



Roundtable Summary – Higher Education and VET

Date: Friday 31 May 2024

Hosts: Dr Angela Jackson, Professor Catherine Bennett, Commonwealth Government COVID-19 Response Inquiry

Participants: This roundtable brought together a range of participants from the higher education and vocational education and training (VET) sectors, including peak bodies and unions.

Purpose of this roundtable

- The tertiary education sector plays a critical role providing education opportunities, building the workforce pipeline, undertaking essential research, and contributing to Australia's economy.
- This roundtable provided higher education and VET representatives with the opportunity to share their thoughts and experiences on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and pandemic response on the sectors and steps that could be taken to improve preparedness for future emergencies.

What we heard at the roundtable

- The impact of the pandemic on the sector varied between providers, institutions, courses and locations. The sectors had to pivot quickly to ensure students could continue studying, including online. This placed pressure on students, teachers and support staff. Some students found the transition to fully online learning challenging and withdrew, and have been slow to return to study.
- Academic and professional staff experienced significant stress. Staff moved to online teaching at short notice, while also supporting students and dealing with uncertainty about their own job security. Many staff continue to feel the impacts of the pandemic.
- Increased investment, support and training for staff in developing and delivering quality online learning options would improve preparedness for future disruptions to in-person teaching and training.
- Many students were directly impacted by public health orders. This included international students who were either unable to return to study from their home countries or remained in Australia and were unable to visit home and family until their course concluded.

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- International students who were not eligible for other government supports were significantly affected. Many lost jobs following business closures and required assistance from institutions. A more comprehensive approach to support is needed to recognise the role and value of international students in Australia.
- Institutions provided a range of wraparound supports for students during the pandemic, including financial assistance, mental health services, food access and housing advice. This helped support students until other government and community supports were put in place. Investment in well-coordinated and accessible support is essential to help students continue studying. This is particularly important for student supports that cannot always be easily replicated online.
- Many students' work placements were impacted by the pandemic. The impact depended on sector restrictions and whether online alternatives were available or suitable. The disruption had flow on effects to critical workforce pipelines. Some students made important contributions to the COVID-19 response through voluntary and paid work, though this could not count towards placement requirements. Greater national leadership and coordination of placement requirements among key stakeholders would help minimise and manage this in future crises.
- Data collection, reporting and contact tracing requirements placed a burden on institutions.
- Government support for VET staff was critical to maintaining staffing levels to support changes in delivery models. This enabled a more efficient recovery.
- Australia's research sector contributed its expertise to the COVID-19 response across governments. Reliance on an insecure workforce may impact the sector's long-term research capacity. Ensuring it is able to support the response to future crises requires sustained investment with a secure workforce.

You can read a summary from the related [roundtable on health research](#).