RESEARCH REPORT

NCVER

Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on VET

Daniella Trimboli
Melinda Lees
Zhihui Zhang
National Centre for Vocational Education Research

INFORMING + INFLUENCING
THE AUSTRALIAN VET SECTOR

Publisher's note

The views and opinions expressed in this document are those of NCVER and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Australian Government, or state and territory governments. Any interpretation of data is the responsibility of the author/project team.

To find other material of interest, search VOCEDplus (the UNESCO/NCVER international database <http://www.voced.edu.au>) using the following keywords: apprenticeship; client satisfaction; completion; disadvantaged; employment outcomes; enrolment; equity; financial aspects; funding; government role; online learning; outcomes; participation; providers of education and training; students; teaching and learning; traineeship; vocational education and training; wellbeing; work based learning.

© Commonwealth of Australia, 2023

With the exception of the Commonwealth Coat of Arms, the Department's logo, any material protected by a trade mark and where otherwise noted all material presented in this document is provided under a Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Australia <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/au> licence.

The details of the relevant licence conditions are available on the Creative Commons website (accessible using the links provided) as is the full legal code for the CC BY 3.0 AU licence <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/legalcode>.

The Creative Commons licence conditions do not apply to all logos, graphic design, artwork and photographs. Requests and enquiries concerning other reproduction and rights should be directed to the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER).

This document should be attributed as Trimboli, D, Lees, M & Zhang, Z 2023, *Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on VET,* NCVER, Adelaide.

This work has been produced by NCVER on behalf of the Australian Government and state and territory governments, with funding provided through the Australian Government Department of Employment and Workplace Relations.

COVER IMAGE: GETTY IMAGES

ISBN 978-1-922801-12-8
TD/TNC 151.08

Published by NCVER, ABN 87 007 967 311

Level 5, 60 Light Square, Adelaide SA 5000
PO Box 8288 Station Arcade, Adelaide SA 5000, Australia

Phone +61 8 8230 8400 **Email** ncver@ncver.edu.au
Web <https://www.ncver.edu.au> <https://www.lsay.edu.au>
Follow us: <https://twitter.com/ncver> <https://www.linkedin.com/company/ncver>

About the research

Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on VET

Daniella Trimboli, Melinda Lees and Zhihui Zhang, NCVER

When the COVID-19 virus arrived in Australia in March 2020, no one could have anticipated the extent to which it would impact on all aspects of Australian society, including the vocational education and training (VET) sector — nor for how long. The VET sector has always prioritised practical experience and face-to-face engagement between learners and trainers, an underpinning characteristic of the sector that has been affected at every level throughout the pandemic. In 2023, it is now clear that while the fundamental structure of VET has remained intact, COVID-19 has significantly reorganised the business practices of training providers and its impacts on the sector will be long-lasting.

This research assembles a range of quantitative and qualitative data to map the key impacts of the pandemic on VET students and providers. Student enrolments, outcomes, and satisfaction data from 2020 through to the end of 2021 are compared with pre-pandemic data (2019). Augmenting these data are qualitative findings from consultations with peak body representatives and interviews with training providers from across Australia.

Key messages

- The COVID-19 pandemic brought particular challenges to the VET sector, affecting mandatory work placements (MWPs), student enrolments and engagement, and staff wellbeing and retention. Students in disadvantaged cohorts were most severely impacted, as were students and training providers located in the states or territories where infection numbers were high and public health mandates proportionately more intense.
- The impacts on training provider financial viability as a consequence of reduced student enrolments and completions were substantial, with training providers reporting a decline in these areas in the early stages of the pandemic, some recovery in late 2020 and into 2021, and either stabilisation or further decline in 2022.
- Training providers reported several operational changes in response to the pandemic, the most significant being the transition to blended delivery modes, changes to hygiene practices, and new approaches associated with flexible work arrangements, communication strategies, and wrap-around services, such as mental health and wellbeing programs. These offer lessons for both alleviating pain points and highlighting areas of opportunity arising from the pandemic.

Simon Walker
Managing Director, NCVER

Acknowledgments

We acknowledge and thank the peak body representatives and the training provider managers and staff who gave their time to participate in this project. Their input is greatly appreciated and their insights highly valued.

Our appreciation is also extended to the research sponsors and the Project Advisory Committee members for their guidance and comments over the life of this project.

Contents

About the research 3

Acknowledgments 4

Tables and figures 6

- Tables 6
- Figures 6

Executive summary 7

How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the VET sector? 11

- Scope and limitations 11

Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on training providers 12

- Peak body consultations 12
- Interviews with training providers 13
- Effect on business resilience and operations 15

Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the participation patterns and training outcomes of VET students 24

- Overall enrolments 24
- States and territories 28
- Type of training and training requirements 29
- Specific student cohorts 31
- Student outcomes 39

Lessons learned 51

References 58

- Appendix A – Example list of support packages offered by governments in response to COVID-19 61

Tables and figures

Tables

1 Subject withdrawal rate by equity groups, 2019—21 (%) 25

2 Subject withdrawal rate by the top 10 training packages, 2019—21 (%) 26

3 Total VET students by type of training and funding source, 2019—21 ('000) 26

4 Program enrolments by training package, 2019—21 28

5 Program enrolments by state/territory of delivery location, 2019—21 29

6 Program enrolments by level of education, 2019—21 30

7 Quarterly apprentice and trainee contract commencements by state/territory administering the contract, 2019—21 ('000) 32

8 Program enrolments by age group, 2019—21 33

9 LSAY health and life satisfaction outcomes, 2015 and 2021 (%) 34

10 Program enrolments by equity groups and other cohorts of interest, 2019—21 35

11 Regional/remote program enrolments by state/territory of student residence, 2019—21 37

12 Overall subject results, 2019—21 40

13 Subject result rate by delivery mode, 2019—21 (%) 41

14 Continuing subject rate by equity groups and top 10 training packages, 2019—21 (%) 42

15 Subject withdrawal and pass rates by equity groups and top 10 training packages (as at 2019), 2019—21 (%) 43

16 Quarterly apprentice and trainee contract suspensions by state/territory administering the contract, 2019—21 ('000) 46

17 Key satisfaction measures for domestic qualification completers aged 18 and over, 2019—21 (%) 47

18 Key satisfaction outcomes for international qualification completers aged 18 and over, 2019—21 (%) 47

Figures

1 Total VET students by funding source 2019—21 ('000) 24

2 Quarterly apprentice and trainee contract commencements, 2019—21 ('000) 31

3 Quarterly apprentice and trainee contract suspensions, 2019—21 ('000) 45

4 Challenges with online learning faced by domestic qualification completers and part-completers, 2022 (%) 48

5 Key employment outcomes for domestic qualification completers aged 18 and over, 2019—21 (%) 49

Executive summary

Both documented and anecdotal reports of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on some aspects of the vocational education and training (VET) sector and specific student cohorts are widely available (Avis et al. 2021; Community Colleges Australia 2022; Pennington 2022; Pilcher & Hurley 2020; Skiba 2020; TAFE Directors Australia 2020). The aim of this project is to identify the impacts the pandemic has had on various aspects of VET and to examine how the sector has responded to the resultant, rapidly changing and uncertain, environment. This report collates and, in some cases, updates existing data to identify trends and develop a summary of the overall impacts on the VET sector.

The methodology for this project involved a comparative analysis of 2019, 2020 and 2021 total VET activity (TVA) data on enrolments and completions, as well as an analysis of data from the National Apprentice and Trainee Collection, National Student Outcomes Survey, and the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY). An analysis of regulatory data to compare the number of registered training organisations (RTOs) operating in the sector over the past three years was also undertaken. Qualitative methods, in the form of semi-structured interviews with peak bodies and training providers, supplemented the quantitative data analyses. These findings were further supported by a summary of the results of NCVER's late-2020 interviews (NCVER 2020) on the pandemic's impact on mandatory work placements (MWPs) and key findings from two recent NCVER reports on online learning (Hume & Griffin 2021, 2022).

Longley and Clarke (2022) argued that many of the challenges facing the Australian VET system were exacerbated rather than caused by COVID-19, a point largely confirmed by our research findings. Inflexible mandatory work placements; access barriers for learners (including the digital divide); delays in developing training that accommodates shifting industry demands; and difficulties in engaging young people in further education and training were all challenges for VET that predated COVID-19 but which became more pronounced once it had arrived.

Tertiary education at large was disrupted by the introduction of public health restrictions that required students and staff to remain off site, necessitating remote delivery of services (Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training 2020; Erlam et al. 2021; Tertiary Education and Quality Standards Agency [TEQSA] 2022). However, given that practical, hands-on training is an integral part of VET, it follows that the VET sector more acutely experienced the impacts of social distancing, travel restrictions, and the need to rapidly adapt to anticipated changes in labour markets (OECD 2020).

Internationally, the pandemic gave rise to other challenges for the VET sector, including the lack of teacher and trainer competence in multi-modal delivery; the need to reorganise learning environments; disrupted transitions from school to VET and from VET to work; and socio-psychological impacts on learners (Association of Colleges 2021; European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training 2020; German Office for International Cooperation in Vocational Education and Training 2022; Hoftijzer et al. 2020). These challenges also held true for Australia (Clarke 2022; Crawford 2020; Pilcher & Hurley 2020; Vector Consulting 2021) and were evidenced in this research, although, for the training providers we interviewed, the upheavals in the learning environment, together with staff capability and student engagement difficulties, were most frequently mentioned.

Apprentices and trainees were particularly affected by the pandemic-related restrictions (Hall 2021), with more than one in five Australian apprentices and trainees reporting that the on-job-training component of their study had been delayed by COVID-19 in 2020 (NCVER 2022a). While these figures later rebounded strongly, suspensions in apprentice and trainee contracts increased by over 650% in March and

April 2020 and by nearly 300% in May, by comparison with 2019 figures (Hall 2021). Additionally, there were significant declines in new apprentice and trainee contract commencements in the first months of the pandemic; namely, in April and May 2020. The industries hardest hit by suspensions included Arts and recreation services; Accommodation and food services; Transport, postal and warehousing; Retail trade; and Agriculture, forestry and fishing (Hall 2021). Furthermore, 6.7% of people who completed training in 2019 were temporarily stood down in 2020 due to COVID-19, and 34% had their work hours reduced. Young women aged 18 to 24 years old represented the highest proportion of employees stood down or who experienced a decrease in working hours (White 2021).

Our comparison of the 2019 quantitative data with those of 2020 and 2021, cross-analysed with the qualitative interview data, illustrates the various ways in which students were impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic in Australia. Student enrolments declined sharply in the early stages of the pandemic, before bouncing back in late 2020 and into 2021. Providers indicated that students' reasons for returning to VET tended to be different from their pre-COVID motivations; for example, enrolling in training they deemed would lead to more secure employment; being inspired to embark on a new career path; and/or wanting to make the most of government incentives targeted at specific industries. The training providers who participated in the interviews noted, however, that for particular student cohorts — Indigenous students, those from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds, rural and remote students, and international students — disengagement from VET was higher than for other students, and they also took longer to return to training. Encouragingly, satisfaction with various aspects of the training, as well as employment outcomes, remained relatively positive for most students.

The interviews with training providers highlighted the substantial impact the pandemic had on their operational practices, affecting business practices at four key levels — financial, operational, people, and infrastructure — although the extent of the impacts varied according to the type of provider and their location. For example, training providers located in New South Wales and Victoria were more severely impacted than providers in Western Australia or the Northern Territory due to higher infection rates in the former. In addition, community education and private training providers interviewed were, overall, more affected than TAFE (technical and further education) institutes and government enterprise providers. This difference can be attributed, in part, to the disadvantaged student cohorts the former were often servicing, and/or the comparatively lower level of wrap-around services available to support them and their staff.

Funding support from the Commonwealth and state and territory governments was viewed positively by most of the participating training providers, and it is clear that the various support packages assisted the VET sector to adapt to the turbulent pandemic environment. Governments significantly increased their investment in VET during the pandemic, with the largest increase in expenditure dedicated to employer assistance, through wage subsidies for apprentices and trainees under the Australian Government's Australian Apprenticeships Incentives Program. This investment continued into 2021: support for employers totalled $3.7 billion in 2021, up by 155.7% when compared with 2020 (NCVER 2022b). The training providers interviewed for this research most frequently cited the national JobTrainer program (July 2020 — December 2022), which provided significant additional funding for skills training — made up of matched contributions from the Commonwealth and state and territory governments — as the key funding support program they accessed. In addition to these VET-specific funding interventions, training providers were very appreciative of the support provided through the Commonwealth Government's JobKeeper program (March 2020 — March 2021), which enabled non-public providers to remain viable during the peak of the pandemic.

One of the main impacts of the pandemic on training providers and the Australian VET system was a forced, rapid transition to online delivery. This shift was a particular challenge, given that online delivery

of VET is associated with lower qualification completion rates and higher subject withdrawal rates (Griffin & Mihelic 2019). The digital shift was especially challenging for those offering apprenticeships and traineeships with their emphasis on workplace-based learning (Hall 2021). Consequently, quick thinking in relation to course rescheduling and collaboration became crucial for the sector. Hume and Griffin (2021, 2022), in tracking the change in online delivery of VET over the first years of the pandemic, illustrated the enormous investment in digital infrastructure and the human resourcing effort that went into redesigning courses for this mode. For example, between 2019 and 2020, the number of VET subjects delivered online increased by about 24% (Hume & Griffin 2021). This effort is replicated in this report: digital delivery, as well as remote working arrangements for staff, was a primary focus for most of the training providers we interviewed.

The rapid shift to digital delivery indicated how the pandemic might represent an opportunity for the VET sector to innovate and become more resilient (Hume & Griffin 2022). Indeed, while it is true that the pandemic highlighted existing areas of weakness in the sector, it is also true that the pandemic emphasised existing areas of strength and potential. The data, combined with the many stories offered by training providers, illustrate the capacity of the VET sector to quickly tailor training to meet the needs of students and to adapt to local needs. This feature points to the resourcefulness of a sector that made the most of its on-the-ground skills to guide this reinvention at both practical and conceptual levels. While debate continues in the sector on whether the pandemic led to innovation or simply adaptation (O'Dwyer 2021; Community Colleges Australia 2022; NCVER Podcast 2022), many valuable lessons undoubtedly emerged. Certainly, the collaborative problem-solving approaches described by training providers highlight the level of interconnectivity the VET system has at its disposal and flag a useful resource for the future.

Concluding remarks

This report focuses on the key impacts of COVID-19 on VET providers and students from 2020 to 2022. While these impacts were often significant, they were not always negative; moreover, some of the initially detrimental impacts paved the way for positive outcomes, the shift to multi-modal learning perhaps being the hallmark example. The extent of the various impacts on the VET sector has been contingent on a range of additional, often rapidly evolving, factors and thus not always straightforward to quantify or capture. Nonetheless, this research project offers a valuable resource for the VET sector, and COVID-19 research more broadly, by way of its longitudinal methodology. The project provides a unique perspective by exploring the immediate impacts of and responses to the pandemic on VET against longer-term impacts and the sector's shifting needs over time. While the pandemic's end date is unknown, the World Health Organisation predicts it will remain a significant factor of everyday life for some time to come, and certainly well into 2023.

For the most part, the training providers interviewed for this study commended the responses and support packages provided to the VET sector by the various levels of government, and it is worthwhile emphasising that student outcomes — including satisfaction with their training — remained relatively positive throughout 2020—21. While the Australian VET sector is clearly underpinned by a strong foundation, substantial challenges were encountered during the pandemic, with the providers interviewed offering a range of suggestions for how they might be best supported as the pandemic continues and as other crises inevitably arise.

The main points of focus emerging from the consultations emphasised: the development of processes to re-engage students in VET, especially young people and those from disadvantaged cohorts; the need for wrap-around services (such as mental health services, digital literacy, and IT support) for staff and students alike; and ways to consolidate the business operations of providers now that the most

immediate impacts of the pandemic have receded, revealing gaps in operations. In instances where providers were struggling, they were often attempting to reorganise what had become a fragmented organisational environment, and/or to balance the need to address emerging issues in the short-term with the requirement to maintain compliance and financial security in the long-term.

Looking to the future, the question of how to reconcile the need to be resilient — adaptive, responsive and, in some ways, short-term focused — with the need to be sustainable, that is, having the space to experiment, innovate, and make steady, long-term plans, is a question that will likely remain important for training providers and the VET sector at large for some time.

How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the VET sector?

The aim of this research was to examine the overall impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the VET sector. The questions that guided this research were:

- How has the VET sector been impacted overall by the pandemic?
- What impact has the pandemic had on VET enrolments and completions for various student cohorts? And by state and territory?
- How do the impacts of the pandemic compare across types of training?
- What lessons might be learned that could support potential responses to alleviate identified training provider pain points, should the pandemic persist, or crises of a similar nature eventuate?

The research utilised a mixed-methods approach and included several parts. The quantitative component of the research involved the following analysis of VET data:

- a comparison of total VET enrolments and completions in 2019, 2020 and 2021 for all students and by various student cohorts, type of training and state and territory
- a comparison of apprentice and trainee enrolments, completions and suspensions in 2019, 2020 and 2021 by state and territory
- an analysis of student outcomes, including completions, student satisfaction with training, and employment status after training
- an analysis of regulatory data on the number of registered training organisations (RTOs) operating over the past three years.

Qualitative methods in the form of semi-structured interviews supplemented the quantitative data analysis. Three peak bodies and 24 training providers were consulted. The findings from this analysis were further supported by a summary of the results of the late 2020 interviews on how COVID-19 impacted mandatory work placements and key findings from two recent NCVER reports on online learning.

Scope and limitations

A relatively small number of training providers were interviewed due to difficulties recruiting interviewees. While the interviews provide a rich understanding of the impacts of the pandemic on training provider business operations and resilience, the findings may not be generalisable to all training providers. Additionally, the proposal for this research was written when the duration of the pandemic was still unknown and it initially proposed to examine the impacts of COVID-19 on the VET sector until the end of 2021. However, when we began qualitative fieldwork in mid-2022, the pandemic was ongoing and continuing to exert profound impacts. The timeline of our analysis and reporting was subsequently extended, the result being that we have integrated the most current total VET activity (TVA) data (to the end of 2021) with qualitative data that describes the impacts of the pandemic in 2020, 2021 and 2022.

Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on training providers

The overall number of RTOs operating in Australia remained steady across the period of the pandemic. Between 1 January 2020 and 1 January 2022, the number of RTOs with a current status declined by only 0.3%, from 4074 to 4063.

Consultations with the peak bodies representing the VET sector, together with qualitative interviews with a range of Australian training providers, offer a clearer picture of the various ways in which they were impacted by the pandemic, and their responses.

The consultations gathered information about how training provider operations were impacted by the pandemic, and the extent to which their business practices changed. Training providers were asked to reflect on the government support offered, and to provide recommendations for how they could be best supported in the context of a continuing pandemic or crises of a similar nature.

Key points

- Short-term impacts on providers involved rapid shifts to online work and delivery, risk-management planning and infection control.
- Long-term impacts on providers encompassed persistent disruption, in the form of absenteeism and fragmentation of the operational environment.
- Providers implemented several strategies to mitigate negative impacts including: investing in professional development and new technologies; increasing wrap-around services and communications with staff and students; and drawing on collaborative problem-solving within their businesses and communities wherever possible.

Peak body consultations

The four peak bodies representing the VET sector were consulted to provide a broad picture of how their members were impacted by the pandemic and to nominate member training providers for focused interviews. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the Independent Tertiary Education Council Australia (ITECA), Community Colleges Australia (CCA), and TAFE Directors Australia (TDA). The Enterprise Registered Training Organisation Association (ERTOA) felt their training providers would be best placed to directly provide the relevant information.

All peak bodies consulted emphasised the significant transition their members underwent to deliver training online and to keep students enrolled and engaged from the beginning of the pandemic in Australia in early 2020. They also flagged the toll that inflexible MWP arrangements and rapidly changing advice had on business operations.

Overall, the key innovations and impacts reported by peak bodies in the consultations aligned with those identified in the training provider interviews. The key issues, impacts and concerns highlighted by the peak bodies are summarised below.

Community Colleges Australia

- the level of burnout experienced by their members
- the impact on disadvantaged students
- the longer-term impacts of the pandemic on the overall sustainability of the adult and community education (ACE) sector generally, and community education providers more specifically, in Australia.

Independent Tertiary Education Council Australia

- the importance of micro-credentials/short courses
- the development of network-style relationships between training providers and employers
- the need for business continuity plans that better suit various types of training providers.

TAFE Directors Australia

- the cultural shift that occurred in TAFE institutes in relation to training approaches and business operations
- themes of collaboration and unification.

Interviews with training providers

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 24 training providers across all states and territories: six community education providers, five government enterprise RTOs, seven private training providers, and six TAFE institutes.

All the interviewed training providers reported being impacted by the pandemic, and almost all indicated significant impacts to their business operations. Overall, the TAFE institutes and government enterprise providers interviewed were the least impacted or most able to adapt, while the community education and private training providers interviewed were the most impacted. Training providers with a strong community outreach and participation remit and/or a more disadvantaged student cohort were also significantly affected, as these students were the first to disengage from VET once the pandemic arrived in Australia.

Community education providers

Given that community education providers are underpinned by community outreach and deliver training to some of the most diverse or disadvantaged student cohorts in the VET sector, it is not surprising that they suffered significantly due to the pandemic. All community education providers interviewed reported a severe loss of enrolments and revenue. Notably, all said that 2022 was the hardest year of the pandemic to that point due to the combined effects of a loss of income, students struggling to stay engaged, and staff experiencing burnout from two years of increased pressure and constant change. A general sense of exhaustion and 'barely managing' prevailed among those interviewed, and concern that the adult and community education sector was in danger of being if not lost altogether then greatly downsized. Consequently, there was an overwhelming sense among these community education providers interviewed that the pandemic had impacted on the social-cultural fabric of Australian communities, creating 'a net loss' for society, one not appreciated by funding bodies.

While the community education providers were severely impacted by the pandemic, their efforts to adapt and lessen its impacts were impressive. Those interviewed described some of the extraordinary lengths to which their staff went to provide training to students and to keep them engaged, emphasising the flexibility, determination and problem-solving that emerged from the crisis. This observation is consistent with other training providers interviewed; however, it appears from the interviews that the community education providers had, overall, smaller financial buffers and less capacity to maintain wrap-around services to support their staff, and it is perhaps for this reason that their sustainability was considered more tenuous than for other provider types.

