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Ms Anna Faithful

Deputy Secretary – Skills & Training Department of Employment & Workplace Relations

GPO Box 9828

CANBERRA ACT 2601

Ai Group welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Australian Government’s consultation paper on developing a blueprint for the vocational education and training (VET) workforce. A high-quality and sustainable VET workforce, particularly teachers, trainers, and assessors, must remain a high priority if government is to meet the aims and objectives of key reforms including the National Skills Agreement, the Employment White Paper, and the Australian Universities Accord.

Working with the states and territories ultimately responsible for developing the VET workforce is a matter of national interest. The VET workforce is crucial for developing skill pipelines that align with industry demand, particularly in areas experiencing skills shortages. It is also central to equipping Australians with skills for fulfilling and productive careers.

The quality of teaching, training and assessment has a direct link to the quality of learning in the VET system. It is also important that teachers, trainers, and assessors have and maintain relevant industry currency in their field of vocational instruction.

### **Certificate IV in TAE**

For those seeking to join the sector, a balance must be struck between maintaining high standards for the quality of the training and assessment delivered and the ease of entry into the sector.

It is understood that the Certificate IV in Training and Education (TAE) has become a barrier to new entrants to the VET teaching profession. Many prospective teachers are discouraged by the idea of designing curriculum resources and materials in addition to the assessment and evaluation of student performance against competency. Ai Group has heard anecdotally that many workplace-based trainers have let their qualification lapse, because they see the requirements for the TAE as too burdensome for what is only one component of their work.

The updates to the Current Standards for RTOs that commenced on 1 March 2024 have been designed to serve as a circuit breaker to overcome the pressing skill shortages in the sector.<sup>1</sup> These changes enable prospective trainers and assessors studying to complete a qualification in the TAE training package to begin participating in the delivery and assessment of qualifications under supervision of qualified trainers and assessors. Any further changes considered during this Blueprint process need to be made with consideration to the emerging outcomes of these recent changes.

### **Other reform considerations**

Consideration also needs to be given to other reform areas such as the Qualification Design Group Reform recommendations delivered in March 2024, which propose a new differentiated qualification system. If adopted, these qualification design reforms may have implications for

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<sup>1</sup> Standards for Registered Training Organisations Amendment (VET Workforce Support) Instrument, 2024

delivery and assessment requirements across the sector. The historical role of the Certificate IV in TAE may be less fit for purpose, particularly as the sector continues to evolve to a more nuanced qualification system.

That said, caution is also needed in case changes implemented result in the existing qualification being superseded. Phasing in any updates would assist in providing smooth transitions that minimise the impact on the existing qualified workforce.

Finally, with mind to creating a cohesive and connected tertiary system that enables dual qualified trainers and assessors to work between both the VET and tertiary system, the VET Blueprint must consider the potential role and impact of the Australian Tertiary Education Commission (ATEC) and its overarching governance duties, should this be adopted.

### **Flexible pathways into the sector**

Often working in the VET sector – particularly as a trainer or assessor – is a second career for those who have worked in Industry. Improving the flexibility of entry and exposure to the sector is an important step to increasing the supply of dual professionals that have the desirable blend of (current) industry experience and formal qualifications in the delivery of training and assessment.

There are examples in different states of strategies to make it easier for skilled workers to progress into teaching and attain their formal qualification. In Victoria, Chisholm Institute developed a contextualised Certificate IV for people working in the construction sector. These people were able to continue working in their field but take apprentice classes on a casual basis as subject matter experts, and then use that teaching experience to support their progress in the qualification. Some states have offered scholarships for skilled workers to undertake the TAE, and others offer fee-free TAE training. These examples have made progress in expanding the pipeline of the VET workforce and should be considered as the Blueprint is developed.

TAFEs and other training providers should be working more closely with their local industries to identify workers in these companies who might be interested in teaching opportunities. This might include attending a class as a guest lecturer to provide expertise on a particular process or a particular technology, to supporting older staff transitioning to retirement to consider teaching as a part of that transition.

### **Attraction**

Prospective VET teachers capable of teaching within the system are not necessarily attracted to the teaching profession for the simple economic principle that their earning power is greater within industry than it would be in teaching.

Another reason is the employment conditions for new teachers. Many commence teaching on a casual basis while they are still working in industry. For them, making the jump to full-time teaching carries risks because only 58% of training assessors roles available are full-time, with the remainder of roles filled as sessional or casual arrangements.<sup>2</sup> Such arrangements don't always suit an individual's own circumstances.

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<sup>2</sup> Vocational Education Teachers, Labour Market Insights, 2024

To increase the appeal of working in the VET sector and attract and retain skilled workers that can support the delivery of current skills needed by industry, strategies need to address the key barriers. To elevate the status and desirability of a career working in the VET sector, a good place to start may be to create competitive and enticing career pathways.

### **Deepening connections with industry**

Good relations with local industries can lead to reciprocal arrangements that allow current practising teachers to spend time in these companies to maintain their industry currency. Increasing industry engagement with the sector should identify and follow the pockets of best practice and contemporary examples, which prioritise building long-term partnerships. There are excellent examples of successful long-term partnerships and collaboration between industry and training providers. Such as the case of one our members, White Industries, who over time has built a strong and close relationship with their local RTO provider and now continually invest in building out capacity.<sup>3</sup>

While some medium and larger firms may have the capacity to invest time and capital into building stronger links with the VET system, there must be consideration of the incentives and support available, particularly to smaller firms. This is also particularly important for businesses with limited experience looking to begin engaging with the VET sector.

### **Improving workforce data**

Underpinning the objectives of the taskforce is a need for better data that captures the current and future state of employment in the sector. It would assist the sector's ambitions for improved supply of workers to gather, publish and understand the composition of their workforce. The available data can be enriched by focusing in on the available pathways and diversity of the workforce. It might also be useful for analysis to understand the levels of expertise (formal and informal qualifications and experience) and average tenure of those active in the sector.

Mapping how engagement of skilled industry workers with the sector takes place – in structured internships or unstructured engagement – may also help to raise awareness of careers pathways in the sector and remove uncertainty that may act as a barrier to entry.

In conclusion, we urge the steering group of the VET Workforce Blueprint to prioritise finding the balance between the need to increase the supply of skills in the VET workforce and maintaining the high standards in the quality trainers and assessors active in the sector. Achieving this will require careful consideration of the relationship between the Blueprint and other active reforms proposed that may alter the needs and landscape of the sector for years to come.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads 'Megan Lilly'.

**Megan Lilly**

Executive Director

Ai Group Centre for Education and Training

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<sup>3</sup> White Industries' investment in young people pays off, Ai Group, 2023