
Communiqué for the Skills Ministers' Meeting

31 July 2020

Skills Ministers met today to advance priorities to support Australia's critical skills and training needs in response to COVID-19 and to continue progressing long-term reforms that will deliver a strong vocational education and training (VET) system for students, employers and industry.

Skills Ministers confirmed the central role that an accessible, relevant and high quality training system will have in Australia's economic recovery.

National Cabinet

Skills Ministers discussed the cessation of COAG and new architecture for Commonwealth-State relations under National Cabinet and the National Federation Reform Council. They noted that the National Cabinet Review of COAG Councils and Ministerial Forums is currently underway, with recommendations on the best model for Commonwealth-State relations expected in September 2020. While the review is underway, Skills Ministers continue to meet to progress critical priorities and to fulfil regulatory and legislative requirements.

Skills Reform

Reform of the VET system is central to supporting Australia's economic recovery and growth. Skills Ministers acknowledged that the jobs created as we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic are not likely to be the jobs that were lost. Many jobseekers will need to reskill or upskill, and young people will require support to meet their needs and aspirations. Strengthening Australia's skills and training system is a priority for national recovery and now more than ever we need a responsive and adaptable system that is able to pivot to meet the needs of learners and the economy.

Through signing of the Heads of Agreement for Skills Reform, seven jurisdictions have committed to immediate reforms to improve VET quality and relevance along with a set of high-level reform priorities which will be worked through in detail as part of the negotiation of a new national skills funding agreement.

The Heads of Agreement, in combination with the JobTrainer Fund, forms a vital part of the national recovery efforts. Skills Ministers noted that bilateral discussions on the JobTrainer Fund have commenced. The JobTrainer Fund is expected to provide for around an additional 340,700 training places for school leavers, and help upskill and retrain jobseekers. Places will be available from September 2020. JobTrainer is a significant joint investment by the Commonwealth and states and territories in skills for recovery and in supporting people into jobs.

VET Reform Roadmap

Skills Ministers have worked together over the last twelve months to develop a draft VET Reform Roadmap (Roadmap). Ministers noted that the Roadmap is the result of significant collaboration between all jurisdictions and consultation with industry and the VET sector. This has informed policy priorities in the Heads of Agreement for Skills Reform.

Skills Ministers asked the Skills Senior Officials' Network to update the draft Roadmap to reflect the impact of the skills and training system to the COVID-19 pandemic and the intensive stakeholder feedback.

An updated Roadmap will be considered at the next Skills Ministers' meeting in the context of discussions under the Heads of Agreement for Skills Reform.

COVID-19 and skills for recovery

Skills Ministers recognised the significant contribution of the Infection Control Training Fund to assist Australian workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Skills Ministers noted the significant work of all jurisdictions in delivering the vital skills needed to limit the spread of COVID-19. The rapid rollout of the Infection Control Skills Sets has commenced with training providers offering government funded training to critical workers across the country.

There are training places still available in all states and territories, and this training will continue to support the re-opening of businesses across Australia.

Apprentices and Traineeships

Ministers considered the progress made by the working group of senior officials to understand the impacts of COVID-19 on apprenticeships and traineeships. Ministers noted that whilst there has been an increase in suspensions since the onset of COVID-19, there has been a decrease in cancellations and withdrawals compared to the same period in 2019. Analysis by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research attributed this reduction in cancellations and withdrawals to key government initiatives such as the Supporting Apprentices and Trainees Wage Subsidy and JobKeeper program.

Members acknowledged the importance of providing support to those apprentices and trainees most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, in areas such as hairdressing, automotive, hospitality, tourism. Information from stakeholders suggests that construction is likely to be significantly impacted over the coming months.

Skills Ministers tasked the Skills Senior Officials' Network to identify gaps in service delivery for impacted apprentices and trainees, and to provide advice on how we might increase new commencements, retention and reengagement of apprentices and trainees for consideration at the next meeting.

MEM Manufacturing and Engineering Training Package

Ministers discussed next steps for Release 2.0 of the Manufacturing and Engineering Training Package (MEM R2).

Ministers requested that the Australian Industry and Skills Committee (AISC) urgently provide up-to-date advice from industry about the workplace practice hours component of MEM R2, in recognition of changed economic conditions, to enable an endorsement decision on the MEM R2 during September 2020.

Next meeting

Ministers will meet again in the coming months to progress reforms in the skills and training sector, and consider the ongoing impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on Australia's economic recovery.