Enterprise training providers

The enterprise training providers interviewed reported minimal impacts to their business viability from the pandemic, largely because their client base consisted of their employees. The enterprise providers interviewed for this project all provided government-based services, such as fire services, police and public transport services; no private enterprise training providers were available for interview. The interviews conducted illustrated that, while these particular training providers were able to absorb the overall impact of the pandemic reasonably efficiently, the businesses still endured significant impacts, which required quick thinking and adaptation. For example, all government enterprise providers interviewed described having to significantly adjust: the delivery of their courses; the physical spaces within which their training occurred; and the level and nature of wrap-around services for their staff, including wellbeing programs. These adjustments were more intense for enterprise training providers, whose staff were also living onsite for their training, for example, police and defence,[1] as the risk of infection outbreak was high and more problematic for the sustainability of their business should it occur. Finally, because the enterprise providers interviewed all fell under the government's 'essential workers' umbrella, ensuring sound operational and risk management became even more critical.

Private training providers

For the most part, the private training providers reported significant impacts and challenges arising from the pandemic, especially in the first year, due to lockdowns and the wait for the vaccination roll-out. Almost all these providers reported loss of revenue and difficulty rebounding financially, as ongoing COVID-19 waves — leading to student dropouts and absenteeism — continued to create financial difficulties for them in 2022. Most private training providers were also still operating with smaller class sizes in their attempts to manage the spread of infection, which also meant less income.

Private training providers who were offering shorter courses tended to be coping comparatively better than those offering longer courses. While these providers often reported ongoing concern for their future viability, their short course offerings seemed to be acting as an anchor, providing a sense of reassurance. This is likely because shorter courses were comparatively easier for students to complete during the pandemic, with its constant disruptions. Mirroring the other training providers' responses, the private training providers reported a swift and impressive shift to online and/or blended modes of delivery (that is, online in combination with another delivery mode), along with strong investment into professional development for staff.

In a pattern similar to that reflected in the interviews with community education providers, some concern was raised about the gaps in business governance and administration in 2022 and beyond. Finally, almost all private training providers commented on difficulties with staff recruitment and retention, in particular difficulties accessing appropriate trainers.

TAFE institutes

The interviews with TAFE institutes culminated in a positive story in terms of operational management during a crisis. While almost all of the TAFE institutes interviewed were significantly impacted, it seems

1 Several of the government enterprise training providers interviewed had their own training campuses, on which a large proportion of their employees would live while completing their training. For example, the government enterprise training providers who provided police services and national defence had barracks or academies that provided accommodation, food, gyms and hospitality/social spaces for their training recruits. This created different but notable challenges for these providers comparative to other training providers (including private enterprise training providers, whose staff complete their training in their usual workplace).

they were able to manage effectively, drawing on various arms of their organisations to problem-solve and adapt efficiently. All commented on the infrastructure investments made and the massive endeavour towards upskilling staff in 2020. They also stressed the difficulties presented in managing student engagement and wellbeing. Most TAFE institutes commended staff for the additional work they had undertaken in their efforts to keep students engaged and emphasised a paradigm shift within their organisations. This paradigm shift occurred in a reciprocal fashion between management and administrative/training staff. Trainers experienced the change in terms of how they imagined training and its possibilities, and management realised they were able to trust their staff to be proactive and productive when not in the office. The pandemic therefore allowed for trust to be fostered within these organisations.

Other cultural impacts, in terms of enhanced collaboration, creativity and innovation, were highlighted in the interviews with TAFE institutes, and there was a strong sense that the pandemic had been a unifying factor for TAFEs, who often worked across multiple sites even within the one campus. It was clear, however, that institutes were impacted differently, depending on the jurisdiction(s) in which they operated and their scope of delivery. For example, TAFEs with large and diverse cohorts, especially in locations with high numbers of COVID-19 cases, were impacted more severely than institutes with less diverse cohorts and in geographical regions more protected from infections.

Effect on business resilience and operations

The timeline of the pandemic has been much longer than first anticipated and has involved shifting circumstances and contexts. At the time of writing this report, the pandemic was ongoing, with new variants and associated waves emerging. The interview data revealed, however, that there were two main phases of impact for training providers, at least until mid-2022: a short- to medium-term impact phase and a long-term impact phase. The first of these phases referred to the onset of COVID-19 in March 2020 and immediate responses, followed by the impacts and shifts that occurred as 2020 transitioned into 2021 and training providers negotiated border closures, lockdown periods, and the vaccination rollouts. The long-term period referred to roughly mid-2021 to mid-2022, after vaccinations had mostly been received by the Australian population, borders had started reopening, and a different way of managing the pandemic came into play governmentally. These two phases are summarised by one interviewee:

> I think there's two different phases in our COVID-19 responses and the first one was dealing with lock down … essentially, [we] sent our staff home and they continued to support students from home, which was last year; and this year when we're 'living with COVID', it was a case of dealing with absenteeism, which [is] different to the lockdown phase … For us here in WA: we had a period where we were expected to continue but we're in lockdown; this is a period where we were expected to continue and deal with the fact that not everyone's going to be there all the time.
>
> (Executive Director: Training Organisation & Business Improvement, TAFE institute)

These two phases are slightly different in timeline according to the state or territory in which the training providers were located. Training providers in New South Wales, the Australian Capital Territory and Victoria reported greater impacts during the first phase of the pandemic compared with other states and territories due to the high infection rates and resulting lockdowns. For training providers in jurisdictions such as Western Australia, for example, the first phase was somewhat delayed as COVID-19 infections took longer to reach them due to border restrictions, and the second phase in 2022 hit harder when borders reopened in January that year.

Across both phases, providers operating in more than one jurisdiction — or in the case of one TAFE institute interviewed, across campuses either side of a state border — faced the challenge of different

COVID-19 regulations between jurisdictions. The government enterprise providers interviewed frequently mentioned this, as did other providers that delivered training in multiple states.

While the impacts and responses differed according to variables such as location and type of provider, they can be summarised into four main areas: financial, operational, people and infrastructure.

Short- to medium-term impacts and responses

Financial

The major short- to medium-term impact for training providers was loss of students and consequently revenue, especially during the early stages of the pandemic. The loss of revenue was then compounded by delays in completion for some students who were unable to undertake mandatory work placements. Without access to workplaces, many students were unable to complete or meet major milestones towards completion, meaning that training providers were subsequently unable to claim funding.

Existing research (NCVER 2020) suggested that the impact of COVID-19 on MWP varied across states and territories and was highly related to the number of COVID-19 cases and government responses in each state or territory. Training providers in health and community services particularly reported having issues facilitating placements, such as for enrolled nurses. This was particularly the case for training providers in Victoria, given the high number of infections and multiple lockdowns in the state. Training providers reported that most students had to delay the completion of their qualifications until they were able to undertake their MWP. The research found that students who were about to finish their MWPs experienced increased levels of anxiety and stress, likely related to delayed completions, moving to online and virtual communication, and concerns relating to the risk of catching COVID-19 in clinical placement settings. Training providers reported that for international students delays in MWPs affected them profoundly in terms of visas and employment opportunities.

The training providers in this research project echoed these concerns, feeling that the regulations for MWPs not only weakened their financial position, but were counter-productive to the broader issues at hand. As some training providers noted, this was exemplified by the desperate need for care workers throughout the pandemic on one hand, and the inability for students in care work to get into workplaces to complete their qualifications and go into employment on the other. One training provider described the multi-level way by which MWP restrictions during the pandemic affected the sector:

> Being unable to access workplaces hampered student progression and restricted training providers' access to funding, affects the employees of a company at a welfare perspective and ultimately feeds into Australian unemployment problem. (CEO, private training provider)

Revenue was further impacted by training providers having to make their classes smaller to meet social-distancing requirements, abandon classes altogether because they were too difficult (in terms of getting the right staff and/or interruption-free access to workplaces), or move into 'stop and start' modes for courses.

To manage these impacts, training providers implemented several strategies, the most important and immediate being to shift as much training as possible online in an attempt to retain students. This presented a major challenge, especially for courses with strong practical elements or hands-on requirements. Almost all providers interviewed reorganised the content of their training, such that the scope itself did not change, but, as one training provider expressed it: 'the scope within the scope' changed. Generally, this reorganisation occurred in the form of bringing the theoretical components of courses forward and moving the practical elements further back, to better align with lockdown periods and worksite closures.

A positive story came from a private training provider operating in both Victoria and Western Australia: this provider welcomed the impetus given by COVID-19 to the VET sector to adopt online methods, an approach it had been trying to encourage and roll out for several years:

> It actually reversed the business fortunes from sliding downhill … We went uphill. We had a really good year and since then we've had, you know, some good years now.
>
> (CEO, private training provider)

Until the pandemic, the RTO had been struggling with clients reluctant to study certain training modules online, a situation that changed completely in 2020:

> We're getting very, very few inquiries about face to face anymore. People have adapted now … none of this would have happened if the COVID didn't come along. People would still be fighting the whole process of online stuff. (CEO, private training provider)

Another positive story came from a community education provider in New South Wales, which exemplified the concept of pivoting: this provider completely reworked its course offerings and business model to fit the various gaps that presented themselves at the onset of the pandemic. Pre-COVID, the provider had identified a gap in the provision of NSW Smart and Skilled program[2] units and had begun to move away from its general program (non-accredited) towards these skill sets just before the onset of the pandemic. The provider spent some time at the beginning of the pandemic determining the technical equipment needed to transition online and assembled single units from full training packages. The provider approached the market quickly to get trainers to deliver the new units online or with carefully blended delivery. A close working relationship with community organisations and businesses meant the organisation kept abreast of what training needed to be delivered: the organisation realised, for example, that many people in the community needed entry-level training to fulfil jobs newly open to them due to the lack of migration into the area. At the same time, the community education provider offered alternative training during the pandemic to help highly skilled, recently arrived migrants to improve their English communication and technology skills as these people waited for businesses to reopen and their employment to commence. The provider's CEO described:

> We will talk with them about what they think their community needs and then map that to the products that we can offer them and then build a pathway through that organisation. So it's a much more personalised engagement as opposed to whacking it on the website and random people from the community enrolling in the product.

Training was delivered to cohorts of no more than 10, and the short and sharp nature of the courses meant the provider did not suffer the same impacts of the pandemic as other providers, being able to stop and start more easily when a COVID-19 wave hit, move on to the next cohort and return to those affected within short timeframes.

In their report *Online delivery of VET*, Hume and Griffin (2021) showed that the number of subjects delivered online increased by around 24% from 2019 to 2021. Both government-funded and domestic fee-for-service subject enrolments saw an increase in online training delivery. ACT and Queensland recorded the most increases in online delivery modes between 2019 and 2020 (an increase of 46.5% and 36.4%, respectively).

---

2 Smart and Skilled is a NSW Government program designed to help people obtain qualifications in skills and industries that are in high demand. The program provides eligible students with government-subsidised training up to and including certificate III, and government funding for certificate IV and above in areas targeted as priority. More information can be found here.

Hume and Griffin (2022) reported a high level of intention among training providers to maintain an increased level of online training and assessment in the future, with 61.8% of surveyed training providers indicating they would be more likely to use blended delivery in the future. However, some obstacles were encountered in transitioning to online delivery; for example, it was difficult for students with low language, literacy, numeracy and digital (LLND) skills to learn effectively online. This was particularly the case for mature-aged students, while other students reported challenges relating to the unsuitability of online delivery and difficulties maintaining engagement in an online environment. Additionally, it was challenging for courses which focused heavily on practical skills to be transferred to the online environment (Hume & Griffin 2022).

Many training providers interviewed said they were unable to change their scope, although almost all explained that they had researched the possibilities to determine whether it was worthwhile. For some training providers, the students were already committed and/or the training provider was the only one in the area who delivered the particular qualification necessary for employment pathways. There was thus a responsibility for these providers to help their students get through their training. Students who were able to add on short courses found them beneficial, as they ultimately were easier to complete in a shorter timeframe. Several of the interviewed training providers (across TAFE institutes, private and community education providers) added the infection control courses, which became available early in the pandemic, to their scope and commented that this helped them with revenue. Similar short course packages, such as the COVID SAFE Work courses made mandatory by the Queensland Government when businesses first reopened,[3] further enabled some providers to draw in new cohorts and raise much-needed revenue, especially during the first year of the pandemic.

Financial impacts were tempered by the provision of COVID-19 support packages for VET, outlined in more detail in the 'Lessons learned' section of this report. For example, almost all providers (excluding TAFE institutes, who were ineligible) cited JobKeeper as a vital support stream for their business; it provided wage subsidies for their employees and allowed them to direct revenue to other areas of their operations. That said, some of the providers interviewed, especially those operating as private or community educator providers, felt the types of COVID-19 funding available lacked flexibility, and the funding was not always evenly distributed across provider types. These providers suggested that the types of funding available suited certain training providers more than others, but that ineligibility for a funding stream did not mean they were not in need of recovery support. Community education providers, for example, consistently stressed that the outcomes-based evaluation measurements did not match their training goals, which were often less concerned with specific employment pathways and more with enhanced engagement and community interaction.

Operational

One of the main focuses for training providers at the onset of COVID-19 was preparing for the virus and establishing new risk-management strategies. In the early stages of the pandemic, the virus was mostly unknown, and so these strategies underwent several changes as new information about it emerged. Strict social distancing was also in place as concerns about aerosol infection became understood. All training providers quickly undertook surveys of their physical spaces and rearranged them, in terms of layout, access pathways, and capacity numbers, to comply with the social distancing requirements outlined for

3 Micro-credential courses developed by TAFE Queensland for COVID SAFE Work and that were mandatory for businesses to complete for a time included 'COVID SAFE Training for Dining In', 'COVID SAFE Training for Personal Services — Beauty, nail salons, massage (therapeutic and non-therapeutic), tanning, tattoo parlours, spas, saunas and bathhouses', and 'COVID SAFE Training for Business'. More information on these courses available here.

education institutions by governments. Some providers adopted additional precautions beyond those mandated by governments in their attempts to prevent infection breakouts within their institutions or workplaces and to help students and staff feel more secure. The government enterprise providers interviewed provided notable examples of these additional precautions, explaining strategies such as creating 'onsite bubbles' within which staff would move together if completing their training at the worksite. Another example from an enterprise provider was the implementation of their own internal QR coding system in their academy, which enabled the movements of their training recruits to be tracked as they moved in and out of their classrooms in real time. Any potentially affected recruits and teaching staff would then be quickly informed if there were reports of infection. These additional efforts seemed to have been effective for these organisations in preventing severe infection spreads within their campuses and adjoining workplaces.

People

Training providers reported high levels of confusion, uncertainty, and fear in students and staff alike due to the pandemic. Those interviewed noted that this uncertainty was acute for those from vulnerable cohorts, a point reinstated by Naidoo, Valentine and Adamson (2022), who illustrated that people from disadvantaged demographics often experienced escalating needs for 'fundamental provisions' such as food or accommodation during the pandemic. Access and inclusion issues that had been present previously in Australia were exacerbated by the pandemic (Shergold et al. 2022; The Smith Family 2020), including the digital divide and economic and social barriers to education. As the CEO of one community education provider described:

> That's our heartbeat. That's our mission. That's our purpose: working with [the] disadvantaged. So, the biggest hit is to just the sheer numbers of disadvantaged people we are serving because they're on the wrong side of disadvantage and they're on the wrong side of digital literacy.

At a staffing level, some of the training providers we interviewed indicated there was often a lack of capability and/or willingness to teach in an online platform, as well as concern about income being reduced either presently or in the near future due to the pandemic. Consequently, some training providers lost staff who decided to take up employment elsewhere, either because they were not getting enough hours during the pandemic or were too stressed by the new training circumstances.

To retain staff and ensure training could continue, all the training providers we spoke to invested in intensive professional development for their employees. The professional development occurred in the areas of digital literacy — for trainers needing to offer courses online and administrative staff needing to work from home — as well as in infection control and hygiene protocols. Many providers also implemented new communication plans that included frequent — often daily or more — check-ins with staff, to update them on the changes occurring that affected the organisation or region and to ensure that they felt supported with adequate information and resources. Wrap-around services in the form of mental health and wellbeing programs and management-to-employee check-ins were also drastically increased, to ensure any struggling employees were quickly offered support:

> We had a weekly Workforce Wellness Mental Health survey that went to staff. So, we got that up and running very quick and it was, 'Are you OK? Do you need a call? Do you need some help?' [and that's what] the manager of every team was doing in terms of checking in with their teams and that's continued to happen … But … the Workforce Wellness Mental Health survey was really the thing that we looked at every week and any cry for help was attended to pretty quickly. Now, often that wasn't a work-related issue. (CEO, TAFE institute)

Overall, it seems that those who were able to provide these additional wellbeing and communications supports were able to cope better with the negative impacts of the pandemic. The TAFE institute and government enterprise providers, for example, mentioned burnout far less often than the private and community education providers.

One of the more positive results mentioned by training providers regarding their staff was the noticeable increase in innovation and creativity that occurred among them, particularly in the early stages of the pandemic: trainers often worked together to arrive at new and interesting ways of delivering training online and keeping students engaged in their studies. In the first year in particular staff were frequently cited as going 'above and beyond' to maintain training and business operations:

> It was a willingness and even just a … confidence. This, 'what we can do working across regions and across delivery teams?' And that sharing and that collaboration and that communication has made the organisation feel much smaller, we've come together much more, I think. (CEO, TAFE institute)

The other major impact on people was of course on learners. Issues of access and wellbeing became a primary concern for providers, who were driven to prevent further loss of enrolments. There were two key elements to this concern: the first was that many students simply did not have the appropriate digital equipment and/or literacy to undertake online training; the second was that students were incredibly overwhelmed and concerned about safety and their future in general.

A great deal of attention was therefore given to providing different and flexible arrangements to students, according to their individual circumstances and needs. This was often easier to achieve if the training providers were in regional areas, where their relationships tended to be more direct; however, even larger training providers in urban areas reported staff undertaking tasks such as delivering laptops or hard-copy course work to students or sitting one on one with students to help them navigate the digital systems.

Support for student wellbeing was significantly enhanced, with staff checking in more frequently with their students at group level but also one on one, to determine how they were faring and to offer support in the form of extensions, mental health referrals, or other guidance as needed. As one private training provider described:

> We also maintained the focus on existing learners … during that time we wanted to stabilise, manage the existing staff and students, supporting them, rather than going out and about getting new students.

Student enrolments still declined, although perhaps due to these efforts they did not decline quite as severely as they might have, or as one TAFE institute put it, 'not falling off the cliff in the way we expected'.

Infrastructure

While some of the providers we interviewed had a good foundation in place for pivoting their administrative work and training delivery to online platforms, almost all explained they did not have the appropriate infrastructure in place to do so. Thus, training providers described having to make significant investments in the form of IT hardware and software to enable their transition to online delivery and remote working arrangements. The unexpected need for health infrastructure in the form of PPE (personal protective equipment), signage and QR code capability emerged, and a couple noted they had invested in thermal temperature gauges as an additional precaution for staff and students.

As detailed earlier, infrastructure in terms of the physical space of campuses and related training sites had to be rearranged substantially. This included the closure of social areas and catering services, such

as lounges or canteens, blocking off rooms that were not well ventilated, and often utilising other spaces in the local area to enable additional classes, which had to become smaller in number to accommodate social distancing.

Long-term impacts and responses

Financial

Although enrolments, and therefore revenue, began to increase again for providers in late 2020 and into 2021, the interviews revealed frequent instances of financial difficulty in 2022, with some suggesting it was the most problematic year in this regard. This difficulty was often attributed to the loss of the government COVID-19 support and/or other VET sector incentives for which providers had previously been eligible, as well as ongoing delays with payments related to MWP and completions. Disruptions were constant, with the arrival of new, more infectious, strains of the virus in 2022, and this seemed a particularly difficult period for providers in South Australia and Western Australia. One training provider mentioned additional costs due to the requirement to hire 'on-call' training staff to help to alleviate the effects of staff becoming sick from, or their being a close-contact of someone with, COVID-19.

Those who spoke more positively about the present and long-term situation for their organisation tended to identify broader government support. For example, more generally, the TAFE institutes interviewed appeared much more confident about their financial viability than private training providers, with some explicitly mentioning the flow-on effects that increased funding into the VET sector, and TAFE institutes especially, was having.

All training providers agreed that maintaining blended delivery modes would enable them to continue engaging students and potentially attract new students — those previously unable to participate in the training due to geographic isolation or other commitments. Consequently, similar to findings reported by Hume and Griffin (2021), almost all providers to whom we spoke expressed a commitment to not only continuing these modes but to expanding them; for example, considering how they could improve simulations or multi-modal classroom experiences for the future.

Operational

One of the lasting effects of the pandemic on training providers in all jurisdictions seems to be the continuation of hygiene- and infection-control practices. The majority of organisations interviewed said they would continue with a vaccination mandate for students and staff alike and social distancing practices to the extent possible, while many were still enforcing mask wearing. More general issues, such as thorough cleaning and the provision of hand sanitiser, had become the norm for these providers.

At an operational level, many providers, particularly private or community education providers, expressed concerns about 'gaps' in their organisational environment, particularly relating to core business and administrative work. Many training providers reported that they had dedicated so much attention to risk management and COVID-19 response processes for the first two years of the pandemic that administrative tasks associated with their business operations, such as compliance paperwork, had fallen behind. The same can be said for the broader infrastructure investments, such as capital upgrades. At the time of the interviews, training providers reported struggling to catch up on these areas. Many felt that the gaps that were appearing now might become more pronounced in years to come, given that the pandemic was still very much a reality:

> I mean, it's one of those things where you won't feel it until about 5, or 8 or 10 years when suddenly we say there's a 25,000-person shortfall … I can just sort of see, you know, whilst at the moment training providers and everything are trying to deliver to the best they can, the true pain point will be the industries in about 5 years.
>
> (Director of Learning Quality and Design & CEO, government enterprise RTO)

People

In the long-term, and looking to the future, training providers reported that many positive elements had emerged in their staff and student culture because of the COVID-19 crisis. Increased trust and collaboration were frequently cited as positive human resource outcomes, and the interviewees reported an eagerness to maintain a level of innovation and creative thinking about training, delivery and flexible work arrangements in their workplaces. Flexible work arrangements were supported by all training providers interviewed, with many feeling hybrid arrangements were enabling just as good, if not better, levels of productivity than in-office arrangements, as well as more effectively supporting staff needs. In addition, providers were keen to continue the process of upskilling their employees' digital capacity, with several emphasising that, while they had been able to deliver adequate online training, quality digital content provision and student engagement had room for improvement.

