



Employers' views on improving the vocational education and training system

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Employers' views on improving the vocational education and training system

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Vocational education and training (VET) plays an important role in providing employees with the skills they require to be effective in the modern workplace and contribute to Australia's economic growth. But how well does the VET system meet the needs of employers?

This study examines employers' views on the three ways they can engage with the VET system: by having vocational qualifications as a job requirement; employing apprentices and trainees; and using nationally recognised training. In particular, the authors focus on employers' suggestions for improvement to the VET system and, for those employers who are dissatisfied with the system, their reasons for dissatisfaction.

Key messages

- ✧ Employers are generally satisfied with the VET system. Across the three types of engagement with the VET system, the level of satisfaction ranged between 77% and 83%.
- ✧ Those dissatisfied with the VET system point to the relevance of skills taught: that training is too general and not specific enough, and there is insufficient focus on practical skills for employees.
- ✧ Employers' suggestions for improving the VET system revolve around providing more practical skills and experience, tailoring training to specific industries, increasing flexibility in training provision, improving access to training in regional areas, and increasing government funding.

The challenge is to use these findings to improve the VET system, noting that the level of satisfaction among employers is very high.

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Executive summary

Over 50% of employers use the VET system to meet their skill needs. Employers can engage with the VET system in three ways:

- ✧ by requiring their staff to have vocational qualifications
- ✧ by employing apprentices and trainees
- ✧ by providing or coordinating nationally recognised training for their employees.

Regardless of how they engaged with the VET system, the majority of employers are satisfied with the training their employees receive. Less than 10% are dissatisfied with the system.

In this report, we analyse data from the 2005 and 2007 Surveys of Employer Use and Views of the VET System to examine what employers say frustrates them about the VET system, and explore their suggestions for improvement.

What frustrates employers about VET

Dissatisfied employers provide three consistent messages about the things that frustrate them. With few exceptions, these employers are concerned that the VET system:

- ✧ provides training which fails to teach relevant skills
- ✧ provides training which is too general and not specific enough
- ✧ lacks focus on practical skills training.

Firstly, large and small business employers dissatisfied with training are concerned that training has not added any value. It has not raised the skill levels of their employees and has not increased their ability to meet work requirements. Secondly, employers (particularly small business employers) feel that the training provided is too general and does not meet their particular needs. Some employers are concerned that there are no training courses in their specific fields, while others think the available training does not provide employees with broad knowledge or experience. Thirdly, employers are frustrated with the lack of focus on practical skills training. This is especially the case for those who require employees to have specified vocational qualifications for their jobs, and those who deliver or coordinate nationally recognised training for their employees. They are of the view that employees are unable to apply what they have learnt in training and that the amount of training provided is insufficient to help employees increase their skills to meet job requirements.

Changes between 2005 and 2007

Looking at what was frustrating employers in 2007 reveals similar trends to 2005. Dissatisfied employers still believe that the VET system does not teach relevant skills and that there is not enough focus on practical skills in the training. There has been a move away from the comment that training is too general. More employers now believe the training is of poor quality and of a low standard.

Suggestions for improvement

In addition to identifying what they perceived to be wrong with the VET system, all employers were asked to suggest ways it could be improved to better meet their skill needs. Looking at the VET system as a whole, employers suggest the need for it to:

- ✧ provide more practical skills and experience
- ✧ tailor training to specific industries
- ✧ increase flexibility in training provision
- ✧ improve access to training in regional areas
- ✧ increase government funding.

Another consistent message from small and large business employers requiring vocational qualifications for jobs, or engaged in the delivery or coordination of nationally recognised training, is that the system needs to provide more practical skills training and workplace experience. These employers want to see these elements incorporated into qualifications to enable employees to improve their skills.

Tailoring training to the needs of specific industries is cited as a major area for improvement across all three groups of employers. Employers want training content to be adjusted to make it more industry specific and for training to develop higher skill levels.

Flexibility in the provision of training is a key concern for small business employers with apprentices and trainees, and for those who provide or arrange for nationally recognised training for employees. Employers want more flexibility in the timing, structure, and delivery of training.

Employers providing or coordinating nationally recognised training for their employees feel that the lack of access to training in regional and rural areas is an important issue. These employers want more relevant training courses, and a local trainer or training centre.

Employers with apprentices and trainees, particularly those in small and medium businesses, are of the view that training improvements require additional government funding. Common suggestions are for increased incentives and subsidies, and funding of apprentices and trainees wages.

