Submission

National VET Sector Sustainability Policy and Action Plan

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1. Introduction

The Australian Council for Private Education and Training (ACPET) is the peak, national industry association for independent providers of post-compulsory education and training. ACPET represents more than 1,200 organisations, from schools to higher education institutes, delivering a full range of education, training and English language courses to both domestic and international students.

ACPET welcomes the opportunity to present a submission to the National VET Sector Sustainability Action Group delegated by the Ministerial Council for Vocational and Technical Education (MCVTE) to establish a draft National VET Sector Sustainability Policy and Action Plan (the Plan).

ACPET supports the need to deliver a national cohesiveness and consistency of effort and performance in the transition from the current carbon intensive, high emissions, environmentally detrimental economy to a low carbon, sustainable economy. It is important that the actions are directed at ensuring industry, individuals, and the wider community has access to relevant skills and VET services to support a productive and prosperous economy in the national shift towards a lower carbon, environmentally sustainable economy.

ACPET also supports the direction of the current government to boost productivity and workforce participation through a focus on education and training. It is important that Australia develops an internationally competitive education and training sector through significant reform and investment however reform of this sector must be in the context of reform for the nation in a number of interconnected areas such as climate change, immigration and tax reform policy.

The focus of the NVSSAG on human ingenuity, skills and knowledge, and a commitment to environmental sustainability, are endorsed by ACPET as important elements of strategies and actions for climate change mitigation and adaptation.

In terms of defining green skills, ACPET endorse a definition which identifies the modified and new knowledge and skills required by clients (employers and individuals) to apply climate change policy and make the transition to a low carbon, sustainable economy (green economy). It is also important that the identified green skills connected with the transition become an integrated part of existing frameworks i.e.: Training Packages and are not set apart as a set of separate skills or processes. Australia has developed a National Training Framework and it is important that the green skills become part of this framework.

This focus must initially centre on professionals within the education and training sector, who as the drivers of change, will be responsible for re-skilling, up-skilling and preparing workers for new jobs created as a result of the transition to a green economy. Without initial significant investment to equip education and training professionals, industry will find it difficult to engage the workers with the necessary knowledge and skills to make the required transition to ‘ensure that the VET sector invests
in designing and delivering new training programs and retooling existing training programs to meet the expected demand\(^1\).

It would be a significant oversight if the Federal Government does not provide the required investment in education and training professionals and assume that professional development of this sector will happen by osmosis.

Industry will need to be supported by research to identify the impact of climate change policy on workplace procedures and practices so that this information can be fed through to the Industry Skills Councils to make the required changes in Training Products. This research would also be useful in identifying good practice and effective use of new technologies. The same research must be used to assist the education and training sector to make the necessary changes to its workforce and resources through a major investment of funds.

Identification of future workforce needs has been problematic. Assisted workforce planning services integrated into overall business planning would help enterprises to identify the green skills needed by their workers in making the transition to a green economy. Once these skills are identified and integrated into accredited training products, then the education and training sector needs government investment to bring its workers (teachers and trainers) up to date with the required changes.

2. The Policy

ACPET supports the need for the Federal Government to take the lead in assisting the nation to make this transition. Innovation and technology diffusion occurs in all industries and it is important that the education and training sector workforce has access to latest industry developments through further development and implementation of workplace learning models. Funding and policy must be realigned to support this approach.

Independent providers have led the way with workforce learning approaches and provide significant amount of training onsite using the enterprise’s equipment. A shift to fully competitive funding based on individual and industry needs will ensure a faster transition to delivering the required green skills.

Governments need to shift away from huge investments in funding capital buildings and infrastructure which become outdated quickly and move to investment in funding training which is flexible and time responsive to industry needs i.e.: workplace learning models.

\(^1\) The Apollo Alliance and Green for All (2008), Green-collar jobs in America’s cities - Building pathways out of poverty and Careers in the clean energy economy. (http://www.greenforall.org/green-collar-jobs)
ACPET support the key principles outlined in the Plan but in light of recent announcements by the Hon. Julia Gillard about structural reform, our organisation recommends that the Plan should be across the education and training sector and not just VET. It is understandable that this work is limited to the VET sector due to the work being commissioned by MCVTE however; the intended move to a single ministerial council for one tertiary sector does indicate that this plan should encompass the full sector.

