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RESEARCH PLANNING EVALUATION

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VET stakeholder views about completions

**A paper for the Service Skills Australia project “Evaluation
Frameworks for VET”**

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Executive summary

This paper is a product of a project commissioned by Service Skills Australia (SSA) and entitled “Evaluation Frameworks for VET”. The project is being undertaken from April 2010 to March 2011 with the assistance of VET research company John Mitchell & Associates and its associated quantitative measurement company JMA Analytics.

In 2009 SSA developed an issues paper “Evaluation Frameworks for VET on completion rates – issues paper on completion rates 2009” about the need for the development of nationally consistent data collection tools that will more accurately measure and evaluate course completion and non-completion rates. The current project and this report are consequences of that issues paper. An overview of the project is set out in Appendix 1.

Aim and methods

The aim of this paper is to record a range of stakeholder views about the issues of completion, non-completion and the national VET data collection method. To focus the attention of interviewees, the interview was based around the earlier literature review produced by this project, “Why measure non-completions?”

The interview was semi-structured, in that all interviewees were asked the same questions, to enable some comparison and grouping of responses, but some additional questions were asked to follow lines of thought. The interview questions are set out in Appendix 2.

The interviewees were selected by Service Skills Australia as a group that represented a range of stakeholder views, from enterprises, some of whom are training providers, to industry and policy makers.

Acknowledgements of systemic initiatives

This project is occurring during a time of change in the field of VET data collection and reporting. Based on discussions in May 2010 with the National Centre for Research in Vocational Education (NCVER), it is acknowledged at the outset that NCVER is not only aware of issues such as those raised in this paper but also has released a discussion paper on the Australian Vocational Education and Training Management Information Statistical System (AVETMISS). Consultations in May 2010 also revealed that the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) is aware of and working on key issues discussed in this paper, particularly the possibility of a unique student identifier (USI).

Definitions

The Australian Vocational Education and Training Management Information Statistical Standard (AVETMISS) for vocational education and training (VET) is the Standard that underpins the National VET Provider Collection. The NCVER paper “Review of the AVETMISS Standard: Discussion Paper” (June 2010) explains that AVETMISS “provides consistency in data definitions, which ensures accurate data for use in national data collections, where information is compiled from many different sources” (p.5). The data from the collection is also used for a number of purposes such as to track funding, inform policy, monitor performance and as a basis for research (p.5).

A number of stakeholders who are quoted in this document sometimes use the term AVETMISS when they mean the national data collections. At other times they use the term AVETMISS as shorthand to mean both the Standard and the collections. However, their views are still noteworthy and relevant to this project, which is interested in both AVETMISS and the data collections.

Key findings

These interviews identified the following range of stakeholder views. Please note, this summary is designed to reflect the range of views, not to champion some over others. On the other hand, some views have widespread support while others are those of an individual or small number.

“After skimming the literature review ‘Why measure non-completions?’, what are some issues that come to mind?” (section 1)

A common view among the stakeholders interviewed was that the core problem is the lack of data; the inadequacy of the data in the VET national data collection. People want more data made available, and data that is easy to access.

A number of stakeholder comments focused on the methodology and definitions used in recording non-completions. Their views included the following:

- The methodology used to record non-completions is flawed, for instance in the apprenticeship area, where the system tracks contracts, not people.
- The definition of a completion needs to be broadened to include not only course completion but also completion of a skills set. Where an individual completes an intended learning path, that should be measured as a completion. A distinction can be made between training for full-time students, where a focus on course completion is important, and enterprise-specific training where a focus on module completions or competency completions is appropriate.

Some other stakeholders highlighted what they perceived as the rigid timetables of some providers and the inflexible guidelines of funding bodies, as follows:

- Funding mechanisms make it difficult to record high levels of completion, because programs sometimes end before people are able to complete them.
- Institutional providers sometimes make it difficult for some people to complete programs, for example by being inflexible about delivery times.
- Governments are also contributing to non completions in the way they provide funding for training but not for intervention strategies that might reduce non-completion rates.
- An unexpected consequence of new funding arrangements in some parts of Australia is that the non-completion rate is not going to have a funding impact on the provider.

Some stakeholders expressed the view that the national VET data collection system is unable to acknowledge that some people may enrol in a program saying they have every intention to do the qualification when all they want are the core subjects to lead to employment. Without destination data, the system is unclear about the benefits of such partial completion.

Balancing that point of view which emphasises the inadequacies of the data collection system, several stakeholders suggested that those people who argue for the value of people participating in training just to acquire skills, with no intention of completing, might be inadvertently disguising poor practice by providers not committed to ensuring completions. One stakeholder made the point that if the student didn't perceive the training to be of high value, that also might lead to a non-completion.

Another defense of the ongoing use of the completion rate was the view that data issues 'can be fixed', and the completion rate is still a worthwhile indicator. Completion is a legitimate indicator of a range of factors and the focus needs to be on those individual factors.

Enterprise RTOs tend to prioritise the measurement of completions, not non-completions, as high completion rates are both expected and usually obtained. Notably, these enterprises monitor their own completion rates using their internal measurement systems, not the national system.

“In your experience, what are some of the reasons for non-completions by VET students?” (section 2)

One common view put by stakeholders was that non-completion does not always mean a student ‘dropped out’ in the sense of failing. Sometimes students don’t complete because they are given insufficient information when they enrol about the potential outcomes of the training program. These stakeholders generally believe that the data measurement system may not be using valid methods for recording non-completions.

In enterprises, students often don’t complete for two main reasons: they leave the company and therefore the training program or they receive a promotion. In some enterprises, lack of commitment from the store management or the student might be the main reasons for non-completion.

“In relation to the service skills industry, what is an example you can think of where non-completion was not a negative outcome?” (section 3)

One view put was that some people leave a program part way through it, soon after they obtain the skills they want. Another common view was that students’ circumstances sometimes change – for example, they leave the company or they leave the city where the program is conducted – and these non-completions are not negative.

Stakeholders in enterprises find that a frequent reason for non-completion is because the student receives a promotion. Sometimes managers identify management talent in students who are enrolled in Certificate II or III programs and pull them out of those programs and enrol them in management programs.

On the other hand, for some enterprises, all non-completions are viewed as negatives, especially where the company offers a recognition of prior learning (RPL) alternative and convenient pathway if the student cannot attend or finish the training. One stakeholder commented that if the non-completion is due to poor delivery then the program should be abandoned and a non-completion accepted as the better of two evils.

Some enterprises look beyond completions and value the broader learning that occurs in training programs. They believe that the way people build on their training and skills is more important than solely the completion of a program. The view was put that sometimes it is a good process if a participant undertakes a program and finds, through that study, that the industry is not appropriate for them.

“Why do you think it is important that (1) completions and (2) non-completions be measured?” (section 4)

Enterprises value the measurement of completions. Measuring completions enables an enterprise to track the effectiveness of its training and to ensure that the training staff are doing their job correctly. Measuring completions also enables an enterprise to detect whether any negative patterns are developing of high levels of students not completing their programs, and to address the reasons for any such pattern. Overall, measuring completions can indicate the level of return on investment in a training program, at the enterprise level.

From a whole-of-system point of view, more accurate measurement of completion rates will enable policy planners to make informed judgments about where they allocate funding. One stakeholder expressed the view that from the individual student’s point of view, measuring completions is perhaps less important than an individual keeping a record of progress in study, over their full career.

“What types of information or details do you need about completions and non-completions? (section 5)

Generally stakeholders would value more information about peoples' intentions at the point of enrolment and the reasons why they exit. Enterprises in particular would value more information about who completes as well as who doesn't and why not.

Many interviewees noted that benchmarking data about completion and non-completion rates would be useful for providers, enterprises and industry. This industry-wide data could be used to address, in part, the reasons for non-completion. Accurate data about completions is needed for workforce development purposes.

In a move that would impact positively on completion rates, policy makers want to provide people with useful information about their opportunities in the labor force. People can make better decisions about which industry to enter if they have clear information about future opportunities for themselves in that industry.

“Regarding completions and non-completions, what information do you believe the sector currently (a) receives and (b) doesn't receive?” (section 6)

Some stakeholders acknowledged that there are 'holes' in AVETMISS, and the national data collections, that need to be fixed and that it is an 'elderly' system. In future versions of the data collections, newer programming languages will use simpler language. Currently, the lack of a unique student identifier artificially inflates the total of non-completions, but there are plans to implement such an identifier in the near future.

Many stakeholders expressed the wish that the national information that is disseminated widely be put in a language more easily understood by industry. Many enterprises use their own tracking software and don't look at AVETMISS, and the national data collections, because they want to identify trends quickly.

“What do you see as the advantages and limitations of the AVETMISS system?” (section 7)

Many stakeholders noted that the main disadvantage of AVETMISS (and the national data collections) is that it doesn't measure the full national training effort. AVETMISS could be improved. It could provide much more information about themes or trends or differences between levels of programs or between locations. A specific limitation of AVETMISS and the national data collections is that most students can't be tracked across systems.

Some enterprises perceive the compulsory provision of data for the national data collections as a compliance matter and believe that the collections are of no use to them. Some users have had difficulty entering data, which adds to the low value attached to AVETMISS and some scepticism about the accuracy and relevance of the national data collections.

Another view expressed by some stakeholders is that it is unfair to blame all problems on AVETMISS. For instance, funding at State level is focused on course enrolment, not for instance on skills sets, and this skews the AVETMISS results. Additionally, administrative practices in some registered training organisations do not encourage students to register that they have completed the program.

The view was expressed that perhaps some students don't formally claim they have completed the program because they don't value the qualification. Some training is very broad and has a loose link with the actual job.

A number of stakeholders were confident that improvements to AVETMISS and the national data collections will occur, noting that policy changes will drive changes, particularly the COAG work on a national data strategy.

What would you like to see improved in the way data is provided to the sector?" (section 8)

Most stakeholders would like to see an improvement in the way data is collected and reported nationally. As part of those improvements, more information could be made available including the reasons for non-completion.