Changes between 2005 and 2007

In 2005, it was mainly the view of employers with apprentices or trainees that additional funding was required from the government. Other employers rated this as a medium concern. By 2007, this was a high priority voiced by all employers engaged with the VET system. Unchanged was employers' requirement for providers to supply courses with more industry-specific skills. This was a major issue which still needed addressing as little has improved from 2005 to 2007.

Two new areas emerged as needing attention in 2007. Employers, particularly those requiring vocational qualifications for jobs and those with apprentices or trainees, would like to see the VET system standardised or regulated across institutions and states. Employers also want more information or information that is easier to understand on how to take on apprentices and trainees.

Conclusion

Regardless of how employers engage with the system—by having vocational qualifications as a job requirement, employing apprentices and trainees, or providing or coordinating nationally recognised training for their employees—they tend to give similar messages about what frustrates them and suggestions on how the system can be improved. The challenge now is how to progress these findings and determine what, if any, changes should be made to the VET system, noting that the overall level of satisfaction among employers is very high.

Introduction

More than half of Australian employers are engaged with the vocational education and training (VET) system in some way (NCVER 2005, 2007). They do this by having vocational qualifications as a job requirement, employing apprentices and trainees, and providing or coordinating nationally recognised training for their employees.

Satisfaction with the VET system is high. Over three-quarters of employers engaged with the VET system think it meets their skill needs (NCVER 2005, 2007). Despite this high level of satisfaction, studies have identified several common areas of employer frustration with the system (Allen Consulting Group 2006, 2004; Victorian Employers' Chamber of Commerce and Industry 2003). These concerns centre around:

- ✧ a lack of responsiveness to industry needs
- ✧ the breadth and balance of skills on offer (particularly the lack of emphasis on 'soft' skills/employability skills)
- ✧ providers' lack of flexibility in meeting employer needs
- ✧ a cumbersome system, in particular the administrative processes.

In order to tease out these concerns, this study investigates qualitative responses collected in the Survey of Employer Use and Views of the VET System to identify areas of employer dissatisfaction and their recommendations for improvement. The survey measures employers' engagement and satisfaction with Australia's training system and is conducted every two years. As part of the survey, employers are asked to suggest improvements to the VET system. This provides an opportunity to understand what employers like and dislike about the VET system.

The objectives of the study are to:

- ✧ identify employers' reasons for dissatisfaction with the VET system
- ✧ explore the suggestions made by employers on how the VET system could be improved.

The next section outlines the methodology used, listing the relevant questions in the survey relating to dissatisfaction with the VET system and suggestions for improvement. The section 'Detailed findings' analyses the responses, starting with dissatisfaction and then moving on to suggested improvements. Three themes relating to dissatisfaction emerge: relevant skills are not taught; training is too general; and there is not enough focus on practical skills. In terms of suggested improvements, five themes emerge: provide more practical skills and experience; tailor training to specific industries; have flexible provision of training; improve access in regional areas; and increase funding from governments.

Methodology

The Survey of Employer Use and Views of the VET System provides information on the various ways in which Australian employers use the VET system to meet their skill needs and their satisfaction with these methods of training. The survey is conducted every two years by telephone interview and the results relate to employers' training experience in the 12 months preceding their interview.

Of interest to this study were those employers who engaged with the VET system such as employers with jobs requiring vocational qualifications, employing apprentices or trainees, or using nationally recognised training. In 2005, 57% of all Australian employers were engaged with the VET system in some way, falling slightly to 54% in 2007 (table 1).

Table 1 Employers using the VET system in 2005 and 2007

	2005	2007
	Of all employers (%)	Of all employers (%)
Employers using the VET system	57.1	54.0
✧ with jobs that require vocational qualifications	35.0	33.3
✧ with apprentices and trainees	28.2	29.1
✧ using nationally accredited training	24.1	22.1

Source: Survey of Employer Use and Views of the VET System 2005, 2007

The survey questions about reasons for dissatisfaction and suggestions for improvements are open-ended and gave employers the opportunity to make comments. Employers were able to express their views about the training system and its benefits and pitfalls, as well as suggest solutions.

Dissatisfaction with the VET system

For each type of engagement with the VET system, employer dissatisfaction was measured by asking:

Thinking about the overall needs of your organisation, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with Formal Vocational Qualifications/Apprenticeships and Traineeships/Nationally Recognised Training in providing employees with the skills required for their job?

Employers who answered 'dissatisfied' or 'very dissatisfied' were asked for reasons for their dissatisfaction. These reasons were recorded verbatim during the telephone interview.

Improvements to the VET system

In the 2005 survey, employers who were currently using the VET system, as well as those who had previously used or had considered using it, were asked for suggestions for improvements. Employers were asked:

Are you able to suggest any improvements that would assist your organisation in meeting its skill requirements?

