



VET PARTNERSHIPS POWERING A DYNAMIC WORKFORCE

Joanne Waugh

National Centre for Vocational Education Research

Introduction

VET-skilled jobs are integral to the Australian economy. Skilling sufficient and appropriate workers to meet workforce demand in an ever-changing and complex context is a challenge that has been described as “multi-faceted” and “multi-horizon” in nature (Jobs and Skills Australia 2023a, p.27; PwC 2023). Jobs and Skills Australia estimates that 36% of occupations are in national shortage, with new occupations in demand entering the list each year, reflecting rapidly altering skills needs (Jobs and Skills Australia 2023a). Generating and sustaining a dynamic workforce to meet the evolving demand for skills is a central concern of governments right now.

A greater policy focus has been applied to the systems and initiatives that ‘equip people with the capabilities and skills necessary to respond to changes in the labour market’ (Australian Department of the Treasury 2023, p.99). That focus is on targeting education and training commencements in areas of need and on boosting completion rates to leverage the full potential of the Australian working population. The vocational education and training (VET) sector’s contribution to this critical national endeavour is delivering the training needed by industry where and when it is needed, and in ensuring access for traditionally disadvantaged cohorts.

In 2021, Innovation and Business Skills Australia predicted that industry partnerships would become increasingly important to skilling. Collaboration and consultation with industry has always been a fundamental tenet of the VET system, reflected at every stage from industry’s involvement in training package development through to the requirement for RTOs to engage with industry, stipulated in the Standards for Registered Training Organisations (RTOs). In the new draft Standards for RTOs, providers are required to ‘engage effectively with industry, employers and community representatives’ (Australian Department of Employment and Workplace Relations 2023, p.9). Partnerships between RTOs and employers offer a way to ease the difficulty of meeting a longstanding requirement for VET trainers to be dual professionals: experts in their field *and* in the delivery of training and assessment. Additionally, VET partnership activities offer a way for the VET sector to more effectively meet the needs and expectations of employers, as well as to target specific cohorts.

Broadly, education access has improved for Australians, although some cohorts remain left out of that progress (Australian Universities Accord Panel 2024). NCVER’s equity data product reveals the persistent under-representation of groups such as people with disability, who make up approximately 18% of the population but represent just 4% of VET students in 2021 (NCVER 2023b). Addressing inequitable access will go some way towards unlocking the full potential of the Australian workforce. The VET sector has great utility in addressing social disadvantage, and VET partnerships represent one high-impact, underdeveloped tool for delivering a dynamic workforce and engaging priority groups in skilled work.

What are VET partnerships?

Any definition of VET partnerships must allow space for flexibility. As in most aspects of vocational education, there is no one-size-fits-all arrangement that satisfies all purposes and participants. However, central to the concept of partnership is a mutually agreed purpose. A partnership in VET is signified by a jointly created goal-oriented relationship between VET providers and other entities, including employers; schools, universities and other RTOs; industry; governments; and communities and families.

Although the word ‘partnership’ implies a bilateral relationship, the arrangements often involve more than two parties. Vocational education and its participants are necessarily, and ideally, embedded in the broader context of workplaces, industries, communities, and the socioeconomic environment. Additional factors that could draw in more partners include whether the skills training is a component of a larger social project and the urgency and type of skills gap being targeted. Based on these considerations, partnerships often benefit from co-opting the expertise of group training organisations, industry bodies, community education providers, schools and universities, apprenticeship network providers, and local and state governments.

Specific cultural interest groups can also be critical partners when seeking to engage vulnerable or difficult-to-reach cohorts, for example, religious organisations or locally embedded social and language groups. Engaging and consulting with the other institutions and services with which students interact while studying recognises the complexities and complementarities of students’ real lives and promotes positive individual outcomes, which in turn boosts overall engagement in work. That broader engagement will be especially important for cohorts who have been under-engaged or disengaged with VET until now.

In the context of the ‘No Frills’ 2024 conference theme — partnerships for a dynamic workforce — training organisations and employers/industry have been identified in the literature as the central agents to success in partnerships and are therefore the focus of this paper. Although all types of partnerships are valuable, this core RTO-employer partnership stands out as the most studied and referenced.

