



**TAFE
DIRECTORS
AUSTRALIA**

SUBMISSION

Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia
Australian Association for Research in Education

DEVELOPING A DECADAL PLAN FOR AUSTRALIAN EDUCATION RESEARCH

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About TAFE Directors Australia

TAFE Directors Australia (TDA) is the national peak body that represents Australia's network of state and territory publicly owned Technical and Further Education (TAFE) institutes and TAFE divisions of dual sector universities. TDA is also the Coordination Hub for the National TAFE Network.

The primary business of TDA members is skills development and tertiary education, focusing on nationally accredited qualifications and skill sets, non-accredited training for bespoke employer purposes, and foundation skills. Over half TDA members are higher education providers. TDA members also lead the nationally networked TAFE Centres of Excellence fostering innovation and applied research in partnerships with industry, universities and other stakeholders.

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Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input into a Decadal Plan for Australian Education Research 2025 – 2036. The Discussion Paper *'Charting Australia Education Research Priorities and Future Directions'* identifies a number of issues and research priorities for vocational education and training (VET).

The purpose of this submission is to provide additional context to consider when determining the decadal priorities, with a particular focus on research priorities for Australian TAFEs and TAFE divisions of dual sector universities. TDA recommends that the Decadal Plan is developed in consideration of the following critical points:

1. A clear distinction must be made between TAFE as a public provider at the heart of Australia's technical and tertiary education system and the 'VET sector' which is comprised of more than 4000 Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) of varying size, capability and purpose.
2. Research about TAFE, if not led by TAFE, should be participatory and enable the development of TAFE research capability.
3. A national pricing scheme for VET should NOT be included as a research priority, as this will duplicate previous research and result in poor quality outcomes and increased cost burdens for TAFEs.
4. There are opportunities to leverage TAFE capability to investigate solutions to entrenched curriculum misalignment between VET and higher education.
5. Research priorities must leverage the potential of TAFE Centres of Excellence.

Distinguishing TAFE as the public provider

Distinguishing between 'TAFE' and other providers within the VET sector is critical to determine research priorities and to yield meaningful insights from investigations. Of the more than 4000 Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) involved in VET delivery throughout Australia¹, only 28 are public TAFE providers (including the public TAFE divisions of dual sector universities in Victoria, Northern Territory and Queensland). More than 2700 RTOs are private training providers (i.e. a for-profit business model based upon the provision of VET). While some issues are sectoral, they are experienced differently by TAFE than by non-TAFE providers.

¹ Jobs and Skills Australia. (2024) *RTO Typology: Methodology Paper*.
<https://www.jobsandskills.gov.au/publications/rto-typology>

TAFEs are large, complex public organisations at the heart of Australia's skills development and tertiary education system, tasked with bipartisan responsibilities to deliver on both commonwealth and state/territory priorities. TAFE NSW, for example, has over 350,000 enrolments, approximately 15,000 employees and reports directly to the NSW Skills Minister.

TAFEs hold societal and sovereign responsibilities which non-government RTOs do not, and the capability requirements and industrial relations environment associated with the TAFE workforce is vastly different to non-TAFE RTOs. TAFEs deliver the majority of Foundation Skills programs, and more than half deliver higher education as well as vocational education and training. Therefore, they are subject to regulation by both ASQA and TEQSA.

Research 'about TAFE' by TAFE

A decadal plan for education research must support funding of TAFE-led research into TAFE priorities. Too often and for too long, research about TAFE (and VET more generally) is undertaken by researchers and consultants with good intentions, but without deep insider knowledge of this complex and historied component of Australia's tertiary education system.

TAFE institutes have demonstrated capability to conduct research, particularly applied research undertaken in partnership with industry and other stakeholders. TDA's [submission](#) to the Strategic Examination of Research and Development, highlighted TAFE's capability and the barriers which limit participation.

TAFE educators participate and lead applied research activities as a means of improving teaching and learning, however there are structural barriers which limit wider TAFE participation in research and negatively impact the development of TAFE researcher capability. TDA's [submission](#) to the Australian Research Council (ARC) on the Policy Review of the National Competitive Grants Program highlighted the barriers created by restrictive funding guidelines. For example, guidelines for ARC funded research proposals and Cooperative Research Centre (CRC) Programs limits TAFE involvement to 'in-kind' support, which constrains and devalues TAFE's potential contribution and increases the personal burden to TAFE researchers who choose to participate in such projects or undertake research work out of hours. TAFE partners are most often recruited by universities to demonstrate stakeholder involvement, to leverage the industry current skills and connections that TAFE is well known for, to recruit TAFE students or staff as participants, or to utilise specialised TAFE facilities.

