

Strengthening our skills base in uncertain times

Communiqué following the Strategic Industry Forum 20 February 2009

Industry and government should work together so that Australia emerges from the current economic downturn with a better-skilled workforce.

At a strategic industry forum held on 20 February 2009, Skills Australia, the chairs of the boards of the eleven national Industry Skills Councils (ISC), representatives of key industry peak bodies, and the chairs of State Training Authorities (STA) resolved to ensure that skills development and training do not become a casualty of the current uncertain economic times.

Participants acknowledged that Australia has a strong training system, features of which are internationally recognised. Australian industry has driven the push for national consistency, regulation, flexibility of delivery, greater responsiveness to client needs and higher quality skills development outcomes. The pillars of this integrated system are the Australian Quality Training Framework and competency based Training Packages which cover more than 85% of the work performed by Australia's workers.

Spurred on by the current economic uncertainties, members of the Forum recognised that Australia cannot live on past merit and that major change is required to ensure a more prosperous and fair future. Eight areas were identified: quality, equity and fairness, funding, evidence-based policy and planning, sustainability, the image of vocational skills and governance—facilitated by partnerships operating strategically at all levels of industry, government and training providers.

The Forum was also addressed by Steve Vamos of the Society for Knowledge Economics, whose ideas on leadership have obvious implications for industry-government collaboration.

Participants in the Forum then decided on four areas for action:

Strategic Industry Leadership

Industry involvement is a crucial driver for training. Participants agreed that a co-ordinated industry response to strengthen industry leadership is needed. This could be achieved both by more formal industry linkages and by industry-government collaboration with determinative powers.

At a local level, more cohesive sectoral/regional networks of employers and training providers are required to meet enterprise workforce development needs.

Quality

A system focused on competence and knowledge will have a higher level of credibility with employers. A focus on outcomes rather than on inputs and processes is needed. This should be accompanied by true national consistency of both qualifications and quality assurance.

Funding and equity

The ways in which both Governments and employers allocate funds to training should support a flexible approach to skills and workforce development. Such approaches need to ensure that those who are in most need of skills are able to readily access appropriate support, and that employers, employees and government remain committed to skill development in their own interests and through periods of economic downturn.

Evidence-based policy and planning

A full picture of national skills needs is required. This will involve a more integrated and inclusive approach to policy development and planning involving ISCs, STAs, Skills Australia, peak bodies and skills development providers, public and private.

Planning models will need to be developed that reflect the complexity of the labour market, workforce development and the provision of education and training. It will require additional high-level research and better data collection of the full training effort. ISCs will need increased capacity to undertake research and data analysis.

Based on these assessments, a new national skills plan must be developed. To this end, Skills Australia will progress work on scenario planning and share insights with industry groups.

Key industry leaders expressed their commitment to work collaboratively at the industry, state and national level to address the agreed priorities of industry and government.

The Chair of Skills Australia, Philip Bullock, said: “We are indeed fortunate to have people of the passion and capability across industry, providers, and commonwealth and state government stakeholders. The next phase of the skills development journey has commenced,” he said, “and we now have the opportunity to develop a new and reenergised commitment to collaborative action. This will ensure that we have a higher skilled industry and population through the current economic uncertainties and beyond.”

Work on the four themes identified will be coordinated by a Working Group, which will help drive change in these nominated areas and will provide a conduit to the broader industry and community stakeholders.

Issued by Skills Australia

on behalf of ISC Chairs, Peak Body Representatives, STA Chairs and Skills Australia

*Inquiries: Sue Beitz
Secretariat
Skills Australia
Ph: 02 6240 5784
Ph: 0422 806 548*