Currently some enterprises see little or no value in AVETMISS and the national data collections. If the VET system was as good as the higher education system, it would have more value. More student destination data needs to be collected, as it might point out problems with the way programs are designed, rather than place the spotlight solely on non-completion.

Policy changes, such as a move to a more demand-based system where the funding follows the individual, may change VET data systems dramatically. Generally, VET policies will drive an increase in transparent and publicly available data.

"Are there any other issues about measuring non-completions that you haven't mentioned and would like to table?" (section 9)

Many stakeholders interviewed expressed the view that non-completions need to be measured to fill a gap in the system. With that data in hand, enterprise will be better able to lower the number of non-completions. Some enterprises do not rely on AVETMISS to monitor non-completions, preferring to use their own data systems for this purpose.

Another common view tabled in the interviews was that, in some instances, the rigidity of the data collection system exaggerates non-completions. Some programs understandably have low completion rates because of the characteristics of the student cohorts. Some providers may be using VET enrolments to trigger payments but may also be contributing to the low completion rates.

Some enterprises would like to be able to compare their own completions data with national benchmarks. However, other enterprises avidly collect their own data and are first looking to improve their internal systems, rather than look to a national system. The future provision of student intention data was generally welcomed.

While policy makers need more and better data about completions and non-completions in order to make evidenced-based decisions, they may never have enough useful data because of the complex nature of the VET sector.

Recommendations

Based upon the findings outlined above, the following recommendations are made:

- Recommendation 1: That the findings about initiatives by NCVER (e.g. impending pilot of Student Intentions Survey; discussion paper on AVETMISS), COAG (national data strategy projects) and the Commonwealth (e.g. transparency agenda) be taken into account in the framing up of the final report of this project.
- Recommendation 2: That these findings immediately inform the design and conducting of the case study field research.

1. Initial issues

This section sets out a range of responses by interviewees to this question: “After skimming the literature review, what are some issues that come to mind?”

Key points

Some key points raised by interviewees were as follows:

- The core problem is the lack of data, the inadequacy of the data in the VET national data collection.
- Funding mechanisms make it difficult to record high levels of completion, because programs sometimes end before people are able to complete them.
- Institutional providers sometimes make it difficult for some people to complete programs, for example by being inflexible about delivery times.
- Governments are also contributing to non completions in the way they provide funding for training but not for intervention strategies that might reduce non-completion rates.
- An unexpected consequence of new funding arrangements in some parts of Australia is that the non-completion rate is not going to have a funding impact on the provider.
- For enterprise RTOs, the main focus needed to be on measuring completions, not non-completions, as high completion rates are both expected and usually obtained.
- The methodology used to record non-completions is flawed, for instance in the apprenticeship area, where the system tracks contracts, not people.
- The definition of a completion needs to be broadened to include not only course completion but also completion of a skills set. Where an individual completes an intended learning path, that should be measured as a completion.
- A distinction can be made between full-time students, where a focus on course completion is important, and enterprise-specific training where a focus on module completions or competency completions is appropriate.
- Those who argue for the value of people participating in training just to acquire skills might be inadvertently disguising poor practice by providers.
- Data issues can be fixed, but the completion rate is still a worthwhile indicator. Completions is a legitimate indicator of a range of factors and the focus needs to be on those individual factors.
- The national VET data collection system is unable to acknowledge that some people may go into a qualification saying they've got every intention to do the qualification when all they want is the core subjects to lead to employment. Without destination data, the system is unclear about the benefits of a partial completion.
- If the student didn't perceive the training to be of high value, that might lead to a non-completion. Retail is not low-skilled, it is only relatively low skilled, compared to some other fields.

Inadequacy of the data

One interviewee felt the literature review “identified the core problem being the lack of data or the inadequacy of data and I think that’s the root of this whole issue. It is not easy to get to and there is not enough; that is the core problem”.

Rigid timetables of funding bodies and providers

Another interviewee argued that the funding mechanisms make it difficult to record high levels of completion, because programs sometimes end before people are able to complete them:

A lot of the funding mechanisms actually make it hard for there to be high levels of completion. There are lots of programs in the VETASSES database that are of finite timeline and particularly when people are out there trying to get employed, are employed and they’re doing VET almost as extra to their employment they have lots of issues around family and all sorts of things. Quite often programs end before people get a chance to complete. It’s hard for RTOs too because they’re busy trying to grab funding buckets and people have to be started at a certain time and finished at a certain time and there’s a flexibility issue in funding mechanisms.

The same interviewee argued that institutional providers sometimes make it difficult for some people to complete programs, for example by being inflexible about delivery times:

A lot of the RTOs still have an institutional mindset and that’s causing a lot of non-completions. For example, you’ve got unemployed people who are trying to find a job and you’ve got an RTO that’s offering a Certificate II in Retail one day a week for six months and there’s so much going on in that person’s life over six months that they’re unlikely to complete. The structure of the course offering almost predetermines that a lot of people won’t complete. And you’ve got the same situation with the existing worker and the ways that some of these RTOs work with companies and offer training. They’re offering training to people working fulltime and it almost makes it impossible for them to be a completer.

There are courses that are being offered and they say right, okay we’re going to do this Certificate IV and you’re working fulltime so we’re going to do it over two evenings a month or 16 months and someone has a whole lot of family and personal reasons why they don’t make some of those things and that’s pretty much what’s being offered and if you miss some of those you miss out so you become a non-completer.

Governments are also contributing to completions in the way they provide funding for training but not for intervention strategies that might reduce non-completion rates, said one interviewee:

Governments won’t fund the support around the training. They’ll fund the training but they won’t fund mentoring or case management or a whole lot of other things so again they’re actually reducing the likely outcome of a lot of their funding because they don’t see what truly makes a difference particularly in pre-employment and trying to find people employment. Training’s probably a third of the money you need so they’re actually throwing a lot of money away and creating a lot of non-completions by not taking a realistic view around what’s needed.

Another commented on unexpected consequences of new funding arrangements in some parts of Australia:

One of the influences on non-completion is the way providers are funded. You've almost got a situation now, and I'm sure absolutely nobody intended this, that if you enrol as many people as possible irrespective of whether they've got the attributes to complete the course because you really don't care about the dropout, it's not going to have a funding impact on you.

Focus on measuring completions

One enterprise RTO suggested that the main focus needed to be on measuring completions, not non-completions:

We have a completion tracking program internally so it's interesting discussion to have and I think it's almost like you're asking the negative [in asking why measure non-completions?]. I think the question should be why track completions? I think that's the other piece and I think for us it's about if you're genuinely an RTO and you really want to generate a qualification framework as we do then I think completions and non-completions are essential and we focus more on non-completions and how we can reduce that number as much as possible. So that's really I guess the top line from my point of view. And that's from an internal point of view without even taking it from a VET system point of view, so again I'm being very selfish and very internally focused, that's the really the view that I've got.

Another interviewee said non-completions are a non-issue, as their completion rate is so high:

I can only obviously speak on behalf of my company: non-completion isn't an issue for us in that we have quite a high completion rate.

Flawed methodology for recording non-completions

One interviewee argued that the methodology used to record non-completions is flawed, for instance in the apprenticeship area where the system tracks contracts, not people:

The next issue that came to mind really is the whole methodology of recording non-completions. A couple of years ago we were told that the level of completions for the hairdressing apprenticeship in our State was about 45% and we were working with six RTOs and we asked them the question, what are your completion rates for the apprenticeship and most of them said they were between 60 and 70% and that's all of the RTOs. So we were scratching our head and saying here's the records and here's everyone saying the hairdressing apprenticeship isn't successful because there's only 40 odd per cent completions and isn't this terrible? So we got together with the Department here and we picked 2006 and we picked all of the people who cancelled their apprenticeship so they'd effectively been non-completed in that year and we rang them up. We managed to track half of those 160 odd people to speak to them over the phone and 77% of the ones that we got to stated they'd completed their apprenticeship but they were down as cancelled non-completers. When we investigated it we discovered that the system being used doesn't track people, it tracks contracts. So these people were going on at a commencement, they were cancelling with one employer which went down as a non-completion, they were starting again with another employer and continuing and what you're getting of that non-completion rate. What NCVER is publishing is a snapshot in time of a set of contracts, it's got nothing to do with what the students are actually doing.

Worse than that is that they're [NCVER] making assumptions about why people were not completing that were totally erroneous. And when we started asking more specific questions the primary reason by far that these apprentices were saying they were cancelling was poor training and support by the employer so there's just a massive problem with the system. The assumptions people are making

about the reasons are often completely wrong because a lot of people said “Oh this is just the Y generation, they’re not stayers”. So we actually then did a survey of 200 employees and we discovered that the average apprentice has somewhere between three and four employers during their apprenticeship and so they’re actually being quite resilient young people determined to find an employer to get through the thing with and a lot of them were swapping employers because employers were poaching them. So there’s a whole significant issue around that.

AVETMISS is too imperfect a mechanism to be useful, providing erratic results, said the interviewee:

We’ve met with NCVET a couple of times and they did a whole lot of stakeholder surveying in the last couple of years and I think they’re making a serious effort to try and get their data better but if you talk to most of the industry skills board they’d say they don’t rely on NCVET data at all and they get data out of the Department around commencement and completion. Because of the time lag of people loading data and taking stuff off AVETMISS and recording it, stuff jumps around so much that you can’t trust it because all of a sudden you’ll get hundreds of commencements in a quarter. Next quarter you’ll get no commencements recorded simply because the data hasn’t been loaded from one system to the next.

Definitional issues

One interviewee argued that the definition of a completion needs to be broadened to include not only course completion but also completion of a skills set. Where an individual completes an intended learning path, that should be measured as a completion.