ACPET suggests that a range of indicators should be used to gauge progress during implementation of the Plan. Suggested indicators could include the level of stakeholder engagement, success of research in identifying green skills, identification and endorsement of green skills by industry, integration of the identified skills into training products and client (employers and individuals) satisfaction levels.

ACPET, as the peak national member association for independent providers looks forward to playing a significant role in any further development and implementation of the Plan as well as taking a lead to identify leaders and champions within the sector.

3. The Action Plan

I. Workforce development

ACPET agree that workforce development is essential to addressing skills and labour requirements however; this approach needs to be part of an overall business development plan for enterprises. Industry Skills Councils, employer groups, education and training providers and member associations need to play a pivotal role in providing this type of service so that intelligence can be gathered for a national workforce strategy.

Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) and other education providers are well-positioned to work one on one with business enterprises and to fully utilise formal and informal learning practices. Funding models and tax reform for businesses need to change to accommodate this type of approach. The current method of funding public institutions to deliver on campus is not what industry needs or wants. Losing workers for large blocks of time is not conducive to effective work practices. A major shift needs to occur to incorporate quality assured workplace learning.

ACPET does not support actions listed in the Plan which will add to the excessive regulatory burden on employers and education and training providers. The Plan needs to be integrated into current systems with modified change to policy as required. Policy which acts as barriers to flexible, time responsive delivery must be changed within the existing framework.

Targeted research needs to identify future skill needs. The use of action-research is endorsed as a means of identifying innovative workforce development solutions provided funding models are changed to ensure that industry have access to a provider of choice.
The use of learner-centred funding will enable clients more choice in selecting an education and training provider. Under this approach, target groups such as Indigenous Australians and people with a disability would attract additional funding so that their learning program can be adapted to meet their specific needs.

ACPET supports a national education and training system driven by client-demand where individuals can choose their provider and are also financially supported to gain a Certificate III level or equivalent qualification. Individuals should then be able to access income-contingent loans to access higher level qualifications as is the case for higher education.

The VET sector needs a workforce that has the industry currency required to prepare learners for the modern labour market, as well as the ability and skill to engage a wide variety of learners across a range of mediums. The VET professional needs to be valued and recognised.

ACPET supports a system to identify the VET professional including acknowledgement of the complexity of work demands faced by this individual. It is essential that any processes put in place do not place additional regulatory burden on individuals but rather a process which is valued and rewards the individual’s contribution to the VET workforce.

As the national industry association for independent providers, ACPET welcomes the opportunity to assist in the establishment of a framework for recognition and a process for continual professional development. ACPET would welcome government contribution towards the establishment of a recognition system for the VET professional as a means of ensuring that the VET workforce continues to offer quality training to prepare Australia’s workforce.

ACPET support the need to develop policy which will maximise the utilisation of human capital. It is important that further exploration takes into account work done internationally i.e.: international qualification portability. For example, ECTS makes teaching and learning more transparent and facilitates the recognition of studies (formal, non-formal and informal). The system is used across Europe for credit transfer (student mobility) and credit accumulation (learning paths towards a degree). It also informs curriculum design and quality assurance².

Intelligence needs to be gathered quickly on how the nation’s workforce can be skilled to work in a green economy particularly in light of current global economic circumstances and the pace of workforce change.

II. VET sector products and services

ACPET support the need to develop education and training products and services to respond to changing labour market demand for skills needed by businesses, industry and individuals for the transition to a green economy. Professionals in the education and training sector need more investment in professional development so that they are equipped to best utilise the products and services available.

Current consultation being completed on the Review of Training Products for the 21st Century indicate that the issue is not just in the design of the products but rather in the implementation – practitioners not knowing how to use the products effectively. Another outstanding issue which has been identified through this process is the lengthy processes used to change or update the training products. ACPET suggest that only major and significant reform of the products should need endorsement of the National Quality Council. Minor adjustments should be managed through a process of continual review and be the responsibility of stakeholder committees provided the make-up of the committee is representative of stakeholder input.

