

Tertiary education council support national overhaul of sector

Alex Crowe -Reporter
7 June 2020

A national overhaul of the vocational education and training sector will ensure funding is directed to skills needed to sustain recovery in the post-COVID-19 environment, the peak body representing independent training providers the Independent Tertiary Education Council of Australia has said.

The chief executive of the council, Troy Williams, said current arrangements that assisted states and territories to fund vocational education and training were broken.

"Students and their employers are bewildered by competing study and funding options," Mr Williams said.

"Reform is long overdue. Different loan programs and different levels of government funding make it hard for students.

"The move towards an activity-based funding model that provides state and territory governments with clear guidance on where money will be provided to support students is welcomed."

The Productivity Commission released a report this week which found the VET sector was underperforming, hard to navigate and inconsistent across the country.

A spokesperson for the ACT government said while parts of the sector would benefit from reform, aspects of the system including the states' and territories' capacity to respond to local labour markets were worth hanging on to.

"Any national reforms must be based on evidence and agreed to by the owners of the system. Not doing so could put in jeopardy many of our strengths," the spokesperson said.

The spokesperson said the current system in the ACT was effective in delivering the skills and capabilities citizens and employers needed.

"Many courses are delivered at higher levels than in other Australian jurisdictions, which reflects both the nature of our knowledge-based economy and our highly educated workforce," they said.

The spokesperson said the problems with the VET system that Prime Minister Scott Morrison highlighted

in his announcement at the Press Club last week "are not as clear in the ACT".

"Contrary to the Prime Minister's statement, the ACT has seen increased numbers of apprenticeship commencements - rising 5.9 per cent between 2018 and 2019," the spokesperson said.

"It is also important to note that states and territories have been funding the gaps left by stagnant contributions from the Commonwealth. The amount the Commonwealth provides the ACT for Vocational Education and Training has remained the same at around \$30m despite vastly increasing enrolments.

"At the same time the ACT government has increased its VET funding by over 20 per cent to keep up with training demand. The Commonwealth must recognise the expertise of states and territories in this area and recognise the fact states and territories have shouldered more and more of the funding burden before declaring the VET system to be a 'dud' system."

While there is no legislation to control course costs at the more than 80 registered training organisations in Canberra, the ACT government publishes a minimum tuition fee for all courses and there is an unpublished maximum fee.

If a training organisation advertised a fee above the maximum they would be instructed to reduce it.

The spokesperson said the ACT considered policy decisions in all states and territories, particularly NSW, in its efforts to maintain consistencies between tertiary education costs and quality.

However, "what may be of a higher need in the ACT may not be a need in NSW, and therefore pricing may be different", they said.

When it comes to quality control, the ACT Quality Framework underpins the delivery of training in Canberra's vocational training sector.

Under the framework, training organisations must meet contractual and compliance arrangements to receive funding.

In February, the ACT government reduced its subsidised spots from 107 qualifications and 25 skill sets to 36 qualification and five skill sets, a result of

increased demand for courses, according to a statement at the time.

Last week, the ACT announced it would increase that number to subsidies for 60 qualifications and more than 40 skill sets, as part of its \$2 million COVID-19 Economic Survival Package.

Minister for tertiary education Chris Steel said skills shortages had been identified in several sectors, including early childhood, disability, aged care and construction and would be subsidised under the Skilled Capital program.

According to a statement, more than 1000 Canberrans enrolled in one of the key skills training courses since they opened up last week.

A spokesperson said the government would consult with stakeholders to prevent an oversubscription to courses like that which occurred in February when unprecedented enrolments resulted in the ACT going more than 3.8 million over budget.

On Friday, the ACT government also opened up another 3800 fully-funded training places to support an accelerated accredited of infection control and food handling training in response to the pandemic.

The territory committed \$670,000 for training under the national Infection Control Training Fund.

Ends.