

5 September 2022

The Hon Brendan O'Connor MP
Minister for Skills and Training

Dear Minister,

Adult and Community Education Providers - Jobs and Skills Summit Follow-up

Thank you again for the opportunity to meet with you at the pre-Summit roundtable on Monday of last week (29 August) in the lead up to Jobs and Skills Summit. I subsequently provided you a briefing (attached again, for convenience) about how Australia's adult and community education (ACE) sector can and should play an important role in skilling Australia to become an essential means to assist government efforts to meet skills gaps – especially of disadvantaged learners – and to move to full employment.

This letter adds to the briefing note and provides the adult and community education (ACE) perspective on three important Summit outcomes.

Summit Outcomes

Community Colleges Australia (CCA) greatly appreciates the opportunity to provide input into the Commonwealth's development of skills and training policy development, and strongly supports the Albanese Government's efforts to tackle Australian skills needs.

CCA wishes to comment on three [Summit outcomes](#):

1. **An additional \$1 billion in joint Federal-State funding for fee-free TAFE in 2023 and accelerated delivery of 465,000 fee-free TAFE places.** In his [opening address](#), the Prime Minister announced that the previous day the National Cabinet had “reached an agreement between the Commonwealth and every State and Territory Government to create an additional 180,000 fee-free TAFE places, for 2023.”

CCA strongly supports a strengthened TAFE sector as the anchor VET institution (see [our policy on TAFE here](#)), however we are concerned about the possible unintended consequences for Australia's ethical, community-based, not-for-profit ACE providers, which each year deliver training to almost [half a million VET students](#) – more than 10% of learners. CCA is keen, in the Prime Minister's words, that the additional TAFE funding will be “the beginning, not the end” of progress on skills or training. CCA requests the Commonwealth to develop policy protocols around “free TAFE” that include appropriate “guardrails” to ensure that both VET students and the ACE sector are not inadvertently disadvantaged, to the long-term detriment of Australian skills.

ACE providers should not be disadvantaged by the larger marketing power of TAFE, so that students skip ACE providers – which specialise in enrolling vulnerable and disadvantaged students (see below) – and enrol in TAFE courses just because of a higher level of “brand awareness”. Vulnerable and disadvantaged students could also enrol in inappropriate TAFE courses just because they are free and promoted, commencing higher level qualifications beyond their capability. The lessons of the disastrous VET FEE-HELP Loans program – as summarised by the [Australian National Audit Office](#) review – are that many low level learners enrolled in qualifications way in excess of their capabilities simply because they

were seen as “free” and therefore desirable. Although “free TAFE” will, thankfully, not saddle learners with debt, if the free programs recruit students incorrectly, those learners will not complete the courses, wasting funds and potentially dissuading VET learners from engaging in further training.

2. Improving access to jobs and training pathways for women, First Nations people, regional Australians and culturally and linguistically diverse people, including equity targets for training places, 1,000 digital apprenticeships in the Australian Public Service, and other measures to reduce barriers to employment.

In her [keynote speech to the Summit](#), Danielle Wood said that full employment “will need an emphasis on taking on and training Australian workers – not just abled-bodied, job-ready 30-year-olds, but the younger people reaching for their first job, people with disabilities and older workers who still want to make a contribution.” CCA strongly endorses that sentiment, and is thrilled that the Government has made a strong commitment to improving access to training for equity groups and regional residents.

Australia’s ACE sector *significantly over-perform students from [the most disadvantaged groups compared to TAFE and private for-profit providers](#)*. ACE providers have the highest government-funded student percentages of Indigenous (First Nations) people, people with disabilities, lower-socioeconomic background learners, women, regional/rural residents as well as people from migrant and refugee backgrounds. A recent NCVET report concluded that the [most successful Australian regions](#) that engage disadvantaged learners in VET and promote completion “report higher-than-average concentrations of community provision – especially important for learners with disabilities, unemployed and individuals with low prior educational attainment.”

CCA therefore requests that the Government establish policies that consider the ACE sector’s capabilities to achieve the objective of improving access to jobs and training pathways. We offer our assistance to ensure these policies are appropriate, targeted and draw on the strengths of the ACE sector.

3. The Government, in partnership with states, territories and stakeholders will reinvigorate foundation skills programs to support workers and vulnerable Australians to gain secure employment choices

Australia’s ACE providers provide some of the most important foundation skills delivery in all of Australia. We strongly support these programs and are keen for a quick completion of the current foundation skills framework, which has been long in development. CCA requests that future Commonwealth programs – such as the SEE Program and Foundation Skills for Your Future – have program guidelines that do not discriminate against small, medium and regional not-for-profit providers, as the current system does.

Conclusion

CCA strongly endorses additional resources to TAFE as the first step to revitalise Australia’s training system in a way that reaches all students. CCA also strongly supports national government policies that relieve the burden on these vulnerable and disadvantaged groups and provide properly funded education, training and employment services. However, such funding should not and cannot be at the expense of the community managed, not-for-profit ACE providers, which substantially work with disadvantaged groups and have attained such a high degree of success.

Thank you for your consideration of these requests.