



Strengthening coordination and collaboration

VCOSS Submission to Legislation for a
strong and effective Victorian TAFE
network consultation paper

March 2022





The Victorian Council of Social Service is the peak body for Victoria's social and community sector, and the state's premier social advocacy body.

We work towards a Victoria free from poverty and disadvantage, where all people and communities are supported to thrive. We champion wellbeing and inclusive growth.

VCOSS supports and advocates on behalf of its members. We respect the unique perspectives of people with experience of poverty or inequality, and seek to strengthen and elevate their voices.

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VCOSS acknowledges the Traditional Owners of Country and pays respects to Elders past and present, and to emerging leaders.

We conduct our business on sovereign, unceded Aboriginal land.

This document was prepared on the lands of the Kulin Nation.



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**VCOSS appreciates the opportunity to provide feedback to the
Office of TAFE Coordination and Delivery's *Legislation for a
strong and effective Victorian TAFE network* consultation
paper**

Introduction

The Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the Office of TAFE Coordination and Delivery's *Legislation for a strong and effective Victorian TAFE network* consultation paper.

VCOSS recognises the important role TAFEs play in the Victorian training system with a strong focus on access and equity. We support steps to effect greater TAFE network integration. We agree that changes to the legislation to improve coordination and increase collaboration across the TAFE network can help to create the conditions for better learner outcomes.

The consultation paper describes a range of benefits associated with a “*more joined-up to planning and service delivery across the network*” – for example, “*with a simpler landscape, it will be easier for students to find the right course ...*”.

VCOSS's submission also makes the point that the Victorian Government can also leverage **additional** value by extending this networked approach into other parts of the VET ecosystem.

Specifically, this submission highlights the opportunity to:

- Strengthen system integration within the TAFE network and the Learn Local sector to improve transitions and outcomes for vulnerable learners

The submission also highlights opportunities to:

- Address gaps in the VET landscape and increase access to vocational education and training across the state.
- Boost wrap around support for learners to increase retention, capitalising on the dividends of boosted enrolment as a result Victoria's Free TAFE initiative.

The role and value of Victoria's public TAFE network

The consultation paper identifies the need to “*more clearly articulate the public value, role and purpose of the TAFE network*”.

VCOSS supports the proposed ‘defined role and purpose’, as set out on page 9 of the consultation paper. They reflect a modernising TAFE network, consistent with the value proposition and future-state vision set out in the *Skills for Victoria's Growing Economy Review*.

From a VCOSS perspective, the following dimensions of actual and prospective public value are particularly important:

- The TAFE network as a ‘standard bearer’ – a quality benchmark for Victoria's entire vocational education and training system.
- The role of TAFE – as the public provider – in meeting training needs in ‘thin markets’.
- The TAFE network as a positive disrupter of disadvantage – TAFE's particular role in supporting disadvantaged and ‘second chance’ learners.
- The TAFE network as central to the provision of a pipeline of ‘work ready’ graduates to roles in the fast-growing care economy.
- The TAFE network as an enabler for landmark social services reforms and central to the community sector's workforce development needs – for example, reskilling and upskilling workers in the context of reforms in early childhood education and care, family violence, mental health, aged care and disability.
- The TAFE network as a leader in VET research and innovation – orienting the TAFE network to fill the research gap in VET would boost the capacity of the system to provide high-quality adaptive and innovative VET delivery that is response to learner and employer needs. It would also strengthen VET teachers' professional development and career progression.

VCOSS notes that many parts of the consultation paper express public value in the context of a TAFE network that is responsive to the needs of government and industry. The implication is that this will, in turn, deliver optimal value to learners.

VCOSS members have told us that they want to see a more explicit commitment to a learner-centred system. A ‘learners at the centre’ frame would positively focus attention on partnerships, collaboration and integration, which aligns with the intention of the proposed legislative reforms.

The potential of legislative change to achieve improved student and industry outcomes

The potential for reformed legislation to drive improved student and industry outcomes is inextricably bound in funding and partnerships.

