Expert Review of Australia’s Vocational Education and Training Sector

Response prepared by AMES Australia
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**Introduction**
AMES Australia is an autonomous adult education institute accountable to the Victorian Minister for Training and Skills. The organisation provides a comprehensive range of initial settlement support, English language and literacy tuition, vocational training and employment services to migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, in Victoria, South Australia, Tasmania and Western Sydney.

Newly arrived refugees and migrants are novices in the Australian workforce and a significant number require access to VET to gain first employment in Australia.

AMES welcomes this opportunity to respond to the Expert Review of the Vocational Education and Training (VET) Sector.

AMES contribution to the Review is specifically in relation to how the VET system can be more effective for, and inclusive of, culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) participants. These include vulnerable cohorts, such as those currently unemployed and at risk of unemployment and those with low literacy and numeracy skills as outlined in the Review’s Terms of Reference (number 6).

AMES Australia makes recommendations in four areas for consideration by the Review:
1. Bridging courses
2. Stronger Adult Community Education (ACE) and TAFE linkages
3. Recognition of skills set training
4. Reducing funding and course access barriers for vulnerable cohorts.

**CALD cohort profile**
In this context AMES defines CALD participants as those who have arrived in Australia relatively recently and have one or more of the following attributes:

- Limited or no Australian work experience and work-related networks
- Limited or no knowledge and understanding of Australian workplace culture and systems
- Limited foundation skills including low level English communication skills, literacy and numeracy, some pre-literacy in first language
- Overseas skills and experiences which are relevant but not easily translated, transferable and/or recognised in Australian workplaces.

The CALD cohort also includes migrants and refugees who:

- have been in Australia for a longer period, and may currently be in the workforce – usually in low skilled occupations, but who continue to face barriers in accessing and successfully completing vocational training to progress to higher skilled opportunities.
- need training to re-enter employment after losing a job.

Through our English language programs, vocational training programs and jobactive employment services AMES Australia has significant experience working with these CALD groups and first-hand knowledge of the challenges they face in the VET system. In 2017-18 AMES worked with over 3,000 CALD clients in pre-accredited language programs; over 3,000 CALD clients in Skill First courses; 876 in Skills for Education and Employment (SEE) programs and 475 new arrivals in the Adult Migrant English Program.1

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During the same period AMES worked with 18,840 jobseekers from CALD backgrounds (55% of our total jobactive caseload). 21% of these (3,955) were from refugee backgrounds, and included people from Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, Myanmar, Sudan, Ethiopia and Somalia.²

Previous education background and very minimal English skills provide the major barriers to refugees and migrants undertaking any vocational study using existing models in TAFE Institutes. The time it will take people to develop confident foundation skills and a sufficient level of competence in industry-level technical skills (i.e. achieve a VET outcome) from this starting point should not be underestimated.

AMES Australia’s experience is that the majority of new arrivals are highly motivated to start work as soon as possible after they arrive in Australia. Without supported access to VET that is customised to their particular needs these new arrivals are at risk of not reaching their employment goals; and employers will miss out on the potential contribution of this cohort to the Australian workforce.

**Need for tailored training responses**

Meeting the needs of vulnerable cohorts such as the CALD groups described above, requires tailored training responses.

All Australians with language / literacy skills too low to successfully complete VET training should be eligible to access training in language and literacy and entry level skills, pre-vocational courses and preparation for work and training in the Australian context. Achieving this objective requires VET training providers to have a sound understanding of the characteristics of the individuals who are already identifying a need for training as well as those who, for a range of reasons, are not accessing training. It also requires VET training providers to have a current understanding of what businesses require so that VET, even at entry level, can be informed by potential and realistic labour market opportunities.

For CALD clients the importance of initial career / training pathway counselling and planning is essential to their understanding of the VET system, finding their preferred training pathway and maximising their chances of retention and success in the VET system. Pathway counselling and planning is a recommended inclusion in each of the options detailed below.

### 1 Bridging programs

Some migrants and refugees come to Australia with skills and experience that can be used within a short time frame if the appropriate bridging training is available. Bridging programs are a viable option for new and recent arrivals with low skills levels and with a strong desire to start work.

AMES recommends a significantly increased role for bridging programs within VET. Bridging programs:

- provide capacity for Australians needing a supported pathway into VET
- provide capacity to undertake initial skill set training rather than restricting training to full qualifications as a first step to employment

These may include bridging programs that provide concurrent English language and VET content provided by a combination of skilled EAL teachers and VE trainers.

² Department of Jobs and Small Business Employment Services System.
The concept of bridging courses is supported by newly arrived client communities. In AMES consultations with our client communities improved links between EAL providers, vocational English and pre-employment programs to train refugees or build on their existing skills to expedite entry into the labour market, especially in areas of skills shortage, have been noted.

