



Skills and Workforce Ministerial Council

The Hon Brendan O'Connor MP

Minister for Skills and Training

The Hon Blair Boyer MP

South Australia

Minister for Education, Training and Skills

The Hon Tim Crakanthorp MP

New South Wales

Minister for Skills, TAFE and Tertiary Training

The Hon Felix Ellis MP

Tasmania

Minister for Skills, Training and Workforce Growth

The Hon Dianne Farmer MP

Queensland

Minister for Training and Skills Development

The Hon Paul Kirby MLA

Northern Territory

Minister for Business, Jobs and Training

The Hon Simone McGurk MLA

Western Australia

Minister for Training, Water and Youth

Mr Chris Steel MLA

Australian Capital Territory

Minister for Skills

The Hon Gayle Tierney MLC

Victoria

Minister for Training and Skills

COMMUNIQUE

MEETING OF FEDERAL, STATE AND TERRITORY SKILLS MINISTERS

Federal, State and Territory Skills and Training Ministers met in Darwin to progress negotiations towards a new National Skills Agreement (NSA) to support a modern and responsive skills sector. Building on the success of Fee-Free TAFE which has delivered over 146,000 enrolments in the first quarter of this year, Skills Ministers agreed to take action to achieve better outcomes for students and deliver more access and equity to the Vocational Education and Training (VET) system through a number of priority reform initiatives.

A new 5-year National Skills Agreement

Skills Ministers continued discussion about reform opportunities under the proposed 5-year NSA to address the urgency and opportunity of skills needed by employers and current and future skills for the economy. Commencing in January 2024, the NSA will provide States and Territories with access to additional Commonwealth investment of \$4.1 billion over 5 years from 2024. This includes a Commonwealth investment in TAFE which contributes an additional \$400 million for a further 300,000 TAFE and vocational education places to become fee-free. This investment shows the commitment of the Australian Government to work in partnership with States and Territories to ensure Australia's VET sector, with TAFE at the centre, is high-quality, responsive, affordable and accessible, equipping Australians with the skills they need for well-paid, secure work and filling skill gaps for employers.

Skills Ministers agreed to progress the following shared reform directions to give effect to the Vision and Guiding Principles for a new NSA. National Cabinet and all jurisdictions remain committed to a 1 January 2024 commencement date for the new NSA:

- Shared stewardship of the national VET system
- High quality and accessible training
- Increasing access and completions, especially for those most in need, including for apprenticeships
- Establishing nationally networked TAFE Centres of Excellence
- Supporting the TAFE and training sector, including investment in the VET workforce
- Closing the Gap in partnership with First Nations people
- Coordinating access to foundation skills training to ensure 'no wrong door'
- Enhancing VET data and evidence
- Fee-Free TAFE
- Progressing gender equality
- Continuing to work together on priorities including quality and qualifications reform, Jobs and Skills Australia, Jobs and Skills Councils and the Universities Accord process.

Skills Ministers will continue to work through the details of the agreement and will design clear and simple arrangements to deliver on National Cabinet's vision and principles for the agreement, including providing States and Territories appropriate flexibility, autonomy and funding certainty to deliver national, State and Territory priorities.

Closing the Gap

To achieve a fairer and more effective system, which works towards Closing the Gap, Ministers agreed that measures to support First Nations students must be a priority in the proposed NSA. This means a VET system which will support First Nations people and communities, through greater participation, increased attainment and completion of VET qualifications to obtain culturally safe and meaningful employment.

Skills Ministers reaffirmed that Closing the Gap in vocational education and training is a priority of all governments and key focus of the NSA, warranting collective national leadership, listening to, being guided by First Nations communities. Ministers agreed to a shared response to achieve tangible results.

Skills Ministers agreed key areas of action will be aligned to the four Priority Reforms of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, a crucial element of which is First Nations people being involved in developing and designing initiatives through partnerships and shared decision making from the outset.

Working together, governments will coordinate with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peak organisations, Community-controlled Registered Training Organisations and other First Nations stakeholders to co-design the Closing the Gap initiatives and approaches that will be included in the next NSA.

Skills Ministers held a roundtable with representatives from Indigenous Registered Training Organisations delivering training in remote areas of the Northern Territory, to discuss challenges, successful approaches and to gain insights regarding meaningful support for First Nations people from the VET sector.

Success of Fee-Free TAFE in 2023

Skills Ministers noted the strong uptake of the 180,000 Fee-Free TAFE and vocational education places, available under the 12-month Skills Agreement since January 2023. In the first quarter of this year, Ministers noted there have already been more than 146,000 enrolments in priority skills need areas. Fee-free TAFE will continue to help students with cost-of-living pressures and secure a future workforce. Fee-free TAFE and vocational education places are available across national priority sectors including care, digital and technology, tourism and hospitality, construction, agriculture and sovereign capability. Access is also prioritised for First Nations Australians, young people (17-24), people with disability, and women studying in non-traditional fields.

Federal, State and Territory Skills and Training Ministers are also working together on projects to be funded under the TAFE Technology Fund, with \$28.2 million already committed to 14 priority projects that will upgrade essential TAFE infrastructure and provide modern training facilities.

Education pathways and the Universities Accord

Skills Ministers provided input to the Australian Universities Accord (the Accord), a 12-month review of Australia's higher education system. The Australian Universities Accord is an opportunity to facilitate a national discussion and build consensus around a better integrated tertiary education system.

Professor Mary O’Kane, Chair of the Accord Panel, provided Skills Ministers with an update on the Accord process, including key themes identified in consultations to date and explored opportunities with Ministers to support greater alignment between the VET and higher education systems, with a focus on the benefits to students and the economy.

Skills Ministers discussed how the reform directions under the NSA could also serve a more cohesive and connected tertiary sector and acknowledged the importance of continued engagement with States and Territories by the Accord Panel to test and refine its findings and recommendations to the Federal Government.

National VET Completion Project

In February 2023, Skills Ministers endorsed a project to be led by South Australia to improve VET completions, with future directions to be driven by collective national leadership.

Skills Ministers discussed the *National VET Completions project*, which includes the establishment of a National Taskforce to provide recommendations to Governments on improving VET completions in the context of national skills reform.

The taskforce is undertaking consultation and engagement to better understand major factors impacting completion rates and key intervention points, and identify practical solutions, as well as exploring national and international best practice models.

The discussion highlighted a collaborative data analysis approach between the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER), Jobs and Skills Australia, and Governments, to improve data collection and outcomes reporting.

VET Information Standard and NCVER Strategic Plan

Skills Ministers noted the progress on the VET Data Streamlining program which aims to modernise the way VET student activity data is collected, managed, and used. Skills Ministers noted progress to date on the program’s work to develop the VET Information Standard Release 1.0, and plan for the VET Information Standard to be released later in 2023.

Skills Ministers also agreed that the NCVER develop a five-year strategic plan to ensure NCVER continues to be aligned with the broader skills reform agenda.

NT VET Initiatives

Skills Ministers noted the success of the Northern Territory’s recent professional development training and work placements program for students from Timor-Leste in agriculture, hospitality, aged care and construction sectors, underpinned by a 4-year Strategic Partnership Agreement. Skills Ministers discussed the benefits of new approaches to training for remote-based VET students and provided strong support for further innovation in the community of practice for VET.

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