Again, this question was asked of each type of engagement with the VET system. Employers' suggestions were recorded verbatim during the telephone interview.

The method of collecting employers' suggestions for improvement changed between the 2005 and 2007 survey and, as such, means that the data are not directly comparable. In 2005, the questions focused more on improvements to the training, while in 2007 the questions focused on improvements to the VET system. In addition, the 2005 survey asked for improvements on each type of engagement with the VET system, while the 2007 survey asked a single question at the end of the interview. The following question was asked of all respondents in 2007, while the 2005 questions were only asked of those employers who had engaged, or had considered engaging, with that aspect of the VET system.

Thinking about formal vocational qualifications, apprenticeships and traineeships and Nationally Recognised Training, are you able to suggest any improvements to the VET system that would assist your organisation in meeting its skill requirements?

Responses to these questions were categorised under a frame of broad categories or codes and this forms a base for qualitative data analysis for this study. This broad coding was undertaken at the survey data processing stage. A complete list of the codes for reasons for dissatisfaction can be found in appendix 1. The list of codes for suggested improvements for the 2005 survey can be found in appendix 2 and in appendix 3 for the 2007 survey.

For the purpose of this research, further qualitative analysis was carried out to better understand the types of reasons cited and improvements suggested. This was done by reviewing comments classified under each broad code and breaking them down into more detailed sub-themes.

For survey findings and additional information about the survey, including copies of the questionnaires, see <<http://www.ncver.edu.au/statistic/21066.html>>.

Detailed findings

Satisfaction with the VET system

Employers are generally satisfied with the quality of training their employees receive and believe it meets the overall needs of their organisation. The proportion of employers expressing satisfaction with each form of engagement varies between 76.8% and 83.3% over the two surveys (table 2).

Table 2 Employer satisfaction with the VET system in 2005 and 2007

	2005			2007		
	Satisfied (%)	Neither (%)	Dissatisfied (%)	Satisfied (%)	Neither (%)	Dissatisfied (%)
Employers with jobs that require vocational qualifications	76.8	12.0	11.2	80.8	9.6	9.6
Employers with apprentices and trainees	79.1	10.4	10.5	83.3	8.7	8.0
Employers using nationally accredited training	80.3	10.8	8.9	80.5	13.5	6.1*

Note: * This estimate has a relative standard error greater than 25% and therefore should be used with caution.

Employers dissatisfied with the way they engage with the VET system were asked their reasons for dissatisfaction. The major reasons provided are listed below by type of engagement. A list of each of the coded reasons for dissatisfaction can be found in appendix 1.

Findings from the 2005 survey

Dissatisfied employers who had jobs requiring *vocational qualifications* are dissatisfied with vocational qualifications in the following areas:

- ✧ relevant skills are not taught (29%)
- ✧ training is too general and not specific enough (27%)
- ✧ there is not enough focus on practical skills (25%).

Employers who were dissatisfied with *apprentices or trainees*, expressed dissatisfaction with the following aspects of apprenticeships and traineeships in meeting their skill needs:

- ✧ training is too general and not specific enough (23%)
- ✧ relevant skills are not taught (21%)
- ✧ training content outdated (20%).

Dissatisfied employers using *nationally recognised training* are dissatisfied with the following aspects of that training:

- ✧ relevant skills are not taught (31%)
- ✧ not enough focus on practical skills (28%)
- ✧ training is too general and not specific enough (19%).

Findings from the 2007 survey

Analysis of what was frustrating employers in 2007 reveals similar trends to 2005. Employers still believe that the VET system does not teach relevant skills and that there is not enough focus on practical skills in the training. There has been a move away from the comment that training is too general, with more employers now believing the training is of poor quality and a low standard. This new concern was mentioned frequently across all three areas of the VET system investigated.

Areas of dissatisfaction with each type of engagement with the VET system are detailed below.

Dissatisfied employers who had jobs requiring *vocational qualifications* are dissatisfied with vocational qualifications in the following areas:

- ✧ relevant skills are not taught (38%)
- ✧ there is not enough focus on practical skills (36%)
- ✧ training is of a poor quality or low standard (25%)
- ✧ training is too general and not specific enough (18%).

Employers who were dissatisfied with *apprentices or trainees*, expressed dissatisfaction with the following aspects of apprenticeships and traineeships in meeting their skill needs:

- ✧ relevant skills are not taught (28%)
- ✧ training is of a poor quality or low standard (21%)
- ✧ apprentice/trainee had a poor attitude (20%)
- ✧ not enough focus on practical skills (17%).