Despite these reports of positive impacts, a significant number of the training providers interviewed emphasised high levels of burnout among their employees, and a consequent concern about their wellbeing. Related to the high levels of burnout was the issue of staff retention, an issue becoming increasingly difficult for many providers. As has been evidenced in student indicators, the impact to staff was more negative and challenging for those in areas where simultaneous crises were occurring; for example, for those based in New South Wales, where droughts, floods and mouse plagues had been an issue, and for those in areas where the virus was more concentrated:

> The overwhelming sense at the moment is stress and burnout of staff. I think staff were incredible in the way they adapted and manoeuvred really quickly. Some of it potentially, you know, you wouldn't line up as best practice but they forged on immediately.
>
> (Executive Director — Education & Training, TAFE institute)

Furthermore, it seemed that trainers in care sectors were experiencing additional burdens, having overstretched themselves to provide care during the intensive periods of the pandemic, as well as manage the stress of workplace disruption and infection:

> The other issue I think that we've had is we've had trainers that have left the industry and gone into what they class as safer employment … We've lost hospitality trainers that have gone laying concrete. We've lost aged care trainers that have gone into retail because retail will not close down. And they won't lose work … Prior to COVID, we probably had aged care trainers that were in every campus. And then … if one was off sick, it wasn't hard to get another one to pop in and do their training for them. Now we're relying on reduced numbers that are … getting very tired. And burnt out because … they've gone back into industry said they're picking up double shifts there. They're trying to support their students and it's just I think it could end up that the regional remote providers will end up with major burnout of their staff, but not have the capacity to have replacement step in casuals to fill those spots. (VET Manager, community education provider)

While many of the providers we interviewed were attempting to maintain wellbeing check-ins and supports, some were struggling to find the necessary resources to adequately do this, especially private or community education providers, who tended to have less access to wrap-around services in their organisation:

> I think the burnout is really hitting us all … it's just 'what crisis is there going to be today?' … it's just too unstable, too unstable, it's like a boat that's got in trouble. You can stabilise it to a point, but at some point it just keeps rocking and then the cargo falls off. And I do feel that it's a really dangerous place and looking at our numbers, we're in a worse completion situation and delivery situation than we were in lockdowns, at least we had some predictability, but now it's about which trainers there, how do we do it? … We're lucky that we do anything we can and, you know, sacrifice ourselves really to deliver. But it's not sustainable and we really need a package to help us. It's really … It's dire.
>
> (Executive Officer, community education provider)

Running adjacent to the concern about staff wellbeing was a concern about student wellbeing in 2022 and beyond. Providers felt that student wellbeing had suffered incredibly throughout the pandemic. Now that the shock or crisis-management mode had worn off somewhat, they were very worried about the 'fallout':

> Yeah, look, I think the people is the biggest piece of our puzzle. And that's from our workforce, but also from our student cohorts. And we're seeing it [burnout] already. And especially with the younger ones coming in that have had two years of significant impact to their learning journey and as well as the mental health issues from people that are now trying to reengage … We've got a challenging little journey ahead of us as a sector, I think.
>
> (Executive Director — Education & Training, TAFE institute)

Providers were trying to keep blended delivery options for students as a way to provide them with more flexibility and to remove unnecessary pressure from them, as well as maintaining more frequent communication updates and check-ins. Some providers, especially those who were smaller and in regional locations, mentioned spending one-on-one time with students where possible to support them. However, there was an overall sense that currently the resources or the staffing capacity were lacking for vulnerable groups who were struggling to return to study.

Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the participation patterns and training outcomes of VET students

This section examines the participation patterns and training outcomes for students between 2019 and 2021 using data from the total VET activity and apprentice and trainee collections, survey data from the National Student Outcomes survey and the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth, along with findings from interviews with VET peak body and training provider representatives.

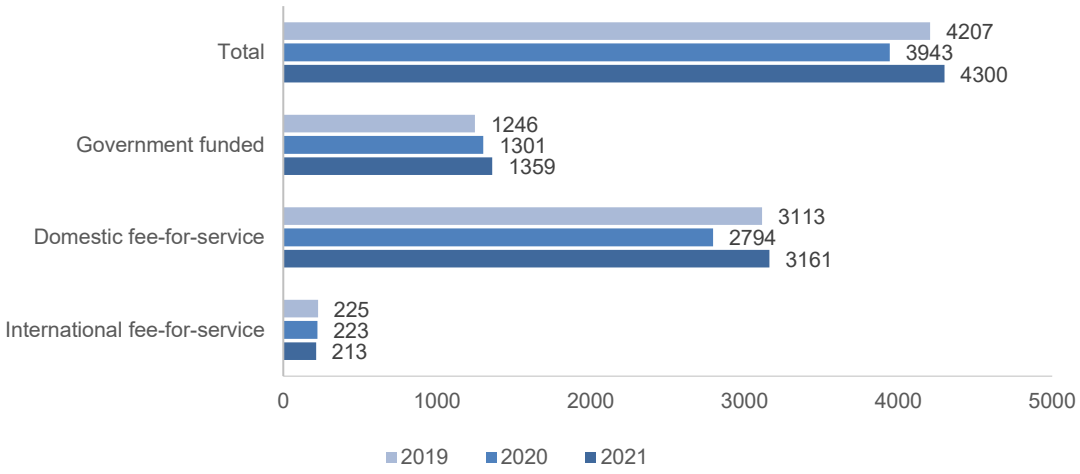
Overall enrolments

The overall pattern of student enrolments across the pandemic period to date revealed a decline in the number of students enrolled in VET between 2019 to 2020, followed by a rebound in student enrolments from 2020 to 2021.

The period 2019 to 2020 saw an overall decrease of 6.3%, driven by a decline in domestic and international fee-for-service students. In contrast, the number of government-funded students increased during this period.

From 2020 to 2021 the number of students enrolled in VET increased by 9%, with a further increase in the number of government-funded students enrolled and an increase in the number of domestic fee-for-service students (figure 1).

Figure 1 Total VET students by funding source 2019–21 ('000)



Source: NCVER Total VET Students and Courses, 2019–21.

From 2019 to 2020, training activity declined in line with the decrease in the number of students enrolled. There was a 3% decrease in program enrolments, driven by a decline in the number of qualification enrolments. In the same period, enrolments in subjects not delivered as part of a nationally recognised program experienced a 9.5% decrease. It would appear that demand for this type of training declined during pandemic lockdown periods, as much of the subject-only enrolment activity is concerned with regulatory compliance and skill maintenance relating to the private sector (Palmer 2021).

From 2020 to 2021 program enrolments increased by 5.1%, with an increase in qualification enrolments to levels above those, pre-pandemic. During this same period, enrolments in subjects not delivered as part of a nationally recognised program rebounded with a 20.5% increase to 7 million (6.4 million in 2019).

Early to mid-2020

For most of the training providers interviewed, student enrolments declined in the early stages of the pandemic due to a combination of stressors on both potential and existing students: lockdowns, high levels of uncertainty, difficulties with or reluctance to studying online, and new income and employment pressures. Most providers reported high levels of withdrawals and sharp declines in enrolment numbers in 2020. Enrolment withdrawals and/or decreases in new enrolments were particularly high for students from disadvantaged or vulnerable groups.

The quantitative data presented in table 1 reflect the experiences of many of the participating training providers, with the overall subject withdrawal rate increasing by 1.6 percentage points from 2019 to 2020. While all the equity groups presented in table 1 experienced an increase in the withdrawal rate during this period, of note was the increase for Indigenous students (increased by 2.3 percentage points), students with a disability (increased by 4.4 percentage points) and students from a low socioeconomic background (increased by 2.1 percentage points) (table 1).

Table 1 Subject withdrawal rate by equity groups, 2019–21 (%)

Equity groups	Subject withdrawal rate			Percentage-point difference		
	2019	2020	2021	2019–20	2020–21	2019–21
Indigenous	15.4	17.8	16.8	2.3	-0.9	1.4
With a disability	14.7	19.1	17.6	4.4	-1.6	2.9
Speak a language other than English spoken at home (LOTE)	9.0	9.5	10.0	0.6	0.4	1.0
SEIFA quintile 1 (most disadvantaged)	10.9	13.0	12.2	2.1	-0.8	1.3
Regional/remote student location	9.0	10.6	10.2	1.7	-0.4	1.2
Total	**8.2**	**9.8**	**9.8**	**1.6**	**0.1**	**1.7**

Note: Rates are calculated by dividing the subject result by the total number of subject enrolments.

The denominator (total subject enrolments) used to calculate the withdrawal rate includes competency achieved/pass, competency not achieved/fail, RPL granted, RPL not granted, withdrawn/discontinued.

Excludes where outcome identifier – national is '81 – Non-assessable activity – satisfactorily completed', '82 – Non-assessable activity – withdrawn or not satisfactorily completed', '60 – Credit transfer/national recognition', or '61 – superseded subject, incomplete due to RTO closure'.

Source: NCVER Total VET Students and Courses, 2019–21.

Training providers reported a considerable decline in enrolments in 2020 and an increase in withdrawals in training package qualifications in the education and care industries due to concern about infection and difficulties faced by students needing to undertake work placements during lockdowns.

Table 2 presents the subject withdrawal rate by the top 10 training packages in 2019. From 2019 to 2020, the withdrawal rate increased for all top 10 training packages (except for Construction, Plumbing & Services Integrated Framework). As reported by some training providers, notable increases in withdrawal rates were evident for subjects in the Community Services training package (increased by 3.6%) and Training and Education (increased by 5.9%).

Table 2 Subject withdrawal rate by the top 10 training packages, 2019–21 (%)

Top 10 training packages	Subject withdrawal rate			Percentage-point difference		
	2019	2020	2021	2019–20	2020–21	2019–21
BSB – Business Services	9.9	10.1	12.0	0.3	1.8	2.1
CHC – Community Services	16.3	19.9	19.6	3.6	-0.3	3.3
SIT – Tourism, Travel and Hospitality	7.0	7.7	7.2	0.6	-0.5	0.1
CPC – Construction, Plumbing & Services Integrated Framework	7.5	6.6	7.8	-0.9	1.2	0.3
SIS – Sport, Fitness and Recreation	11.4	12.0	14.0	0.6	2.0	2.6
HLT – Health	12.3	13.3	15.9	1.0	2.6	3.6
TLI – Transport and Logistics	9.7	11.4	9.1	1.7	-2.3	-0.6
AUR – Automotive Industry Retail, Service and Repair	3.6	4.7	5.8	1.1	1.1	2.2
TAE – Training and Education	9.8	15.8	18.1	5.9	2.3	8.2
RII – Resources and Infrastructure	4.7	5.1	6.4	0.4	1.3	1.7
Total	**8.2**	**9.8**	**9.8**	**1.6**	**0.1**	**1.7**

Note: Rates are calculated by dividing the subject result by the total number of subject enrolments.

The denominator (total subject enrolments) used to calculate the withdrawal rate includes competency achieved/pass, competency not achieved/fail, RPL granted, RPL not granted, withdrawn/discontinued.

Excludes where outcome identifier – national is '81 – Non-assessable activity – satisfactorily completed'; '82 – Non-assessable activity – withdrawn or not satisfactorily completed'; '60 – Credit transfer/national recognition'; or '61 – superseded subject, incomplete due to RTO closure'.

Source: NCVER Total VET Students and Courses, 2019–21.

Late 2020 to 2021

As the VET sector began to adjust to new modes of delivery, and initiatives were introduced by governments in response to the pandemic, enrolment numbers began to recover. In late 2020 and into 2021, students began to return to VET. The number of students participating in VET rebounded to levels above pre-pandemic numbers, with increases in both government-funded and domestic fee-for-service students.

Table 3 shows that the growth in government-funded student participation from 2020 to 2021 was concentrated in qualifications (up 83 640 students or 7.4%), while the increase in domestic fee-for-service students was largely driven by increased enrolments in stand-alone subjects (up 372 300 students or 16.7%).

Table 3 Total VET students by type of training and funding source, 2019–21 ('000)

	Government funding			Domestic fee-for-service funding			International fee-for-service funding		
Type of training	2019	2020	2021	2019	2020	2021	2019	2020	2021
Training package qualifications	1 040.2	1032.2	1107.6	711.0	663.2	692.5	203.4	207.0	199.2
Accredited qualifications	110.5	105.7	113.9	40.0	39.7	41.0	11.6	8.9	7.8
Training package skill sets	12.3	38.5	38.3	63.7	56.6	48.1	0.7	1.1	1.0
Accredited courses	32.5	32.7	38.2	61.1	54.8	58.0	0.2	0.0	0.2
Subjects not delivered as part of a nationally recognised program	132.4	175.3	158.8	2 524.7	2 232.6	2 604.9	15.3	10.3	9.4
Total	**1 246.4**	**1 300.5**	**1 358.7**	**3 112.5**	**2 794.4**	**3 160.6**	**225.3**	**222.6**	**213.0**

Source: NCVER Total VET Students and Courses, 2019–21.

The training providers interviewed stated that students' reasons for enrolling in VET after the onset of the pandemic were often quite different from pre-pandemic motivations. Many providers reported that students began enrolling in courses aligned with industries perceived to be more stable, and/or to add a competitive edge to their existing employment. For example, some government enterprise providers suggested that new students were drawn to their organisations because other employment options began to fold or struggle. As an Assistant Police Commissioner of a government enterprise provider explained:

> Interestingly, during the height of COVID … because we're an employer, there were other industries which were shutting down, so the airline industry, the motor, you know, the manufacturing industry. So, we did actually attract a proportion of those from those industries as well.

Others noted that some individuals undertook short courses to upskill or add additional merit to their resumes. For example, someone working in retail or in a factory might have decided to enrol to get their forklift licence, meaning that they would have an additional skill should their company need to cut staff:

> They were saying, okay, we might work in the office at this factory. But if we — or their employer might have been saying — if you go and get your forklift licence, then you might be able to keep your job because you can do both. (Compliance Manager, private training provider)

Indeed, some private training providers, particularly those offering short courses or micro-credentials in the area of construction and/or transport and logistics, experienced intense periods of high enrolments in 2021, or what one provider called a 'boom year'.

Several providers we interviewed claimed that the pandemic seemed to prompt people to reassess their career paths and use the opportunities afforded by the pandemic, including government funding and support, to begin alternative occupation trajectories:

> Certainly, people had a go because the funding was available to maybe take a career change. You know, you say, well, I actually always wanted to do horticulture. I've got some time now, you know, there looks like there's jobs in this … But certainly training and the ability I guess to have a look at your life and see where you want to go and if something had happened to you beyond your control like you lost your job simply because you know your cafe was shut or whatever … people actually took that opportunity and did something different. But: A. that was available to them; and B. it was affordable, and that's not often the case in the VET sector anymore. (CEO, TAFE institute)

Some of the training providers interviewed commented that students began enrolling in courses that aligned with the targeted incentives offered by governments such as the Boosting Apprenticeships Scheme (BAC). A private training provider noted, for example, that they became 'busy with a different kind of student' due to such incentives. Similarly, one TAFE institute explained that, while their enrolment numbers dropped in 2020, new/different kinds of students began to participate due to increased funding for TAFE and the VET sector more broadly. Further examples of the government incentives can be found in appendix A.

Some of these shifts in training activity can be seen in the data presented in tables 3, 4 and 6. While overall training package enrolments increased by 6.3% from 2020 to 2021, several of the top 10 training packages experienced notably higher increases in program enrolments during this period: Community Services (increased by 13.9%); Construction, Plumbing & Services Integrated Framework (increased by 13.5%); Health (increased by 16.2%); and Automotive Industry Retail, Service and Repair (increased by 12.3%).

Program enrolments in Transport and Logistics and Training and Education suffered large declines from 2019 to 2020 (decreased by 30.5% and 38.0%, respectively), remaining well below pre-pandemic levels in 2021.

Table 4 Program enrolments by training package, 2019–21

Training package	Program enrolments ('000)			% change		
	2019	2020	2021	2019–20	2020–21	2019–21
BSB – Business Services	367.6	355.8	358.7	-3.2	0.8	-2.4
CHC – Community Services	361.5	373.6	425.5	3.3	13.9	17.7
SIT – Tourism, Travel and Hospitality	195.7	198.6	205.7	1.5	3.6	5.1
CPC – Construction, Plumbing & Services Integrated Framework	163.4	157.9	179.2	-3.4	13.5	9.6
SIS – Sport, Fitness and Recreation	112.4	113.5	114.1	1.0	0.5	1.6
HLT – Health	91.6	97.1	112.8	6.0	16.2	23.1
TLI – Transport and Logistics	88.6	61.6	68.7	-30.5	11.6	-22.4
AUR – Automotive Industry Retail, Service and Repair	68.2	71.7	80.5	5.1	12.3	18.0
TAE – Training and Education	67.0	41.5	41.2	-38.0	-0.7	-38.4
RII – Resources and Infrastructure	66.2	66.9	71.0	1.1	6.0	7.2
Total training package enrolments	**2 323.7**	**2 243.8**	**2 385.4**	**-3.4**	**6.3**	**2.7**

Source: NCVER Total VET Students and Courses, 2019–21.

For some private training providers, the pandemic led to an increase in enrolments, possibly by providing students with an opportunity to study, one they might not otherwise have had. As the CEO of one private training provider explained:

> It [COVID-19] didn't change the age group bracket or demographic in any significant way. It led to more enrolments and these students had more time to study and complete the qualifications [due to forced lockdowns]. Instead of dribbling through it in 12—18 months they could get the whole thing done in 5—6 weeks.

Late 2021 to 2022

While enrolments started returning to pre-pandemic levels for many training providers, many others interviewed reported that in 2022 they were once again experiencing declines. At the time of fieldwork, several explained that, in terms of program enrolments, 2022 had the lowest number of enrolments since 2019. This was particularly the case for community education and some private training providers.

The government enterprise providers interviewed noted that their upcoming recruitment levels appeared to be down, a circumstance they linked to the shrinking skills market, the lack of attention paid to longer-term public service sustainability, and their inability to conduct the same level of outreach during the early periods of the pandemic, such as recruitment and advertising activities.

Where there were reports of strong increases or stabilisation in student enrolments in 2021 and 2022, these often coincided with government support. For example, training providers interviewed in Western Australia noted that the deliberate investment in COVID-19 recovery in the form of VET investment has meant enrolment numbers are beginning to increase for VET. It will be interesting to see how the 2022 total VET activity data reflect or otherwise these statements about 2022 enrolments.

States and territories

The extent to which training providers were impacted correlated to geographical context and the related issue of the scale of COVID-19 cases. Training providers in New South Wales, the Australian Capital Territory and Victoria reported higher impacts throughout the pandemic period compared with South Australia, Tasmania and Western Australia. As the Managing Director of a TAFE institute in Western Australia explained:

> I think our experience is very different from the experience of many of the TAFE colleges in the East Coast. And, you know, we've had a couple of meetings and different opportunities through TDA to have some discussion with our colleagues in the eastern states and their experience is very different from ours. And I think the experience of regional TAFEs in WA was also different from the metropolitan colleges in that whilst we had positive COVID cases and we needed to manage those in terms of notifications and reporting requirements and all of those sorts of things … we didn't have as many cases. And we didn't have the sort of major disruptions to our normal operations that many other colleges or other training providers had.

The impacts of COVID-19 on training providers in the eastern states tended to be exacerbated by other crises being managed prior to the pandemic or concurrently, for example, bushfires, flooding, mice plagues. Training providers located in states and territories where COVID-19 cases remained relatively low tended to report more severe impacts later in the pandemic, after borders were opened and the Omicron variant had spread, that is, Western Australia and South Australia. The three training providers that reported not being significantly impacted were based in Western Australia, Tasmania and Queensland, a pattern that is broadly reflected in the enrolment data for these jurisdictions.

Any providers that were operating in more than one jurisdiction — or in the case of one TAFE institute, across campuses either side of a state border — encountered issues with different jurisdictional regulations. The government enterprise providers interviewed frequently mentioned this issue, as did other providers that delivered training in multiple states.

The observations from training providers are reflected in the total VET activity enrolment data presented in table 5. From 2019 to 2020, program enrolments declined for all states and territories, except Queensland (increased by 4.2%). From 2020 to 2021, total program enrolments increased by 5.1%, with all states and territories (except for the ACT) experiencing an increase in enrolments. By 2021, program enrolments in Queensland, South Australia, Western Australia and Tasmania had rebounded to levels above pre-COVID-19 (table 5).

Table 5 Program enrolments by state/territory of delivery location, 2019–21

State/territory	Program enrolments ('000)			% change		
	2019	2020	2021	2019–20	2020–21	2019–21
New South Wales	776.4	757.4	771.0	-2.5	1.8	-0.7
Victoria	733.8	670.0	722.5	-8.7	7.8	-1.5
Queensland	666.3	694.0	728.0	4.2	4.9	9.3
South Australia	121.2	116.7	124.1	-3.7	6.3	2.4
Western Australia	276.0	268.1	282.9	-2.9	5.5	2.5
Tasmania	42.7	41.5	48.5	-2.7	16.8	13.6
Northern Territory	22.9	21.8	22.8	-4.6	4.6	-0.3
Australian Capital Territory	50.8	46.9	45.4	-7.6	-3.3	-10.6
Other Australian territories or dependencies	0.1	0.0	0.0	-55.0	-22.4	-65.1
Offshore	26.5	19.5	24.8	-26.5	27.5	-6.3
Not known	1.5	1.3	1.3	-7.8	-4.3	-11.8
Total	**2 718.1**	**2 637.4**	**2 771.4**	**-3.0**	**5.1**	**2.0**

Source: NCVER Total VET Students and Courses, 2019–21.

Type of training and training requirements

For some of the training providers interviewed, in particular from community education and private training providers, the type of training that students chose did not change: for many of their students it was simply a case of experiencing stop-start rhythms in their training, or even withdrawing or not

enrolling in the first place. However, other providers interviewed noted that any programs requiring an MWP, particularly in care programs, saw declining participation, especially in the early stages of the pandemic. Private and community education providers also commented that they had dropped qualifications from their delivery scope because of difficulties associated with their delivery, a consequence of workplace closures and the stop-start mode that most training had to adopt.

Specific government funding initiatives also affected the types of training to which students were drawn. Providers interviewed observed that government incentives such as JobTrainer and the Boosting Apprenticeship Commencements (BAC) and Completing Apprenticeship Commencements (CAC) Programs attracted students to certificate III and above qualifications. Additionally, the micro-credentials that were introduced as a result of COVID-19 tended to have high uptakes of enrolments in the initial stages of the pandemic.

