

# **Universities Australia's submission to the Senate Education and Employment Committee Inquiry into Free TAFE**

15 January 2025



## Introduction

Universities Australia (UA) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this inquiry and supports the intent of the Free TAFE Bill 2024 (the Bill) to enhance access to vocational education and training (VET). High-quality VET and higher education are vital to Australia's future skills and workforce needs which should be supported by increased Commonwealth financial assistance.

While UA supports the intention of the Bill, we believe further consideration should be given to the proposed approach to data collection and reporting. The Bill would be strengthened by including robust benchmarking and evaluation of the Free TAFE program and the introduction of a comprehensive data collection mechanism.

## Recommendations

UA proposes the following recommendations for the Committee's consideration.

- **Robust Data Collection:** Implement a comprehensive system for data collection, benchmarking and reporting that allows for disaggregated reporting for both regular and Fee-Free entrants.
- **Define Success:** Establish clear and measurable definitions of success for the program, including completion rates and employment outcomes.
- **Track Student Outcomes:** Establish mechanisms for tracking student behaviour in and out of a Free TAFE program, to monitor success in education, training and progression into aligned and other occupations.
- **Review and Evaluation:** Ensure that there are arrangements for reviewing and evaluating the Free TAFE agreements.

## Data Collection, Benchmarking, and Reporting

As drafted, the Bill does not require the development of robust mechanisms for data collection, benchmarking, and reporting, with no mechanism for differentiating between the entry of regular students and Free TAFE students. This may lead to issues in trying to assess the impact and effectiveness of the Bill. This is exacerbated by the lack of clarity and information regarding the following:

- **Program success:** There is a lack of clear benchmarks for defining the success of the program. As drafted, the Bill does not require government to collect data on the number of Free TAFE students who complete the program. There should be mechanisms to track student progress and outcomes.
- **Data Reporting:** Currently, the Bill does not appear to provide for disaggregated reporting that distinguishes between regular entry and Fee-Free entry into courses. Data currently collected by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) cannot differentiate between existing Fee-Free TAFE and mainstream TAFE commencements or completions. This makes it impossible to measure the effectiveness of the Fee-Free TAFE program itself.

UA notes the Bill does set out a list of matters to be dealt with in agreements. However, there needs to be an understanding of the form, manner and period within which the information is to be provided to the Commonwealth. This would require more detail than what is currently contained within the Bill.



## Tracking Student Behaviour and Outcomes

To fully monitor and evaluate the success of the Free TAFE program, there must be comprehensive tracking of student behaviour both during and after the program. This should be a requirement of NCVET and all institutions providing Fee-Free places. Such tracking could include:

- **Enrolment Data:** Track all students who enter through the Free TAFE program, distinguishing them from regular enrolments. This could be achieved through the Unique Student Identifier (USI).
- **Completion Rates:** Measure course completion rates specifically for Free TAFE students.
- **Aligned Occupations:** Monitor whether graduates are entering occupations aligned with their training. The Bill states that Free TAFE agreements must include the areas of study, or the industries, that are a national or State priority for FreeT places to be offered.
- **Further Study:** Track whether graduates continue to further study, and what training they take up.
- **Other Occupations:** Track the occupations that Free TAFE graduates eventually take up, even if they are not in direct alignment with their initial training.

## Conclusion

Universities Australia supports the aims of the Free TAFE Bill 2024 but believes that the program's success depends on a more thorough evaluative approach that tracks outcomes with comprehensive, disaggregated data. By improving data collection, and defining clear benchmarks for success, the program can better contribute to Australia's economic and social prosperity.