While I’m talking about completion I’m not just talking about completion of a course I’m also talking about completion of a skills set, so part of the issue is about intention. Not only have we got data issues but we’ve also got issues with our qualification structure that doesn’t accept what should be considered to be a course to be a course. Where you get an individual who sets out on a learning path and completes the intended learning path, that should be measured as a completion. Now unfortunately maybe we have too narrow a definition of what is a whole course.

The same interviewee distinguished between full-time students, where a focus on course completion is important, and enterprise-specific training where a focus on module completions or competency completions is appropriate:

I think the fundamental issue is that completions should be used as a measure with different emphasis on different client groups within the VET system. For full-time students course completion is an absolutely legitimate measure however I’m amazed people try and push back on that because it strikes me the benefits of having an emphasis on course completion is that if you’re funded on completions you’re going to spend far more time in making sure that the students go on the right course, you’re going to make far more time that you retain the students and you’re going to make every effort that the student achieves. So I think that’s entirely legitimate.

If you’re talking about enterprise-specific training done in the enterprise well that may be different in some cases. I can actually see that maybe module completions or competency completions rather than whole courses are appropriate on occasion.

I think that you can have different measures. You can have course completions as one metric for one group, you can have competency or module completions for another.

A further example he provided was the difference between apprenticeship completions and institutional cohorts:

Non-completion of apprenticeships is materially different from non-completion of an institutional pathway training course because the apprenticeships obviously is the work based learning and there are other factors that come in because you've got all the factors that can impact on the off the job training plus the employment relationship.

Championing skills acquisition might disguise poor practice

The same interviewee argued against the value of people participating in training just to acquire skills as this might disguise lazy or other poor practice by providers.

Too often we're arguing about people coming in for skills and not qualifications and that's a totally different argument and that's an excuse [for poor practice by training providers].

The argument you get from RTOs, which is really surprising, is the old hoary chestnut about people are more interested in skills than credentials.

it's argued here [in the literature review] that a student can come in, do no assessment, get the skills and leave. You quote Lewis, "however it's pointed out many people take only a number of modules sufficient to upgrade their skills". [It's important that the student is] able to have a printed record of what you've achieved, whether that's a whole course, a competency or a skill set.

Completions is a legitimate indicator of a range of factors and the focus needs to be on those individual factors:

Completions is an indicator of a whole series of other factors. It's a perfectly legitimate as an omnibus key performance indicator. What we should be looking at is the component factors and I'm saying if you take the omnibus measure it drives improvement in component factors.

On the other hand, another interviewer accepted that non-completion is not necessarily a failure:

The literature that says that non-completion is not necessarily a failure is something that I agree with. Certainly in the past I've had to report on outcomes from things like the student outcome surveys that include module completers, not just of qualification completers. If you've looked at some of that data, it used to show that even starting an Australian Apprenticeship, a traineeship or apprenticeship, led to a positive outcome. You didn't necessarily have to complete it to get an employment outcome for instance or further education outcome. So certainly I think that the statements in there [the literature review] around non-completion not necessarily meaning failure are certainly true.

Data systems can be fixed

One interviewee argued that data issues can be fixed, but completions are still a worthwhile indicator:

If the data's inaccurate or unreliable it's clearly not appropriate. We need to fix it up.

Data issues can be resolved. The government's initiatives having a My Skills website and having basically performance funding will force resolution of these issues.

I think data collection's an issue, I think the definition of a course is an issue. So there are two issues to be resolved, but that doesn't undermine the case for completions being a legitimate measure.

The data issue and the qualification structure issue to me seems to be an important technical issue but it's not a reason for non-completions. It's not fundamentally a reason for non-completions. I can accept the reason for a non-completion might be because the student leaves. Now why is the student leaving? If the student's leaving because they're not learning anything and they're bored, to me, that's a negative non-completion reason. If a student's leaving because, to take an extreme case they died, that's a legitimate non-completion reason.

No data on students' multiple intentions

One interviewee argued that the national VET data collection system is unable to acknowledge that some people may go into a qualification saying they've got every intention to do the qualification when all they want is the core subjects to lead to employment. Without destination data, the system is unclear about the benefits of a partial completion:

The other thing around non-completions is around the whole employment issue is that people are assuming that VET is being used for a purpose or one or two different purposes and students, employers and to some extent RTOs and policymakers are using VET for multiple purposes. People may go into a qualification saying they've got every intention to do the qualification when all they want is the core subjects to lead to employment. Say we're doing an aquatics project and we've got almost no people going to complete the qualifications because even though they said when we screened them they wanted the qualification, all they really want is employment. So they're just doing lifeguard, pool operations, first aid and they're out there actively trying to get employment and lots of these people that do a Retail Certificate II pick up the five or six core units and they're gone or someone's employed them and that goes down as a non-completion. People are doing it for career development, they're doing it because they're saying well "I'm going to go and do this and there's some funding available and I can do this; someone's offering me this to me for free, so I will go and do it for a month or two." Say they don't like this so they don't complete and that's seen as a complete failure, but we don't know where that person has gone, there's no accurate destination follow-up.

Low perceived value of some training may lead to non-completions

One interviewee argued that if the student didn't perceive the training to be of high value, that might lead to a low completion rate:

Retail is pretty interesting because you're really training people for an occupation where the traditional way in Australia certainly has been on the job. And frankly you're talking about pretty low skilled occupations on the whole because otherwise you're into management and that's a different game from the retail. I think there are big issues about what the value of the training is, and they translate through to completion rates.

When I think of training from the public point of view, I see it as an investment in people's human capital, as investment in their skills, and the only reason you ever make an investment is if there's a return on the investment. And I don't see the return on the investment in retail. When you look at the value of completing an apprenticeship in a traditional trade, it's quite clear there is a very big premium attached to completion. When you look at retail, there's a negative premium attached to completion. Well what it means is that people who leave get paid more than people who stay. And therefore you say well it is pretty hard to see the value of the training. Now from the retailer's point of view, it may be different. They may prefer trained people, but then it becomes no longer a public investment in human capital, it becomes more an industry investment in the way they run their business. And that's fine. I've got nothing against. But then, from that point of view, the idea of public investment is hard to justify.

Retail is not low-skilled, it is only relatively low skilled, compared to some other fields, said the same interviewee:

Of course all retail is not low skilled. And of course, I'm talking about averages, I'm looking at aggregate data.

So I'm not trying to say it's low skilled, but what I'm saying is, compared to many other occupations, it's relatively low skilled and there's not a return to the formal education that you get in other occupations. And when you look at it, it does seem to be related to the amount of cognitive effort you've got to put into the job. So if you look at the traditional trades, the ones who get paid the most are the electro technology people, by quite a long way. The ones who do the most mathematics are the electro technology people. You need more cognitive ability and that's what we pay them for.

2. Common reasons for non-completions

This section sets out a range of responses by interviewees to this question: “In your experience, what are some of the reasons for non-completions by VET students?”

Key points

Some key points raised by interviewees were as follows:

- A non-completion does not always mean a student dropped out.
- Sometimes students don't complete because they are given insufficient information about the potential outcomes of the training program.
- Students don't complete for two main reasons: they leave the company and therefore the training program or they receive a promotion.
- In some enterprises, lack of commitment from the store management or the student might be major reasons for non-completion.
- The data measurement system may not be using valid methods for recording non-completions.

Range of reasons including not guiding the enrolled about the outcomes of the program

This interviewee put the broad case that non-completions do not equal a waste of training effort:

One of the things that's always bothered me with this issue is that there tends to be an assumption in some quarters that non-completions equals waste of training effort whereas in my view there are a whole range of reasons for non-completion which may not necessarily equate to wasted training effort. People might have achieved their goals either in regard to the workforce, gaining employment or gaining the promotion or something like that, or alternatively got the qualification or the skill or the competency they wanted. So I think there are a range of reasons why people don't complete that don't necessarily fit the normal view that a lot of people have that they don't complete because they just basically drop out.

Another interviewee agreed and added that the problem was in the design of the VET training program, lacking any clear outcome:

Quite often it's family reasons, quite often they've found employment or they've found something else that's going to lead them to employment more quickly. The way that courses are designed, funded and supported actually makes it more difficult than it should. I also believe that a lot of VET training is done in isolation of an obvious motivational outcome. We did an airport project a few years ago and that was highly successful because people could see a realistic outcome from it in the short-term. A lot of courses say “Oh you can do this and you can do that” and no one's actually showing them a likely or real motivational outcome at the end of it, so if people lose interest. They drop out for those reasons.

The same interviewee cited a survey which uncovered a range of reasons for non-completion:

This survey we did had 85 respondents, 14 were out for family and personal reasons, one said they didn't like the industry, six said there were low wages, seven said long working hours, three talked

about the course being physically tiring, two said the lack of flexibility in the job, four said health and safety, 12 said, which was really interesting, conflict in the workplace, basically they couldn't get on with people. This is an apprenticeship so I guess it's a bit different. Poor training and support from the training provider was mentioned by only three. Poor training and support by the employer was 30.

Another interviewee also emphasised the need for those taking enrolments need to explain to those enrolling the long-term outcomes of the training:

Certainly the best outcomes in my view were always the ones where the worker or trainee knew exactly what to expect when they got to the job and how the training with the provider and in the workplace would work. I think that it's difficult from the data to pick out that sort of thing but my experience was that that one of the main reasons for non-completion was that the student was not fully across what that training meant. And also where it could take them. I remember years ago doing interviews for a large fast food chain which is the sort of thing that young people coming out of school don't see as a career opportunity. When you explained to them that doing this particular training and what was on the training could actually lead to them having jobs anywhere in the world because it was a chain that was all over the world you really did get top applicants for those positions and almost 100% completion rate. So my personal view is that some of that upfront information is really important particularly in the industry that you're looking at here.

Two main reasons: left the company or gained a promotion

The following interviewee from an enterprise RTO cited two reasons for non-completions: "turnover", that is, people leave the organisation, and people gain a promotion and leave the program:

We're an enterprise RTO and turnover [is the main reason for non-completions]: the turnover of old employees versus the turnover of trainees. That's the biggest reason for non-completions.