These limitations constrain the capacity of TAFE to conduct research and negatively impact the development of TAFE researchers, resulting in a lost opportunity to gain authentic insights into this critical segment of Australia's tertiary education sector.

Funding and pricing

The discussion paper proposes the need for nationally consistent pricing for VET students as a means of ensuring equitable access. TDA **does not** support a national pricing scheme. This is an unnecessary market-control measure which is not enforced in other education sectors. It does not allow for the complexities of the federated VET funding model and the differences between local environments, states and territories.

Similar work was undertaken in 2021 by the [National Skills Commission](#) at significant financial cost, and with great impost to TAFEs during data collection periods. The outcomes from that period were unsupported and TDA remains strongly opposed.

If implemented, a national pricing scheme will likely escalate issues of quality in the sector as 'for-profit' providers seek to reduce critical but costly educator inputs. It will also create significant disadvantages for TAFE as the public provider, who will be tasked with provision of a wide range of 'training products' deemed non-profitable by private RTOs.

Instead, TDA recommends that research should be focused on the kinds of funding and support required to ensure viable public TAFE education can be made available to those in regional and remote areas, where there are thin markets, and which enable learner support needs to be adequately met.

The training system and the VET curriculum

Development of the VET curriculum is based upon the principles of competency-based training (CBT), with job tasks unitised in national training packages. The design of training packages and the structures which guide their development create barriers to learner pathways across the tertiary system. The misalignment between the VET and higher education curriculum has been identified as a critical issue impacting learner pathways and is a risk to achieving the goals of the Commonwealth Government's tertiary harmonisation reforms.

TAFEs have the capability to develop curriculum for VET and higher education. A number have been granted self-accrediting authority by TEQSA for higher education programs. The development of alternative curriculum models which enable smoother learner transitions between vocational qualifications and higher education should be earmarked as a research priority for the tertiary education sector, particularly for pilots and investigations undertaken by TAFE higher education providers and dual sector universities.

TAFE Centres of Excellence

As an outcome of the Commonwealth's [National Skills Agreement](#), TAFE Centres of Excellence (TCoEs) have been established to lead the development and dissemination of best practice solutions to critical and emerging workforce issues, including the TAFE workforce, and to enable applied research and innovation². TCoEs are nationally networked, with established connections to other TAFEs, universities, industry and Jobs and Skills Councils³. [Sixteen TAFE Centres of Excellence have been announced to date](#), addressing identified priority industry areas.

TCoEs must be considered a critical component of the education research context for the tertiary system, including the contribution they can make to build TAFE educator research capability and to ensure ongoing and equitable access to appropriate research-related funding and opportunities into the future. TCoEs are already nationally networked and supported through a National TAFE Network.

If supported in an appropriate policy context, Australian TCoEs also have the potential to connect internationally to further amplify their impact on future workforce needs, and the skills and tertiary education systems to meet these needs. The European Commission, for example, has enabled the proliferation of transnationally connected [Centres of Vocational Excellence \(CoVE\)](#) which are contributing to international economic and social development needs, including education.

Conclusion

TDA welcome a long-term strategy for education research which is inclusive of TAFE and which differentiates TAFE's role as a public provider of vocational skills and tertiary education. This submission has provided additional context to supplement the background provided in the *Developing a Decadal Plan for Australian Education Research Discussion Paper*, and recommended priority research areas for inclusion. We welcome further discussion on this topic.

² Commonwealth Government (2025) TAFE Centres of Excellence Federal Funding Agreement – Education and Skills. Available <https://federalfinancialrelations.gov.au/sites/federalfinancialrelations.gov.au/files/2025-03/TAFE%20Centres%20of%20Excellence.pdf>

³ Commonwealth Government: Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (2025). *TAFE Centres of Excellence*. Available: <https://www.dewr.gov.au/national-skills-agreement/tafe-centres-excellence>