The benefits of partnerships

Many benefits may arise for RTOs as a consequence of partnering with industry or employers. Among the priorities previously identified for providers are maintaining industry currency and ‘keeping a finger on the pulse’, allowing the RTO to both demonstrate compliance and deliver what industry needs (Smith et al. 2017). While the imperative for establishing partnerships may have been driven by the obligations for industry engagement under the Standards for RTOs, there is evidence of other factors motivating partnerships.

Additional factors prompting RTOs to establish partnerships include: to ensure satisfaction with training outcomes; a recognition of an industry training gap; to address specific causes of disadvantage; to meet an industry demand or work in thin markets; to promote the employment outcomes of students; or to boost their own financial and business security (Kilpatrick & Guenther 2003; NCVET 2017).

Training providers seeking to go above and beyond in their provision of training are often motivated by a desire to ‘do good’ (Waugh 2023), a desire that was reflected in RTO survey responses, whereby the training provider wanted to ‘assist the community’ and ‘to support the economic development of this state and Australia overall’ (Smith et al. 2017, p.32). These attitudes displayed by RTO leaders demonstrate a level of strategic thinking and heightened awareness of VET’s unique and valuable place in the broader context of the Australian economy and community.



The large number of VET providers is sometimes described as unwieldy, although one advantage in a sector comprising around 4000 providers is its capacity for niche delivery to specific cohorts, a characteristic that is particularly advantageous for supporting small sectors and uniquely disadvantaged student cohorts, as well as for developing place-based solutions supported by communities (Lange, Hofmann & Di Cara 2020). The unique ability of small and medium RTOs to reach target cohorts can be further enhanced through effective partnership arrangements.

By way of example, a study of private RTOs supporting school leavers and facilitating their transition to employment found that their ability to provide mentoring and pathways support; language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) support; and their strong industry-employer relationships delivered greater employment outcomes for participants (Myconos, Clarke & Te Riele 2016). In another example, an ambitious, government-funded project assembled multiple community, industry and education sector partners into community committees, which worked to develop and deliver place-based solutions designed to address youth unemployment in several locations of disadvantage across Australia (Brotherhood of St Laurence 2021). Such collaborative and inclusive place-based approaches to delivering VET assured positive outcomes for RTOs, individuals and employers, and benefited regions by means of long-reaching socioeconomic impacts.

For their part, employers tend to come to partnerships with different motivations from training providers. They may be seeking customised, flexible training; more reliability and dependability in training provision; access to training staff who have become very knowledgeable in their area; or assistance navigating the VET system (Callan & Ashworth 2004; Smith et al. 2017).

A successful partnership can deliver all those benefits and more, in some instances offering unanticipated opportunities to employers, including upskilling other staff to support their workforce development goals. The literature includes accounts of employers who have shared their experiences of becoming an employer of choice by working in partnership with RTOs, especially in niche sectors or regional areas, where a reputation can quickly grow, confirming them as the pre-eminent provider (Smith et al. 2017; Waugh 2023). Additionally, partnerships allow an industry to rapidly upskill workers to meet emerging skills needs (Ai Group 2018).

In some instances RTOs have joined forces to deliver on employer needs. In the report on the Inquiry into the Perceptions and Status of Vocational Education and Training, partnerships between TAFEs and private RTOs were singled out as worthy of support (Australian Parliament 2023). University-VET partnerships have also proved to be instrumental in meeting skills demand in emerging occupations (Ai Group 2018; Australian Universities Accord Panel 2024).

At a system level, broader engagement in VET partnerships by industry and employers may help to raise the profile of VET and combat the persistent negative perceptions of the VET sector by comparison with other education sectors and the subsequent impact this has on student choices (Australian Parliament 2023).

What inhibits partnerships?

Despite the documented and myriad benefits of partnerships between VET and industry, they are not always considered or sought out by providers or employers. Indeed, the perceived challenges in achieving a satisfactory outcome from RTOs may deter employers from using VET at all. Bowman and Callan (2021) reported that outdated training packages and training not being tailored to employer needs were two reasons why employers chose not to use nationally recognised training. On the provider side, there was some evidence that RTOs preferred to partner with large organisations in order to promote efficiencies and an enhanced likelihood of ongoing business, which means that smaller businesses are less likely to receive the benefits conferred by a lasting partnership (Allison, Gorringer & Lacey 2006).

