

Submission to the Jobs and Skills Australia Discussion Paper

10 February 2023

Universities Australia (UA) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the Jobs and Skills Australia (JSA) Discussion Paper.

UA is the peak body representing Australia's 39 comprehensive universities. Our member universities span the length and breadth of Australia. Together, they educate around one and a half million students each year, undertake significant research and development activities, and engage globally to grow Australia and the world's knowledge base while supporting our nation's economic and social wellbeing.

Universities, along with other tertiary education providers, fuel Australia's workforce, and as such, aim to match their graduate outputs to the nation's skills needs. To do this complex work, tertiary education providers should be given the best economy-wide and sectoral workforce analyses and forecasts that JSA can create and distribute.

This submission makes two key arguments:

1. That JSA conduct economy-wide and sectoral workforce analyses that will support universities and other tertiary educators to support the nation's workforce needs. This would provide the clearest demand signal which universities our students can respond to.
2. That JSA could work with the Department of Education in a coordinating role, bringing together the key stakeholders of workforce development in Australia – universities, other higher education providers, and VET providers, in pursuit of the nation's workforce goals. A collaboration of this nature would support JSA's intention to develop solutions to workforce and skills issues, while also incentivising tertiary education providers' and others' desire to support the functions of JSA.

To this end, UA, TAFE Directors Australia (TDA), the Independent Tertiary Education Council of Australia (ITECA) and Independent Higher Education Australia (IHEA), are collectively seeking to collaborate with government on issues affecting Australia's workforce.

As the peak representative bodies for tertiary education in Australia, whose work contributes directly to Australia's current and emerging workforce, we believe there would be immense benefit to government working closely with these peak organisations to deliver a collaborative approach to strengthening Australia's workforce future.

RECOMMENDATIONS

We believe there would be benefit in the following:

- That UA, and other tertiary peak bodies, be fully represented on the JSA advisory board to ensure workforce issues are fully considered alongside the education pipeline.
- That JSA conduct economy-wide and sectoral workforce analyses that will support universities, students, and other tertiary educators to support the nation's workforce needs.
- That JSA, alongside other relevant departments, take a coordinating role amongst key workforce stakeholders in developing and actioning solutions to Australia's workforce and skills needs.
- That JSA consider working closely with tertiary education providers and representative bodies to identify relevant issues, priority areas and solutions in a coordinated and collaborative manner to enhance JSA's visibility and impact.
- That JSA take a principles-based approach to its work, based on representativeness, inclusivity, evidence-based decision making, transparency, flexibility, independence, collaboration and community engagement, continuous improvement, clear communication, and sustainability.
- That JSA provide clarity on the responsibilities of each advisory group within the proposed structure.

1.1 Structure and Governance

DISCUSSION QUESTION 1: Are there other design considerations that could further strengthen Jobs and Skills Australia's ability to provide advice to government?

UA welcomes the creation of JSA following Royal Assent in November 2022 and supports the Albanese Government's focus on addressing Australia's skills needs. We welcome the current legislation's acknowledgement of the vital role universities play in educating Australia's future workforce and providing the skilled workers our nation needs to grow and prosper.

The proposed commissioner model for JSA reflects a strong participatory approach to JSA's evidence-based advisory functions to government. However, to ensure JSA's success, the proposed tripartite model should make clear that education providers, including universities, other higher education providers and VET providers, are specifically represented in the advisory body to the JSA commissioner.

Clarity around the delegation of roles and responsibilities of each of the deputy commissioners is necessary, including how the sub-committees and the advisory body report to them and the commissioner. It would be useful for JSA to outline to stakeholders the differences between the commissioners through portfolio descriptors that include specific roles and responsibilities and who

reports to them. UA looks forward to these distinctions in roles and responsibilities of the deputy commissioners being provided and working with JSA to help inform workforce strategies.

In supporting the implementation of JSA, including its delivery of principles-informed functions and ways of thinking. As government projections have identified, around one million jobs will be created between 2021 and 2026 – more than half of which will require a bachelor degree or higher.¹ Including universities and other tertiary education providers in JSA's workforce planning is crucial for ensuring Australia's future workforce needs are met.

1.2 Functions and Ways of Thinking

Functions

DISCUSSION QUESTION 2: What principles could be used to guide Jobs and Skills Australia's priorities, and the development of its workplan?