The consultation paper notes Government has developed a new funding model for TAFEs and that a clear articulation of the role of TAFE as public provider is key to supporting a sustainable funding model. VCOSS members stressed the importance of funding in achieving a learner-centred approach that:

- can meet training needs in ‘thin markets’;
- enables flexible wrap around support to improve learner outcomes and provides TAFE teachers with enough time to provide support where it’s most needed; and
- forges strong place-based partnerships to support geographical responsiveness and industry needs.

Strong place-based partnerships also help assure that **learner needs** are met once they are in the TAFE system – for example, that students have access to *“the right training for jobs in the skills areas most needed”* where they live, that they can access industry placements in their own community, and that they are learning from teachers who have relevant industry experience.

However, there is also a need to consider partnerships in the context of pathways **into** TAFE. Pathways into education, training and employment are not always linear – particularly for learners who have experienced disrupted schooling or have other barriers and vulnerabilities.

VCOSS supports the Government’s efforts to strengthen coordination and collaboration across and within the TAFE network, but believes there is an opportunity to optimise the public value of TAFE by **also** formalising TAFE’s partnership with the Learn Local sector.

Learn Local providers play a distinct role in meeting the needs of disadvantaged learners. They engage underrepresented cohorts and foster transition pathways to TAFE. They build the skills fundamental to learner success at TAFE. As such, VCOSS considers that they are highly relevant to this legislative review.

Optimising engagement and transition pathways

Learn Local providers offer pre-accredited and accredited training in community-based learning environments that can be more accessible for learners and can act as a soft entry point into the education system - and an important pathway into TAFE - through their capacity and intention to work with vulnerable learners in smaller, non-institutionalised settings.

The state's network of Neighbourhood Houses play a central role in Learn Local provision. Neighbourhood Houses create "opportunities for people to enrich their lives through connections they might not otherwise make."¹ In addition to adult education offered by Neighbourhood House Learn Local providers, Neighbourhood House offerings can include art and craft classes, childcare and playgroups, community events, government services such as Centrelink or Vic Roads, youth programs or migrant support programs, among others.

These rich program and service offerings create extraordinary potential for engagement with people who may be facing barriers to education and employment. For some of these learners, engagement through a Learn Local provider is vital because:

- TAFE will never be their first port of call because they are not aware of this pathway, don't know how to access this pathway and/or do not think it is attainable.
- Support is needed to address additional barriers such as housing security or mental health issues before they are ready to study.
- They may need additional support to build confidence, language and literacy or employability skills before they can successfully transition to TAFE.

Learners who transition from Adult and Community Education offered by Learn Local providers into TAFE complete courses at higher rates,² demonstrating the value of connection between the two sectors.

From VCROSS's perspective, this legislative review provides a golden opportunity to optimise the public value from the Learn Local/TAFE interface. Government has already identified legislative instruments it can use to drive increased coordination and collaboration across and within the TAFE network collaboration. There is a strategic opportunity to embed TAFE network coordination and collaboration with the Learn Local sector. This would increase

¹ Neighbourhood Houses Victoria, What is a neighbourhood house?, <https://www.nhvic.org.au/whats-a-neighbourhood-house>, accessed 15 March 2022.

² Department of Education and Training, *Future opportunities for adult learners in Victoria: Pathways to Participation and Jobs discussion paper*, 2018, p.19

access to high-quality training for learners experiencing barriers to education and employment, and ensure learners have consistent, seamless and supported transitions in all parts of the state.

Increasing access and equity across the state

VCOSS welcomes the proposal to “better meet gaps in geographic access to vocational education and training across the State.”

To meet the needs of learners **and** Government’s economic and social priorities, the TAFE network should be required to meet training gaps across the state. This will require a funding model that can sustain and deliver training in **local communities** (including in ‘thin markets’), in partnership with industry.

Members have raised concerns that there are large gaps in training delivery because the cost of compliance, high overheads and a funding model that ‘follows’ the student, led to a large number of private Registered Training Organisations (RTOs), including those registered through Learn Local providers, exiting the sector. These gaps have not been consistently filled by TAFE and is felt acutely in ‘thin markets’ or low volume training in rural and regional areas. As one VCOSS member stated:

“There’s a problem with low volume, high maintenance with compliance, and high cost for registration or changing the scope of registration. It’s prohibitive and a lot of Learn Locals haven’t been able to sustain RTO status – so TAFEs need to step in to fill this training gap... If you’re talking about six aged care workers in a rural RTO Learn Local for local industry, it’s not viable. But TAFE should or could come in and deliver this at the Learn Local.”