Dissatisfied employers using *nationally recognised training* are dissatisfied with the following aspects of that training:

- ✧ not enough focus on practical skills (30%)
- ✧ relevant skills are not taught (29%)
- ✧ training is of a poor quality or low standard (19%)
- ✧ poor access to training in regional/rural areas (18%).

An overview of the findings is presented in figure 1.

Common themes of dissatisfaction emerge across the three types of engagement. Regardless of the type of engagement with the VET system, the major themes are:

- 1 relevant skills are not taught
- 2 training is too general and not specific enough
- 3 not enough focus on practical skills.

Each of these themes will now be investigated further to see if these views¹ are held consistently across all employers or only for various segments of the population.

1 Relevant skills are not taught

Relevance of skills is a key concern for employers across each type of engagement with the VET system. It is the major concern for employers with jobs requiring vocational qualifications and those using nationally recognised training. Employers are especially concerned that the training did not cover enough to make it relevant to their type of operation.

¹ Quotes are from the 2005 Survey of Employer Use and Views of the VET System.

Employers with jobs requiring vocational qualifications feel that skill relevance is a major issue. All employers dissatisfied with the relevance of training, across all business sizes, are concerned with the low skill levels of employees after training. They believe the training is not closely enough related to the employee's actual work and does not cover enough information to meet work requirements. Employers said:

Skills that industry require don't seem to be what TAFE are teaching.

It's not providing skills required. It's well behind the technology of today ... the teaching is 20 years out of date and can't even offer training on new and relevant equipment. We've had to retrain staff for necessary skills.

While relevance of training is not their key reason for dissatisfaction, it is still a major concern for employers of apprentices and trainees. Here, the same themes emerge regardless of size of the business commenting. Concerns centre around the poor skill level of employees after training and the failure of training to add any value. Some employers said that this is probably due to there not being any recognition of prior skills. Comments made by employers are along the lines of:

... not providing relevant skills, out-of date teaching and equipment (behind in technology)—how can people learn adequately?

Relevance of the course to what our staff are doing on a day to day basis. Problems with recognition of prior skills.

Relevance of training is an issue for employers providing their employees with nationally recognised training. Small and medium-size employers tend to be more concerned about this aspect of training than large employers. Concerned employers view the skill level of their staff after training to be poor and the scope of training too narrow, with training not covering enough of the relevant components. Examples of comments made by employers include:

The range of skills is insufficient to cover the scope of the work required to do.

Because the more national the training is, the less it's related to the local needs and specific needs of the local industry. It becomes way too generalised. Training not enough on functional competency.

2 Training is too general and not specific enough

Across each of the three VET streams, employers are not satisfied with the general and non-specific nature of the training. They feel that there are no training courses in their field and that the training is too basic and does not provide broad knowledge or experience.

Small and medium employers with jobs requiring vocational qualifications are concerned with the training being too general and not specific enough. This does not appear to be an issue for large employers. Dissatisfied employers raised concerns that there are no courses available for their field. Some added that the training was too basic and gave participants poor skills to equip them in the workforce. Examples of the types of comments made by employers are:

Doesn't suit our requirements. We must supply extra training—the base training is not adequate. It educates too much on the overall rather than specific lines.

There are no courses available for our industry, there are certain aspects but no suitable course.

Employers engaged with apprenticeships and traineeships felt that the training is sometimes too basic and does not provide trainees with a broad knowledge of the industry. Small employers went further, saying that the training is inappropriate and of poor quality. Some of the specific comments made by employers who considered the apprentice and trainee training too general and not specific enough include:

It's just too basic. To a degree, it's good because it offers them a nationally identified and legitimate certificate but it's not specific enough.

Quite often units that are available aren't appropriate to the business.

Only small employers using nationally recognised training indicated that the training is too general and not specific enough. Larger employers do not appear to be dissatisfied with this aspect of the training. Small employers stress that their operational needs require the training to teach skills that are specific to their type of industry. The training that is provided is inappropriate, too basic in some cases and of poor quality. Comments made by employers include:

No one trains for the skills specific for this job.

It didn't address all the industry needs. It addressed some industry needs and it addressed skills that the manager did not need.

3 Not enough focus on practical skills

Training not focusing enough on practical skills is a major concern for employers with jobs requiring vocational qualifications and those using nationally recognised training.