Many training providers interviewed added short courses and micro-credentials to their scope in 2020, which assisted them to attract new student cohorts and boost revenue. In some cases, at the request of the government, courses were added to their scope:

> We were asked as the arm of government … to do some micro-credentials, put them together with less than a week's notice for the online COVID safe return to work of hospitality, hair, beauty, tattoo salons, the dining in, dining out, and we put that together in every place when they were allowed to open [because the businesses] had to have that TAFE certificate in their window. That time we trained nearly 260,000 students. So, we had to get a separate platform up and make it easy for them to enrol. At the same time, we put up 6 to 8 skill sets in micro-credentials, done very quickly for people that were at home. We had 17,000 people enrol in those. They were made free by the government and then we did some targeted industry recognised skill sets all through this same platform and we had over 10,000 enrolments in that. So, when people were home, they were looking to upskill, reskill, you know. Things were made available … (CEO, TAFE institute)

To some degree, the training provider observations noted above can be seen in the data presented in table 6. While there was an initial decline in enrolments across all qualification levels from 2019 to 2020, enrolments in higher-level qualifications notably increased from 2020 to 2021: diploma or higher-level qualifications (increased by 7.9%); certificate IV qualifications (increased by 11.6%); and certificate III qualifications (increased by 6.9%).

As reported by some training providers there was an increase in the uptake of short courses from 2019 to 2020, with non-AQF enrolments increasing by 7.4%.

Table 6 Program enrolments by level of education, 2019–21

Level of education	Program enrolments ('000)			% change		
	2019	2020	2021	2019–20	2020–21	2019–21
Diploma or higher	420.1	419.2	452.6	-0.2	7.9	7.7
Certificate IV	473.9	459.5	512.9	-3.1	11.6	8.2
Certificate III	960.0	946.2	1 011.2	-1.4	6.9	5.3
Certificate II	513.8	476.4	481.4	-7.3	1.0	-6.3
Certificate I	142.3	112.4	108.6	-21.0	-3.5	-23.7
Non-AQF level	208.1	223.5	204.8	7.4	-8.4	-1.6
Total	**2 718.1**	**2 637.4**	**2 771.4**	**-3.0**	**5.1**	**2.0**

Source: NCVER Total VET Students and Courses, 2019–21.

Specific student cohorts

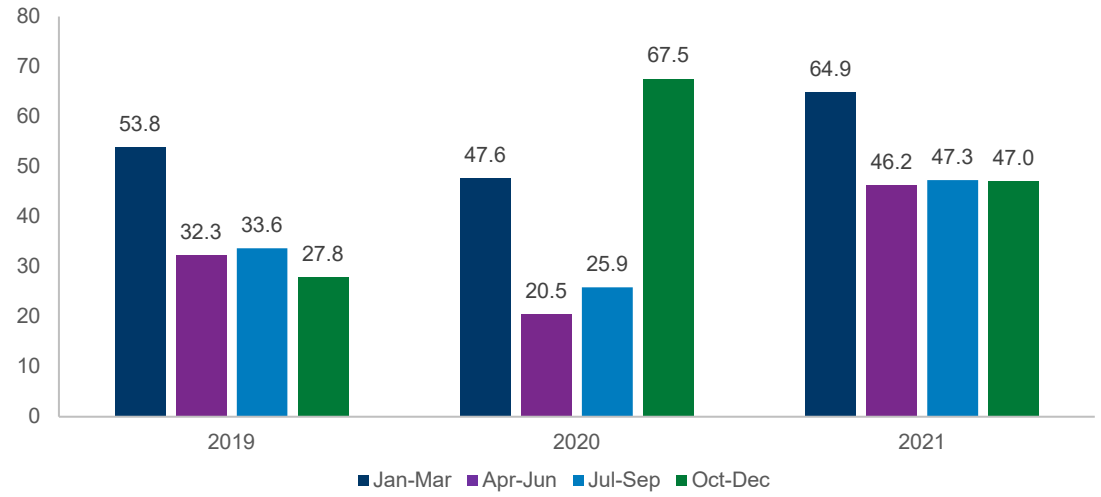
The pandemic affected the enrolment activity of specific cohorts of students to varying degrees. This section of the report discusses the impact by various cohorts of interest.

Apprentices and trainees

The contract commencement patterns for apprentices and trainees between 2019 and 2020 reflect the immediate economic impacts of the pandemic and the subsequent government responses. Figure 2 indicates that commencements in the first three quarters of 2020 followed a similar seasonal pattern to 2019, albeit with much lower numbers than in 2019 between April and June 2020, when the national lockdown was in place and employer recruitment activity was at its lowest. This coincided with an increase in the number of suspended contracts. However, apprentice and trainee commencements spiked dramatically during October through December 2020, likely in response to the introduction of the Boosting Apprenticeship Commencements wage subsidy program and possibly latent employer need following constraints on industry activity. As the CEO interviewee from a TAFE institute noted:

> Those funding streams came on very quickly for … boosting apprenticeships. So, you know, in spite of everything, we weren't faced with the long lockdowns of other states, but we actually had to grow pretty quickly to meet demand because people were, you know, looking at upskilling, changing jobs … lots of people had lost their jobs and were coming to TAFE.

Figure 2 Quarterly apprentice and trainee contract commencements, 2019–21 ('000)



Note: The data presented are point-in-time counts of events, as reported to the National Apprentice and Trainee Collection. They are intended to provide an indication of the trends in training activity in 2020 and 2021, by comparison with 2019, and may not represent the final number of contracts events that occurred in each time period.

Source: National Apprentice and Trainee Collection nos 100, 104 and 108 (June 2019, 2020 and 2021 actuals for March quarter); nos 101,105 and 109 (September 2019, 2020 and 2021 actuals for June quarter); nos 102, 106 and 110 (December 2019, 2020 and 2021 actuals for September quarter); and nos 103,107 and 111 (March 2019, 2020 and 2021 actuals for December quarter).

Table 7 shows quarterly contract commencements by state and territory from 2019 to 2021. With the exception of South Australia, all states and territories experienced a decline in the number of apprentice and trainee contract commencements in the first quarter of 2020 compared with 2019. Contract commencements were down for all states and territories in the second quarter of 2020 compared with 2019. By the third quarter of 2020, contract commencements began to stabilise for a number of states and territories as restrictions were eased in some parts of the country. By late 2020, the level of contract commencements peaked for all states and territories with the introduction of the National Boosting Apprenticeship Commencements wage subsidy program. Commencements remained high throughout 2021, exceeding pre-COVID levels in most parts of the country.

Hall (2021) outlined how the Australian apprenticeships and traineeships system is closely tied to broader labour market conditions, making apprentices and trainees especially vulnerable during economic downturns (Atkinson & Stanwick 2016). Economic uncertainty is associated with declines in contract commencements, in part due to the commitment imposed by three- or four-year contracts between the employer and the apprentice or trainee (Karmel & Misko 2009). In the two recessions prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, a five-percentage-point increase in the unemployment rate resulted in a 30% decrease in apprenticeship commencements (Hurley 2020). Despite the statistics from the early pandemic period indicating a sudden decline in apprentice and trainee contracts in Australia, quick intervention by governments to incentivise these qualifications had reversed this by the end of 2020. It is anticipated that these quick-response initiatives, which have been reinforced by the Commonwealth Government's emphasis on apprenticeships and traineeships via the new National Skills Agreement 2022, will contribute to a stabilisation of the labour market and Australia's economic recovery.

Table 7 Quarterly apprentice and trainee contract commencements by state/territory administering the contract, 2019–21 ('000)

	Contract commencements											
	January–March			April–June			July–September			October–December		
	2019	*2020*	*2021*	*2019*	*2020*	*2021*	*2019*	*2020*	*2021*	*2019*	*2020*	*2021*
New South Wales	17.0	15.2	19.0	8.4	5.7	11.7	9.1	6.9	10.2	7.2	19.4	11.3
Victoria	12.4	10.4	14.3	6.5	3.7	9.6	7.4	3.4	9.4	6.9	15.6	10.1
Queensland	11.6	10.5	14.6	8.2	5.1	12.4	8.8	7.1	14.0	6.7	16.4	12.6
South Australia	2.8	2.9	4.1	2.2	1.7	3.0	2.2	2.1	3.6	1.7	4.0	3.4
Western Australia	5.8	5.3	8.3	3.9	2.6	6.2	3.6	3.7	6.8	3.2	8.3	6.5
Tasmania	1.7	1.5	2.0	1.7	0.7	1.8	1.1	1.2	1.8	1.0	2.1	1.7
Northern Territory	0.9	0.6	0.9	0.5	0.3	0.5	0.4	0.4	0.4	0.3	0.6	0.4
Australian Capital Territory	1.7	1.3	1.6	1.1	0.7	1.1	1.0	1.1	1.1	0.8	1.2	1.0
Total	**53.8**	**47.6**	**64.9**	**32.3**	**20.5**	**46.2**	**33.6**	**25.9**	**47.3**	**27.8**	**67.5**	**47.0**

Note: The data presented are point-in-time counts of events, as reported to the National Apprentice and Trainee Collection. They are intended to provide an indication of the trends in training activity in 2020 and 2021, by comparison with 2019, and may not represent the final number of contracts events that occurred in each time period.

Source: National Apprentice and Trainee Collection nos 100, 104 and 108 (June 2019, 2020 and 2021 actuals for March quarter); nos 101,105 and 109 (September 2019, 2020 and 2021 actuals for June quarter); nos 102, 106 and 110 (December 2019, 2020 and 2021 actuals for September quarter); and nos 103,107 and 111 (March 2019, 2020 and 2021 actuals for December quarter).

Age groups

Table 8 illustrates a decline in program enrolments for all age groups from 2019 to 2020, with a notable decrease for those aged 45 years and over. While participation across all age groups increased from 2020 to 2021, many providers reported facing challenges in engaging some students in training.

Table 8 Program enrolments by age group, 2019–21

Age group	Program enrolments ('000)			% change		
	2019	2020	2021	2019–20	2020–21	2019–21
14 years and under	6.3	5.7	6.4	-8.9	11.7	1.8
15–19 years	762.6	747.0	773.0	-2.0	3.5	1.4
20–24 years	455.9	442.3	463.2	-3.0	4.7	1.6
25–44 years	1 053.4	1 036.4	1 105.0	-1.6	6.6	4.9
45–64 years	413.1	382.8	396.7	-7.3	3.6	-4.0
65 years and over	24.1	21.3	25.2	-11.3	18.0	4.6
Not known	2.8	1.8	2.0	-36.6	13.9	-27.8
Total	**2718.1**	**2 637.4**	**2 771.4**	**-3.0**	**5.1**	**2.0**

Source: NCVER Total VET Students and Courses, 2019−21.

The providers interviewed often mentioned that attracting young people and maintaining their engagement in training was made more challenging by the pandemic, with those in regional or remote areas especially likely to make this claim. The providers interviewed often described their younger students as having high levels of uncertainty and a lack of optimism about the future. Many argued that this caused a feeling of disconnection amongst provider staff, compounded by their inability to undertake the previous level of outreach to connect with them. Young people were also noted as having additional obstacles to accessing training, for example, less money to study, or no car or licence to attend class if living outside public transport networks. Some community education providers also noted that seniors' student numbers declined from 2020, often because of their courses being cancelled to protect them from COVID-19.

A recent report by NCVER reinforced these observations about young people, revealing that the health and life satisfaction of young Australians was lower during the pandemic when compared with historical norms. Generation Z: life at 21 examined data from the LSAY participants who commenced the program when they were 15 years old in 2015. The findings showed that, when comparing 21-year-olds in 2021 with 21-year-olds in 2015, the proportion who felt happy when thinking about their future was significantly lower (79%, down from 88%). This was also the case for those happy with their career prospects (76%, down from 84%) and with the state of the economy (46%, down from 61%); furthermore, 13% had a disability or health problem that limited the type of study or work they could do, by comparison with 8% of 21-year-olds in 2015. Financial hardship was also a concern for 21-year-olds in 2021, with 28% reporting financial stress. One in eight went without meals, and one in seven did not get the medicines they needed or were able to go to the doctor (table 9).

Table 9 LSAY health and life satisfaction outcomes, 2015 and 2021 (%)

	Age 21 in 2015	Age 21 in 2021
Happiness with the standard of living	93	87
Happiness with the future	88	79
Happiness with career prospects	84	76
Happiness with social life	84	69
Happiness with the state of the economy	61	46
Reported having a disability or health problem	8	13
In financial stress	25	28
Didn't get medicines or go to a doctor	10	14
Went without meals	8	12
Employed	83	87

.Notes: 'Satisfaction' includes those answering between 6-10 on a 10-point scale. 'Financial stress' scored as reporting two or more from a list of financial hardships. Minor differences in scoring methods between 2015 and 2021 may partially account for observed effects.

Source: Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth, Y09, Y15 cohort.

The picture is not all negative, as the proportion of young people securing employment in 2021 grew after stagnating in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, with 87% of 21-year-olds employed in 2021 (increase of eight percentage points by comparison with when they were 20 years old, the previous year).

Students belonging to an equity group

The equity groups analysed in this research included Indigenous students; students with a disability; students who were not employed; students for whom a language other than English was spoken at home (LOTE); students residing in regional and remote areas; and students in Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) quintile 1 (most disadvantaged). Other cohorts of interest include students with a mental illness (a subset of students with a disability), and students enrolled in an LLND skills program — all cohorts considered to be more likely to be vulnerable to impacts of the pandemic.

Both the quantitative and qualitative data analyses reinforce the significant impact of the pandemic on many of these student cohorts. From 2019 to 2020, all cohorts of interest (except those with a mental illness and LOTE students) experienced a notable decrease in program enrolments.

From 2019 to 2021 only those students with a mental illness experienced a notable increase in enrolments. The data highlight the additional challenges that COVID-19 presents for most of these student cohorts and the difficulty training providers faced in re-engaging these students during the pandemic. LLND student enrolments were impacted the most, with notable declines year on year since 2019 (table 10).

Table 10 Program enrolments by equity groups and other cohorts of interest, 2019–21

Student cohorts	Program enrolments ('000)			% change		
	2019	2020	2021	2019–20	2020–21	2019–21
Indigenous	145.5	132.5	139.5	-8.9	5.3	-4.1
With a disability	176.7	168.2	176.9	-4.8	5.1	0.1
Mental illness	47.8	47.7	51.0	-0.2	7.0	6.9
Not employed[1]	745.2	716.6	720.2	-3.8	0.5	-3.4
Speak a language other than English spoken at home (LOTE)	567.5	558.6	569.6	-1.6	2.0	0.4
Language, literacy, numeracy and digital (LLND)[2]	181.7	144.6	132.5	-20.4	-8.4	-27.0
Regional/remote student location	810.4	769.1	799.3	-5.1	3.9	-1.4
SEIFA quintile 1 (most disadvantaged)	521.1	486.2	504.6	-6.7	3.8	-3.2
Total program enrolments	**2 718.1**	**2 637.4**	**2 771.4**	**-3.0**	**5.1**	**2.0**

Note: The sum of individual student cohorts will not add to the total program enrolments.

1 Not employed includes those students who were either unemployed or not in the labour force.

2 LLND scope inclusions are defined in https://www.ncver.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0039/9673860/Journeying_through_VET_a_case_study_of_foundation_skills_learners_R.pdf, table 1, page 13.

Source: NCVER Total VET Students and Courses, 2019−21.

Indigenous students

There were notable declines in Indigenous program enrolments during the pandemic with an 8.9% decrease from 2019 to 2020, compared to a 3% decrease in total program enrolments. From 2019 to 2021 Indigenous program enrolments decreased by 4.1%, compared to a 2% increase in program enrolments overall (table 10).

Many of the public training providers and community education providers who participated in the interviews listed Indigenous students as one of the first cohorts to withdraw as a result of COVID-19, and one of the most difficult to re-engage:

> Our vulnerable Aboriginal students were impacted probably more than anybody else. We were really cognisant of … their vulnerability. But if we brought them into a campus, even when we could — what was the risk to their community and family that they were taking back? So, we had particular considerations around those vulnerable groups. (Regional General Manager, TAFE institute)

The total VET activity data support this observation, indicating a 2.3-percentage-point increase in the Indigenous student subject withdrawal rate from 2019 to 2020, compared with a 1.6-percentage-point increase in the overall subject withdrawal rate (table 1).

Culturally and linguistically diverse students

During the interviews many of the training providers frequently mentioned culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) students as being one of the most impacted student cohorts during the pandemic, especially if they were also women. The training providers highlighted that CALD students tended to experience high levels of fear about the pandemic and often struggled to understand the public health messaging. They also reported that this cohort often had additional or more complex caring responsibilities by contrast with other students, for example, living in households with more than one generation or family. Thus, the concerns about protecting vulnerable people or other members of the family were multi-layered.

The training providers we interviewed who had high numbers of CALD students also stated that many of these students were experiencing precarious living conditions before the pandemic, which were exacerbated by COVID-19. For example, pre-pandemic they might have been dealing with the uncertainty of temporary visas, struggling to get employment, and/or experiencing other stressors related to settling

in a foreign environment. The general uncertainty engendered by the pandemic at a nationwide level may have left these students feeling additionally vulnerable about their socioeconomic security. Many also had concerns about returning to their home countries once borders reopened to visit sick family members or honour those who had passed away. Those training providers with high levels of CALD students who participated in the interviews reported that this led many to withdraw from study to avoid becoming sick themselves, or replacing their studies with employment to enable them to save for international flights in the future.

Many CALD students are enrolled in adult and community education or other community education courses to help with their English skills or other foundational skills. As emphasised by the consultation with Community Colleges Australia, these students are often less concerned with employment outcomes and more concerned with social connection or wellbeing outcomes. The interruptions to study caused by the pandemic thus meant many of these students became further disconnected and, according to many providers we interviewed, have really been struggling to reconnect, even well into 2022.

Despite reports of these challenges, the enrolment data for this cohort tell a fairly positive story, with only a 1.6% decrease in LOTE program enrolments from 2019 to 2020, compared to a 3% decrease in total program enrolments. This cohort was one of the few equity groups to experience an increase in program enrolments from 2019 to 2021 (increased by 0.4%) (table 10).

While withdrawal rates weren't particularly high for this group, they were the only disadvantaged cohort to experience a year-on-year increase. From 2019 to 2020 the withdrawal rate increased by 0.6 percentage points, further increasing by 0.4 percentage points from 2020 to 2021 (table 1).

Low socioeconomic students

Students with a low socioeconomic status[4] were impacted across a range of markers. Training providers who participated in the interviews reported that these students tended to have limited access to the digital technology required to study and had a harder time getting to classes or to assigned digital hubs due to the cost of travel. The training providers also noted that many of their low-SES students experienced employment loss in their households and needed to take on additional employment to account for this. Some students chose additional employment over study due to concerns that their overall employment status was insecure; they thus sought to earn as much money as they could for future income protection. A resounding issue amongst all providers, especially community education providers, was the slow return of these students to VET. Many providers interviewed reported that students from disadvantaged groups did not return to study until well into 2022, and even then, it was a slow return:

> 80% of our students are disadvantaged and many of them youth at risk … And they were the first ones to disengage, and they've been the last ones to re-engage. In fact, they still haven't fully re-engaged. So, it's dragging on and you can only do so many backflips and somersaults trying to reinvent things, but we still, as a society, haven't reengaged these people. (CEO, community education provider)

The total VET activity data show the significant impact of the pandemic on program enrolments among this cohort, with a notable decrease in program enrolments from 2019 to 2020 (decreased by 6.7%). From 2019 to 2021 program enrolments for this cohort decreased by 3.2%, compared to a 2% increase in program enrolments overall (table 10).

4 That is, those characterised as 'most disadvantaged' according to the ABS Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas classification.

Students living in regional and remote areas

Students in regional or remote locations experienced mixed impacts due to the pandemic. In one sense, their geographical distance from high infection areas meant that students from these cohorts were shielded from the impacts of the pandemic. This was particularly true for regional and remote students in Western Australia, Tasmania and the Northern Territory. Consequently, the interviewed training providers who operate in these areas noted the delay in the impact of COVID-19, and many explained that, even when it did arrive, the level of transmission was well contained and managed. Further, because of the interconnectedness of these communities, the training relationships tended to be more direct and personal, meaning that providers, employers and students could collaborate to problem-solve issues such as workplace disruptions. Thus, some regional and remote students were able to continue studying with little to no interruption. These reports came from jurisdictions in Western Australia and Tasmania, where COVID-19 cases were comparatively low. While regional/remote program enrolments declined overall from 2019 to 2021 by 1.4%, they increased in regional/remote Western Australia (increased by 1.4%) Tasmania (increased by 13.6%) and the Northern Territory (increased by 1.8%) (table 11).

Table 11 Regional/remote program enrolments by state/territory of student residence, 2019–21

State/territory of student residence	Program enrolments ('000)			% change		
	2019	2020	2021	2019–20	2020–21	2019–21
New South Wales	210.3	198.2	203.8	-5.8	2.8	-3.1
Victoria	172.3	156.7	168.1	-9.1	7.3	-2.5
Queensland	264.4	261.5	259.5	-1.1	-0.8	-1.9
South Australia	38.4	35.6	35.9	-7.4	0.9	-6.5
Western Australia	57.3	55.4	58.0	-3.2	4.8	1.4
Tasmania	42.5	37.9	48.3	-11.0	27.7	13.6
Northern Territory	25.1	23.8	25.5	-5.2	7.4	1.8
Australian Capital Territory	0.1	0.1	0.1	-1.9	-25.7	-27.2
Total regional/remote enrolments	**810.4**	**769.1**	**799.3**	**-5.1**	**3.9**	**-1.4**

Note: The figures in the table above show enrolments for inner and outer regional, and remote and very remote locations.
Source: NCVER Total VET Students and Courses, 2019−21.

Students in remote or regional areas in the eastern states, however, had a starkly different experience, being impacted by higher levels of community infections and the government responses to this. As noted earlier, students in Queensland, New South Wales and some parts of Victoria had recently lived through or were still living with droughts, bushfires, mice plagues and floods. Providers from these areas who were interviewed reported that these crises had already made it difficult for their students to continue with their training, an issue supported by studies exploring the impact of these events on communities, including students (Cahill et al. 2020; Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation 2020; Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements 2020). The arrival of COVID-19 added an additional layer of difficulty. Program enrolments declined across the eastern seaboard and in South Australia from 2019 to 2021 (table 11).

