

Commissioners Jonathan Coppel & Malcolm Roberts
Review of the Skills and Workforce Development Agreement
Productivity Commission
GPO Box 1428
Canberra City ACT 2601

31 July 2020

Dear Commissioners,

Jesuit Social Services welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Productivity Commission's Interim Report of its *National Agreement for Skills and Workforce Development Review*.

INTRODUCTION

The Commission's review of the National Agreement for Skills and Workforce Development (NASWD) comes at a time of significant economic uncertainty due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Many Australians have lost work or are underemployed, and the future of whole industries and ways of working is still up in the air amid the country's first recession since 1991. Certain groups have been hit hardest by unemployment, including young people and women,¹ and the high rate of casual employment in Australia means many people are without paid leave or in insecure work.

We must also recognise that life before the COVID-19 pandemic was already tough for many individuals and communities. Before this crisis, more than one in eight Australians were living in poverty²; youth unemployment was more than double the overall national rate³; and more than half of people on unemployment payments were unemployed long-term⁴. Pre-existing inequalities in society have been starkly underlined. Training systems around the country have a clear role to play in equipping people with the skills and attributes they need to gain meaningful employment. For people experiencing often multiple forms of disadvantage, it is crucial to ensure training pathways are accessible and linked with support services.

While the formal VET system is the main focus of the Commission's Interim Report, we believe there is scope for more nuanced discussion of the important role of foundational learning for many people experiencing disadvantage. Our submission focuses on the key foundational learning pathways that are crucial for the people we work with, including pre-accredited training and accredited foundation skills training, as well as the important role played by the Skills First Reconnect program in Victoria, an initiative assisting the engagement into training, often for the first time, of many people from disadvantaged backgrounds. For people facing significant barriers to social and economic inclusion,

¹ National Skills Commission (July 2020) *A snapshot in time: The Australian labour market and COVID-19*,

https://www.nationalskillscommission.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-06/NSC_a_snapshot_in_time_report.pdf.

² Davidson, P., Saunders, P., Bradbury, B. and Wong, M. (2020), *Poverty in Australia 2020: Part 1, Overview*, ACOSS/UNSW, http://povertyandinequality.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Poverty-in-Australia-2020_Part-1_Overview.pdf.

³ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (September 2019) *The experience of employment*, <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-welfare/the-experience-of-employment>.

⁴ ACOSS and Jobs Australia (April 2020) *Faces of Unemployment*, <https://www.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Faces-of-Unemployment-2020-v4-1.pdf>.

entry into foundational training is often the beginning of a pathway to meaningful employment. Our submission also emphasises the importance of strengthening effective employment services, such as the Jobs Victoria Employment Network (JVEN) in Victoria.

PRE-ACCREDITED TRAINING PATHWAYS

While “informal and unaccredited training” is recognised in the Interim Report as providing “another way of developing skills” for people in the workplace (p. 212), the report does not substantively discuss the importance of pre-accredited training as a foundational entry point for disadvantaged learners. In our experience, pre-accredited training is a vital entry point for many people who may have a low-level of educational attainment or face other barriers to inclusion.

Through the pre-accredited training provided by Jesuit Social Services in Victoria, participants gain the essential foundational learning and personal skills they need to make a successful transition to formal accredited training and employment. A key aspect of pre-accredited training is its flexibility, with no prerequisites for entry ensuring it is accessible for all. For some people, this form of training is their first such opportunity in many years. Given the Commission’s focus on the effectiveness of measures to make training more accessible and affordable, more attention to pre-accredited training is warranted.

We know that people in pre-accredited training who transition to accredited training are more likely to attain their qualifications compared to the average Victorian VET student. According to the Victorian Department of Education and Training, of the 29 per cent of pre-accredited learners who transition into accredited training, 64 per cent directly attain a qualification and a further 14 per cent indirectly do so.⁵ In comparison, the average Victorian VET completion rate is 47.3 per cent.⁶ Importantly, we see pre-accredited training as part of a genuine pathway to employment. Without a pre-accredited training pathway, we would not have been able to assist scores of participants to increase their skills, confidence and engagement with workplace training and, ultimately, to support their transition into work.

In our training programs, we teach practical, hands-on vocational skills in parallel with employability skills, including building participants’ awareness of workplace culture, confidence, communication and conflict resolution skills. Our pre-accredited training offers a window into particular industries, such as aged care or trade-based jobs, and a pathway to get there. These courses are devised in response to industry need, which helps ensure direct practical relevance and connection to existing employment opportunities. The demand for our employment oriented pre-accredited training courses is high; however, the funding available for this training has not kept pace with the level of need, as evidenced by the inability of the Adult, Community and Further Education (ACFE) Board to provide the level of funding needed to meet the community demand identified by Jesuit Community College, the training arm of Jesuit Social Services.