2 Flexibility in the VET system: Skill Sets
There is an understandable focus on targets for completion of qualifications at federal and state level. This is driven by projections on skill shortages and the need to increase the numbers of workers with higher qualification levels.

At the same time, the system must be able to accommodate the needs of individuals and businesses.

AMES experience in providing training, particularly for newly arrived job seekers who urgently need employment, is that they will complete limited accredited training to meet employer requirements and start work as soon as possible, rather than undertaking lengthy full qualifications training and then seeking work.

For those refugees or other migrants with low levels of literacy, completing a whole certificate prior to gaining employment is not realistic and is not the most effective pathway to first step low level skilled or unskilled employment. It is equally important that training does not cease with this first step employment and that workers are not consigned to low skilled employment in the long term.

This is not the case for all newly arrived refugees and migrants who require additional skills to gain employment, but it is the reality for some. A flexible system would ensure that qualifications could be completed in small steps as the learner has the capacity to undertake them, or as the employer requires them. The objective would still be to complete qualifications but over a longer time frame combined with work and other life and settlement pressures. This flexibility would also facilitate increased responsiveness in meeting the changing skill needs of industry.

A culture of lifelong learning must be wide ranging enough to include those learners who commence this continuous pathway with low levels of social and learning capital. While lifelong learning may be accessible to those who start with some qualifications and can progressively build on these (e.g. Skills Passport), it is not an opportunity that is so easily integrated into life plans for those who lack these advantages.

For refugees and migrants who arrive with low levels of formal education and little or no English, achieving a culture of lifelong learning requires entry points to training that recognise these barriers.

This kind of flexibility in the system is also noted as a means of attracting more CALD Australians to undertake formal training.

3 Dual delivery at local level – ACE / VET pathways
An Australian qualification is often a key component in securing employment for newly arrived refugees and migrants. When these participants must undertake training in a strictly linear way – achieving a high level of English language before commencing vocational training – pathways to work are delayed. The alternative is that unskilled work in an area that does not use existing overseas skills and experience is the only work choice. Another option is dropping out of the training system altogether.
Similarly for young people who have a pathway to full time study as well as language/literacy needs, this pathway is either delayed or unachievable. Young refugees and migrants need to normalise their lives as soon as possible and commence study pathways. Insufficient levels of English language continues to present a significant barrier to retention in and successful completion of vocational courses.

[There are also a significant number of “non-CALD” Australians requiring literacy support to successfully complete such vocational training].

The training system is generally not set up to cater well to these group of learners. It is imperative to provide more flexible access for learners who require foundation skills to be developed concurrently with vocational skills. Freeing up the system to accommodate and encourage cooperation is an essential component of any successful reform within VET.

For example, training that relies on specialist facilities cannot be delivered by all providers. Therefore is it necessary to develop models that provide pathways across sectors – both sequentially and concurrently. This would facilitate learners undertaking units from courses across more than one provider – for example, where they enrol with a smaller Adult, Community and Further Education provider because they lack foundation skills or confidence but wish to transition to a vocational course in a trade area that only TAFE Institutes have the infrastructure to deliver.

There is an opportunity to focus on strengthening the links and pathways between TAFE and Adult, Community and Further Education (ACFE) sectors. Establishing and building on existing models that facilitate these sectors working together in the interests of learner pathways will make the best use of the government’s investment in VET.

4 Reducing funding and course access barriers for vulnerable cohorts

Reducing funding and course access barriers to learner pathways is an important aspect to consider. Ensuring eligibility for government supported training and maximising career and work options through foundation and vocational training should be enabled such as a learner with a Diploma undertaking a trade course at Certificate III when seeking a different career path or work opportunity.

Conclusion: Tapping the CALD market

The CALD population – especially those relatively newly arrived in Australia – makes up a significant group of Australians who may not have considered VET studies as a viable option. Mainstream VET, as it is largely delivered today, requires levels of English language considerably higher than that yet attained by many in this cohort. At the same time many migrants and refugees are highly motivated to gain skills and qualifications for careers in Australia.

This market exists and can be tapped if the right supports are in place:

- bridging programs offering concurrent English language support and VET training for CALD students
- pre-vocational courses delivered in partnership with specialist EAL providers as an entry to TAFE
- English language support for CALD students enrolled in mainstream VET courses
- customised courses targeting vocational skills development, communication skills and knowledge of Australian workplace culture
• career counselling to assist students make informed choices about courses / careers in a new country
• options to learn in practical contexts that are not threatening for adults who have not studied formally.

Early investment in appropriately funded specialised vocational training approaches is highly recommended in order to maximise employment and training outcomes for new arrivals and avoid the risk of having these Australians disengage from training and work opportunities.

In this way significant numbers of new and recent arrivals can be transitioned into vocational training and employment with maximum chance of success and skills contribution.

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