Where regional/remote students would previously travel to campus for face-to-face components, they were unable to do so, and they could not always rely on the available digital technology to attend classes via live streaming. The disparity in digital access between metropolitan and regional/remote areas has long presented a problem for business and education, further highlighted by the pandemic. The Productivity Commission's *Interim report* (2022) flagged insufficient internet access and speeds, as well as gaps in broadband and mobile connectivity infrastructure in regional/remote areas, as a point of

concern for future national productivity, an issue confirmed by some of the training providers who were servicing regional/remote students; they commented that many students only had their phones, which were mostly unsuitable for using learning management systems and similar online platforms.

Furthermore, many of the community networks that usually operated in regional/remote areas were disrupted (especially during lockdown periods and/or in eastern states), causing additional access challenges to students in these areas. For example, one training provider in regional New South Wales indicated that, pre-COVID-19, people who were unable to drive often travelled to classes with other community members. However, during peak periods of the pandemic, those drivers became occupied with caring, other types of work or commitments, or simply wanted to socially distance, meaning students who were unable to drive stopped going to class.

These access issues were repeated for MWPs, which were also more difficult to attend and complete. Providers in regional/remote areas that suffered substantial disruption observed that only those students who were 'really committed' tended to continue with their training, with many others feeling it was simply too difficult.

International students

The number of international fee-for-service VET students declined by 2720 students (or 1.2%) between 2019 and 2020 and by 9580 students (4.3%) between 2020 and 2021 (figure 1).

One private training provider offering online courses in digital literacy and finance described experiencing increases in international students throughout the pandemic, especially from Asian countries. However, this was unusual as most other training providers servicing international students — notably TAFE institutes — suffered severe declines in enrolments as they were unable to deliver training either online or offshore:

> It's no surprise. Obviously, the international student numbers onshore and offshore tanked. So that was probably the other thing in terms of the hit we took financially and also … then supporting students on shore with their limited ability to access Australian services and that sort of stuff.
>
> (General Manager, TAFE institute)

Another TAFE institute that participated in the interviews noted that offshore delivery, whereby trainers would travel overseas to deliver the training, had been heavily impacted and at time of interviewing had yet to restart. They felt it could take years to return to pre-COVID-19 levels of confidence and, as such, Australia's ability to export VET expertise had been compromised significantly. This concern was reflected in interviews with peak body representatives, in particular the Independent Tertiary Education Council Australia and TAFE Directors Australia.

One of the TAFE institutes emphasised the importance of government intervention in increasing the allowable working hours for international students:[5]

> The other [initiative] that was really, really good for international students and I'd like to see it go forward, was the ability for them to work more than 20 hours a week, because I think we have this concept that we have a lot of rich international students that can just sort of wander around, do a bit of training] and not support themselves, when really they need to be basically working full time and

5 The federal government relaxed working restrictions for student visa holders in January 2022, to help with workforce shortages, however, at the time of writing (early 2023) it proposed a return to a maximum of 20 hours work a week, beginning 1 July 2023. More information available here.

> doing this study because it's expensive to live in Australia … So, that was a good policy initiative and that should be brought forward and continue, I would hope.

Student outcomes

Student outcomes have been significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, with students unable to complete their training due to many of the issues highlighted earlier, including postponement of MWP, periods of lockdown and illness, and apprentice and trainee contract suspensions. Despite this, most students were satisfied with their training, with satisfaction measures increasing from 2019 to 2021.

The delay in training did have an impact on employment outcomes, with a significant decline in the proportion of qualification completers employed or in further study or with improved employment status from 2019 to 2020. However, the impact appears to have been short-lived, with outcomes returning to near pre-pandemic levels in 2021.

These key findings from the data analysis and interviews with training providers are discussed here in detail.

Completions

Almost all training providers interviewed reported that they had experienced declines in student completions. Many providers claimed that students found it 'too difficult' to continue studying. In earlier sections of this report, we highlighted the range of challenges COVID-19 presented for VET students attempting to continue and complete their training. According to some of the training providers we interviewed, in the face of financial stress, new caring commitments, difficulties accessing online course work or an inability to complete mandatory work placements — to name a few — many students simply gave up and decided to enter alternative employment instead.

The CEO of one NSW private training provider explained the impact on their completions:

> So generally [now], it's about 85 to 90% success rate, not only completion also people getting the job … But during that time [early stages of COVID] we really suffered because then we can't go for the work placement … and that severely impacted our learner progression and learner completion.

Some cases during the pandemic had the reverse effect on what had been anticipated for student outcomes. As previously outlined, some of the interviewed providers explained that the pandemic enabled students to complete at higher levels and at faster rates.

The positive level of completions seen for some jurisdictions in spite of the challenges described earlier may be related to the new courses, those designed for emerging needs in response to COVID-19 and delivered to new markets under new funding arrangements, for example, COVID Safe micro-credentials for workers in businesses required to have COVID Safe plans, micro-credentials for new skills, skill enhancement or renewal, and targeted industry recognised skills sets.

Analysis of completions and non-completions

To illustrate the impact of the pandemic on training completions and non-completions, this section provides an analysis of the subject results recorded during the pandemic period. The data presented below reflect many of the observations reported by training providers.

From 2019 to 2020, there was:

- a decline in the proportion of subjects passed, with 64% of subjects reported as 'competency achieved/passed' in 2020 compared with 69% in 2019
- an increase in the proportion of continuing subjects, with 21.4% of subjects reported as 'continuing activity' in 2020 compared with 18.0% in 2019
- an increase in the proportion of subject withdrawals, with 7.7% of subjects reported as 'withdrawn/discontinued' compared with 6.7% in 2019 (table 12).

These data are consistent with the experiences reported by many training providers, whereby some students stayed enrolled in training while facing delays in completing the MWP requirements of their studies, while other students withdrew altogether due to the range of challenges presented by the pandemic.

Between 2020 and 2021, the proportion of continuing subjects declined 2.1 percentage points (to 19.3%) as lockdowns lifted and students were able to complete the necessary components of their studies. Over the same period, the proportion of subjects passed increased 2.3 percentage points (to 66.3%) and the proportion of withdrawn subjects increased 0.2 percentage points (to 7.9%).

It is important to note that a clearer understanding of the pandemic's impact on subject pass rates will not be known until outcomes for 2021 continuing subjects are finalised.

Table 12 Overall subject results, 2019–21

	Subject enrolments ('000)			% change			Proportion of all enrolments (%)		
Subject result	2019	2020	2021	2019–20	2020–21	2019–21	2019	2020	2021
Competency achieved/pass	18 967.0	16 882.5	19 099.0	-11.0	13.1	0.7	69.0	64.0	66.3
Competency not achieved/fail	800.7	835.4	888.4	4.3	6.3	11.0	2.9	3.2	3.1
Continuing activity	4 948.6	5 634.9	5 543.1	13.9	-1.6	12.0	18.0	21.4	19.3
RPL granted	909.2	982.5	971.5	8.1	-1.1	6.8	3.3	3.7	3.4
RPL not granted	5.4	4.1	4.0	-24.1	-3.1	-26.4	0.0	0.0	0.0
Withdrawn/Discontinued	1 837.2	2 021.0	2 281.9	10.0	12.9	24.2	6.7	7.7	7.9
Incomplete due to RTO closure	11.3	4.2	0.3	-62.5	-93.6	-97.6	0.0	0.0	0.0
Total	**27 479.4**	**26 364.7**	**28 788.2**	**-4.1**	**9.2**	**4.8**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**

Note: Excludes where outcome identifier – national is '81 – Non-assessable activity – satisfactorily completed'; '82 – Non-assessable activity – withdrawn or not satisfactorily completed'; '60 – Credit transfer/national recognition'; or '61 – superseded subject.

Includes where outcome identifier – national is '41 – Incomplete due to RTO closure'.

Includes where outcome identifier – national is '51 – Recognition of prior learning granted', or '52 – Recognition of prior learning not granted'.

Source: NCVER Total VET Students and Courses, 2019−21.

The impact of online delivery on subject withdrawal rates during the pandemic is reflected in table 13.

The withdrawal rate for subjects delivered solely online (external only) is historically double that of internal only (for example, classroom-based) and the combination of online and internal delivery.

From 2019 to 2020 the subject withdrawal rate increased more for online-only delivery (4.2 percentage points) than for internal only (0.3 percentage points) and the combination of online and internal delivery (0.7 percentage points). This increase likely reflects some of the obstacles faced by students in transitioning to online delivery and the corresponding lower subject pass rate for online-only delivery.

Table 13 Subject result rate by delivery mode, 2019–21 (%)

Delivery mode	Subject result rates			Percentage point difference		
	2019	2020	2021	2019–20	2020–21	2019–21
			Withdrawal rate			
External only	17.3	21.5	20.7	4.2	-0.8	3.4
Internal only	7.0	7.3	7.3	0.3	0.0	0.3
Combination of external and internal delivery	5.6	6.3	6.8	0.7	0.5	1.2
Overall subject withdrawal rate	**8.2**	**9.8**	**9.8**	**1.6**	**0.1**	**1.7**
			Pass rate			
External only	81.0	77.0	77.5	-4.1	0.5	-3.5
Internal only	88.1	86.6	86.8	-1.5	0.2	-1.3
Combination of external and internal delivery	92.0	91.7	91.2	-0.3	-0.5	-0.7
Overall subject pass rate	**84.2**	**81.5**	**82.2**	**-2.8**	**0.7**	**-2.1**

Note: Rates are calculated by dividing the subject result by the total number of subject enrolments.

The denominator (total subject enrolments) used to calculate the pass and withdrawal rates includes competency achieved/pass, competency not achieved/fail, RPL granted, RPL not granted, withdrawn/discontinued.

The denominator (total subject enrolments) used to calculate the continuing rates includes competency achieved/pass, competency not achieved/fail, RPL granted, RPL not granted, withdrawn/discontinued and continuing activity.

Excludes where outcome identifier – national is '81 – Non-assessable activity – satisfactorily completed'; '82 – Non-assessable activity – withdrawn or not satisfactorily completed'; '60 – Credit transfer/national recognition'; or '61 – superseded subject, incomplete due to RTO closure'.

Source: NCVER Total VET Students and Courses, 2019−21.

Some student cohorts and training packages experienced greater year-on-year shifts within subject results. Tables 14 and 15 present subject result rates for various equity groups and the top 10 training packages (as at 2019).

From 2019 to 2020, there was an increase in continuing activity for all equity groups, presented in table 14. There were notable increases in the continuing subject rate for students with a disability (3.9 percentage points) and for those who speak a language other than English at home (3.6 percentage points).

From 2020 to 2021, there was a further increase in the continuing subject rate for LOTE students. This sustained increase can be explained in part by the high proportion of international students in this cohort (around one in four students), who were unable to undertake or complete their training during the pandemic due to international border restrictions.

While the continuing subject rate increased for all top 10 training packages from 2019 to 2020, the increase was larger for Community Services (up 7.9 percentage points); Construction, Plumbing & Services Integrated Framework (up 4 percentage points); Health (up 7 percentage points); Automotive Industry Retail, Service and Repair (up 3.6 percentage points); and Training and Education (up 7.2 percentage points).

While the overall continuing subject rate decreased between 2020 and 2021 (by 2.1 percentage points), it increased for subjects in the Training and Education training package (by a further 1.2 percentage points).

Table 14 Continuing subject rate by equity groups and top 10 training packages, 2019–21 (%)

	Continuing subject rate			Percentage point difference		
	2019	2020	2021	2019–20	2020–21	2019–21
Equity group						
Indigenous	24.8	28.1	25.1	3.3	-3.1	0.2
With a disability	20.0	23.9	21.2	3.9	-2.7	1.2
Speak a language other than English spoken at home (LOTE)	17.9	21.5	22.2	3.6	0.7	4.3
SEIFA quintile 1 (most disadvantaged)	20.0	23.2	20.5	3.2	-2.7	0.5
Regional/remote student location	19.8	21.9	18.9	2.2	-3.1	-0.9
Top 10 training packages						
BSB – Business Services	20.2	21.0	20.1	0.8	-0.9	-0.1
CHC – Community Services	32.0	39.9	34.3	7.9	-5.6	2.3
SIT – Tourism, Travel and Hospitality	18.1	19.0	18.3	0.9	-0.7	0.2
CPC – Construction, Plumbing & Services Integrated Framework	22.6	26.6	23.6	4.0	-3.1	1.0
SIS – Sport, Fitness and Recreation	28.6	31.7	29.0	3.2	-2.7	0.4
HLT – Health	29.4	36.4	30.9	7.0	-5.5	1.5
TLI – Transport and Logistics	17.6	14.8	15.9	-2.8	1.1	-1.7
AUR – Automotive Industry Retail, Service and Repair	18.2	21.8	18.0	3.6	-3.8	-0.2
TAE – Training and Education	28.9	36.2	37.3	7.2	1.2	8.4
RII – Resources and Infrastructure	15.1	15.7	15.1	0.6	-0.5	0.1
Overall subject continuing rate	**18.0**	**21.4**	**19.3**	**3.4**	**-2.1**	**1.2**

Note: Rates are calculated by dividing the subject result by the total number of subject enrolments.

The denominator (total subject enrolments) used to calculate the continuing rate includes competency achieved/pass, competency not achieved/fail, RPL granted, RPL not granted, withdrawn/discontinued and continuing activity.

Excludes where outcome identifier – national is '81 – Non-assessable activity – satisfactorily completed'; '82 – Non-assessable activity – withdrawn or not satisfactorily completed'; '60 – Credit transfer/national recognition'; or '61 – superseded subject, incomplete due to RTO closure'.

Source: NCVER Total VET Students and Courses, 2019−21.

As table 15 indicates, from 2019 to 2020, there was an increase in the subject withdrawal rate for all equity groups. There were notable increases in the withdrawal subject rate for Indigenous students (up 2.3 percentage points), students with a disability (up 4.4 percentage points) and most disadvantaged students (up 2.1 percentage points).

During this same period, the subject withdrawal rate increased for all training packages (except for Construction, Plumbing & Services Integrated Framework), with notable increases in the subject withdrawal rate for Community Services (up 3.6 percentage points), and Training and Education (up 5.9 percentage points).

From 2020 to 2021, the overall subject withdrawal rate increased further, as did the subject withdrawal rate as across all training packages, except for Transport and Logistics.

Table 15 Subject withdrawal and pass rates by equity groups and top 10 training packages (as at 2019), 2019–21 (%)

	Subject result rate			Percentage point difference		
	2019	2020	2021	2019–20	2020–21	2019–21
			Withdrawal rate			
Equity group						
Indigenous	15.4	17.8	16.8	2.3	-0.9	1.4
With a disability	14.7	19.1	17.6	4.4	-1.6	2.9
Speak a language other than English spoken at home (LOTE)	9.0	9.5	10.0	0.6	0.4	1.0
SEIFA quintile 1 (most disadvantaged)	10.9	13.0	12.2	2.1	-0.8	1.3
Regional/remote student location	9.0	10.6	10.2	1.7	-0.4	1.2
Top 10 training packages						
BSB – Business Services	9.9	10.1	12.0	0.3	1.8	2.1
CHC – Community Services	16.3	19.9	19.6	3.6	-0.3	3.3
SIT – Tourism, Travel and Hospitality	7.0	7.7	7.2	0.6	-0.5	0.1
CPC – Construction, Plumbing & Services Integrated Framework	7.5	6.6	7.8	-0.9	1.2	0.3
SIS – Sport, Fitness and Recreation	11.4	12.0	14.0	0.6	2.0	2.6
HLT – Health	12.3	13.3	15.9	1.0	2.6	3.6
TLI – Transport and Logistics	9.7	11.4	9.1	1.7	-2.3	-0.6
AUR – Automotive Industry Retail, Service and Repair	3.6	4.7	5.8	1.1	1.1	2.2
TAE – Training and Education	9.8	15.8	18.1	5.9	2.3	8.2
RII – Resources and Infrastructure	4.7	5.1	6.4	0.4	1.3	1.7
Overall subject withdrawal rate	**8.2**	**9.8**	**9.8**	**1.6**	**0.1**	**1.7**
			Pass rate			
Equity group						
Indigenous	79.0	76.8	78.3	-2.2	1.5	-0.7
With a disability	80.2	76.5	78.2	-3.7	1.8	-2.0
Speak a language other than English spoken at home (LOTE)	80.1	77.0	78.1	-3.1	1.2	-1.9
SEIFA quintile 1 (most disadvantaged)	82.3	79.4	80.5	-2.9	1.2	-1.8
Regional/remote student location	84.6	82.6	83.6	-2.1	1.0	-1.1
BSB – Business Services	77.8	75.4	74.6	-2.4	-0.8	-3.2
CHC – Community Services	77.0	71.2	71.4	-5.8	0.2	-5.6
SIT – Tourism, Travel and Hospitality	79.7	73.6	76.2	-6.2	2.6	-3.6
CPC – Construction, Plumbing & Services Integrated Framework	79.5	75.8	75.7	-3.7	-0.1	-3.8
SIS – Sport, Fitness and Recreation	81.8	81.6	77.9	-0.3	-3.7	-3.9
HLT – Health	83.1	80.9	80.4	-2.2	-0.5	-2.7
TLI – Transport and Logistics	84.1	80.3	85.3	-3.9	5.0	1.1
AUR – Automotive Industry Retail, Service and Repair	76.3	77.2	78.5	0.8	1.3	2.2
TAE – Training and Education	78.1	75.5	74.5	-2.6	-1.0	-3.6
RII – Resources and Infrastructure	82.0	83.2	81.3	1.2	-1.9	-0.7
Overall subject pass rate	**84.2**	**81.5**	**82.2**	**-2.8**	**0.7**	**-2.1**

Note: Rates are calculated by dividing the subject result by the total number of subject enrolments.

The denominator (total subject enrolments) used to calculate the withdrawal and pass rates includes competency achieved/pass, competency not achieved/fail, RPL granted, RPL not granted, withdrawn/discontinued.

Excludes where outcome identifier – national is '81 – Non-assessable activity – satisfactorily completed'; '82 – Non-assessable activity – withdrawn or not satisfactorily completed'; '60 – Credit transfer/national recognition'; or '61 – superseded subject, incomplete due to RTO closure'.

Source: NCVER Total VET Students and Courses, 2019−21.

According to several of the training providers interviewed, programs in care and health suffered the most severe level of non-completions. From 2019 to 2020 subject pass rates in the Community Services training package decreased by 5.8 percentage points and in Health by 2.2 percentage points (table 15). A mix of

factors may have contributed to this outcome. First, given that these were considered high-risk settings, there was greater concern for students' health: some students were simply afraid to undertake their placements because they did not want to become sick, or to potentially make others sick. Some providers interviewed also commented that employers were concerned about students bringing the virus into their facilities. Thus, the wait times to access workplaces to carry out assessments were, according to these providers, even longer for these programs than others with disrupted MWP arrangements. Some providers interviewed suggested that the lack of coherence and planning associated with vaccination mandates and policies in these settings further complicated MWPs and added another deterrent for students completing. The initial vaccine rollout focused on the elderly and vulnerable but not the student workers who would be caring for the elderly and vulnerable:[6]

> So those public health orders [for vaccination] would come in and then our students would need to catch up with the vaccination because although, you know, generally the whole population was getting vaccinated, we didn't always have our students in with the right vaccination requirements at the time that their work placements started. So, they couldn't do their work placement and we had to swap them out. So that was a compounding of that sort of [MWP] problem.
> (Head of Education and Training Strategy and Disability Teacher Consultant, TAFE institute provider)

Where students did stay enrolled, they often experienced significant delays in completion. These delays were one of the most frequently cited concerns by the providers interviewed, and at the time of interviews many students were still catching up or just beginning to recover lost ground:

> We have suffered at times from some class cancellations and definitely some slowdown in progression of completion of qualifications and skill sets. You know, with delays to classes or reducing classes or having to finish up at a later date or to catch up people or to do work placements or [placements being] cancelled … So, you know, between industry's capacity to support us in all of the … on-the-job [component] and our capacity to support the off-the-job [component] probably we've continued to operate. But … there's been an impact on the speed and efficiency with which we would get through our workload. (Managing Director, TAFE institute)

Some training providers reported that delays in completion were even more pronounced in 2022 due to the impact of newer, more infectious, COVID-19 variants, leading to higher levels of infection in staff, students, and community and causing frequent disturbances to MWP arrangements.

Many providers interviewed noted that there was also a high level of non-attendance, sometimes, simply because students were sick themselves or were close contacts and needed to isolate. However, some providers suggested that many students started courses (particularly during the early stages of the pandemic) based on incentives rather than genuine interest, so a lot of new students were not motivated to complete.

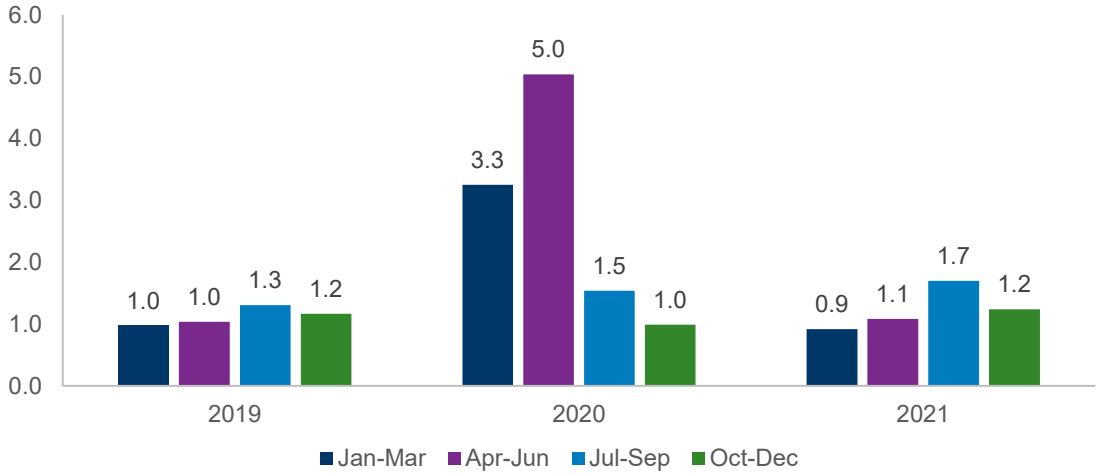
Government enterprise training providers reported that their students also experienced delays in completing their training. However, because many of these types of providers delivered training to students in their own workplaces, barracks, or academies, they were generally better equipped with on-site facilities to continue training. Further, the students of these government enterprise training providers were already embedded in the workplace through their employment, meaning that, as most of

6 Australia's COVID-19 vaccine rollout was launched on 22 February 2021 with individuals in Phase 1a being the first to receive the vaccine. This group, deemed priority given their higher risk rate, included quarantine, border and frontline healthcare workers and aged care and disability care residents and staff; note, however, that students were not included in this first phase. The full vaccination policy is available here.

the providers acknowledged in the interviews, any setbacks could readily be addressed in due course. It could also be deduced that, as a consequence of the rapid responses and additional measures they enacted to manage the virus, delays were prevented or at least minimised for government enterprise providers; for example, by using their own QR code contact tracing systems, as noted earlier. Several of these types of training providers also mentioned that they felt relatively comfortable rolling out a COVID-19 pandemic response plan because their core operations were already focused on risk management, that is, as police or fire services.