In our recent submission to the *Skills for Victoria’s Growing Economy* review,⁷ we called for pre-accredited training to be better recognised, valued and resourced, and urged the Victorian Government to increase funding for pre-accredited training programs through the ACFE Board, to

⁵ Department of Education and Training (August 2018) *Future Opportunities for Adult Learners in Victoria*, <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/about/programs/adult-learners-paper.PDF>

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/department/Pages/macklin-review.aspx>.

further support often highly vulnerable people to enter or re-enter education and training as a pathway to employment. Many participants who complete pre-accredited training ultimately find work, including through our Jobs Victoria Employment Network (JVEN) program (discussed further below).

SKILLS FIRST RECONNECT

The Interim Report notes that information for prospective students about training opportunities, including practical information on courses, careers, and training providers, is “fragmented and duplicated across multiple government and private sector websites” (p. 14). Ensuring clear and accessible information is an integral element of ensuring equitable access to the training system and is particularly salient for students facing disadvantage. In this context, we wish to highlight the importance of the Skills First Reconnect program in Victoria, which supports people who have left school early to be able to engage with accredited training as part of a pathway to employment.

Disadvantaged people often need support to identify, access and participate in the training programs that are right for them. Jesuit Social Services sees Skills First Reconnect as a crucial initiative to identify and support people with low levels of educational attainment into training as a first step toward meaningful employment. Through Skills First Reconnect, Jesuit Social Services’ staff proactively connect with potential training participants. The caseloads of our Skills First Reconnect team are small, enabling staff the time required to effectively engage and provide practical, individual and holistic support to participants.

This support includes co-developing an individual learning plan that sets out the person’s aspirations with clear steps to achieve them, career mentorship, and connection with other services as needed. It also includes the kind of practical support that is often overlooked, including supporting participants to enrol and access essentials such as a myki card for transport, a laptop, internet and funding for the associated costs of training that may otherwise be a barrier. We are calling on the Victorian Government to recommit to provide, expand on and fund Skills First Reconnect over the long-term.

EMPLOYMENT PATHWAYS

The Commission has sought information on the effectiveness of programs and services aimed at assisting people to transition from education to employment (p. 102). It is vital that the kind of foundational training pathways outlined above are linked with employment opportunities. For disadvantaged jobseekers in particular, governments have a key role to play. This includes harnessing the potential to create jobs for people facing significant barriers to employment through social and infrastructure expenditure. The Out for Good pilot initiative in Victoria, which supports 50 young people who have had contact with the justice system into jobs in the construction industry – and in which Jesuit Social Services is a partner – is one such positive example.⁸

For disadvantaged people out of work, the effectiveness and value of the training system is only realised when it helps them get a job. For this to happen, strong links are needed with effective employment services systems. Current initiatives under Jobs Victoria, such as the Jobs Victoria Employment Network (JVEN), have enabled providers such as Jesuit Social Services to support people who face significant barriers, including past justice involvement, mental-ill health or other complex

⁸ <https://jss.org.au/out-for-good-initiative-will-help-vulnerable-young-people-to-reach-their-potential/>.

needs, into jobs. For this cohort, the kind of tailored, flexible and long-term support able to be provided both through pre-accredited and foundation skills training, and then through their engagement in JVEN programs, has been crucial. JVEN, with its focus on supporting the most disadvantaged, stands in contrast to the compliance-focused nature of the federal employment services system, *jobactive*.

Jesuit Social Services is advocating for sustained funding for Jobs Victoria initiatives, such as JVEN, and we continue to call on the Victorian Government to expand investment in these initiatives and commit to recurrent funding over the long-term to support disadvantaged Victorians.

ONLINE DELIVERY

The COVID-19 crisis forced many of us – trainers and participants – to adapt to modes of online delivery where possible. The Commission has asked for further information about the advantages and challenges of increasing the use of online delivery of training, as well as what actions governments would need to take to support this.

We recognise that online delivery, or a blended approach, may be suitable for some participants, particularly those who are younger and typically more digitally savvy. Online delivery may be advantageous for some people for whom attending a physical site is difficult, for example, due to their geographic location. However, the face-to-face element of engagement is very important and losing this may, in some cases, detract from the capacity of training courses to build social skills and foster connectedness.

In any shift to increased online learning, we must address the issue of digital inequity. We know that disadvantaged learners often do not have access to laptops, phone data, stable internet and associated equipment needed for effective online participation. They may also lack the digital skills to enable their full participation in online courses. Government funding should target the supply of these materials and relevant digital skills training for disadvantaged learners, as well as training for trainers on online teaching.

Thank you for taking our views into consideration. We would welcome any further opportunity to engage with the Commission and to provide further information about our programs.

Yours sincerely



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