

Collecting 'total' vocational education and training activity

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Collecting ‘total’ vocational education and training activity

The National Centre for Vocational Education Research manages, on behalf of all Australian governments, a series of data collections that cover vocational education and training (VET). The primary collection, known as the National VET Provider Collection, captures data on training activity and completions of all students attending a government provider (mostly TAFE institutes) and those students who are funded through state training authorities but whose training is delivered by a private provider.

This arrangement arose from the origins of the provider collection, which was to provide accountability for the expenditure of state training authority funds, jointly provided by the Commonwealth and state or territory governments. As the overall training market has developed, the NCVER provider collection has become more and more deficient in terms of measuring the overall level of vocational education and training. This has been recognised for some years and, in the 2009–10 Commonwealth Budget, NCVER received funding to redress the deficiency. The budget allocation was intended to enable NCVER to expand the provider collection to be comprehensive, in part so that it could be used to select a representative sample of all students to take part in the annual Student Outcomes Survey. This survey would then be able to provide the data required to fully measure two of the six indicators against which the Council of Australian Governments measures progress under the National Agreement for Skills and Workforce Development.

This initiative is floundering for the simple reason that training providers are reluctant to voluntarily supply the necessary data; some because of the cost, others for ‘commercial’ reasons. To remove this impediment to a comprehensive collection, data provision needs to be mandated.

Such a course of action can only be justified if the arguments for a comprehensive collection are strong enough.

- ✧ There are essentially three reasons why we need a comprehensive data collection of vocational education and training.
- ✧ First, we need a comprehensive data collection for public policy. How can governments make sensible resource allocation decisions if they do not have a complete picture of the level of vocational education and training activity and subsequent outcomes?
- ✧ Second, we need a comprehensive data collection for quality assurance. How can we design robust quality assurance processes if we do not have comprehensive data on the training activity to be assured? NCVER has argued that a sound and comprehensive statistical collection is a necessary foundation for an effective quality assurance system.
- ✧ Third, we need a comprehensive data collection for consumers. One of the difficulties of purchasing a service such as education is that it is very difficult to know what you are buying until you have actually consumed it. Therefore, it is important for consumers, whether they are individuals or businesses, to have plentiful information about a potential provider; for example, what courses the provider offers, how many students have undertaken the various courses, what are the pass rates and completion rates of the various courses.

The argument that a comprehensive data collection would be of benefit to providers has also been advanced. The argument is that it would enable providers to benchmark themselves and use the data for business planning purposes.

Of course, none of these arguments would be of much importance if the publicly funded part of the sector dominated provision. But we know this is not the case from various surveys and attempts to estimate total provision. While all of these surveys suffer from methodological drawbacks, the overall conclusion is that private provision is very sizable. Such provision covers a multitude of situations including training by not-for-profits, training by enterprise registered training organisations, and training which is government subsidised but is funded outside the conventional state training authority route. Currently, we get data from 152 TAFE institutes and other government providers, from 528 community education providers and partial data from 1775 private providers. We get no data from the remaining 2500-odd private providers.

If the need for a complete collection is accepted, then the issue is how to make it happen. NCVER's view is that a voluntary collection will never work. This is because the provision of data will cost individual providers—even if we design systems to minimise this cost—and some providers will view the provision of data as being against their commercial interests. Therefore, mandatory provision of data needs to be a condition of registration as a registered training organisation (RTOs). Simply put, the benefits of being part of Australia's accredited and quality assured vocational education and training sector need to imply an obligation on the registered training organisation. Unaccredited training would not be affected.

While NCVER argues strongly for a mandatory collection, it is very mindful of minimising the cost to providers. Information required under the Australian Vocational Education and Training Management Information Statistical Standard (AVETMISS) comprises where the training occurs, who the students are, what they are doing, when they did it and what they achieved. A number of other essential elements (relating to the classification of data) in the provider collection can be collected from other sources such as the National Training Information System or state training authorities.

To spell out the requirements in a little more detail, the information comprises:

- ✧ enrolments at the unit of competency level for each student: the provider identifier (where), student identifier (who), unit of competency and qualification identifier (what), unit start and end dates (when), and an outcome identifier (whether the competency was achieved or otherwise)
- ✧ qualification completions for each student: RTO identifier (where), the qualification (what), the student identifier (who), year program complete (when), and whether the student has received the qualification
- ✧ student information: student identifier (who), prior educational background (school level and other qualifications), sex, date of birth, Indigenous status and locality of residence (postcode and suburb). There are a number of other student demographics that are needed under the standard such as year completed school, language spoken at home if not English, labour force status, country of birth, disability status, and proficiency in English. However, these could be treated with leniency so that providers have ample time to change enrolment forms and business systems.

Operationally, the cost to providers can be minimised by working with firms which provide student management software, so that the providers can simply download an extract from their student system.

As argued, the provision of data needs to be a condition of registration. The appropriate mechanism has been available under the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF) since its revision in 2007. The latest 2010 revision has the following provision as part of the condition for initial and continuing registration:

The RTO must have a student records management system in place that has the capacity to provide the registering body with AVETMISS [the statistical standard for the provider collection] compliant data.

However, this condition falls short of what is required. Having an AVETMISS compliant student system is not the same as actually providing the data – ‘having the capacity’ does not advance the situation very

far at all if the provider is not required to use that capacity by providing the data to the provider collection.

The new legislation for the national VET regulator (the Australian Skills Quality Authority) does contain an appropriate mechanism for mandating the provision of core data. It will have a legislative instrument which will contain data provisions endorsed by the Commonwealth and State/Territory Ministers. Those provisions need to go beyond the AQTF condition and explicitly specify the provision of AVETMISS compliant data to NCVER. Otherwise we will be no further forward.

While NCVER is very keen to effect a comprehensive data collection, we need to be realistic. It is our experience that it takes two to three years to bed down any administratively-based statistical system. We know that it takes time for providers to amend or develop their systems. Therefore, we would want to encourage providers to provide the data in the early years on the understanding that there is a period of grace for those who do not have government funded activity. Our intention would be to make the process as painless as possible and so we intend to work closely with software vendors to assist the process of providing AVETMISS compliant data.

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