Employers with jobs requiring vocational qualifications are concerned about the lack of sufficient practical training, adding that most of the graduates cannot put into practice what they have learnt. Employers speculate that this is because employees do not have enough practical experience or on-the-job training whilst doing the training. Comments made by these employers focus around the following themes:

The training programs are too academic. The graduates don't come out with any real appreciation of what is required for the job. There is no private enterprise orientation. The courses are run by academics for academics.

The job readiness of the people who have gone through the course is not up to what it should be.

Employers who are using nationally recognised training and are concerned about the lack of practical training believe that it doesn't provide employees with enough skills for the job ahead. They also feel that much of the practical training is better carried out on the job. Specific comments centre on the following:

It teaches people to drive a machine safely but doesn't teach them to operate a machine. There is a big difference between the two.

They don't do any practical training. They get a certificate but no real on-the-job training.

Improvements to the system

Findings from the 2005 survey

All employers who had used the system, either currently or at some point in the past—as well as those employers who had considered using the system—were asked to provide suggestions for improvements. More than 1000 suggested improvements were received from employers with jobs requiring vocational qualifications and from those that employ apprentices and trainees. Over 700 suggestions were collected on how to improve nationally recognised training. The most common suggestions for improvement are summarised below by each type of engagement with the VET system. A list of each of the coded suggestions can be found in appendix 2.

Employers with jobs requiring *vocational qualifications* identify the following areas for improvements:

- ✧ provide more practical experience/skills (16%)
- ✧ training should be tailored to specific industries (15%)
- ✧ better match between work requirements and course components (10%)
- ✧ better access to training in regional/rural areas (9%)
- ✧ more on-the-job training (9%).

Employers with *apprentices or trainees* propose the following areas for improvements:

- ✧ additional funding from the government (15%)
- ✧ training should be tailored to specific industries (10%)
- ✧ more flexibility in provision of training (8%)
- ✧ provide more practical experience/skills (7%).

Employers using *nationally recognised training* focus on the following areas for improvement:

- ✧ provide more practical experience/skills (17%)
- ✧ better/easier access to training in regional/rural areas (15%)
- ✧ training should be tailored to specific industries (14%)
- ✧ more flexibility in provision of training (10%).

Findings from the 2007 survey

While the data are not directly comparable due to changes in the survey methodology, we are still able to examine the responses to see if the key themes are similar. More than 2000 improvements were suggested by employers in 2007. A list of the coded suggestions for the 2007 survey can be found in appendix 3.

In 2005, it was mainly the view of employers with apprentices or trainees that additional funding was required from the government. Other employers rated this as a medium concern. By 2007, this was a high priority for all employers engaged with the VET system. Unchanged was employers' requirement for providers to supply courses with more industry-specific skills.

Two new areas emerged as needing attention in 2007. Employers, particularly those with jobs requiring vocational qualifications and those with apprentices or trainees, would like to see the VET system standardised or regulated across institutions and states. Employers also want more information or information that is easier to understand on how to take on apprentices and trainees.

Looking at the VET system as a whole, the major areas needing improvement are:

- 1 offer more courses for industry-specific skills (14%)
- 2 increase funding and implement government subsidies and incentives (11%)
- 3 provide more information on arrangements and opportunities for apprentices and trainees (10%)
- 4 standardise the entire system across institutions and states (8%).

An overview of the findings is presented in figure 1.

Looking at the VET system as a whole, the major areas needing improvement, based on the findings from each type of engagement with the VET system, are:

- 1 provide more practical experience/skills
- 2 tailor training to specific industries
- 3 allow more flexibility in the provision of training
- 4 allow better/easier access to training in regional/rural areas
- 5 additional funding from the government.

Each of these five areas will now be investigated to see if these views² are held consistently across all employers or only for various segments of the population.

² Quotes are from the 2005 Survey of Employer Use and Views of the VET System.

1 Provide more practical experience/skills

Across each type of engagement with the VET system, employers expressed the view that training needs to provide more practical experience and skills. This is the most cited suggestion for improvement for employers with jobs requiring vocational qualifications and for those using nationally recognised training.

Regardless of how employers engaged with the VET system, they resoundingly want to see more practical training and industry experience incorporated into training and qualification requirements. Employers believe this will help employees acquire better skills. This message is consistent across all employer sizes and regardless of whether the employer is satisfied or dissatisfied with the training. Employers also want more intensive training, with some suggesting that competency-based training should form the basis of the training. Relevant assessments are also suggested as an area for improvement. Suggestions for improving the attributes and behaviours of the actual trainers focused on ensuring the trainers have practical skills and that industries be involved in the delivery of training.

Comments made by employers wanting a greater focus on practical skills are consistent across each type of engagement with the VET system. Examples are listed below.