The other [reason for non-completion] would be promotion: they move into a role where their role is more significant and they don't have time to finish the training that they've commenced. [This is a common reason for non-completion] because we actually promote those that have qualifications. Normally we promote them when they've got a qualification but because they're doing one we often promote them so they don't finish what they started but really it's probably a small percentage of the overall population. The biggest reason [for non-completion] is turnover of employees; they move out of our organisation to other ones.

An interviewee from another enterprise RTO gave a similar response:

The only reasons we give for non-completion are a cancellation where someone leaves our organisation for some reason or another, or they may not complete if they are promoted into a management position. We deliver a Certificate II and Certificate III in Retail and if someone is doing a Certificate III in Retail and they are promoted it's possible that they will be cancelled off that so that they can commit to management development programs which currently isn't linked comprehensively to the Certificate III. They're the two main reasons [for non-completion]: it's either if someone leaves or if they're promoted into a different position.

A third interview from another enterprise RTO concurred:

We've found that the main reason [for non-completions is that] people leave the organisation and hence leave the program before they've completed. Other reasons [for non-completion] are where

people have decided to perhaps step down from that position as they may have been promoted or seconded.

A representative from an enterprise provided three reasons – lack of support from store management, lack of student commitment and departure from the company:

In terms of our business, it [the reason for non-completion] could be a lack of support from our store management team. We train people onto the program and we expect our managers to act as a support as well as our RTO. [A second reason could be] lack of commitment from the students. We've got a very young workforce. Sometimes people sign up through a traineeship not quite expecting what it's about and what it is and there's not a commitment there and that leads on to not having an understanding of the program or the qualification and what's expected of them. That's more of a re-education [program we need to instigate] for us as well, that we've got to look into about their not understanding the depth of the program. [A third reason could be that] they might move on for another role and leave the company which is a big thing in the industry these days.

Issues with the data measurement system

One interviewee pointed out that, currently, the national data measurement system records non-completions where a person simply shifts their enrolment:

Where someone has started up an enrolment in X but moved their enrolment to another qualification either in an unrelated field or related field and you measure a completion downstream, I think there are some data issues associated with that. Without a USI [universal student identifier] you can never be comfortable that you're actually measuring what you're trying to discern an answer to. I think the data systems at the moment are not fragile but do not go adequately to the kind of assurances that you're measuring things in a way that are valid.

3. Non-completions that are not a negative outcome

This section sets out a range of responses by interviewees to this question: “In relation to the service skills industry, what is an example you can think of where non-completion was not a negative outcome?”

Key points

Some key points raised by interviewees were as follows:

- Some people leave a program part way through it, soon after they obtain the skills they want.
- A common reason for non-completion is because the student receives a promotion. Sometimes managers identify management talent in students who are enrolled in Certificate II or III programs and pull them out of those programs and enrol them in management programs.
- Some companies look beyond completions and value the broader learning that occurs in programs. It is the way that people build on their training and skills that is more important than completion of a program.
- Sometimes it is a good process if a participant undertakes a program and finds, through that study, that the industry is not appropriate for them.
- Students’ circumstances sometimes change – for example, they leave the company or they leave the city where the program is conducted – and these non-completions are not negative.
- Poorly delivered program should be abandoned and a non-completion accepted as the better of two evils.
- For some interviewees, all non-completions are negatives, especially where the company offers a recognition of prior learning (RPL) alternative pathway if the student cannot attend or finish the standard training.

Participants gain immediate benefits and leave the program

One interviewee argued that some people leave a program part way through it, soon after they obtain the skills they want:

Well I think a lot of what’s going on is that people are obviously getting part-time employment and they’re picking up a bit of part-time employment and some of the core units they’re picking up are all they need. That happens a lot in sport and recreation programs, it happens in retail, to a lesser extent hairdressing because of the apprenticeship, to some extent in beauty, people are picking up units. The primary example of non-completers not being a negative outcome is when they walk away from the course because they’ve got what they wanted.

Participants receive promotions and leave the training program

As expressed by many interviewees in response the previous question, a common reason for non-completion is because the student receives a promotion:

I can think of an example and it’s not an uncommon example. For example in retail some companies tend to use Certificate II and III virtually as pre-management training and sometimes people will start

those Certificates. They may never finish because they may well be promoted within the company and it is no longer considered necessary by them or the company for them to complete the training so it comes back to the previous question. They achieve their employment goals by getting the position they wanted, getting the promotion they wanted. I think that's something we do see a bit of.

Another interviewee put a related point, that sometimes managers identify management talent in students who are enrolled in Certificate II or III programs and pull them out of those programs and enrol them in management programs:

One of the things that used to happen [in retail] was that the employer would see potential in them and put them into management. They saw this person as being a potential management trainee and often sponsored them to go to university so actually put them into a higher level training, or they took them straight into their own management training. That's not necessarily a negative outcome. Certainly you did have people that left but there was quite a steady stream of people that the retailers in particular saw as suitable for management.

Participants can benefit from any training program, whether or not they complete

One interviewee expressed the view that in his company looks beyond completions and values the broader learning that occurs:

We have a young workforce, we've got a lot of teenagers in our business, a lot of young permanents, and for us putting people through the training program is more than just about completion. Although the subsidies available are very important, they keep the program running, for me it's more about what people are getting out of it and what they can add to the business, but also what they can add themselves personally, what they can take away from it. They're learning a lot of skills and life lessons from the qualification that they bring to our business and that make them better employees all round, so that would be the biggest example where a non-completion wasn't a negative. They're learning and they still bring some benefit to the business.

Another interviewee made a related comment that any learning may be useful:

I'm of the view that any training is good training and the whole concept when you think about of completion is completion of what? If you're a devotee of lifelong learning then completion becomes meaningless and if you come from that philosophical viewpoint then any training is going to be of some benefit to the individual. It's the way that I think people build on their training and skills [that is more important] and at some point we have a system which says okay you've done this amount of training and your competencies or skills and knowledge is X, you now get yourself to be certificated and you carry a parchment which says you've done X, but in a sense that's just a compilation of educational and academic decisions as to where you've reached at a particular point of your life.

Will we look at and concern ourselves with funding something that's less than a full qualification? The answer is de facto that happens all the time. COAG has said we want outcomes by way of full attainment. We appreciate that but industry and the market is saying we want employability: [we want] people who have skills for the job and they come in and out of training and in and out of jobs.

Change of circumstances of the participant

One enterprise-based interviewee noted the students' circumstances sometimes change – for example, they leave the company or they leave the city – and these non-completions are not negative:

In that instance where somebody decides that they actually don't want that more senior role, let's say, and they want to move back to another one (and don't complete the training program), that's not necessarily negative. It might be the right choice for them at that point and therefore continuing to try and do that training program would not be appropriate. They may decide to leave the organisation because the city's not right for them, and that's not necessarily negative: it's a personal decision and it might be appropriate for both parties if they find they are not in the right role.

Participants find they are not suited to an industry

An interviewee pointed out that sometimes it is a good process if a participant undertakes a program and finds that the industry is not appropriate for them:

Pre-employment and Certificate IIs and even the start of the apprenticeships are being used to help people make decisions about whether they're going into the right industry, so they're using it as a career development, career choice tool. For example, some young girl who wasn't seen as very academic and was sent down the hair and beauty path by someone in school or their parents and stuff got into it and discovered that they're actually introverts and it's not their industry because they have to be bubbly, constantly talkative in a high activity environment.

The interviewee inferred that some non-completion filters out people not suited to an industry:

Industry people are saying it's not necessarily the wrong thing because they'd rather have that happen early on than have some disgruntled person working for them who they eventually have to get rid of a couple of years down the track. So things that a lot of industry people say if we lose some people early on to help us get the right people it's not necessarily a bad strategy. We don't know what those people think but a number of industry people have said to me that having a level of non-completions is not a complete tragedy as long as it's not a massive level of non-completion.

The some interviewee added that some career guidance at school was steering some students into the inappropriate programs:

Another thing that people are saying about the system is that the career guidance, career development at school level and at an early level of people's lives is actually leading to a significantly higher level of non-completions, because they are getting lots of kids into things and it's not the right choice for them but they've never been given an opportunity to delve into things. A lot of these kids aren't getting any and what's worse is that the government is funding things like apprenticeship brokers who go out and sell careers to kids you have to come and be a plumber because Australia needs plumbers, I'm going to run around all the schools and sell plumbing, and it just doesn't suit some kids but being dragged into it and it's the same argument, if you're going to spend \$500 million you might as well spend more money recording it properly using that information but you might as well spend a few million dollars upfront helping make sure that the right people get into the right courses.

If training is inadequate the abandon it, but non-completions are never a positive

This enterprise manager believes it is better that poorly delivered program be abandoned and a non-completion be accepted as the better of two evils:

Let me talk about it from a business point of view firstly. If a manager can't cope with our core business and provide training of a required level to the trainee then non-completion is good in that we'd rather they don't finish the training than finish sub-standard training. That's probably one. But

from a human point of view I can't think of a situation where we would not see it as negative outcome. I think we would love everyone to complete for a number of reasons.

Another interviewee also noted that her company views all non-completions as negatives, because the company offers a recognition of prior learning (RPL) alternative pathway if the student cannot attend or finish the standard training:

We still see it [non-completion] as a negative [if they get a promotion within the company and don't complete the Certificate III] because we do offer Certificate III as RPL [recognition of prior learning] as well. So say they do cancel off the traineeship because they've moved into management, after they've been in management for six months they actually are eligible to apply for it [Certificate III] through RPL so they can still get it. However what we're working on at the moment is streamlining that process as they move into management so that we don't have to have that cancellation, because we still see it as a bit of a negative psychologically: if someone's cancelled it's not always seen as a positive thing so at the moment we're working on something that will more comprehensively put the Certificate III and the management program together so that they can just keep moving along the same path rather than stopping one and starting another one. They'd end up with Certificate III in Retail but it would be more seamless. Instead of cancelling off the traineeship and then getting it later as an RPL they would actually just continue working through it.