Representativeness: JSA should include a diverse range of stakeholders, including government, industry, unions and education bodies, to ensure that the advice provided is representative of the needs of the entire workforce and education sector.

Inclusivity: JSA should actively seek input and engagement from underrepresented groups, stakeholder peak bodies and industry experts to ensure that their perspectives are included in the advice provided.

Evidence-based decision making: JSA should base its decisions on expert-led evidence, using data and research to inform its understanding of the education and industry sectors, and to identify skills priorities, workforce needs and potential solutions. JSA should use a variety of data sources and research methods, including through close stakeholder consultation, to inform its decisions and recommendations.

Transparency: JSA should be transparent about its decision-making processes, methods and data sources so that its evidence-based approach can be independently verified, thus building trust with stakeholders.

Flexibility: JSA should be able to adapt its advice to changing circumstances, such as new technologies or policy developments.

Independence: JSA should be at arms length from government and industry to avoid potential conflicts of interest and ensure that its advice is objective, impartial and based on the advice of key stakeholders, and to the benefit and interests of Australia. To the extent that resourcing of JSA will be expended under the *Public Governance, Performance and Accountability Act*, the findings, advice and review of JSA should be independent of non-direct functions of the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations and the government. However, the findings, advice and review of JSA should be considered within the scope of the JSA Act and priorities of government.

¹ . Department of Employment, Skills, Small and Education. Labour market information portal - 2020 Employment Projections by skill level - five years to 2025 [Internet]. Australian government; 2020 [cited 2021 Mar 2]. Available from: <https://lmip.gov.au/PortalFile.axd?FieldID=2787736&.xlsx>

Collaboration and community engagement: JSA should foster close and continuous collaboration between stakeholders to ensure that its advice is informed by the collective wisdom of the advisory group, sub-committees and external stakeholders.

Continuous improvement: JSA should continuously monitor the impact of its advice, gather feedback and learn and improve over time to ensure its relevancy and efficacy remain strong and true to purpose and functions.

Clear communication: JSA should communicate its advice in a clear, accessible and actionable manner to stakeholders and the Australian public to ensure that it is understood and can translate easily to the intended outcomes.

Sustainability: JSA should consider the economic, social and environmental sustainability implications of its advice, taking a long-term perspective and aiming to promote sustainable development. This principle would mean that the advice provided should support not just short-term goals, but also the long-term well-being of Australia's workforce and workforce stakeholders, and not just for economic but also for environmental and social concerns as well. The focus of advice should consider the human-element of the workforce and skills development analysis and strategies.

DISCUSSION QUESTION 3: How could Jobs and Skills Australia seek broader input into the development and refinement of its workplan?

UA supports the proposed framework for engagement in gathering input for JSA's key functions and workplan. To enhance the information provided to JSA and more fully represent Australia's diverse workforce, JSA could request input and engagement from tertiary education peak bodies, including UA, the Independent Tertiary Education Council of Australia, IHEA and TAFE Directors Australia.

Furthermore, the remit of JSA's functions is such that engagement with these groups will be essential to the identification of workplan needs, objectives and proposed outcomes that will inform research, program and policy development.

As well as engagement with education providers, it will also be important to engage with industry, and in some cases regulators and accreditors. This is especially important in, for example, health workforce development, where:

- education providers are mandated to provide sufficient quality work-based clinical learning experiences within health services for students to embed their skills;
- the nature of these clinical work experiences influences later career choice (setting, specialty) and workforce distribution; and
- clinical work experiences need to be approved by regulators and accreditors.

In seeking broader engagement, JSA may also wish to consider input and potential agreements about data sharing between States/Territories and the Commonwealth and also federally between different departments too. This is certainly important for health workforce planning and may well apply to other domains too.

DISCUSSION QUESTION 4: How could Jobs and Skills Australia engage tripartite partners, experts and other interested parties in its major studies?

The proposed approach to engaging partners, experts and other interested stakeholders in its major studies through focus/working groups and public consultation is a good basis for effective engagement.

However, consultations like this can be complex and therefore require clear, expert-informed guidelines about how JSA and tertiary education providers can work together to deliver informed workforce and skills solutions.