The level of apprenticeship and traineeship suspensions reflects some of the challenges students faced in completing their training. The number of suspended contracts increased in the first three quarters of 2020, followed by some relief in late-2020/early-2021. However, contract cancellations/withdrawals increased to above pre-pandemic levels throughout 2021, possibly a result of students with suspended contracts in 2020 finding alternative employment, enrolling in other further education, or taking up contracts of training with new employers in 2021 (figure 3).

Figure 3 Quarterly apprentice and trainee contract suspensions, 2019–21 ('000)



Note: The data presented are point-in-time counts of events, as reported to the National Apprentice and Trainee Collection. They are intended to provide an indication of the trends in training activity in 2020 and 2021, by comparison with 2019, and may not represent the final number of contracts events that occurred in each time period. Due to differences in reporting, the suspension counts for New South Wales that contribute to the figure above are based on earlier collections.

Source: National Apprentice and Trainee Collection nos 100, 104 and 108 (June 2019, 2020 and 2021 actuals for March quarter); nos 101,105 and 109 (September 2019, 2020 and 2021 actuals for June quarter); nos 102, 106 and 110 (December 2019, 2020 and 2021 actuals for September quarter); and nos 103,107 and 111 (March 2019, 2020 and 2021 actuals for December quarter).

Table 16 shows quarterly suspensions by each state and territory from 2019 to 2021. On average, suspensions tripled in the first quarter of 2020 compared with 2019. By mid-2020, most states and territories had reached the highest level of contract suspensions during the pandemic. Queensland had the highest level of suspensions (1800), followed by New South Wales (1000) and Western Australia (800). In the third quarter of 2020 suspensions began to stabilise to pre-COVID-19 levels for most states and territories, before declining further in the last quarter of 2020 in line with an increase in contract commencements with the introduction of the National Boosting Apprenticeship Commencements wage subsidy program. By the second quarter of 2021, suspensions had returned to pre-pandemic levels for most states and territories.

Table 16 Quarterly apprentice and trainee contract suspensions by state/territory administering the contract, 2019–21 ('000)

	Contract suspensions											
	January–March			April–June			July–September			October–December		
	2019	*2020*	*2021*	*2019*	*2020*	*2021*	*2019*	*2020*	*2021*	*2019*	*2020*	*2021*
New South Wales	0.2	0.4	0.2	0.2	1.0	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.6	0.2	0.2	0.2
Victoria	0.2	0.7	0.1	0.2	0.5	0.1	0.2	0.4	0.2	0.2	0.1	0.2
Queensland	0.1	0.3	0.2	0.2	1.8	0.2	0.2	0.4	0.3	0.2	0.2	0.3
South Australia	0.2	0.7	0.2	0.2	0.6	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.1
Western Australia	0.2	0.9	0.3	0.3	0.8	0.3	0.4	0.2	0.3	0.3	0.2	0.3
Tasmania	0.0	0.1	0.1	0.0	0.1	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.1
Northern Territory	0.0	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Australian Capital Territory	0.0	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Total	**1.0**	**3.3**	**0.9**	**1.0**	**5.0**	**1.1**	**1.3**	**1.5**	**1.7**	**1.2**	**1.0**	**1.2**

Note: The data presented are point-in-time counts of events, as reported to the National Apprentice and Trainee Collection. They are intended to provide an indication of the trends in training activity in 2020 and 2021, by comparison with 2019, and may not represent the final number of contracts events that occurred in each time period. Due to differences in reporting, the suspension counts for New South Wales that contribute to the table above are based on earlier collections.

Source: National Apprentice and Trainee Collection nos 100, 104 and 108 (June 2019, 2020 and 2021 actuals for March quarter); nos 101,105 and 109 (September 2019, 2020 and 2021 actuals for June quarter); nos 102, 106 and 110 (December 2019, 2020 and 2021 actuals for September quarter); and nos 103,107 and 111 (March 2019, 2020 and 2021 actuals for December quarter).

Satisfaction with training

The training providers interviewed reported that maintaining student engagement and satisfaction was incredibly challenging. As discussed above under the 'Impacts to provider' section, various strategies were introduced by providers to support students whose study experiences had been forced to change dramatically. These strategies appear to have been largely effective, with training providers also indicating that student satisfaction remained relatively high despite the disruption caused to VET by the pandemic. Most of the training providers interviewed reported that students were frequently disappointed, frustrated and stressed by the shifting circumstances, but overall were understanding and accommodating of the situation. Several providers explicitly noted that student evaluations of their training were not substantially different from pre-pandemic assessments.

The quantitative data available support the observation that students remained mostly satisfied with their training. Data from the National Student Outcomes Survey[7] shows a significant increase in six of the seven key satisfaction measures for domestic qualification completers from 2019 to 2021 (table 17).

7 <https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/collections/student-outcomes>.

Table 17 Key satisfaction measures for domestic qualification completers aged 18 and over, 2019–21 (%)

Satisfaction outcomes	Proportion			Percentage-point difference		
	2019	2020	2021	2019–20	2020–21	2019–21
Achieved main reason for training	83.9	83.9	85.5	0.0	1.6	1.6
Satisfied with the training overall	88.1	87.9	88.8	-0.2	0.9	0.7
Developed problem-solving skills	77.9	78.6	78.6	0.7	0.0	0.7
Satisfaction with assessment	89.2	88.9	89.3	-0.3	0.4	0.1
Improved numerical skills	45.6	45.4	47.3	-0.2	1.9	1.7
Satisfaction with teaching	86.9	86.7	87.3	-0.2	0.6	0.4
Improved writing skills	52.6	52.3	53.6	-0.3	1.3	1.0

Notes: Grey shading on numbers indicates statistically significant results.
Source: National Student Outcomes Survey, 2019, 2020, 2021.

A similar result was seen for international qualification completers, with a significant increase in most satisfaction measures from 2019 to 2021 (table 18).

Table 18 Key satisfaction outcomes for international qualification completers aged 18 and over, 2019–21 (%)

Satisfaction outcomes	Proportion			Percentage-point difference		
	2019	2020	2021	2019–20	2020–21	2019–21
Achieve main reason for training	88.8	87.7	88.9	-1.1	1.2	0.1
Satisfied with the training overall	84.4	83.7	85.4	-0.7	1.7	1.0
Developed problem-solving skills	81.8	83.4	84.1	1.6	0.7	2.3
Satisfaction with assessment	83.7	83.1	85.2	-0.6	2.1	1.5
Improved numerical skills	65.4	64.8	67.2	-0.6	2.4	1.8
Satisfaction with teaching	82.3	81.2	82.6	-1.1	1.4	0.3
Improved writing skills	76.5	76.2	77.0	-0.3	0.8	0.5

Notes: Grey shading on numbers indicates statistically significant results.
Source: National Student Outcomes Survey, 2019, 2020, 2021.

The student response to changes in delivery mode were varied, although mostly positive. Almost all of the training providers interviewed said that the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic provided the impetus to move to blended modes of delivery, with some being forced to offer online-only delivery for certain periods of time, such as during lockdowns. VET delivered through blended delivery experienced sustained growth during the pandemic. Hume and Griffin (2021) showed that the number of subjects delivered online increased by around 24% from 2019 to 2021.

Despite a mostly positive response to delivery changes, the training providers interviewed noted frustrations, especially for students undertaking training with an MWP requirement. Some providers reported students experiencing disappointment or even anger in response to their being unable to complete due to outstanding MWP requirements:

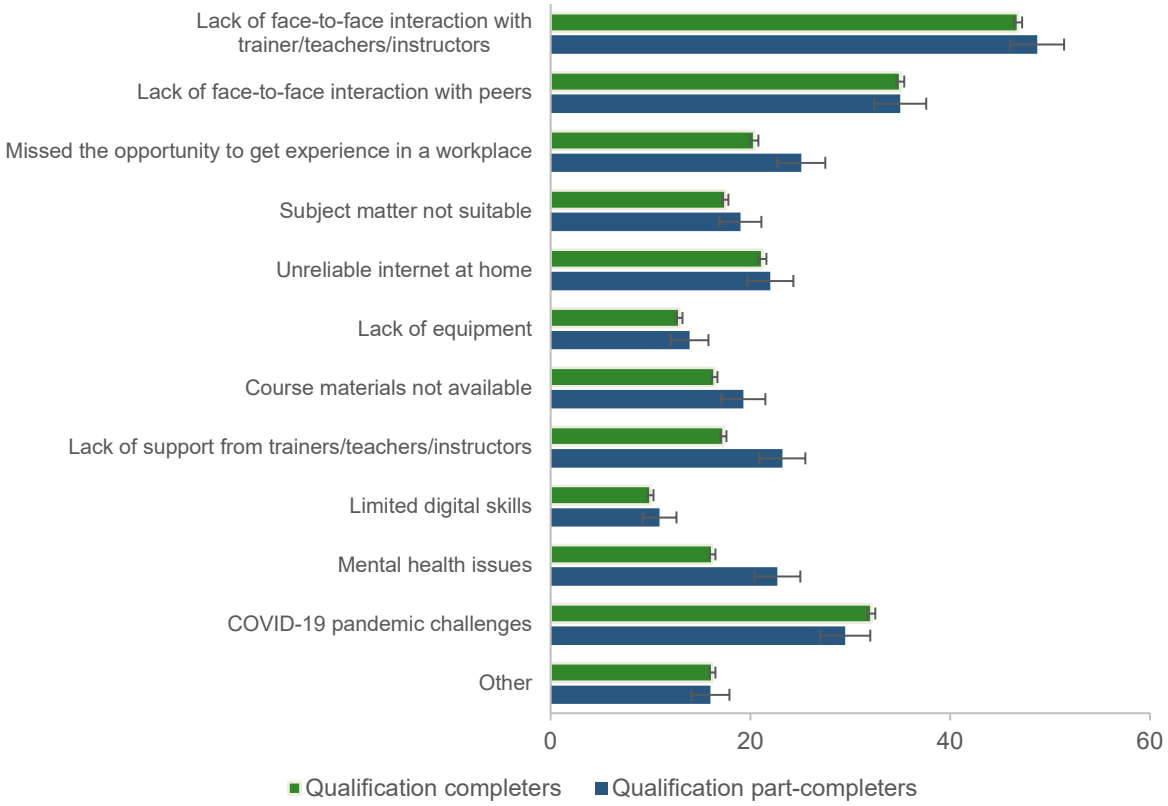
> Some [students] are okay, some of them are desperate and they are struggling, you know? Maybe a husband or wife lost her job, and this is the way they want to get the job and it's like we are blocking them. And you know, [saying]: 'you gotta give the certificate! I finished all these 17 units or 14 units', or something. 'Why are you not giving me the certificate? I can come and do the work placement. I can go into the job. Why don't you treat it as a work placement? (CEO, private training provider)

Others found it difficult to study online, and struggled with digital literacy, which compounded their feelings of anxiety and led to disengagement in many cases.

Several of these sentiments are reflected in figure 4. Of qualification completers and part-completers who undertook learning online and faced challenges with it, the most-cited challenges were lack of interaction with both trainers and peers. Other challenges related to the inability to complete workplace

requirements, the unsuitability of the online environment and equipment available for learning, and limited digital literacy.

Figure 4 Challenges with online learning faced by domestic qualification completers and part-completers, 2022 (%)



Note: Totals sum to more than 100% as respondents could choose more than one response category.
Source: NCVER, VET student outcomes 2022.

One of the clear positives of the move to online delivery modes was the wider access it allowed, with many different kinds of students able to access and experience study. In some instances, students' satisfaction with the new mixed mode of delivery was so great that, as reported by providers, the students were reluctant to return to face-to-face delivery or avoided it altogether:

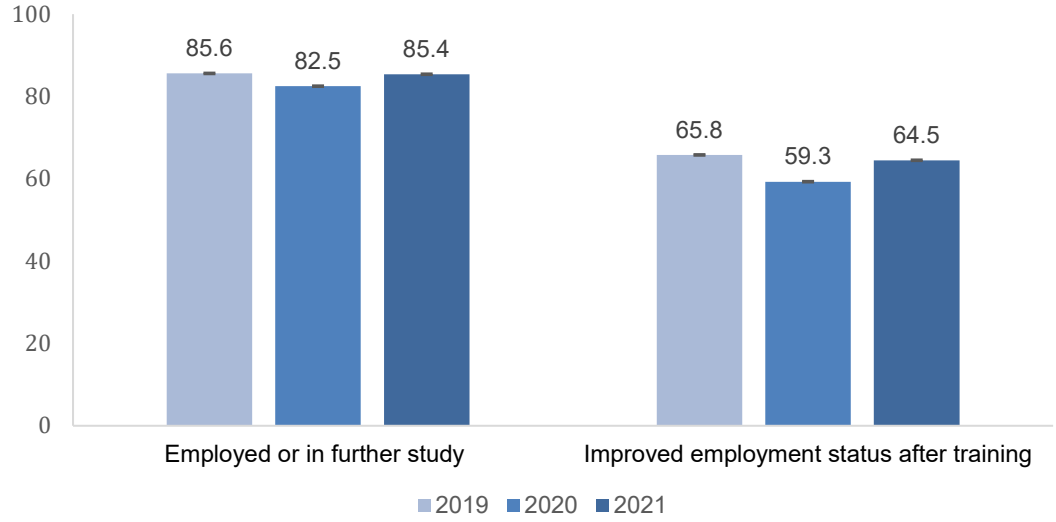
> The students, particularly, our international students, found that the ability to stop a recording and then look up something so that they're not getting behind and then go back to that again and go at their own pace was very useful in terms of their skill building and particularly those who are not available for the class time, but want to still do the class. They're finding that if they do that in the evening when it's quiet and in their time, they're quite enjoying studying that way. So, there's some big positives there for some areas that are delivering in that space.
>
> (Executive Director: Training Organisation & Business Improvement, TAFE institute)

The positive experience and satisfaction with online learning is reflected in data from the 2022 Student Outcomes Survey, with 83.9% of qualification completers who undertook learning online satisfied with the support received from teachers/trainers during online learning and 83.1% satisfied with the overall quality of their online experience. Qualification part-completers also reported a positive experience, with 74.6% of those undertaking learning online satisfied with the support received from teachers/trainers during online learning, and 72.4% satisfied with the overall quality of their online experience.

Employment after training

From 2019 to 2020, there was a statistically significant decline in the proportion of qualification completers employed or in further study after training (figure 5). The proportion of qualification completers with an improved employment status after training in 2020 was also significantly lower than in 2019. However, following the patterns of other indicators, the proportion of qualification completers employed or in further study after training increased significantly to near pre-pandemic levels from 2020 to 2021, as did the proportion of qualification completers with an improved employment status after training.

Figure 5 Key employment outcomes for domestic qualification completers aged 18 and over, 2019–21 (%)



Note: Qualification completers are students who completed a training package qualification or an accredited qualification.
Source: NCVER National Student Outcomes Survey, 2019–21.

Mental health and wellbeing

Mental health was an issue consistently flagged in the training provider interviews, although it did not appear to affect student enrolments. From 2019 to 2021, program enrolments for those with mental illness increased by 6.9% (table 10). Several providers interviewed reported that fear and uncertainty were widespread among student cohorts for the duration of the pandemic, although peaking at different times, depending on geographic location and level of infections. Providers explained that in the early phases of the pandemic students were afraid to attend the campus — even if not in lockdown or isolation — concerned they would become ill. This fear began to reduce as more knowledge about the virus became available and was communicated with the public.

The constant disruptions to everyday life and the rapidly changing context for education and business settings during the pandemic ultimately impacted on all students, although students from disadvantaged backgrounds or vulnerable groups were disproportionately affected. For example, providers spoke of international students experiencing significant isolation — away from their homes, families and communities — as well as being unable to consolidate new connections with students in Australia. One training provider noted that some CALD students reported gratitude and relief that training was still being delivered in a blended format, as this meant they could maintain much-needed connections with others.

While the fear has largely eased, uncertainty has been a constant for students throughout the pandemic; for example, public health management strategies have shifted in rapid and often confusing ways with the arrival of different variants and infection waves. Some training providers we interviewed noted that the 'chronic uncertainty' experienced by students is requiring a lot of work to undo, with some suggesting it has deterred students from committing to longer forms of training, or from engaging in study altogether.

The general sense of unease about the future appears to be widespread among students regardless of their jurisdiction, although the extent of the anxiety does appear to be affected by the context in which they are studying. As discussed previously, many students in New South Wales were managing the effects of other natural crises when the pandemic arrived. Students in Victoria, on the other hand, although not dealing with the after-effects of natural crises, were confronted by a high level of infections, with the consequent lockdown periods taking a toll on them in other ways. As noted earlier, similar high levels of anxiety and uncertainty were likely delayed for jurisdictions such as Western Australia and South Australia.

The training providers interviewed also described students suffering from a lack of connection with, and contextualisation of, their training. For example, many students did not receive the work placement experience that was part of certain courses, meaning that they were unable to contextualise their learning as effectively. They also missed out on the social and ceremonial aspects associated with studying, including class interactions and other events such as graduation ceremonies.

The government enterprise providers interviewed also highlighted how social isolation was felt acutely at times by their workers who were undertaking training. As these providers explained, workers often proceed through the entirety of their courses in assigned cohorts, thus building community and a sense of belonging. As a government enterprise provider in public transport services explained:

> That cohort would have a support network around them, and they would move through training programs together. As a result of the scenarios we went through … whereby you might have an individual have COVID that knocks the whole class out, or an individual sick and couldn't attend training … then trying to do all those catch ups, all this rescheduling, replanning and everything, all of the cohorts then start to get fragmented. So, the support network around the learners wasn't as good, so we had to introduce additional support to be able to assist students in moving through training programs. And, at times, the training programs were put on hold for six months, eight months, like, we just couldn't deliver completely.

In addition, the employees of some of these government enterprise providers, notably those in defence and police services, live onsite during their training — or large portions of it — to consolidate the cohort connection. During peak periods of the pandemic, the employees, although still onsite, were forced into isolation and social distancing. Social events were cancelled and communal areas closed, resulting in living onsite, away from family and friends, becoming even more challenging.

Given these impacts, it is perhaps not surprising that mental health issues have been or continue to be prevalent in VET students; it was an issue that consistently arose as a topic of concern in the qualitative interviews and substantiated in the recent LSAY data presented earlier in this report.

Lessons learned

Government response packages

The federal, state and territory governments introduced a suite of policies throughout the duration of the pandemic with implications for the VET sector. These are too numerous to list or describe in full, and a select list of the initiatives is provided in appendix A. Brief details about two particular Commonwealth initiatives, JobKeeper and JobTrainer, are provided below, as they represent the key support programs often referenced by the training providers participating in this research.

About JobKeeper and JobTrainer

JobKeeper

The JobKeeper package was a wage subsidy program provided for all eligible businesses and not-for-profits between March 2020 and March 2021. In the first phase of JobKeeper (30 March – 27 September 2020) eligible businesses and not-for-profits could receive $1500 (before tax) per fortnight per employee to cover the cost of wages. During the extension phase of JobKeeper (28 September 2020 – 28 March 2021), the eligibility requirements were tightened and the subsidies minimised: first (28 September 2020 – 3 January 2021) to $1200 per fortnight for employees who worked 20+ hours per week, and $750 for employees who worked fewer than 20 hours per week; and then (4 January 2021 – 28 March 2021) to $1000 per fortnight for employees who worked 20+ hours per week, and $650 for employees who worked fewer than 20 hours per week.

JobTrainer

The JobTrainer skills package announced on 16 July 2020 had two components:

- $1.5 billion to expand and extend the Supporting Apprentices and Trainees initiative

- $500 million investment in the JobTrainer Fund, with matched contributions from state and territory governments.

The JobTrainer Fund, jointly established by the Australian Government and states and territories through the Heads of Agreement for Skills Reform, was aimed at helping school leavers and job seekers gain new skills by retraining and upskilling them into sectors with job opportunities.

In the 2021–22 federal Budget, an additional $500 million was allocated to extend and expand the JobTrainer Fund until 31 December 2022, with matched contributions to be agreed with state and territory governments.

Further information on this package can be found in appendix A.

JobKeeper was most frequently mentioned in the interviews. Reviews of this funding support program were overwhelmingly positive: those who could claim it, did and described it as a necessity or even a 'lifeline'. Providers who used the package commented that it kept their businesses afloat and staff employed. Relief and gratitude were expressed about JobKeeper, with most saying it provided much-needed security in an otherwise turbulent time:

> I think if we hadn't had JobKeeper and those sorts of things that when we went into 2020 our consideration was that the RTO was going to go backwards by around quarter of $1,000,000.
>
> (Principal CEO, community education provider)

Most providers interviewed were happy with the nature of the package and its administration, and one emphasised the speed with which the response was received and the regularity of the income. A few providers felt the package and its administration could have been improved, with one finding the sign-up process to be arduous and having 'a long lag time'.

> We started the delivery, but it took — for one group of trainees … it took ages for it to get processed through the funding bodies. And it wasn't just weeks. It was sort of like months. So they … could have been two thirds of the way through or coming up to two thirds of the way through and we couldn't access funding for those because it hadn't been processed.
>
> (VET Manager, community education provider)

Another suggested its effectiveness would have been improved had it been dispersed through businesses rather individuals via Centrelink. Nonetheless, even those who did criticise the package were mostly satisfied, a point of view summarised by one provider, who described JobKeeper as needing some tweaks, but overall being, in their view, 80% effective and therefore a resounding success.