More ability to work in different areas for getting practical skills, perhaps a series of employment opportunities which are structured into the course.

More in-depth training, current courses skim over the skills needed to do job. The trainee gets a general idea and we have to actually show them how to do the task.

Teach more practical things, the lecturers need to know what is really required in the real world and what they should teach them aligned a little bit closer to the requirements of the industry, not just the technical stuff.

Head-knowledge via lectures etc is not putting into practise/hands-on learning ... effectiveness is much higher when methods other than lectures are used ... application, opportunity for questions so 'students' identify with information being imparted.

Higher emphasis on practical side and input from people in the industry, need more people educating who are currently in the industry.

2 Tailor training to specific industries

Across each type of engagement with the VET system, employers also consider the tailoring of training to the needs of specific industries a high priority.

Employers with jobs requiring vocational qualifications, regardless of size, give similar suggestions for improvement. They want the training content adjusted to make it more industry specific, more detailed, and provided at a higher skill level. Many also suggest the development of specific qualifications for their field. Larger employers want a proper assessment of competence performed. The same messages come from both satisfied and dissatisfied employers as well as those not currently using the VET system. Specific comments made by employers include:

The industry to be consulted before training courses are compiled and the training to be directed towards what we do, not what people think we do.

... some of the components of formal vocational qualifications are time based rather than competency based ... and some of the modules aren't required for our industry although they are required to get qualifications.

The focus of employers involved with apprenticeships or traineeships is also on making the training more specific. Smaller employers would like to see more intensive, industry-based training with a higher skill level, while medium employers want current training techniques reviewed. Large employers tend not to have major issues with the tailoring of training to their needs. Those employers satisfied with the training of apprentices and trainees had the same concerns as those

who were dissatisfied with the training. In addition, in some industries, those employers considering taking on apprentices and trainees would like to see more support provided. Examples of specific employer comments are:

I think that it's a bit too pointed towards the major users of the industry, the skill levels have fallen, the larger companies dictate the course structure, doesn't give specialised training.

It should be module based. The whole apprenticeship scheme is out of date. The training should be specialized to specific skills rather than cover all.

Improvements suggested by employers using nationally recognised training are very similar to those reported by employers with jobs requiring vocational qualifications. Besides having more industry-specific training and specific qualifications for their field, employers are looking for providers to adjust course content and provide more variety. They want trainers to be more skilled, particularly in current industry trends. These same themes emerge across all employer sizes and regardless of whether the employer is satisfied with the training or not. Employers not currently using nationally recognised training suggested the same improvements. Specific comments focused on the following messages:

Tailoring for individual skills and tailoring for specific industries. Develop these courses hand in hand with private enterprises. Value add to what the private sector is doing and evaluate where the gaps are.

More flexibility, variety and more options for electives so that way we can tailor it to meet our needs, lots of nationally recognised training is same old same old, need more electives, they need to cover more areas.

3 Flexible provision of training

Greater flexibility in the provision of training is one of the main areas suggested for improvement by employers with apprentices or trainees and those using nationally recognised training. As may be expected, employers with jobs requiring vocational qualifications are less worried about this area.

Employers of apprentices and trainees and those using nationally recognised training are more concerned about flexibility than large or medium-sized employers. They want more flexibility in the structure and delivery of training. Some employers also raised the need for e-learning. Similar suggestions for improvement were made by employers who do not have apprentices or trainees, do not use nationally recognised training, and those considering engaging with the VET system in the future.

Typical comments are:

Some form of online training so they don't have to appear at TAFE every week.

More flexibility that allows the modules to be changed or added to suit the particular industry that the person is looking at working in.

It should be TAFE training for a couple weeks in a year, instead of one day a week, where apprentices can get different ideas from different people, have different lecturers.

Just having a more flexible approach ... so competency based rather than time based ... they should be able to be assessed on the job more rather than TAFE and on the job—more on the job assessment.

More flexibility for people who are actually working.

4 Access to training in regional/rural areas

Employers using nationally recognised training highlight the issue of better or easier access to training in regional areas as a major issue. It is a lesser concern for employers with apprentices and trainees, and those with jobs requiring vocational qualifications. Their comments, however, contain the same messages.

The main improvement employers would like to see is the provision of a local trainer or training centre. They would like more training centres established and more training courses created. Other themes to emerge are the provision of flexible learning for remote areas, better accessibility to training, and a reduction in the costs of training for remote areas. The following comments are typical:

Flexibility in relation to delivery modes, course skill development needs to be broadened to encompass rural needs.

In the regional area, it's difficult. We have to travel, unless it can be done online or via correspondence ... It's the tyranny of distance, travel and down time.

