
Communiqué for the COAG Skills Council Meeting

17 April 2020

The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) Skills Council (the Council) held its fourth meeting today. Skills Ministers met to continue work on a set of urgent national actions agreed a fortnight ago to deliver critical skills during the COVID-19 pandemic and to preserve the capacity of Australia's training system.

Members reaffirmed their commitment to work together and share developments across jurisdictions to inform a national approach to protecting students, supporting training providers and maintaining training for critical workforce areas during the pandemic.

Critical skills and workforce availability

Following agreement at the 3 April Skills Council meeting, the Australian Industry and Skills Committee (AISC) Emergency Response Sub-Committee has been established to provide a streamlined and rapid process to provide advice to Skills Ministers on urgent adjustments that need to be made to national training package products to meet critical workforce needs as they emerge during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Council welcomed progress made by the sub-committee from their meetings on 8 and 15 April. Members considered advice on labour market pressures and priority areas for examination related to the delivery of training in critical or potentially vulnerable workforces.

Members noted a key theme across all sectors was the need for infection control training, which is critical not only for frontline health care workers but several other occupations that are exposed to unprecedented and unusual infection risks such as cleaners and laundry workers.

Provider viability

The Council discussed the current state of the VET sector, including viability issues emerging across providers due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Preliminary actions that jurisdictions are taking or that are being considered to vary existing funding arrangements with private and other non-government training providers to allow for greater flexibility of delivery over the next six months were noted by Council. Final advice on the measures to be put in place will be provided at the next meeting.

Council noted that the JobKeeper Payment and other pay-roll and business assistance initiatives announced by state and territory governments will provide welcome relief for many training providers.

Council reiterated the need for further work to be done by senior officials to provide advice on what further action may be required to support the VET sector over the next six to nine months.

Supporting students

Council agreed that supporting VET students to continue their training in the event their training provider closes during the COVID-19 pandemic is a national priority.

Members noted that since their last meeting, all jurisdictions have committed to having some form of course assurance arrangements in place to support government-subsidised VET students to continue their studies in a comparable course, if their course provider closes, wherever this is possible.

It was noted that further advice from senior officials on options to support full-fee paying students currently not protected will be provided to Council in May.

Australian Training Awards

Members noted that given the COVID-19 crisis and its impact on the Australian community, acknowledging excellence in VET is very important.

Members discussed the crucial role the VET sector has to play in providing critical skills at this time, and in Australia's economic recovery; and that over the coming months, we will see Australians looking for opportunities to change careers, which many of them will achieve through VET pathways.

Council agreed that the Australian Training Awards will proceed in 2020 and noted that individual jurisdictions will determine appropriate arrangements for their State or Territory awards. A range of options will be considered for the national awards ceremony in the event that COVID-19 restrictions continue to apply.

Regulatory fee relief

Members welcomed the announcement of Australian Government measures that provide regulatory fee relief through the Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA).

To enable ASQA to provide refunds to the sector for certain fees and charges Council agreed to minor amendments to ASQA's fees and charges instruments.

The measures will assist registered training organisations and VET Accredited course owners to maintain their financial viability and to support students to continue to train.

Next meeting

The Council will continue to work closely over the coming months, with Ministers committing to regular teleconference meetings to ensure key measures are progressed during the COVID-19 pandemic.