It is important to the VET sector's reputation and standing that, when employers partner with providers for the purpose of accessing nationally recognised training, the desired outcomes are achieved. In the 2023 Survey of Employer Use and Views, 40.2% of Australian employers reported using nationally accredited training, but their satisfaction with training had declined from 84.6% in 2011 to 74.0% by 2023. Two of the top three reasons for employers' dissatisfaction were 'relevant skills are not taught' and 'training is of a poor quality or low standard' (NCVER 2023a).

Partnering with industry can help to make training relevant and satisfy employers' needs for tailored delivery and assessment, but only where RTOs have the capacity to work flexibly with training packages to meet the requirements of the employer (Allison, Gorringer & Lacey 2006). Allison, Gorringer and Lacey claim that employer bodies believe the concept of RTO-industry partnerships represents best practice and conclude that 'stronger relationships between RTOs and employers are key to the effectiveness of this essential upskilling' (2006, p.8).

Employers have also expressed a desire for training providers to develop: better skills for engaging with industry; a better understanding of workplace environments and industry relations arrangements; and the ability to deliver training and customised assessment in the workplace (Bowman & Callan 2021). In relation to the latter, the VET training data indicate that VET has responded to the demand for customised delivery, given that the prevalence of students studying 'subject bundles' has risen, possibly in lieu of full programs. The increase is probably in response to the demand from employers who value a tailored training experience and have specific licensing and mandatory training requirements to fulfil (Smith et al. 2017; Stanwick & Siekmann 2019).

A partnership between an RTO and employer is integral to apprenticeships, with the value and challenges of that relationship well documented. However, non-apprenticeship partnership arrangements in VET face additional challenges and often lack the structured supports to promote success. At the same time, they provide some freedom to create an arrangement that works for all the partners according to the occupations, cohorts and settings involved.

Partnerships as best practice

NCVER's research into this area over the last few years highlights the value of partnerships. Whether investigating VET's role in skilling the workforce, student engagement and outcomes, or delivery and practice, the same theme is present in the key findings, namely, VET partnerships are essential to quality training and delivery. Bowman and Callan, whose 2021 work precedes the most recent tranche of research, studied potential strategies to engage more employers in nationally recognised training for developing their workforce. A key conclusion of their research was that partnerships between RTOs and employers are vital in promoting the use of VET.

Guthrie and Waters (2022) subsequently published an in-depth investigation of VET quality and how RTOs define it. 'Employer feedback' and 'relationships with employers' were deemed as essential components of RTO quality, with the achievement of both employer and industry satisfaction viewed as crucial aspects of VET quality, while the importance of partnerships was highlighted once again. This finding was supported in Waugh's (2023) exploration of RTO motivations for high performance, with RTO leaders describing employer satisfaction as one vital motivator to pursuing excellence, along with developing strong relationships with employers and industry.

Guthrie and Waters (2022) also reported that partnerships benefited RTOs, in that choosing to partner with employers and industry for the purpose of student work placements and subsequent employment resulted in many benefits, these included business-sustaining engagement with employers and industry; increased satisfaction and confidence in the RTO; and high employment rates of graduates and work-placement students, as well as securing repeat business for RTOs and recommendations to other employers. Moreover, close relationships between VET and industry eased the difficulties faced by RTOs in meeting the vocational currency requirements for trainers (Guthrie & Waters 2021; Waugh 2023).

A research project documenting the impact of COVID on VET again yielded observations about the value of partnerships, concluding that COVID pushed RTOs to be more innovative in how they approached training delivery and student support, one aspect of which was enhancing their relationships with industry (Trimboli, Lees & Zhang 2023). Maintaining the focus on partnerships was considered by RTOs to be of great benefit as they moved beyond the pandemic era.

Another recent NCVER research project explored the barriers to success for VET and providers in regional and rural settings (Griffin & Andrahannadi 2023). One of the key findings from this project was that partnerships were pivotal not only to quality outcomes but also to meeting the expectations of communities. In regional and rural settings, the locally acknowledged benefits from VET partnerships were not limited to attracting students — and their successful completion — but also extended to the planning phase. Initial talks between training providers, employers, regional councils and community representative bodies delivered insight into region-specific workforce needs, which were not necessarily revealed through reference to quantitative workforce data tools.

Additionally, the choice to draw community groups into VET partnerships proved invaluable to outcomes, for example, facilitating the inclusion of difficult-to-reach cohorts such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. As Griffin and Andrahannadi (2023, p.10) note, 'These relationships are critical in informing RTOs about what communities and local industries/employers need from training. They are also important in gathering community support for training, especially in Indigenous communities, and in gaining access to infrastructure and/or resources'.

The subject of VET partnerships became something like the 'Where's Wally' of NCVER's research program, arising wherever issues of quality, inclusion and outcomes were explored, with the most recent project investigating the 'strategies that foster the development of quality partnerships between RTOs and employers' (Trimboli, Circelli & Berghella 2023, p.8).



What makes VET partnerships work?

VET partnerships do not emerge spontaneously. They are often the result of deliberate and concerted effort by a handful of passionate and dedicated individuals. Myriad case studies and examples of effective partnerships, such as those referenced in the research cited above, all demonstrate welcome and satisfying outcomes for individuals, employers, industries and communities.

Trimboli, Circelli and Berghella's (2023) definitive investigation identified four pillars for success in RTO-employer partnerships: quality training and service delivery; customer focus through agile and flexible delivery of training and customisation on demand; strong communication and collaboration when working together; and long-term, trust-based relationships.

Each of these pillars necessarily has features and functions that overlap, with these complementing the success factors outlined in NCVER's 2017 VET partnerships good practice guide (NCVER 2017, p.4):

- **Values alignment:** the RTO and the employer share a set of values, which enables the parties to communicate well and understand each other's expectations.
- **Trust:** trust is typically built up over a long period of time and is a particular characteristic of long-term partnerships.
- **Personal connections:** the establishment of trust in a partnership is often the result of personal connections between key players.
- **Communication:** a key element is regular communication between the RTO and the employer. This communication does not generally need to be formalised.
- **Single point of contact:** it is critical that there are clear channels of communication between the two players and that, preferably, a single major point of contact is established by each partner.
- **Flexibility:** this refers to the willingness of the RTO to alter delivery methods and to customise content to suit the specific needs of the employer.
- **Understanding of business needs:** RTO staff need to know about the employer's industry and be keen to learn more about the business. Improving understanding of the business is also considered by many RTOs to be an invaluable source of development for their staff involved in training.
- **Government funding:** funding facilitates partnerships in the initial stages, although it appears to become less important over time. Generally, employers affected by funding reductions try to maintain the partnership through self-funding, but this may prove difficult.

Lists that neatly outline the elements of success, however, belie the sheer energy and resources required to establish and maintain such arrangements. Hidden between the lines are the likely numerous attempts to establish partnerships that have never been realised despite dedicated effort.

One vital contributor to fruitful VET partnerships is the presence of RTO leaders and trainers who possess the right mix of skills necessary for engaging with the various parties. The research suggests that employers are keen to see a wider range of skills developed within the VET workforce, with these skills enabling them to offer the flexible training employers desire (Misko, Guthrie & Waters 2021). Amongst the skills required for RTO leaders and trainers is having the flexibility to integrate nationally recognised training with non-nationally recognised training in order to meet employers' needs; having the ability to reach out to educate employers on what VET can offer; and recognising the need to establish special partnerships and utilise applied research partnerships (Bowman & Callan 2021).

Some RTOs may have the capacity to have a dedicated staff member whose role is to identify and develop relationships with employers, community groups and schools. Often, however, these activities are attached to the core responsibilities of trainers and managers, adding to their already-heavy workload. Many VET professionals do take on that role because they recognise the potential benefits, and they are passionate about their students and their industry, and are committed to a favourable perception of VET; in short, it is an act of altruism, which is often repaid by witnessing the success of others (Waugh 2023).

RTOs are not the only initiators of VET partnerships. Employers and community groups and schools approach RTOs and, either explicitly or through requests for bespoke training, invite training providers to form a partnership. Irrespective of how a demand is generated, the training provider must be sufficiently resourced to enable the partner's expectations to be fulfilled and the relationship nurtured, such that it becomes a productive one.

For employers who view training as an investment, they need to see the value in expending the funds and allocating staff time away from productive work. According to a 2017 survey of Australian employers, 60% of employers would like to deliver more training but are constrained by a number of factors, including their budget; by feeling staff are too busy to take time out for training; and by management not having time to arrange training (Smith et al. 2017). Furthermore, many employers are either not aware of nationally recognised training as distinct from other training options, or have negative views of the utility of nationally recognised training compared with non-nationally recognised training (Bowman & Callan 2021). A study of post-COVID demand for VET training found that some employers considered that VET needed to be more responsive and focus on more short-form delivery (O'Dwyer 2021).

The focus on bite-sized training has been building for many years now, with the delivery of short courses and skill sets considered to be an important function of VET, one that complements rather than competes with full program delivery by providing tasters and stepping stones to further study (Ranshaw et al. 2012). Partnerships are ideal responses to the demand for such 'microcredentials' and bespoke training and enable RTOs to address employers' needs for custom training. That said, employers need to be willing to initiate engagement with RTOs, and the VET sector in turn needs to be sufficiently resourced and skilled to respond to employers' needs.



Discussion

Data collected from providers, industry and communities and contained in recent research demonstrate that the value and importance of VET partnerships is understood and recognised; however, implementation remains a challenge. The capacity of VET to partner with other entities will be developed through a combination of an appropriately skilled VET workforce, resources to drive relationship-building and a social or financial imperative.

The report from the Inquiry into the Perception and Status of Vocational Education and Training concluded that VET 'lacks a clearly defined purpose or structure'; this lack of coherence has long been a criticism of the system (Australian Parliament 2023, p.136). The disparate nature of the system is both a design feature and a flaw: its make-up enables targeted, niche education responses, but at the same time resists the broadbrush policy interventions that produce the rapid results governments might desire.

The current Skills Reform agenda does not specify VET partnerships as a target for support, although the stated intention is to improve industry engagement in the development of training packages through the establishment of the Jobs and Skills Councils as 'key sites of focus for partnership engagement' (Australian Department of Employment and Workplace Relations 2022, p.4; Australian Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet 2020). The creation of any initiatives freeing up RTO resources for use in seeking out and maintaining partnerships forms one part of the solution.

VET reforms are underway that aim to do just that, for example, the Qualifications Reform Design Group and the new Draft Standards for RTOs, both of which have the potential to increase the flexibility and responsiveness of the VET sector by releasing providers to work with their chosen partners to deliver much-needed skills. For providers, part of this is reducing the workload entailed by compliance activities. Shifting RTO focus and resources from compliance activity may free up their resources to enable the delivery of the customised, collaborative and learner-centric training that employers are seeking via partnerships.

The multi-sectorial nature of partnerships implicates the involvement of informed insiders, or brokers, to promote the available opportunities and assist each sector to understand the other. Public policy approaches to brokering have historically been facilitated through government programs and funding for the purpose of establishing specific partnerships, which are intended to be independently maintained (Berghella, Circelli & Trimboli 2023; NCVET 2017). In the past these approaches have tended to be disjointed and short-lived, although some ambitious and successful projects have resulted, for example those developed under the Commonwealth Department of Education and Training's *Apprenticeships Training — Alternative Delivery Pilots Program*.

VET partnerships are already widely recognised as mutually beneficial to all participants, and vital to training quality, student success and employer satisfaction. The research makes clear the components required for effective VET partnerships, challenges remain in the lack of resources and influence for RTOs, employers and others to seek out partnerships. Not all potential parties in a collaborative venture feel equipped to pursue partnerships such as the those currently held up as examples, which tend to feature large and well-resourced partner institutions. Additionally, there remain regulatory and other systemic barriers to establishing partnerships across states and territories, between education sectors and where training programs are stymied by industrial award conditions.

The under-explored territory in VET now is how to enact effective support to promote partnership activity more widely. That support should be holistic and consistent and complemented by a VET system that rewards the establishment of partnerships. Partnership activity could be promoted through the provision of resources to develop the relationship-building skills of the VET workforce and funding to establish partnerships that address specific needs. Such targeted investment in partnerships will further improve VET's flexibility to meet Australia's emerging and rapidly changing workforce needs.

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Level 5, 60 Light Square, Adelaide SA 5000
PO Box 8288 Station Arcade, Adelaide SA 5000, Australia
Phone +61 8 8230 8400 Email ncver@ncver.edu.au
Web <<https://www.ncver.edu.au>>

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