If they could be held more frequently or closer. A day to get there, a day to get back. Three or four days training and it's a week.

5 Funding from the government

The top suggestion for improvements made by employers with apprentices and trainees is that additional funding is required from the government. To a lesser extent, it is also raised by employers using nationally recognised training and those with jobs requiring vocational qualifications.

Funding is an issue for small and medium-sized employers with apprentices and trainees. Large employers seem to be less concerned with improving the level of funding received from the government for apprenticeships and traineeships. Employers citing improvements want more focus on government funding as well as other types of funding, such as funding for employers rather than the employee, travel expenses and more funding for the training providers. Incentives and subsidies are commonly mentioned, as are funding of apprentice and trainee wages, and funding for back-up and support. The same comments are made regardless of an employer's satisfaction level with the training received.

The same areas of concern emerge when comparing the suggestions of employers with and without apprentices and trainees. Current employers of apprentices and trainees want improved funding for small businesses, and equipment and facilities for remote areas. Those employers without apprentices or trainees want less paperwork and timelier funding.

Examples of comments provided are:

If you could get a subsidy while they are not being productive that would definitely help.

They need to gear it more towards the people running the business. People put the money out there. More towards the owner not the apprentice.

It would help if initial wage subsidies for trainees were higher as they are very time intensive and expensive at the beginning. We would take on more trainees if the subsidies were higher.

I'd like to have local training and subsidies. When I first started the business 20 years ago, the government was subsidising the full wage of the apprentice, and then it was dropped. I used to put on an apprentice a year, and now I don't see the point.

Figure 1 Employers' views on improving the VET system

The VET system		
Areas of dissatisfaction (what's wrong with VET?)		
2005 ✧ Relevant skills aren't taught ✧ Training is too general and not specific enough ✧ Not enough focus on practical skills		2007 ✧ Relevant skills aren't taught ✧ Not enough focus on practical skills ✧ Quality of training is poor
Suggestions for improvement (how can VET be improved?)		
2005 ✧ Provide more practical skills and experience ✧ Tailor training to specific industries ✧ More flexibility in the provision of training ✧ Better access to training in regional areas ✧ Additional funding from the government		2007 ✧ Tailor training to specific industries ✧ Additional funding from the government ✧ Provide more or better information about taking on apprentices and trainees ✧ Standardise the system across institutions and states ✧ Improve the running of TAFE institutions
Vocational qualifications	Apprenticeships/traineeships	Nationally recognised training
Areas of dissatisfaction		
✧ Relevant skills aren't taught ✧ Training is too general and not specific enough ✧ Not enough focus on practical skills	✧ Training is too general and not specific enough ✧ Relevant skills aren't taught ✧ Training content is outdated	✧ Relevant skills aren't taught ✧ Not enough focus on practical skills ✧ Training is too general and not specific enough
Suggestions for improvement		
✧ Provide more practical skills and experience ✧ Tailor training to specific industries ✧ Better match between work requirements and course components ✧ Better access to training in regional areas ✧ More on-the-job training	✧ Additional funding from the government ✧ Tailor training to specific industries ✧ More flexibility in the provision of training ✧ Provide more practical skills and experience	✧ Provide more practical skills and experience ✧ Better access to training in regional areas ✧ Tailor training to specific industries ✧ More flexibility in the provision of training

Concluding comments

Employers consistently provide the same messages about what frustrates them about the VET system, regardless of how they engaged with it. The reasons identified here align closely with those found in similar employer studies. The challenge now is how to progress these findings to determine what, if any, changes need to be made to the VET system, noting that satisfaction levels among employers are already high.

Analysing survey responses, as has been done here, is a time-consuming task. However, given the wealth of information available, a periodic look is warranted to determine whether the themes identified continue to remain a concern for employers, or whether new themes emerge.

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Appendix 1: Reasons for dissatisfaction code frame

Complete code frame of employers' reasons for dissatisfaction with the VET system, 2005 and 2007

Code	Code Descriptor
1	Not Enough Hands On/Practical Skills Taught
2	Don't Teach Relevant Skills/Mismatch Btw Skills Taught and Skills Required
3	Standards Are Inconsistent Across Institutions
4	Training Content Outdated
5	Qual/Training Too General/Not Specific Enough
6	Lack Of Flexibility With Training/Too Rigid
7	Trainers Do Not Have Enough Skills/Industry Exp
8	Training Is Poor Quality/Low Standard
9	Poor Access/Availability Of Training (Regional/Rural)
10	Courses Are Too Long
11	Not Enough Communication Between Training Providers & Employers
12	Apprentice/Trainee Wrong Person/Poor Attitude
13	Dissatisfied With TAFE (Unspecified)
14	Access/Amount Of Funding Available
15	Courses Are Too Short/Should Be Longer
16	Is Too Expensive
97	Other

Source: Survey of Employer Use and Views of the VET System, 2005 & 2007.