While initiatives like the Regional and Specialist Training Fund exist, there is a need for a ‘knitted up’ approach across the state that consistently meets the training needs of learners and doesn’t require local organisations or business to cobble together solutions to meet learner and industry needs. In line with a learner-centred approach, this shouldn’t require learners to relocate or commute for hours to undertake training, only for them to relocate back to their local community to take up an employment opportunity.

Case study – Central Ranges Local Learning and Employment Network

To support the roll-out of the Victorian Government's nation leading initiative to provide universal access to three-year-old kinder, the early childhood education and care workforce needs to increase the number of educators and teachers by 6000 over the coming years.

In the Macedon Ranges, local council is working with community organisations like the Central Ranges LLEN to undertake workforce planning. Despite workforce shortages and a need to grow the workforce we can't get TAFEs to provide local delivery of the Early Childhood Education and Care courses, currently available under Free TAFE.

So the LLEN is delivering the Certificate III in Early Childhood Education and Care in partnership with the local council and a Bendigo-based RTO, Access Skills Training. The LLEN has provided the money to deliver the course to support the 10 students enrolled.

The reason we can deliver the Certificate III is because we have someone in our team who happened to be an early childhood teacher before their current role, who has the right skills, trainer's certificate and availability to deliver the course. We also have the trusted relationships with local services that are ready to take students on placement or into traineeships.

At the end of the course next year, we'll have 7-10 students ready to go into employment to support government's priority agenda and TAFE hasn't played a role in that process – but they could have.

There are opportunities for the TAFE network to better leverage existing Learn Local education infrastructure, where there are access issues. In addition to these being trusted environments for the local community, Learn Local providers are well placed to undertake engagement with learners and build the relevant skills so they are ready for TAFE.

Case study – Neighbourhood Houses Victoria

In a rural town there is a pet food production industry that's a great example of how a formalised, connected partnership between the TAFE network and Learn Local providers can support learners and industry in their local community.

The Learn Local provider is well placed to find out what the learner needs are - from safe working practice to workplace literacy – and do the introductory work with those learners. Then the TAFE comes up to deliver the accredited training required for that industry. That's what integrated services should look like.

Whatever the example of local industry and training needs, TAFE should have the capacity to deliver the training, and Learn Local providers have the capacity for engagement and delivery of pre-conditions like literacy for successful TAFE outcomes.

This is what the system should look like when we prioritise learners first.

Boosting retention

TAFEs currently offer a range of services and supports to learners, however, lower than desired completion rates indicate more can be done to meet the needs of learners experiencing disadvantage or complex barriers.

Formalising the partnership between the TAFE network and Learn Local providers will increase access to vocational education and training and support to high-needs learners, but it won't capture every learner who may require additional support to boost retention.

The TAFE network should be equipped with the additional resources needed to ensure learners facing barriers are able to complete their qualifications. This will require:

- TAFEs to embed language, literacy and numeracy support in or alongside foundational and higher-level certificate and diploma courses. We have previously

highlighted the impact of cost-cutting measures in the TAFE sector that reduced the availability of these supports in the classroom.³

- Providing TAFE teachers will the time to follow-up with and provide additional support to students who need it. The highly casualised nature of the workforce can contribute to teachers having insufficient time in being flexible to meet the needs of individual learners.
- Resourcing TAFEs with youth workers and social workers to support learners to overcome barriers that impact their ability to sustain engagement in education.
- Adequately fund TAFEs to deliver reasonable adjustments to learners with disability.

Expanded Skills and Jobs Centres as recommended in the Macklin Report, to include connecting vulnerable learners with a range of tailored supports, could increase learner outcomes.

³ Victorian Council of Social Service, *TAFE: Accessible for all*, October 2022.



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