Many of the providers interviewed — TAFE institutes and government enterprise providers in particular — were unable to access JobKeeper due to their public status. Several private training providers explained that they were not always able to access JobKeeper and other support packages due to an increase in their revenue. However, some also noted that the revenue increases did not necessarily reflect their overall financial standing, nor the financial difficulties they were experiencing, especially as the pandemic progressed. For example, one training provider interviewed explained that they had a sudden influx of students in mid-late 2020 due to the skills incentives offered by the government, but many of these students did not attend or complete and therefore they received far less of the projected income.

The training providers drew on other funding response packages to support their individual circumstances wherever possible. For example, those who accessed JobKeeper also tended to access tax relief help, which further supported the sustainability of their business during the first year or two of the pandemic in particular. Many of the community education providers singled out the relief grant from the New South Wales Adult and Community Education program and found this additional support to be incredibly beneficial. They reported that, along with JobKeeper, this helped to keep administrative and training staff on payroll, and also allowed for new roles to be explored and established. For example, one community education provider was able to assign someone into a much-needed student engagement role, while another said it allowed their educators to develop online teaching materials for their courses. Even providers who said they were usually critical of public policy felt the overall support from the Commonwealth and the states and territories was helpful, targeted, and fair, with the CEO of one community education provider explaining:

> I'm very critical of state training. I'll tell you that now. But when it comes to pandemic, it's the first time … I just thought 'oh, my gosh, there are actually people who care'. I hadn't seen it beforehand … But, I cannot — I'll be honest with you — I cannot think of anything … I could have asked more of them. So, they really understood. You felt like you were really understood and the challenges you were facing that people really got it and policy adapted for it. (CEO, community education provider)

Several community education and private training providers mentioned they had received funding for personal protective and hygiene equipment. While delays were experienced with elements of this, it was overall well received and useful. Another commended Skills Canberra's automatic extension for all job training funds by six months, explaining that it had taken pressure off them and allowed them time to get students back into workplaces for observations and completion.

TAFE institutes tended to acknowledge the way in which broader state-based COVID-19 recovery packages fed positively into their own operations. One eastern-based TAFE institute transferred funds

freed up as a result of wage subsidy relief into delivery and commented that the packages also enabled agile responses to the pandemic, such as moving an employee into a dedicated COVID-19 response and support position. These interviewees also mentioned using other recovery programs for the creation of critical incident teams for the enterprise overall, as well as for campuses and cohorts in each region. This allowed them to roll out a consistent communications strategy, including specialised SMS messaging for staff and students; this strategy became incredibly important for students and staff living in locations straddling state borders, where they routinely dealt with two sets of regulations, or for those in remote areas. Other TAFE institutes mentioned COVID leave and noted that their operations were boosted by wider state or territory funding towards training or skills development; for example, the provision of fee-free or lower fee courses, allowing enrolments to grow:

> I think [the recovery packages] were very good and they clearly did, you know, they certainly contributed and significantly boosted enrolment numbers in the second half of 2020 through 2021 and enrolment numbers continue to be strongly steered as well. So, there's a lot of people engaged in training in WA. I think the announcement of the fee-free regime staying in until 2025 has been very positive — that's provided assurance to providers in terms of being able to plan around that. It also provides assurance to potential students, to parents planning their children's training future post school and those sorts of things … This is a level of investment that I haven't seen in TAFE for many, many years, which is very positive. (Managing Director, TAFE institute)

That said, a couple of TAFE institutes interviewed felt that, while they were able to manage without direct funding, it was a highly stressful time, and making decisions would have felt less daunting and risky if they had had their own safety nets.

Some of the providers interviewed felt there needed to be more flexibility about who could claim recovery funding, while also ensuring there was a fairer or more consistent distribution of funding available across the VET sector. One community education provider explained that they had 'more funding than ever' in theory, but in practice they were unable to use it because the available funds did not directly match the ways in which they needed to use it. Another mentioned being unable to access the NSW Smart and Skilled program as they did not meet the criteria. Some providers felt there was an inconsistent level of funding or support across the VET sector, explaining that they could only claim small amounts, for example, one-off $1000, $1200, or $4000 payments. Related to this was a suggestion that recovery packages should better align with specific types of providers and their respective needs. Finally, concerns were frequently raised in the interviews about funding support ceasing in 2022 despite the ongoing pandemic continuing to cause disruptions and despite many providers feeling the operational effects more deeply at that time:

> For us out here in the regional area the beginning of 2022 was really when COVID probably hit us the worst because whilst there was no lockdown, there was also … really no financial support, so we were running things with hardly anyone in them, because we had this kind of wave of COVID that went through in January, February, and we've … had that continual infection going through the community right up until now … So really the greatest COVID pains are really hitting us probably now.
> (Executive Officer, community education provider)

Recommendations for mitigating the effects of an ongoing pandemic and/or future crises

The COVID-19 pandemic presented several challenges to the VET sector and it is clear that its impacts will reverberate for some time. The training providers interviewed offered a range of recommendations designed to not only alleviate the pain points, but also to expand on the opportunities the crisis presented for VET. While some of the recommendations could be grouped according to provider type,

there were many crossovers in the recommendations, irrespective of provider type or jurisdiction. Nine core themes emerged from the recommendations:

- mandatory work placement
- sector consistency and comparability
- capacity-building
- governance support
- learner engagement and wellbeing
- access and connectivity
- scaffolding services
- staff recognition and support
- VET sector collaboration and resource-sharing.

Mandatory work placement

MWP was one of the most significant issues raised by training providers, who felt that the pandemic had illuminated systemic issues with its current management. Suggestions offered to assist with MWP included:

- The regulator should work with training providers and employers to help to define the process of continued learning, including alternative approaches for when students and staff are unable to access workplaces.
- Explore the possibilities of simulations, which some training providers felt were not used to their potential. Prepare appropriate infrastructure and processes to ensure that, in the event of challenges similar to the pandemic, the sector has the capacity to respond quickly with simulated environments, video recordings and camera set-ups to assist students to complete.
- Consider allowing students in the areas of care and community services to enter employment with the option of returning to the same provider in a couple of years' time to complete their qualifications, with an offer to pay the provider again/top up the funding for these returning students. With this approach individuals can still be properly trained while helping to rebuild the workforce.
- Embed flexibility into the MWP at all levels, including the hours required. Fee relief for providers from the Australian Skills Quality Agency (ASQA) was useful but flexibility will enable staff and learners to reset and resume more quickly after a disruption.
- Have confidence in training providers and grant them more authority and autonomy to complete assessments if required.

Sector consistency, comparability and flexibility

The majority of the providers interviewed highlighted a sense of inconsistency in the VET sector in relation to pandemic funding, compliance and other regulations. A frequent argument presented in the consultations was that tailoring VET programs and protocols to specific types of providers would result in a fairer and more consistent distribution of funds and application of regulations. As one private training provider of construction short courses noted: they followed all COVID-19 regulations pertaining to education and VET delivery despite their organisation being very different from a TAFE institute or university setting. At the same time, there was a general view from providers that some support for providers could be better streamlined to alleviate challenges during a crisis. Specific suggestions relating to this included:

- Recognise that different providers have different goals and outcomes and evaluate them accordingly or, alternatively, treat each as a unique entity.
- Promote clarity and consistency for all training providers in relation to the approaches that are acceptable and those that are not, including those COVID-19 restrictions that apply and those that do not.
- Provide funding streams with more flexibility in how training organisations use them. For example, one training provider wanted to use funding money for capital maintenance, an area in which they'd fallen behind due to COVID-19 expenses; another to develop their learning management systems, but the money available did not directly align in that way:

  > We … got JobKeeper as I mentioned earlier, but … the other packages out were mainly for RTOs … that ran traineeships and apprenticeships … They didn't apply to us because we weren't running traineeships … So we … kept saying, well, you know, we're getting nothing out of this … Again, I'll probably come back to a capital expenditure fund because even though we can't get funding for the students coming through the doors, we still have to keep our equipment up to current standards … And that still had to be done through COVID. If there was a possibility for funding there, then we could have stayed on top of that … that would have been great from our perspective because we weren't doing traineeships [during COVID]. (CEO, private training provider)

- Explore the ways by which greater consistency can be reached both within and across jurisdictions in relation to compliance, training package content, and COVID-response operations. Several providers commented that a national approach to these issues would be a more effective use of money and avoid the perception that they were 'working in silos'. Those who were working across states found managing different COVID-19 regulations complicated, which in turn led to apprehension about quality control and compliance. Some suggested a 'one stop shop' for key operational elements of COVID-19 at a national level, even if the states retained control.

Capacity-building

While training providers invested heavily in capacity-building for their staff, there remained calls for greater capacity-building in general, especially with regard to digital literacy:

- Provide more support for learning and development in industry, for example, some industries are still struggling to fully understand and utilise the digital world.
- Invest in digital training and delivery and acknowledge the role of digital in regulation and assessment: 'if it's a digital world then bring us into it'.
- Invest in simulation and other digital options for Australian VET providers.
- Allocate funds for providers to enable the development of digital learning management systems and other online capabilities.

Governance and scaffolding support

- Provide incentives and resources for administration and corporate governance costs, enabling some of the gaps that have emerged in operations as a consequence of the pandemic to be filled (and avoid a similar situation in the event of future crises).
- Provide support for other wrap-around services such as mental health and wellbeing, communications, and IT teams.
- Utilise the various operational response plans developed by training providers in response to COVID-19 as a shared resource for future disasters or crises.

Learner engagement and wellbeing

Many of the providers interviewed believed that re-engaging students in training would take a concerted effort from the government and needed to be underpinned by policy. Specific suggestions included:

- Establish outreach programs for students, along with a relevant policy, especially for those in disadvantaged cohorts, including young students who have recently finished or are due to finish school and feel anxious about their future and transitioning into VET.
- Invest in learner mental health and wellbeing to help learners to feel safe and confident about returning to VET and provide ongoing support for them once they do.
- Consider ways in which learners can transition into employment more easily; for example, funding streams for employers to take on new students, which then provides scaffold revenue for learners as they move from unemployment into employer settings. A program similar to the Commonwealth Government's New Work Opportunities, used during the last recession, could be one suggestion.
- Invest in digital literacy and foundation skills for learners who are struggling to stay engaged in the pandemic context, and help them to work with new digital modes of learning, which are increasingly the norm.

Access and connectivity

- Invest in digital infrastructure, especially in regional and remote areas, to ensure access, safety and connectivity for learners.
- Develop policy that ensures students have digital access and the appropriate hardware, beyond mobile phones, for undertaking digital training.
- Provide supports for international students, including maintaining the relaxed working hours regulation, which helped international students to support themselves more effectively while studying in Australia (for more information refer to footnote 5, page 38).

Staff recognition and support

While student impacts and wellbeing were of great concern to training providers, it is clear that staff themselves have been impacted by the pandemic, with many providers believing that this issue was affecting the overall viability of the sector. A large number of the training providers interviewed were concerned about levels of burnout among trainers and staff, also recognising the challenges that many had encountered in adapting to online forms of training. The providers indicated that they were struggling with staff retention. The following suggestions were offered to address these issues:

- Formally acknowledge and validate staff, both teaching and non-teaching, for the incredible work they have done (and are still doing) in managing the effects of the pandemic. Consider potential ways by which they can be thanked and feel appreciated and acknowledged, even within their organisations.
- Establish mental health support programs, including counselling services and mental health support, for staff and trainers, as well as support mechanisms that can be accessed outside educational delivery.

VET sector collaboration and resource-sharing

For training providers, one of the most positive outcomes of the pandemic were the collaborative problem-solving approaches that developed during the crisis, with innovation, creativity and 'pockets of brilliance' not previously seen in their teams being the end result. The emergence of this latent

capability during this time highlights an opportunity to foster these qualities in their organisation and in their staff by considering the following suggestions:

- Create support that gives staff, including trainers, space to experiment with governance and delivery options, to test things out and to collaborate more regularly together.
- Maintain regular communications with staff, including the creation of onsite or online 'hubs', where they can meet and share resources and information, an approach initiated by many providers during the height of the pandemic but which has been maintained because of its unifying effects.
- Create more opportunities to collaborate with other training providers, for example, on the development and sharing of course content.
- Re-establish and deepen partnerships with employers and industry, and offer incentives to employers who are struggling financially (and thus less willing to be a VET workplace) to take on new students.

References

ABS (Australian Bureau of Statistics) 2022, 'Cultural diversity of Australia: information on country of birth, year of arrival, ancestry, language and religion', viewed 27 September 2022, <https://www.abs.gov.au/articles/cultural-diversity-australia#measuring-cultural-and-ethnic-diversity>.

Association of Colleges 2021, *How are vocational institutions innovating, evolving and changing as a result of COVID-19? A study of practice and perspectives in five countries*, British Council, Manchester, viewed 6 June 2022, <https://www.britishcouncil.org/education/skills-employability/research/innovating-vocational-institutions-covid-19>.

Atkinson, G and Stanwick, J 2016, *Trends in VET: policy and participation*, NCVER, Adelaide, viewed 6 June 2022, <https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/publications/all-publications/trends-in-vet-policy-and-participation>

Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training 2020, *Beyond COVID-19: the impact of COVID-19 on disability practitioners in the tertiary education sector: survey report*, Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training, Launceston, viewed 6 June 2022, <https://www.adcet.edu.au/resource/10398/survey-report-beyond-covid-19/>.

Avis, J, Atkins, L, Esmond, B & McGrath, S 2021, 'Re-conceptualising VET: responses to covid-19', *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*, vol.73, no.1, pp.1—23.

Bowman, K & Callan, V 2021, *Engaging more employers in nationally recognised training to develop their workforce*, NCVER, Adelaide, viewed December 2021, <https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/publications/all-publications/engaging-more-employers-in-nationally-recognised-training-to-develop-their-workforce>.

Business New South Wales 2020, *Skilling Australia for a better future: supporting apprenticeships through COVID-19*, Business New South Wales, Sydney, viewed 19 April 2022, <https://www.businessnsw.com/content/dam/nswbc/businessnsw/pdf/Skilling%20Australia%20report%20-%20Business%20NSW%20-%20200708.pdf>.

Cahill, H, Dadvand, B, Shlezinger, K, Romei, K & Farrelly, A 2020, *Natural disasters and pandemics: supporting student and teacher wellbeing post emergency*, Youth Research Centre, Melbourne, viewed 23 January 2023, <https://education.unimelb.edu.au/mgse-industry-reports/report-3-natural-disasters-and-pandemics>.

Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation 2020, *The impact of bushfires on student wellbeing and student learning: environmental scan*, NSW Government, Sydney, viewed 23 January 2023, <https://education.nsw.gov.au/about-us/educational-data/cese/publications/research-reports/impact-of-bushfires-on-student-wellbeing-and-learning#:~:text=While%20the%20majority%20of%20children,developing%20problems%20following%20bushfire%20events>.

Clarke, K 2022, 'All things to all people: VET as a vehicle of post-COVID recovery', *Griffith Review*, no. 75, viewed 6 June 2022, <https://www.griffithreview.com/articles/all-things-to-all-people/>.

Community Colleges Australia 2022, 'COVID-19 impact on NSW adult and community education providers', Community Colleges Australia, Sydney, viewed 19 April 2022, <https://cca.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Impact-of-Omicron-on-NSW-ACE-Providers-23February2022.pdf>.

Crawford, N 2020, *Supporting student wellbeing during COVID-19: tips from regional and remote Australia*, National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, Curtin University, Perth, viewed 19 April 2022, <https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/student-wellbeing-covid-19-regional-remote-australia/>.

Erlam, GD, Garrett, N, Gasteiger, N, Lau, K, Hoare, K, Agarwal, S & Haxell, A, 2021, 'What really matters: experiences of emergency remote teaching in university teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic', *Frontiers in Education*, vol.6, no.639842, pp. 1—14, DOI: 10.3389/feduc.2021.639842.

European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training 2020, *How are European countries managing apprenticeships to respond to the COVID-19 crisis?*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, viewed 6 June 2022, <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/news-and-press/news/how-european-countries-manage-apprenticeships-respond-coronavirus-crisis>.

German Office for International Cooperation in Vocational Education and Training 2022, *Effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on vocational education and training: international perspectives of policy makers and practitioners*, Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training, Bonn, viewed 19 April 2022, <https://www.bibb.de/dienst/veroeffentlichungen/en/publication/show/17576>.

Griffin, T & Mihelic, M 2019, *Online delivery of VET qualifications: current use and outcomes*, NCVER, Adelaide, viewed 6 June 2022, < https://www.ncver.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0040/7682296/Online-delivery-of-VET-qualifications.pdf>

Hall, M 2021, *Apprentices and trainees 2020: impacts of COVID-19 on training activity*, NCVER, Adelaide, viewed 6 June 2022, <https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/publications/all-publications/apprentices-and-trainees-2020-impacts-of-covid-19-on-training-activity>.

Hoftijzer, M, Levin, V, Santos, I & Weber, M 2020, 'TVET systems' response to COVID-19: challenges and opportunities', World Bank, Washington, viewed 6 June 2022, <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/930861589486276271/pdf/TVET-Systems-response-to-COVID-19-Challenges-and-Opportunities.pdf>.

Hume, S & Griffin, T 2021, *The online delivery of VET during COVID-19: part 1*, NCVER, Adelaide, viewed 6 June 2022, <https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/publications/all-publications/the-online-delivery-of-vet-during-covid-19-part-1>.

——2022, *The online delivery of VET during the COVID-19 pandemic: part 2*, NCVER, Adelaide, viewed 6 June 2022, <https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/publications/all-publications/the-online-delivery-of-vet-during-the-covid-19-pandemic-part-2>.

Hurley, P 2020, *Impact of Coronavirus on apprentices and trainees*, Mitchell Institute for Education and Health Policy, Victoria University, Melbourne, viewed 12 March 2023, <https://www.vu.edu.au/sites/default/files/impact-of-coronavirus-on-apprentices-and-trainees.pdf>.

Karmel, T & Misko, J 2009, *Apprenticeships and traineeships in the downturn*, NCVER, Adelaide, viewed 6 June 2022, <https://www.ncver.edu.au/__data/assets/file/0012/10731/apprenticeships-and-traineeships-in-downturn-2197.pdf>.

Longley, D & Clarke, K 2022, 'Unlocking the potential of Australian apprenticeships', Brotherhood of St Laurence, Fitzroy, Vic., viewed 19 April 2022, <https://www.bsl.org.au/research/publications/unlocking-the-potential-of-australian-apprenticeships/>.

Naidoo, Y, Valentine, K & Adamson, E 2022, *Australian experiences of poverty: risk precarity and uncertainty during COVID-19*, Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS), Melbourne, and UNSW, Sydney.

NCVER (National Centre for Vocational Education Research) 2020, 'The impact of COVID-19 on VET qualifications that involve a mandatory work placement', NCVER, Adelaide, unpublished.

——2022a, 'Apprentice and trainee outcomes 2021', NCVER, Adelaide, <https://www.ncver.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0033/9671172/Apprentice_and_trainee_outcomes_2021.pdf>.

——2022b, 'Government expenditure on VET climbed to $10.4 billion in 2021', media release, 3 November 2022, <https://www.ncver.edu.au/news-and-events/media-releases/government-expenditure-on-vet-climbed-to-$10.4-billion-in-2021>.

——2022c, 'VET student outcomes 2022', NCVER, Adelaide, <https://www.ncver.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0045/9675774/VET_student_outcomes_2022.pdf>.

——2022d, 'Australian VET policy initiatives: 1998—2021, VET Knowledge Bank', NCVER, Adelaide, <https://www.voced.edu.au/vet-knowledge-bank-timeline-australian-vet-policy-initiatives>.

——NCVER Podcast 2022, 'Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on VET', *Vocational Voices*, Season 7, episode 4, transcript viewed 15 December 2022, <https://www.ncver.edu.au/news-and-events/podcasts/vocational-voices-podcast/transcripts/transcript-of-impact-of-the-covid-19-pandemic-on-vet>

O'Dwyer, L 2021, *The impact of COVID-19 on industry innovation, skills and the need for training*, NCVER, Adelaide, viewed 23 January 2023, <https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/publications/all-publications/the-impact-of-covid-19-on-industry-innovation-skills-and-the-need-for-training>

OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) 2020, *VET in a time of crisis: building foundations for resilient vocational education and training systems*, OECD, Paris, viewed 6 June 2022, <https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/view/?ref=132_132718-fdwmrqsgmy&title=VET-in-a-time-of-crisis-Building-foundations-for-resilient-vocational-education-and-training-systems->.

Palmer, B 2021, *An analysis of 'micro-credentials' in VET*, viewed 19 April 2022, <https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/publications/all-publications/an-analysis-of-micro-credentials-in-vet>.

Pennington, A 2022, *Fragmentation and photo-ops: the failures of Australian skills policy through COVID*, Centre for Future Work, Australia Institute, Manuka, ACT, viewed 19 April 2022, <https://apo.org.au/node/317068>.

Pilcher, S & Hurley, P 2020, *Skills for recovery: the vocational education system we need post-COVID-19*, Mitchell Institute for Education and Health Policy, Victoria University, Melbourne, viewed 19 April 2022, <https://www.vu.edu.au/mitchell-institute/tertiary-education/skills-for-recovery-the-vocational-education-system-we-need-post-covid-19>.

Productivity Commission 2022, *5-year Productivity Inquiry: Australia's data and digital dividend: Interim report, no.2*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, viewed 7 September 2022 <https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2022-08/apo-nid319126.pdf>.

Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements 2020, *Report*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, viewed 23 January 2023, <https://naturaldisaster.royalcommission.gov.au/system/files/2020-11/Royal%20Commission%20into%20National%20Natural%20Disaster%20Arrangements%20-%20Report%20%20%5Baccessible%5D.pdf>.

Shergold, P, Broadbent J, Marshall I & Varghese, P 2022, *Fault lines: an independent review into Australia's response to COVID-19*, John & Myriam Wylie Foundation, the Minderoo Foundation, the Paul Ramsay Foundation,

& e61 institute, viewed 15 December, <https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2022-10/apo-nid320067_0.pdf>.

Skiba, R 2020, 'Managing Australian vocational education and training for economic recovery', *International Journal of Economics, Business and Management Research*, vol.4, no.10, pp.222—33, viewed 19 April 2022, <https://ijebmr.com/link/632>.

TAFE Directors Australia 2020, *The power of TAFE: the COVID story*, TAFE Directors Australia, Canberra, viewed 19 April 2022, <https://tda.edu.au/the-power-of-tafe-the-covid-story/>.