4. Importance of measuring completions

This section sets out a range of responses by interviewees to this question: “Why do you think it is important that (1) completions and (2) non-completions be measured?”

Key points

Some key points raised by interviewees were as follows:

- More accurate measurement of completion rates will enable policy planners to make much more informed judgments about where they allocate funding.
- Measuring completions enables an organisation to track the effectiveness of its training and to ensure that the training staff are doing their job correctly.
- Measuring completions also enables an organisation to detect whether any negative patterns are developing of high levels of students not completing their programs, and to address the reasons for any such pattern.
- Measuring completions can indicate the level of return on investment in a training program, at the enterprise level.
- From a whole-of-system point of view it’s important to measure completions “for those areas where there’s a real value in the whole qualification”.
- From the individual’s point of view, measuring completions is perhaps less important than an individual keeping a record of progress in study, over a career.

Accurate measurement will assist policy makers

One interviewee expressed the view that more accurate measurement of completion rates will enable policy planners to make much more informed judgments about where they allocate funding.

The frustration that I have is that some parties conclude that non-completions equals wasted training effort and that then leads to a conclusion of why are we investing resources in certain industries? Industries that appear to have high non-completion rates like some of the service industries are classic example, so I think to inform funding [bodies] is the critical issue here. It bothers me for example when I see papers given by the Deputy Prime Minister which are obviously written by a bureaucrat but essentially she makes the point “Oh well look it’s not worth investing in some industries because of such high dropout rates”. I just think if we can get more information on this it should allow policy planners to make much more informed judgments about where they allocate funding.

The same interviewee added that inadequate analysis of data may lead to an unfair assessment of the VET sector:

They’re using the data in a very simplistic way without proper analysis and I’m not sure it’s always leading to good decisions in terms of funding. I think the other thing is it does have an impact on the VET system and the way the VET system is assessed and I think it’s unfortunate the VET system is seen to have a lot of under-performance where really that under-performing may not be there if there’s a better analysis.

A policy maker agreed that accurate data about completions and non-completions is critical to good policy:

We're always wanting to know that our funding has been spent in an appropriate manner and we're looking for value for money, but we're also wanting to see how many outputs or outcomes there are from the inputs in order for us to project where the future needs might be. I'm a policymaker so I am a person who needs to see that sort of data to project and make reasonable decisions around the future, particularly in training where it does take some while for people to get skills. So we need data on both completions and non-completions. I think they are both equally important.

Tracking completions helps to measure training effectiveness and trainer competence

One interviewee explained that her organisation measures completions in order to track its effectiveness as a training organisation and to make sure that the training staff are doing their job correctly and following up:

There's a couple of reasons but I'm more concerned about completions than non-completions because for us non-completions are more an anomaly than anything else. The two reasons [it is important to measure completions] are: one, we can then track our effectiveness as a training organisation, for example whether the traineeship is done within a timely manner and whether the student is actually getting the outcomes that's required so for that it's the effectiveness of the training; and two, we use it as an administrative tool to make sure that the training staff are doing their job correctly and following up. So from our training and assessment point of view it's more an administrative tool we have evolved and we actually have ours set a little bit higher than the recommended completion rate depending on what State our teams are in. They all have as part of their performance process a goal that they have to strive to achieve in terms of meeting completions. So for us it's two things, it's effectiveness of the training and two, to have some administrative control.

The same company measures non-completions to make sure there aren't any negative patterns developing of high levels of students not completing their programs:

We track cancellations and that's what we would call non-completions. We track cancellations to make sure there aren't any negative patterns, that is, for example, if one State, one region or one area is starting to show a pattern of cancelling people because then we start to look at incidences of where if this is starting to happen, and at what stage of the traineeship are they cancelling and for what reasons? We look at non-completion from a cancellation point of view.

Another enterprise representative added that by recognising the main reasons for non-completion, the organization can try to prevent them.

It's important to have that data from a statistical point of view. It's useful from a benchmarking perspective for an employer when you're trying to make some assumptions and predictions about what's usual, what's typical, how your organisation performs. It is important if the data is available about reasons for non-completion to try and reduce those. By recognising the main reasons (for non-completion), it can be valuable to try and prevent them.

In the case of non-completions, [it would be valuable to know] at what point in time [in the training program] are most of the non-completions occurring, for example in the first three months or first six months. That also could be valuable information because often there can be high dropouts at the beginning of a program. That can be useful data.

Another representative of an enterprise agreed that measuring completions can highlight programs' possible problems and flaws:

It's important to measure the completions and non-completions. It can highlight programs' possible problems and flaws within a qualification or a unit. It can show the success or limitation of our program. There could be a problem where if we're having terrible completion rates there could be a problem with the trainers out there or an internal problem with our managers, so it can really set the alarm bells ringing to say that there's a problem out there.

Monitoring completions reveals the return on investment in training

The same representative added that measuring completions can indicate the level of return on investment in a training program, at the enterprise level:

It [measuring completions] can also show a return on the financial investment of the program: the money that we're spending on the fees, the training fees, the money that we are able to obtain from the government in completions and commencements, you can see whether it's proving viable, not that the program's ever made a profit.

The following interviewee explained that his company measures completions, using its own data system, because qualifications improve staff retention:

We track completions ourselves. Why do we do it? We do it because we believe that qualifications improve [staff] retention, number one, that's a fundamental belief we have. It's not just qualifications but [professional] development. And secondly we tie our completions through to milestones in the career, so for example Cert III is Shift Supervisor, Cert IV is Restaurant Manager etc, so when they finish they get the qualification and they get the status, that's how it works. I think measuring non-completions provides us with an opportunity to try and understand reasons. It is a bit like measuring staff turnover. Why are people not doing it?

Another interviewee spoke from a whole-of-system point of view and argued that "it's very important to measure completions for those areas where there's a real value in the whole qualification":

And that will probably differ by field of study a bit and also by the demographic group. If the qualification framework has value, these qualifications must have value and therefore it's important to count the completions. But it's probably more important to count them for the groups that really get the value out of them.

Measuring completions should reveal reasons for non-completion, and their eradication

One interviewee spoke from a sector perspective in arguing that measuring completions should reveal the reasons for non-completion, so those reasons can be addressed.

We need to be measuring more than just the completion and non-completion, we need to be measuring the reason non-completions, I think that's a critically important. I know how horribly hard destination surveys are because people just aren't interested and you can't track them and they move around so much. I think tracking non-completions is a critically important issue for the whole system because it's enormous amounts of money and it's lives and heaps of businesses that are tied up in it and the kind of information where you're saying to people well the problem is more with the employers, or is the problem with the structure of how it's being delivered, is it lack of support? Is it

the actual training packages themselves that aren't speaking to employment needs? So for all of those reasons we need to measure non-completions. And the other thing about it is that if someone's getting a high level of completion we also need to be looking at how they're doing that so we can transpose it elsewhere.

Recording an individual's progress is more important than measuring completions

One of the interviewees argued that measuring completions is perhaps less important than an individual keeping a record of progress, over their career:

Completions are important and yes, we would want to measure progress by way of non-completions but it's important that we measure progress and for a whole bunch of reasons this is where some of the potential benefits of the USI. One of the benefits that people are arguing about is owning their own e-portfolio, allowing people to compile their own record such that they can have a verified record of who they are and what they've attained as they move about their training and move about the country and change provider. Given my philosophy, I don't accept that there is a non-completion. I just think it's a part completion.

The same interviewee added that the VET system needs to respect the fact that people discontinue their training if "they figure they can earn money":

It's the strong view of industry is that they want people who have the employability skills on-the-job and people don't want to hang around training if they figure they can earn money but they're happy to continue their training while they're earning money. I think we have to be respectful of that.

5. Types of information about completions needed by providers and stakeholders

This section sets out a range of responses by interviewees to this question:

- *“For providers only: What types of information or details do you need about completions and non-completions?”*
- *For other stakeholders: What types of information or details do you need about completions and non-completions?”*

Key points

Some key points raised by interviewees were as follows:

- More information is needed about peoples’ intention at the point of enrolment and why they exit. Enterprises need information about who completes as well as who doesn’t and why not.
- Benchmarking data about completion and non-completion rates would be useful for providers and industry. This industry-wide data could be used to address, in part, the reasons for non-completion.
- Accurate data about completions is needed for workforce development purposes, but the current data is incomplete.
- Policy makers have good reasons for wanting to provide people with useful information about their opportunities in the labor force, including the reason that people can make better decisions about which industry to enter if they have clear information about future opportunities for themselves in that industry.

More information is needed about why people enrol and exit

One interviewee believed that more information is needed about peoples’ intention at the point of enrolment and why they exit:

What we’re really looking for is just more information on why non-completions might occur and I think that probably needs to happen at two levels. One, there needs to be better information on why people enrol and what their expectations of that enrolment are because some of the assumptions that are made with enrolments, I’m not sure they stand up anymore: I think they belong to a bygone day. Once upon a time everyone did enrol to get their trade qualification or something similar, but it’s a much more complex system now and I’m not sure we’ve necessarily adjusted the system to take account of that. So I think we need more information about why people enrol but we also then need to have some sort of capacity to collect information when people exit and to be able to do proper exit studies. I think the universities to some degree do this much better than the VET sector and if we could get more information on why people leave when they leave and what their expectations were and whether when they leave their expectations or even if they’ve adjusted over time, have been fulfilled, I think that would give us a much more rounded picture.

Enterprises need information about who completes as well as who doesn’t and why not:

What information do we have and what information do I think we need? I think it's really about who completed what when; that's really all we need; and we track overall qualifications. I think for non-completions, I think you want more reasons for non-completion than reasons for completion, so I think it's really again analysing reasons why not.

This enterprise expects full completion so it only tracks the numbers of completions:

For completions all we need to know is who has completed. We don't actually track how long it takes to complete because typically for us they complete early, so we don't track when they completed. And for non-completions the same thing: we track the numbers.