ACPET agree that the modern labour market has an increased emphasis on broadly based skills and knowledge. Recognition of levels of cognitive thought used in daily work practices and the value of personal attributes must be considered within future development of green skills.

ACPET endorse the need to:

- redefine the term competence as currently used in the National Training System (NTS) to acknowledge cognitive thinking and attributes;
- review the appropriateness of qualification levels and descriptors under the Australian Qualification Framework (AQF) particularly above Certificate III level;
- creating more flexibility and portability within and across Training Packages to support the needs of industry and assist individuals move through industry and/or career pathways;
- encouraging innovative learning and assessment practices to assist with the recognition of all types of learning; and
- developing a system of crediting all forms of learning as a means of gaining a qualification.

By redefining the term of competence, the building blocks (units of competence) for the Training Packages will be more suited to packaging qualifications. ACPET agree that the current prescriptive process of building qualifications is not flexible enough to meet the changing needs of industry or to support individuals to progress through an industry and/or career pathway.

Systems, including the capability of the education and training workforce, must be improved to recognise and credit all types of learning. The current system of compliance under the AQTF needs to be changed to ensure that quality, creative practices of educating, training and assessing can flourish.
and not be inhibited under a burden of auditing which stifles innovation through lack of understanding by auditors of learning and assessment principles.

Learner-centred funding and industry driven training models will ensure the delivery of education and training programs are based on demand. Demand driven programs, as a result of the need for green skills, will ensure that providers which meet industry’s requirements for a green economy will remain sustainable.

III. Leaders, partnerships and champions

The recently announced broadened role of Skills Australia is indicative of the need for the Plan to also encompass all education and training, not just VET. Despite the education and training workforce being at the forefront of implementing the actions in the Plan, it is still undervalued in the role it plays. Policy around how government-funded education and training dollars is directed must change to ensure that providers which meet demand are supported in the continuation of good practice.

ACPET does not support separate certification for ‘green skills providers’ but rather an approach where the identified green skills and approaches are integrated into existing structures, products and services. Champions and leaders within the sector can be acknowledged through existing award programs. Additional certification will increase the regulatory burden on providers.

Using funds to establish a ‘Green Skills Centres of Excellence’ is limited in its coverage. Funds would be better directed to existing Skills Centres so that innovation for a green economy can be applied to industry specific needs.

ACPET would also support the establishment and facilitation of networks of practitioners so that good practice can be shared. This network can be built into existing partnerships with a common ‘green’ theme. Contextual examples of green skills development in specific industries will have more influence and increased take-up of this approach than speakers using a broad brush approach.

ACPET would support a portal approach to the green theme so that underpinning principles can be applied across a range of contexts. The development of a website is just that - another website. Integration must be the focus to ensure maximum uptake of principles.

IV. Reducing VET sector carbon footprint

As the peak national association for independent providers, ACPET is prepared to play a significant role to ensure that the carbon footprint of the VET sector is reduced. As stated in the Plan, education and training professionals can demonstrate the leadership needed in the transition to a low carbon, sustainable economy. Membership organizations, such as ACPET, can facilitate the distribution of knowledge and demonstrate through its own practices, how to make a successful transition.
ACPET does not support an approach whereby providers would be required to submit programs and plans for reducing their carbon footprint. An alternate approach is for providers to be educated about the value of reducing their carbon footprint as well as acknowledged via awards or training contracts for taking a ‘green’ approach.

4. The Implementation

As stated previously, ACPET support the COAG reforms on both Climate Change Adaptation and its Productivity and Human Capital Reform. Although understanding that MCVTE has the initial authority to approve the National VET Sector Policy and Action Plan, ACPET would encourage the government to take an education and training sector approach to this item.

ACPET does not support any additional regulatory burden on providers which may result from reporting or monitoring. All policy change required to assist the transition to a green economy should sit within existing structures and processes.

5. Contact

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