The end of innovation in Australia’s VET system

The Australian Council for Private Education and Training today called on Ministers for vocational education and training to make a clear statement of support for diversity in the training system.

Chief Executive Officer of ACPET, Ms Claire Field, said “the release of the National Skills Standards Council’s position paper on new standards for the training system, and the release of substantially higher fees for VET providers in the latest fee schedule of the Australian Skills Quality Authority can only be seen as a signal that small providers are no longer wanted in the VET system.”

“For decades Australia’s VET system has prided itself on its flexibility, innovation and responsiveness. All of that is now at risk with the release of these new reports” she said.

“Despite there being no evidence presented by the National Skills Standards Council that small providers pose quality problems in the VET sector, the changes being proposed by the NSSC signal the end of high quality, niche providers and their replacement with a suite of large, homogenous institutions – all in the name of quality.

“No-one can question ACPET’s commitment to quality with its efforts in recent years on behalf of its proud member organisations to lift the quality bar – but the changes being proposed by the NSSC and ASQA are unjustified and unwarranted”, Ms Field said.

Ms Field suggested the NSSC was “dressing up the changes as introducing more balanced regulation for high quality providers” by suggesting that proven performers would benefit from a reduced regulatory burden. In fact the mechanisms the report identifies where regulation might be reduced for high quality providers already exist – the problem is that they are yet to be systematically implemented.

“This means that providers will not see benefits beyond those that are already theoretically available to them, and instead will be subject to a host of new regulations which will force-fit providers into a one-size fits all model to continue to be able to trade. Combined with the fees now being charged to providers by the national (ASQA) and Victorian (VRQA) regulators – the only state where niche providers will stand some chance of continuing to exist is in Western Australia.”

“ACPET supports measures to improve teaching and assessment practices in VET. Providers’ experiences are that the lack of specificity in current Training Packages is the main impediment to industry having confidence in VET outcomes in some occupations.”

Prescribing the minimum amount of capital providers must have to be allowed to operate (in addition to the existing determinations of financial viability and measures to protect student fees paid in advance), new requirements to have ‘registered’ Accountable Education Officers in all organisations, and formal assessment processes for all VET trainers and assessors (in addition to those required for them to gain their qualifications) will see the sector awash in new bureaucratic red tape and with no assurance that quality will improve.”

“No other education sector is required to have teaching and assessing staff undertake ongoing formal assessments to keep their academic qualifications up to date. No other business sector is required to have key senior staff ‘registered’ with an external government regulator. If an
educational provider does not meet the standards for teaching and learning, or any other standard, it should be the CEO who is accountable. Instead the NSSC proposes that where an organisation has issues with compliance this could lead to the removal of registration for the Accountable Education Officer. Quite how this will fix the problem and lead to better learning outcomes for students is not addressed in the position paper.

“Instead the overwhelming majority of providers who are running good operations will be penalised by having to deal with more red tape, so the system can deal with the problems of a minority. But at the same time, the NSSC ignores that in its first 18 months of operation ASQA has cancelled registration or refused to renew registration of 100 poor performing providers. ASQA’s efforts show the current standards work as an effective regulatory tool. ACPET supports improvements to refine the current standards but we do not believe a case has been made for the changes put forward by the NSSC. It’s a solution looking for a problem,” said Ms Field.

“The outcomes of the National Skills Standards Council’s deliberations reflect the nature of the ‘expertise’ on the panel. Only three of the nine expert members have experience in a VET provider, and in each instance that experience is in TAFE. While TAFE educates a large number of VET students, they make up only 1.5% of providers operating in the VET sector. The standards under review are ‘the registration standards required to be a provider that issues vocational qualifications’. The Council’s inherent lack of understanding of small, high quality providers is evident in how they have tackled the ‘problem’ and the solutions they are proposing,” said Ms Field.

“ACPET urges VET Ministers to publicly confirm their support for diversity in the VET sector and to request that the National Skills Standards Council ensures that its recommendations adequately reflect the current diversity in the sector and seek to protect it. Quality must be the benchmark for providers not homogeneity”, Ms Field said.