However, the following enterprise representative would like more information about at what point in time people discontinue:

[Regarding] non-completions, are most of the non-completions in the first three months or first six months? That could be valuable because often there can be a high dropout at the beginning and then you go past a certain point and then it's usually less. That could be useful data.

A policy maker tabled a wish for more information on people's intention at the start of a program.

The NCVET does the student outcome survey and we have data that continues for some while after, but it is difficult to trace those people. We don't have a lot of information on why people go into certain types of training. Some discussions I've had with TAFE fairly recently show that a lot of their higher level students only want to do a few modules because they want to upgrade skills; the student only ever intends to do a couple of specific modules. We don't have a lot of information about that sort of thing. We know how many commence and we know how many complete and we certainly know how many withdraw. We don't have any quantitative data on why people take up the training. We have information on broad intentions like for employment or for interest, but not a lot of detail.

Benchmarking data would be useful for providers and industry

Some interviewees expressed an interest in industry-wide data, for benchmarking purposes:

I think it would be good to know more about the industry completions and non-completions so what other businesses are achieving. I haven't even looked to see if that information's available; to see what other sort of retailers are finding and if they're going through the same sort of things we're going through with completions and non-completions and just seeing the sort of the industry standards. [Our training provider] has done some work for us and shown that our completions are quite high against the industry standards so [that RTO] is very good: they've been giving me a fair bit of information in terms of our completion rates. So I would like just more overall information in general.

This interviewee wants industry-wide data to address, at least in part, the reasons for non-completion:

Industry skills boards and ITABs all around the country need that information to see what number of people are actually starting and finishing training and to tell us whether there's enough people for industry being trained, whether the problem is that the people are being trained and not staying in the industry. We need to know it for funding purposes because obviously people are saying "Oh we shouldn't fund retail because there are so many non-completions," so we obviously need the data to try and resolve the problem.

Accurate data about completions is needed for workforce development purposes, but the current data is incomplete:

There are a lot of workforce development issues why we need the information, why the government needs the information, why industry needs the information but you can't trust any of the current information. The whole private sector training component in our State isn't measured at the moment. How bad is that? There's a whole lot of training going on in enterprise RTO that isn't in the system yet.

Policy makers want more data on why people don't complete

The next interviewee expressed a preference for knowing why people did not complete:

I think the more important details are the reasons why people didn't actually proceed to complete. Non-completions are the most important and the most difficult to work through. The quality of longitudinal surveys on individuals' choices and behaviours is pretty thin.

Why did you change your mind? Or why did you get off this particular course? Those questions are the ones that are the most telling and typically they're private reasons. Very often they can be financial reasons or some other personal domestic reasons.

This interviewee explained that policy makers have good reasons for wanting to provide people with useful information about their opportunities in the labour force:

I think to some extent one of the policy reasons for wanting to know all that is about systemic quality matters, across-industry quality matters about training and then labour market information where people start out on a program or course of studies and then learn more about what their net present value might be or net present earnings might be if they get into that profession and stay. The more and more we get signals about people getting good information about the labour force and their opportunities in the labour force will help steer people to making rational decisions for change.

6. Current information about completions received by the sector

This section sets out a range of responses by interviewees to this question: “Regarding completions and non-completions, what information do you believe the sector currently (a) receives and (b) doesn’t receive?”

Key points

Some key points raised by interviewees were as follows:

- AVETMISS only measures part of the training effort, nationally.
- It is readily acknowledged that there are holes in AVETMISS that need to be fixed. It is an elderly system and in future versions newer programming languages will use simpler language. The national information that is disseminated needs to be in language easily understood by industry.
- Many enterprises use their own tracking software and don’t look at AVETMISS because they want to identify trends quickly.
- Some valuable information is provided to the regulator but is not used.
- There needs to be more transparency about the data collected and used.
- Stakeholders are not clear what information is collected or disseminated nationally.
- The lack of a unique student identifier artificially inflates the total of non-completions.

Incomplete data

AVETMISS only measures part of the training effort, nationally:

One of the frustrations I’ve always had with AVETMISS, and I know it’s improved a little bit in more recent years, is that AVETMISS only measures part of the system and I actually have a feeling there are a range of employers out there who are quite happy under certain circumstances to provide a lot more information but AVETMISS doesn’t even make an attempt to collect that information. So there’s a whole lot of training effort going on that the system doesn’t measure and I think that’s part of the problem. We’re not getting a really accurate picture – and I’m not talking about training that doesn’t lead or lead into training package arrangements – but I think there’s a lot of reasonably formal training that’s going on that is just not being measured. So I think if we could get better measurements in those terms it would be a big help all round.

It is readily acknowledged that there are holes in AVETMISS that need to be fixed:

There are probably 12 things identified by us as being holes in AVETMISS that need to be plugged. And if other people have got other holes [we need to know]. There are heaps of holes.

AVETMISS is an elderly system and in future versions newer programming languages will use simpler language:

It’s worked pretty well but it’s now getting quite elderly. And I think people’s expectations now are changing and I think we’ll be able to probably express it in simpler terms, in terms of the concepts because the programming languages have changed.

Another interviewee commented that the national VET information that is disseminated needs to be in language easily understood by industry:

And I think the other thing about it too is knowing where the data is and understanding the data. If they're focusing data on industry then it needs to be in industry speak, not in academic VET talk. I think if we are going to receive data they need to be careful about how they contextualise it then and the explanation that comes with it. It's actually of no value unless it has that.

Data released too slowly

Many enterprises use their own tracking software and don't look at AVETMISS because they want to identify trends quickly:

We use a tracking software for students. It's a very cheap and nasty one but we've started ourselves. And to get a report with absolute completions and non-completions, it's very hard because we've got people who are with us three or four years and a traineeship contract might take longer than they're employed and so the absolute [rate of] completions and non-completions is hard to work through because it takes more than a year. You can't just say completions in a year. And we do everything else on a yearly basis so for us I'd like to know absolute number of completions, you almost also want to know recently whether completions are increasing or decreasing as a percentage of the total population. We want to be able to identify trends very quickly. I don't look at any AVETMISS data. From a top level I just look at the overall number of completions on a period by period basis.

Information collected but not used

One interviewee pointed out that some valuable information is provided to the regulator but is not used:

This is an interesting one because when I was reading this I was thinking back to when we had to submit our quality indicators and we registered in New South Wales which meant we had to submit our completions rate to VETAB. Now as far as I'm aware nothing has actually been done with that information so to me that's an area of concern if they're getting this information, as to who's completed it, the information that they did get was who's completed which module of which qualifications delivered in which State so that's the information that we submitted. I actually think that could be quite valuable. I think it's more valuable not so much for NCVET or for VETAB but I think it's actually more valuable for the Skills Council or the people who write the Training Package because if you're getting high completions in certain modules and not in others that might be giving you some information about the Training Package and units of competence within that Training Package. So I'm a bit 50/50 on that one because I think we're collating this information but no one's actually using it so it'll be interesting to see what happens this year.

There needs to be more transparency about the data collected and used:

The Commonwealth is running a transparency agenda and we want the system to be transparent. We want to be able to look at performance of the system and we want to look at performance of providers and certainly completions and non-completions is a very important part of measuring and looking at provider performance. The Commonwealth is driving a whole strategy around data. You'll see in the budget that there's a My Skills website and that is around information for consumers. It's also around reporting performance of providers. So we think there needs to be a lot more information.

Lack of clarity about what information is collected and disseminated

Most interviewees are not clear what information is collected or disseminated nationally, as shown by the following separate responses:

I don't really know what the sector gets. We don't receive a lot of information on it.

If we cancel somebody from a traineeship we fill in the cancellation form so therefore I would expect that that's kept but to be honest I have little visibility of anything else.

I believe we receive very little accurate data and I think apart from not being able to trust the accuracy of it I don't think it's published, it's not being delivered to the stakeholders in any kind of properly articulated way. Just firing out some graphs saying this is the level of commencement and completions over the last three years doesn't tell industry anything. You need to say here is a level of commencements and completions, funding levels during this period were higher or lower and what are the circumstances involved in it? You might find the number of apprentices have dropped off dramatically. There's no attempt to say this has been during 18 months of the global financial crisis or this increase has happened because there's been a massive drive in our State to get schoolkids into apprenticeships. A lot of the data doesn't have the environment or the framework information around it to actually make it talk properly. And obviously we're not receiving the whole story, we're not receiving the private sector story.

Lack of a unique student identifier (USI)

The lack of a unique student identifier artificially inflates the total of non-completions:

The big problem that we have on this completion issue, really, is the lack of a unique student identifier. We're always playing games trying to track people, rather than doing it cleanly. That's ideally what you'd like because we don't know the extent to which people jump between providers and you know it's quite a reasonable thing to do. If you jump between providers, you will certainly be counted as a non-completer for the first, but you'll be counted, if you complete, as a completer for the second despite the fact you didn't do all your training there. So there are the odd swings and roundabouts. But that bedevils us. And it's going to become more and more important because now that we're going to be trying to cover the whole VET sector, and the nature of VET is a lot of people do a lot of quite short things. If we're not careful we're going to end up with more VET students than there are people in Australia, because we'll be counting the same people 20 times.

7. Advantages and limitations of AVETMISS

This section sets out a range of responses by interviewees to this question: “What do you see as the advantages and limitations of the AVETMISS system?”. Many interviewees addressed this topic in responding to the previous question, so sections six and seven can be read as a pair.