Therefore, to support this engagement further, UA suggests JSA develop terms of reference to guide the different types of work being undertaken by these groups. Further, these terms of reference should make explicit the unified and complementary nature of the work being undertaken, with clear outlines and boundaries for this work. It will be essential for effective engagement, strong outcomes and building trust that the various activities undertaken by JSA – through the advisory body, sub-committees, expert advice, its own internal mechanisms and other means – all support each other and are clear in the remit of the work.

DISCUSSION QUESTION 5: What new information should Jobs and Skills Australia be collecting through its engagement to build a stronger evidence base?

UA supports JSA's proposed list of first functions as a first step towards developing a foundation for future programs and policy developments.

To support these functions, UA suggests JSA work with relevant government and non-government organisations and stakeholders to provide a clear demand signal to tertiary education providers on workforce and skills needs.

In signalling a willingness to collaborate with the tertiary sector and other stakeholders, JSA and related departments can then take a coordinated approach in addressing workforce and skills needs. The principle of workforce sustainability would underpin this coordinated work, to ensure Australia has the skills we need now and also in the future.

In this context, sustainability will need to rely on environmental, social, economic and cultural data, as well as occupational standards that focus on the human-element of the workforce (as opposed to only focusing on economic measures of productivity and efficiency). This additional information set – gathered from relevant stakeholders through JSA, its advisory body and sub-committees – will help to centre JSA's functions within a long-term vision for Australia. This information will also benefit JSA's engagement with a range of stakeholders and signal to all sectors JSA's commitment to collaborative, solutions-based, forward-thinking approaches to Australia's future.

Ways of Thinking

DISCUSSION QUESTION 6: How can Jobs and Skills Australia expand its engagement to include a broader range of skills and industry stakeholders in its work?

UA welcomes JSA's proposal to include a wide range of stakeholders as possible within its remit to maximise the potential benefits such engagement might produce in considering Australia's current, emerging and future workforce needs.

To support this engagement, UA suggests JSA design – in consultation with and with support from relevant stakeholders – stakeholder-specific information packs that include links to context-specific data, insights and recommendations for specific industry groups, such as agriculture, health or education. These tailored information packs would be delivered in a clear and accessible way to the engaged group. While these information packs may cover the same topic (e.g., skills taxonomy), the information provided should be specific to the relevant industry to maximise its uptake and applicability. This will ensure information is made applicable and relevant to each stakeholder group, while supporting each other under an overarching strategic objective or function.

DISCUSSION QUESTION 7: What types of outreach could Jobs and Skills Australia use to increase visibility and use of its products and advice?

JSA could consider consulting closely with its advisory body and sub-committees to determine the most effective methods of increasing visibility and use of its products and advice to each relevant stakeholder.

As noted in Figure 1 of the Discussion Paper, the JSA structure will incorporate a significant tranche of communications work. As we've suggested at Discussion Question 6, we recommend the creation of communications packages that are context-specific and tailored to the relevant audience. These packs could be informed and refined through information-sharing and collaboration with the relevant stakeholder group, such as tertiary education peak bodies.

Key to the success of an effective engagement strategy is ensuring compatibility and support across all relevant departments, organisations and agencies. This will also increase visibility and use of JSA's products with stakeholders not normally exposed to JSA or the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, such as students and non-working persons.

DISCUSSION QUESTION 8: How can Jobs and Skills Australia present data and analysis to best inform your work?

Any presentation of data and analysis should be informed by the principles underlying the purpose and functions of JSA and centred in the relevant context/stakeholder-specific communication strategies. Key to the presentation of information and data is accessibility, clarity and stakeholder-relevant support information (i.e., information is presented in such a way as to be responsive to the unique nature of specific audiences, rather than being wholly generalised). This will require close consultation between JSA, the sub-committees and relevant communications and media groups that represent each stakeholder.

1.3 Conclusion

In conclusion, Universities Australia welcomes the creation of Jobs and Skills Australia and supports its approach to addressing Australia's skills needs. We believe that JSA's success is dependent on its representation of all stakeholders, including tertiary education providers, and its ability to conduct economy-wide and sectoral workforce analyses that will support tertiary education providers in meeting the nation's workforce needs. This submission makes several recommendations, including having the peak bodies of tertiary education providers be fully represented on the JSA advisory board and JSA taking on a coordinating role amongst key workforce stakeholders. We look forward to collaborating with JSA to ensure the future workforce needs of Australia are met.

Please don't hesitate to contact us for further information:

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