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The VET sector is struggling to keep up with the rapid changes in industry. from shutterstock.com

The government keeps talking about revamping VET – but is it actually doing it?

May 30, 2019 5.43am AEST

The vocational education and training (VET) sector is integral to Australia's economy and the businesses and workforce that underpin it. The sector provides skills to 4.2 million students at 4,200 registered training providers.

This is important because, as the World Economic Forum highlights, access to skilled workers is a key factor that distinguishes successful enterprises from unsuccessful ones. But many Australian employers are unhappy with the VET system – employer satisfaction is the lowest it's been in the decade.

The rise of the digital economy and the fourth industrial revolution are predicted to cause major job disruptions. In essence, industry needs are changing rapidly and the VET sector isn't keeping up. And there are ongoing concerns about the quality of the sector itself, after the rise of some dodgy private organisations offering questionable qualifications.

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In November 2018, the federal government appointed former New Zealand skills minister Steven Joyce to lead a once-in-a-generation review of VET. The Coalition government based many of its pre-election announcements on some recommendations of this review (now known as the Joyce review), which were released in April 2019.

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A plan that will give an additional 80,000 Australians a career by gaining an apprenticeship. [#BuildingOurEconomy](#)

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So, what did Joyce recommend and is the government actually heeding the advice?

What did Joyce recommend?

The Joyce review details 71 recommendations. These form the basis of a six-point plan to transform VET so it can provide students with skills that reflect the needs of employers.

The plan centres on:

- strengthening quality assurance
- speeding up qualification development
- simplifying funding and skills matching
- providing better careers information
- providing clearer secondary school pathways into VET
- providing greater access for disadvantaged Australians.

The Joyce review noted it might take five to six years to act on many of the recommendations. In the interim, the report advised moving early on recommendations that would address the declining confidence in the sector. These early steps are:

1. bringing forward reforms to strengthen the Australian Skills Quality Authority – the national VET regulator
2. piloting a new business-led model of organising skills for qualification development, and extending work-based VET further into less traditional areas, such as assistant professional jobs in health care or high-tech industries
3. establishing a national skills commission, which would start working with the states and territories to develop a nationally consistent funding model based on shared needs
4. revamping apprenticeship incentives to increase their attractiveness to employers and trainees

5. establishing a national careers institute, which would provide better careers information to students
6. introducing new vocational pathways into senior secondary schools to create a more seamless transition from Year 11 and 12 into VET courses
7. providing new support for second-chance learners needing foundation language, literacy, numeracy and digital skills.



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Strengthening Skills: Expert Review of Australia's Vocational Education and Training System by Steven Joyce buff.ly/2lo0RZc

Strengthening Skills
Expert Review of Australia's Vocational Education and Training System
The Honourable Steven Joyce

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Is the government doing it?

The federal government agreed to implement most of the early action recommendations. It committed A\$525 million to the Delivering Skills for Today and Tomorrow package. But it has a looser interpretation of how early these should be put in place.

Only two of the six early actions identified by the Joyce review were budgeted for in 2019-2020: the establishment of a national skills commission and a national careers institute. Some actions, such as 40% of the funding for a new apprenticeship initiative, or A\$108 million, are only planned to be resourced as late as the 2023-24 budget.

The review's recommendations mainly focused on the slow process of creating and updating qualifications. This is good, but it could be argued the review didn't directly address the needs articulated by various industry groups.

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These included calls for more collaboration between the VET and university sectors. Then there was the Business Council of Australia’s appeal for a single market platform and funding model for the two sectors to enable workers to more easily retrain and reskill over their lives.

However, the review agrees with industry that “change will take time”. It will require the federal government to “work with the states and territories” but also, as the Productivity Commission noted, the changes will need to be “piloted and evaluated by willing industries”.

Some creative partnerships

Some states and territories have already started experimenting with a small number of players in the VET sector to overcome industry concerns. There is Rio Tinto’s collaboration with Western Australia’s South Metropolitan TAFE to develop an autonomous vehicle qualification. And Blockchain Collective’s development of an Advanced Diploma of Applied Blockchain).

Other significant experiments include the New South Wales government’s Sydney School of Entrepreneurship between TAFE NSW, universities and industry, and the Factory of the Future between the Victorian government, Swinburne University and Siemens.

These green shoots point to a willingness in governments, industry and broader VET stakeholders to take the initiative to work together and experiment. We believe this will help overcome the inertia in making changes to the VET sector, and better meet the future needs of employers and students.

Read more: Fewer Australians will have uni or TAFE skills if governments don't reform tertiary education

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