NAEN believes that removing the silos that currently exist in the tertiary education sector, moving to a genuinely integrated system and thereby nullifying much of the terminology that pitches VET against university, will be central to achieving change.

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