Key points

Some key points raised by interviewees were as follows:

- A disadvantage of AVETMISS is that it doesn't measure the full national training effort.
- AVETMISS could be very useful but it isn't at present. It could provide much more information about themes or trends or differences between levels of programs or between locations.
- Some enterprises see the provision of data for AVETMISS as a compliance matter and AVETMISS is of no use to them. Some users have difficulty entering data, which adds to the low value attached to AVETMISS and the scepticism about its accuracy.
- Currently, most students can't be tracked across systems.
- It is unfair to blame all problems on AVETMISS. For instance, funding at State level is focused on course enrolment, not for instance on skills sets, and this skews the results. Additionally, administrative practices at the level of registered training organisations do not encourage students to register that they have completed the program.
- Perhaps some students don't formally claim they have completed the program because they don't value the qualification. Some training is very broad and has a loose link with the actual job.
- Policy changes will drive changes to AVETMISS, particularly the COAG work on a national data strategy.

Not a measure of all training

A disadvantage of AVETMISS is that it doesn't measure the full training effort, noted two interviewees:

The one with AVETMISS that's really frustrated me is the inadequate measuring. We don't measure the full training effort and we don't effectively measure why people enrol and therefore we can't effectively measure outputs.

The advantage is that it collects the consistent and accurate data on the VET sector. Limitations for me are that it's only for the government funding training programs and not all the reasons for completions are recorded, and State [based data] isn't recorded. I think it could be broader and have more information.

AVETMISS could be very useful but it isn't at present. It could provide much more information about themes or trends or differences between levels of programs or between locations.

The advantages of that could be that data could be provided by sector, by program. It might provide statistical information and whether there are themes and differences to do with the level or even the geographical location or whatever. That could be valuable. The immediate limitation is [that it only

records] the government funded training program. We might have one program with a group of people but only certain people would be included in the AVETMISS system which then wouldn't represent the whole program equally.

Because some fields in AVETMISS are voluntary and are not always filled in, the data is incomplete:

One of the things that I've come across is that even though we have the AVETMISS standard some parts of it are voluntary so when I was looking to do some data matching or looking at some data synergies recently I found that because some of the fields are voluntary providers don't fill them in and because of that, some data is limited.

A compliance requirement of little value at enterprise level

Some enterprises see the provision of data to AVETMISS as a compliance matter and AVETMISS is of no use to them:

They [colleagues in each state] use it [AVETMISS data] but look I don't look at it. From my point of view we provide the information [to AVETMISS] really because we have to.

I find it very difficult to understand the AVETMISS data [we collect]. It's just a series of numbers and it's time-consuming to collect, it isn't easy on the eye, it's not in a format that is useful. It doesn't give you much unless you then take it and do something else with it.

AVETMISS is not easy to use

Some users have difficulty entering data, which adds to the low value attached to AVETMISS and the skepticism about its accuracy:

I don't really know how the AVETMISS system works as far as its mechanics and what's really available from it because our attempts to get stuff out of it. When people start talking about AVETMISS everybody runs for cover and panics but we're doing activity places program in our State and the trouble the RTOs have been having logging stuff onto AVETMISS is just mind-boggling. There seem to be so many problems.

They try and log stuff on and it rejects it. They log stuff on and it's accepted and it doesn't come out in the reports. We pay people against what gets logged on and RTOs quite often come back and say we put this on two months ago and it hasn't appeared on the reports. We don't get the money from the government to pay the RTOs until it's on the system but there are people tearing their hair out about the whole system. So when you say what do you see as the advantages and limitations of the AVETMISS system I'd have to say to you I don't understand enough about how the system works, all I can see is a lot of frustration around the difficulties RTOs are having with the system.

Cross-sector students not tracked

Most students can't be tracked across systems:

And the big limitation of course is because we don't have the student ID we can't track students across various sectors, we can't track them in and out of programs. The only students that can be tracked in the system are students who are accessing things like FEE HELP or VET FEE-HELP because they have a CHESSN number, a Commonwealth higher education student support number, which is linked to their tax file number. Those students can be tracked between the two sectors but that's very new.

Administrative practices skew results

It is unfair to blame all problems on AVETMISS. For instance, funding at State level is focused on course enrolment, not for instance on skills sets, and this skews the results:

The funding tends to flow to people enrolled in courses. And as soon as you do that, then of course people enrolled in a course. And now that's not AVETMISS. It's the mindsets of the people running the systems that are driving it, not the statistics.

Administrative practices at the level of registered training organisations do not encourage students to register that they have completed the program:

Maybe we do underestimate them [course completions], but of course people always blame the statistics. It is true, it is true that ... that the practices of a lot of the institutes do not encourage people necessarily to register that they completed. So again it's not our statistical system driving it. At university, everybody knows when they finished their degree and it's a sort of rite of passage. Now how come that's not happening in the VET sector too?

Questions about the value of qualifications

Perhaps some students don't formally claim they have completed the program because they don't value the qualification, suggested one interviewee:

It's a cluster of reasons, and I guess the thing I'm throwing on the table is one possible reason is that the actual value of the qualifications is not that flash. And that's what's driving some of this [low completion rates recorded by AVETMISS].

Why on earth have we gone to all this trouble to set up this qualification system? Surely it's because qualifications have value in their own right.

The interviewer added that some training is very broad and has a loose link with the actual job:

In some areas of the VET system it's clearly very vocational training. And the trades are a pretty good example, and also some of the community care are. You only train to be a care of older people if you're going to work in the industry. But in other parts of it [the VET system], it's not like that at all. It's really very generic [training] in the sense there's very loose match between what people are studying and what they're [doing when they're] working. In retail the tightness between the training people are doing and that work is probably pretty poor.

Other data is useful

The student outcomes survey does show that many people who don't complete are dissatisfied:

Everybody who is either a module complete or a graduate gets the student outcomes survey. A module completer is simply somebody who's done one module and completed it. There are some people who don't get the survey who may have enrolled in a module but didn't actually complete one unit. So they're not in it. But everybody else is in it and we typically know that for the module completers, they're less satisfied and the outcomes are not as good as those who complete. And yes at very aggregate level. The immediate conclusion from that is that we can't kid ourselves that all the drop out is good because people got exactly what they wanted, as that's clearly not the case. You can just see that from the data.

The impending trial of a student intentions survey may provide even more useful data, but it will be contested:

We were pushing quite strongly for a students' intentions survey. The hope is that we'll get data out of that, but the hope is also we'll perhaps be able to track them through our administrative systems and then work out who completes, who doesn't complete, how that lines up. And even then people won't be happy because they say "Oh yeah, that's what people thought when they started it but then of course things change and they change their mind and they still got what they wanted out of it".

Policy will drive changes

Policy changes will drive changes to AVETMISS:

The wind is blowing in the back of a demand driven system for the students. If that is the case the data systems to measure how and where students are going are just going to have to be that much better. And that is likely I think to impact on AVETMISS.

The COAG work on data will bring changes to AVETMISS:

The VET data strategy means that lots of data issues are being looked at. They're looking at a comprehensive strategy of not just amounts of data but quality of the data.

8. Suggested improvements in the way data is provided to the sector

This section sets out a range of responses by interviewees to this question: “What would you like to see improved in the way data is provided to the sector?” Many of the responses in the previous two sections addressed this question, and need to be read in conjunction with the comments below.

Key points

Some key points raised by interviewees were as follows:

- Interviewees want to see an improvement in the way data is collected and reported. More information needs to be made available including the reasons for non-completion
- Currently some enterprises see no value in AVETMISS. If the VET system was as good as the higher education system, it would have more value.
- More student destination data needs to be collected, as it might point out problems with the way programs are designed, rather than place the spotlight on non-completion.
- Policy changes, such as a move to a more demand based system where the funding followed the individual, may change VET data systems dramatically. The MySkills website will drive an increase in transparent and publicly available data.

Improvements needed to data collection and reporting

Interviewees want to see an improvement in the way data is collected and reported. More information needs to be made available including the reasons for non-completion. Sample responses follow:

I think if we could get the data collected that's where I've really been turning my attentions now, because I think in a sense once the data's collected the mechanisms are probably there for the information to be made available. It's the lack of data that I think is our problem.

I think it'd be great to actually have it [AVETMISS data easier to access]. We had to create our own [measurement system] at our own cost and a report that said absolutely how many people who started a traineeship with us finished a traineeship with us over a period of time up to three years, and we track it every period. So I think very simply if they could tell us absolute completion [rates] versus not [completing], enter the qualifications and its level, that qualification and breaking it down and then reasons for non-completions of those that haven't completed, I think that's simple.

Currently some enterprises see no value in AVETMISS:

I understand that every RTO is reporting [to AVETMISS] in the same fashion because it's got to go to a central database in whatever State you're in but in terms of us as an RTO, once we submit it we would never even look at it again.

If the VET system was as good as the higher education system, it would have more value:

The Australian higher education Higher Education Information Management System (HEIMS) system looks at more than just the raw completion data. Overall I think that [approach] would probably help us.

More destination data needed

More student destination data needs to be collected, said this interviewee, as it might point out problems with the way programs are designed, rather than place the spotlight on non-completion:

There should be some destination work done even if they effectively went around and picked a number of industry sectors each year and then cyclically over a five year period did some proper destination surveys in different industry sectors to give some true background to what's really happening. I think that would be critically important. In hairdressing we knew that there was massive frustration with management practices and the way apprentices are treated. Even to actually know that that's true [would be useful] but also then to know that there's a range of other problems because people need to think about if we've got these other problems around people with family issues and all sorts of other things it talks to the way we're designing, training and dealing with people. We give an RTO three grand to deliver a course and 25% aren't completing. What would happen if we built in some kind of flexibility and case management support for an extra grand, would we get a more than proportionate change in outcome?

On the other hand, one interviewee argued that the Student Outcomes Survey data captures important data related to completions.

The Student Outcomes Survey that captures [important data] and I don't think you make it quite clear enough in your paper [literature review] about the relationship between the students and courses and the Student Outcomes Survey. The Student Outcome Survey I think is terrific and enables you to do a heap of stuff. But it's not perfect.

Policy changes may bring big changes to data systems

Policy changes may change data systems dramatically, said one interviewee:

If we move way downstream to think that there may be a point in time where all public monies, both state and commonwealth, are available for training to all providers, whether publicly owned or not, for all students who would have an entitlement to take their training wherever they wished, subject to their quality and entry standards, you get to a point where in that hypothetical situation the data systems are going to have to be very different to what they are now.

