
Communiqué for the COAG Skills Council Meeting

3 April 2020

The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) Skills Council (the Council) held its third meeting today. Skills ministers met to agree a set of urgent national actions to deliver critical skills during the COVID-19 pandemic and to preserve the capacity of Australia's training system.

The Council agreed to immediate steps to support and protect the interests of students, the skilled workforce and training providers. These measures will also position the vocational education and training sector (VET) to recover quickly when the COVID-19 pandemic abates, to fulfil its vital role in underpinning economic recovery.

The Council agreed to action in three key priority areas:

1. Critical skills and workforce availability

The Council noted the significant disruption being experienced in the national training system as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Ministers recognised the risk of a loss of capacity within the VET system. Addressing this will require new ways of working to enable training to continue and to support skills for workers in areas of critical need.

The Council acknowledged the work of training providers and regulators, including the Australian Skills Quality Authority, on their rapid action to adapt training to the current situation where possible, including through development of online and flexible delivery arrangements and precautions taken to prevent transmission of COVID-19.

The Council agreed that as the COVID-19 pandemic deepens, critical short-term gaps will emerge in key frontline workforces, in sectors such as aged care, disability support, and health care, and new training will be needed to keep these and other sectors operating.

Council agreed to take immediate action to ensure a core of training system capacity remains operational as an essential service across all jurisdictions. This will enable the VET system to continue to deliver training for critical COVID-19 related skills and ensure it is well positioned for recovery.

The Council also agreed to adopt a rapid and agile process to support essential skilling requirements during the COVID-19 pandemic period. The Chair of the Australian Industry and Skills Committee (AISC), Emeritus Professor Tracey Horton AO, will establish an emergency COVID-19 sub-committee of the AISC. Ministers agreed to include a representative of the ACTU as an ex-officio member of the sub-committee.

The sub-committee will meet regularly to enable short-term and urgent adjustments to be rapidly made to the qualifications and training package requirements to support critical training delivery. The Council has agreed to support this work with a rapid endorsement process.

2. Provider viability

The Council agreed to implement actions to support TAFE, public and private provider viability during the COVID-19 pandemic.

- For TAFEs and other public providers, work has already commenced with all states and territories transitioning these providers to more flexible online delivery modes to support students to complete their courses. In addition, the Commonwealth is evaluating options for targeting funding under the *Revitalisation of TAFE Campuses across Australia* initiative, to assist TAFEs adjust their business and delivery models.
- For publicly funded private providers, all jurisdictions agreed to urgently consider options to vary existing funding arrangements with private registered training organisations (RTOs) to provide greater flexibility for delivery to support RTO viability to deliver critical training.
- Council also noted that private RTOs will have access to assistance under both Commonwealth and state and territory COVID-19 business support measures and the JobKeeper Payment.

The Council tasked the Skills Senior Officials' Network (SSON) with providing urgent advice on what further action is required to support VET sector viability over the next six to nine months.

3. Supporting students

Supporting VET students is a priority for all jurisdictions, and Council emphasised the importance of ensuring as many VET students as possible are supported to continue their training in the event their training providers temporarily or permanently close during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Ministers agreed the first priority in protecting students is preserving the capacity of Australia's training system and keeping the VET system viable.

The Council tasked the SSON with providing urgent advice on options for additional course assurance for students including:

- for each jurisdiction to put in place targeted arrangements so that government-subsidised VET students, not covered by existing course assurance arrangements, can continue their studies in the publicly subsidised system; and
- consider what further course assurance may be appropriate for full fee-paying students.

Delivering a COAG VET Reform Roadmap for a responsive, dynamic and trusted VET sector

Council also discussed ongoing work on the COAG VET Reform Roadmap.

It was agreed the Roadmap remains central to building a resilient and responsive national training system into the future. The Council noted the outcomes of the consultations on the Roadmap, including stakeholder support for the overall direction of the Roadmap. To continue to progress the Roadmap, the SSON was tasked with reviewing and revising the

Roadmap, including phasing and implementation arrangements, to take account feedback from stakeholder consultations, the current COVID-19 pandemic and the impact on the business cycle, for consideration at the next Skills Council meeting.

Next meeting

The Council will work in closely over the coming months, with ministers committing to regular teleconference meetings to ensure key measures are progressed during the COVID-19 pandemic.