Appendix 2: 2005 Suggested improvements code frame

Complete code frame of employers' suggested improvements to the VET system, 2005

Code	Code Descriptor
1	Provide More Practical Experience/Skills
2	Provide More Theory
3	Better Match Btw Work Requirements & Course Component
4	Better Tailored To Specific Industries
5	Communication/Consultation Btw Employer & Training Provider
6	More Input From Industry
7	More On The Job Training
8	Better/Easier Access To Training (In Regional/Rural Area)
9	Streamline Courses/Make Courses Shorter
10	Additional Funding/Incentives/Subsidies from Gov
11	More Flexibility In Provision Of Training
12	Higher Assessment Standards (For Students)/Competencies
13	Reduce Costs
14	Incentives To Encourage People Back Into Trades
15	More Up-To-Date Training (New Techniques/Techniques)
16	Higher Quality/Better Trained Providers
17	Monitoring Of Training Providers To Meet Standards
18	More Recognition For Prior Learning
19	Consistency Of Standard Across Institutions/States
20	Increase Rate Of Pay/Increase Award
21	More Communication With Schools On Career Opportunities
22	Less Bureaucracy/Less Paperwork
23	They Should Be More Publicised/More Info Available
24	Need To Address More Gen. Skills/Typing/Communication
97	Other

Source: Survey of Employer Use and Views of the VET System, 2005.

Appendix 3: 2007 Suggested improvements code frame

Complete code frame of employers' suggested improvements to the VET system, 2007

Code	Code Descriptor
1	Offer More Courses For More Industries
2	Offer More Courses For Industry-Specific Skills
3	Improve The Running Of TAFE Institutions
4	Increase The Number Of Courses Available At Individual TAFE Institutions
5	Implement Fundamental OH&S Training
6	Improve Formal Recognition Of Qualification
7	More/Better Trainers/Providers/Supervisors
8	Standardise/Regulate The Entire System Across Institutions/States
9	Provide More/Easier Information Regarding The Arrangement And Opportunities For Traineeships/Apprenticeships Available
10	Less/Simplified Paperwork/Bureaucracy Involved In The Arrangement Of Traineeships/Apprenticeships
11	More Support For Small Businesses In Acquiring Trainees/Apprentices
12	More Support For Rural/Regional/Remote Areas In Acquiring Trainees/Apprentices
13	Increase Vocational/On The Job Training As Part Of Traineeship/Apprenticeship
14	More Communication With Schools On Career Opportunities/Promote In Schools
15	Lower The Legal School Leaving Age To Allow Traineeships/Apprenticeships To Begin Earlier
16	Improve Literacy/Basic Computer And Interpersonal Skill Standards/Requirements
17	Better Match Between Work Requirements And Course Components
18	Communication Between Employers And Training Providers
19	More Up To Date Training (New Techniques/Technology)
20	More Flexibility In The Provision Of Training (Evening Courses/Correspondence/Online)
21	Streamline Courses/Make Courses More Concise/Shorter
22	Reinstate More Introductory Vocational/VET Subjects At Schools
23	Make Traineeships/Apprenticeships Longer
24	Higher Assessment Standards (For Students)/Better Quality Courses
25	Greater Recognition Of Prior Learning And Internationally Acquired Qualifications
26	Increase Funding/Reduce Costs/Implement Government Subsidies And Incentives
27	Increase The Award Wage For Trainees/Apprentices
28	Provide Incentives For Mature Age Trainees/Apprentices
29	Screen Traineeship/Apprenticeship Applicants For Appropriateness (Character/Basic Competencies)
30	Create A Register Of Potential Employers And Employees
31	Improve Commitment/Introduce Contractual Obligations Into Traineeship/Apprenticeship Agreements
32	Offer (Younger) Workers Workplace/On-Site Training
33	Provide Work Ethics Course/Promote The Importance Of Work Ethic
34	Promote Young People's Interest In Taking VET Courses
35	Review Immigration Policies To Increase Apprentices/Trainees
36	Allow Casual/Part-Time Workers To Take Part In Training
37	More Practical Than Theory Based Training
38	More Local Access To Training/More Courses Available In More Areas
97	Other

Source: Survey of Employer Use and Views of the VET System, 2007.