The MySkills website will drive an increase in transparent and publicly available data, said one interviewee:

The My Skills website is aimed at more publicly reported data with data reported back to providers as well as being more widely available. In higher education providers are provided their own data for performance so they can measure their own performance and that's something that I'd like to see in VET as well.

9. Other issues about measuring non-completion

This section sets out a range of responses by interviewees to this question: “Are there any other issues about measuring non-completions that you haven’t mentioned and would like to table?”

Key points

Some key points raised by interviewees were as follows:

- Non-completions need to be measured to fill a gap in the system. With that data in hand, lowering the number of non-completions is the main goal of some enterprises.
- Some enterprises do not rely on AVETMISS to monitor non-completions, as they use their own data systems for this purpose.
- In some instances, the rigidity of the data collection system exaggerates non-completions.
- Some programs understandably have low completion rates because of the characteristics of the student cohorts. Some providers may be using VET enrolments to trigger payments but may also be contributing to the low completion rates.
- Some enterprises would like to be able to compare their own completions data with national benchmarks. Other enterprises avidly collect their own data and are first looking to improve their internal systems, rather than look to a national system.
- The future provision of student intention data is welcomed. However, while policy makers need more and better data to make evidenced-based decisions, they may never have enough useful data.

Measure and lower non-completions

Non-completions need to be measured, said one interviewee, to fill a gap in the system.

I think this is a pretty straightforward sort of issue. It’s unfortunate that we’ve gone down the path for so many years and it’s still an issue and I think you’re absolutely right when you say in your literature review about two camps and I think that’s a good way to describe it. Unfortunately the camp that doesn’t want to measure completions for whatever reason has had the upper hand and I guess that that’s my frustration. If we could turn that around and get a little bit more data, I think that’s one of the big gaps in the system at the moment.

With such data in hand, lowering the number of non-completions is the main goal of some enterprises:

We’re pretty high in terms of completions because of our employees [attitude]. From our end the lower that number [of non-completions] the better. We’re passionate about improving completion rates.

Some enterprises do not rely on AVETMISS to monitor non-completions, as they use their own data systems for this purpose. A sample comment follows:

It [measuring non-completions] is not really an issue for us and when it is an issue we typically have it in one area and is quite easy for us to manually seek out what the problem is. We’re used to doing it

ourselves [measuring non-completions] so we're using reports that are familiar to us already so that's part of it but AVETMISS is too difficult to work with.

Modify the data collection system to remove anomalies

In some instances, the rigidity of the data collection system exaggerates non-completions:

You've actually got programs like VET in schools where people aren't going to complete and they're going to leave school so there's actually structures within the system that are based on non-completions. We're saying "Oh non-completions are terrible" but hang on a minute, it was never intended that some of these things were completed.

The same interviewee added that some programs understandably have low completion rates because of the characteristics of the student cohorts:

A more diverse labor force pool than five years ago is making the non-completion issue even harder. You're getting into a lot of cultural issues, a lot of migrants, a lot of language, literacy, numeracy problems, so understanding the reasons for non-completions becomes even more important. For instance, these are the reasons for non-completions, so how do we design training and mechanisms.

The same interviewee questioned the practices of some providers who may be using VET enrolments to trigger payments but may also be contributing to the low completion rates:

I think the other issue that really needs to be looked into around non-completions is how people like job service providers are using VET training. Are they earnestly using VET training to achieve completions? Are they piling people into courses because it'll trigger a payment for them? What is VET being used for? We have experienceds where people are thrown into VET courses because there's funding and because they need to do it and well it's better than these people sitting at home doing nothing, but the likelihood of a completion is very low because what they're offering isn't going to solve all the problems.

Another interviewee put it briefly: "Factors such as wrong choice of course or subject, preparation and whatever, that is exactly my experience of why non-completions occur."

Provide national data for local benchmarking purposes

Some enterprises would like to be able to compare their own data with national benchmarks. Comments by two representatives follow:

We keep our own statistics in terms of the rates of completions but apart from comparing year on year it is difficult I haven't looked at the AVETMISS data. It would be valuable to be able to look at that data as a benchmark, by program.

Well we also do it ourselves because we have to make some decisions with respect to budgets and fees and incentives and so part of it is financially driven that we have to be able to forecast accurately. They're probably the drivers that work but also to be able to go back to the business in terms of success of program and say the completion rate was X per cent as opposed to this per cent last year and whether that might be better or not better. But it would be quite interesting to be able to say well this compares with the same qualification nationally: this is the completion rate so that might be useful if it was higher or lower. Then you might want to do some additional research or take additional actions but I actually don't look further than that, you're not really sure quite what you're

comparing it with, only year on year. You have to make a bit of an assumption or it's better than last year so that's kind of good or not.

Other enterprises avidly collect their own data and are first looking to improve their internal systems, rather than look to a national system:

We only really collect the information on the statistics of people that enrolled and then the people that graduate. We actually have an internal graduations program where they're awarded their certificate so we only have the start and the completion number. We probably have a little bit more information available on the reasons but we don't collect that statistic. It's not very easy to obtain it but we know the key reasons but they're not logged. And they're not analysed.

Student intention and other data welcomed

The future provision of student intention data is welcomed by this interviewee:

The student intention surveys that the National Training Statistics Committee is looking at are a good idea. For us it would give a snapshot as to what our people want out of a traineeship. At the moment we've got this program, it's very successful and it runs very well with [our training provider] but it'd be good to pinpoint more what people are actually after [their intentions].

Policy makers need more and better data to make evidenced-based decisions, but they may never have enough useful data:

It's hard to make robust policy decisions unless you have the evidence to base those decisions on. You need to have solid, robust evidence across the entire spectrum of what you're providing advice on policy about, to make all the predictions. If I'm working on a policy now it's probably being implemented in 12 months' time, so we need to have the historical evidence as well. Even when we get the new data strategy in place there may be a break in series somewhere.

Appendix 1. Overview of the project

Project title

Evaluation Frameworks for VET

Project focus

The focus of this project is the collection of accurate and meaningful data pertaining to student non-completion of courses, and in particular:

- What non-completion data is currently being collected in VET?
- What non-completion data that is not being collected, but should be collected?
- What is the preferred structure, frequency and collection methodology for data on non-completion rates?

The initial investigation in this project will move along the following path:

1. Determination of data requirements
 - a. What do SSA stakeholders want from completion rate data?
 - b. This will require interviews with a number of SSA stakeholders and affiliated organisations, as well as interviews with people who are currently working with non-completion data
2. Determination of the extent to which current non-completion data meets SSA's requirements or preferences
3. Recommendation for new draft non-completion data standards that meet the requirements of SSA.

Once draft standards emerge from this literature review and industry consultations (stage 1), these standards will be tested with three registered training organisations in the second half of 2010 (stage 2). Then results from these field tests will be analysed and a report prepared (stage 3).

Project stages

Stage 1, April-June 2010. Initial qualitative investigation to determine:

- a. user needs from non-completion data
- b. issues with current non-completion data
- c. issues emerging from a review of AVETMISS data collection approach
- d. progress report on Stage 1

Stage 2, July-December 2010. Trial evaluation of changes to AVETMISS data collection approach:

- e. The RTOs used for this collection will be selected and briefed.
- f. trial to run for six months within the RTOs, normally July-Dec 2010, with a progress report and analysis compiled part way through that six-month period

Stage 3, January-March 2011. Data analysis report and debrief:

- g. final report and recommendations

Contact

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Appendix 2. Interview schedule

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed for this project. You are one of ten stakeholders in the VET sector to be interviewed. The results from these interviews will inform the reporting in this project.

I would like to tape the interview. Any quotes used in the report on the set of interviews will not be attributed to any individual; that is, every attempt will be made to ensure your quotes are not recognizable as coming from you.

The tape will only be listened to by me and my transcriber Coralie Faulkner, and will not be used for any other purpose than for the reporting in this project. I will delete the tape at the end of the project. I propose to list your name in the Appendix to the report on the interviews.

Please tell me during the interview if you would like to delete any previous comments.

John Mitchell, 5 May 2010

QUESTIONS

1. After skimming the literature review, what are some issues that come to mind?
2. In your experience, what are some of the reasons for non-completions by VET students?
3. In relation to the service skills industry, what is an example you can think of where non-completion was not a negative outcome?
4. Why do you think it is important that (1) completions and (2) non-completions be measured?
5. *FOR PROVIDERS ONLY:* What types of information or details do you need about completions and non-completions?
FOR OTHER STAKEHOLDERS: What types of information or details do you need about completions and non-completions?
6. Regarding completions and non-completions, what information do you believe the sector currently (a) receives and (b) doesn't receive?
7. What do you see as the advantages and limitations of the AVETMISS system?
8. What would you like to see improved in the way data is provided to the sector?
9. Are there any other issues about measuring non-completions that you haven't mentioned and would like to table?

Appendix 3. List of interviewees

Service Skills Australia and the researchers wish to thank the interviewees for generously giving their time for the interviews.

- Alison Briers, Manager - Training and Development, David Jones
- Dr Craig Fowler, Deputy Chief Executive - Planning, Policy and Innovation, SA Department of Further Education Employment Science and Technology (DFEEST)
- Graham Oades, Executive Officer, Service Skills South Australia
- Ian Blandthorn, National Assistant Secretary, Shop Distributive Allied Employees Association
- John Sutherland, Recruitment, Development and Traineeships Manager, Best and Less Pty Ltd
- Linda White, Branch Manager, Industry Engagement Group, Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR)
- Lisa Apthorpe, National Training Consultant, McDonalds Australia Ltd
- Richard Wallis, Employee Relations Director, Yum! Restaurants International Australia Pty Ltd
- Robin Shreeve, Chief Executive Officer, Skills Australia
- Tom Karmel, Managing Director, NCVET National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER)