

Skills Australia

Australian Workforce Futures

The TAFE Teachers Association of the NSW Teachers Federation, representing some six and a half thousand members, would like to make the following comments on the proposals from Skills Australia, contained within the Workforce Futures papers.

Initially we would make the comment that reliably predicting workforce capability is very difficult. Many of us have seen various pieces of research over the years, and a number of mistakes made. Using different scenarios to model what Australia may face over the next 15 years, does appear to give greater reliability and hopefully allows for adjustments to be made in a more timely and systematic fashion.

In so saying, TAFE TA wishes to urge caution in Skills Australia providing governments with a 'so-called' plan that may drive funding. Whilst funding should be directed to areas of economic need and skills requirements, there are also many other factors that need to be considered, and sometimes governments forget them. TAFE continues to need to be funded to deliver in niche and specialty industries and vocations, and funding must always recognise the needs of equity groups and regional/community requirements. Consequently, we urge a transparent separation between workforce planning and funding for vocational education and training at all levels.

This also indicates a possible problem if workforce capability is determined at a federal level for all Australia, without regional and local issues being taken into account. This matter needs to be highlighted in any planning.

The papers also appear to focus on under-utilisation of skills perhaps too heavily. Skills development for an individual surely continues throughout their life, and is not a static goal that one reaches and goes no further with. These skills can be utilised in a person's job in many different ways. Over a person's career they are likely to move in many different directions, which may or may not utilise the initial skills they developed. This is the reason why in many cases there is a need to focus more on broad rather than narrow skills development in vocational education and training, so that such skills development is not seen to be obsolete.

Vocational education and training should be built on a strong educational and theoretical base, allowing for transferability of skills. This needs to be reflected in any workforce capability planning and modelling, and also should be part of government funding. Maybe it is about time that it is recognised that CBT, Training Packages and narrow based skills development including workplace assessment as opposed to training and development, have sent Australia down the wrong track. Or maybe they have served their purpose and it is time to move on. Part of Australia's workforce capability development should recognise the full development of educational opportunities, support skills development, changing of careers and lifelong learning.

TAFE TA agrees that the matching of skills and shortages has not worked in the past and that there is a need for fluid and dynamic labour markets. We support the move to higher level qualifications, but also recognise that some of this is occurring as a result of credential creep and the inconsistent use of the AQF. Despite this, many industries and employers are calling, rightly or wrongly for higher level qualifications, and the VET system needs to support individuals in increasing their qualification levels, recognising at the same time that many people broaden their qualifications as well as increase them.

TAFE TA notes the issues raised in the papers around skilled migration, and whilst we strongly support assisting migrants to utilise their skills and qualifications, we do not believe immigration should be used to replace skills development and proper planning around workforce capability. Skilled migration should be part of the planning process, and recognition and funding of support for these new arrivals an important responsibility of government.

TAFE TA also notes the issues raised in the papers on the ageing population, but also notes that many people are not leaving work at the so-called retirement age, but are instead choosing to continue to use their skills in many ways, whether in paid or unpaid work. The need for continuing support for skills development of our more senior citizens, should be part of the workforce capability planning.

Interventions

Whilst government interventions are needed in terms of skills development and workforce capability, and the criteria suggested reasonable, I reiterate the issues around niche industries and access and equity areas that should be allowed for. However, leaving such decisions up to the market is also not viable. One only needs to consider the recent examples of market failure, both in the global financial crisis and the collapse of training colleges for international students. Governments should certainly intervene at such times. A far greater confidence in and focus on public provision of vocational education and training, and funding that supports and allows for intervention and quick action, is a better proposal. Governments also need to consider intervention not just in terms of skills development in certain industry areas, but also in certain geographical locations. Such decisions need to be made not just based on advice of major industry and employer groups, but also SMEs and educational providers, with their extensive wealth of knowledge.

TAFE TA strongly supports greater funding and recognition of innovative areas for skills development. The funding that is supplied to universities to expand their research and innovation, should also be applied to VET to help drive skills development in innovative as well as traditional industries.

TAFE TA agrees that job design and skills development need to go hand in hand. Workers in many areas, need incentives for skills development that go hand in hand with recognition of their contribution to the productivity of the organisation. Better wages and conditions need to be seen as part of this scenario, along with a workplace culture that supports continued skills development. Skills development must also be supported for part time and casual workers. Often enterprises don't value and invest in their part time and casual workers, yet these people often make up significant parts of the workforce. Support for increased literacy and numeracy levels in the workforce, must be considered an important part of this development.

Linda Simon
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