Tertiary Education and Quality Standards Agency (TEQSA) 2022, *2022—2026 corporate plan*, viewed 15 December 2022, <https://www.teqsa.gov.au/sites/default/files/corporate-plan-2022-26.pdf>.

The Smith Family 2020, 'Covid-19 insights snapshot: learning experiences during Covid-19 in some of Australia's most disadvantaged communities', viewed 12 March 2023, <https://www.thesmithfamily.com.au/-/media/files/about-us/media/the-smith-family_insights-snapshot_november-2020.pdf>.

Vector Consulting 2021, *Changing the design of TAFE for a new normal: how digital is transforming the training experience, campus design and TAFE operating models*, Cisco and Optus, viewed 19 April 2022, <https://tda.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Changing-TAFE-Report.pdf>.

White, I 2021, *VET student outcomes 2020: impact of COVID-19 on domestic students*, NCVER, Adelaide, viewed 6 June 2022,<https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/publications/all-publications/vet-student-outcomes-2020-impact-of-covid-19-on-domestic-students>.

White, I & Rittie, T 2022, *Upskilling and reskilling: the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on employers and their training choices*, NCVER, Adelaide, viewed 6 June 2022, <https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/publications/all-publications/upskilling-and-reskilling-the-impact-of-the-covid-19-pandemic-on-employers-and-their-training-choices>.

Appendix A – Example list of support packages offered by governments in response to COVID-19

The Australian Government and state and territory governments introduced a raft of policies throughout the pandemic to assist the VET sector. The following table provides a selection of some of the packages offered and/or expanded in response to COVID-19. This list was compiled from NCVER (2022c) where a more extensive list of policy initiatives unrolled during the pandemic can be found.

Government	Fund Name	Overview
Commonwealth	JobTrainer	The $1 billion JobTrainer Fund, jointly established by the Australian Government and states and territories through the Heads of Agreement for Skills Reform, is aimed at helping school leavers and job seekers to gain new skills by retraining and upskilling them into sectors with job opportunities. The program is expected to provide up to 340 700 additional training places in areas of identified skill needs. School leavers and job seekers are able to access free or low-cost short and long courses to develop new skills. Public, not-for-profit and private training organisations can apply for funding to provide these courses. The JobTrainer Fund was announced on 16 July 2020 as part of the JobTrainer skills package. The initial JobTrainer skills package had two components: $1.5 billion to expand and extend the Supporting Apprentices and Trainees initiative; and $500 million investment in the JobTrainer Fund, with matched contributions sought from state and territory governments. In the 2021–22 federal Budget, an additional $500 million was allocated to extend and expand the JobTrainer Fund until 31 December 2022, with matched contributions to be agreed with state and territory governments. The extension brings the total funding available under the fund to $2 billion and provides for around 163 000 additional training places, including 33 800 dedicated to support training in aged care and 10 000 in digital skills to strengthen Australia's digital workforce.
Commonwealth	Supporting Apprentices and Trainees wage subsidy (SAT)	A wage subsidy that provided financial support to small and medium-sized businesses to retain their existing apprentices and trainees. The wage subsidy was also available to new employers of any size and group training organisations (GTOs) if they re-engaged an apprentice or trainee who had been displaced from a small or medium-sized business. Eligible employers could apply for a wage subsidy of 50% of the eligible apprentice or trainee's wages paid until 31 March 2021. The SAT wage subsidy was part of the Australian Government's economic response to COVID-19. It was announced on 13 March 2020 to support up to 70 000 small businesses employing around 117 000 apprentices and trainees and was only available to small businesses, including those using a GTO, with apprentices or trainees in-training as of 1 March 2020. Financial support was to cover wages paid from 1 January 2020 to 30 September 2020. Employers of any size who re-engaged an apprentice or trainee who had been displaced from a small business could also apply for a wage subsidy. On 16 July 2020, the government announced an expansion of the initiative: the SAT wage subsidy was extended for an additional six months to 31 March 2021, and expanded to include medium-sized businesses for wages paid to eligible apprentices or trainees from 1 July 2020 to 31 March 2021. The expanded initiative was expected to support up to 90 000 businesses employing around 180 000 apprentices and trainees.
Commonwealth	Boosting Apprenticeship Commencements (BAC)	A wage subsidy aimed at supporting employers and group training organisations to take on new apprentices and trainees to build a pipeline of skilled workers to support sustained economic recovery. Under the initiative, employers and GTOs may have been eligible for a subsidy of 50% of wages paid to a new or recommencing apprentice or trainee for a 12-month period, to a maximum of $7000 per quarter. The program, initially capped at 100 000 places, was extended and expanded in May 2021. The initiative was announced in the 2020–21 federal Budget with $1.2 billion allocated over four years from 2020–21. It built on the July 2020 COVID-19 pandemic response package Supporting Apprentices and Trainees and was funded under the Australian Apprenticeships Incentives Program. An additional $2.7 billion over four years from 2020–21 was announced in the 2021–22 Budget, expanding the program into 2022–23. Due to higher than anticipated demand, a Material Estimates Variation was published in the 2021–22 Portfolio Additional Estimates Statements (PAES) increasing total funding for the subsidy to $4.8 billion. A new program, Completing Apprenticeship Commencements, was announced in September 2021, as an expansion of BAC. It allows eligible BAC employers to continue receiving support in the second and third years of an apprenticeship.

Commonwealth	Completing Apprenticeship Commencements (CAC)	The $825 million Completing Apprenticeship Commencements program, announced in September 2021, provides additional tapered financial support to employers of Boosting Apprenticeship Commencements eligible apprentices and trainees who progress to a second or third year of training. From October 2021, eligible employers received a 10% wage subsidy in the second year of an eligible apprenticeship, up to a maximum of $1500 per quarter per apprentice, and 5% in the third year, to a maximum of $750 per quarter, per apprentice. Subsidies are available to employers of any size, industry or geographic location. Final claims for payment must be lodged by 30 June 2025.
Commonwealth	ASQA regulatory fees and charges relief	As part of the Higher Education Relief package announced in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA) waived fees and charges for VET providers and accredited course owners who were invoiced between 1 January 2020 through to 30 June 2021 and reimbursed any payments already made for invoices issued since 1 January 2020. Excluded from these relief measures were ASQA fees related to: initial registration as a registered training organisation; initial registration on the Commonwealth Register of Institutions and Courses for Overseas Students (CRICOS); and initial accreditation of a VET course, for new course owners. An extension of the fees and charges relief to 31 December 2021 was announced in April 2021, and funding for a further extension to 30 June 2022 was allocated in the 2021–22 mid-year economic and fiscal outlook (MYEFO). The relief measures also included postponing ASQA's move to full cost recovery until 1 July 2022. Additionally, the 2021–22 MYEFO also included the waiving of the International Tuition Protection Service Levy and the VET Student Loans Tuition Protection Levy for 12 months, until the next scheduled collection of levies in late 2022 and early 2023.
Commonwealth	Apprentice and Trainee Re-engagement Register	The Apprentice and Trainee Re-engagement Register aims to connect apprentices and trainees who have lost their jobs with potential employers. The register is open to: apprentices and trainees from small businesses who were in a training contract at 1 March 2020 or 1 July 2020 and have since lost their jobs; and employers of any size, including group training organisations, who wish to register their details and post a vacancy for an apprentice or trainee. The register is being coordinated by the National Apprentice Employment Network. The initiative is part of the Australian Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.
ACT	JobTrainer	The ACT Government launched its $16.l75 million JobTrainer package on 8 September 2020. The ACT package comprised $8.375 million from the Australian Government, matched dollar for dollar by the ACT Government. The initiative aimed to deliver approximately 3500 training places in key industries and occupations that were in demand in the ACT by offering free vocational education and training to young people (aged 17 to 24 years who had finished school) and job seekers across Canberra in areas of employment growth. In September 2021, the ACT Government announced a $16.75 million expansion of JobTrainer, providing up to 2500 additional training places over two years. The new funding was also expected to support other vulnerable Canberrans struggling to find a job, including those who were out of work for an extended period, by providing places in pre-employment, pre-apprenticeship and foundation skills program.
ACT	Skilled Capital Program	Skilled Capital, launched in February 2015, is the ACT's entitlement program developed as one of the ACT Government's commitments under the National Partnership Agreement on Skills Reform. A total of $21 million over three years was allocated to the program to improve access to high-quality training in areas of skills need, maximise improved employment outcomes for students and provide a comprehensive range of support services to ensure students accessing training receive the help they need to successfully complete their chosen qualification. In June 2020, the ACT Government announced a special release of the Skilled Capital program to address workforce demand and supply issues because of the COVID-19 pandemic. More than 2 000 subsidised training places were made available across 60 qualifications and 39 skill sets.
ACT	Youth Support Package	The ACT government's youth support package provided: a six-month payroll tax exemption for businesses who paid wages for new employees who were apprentices or trainees. The exemption applied to six months of wages for eligible employees recruited between 1 August 2020 and 31 January 2021; a $2 million extension of the ACT Public Service graduate program to provide additional graduate positions over two years, including cadet and apprentice recruitment; and an additional $250 000 for targeted mental health support for young people. The program built on the Mental Health Support Package previously announced as part of the economic survival package.
ACT	Support for the VET sector in response to COVID-19	The ACT Government announced the following measures to support the capacity of the VET sector during the COVID-19 pandemic: 1. delay the pricing measures introduced in January 2020, to address User Choice and Skilled Capital program budget measures, until 2021. Subsidy levels were reinstated to 2019 levels. The changes applied only for 2020 enrolments and payments were backdated for User Choice commencements and Skilled Capital enrolments from 15 January 2020; 2. release an additional 2405 Skilled Capital places across 60 qualifications and 39 skill sets to address emerging workforce needs in response to the COVID-19 crisis; 3 provide RTOs with an ACT Government Training Initiative Funding Agreement access to a 50% unit payment where a student had commenced a unit of competency, but the RTO was not able to finalise assessment due to workplace access and social distancing policies.

NSW	JobTrainer	The NSW Government launched its $318.56 million JobTrainer package on 16 September 2020. The NSW package comprised $159.28 million from the Australian Government, matched dollar for dollar by the NSW Government. In August 2021, in response to the NSW COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, the government announced an additional 3000 training places and 60 free courses under the JobTrainer initiative. The program was further expanded in October 2021 as part of the government's economic recovery package with: another 103 000 fee-free training places; a new IT traineeship program for school leavers; and an extension of the school-based apprenticeships and traineeships program. In November 2021, the government announced more than 3500 fee-free training places across 40 different retail courses to address skills shortages in the retail sector over the Christmas retail period.
NSW	Infrastructure Traineeship Program	The Infrastructure Traineeship Program, targeting Year 12 school leavers, was a new two-year, office-based traineeship within the infrastructure sector that commenced in 2020 with 137 traineeship positions. The program was aimed at creating employment for young people disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The paid traineeship combined fee-free TAFE study with practical experience working for NSW Government agencies and private sector industry employers. Trainees were managed by a GTO, who recruited, managed and supported trainees to complete their nationally recognised certificate IV qualification. The government agency paid the trainees' salary and the GTO service fees.
NSW	Fee-free TAFE courses	In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the NSW Government, through TAFE NSW, offered fee-free short courses that could be completed in days or weeks, offering practical skills and experiences across a range of industries. To be eligible for a fully-subsidised place, an individual must have: lived or worked in NSW; been an Australian citizen or permanent resident or New Zealand citizen or humanitarian visa holder; been over 17 years (people aged between 15 to 17 years may have been eligible); and have left school or registered for home schooling. An initial suite of 21 online courses were announced on 6 April 2020; on 30 April, 13 new fee-free courses were added to replace those that had reached capacity to ensure the availability of a total of 21 accredited courses. A suite of 10 COVID-19 pandemic rapid response courses were announced in August 2021.
NSW	COVID-19 rapid response courses	A suite of 10 COVID-19 rapid response courses were announced in August 2021 aimed at building the skills of NSW residents during the pandemic. The TAFE NSW courses were available to Australian citizens and permanent residents living or working in NSW who were aged 15 or older who were no longer at school.
NSW	Lockdown Learning	In response to the 2021 lockdowns in NSW, TAFE NSW, in conjunction with the NSW Government, offered several fee-free short courses that would lead to a variety of full TAFE NSW qualifications. Individuals who met Smart and Skilled eligibility guidelines could enrol in up to two fee-free courses at a time.
NT	JobTrainer	The JobTrainer program supported job seekers and young people to upskill or reskill by providing free or low-cost training courses. These courses included full qualifications and skill sets in identified areas of skill needs. To be eligible, participants needed: to be a NT resident and an Australian citizen or have permanent residency; to have the skills and capabilities to undertake training and to actively engage in employment; and to either be a job seeker, or receive an income support payment, or be underemployed, or be a school leaver aged 17 to 24 years. The NT Government received $4.976 million in Commonwealth funding in 2020–21, with the NT Government matching this amount.
NT	Free training courses	A suite of over 50 free training courses were developed to help NT workers impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic to upskill and reskill.
NT	Critical Worker Support Package	The Critical Worker Support Package, announced in April 2021, was a $2 million package aimed at attracting hospitality and tourism workers to NT to alleviate pressures around a worker shortfall due to the COVID-19 pandemic travel restrictions.
Qld	JobTrainer	The Queensland Government launched its $201 million JobTrainer package on 25 September 2020. The Queensland package comprised an investment of $100.5 million from the Commonwealth matched dollar for dollar by the state government. The program targets school leavers and job seekers, providing increased access to low-fee or free training and was focused on investing in apprenticeships and traineeships. In December 2021, an additional $200 million joint investment was made to continue providing access to low-cost or free training in key industries. The enrolment deadline was extended to 31 December 2022.
Qld	Free Online Training	The Queensland Government supported a number of online training courses in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, through: 1. TAFE Queensland's Isolearn: COVID Safe training modules for businesses that are required to have a COVID Safe plan; infection control skill sets for eligible employees in customer-facing roles; micro-credentials; and skill sets to build on existing skills or retrain in new areas for eligible Queensland residents impacted by COVID-19; 2. CQ University: eligible Queenslanders could enrol in free online skill sets in community care, health support, medication assistance, mentoring and

		supervision, and food services; 3. Skills Focus Queensland training hub: small business impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic could access a free online library of courses tailored to small businesses.
SA	JobTrainer	The SA Government launched its $88 million JobTrainer package on 31 August 2020. The SA package, which comprised an investment of $53.5 million by the state government and $34.5 million from the Australian Government, complemented Skilling South Australia. The JobTrainer target was 15 000 training places and was aimed at providing low-cost training to young South Australians, school leavers and job seekers in industries where there was high demand for skilled workers to drive employment, such as aged care, disability care and childcare. It also included support for around 4000 people to transition into paid training contracts such as apprenticeships and traineeships in sectors that had not traditionally used the paid traineeship model.
SA	Group Training Boost	The Group Training Boost was available for a limited time for training contracts at certificate II or higher that were in place by 28 February 2021 (subject to funding availability). Businesses looking to host a new apprentice or trainee through a GTO from 2 March 2020 were able to access a reduced charge-out rate of up to $200 per week per apprentice for six months, to reduce costs associated with the impact of COVID-19. Eligible businesses received up to $5200 off the GTO charge-out rate in total.
SA	Mentoring Suspended Apprentices and Trainees	The Mentoring Suspended Apprentices and Trainees project was a cross-industry mentoring project established by the Training and Skills Commission (TASC) in partnership with the SA Government's Skilling South Australia initiative. The project delivered ongoing support to South Australian apprentices and trainees employed by businesses who had their training contracts suspended because of the COVID-19 pandemic. It assisted apprentices and trainees to remain engaged and focused on their completing elements of their learning during the period of suspension.
SA	VET Market Continuity Package	The $16 million VET Market Continuity Package was announced on 4 April 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The package was aimed at supporting non-government training providers meet the skill needs of the state and to adapt and remain viable. The package comprised two measures for training providers that had existing contracts with the state government: 1. a $4 million investment that enabled training providers to put in place delivery modes and technology to support training, students and employers; 2. continuity of subsidy payments at pre-COVID activity levels for a period of three months until June 2020, after which payments were to be reviewed.
SA	Community and Jobs Support Fund	The $250 million Community and Jobs Support Fund aimed to assist community organisations, such as sporting, arts and recreational bodies, non-profit organisations and some other industry sectors. The fund was also expected to help to train South Australians seeking new skills and employment and to assist organisations to meet increased demand for services, including emergency relief. Included in the fund was a $13.8 million support package for South Australia's international students. The fund was part of the wider Jobs Rescue Package announced on 26 March 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.
Tas.	JobTrainer	The Tasmanian Government launched its $21.04 million JobTrainer package on 23 September 2020. The package comprised an investment of $10.52 million from the Commonwealth matched dollar for dollar by the Tasmanian Government. The program targeted school leavers and job seekers, providing increased access to low-fee or free training.
Tas.	Rapid Response Skills Initiative (RRSI)	The Rapid Response Skills Initiative was a Tasmanian Government program that provided support for people who had lost their jobs because of retrenchment due to company downsizing or closure. It provided funding assistance of up to $3000 to people who needed help to upskill, retrain or obtain licences in order to gain new employment. The RRSI program aimed to get people back to work as soon as possible by making funding assistance available when the individual had been notified by their employer that they would be made redundant. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the government announced an expansion of the RRSI with an additional $6.3 million to help redeploy people who lost their jobs.
Tas.	SKILL UP for your future	Announced on 11 May 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and aimed at enabling Tasmanians to quickly upskill, reskill, or gain new skills and ready to enter into employment or change careers once the economy started to recover. It comprised a suite of online short courses and skill sets, many of which had no fees, specifically focused on transferrable skills useful to employers across various jobs and industries, as well as skills to support people to successfully enter employment.

Vic.	JobTrainer	The $260 million Victorian JobTrainer package provided free or low-fee training in key industries and occupations such as health, construction, agriculture, community services, food processing, financial services, logistics, and beauty services. Funding was available to young people aged between 17 and 24 years and job seekers of any age. JobTrainer supported Victoria's Skill First program, which subsidised training and tuition-free training at TAFEs.
Vic.	COVID-19 support package for training providers	The Victorian Government announced a $260.8 million support package on 17 April 2020 to ensure Victoria's TAFE and training system was ready and able to continue to train Victorians in priority industries. The package comprised: (1) $191.9 million for TAFEs, dual-sector TAFEs, Learn Local providers, and AMES Australia in grants to support business continuity until 30 June 2020; (2) $68.9 million over three months in crisis support to ensure Victoria's public training system could respond and recover from the coronavirus pandemic. Additional funding of $55 million was announced in September 2020 to help TAFEs address maintenance needs.
Vic.	Free TAFE for Priority Courses	The Free TAFE for Priority Courses Initiative was announced in the 2018–19 Budget and commenced on 1 January 2019. The aim of this initiative was to encourage Victorians who were eligible for government-subsidised training to gain skills for the future by making priority TAFE courses and pre-apprenticeship courses in growth industries tuition-fee free. In July 2020, the Victorian Government announced the expansion of the Free TAFE program as part of its $163 million package of investments to boost skills, create jobs and drive the state's economy recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.
Vic.	Retrenched Apprentices and Trainees program	The Retrenched Apprentices and Trainees program was established by the Victorian Government in collaboration with the Apprenticeship Employment Network (AEN) in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The initiative, which commenced in May 2020, built on the Apprenticeship Support Officers program and aimed to assist apprentices and trainees who had lost their employment to complete their training. Employers could also use the program to register apprenticeship and traineeship vacancies, making the process of matching them with displaced trainees and apprentices easier. In September 2020, an additional $900 000 was invested in the program to fully fund its operation until June 2021. This money was part of the $163 million package of investments to boost skills, create jobs and drive the state's economic recovery from the pandemic, announced in July 2020.
Vic.	Working for Victoria	The $500 million Working for Victoria initiative was announced on 21 March 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The initiative, which was delivered in partnership with Sidekicker, supported: job seekers to find work; job seekers to access online training; and employers to find workers with the skills and experience they needed quickly. The initiative also included the $50 million Agriculture Workforce Plan to provide dedicated support to the agriculture, food processing and critical food supply chain businesses in rural, regional and outer metropolitan Victoria. Working for Victoria was part of the Victorian Government's $1.7 billion Economic Survival Package.
WA	JobTrainer	The WA Government launched its $103.4 million JobTrainer Agreement on 13 October 2020. The WA package comprised an investment of $51.7 million from the Australian Government matched dollar for dollar by the WA Government. The program funded free or low-fee training places in WA, with a combination of short and long courses for job seekers, and young people including school leavers. A second round of joint funding, secured in October 2021, boosted the package by $103.5 million.
WA	Construction Industry COVID-19 support package	On 23 April 2020, the state government and the Construction Training Fund (CTF) announced a new $24.5 million support package for the construction industry, to ensure jobs were maintained and the WA construction workforce was ready to assist with the post COVID-19 economic recovery. The package comprised: $10 million to provide an immediate, one-off payment of $2000 to employers of existing apprentices and trainees receiving currently CTF grant payments; a new grants scheme worth $9.5 million, to assist employers to retain their existing apprentices, with payment beginning from 1 June 2020 (backdated from 1 April 2020). Payments ranged from $250 to $500 per month, per apprentice or trainee, depending on the trades facing the most critical skills shortages in the industry. This supplemented CTF's existing grants scheme for a period of six months: employers receiving CTF grants for apprentices and trainees in employment were eligible for the new grant scheme; and $5 million to support more than 5000 building and construction apprentices and trainees to claim up to $1000 to support the costs of undertaking short training courses to assist them in upskilling to meet business needs.
WA	Rebuilding our TAFEs	The $22.92 million Rebuilding our TAFEs program was announced on 28 July 2020 as part of the $5.5 billion 'WA recovery plan' aimed at driving economic and social recovery across WA. The Rebuilding our TAFEs plan included: $167.4 million in capital works projects across WA; $25 million for free short courses to upskill thousands of Western Australians, $32 million for the expansion of the Lower Fees, Local Skills program; and $4.8 million for the Apprenticeship and Traineeship Re-engagement Incentive.

National Centre for Vocational Education Research

Level 5, 60 Light Square, Adelaide, SA 5000
PO Box 8288 Station Arcade, Adelaide SA 5000, Australia

Phone +61 8 8230 8400 **Email** ncver@ncver.edu.au
Web <https://www.ncver.edu.au> <https://www.lsay.edu.au>
Follow us: <https://twitter.com/ncver> <https://www.linkedin.com/company/ncver>