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- *Improving participation and success in VET for disadvantaged learners – regional analysis: support document.*
- *Improving participation and success in VET for disadvantaged learners – provider survey findings: support document.*

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# About the research

## *Improving participation and success in VET for disadvantaged learners*

Stephen Lamb, Quentin Maire, Anne Walstab, Graeme Newman, Esther Doecke, and Merryn Davies, Victoria University

Improving the educational outcomes of the various disadvantaged groups, such as Indigenous Australians, people with a disability, learners with low prior educational attainment and individuals from non-English speaking backgrounds, is a focus of many government policy initiatives centred on social inclusion.

This research takes a regional approach to investigate the educational outcomes for disadvantaged groups, to account for variation in the characteristics of local populations, industries, infrastructure and communities, and then identifies effective practices for improving outcomes for disadvantaged learners.

The research was conducted in three stages. Firstly, a range of data sources was used to identify regions with both high participation and high completion rates of disadvantaged learners in vocational education and training (VET). Secondly, it reports on a national survey of registered training organisations (RTOs) to determine the strategies used to engage and support disadvantaged learners. Lastly, the research more thoroughly explores the high-performing regions through case studies including public, private and community providers, aiming to better understand why they achieve higher-than-average results with disadvantaged learners.

### Key messages

- Supporting disadvantaged learners is successful when it is an institution-wide commitment. The institute should have a defined set of initiatives in place, such as providing learning support and matching more experienced staff with high-need learners, rather than relying on ad hoc practices.
- Building strong relationships with employers and other service agencies in the community is important but requires adequate resourcing. These relationships, which help training providers gain a better understanding of the local community, the types of disadvantaged learners within it, and the available employment and labour market opportunities, enable them to better support their students.
- While diverse groups of disadvantaged learners are widely offered support, it is necessary to customise the support to the individual, particularly for culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) learners and learners with low levels of prior educational attainment. Support includes tailored services to the individual's specific learning needs, such as extra literacy and numeracy support, as well as promoting the benefits of specific outreach programs in the community.
- The development of regional frameworks that coordinate relationships between local community groups, VET providers and regional labour markets would likely benefit all involved. Collaboration helps to develop a comprehensive and coherent approach to the engagement of disadvantaged learners and may help to strengthen the relationship between VET completion and relevant job opportunities.

Dr Craig Fowler  
Managing Director, NCVET

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# Executive summary

## Introduction

The vocational education and training (VET) sector in Australia enrolls learners from a wide variety of backgrounds in a diverse range of settings, fields of education and programs. As a result, learner participation and success can be uneven. Previous studies have shown that there are large regional variations in VET study across Australia and that regional frameworks provide a useful mechanism for identifying and reporting effective practices and approaches that promote engagement and improve outcomes (see, for example, Walstab & Lamb 2008). It is important to identify the VET providers who are successful in engaging different groups of learners and helping them to complete their education and training so that we can understand and extend the use of good practice. Identifying the most effective practices VET providers use is useful in the context of a national policy agenda which aims to increase the levels of educational attainment of the population (Council of Australian Governments [COAG] 2009).

This study draws on national administrative and provider-based survey and interview data to identify effective practices for improving VET participation and learner success. Knowing the types of interventions and activities that work best to engage learners and promote learner success can assist providers to improve the quality of their VET delivery. Better delivery helps VET to work well for all and can assist policymakers to target support for providers, thus raising levels of engagement and completion.

## The study

Disadvantaged learners<sup>1</sup> are defined as Indigenous learners, learners with a disability, learners from a culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) background, people who are unemployed, or have low levels of prior educational attainment (not having attained Year 12 or an Australian Qualifications Framework [AQF] certificate III or above). The study aims to identify the most effective policies and practices used by providers to improve the participation and outcomes of disadvantaged learners.

The study used a mixed methods approach to data collection and analysis, based on a layered, three-stage research design:

- starting from the broadest level of coverage, national mapping of regional participation and performance in VET, using administrative datasets, identified the regions displaying high levels of engagement and completion for different groups of disadvantaged learners
- a national survey of VET providers then identified the successful practices used to promote engagement and better outcomes
- eight case studies documented instances of strong regional and local practice in the participation and outcomes of disadvantaged learners.

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<sup>1</sup> These groups were defined by the National VET Equity Advisory Council (NVEAC) and exclude learners from low socio-economic backgrounds who would otherwise be included in the definition of 'disadvantaged'.

The accompanying support documents provide further details on the research process including the theoretical framework, methodology, data collection and analyses.

## Findings

### Regions with high levels of VET participation and completion

Participation in vocational training varies markedly across regions of Australia. The research uses Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS; 2011) Statistical Area Level 3 (SA3) as the regional or geographical unit (there are approximately 351 SA3s across Australia). The mean regional participation rate of the adult population in VET in 2014 was 7%, but this varied from a low of 2% in one region to a high of over 17% in another. Some regions have very high rates of participation in VET, particularly for disadvantaged learners. For Indigenous populations the participation rates vary from under 5% to over 40%, depending on the region. For people who are unemployed, the rates of VET participation vary from below 5% to over 50%, and for those with low attainment, from 2% to over 20%. Similar variations occur for award completions, with the rates of completion ranging from below 10% in some regions to over 50% in others, depending on the learner group.

Some of the variations in levels of engagement and outcomes are due to features of the regions themselves, such as industry profiles, employment, VET provision, population characteristics and types of learners. However, not all are due to these influences. Some regions achieve comparatively high levels of participation and completion after taking account of these factors, due to the policies and practices employed in the regions.

Regression models were used to control for differences in regional characteristics and identify high-performing regions for different groups of disadvantaged learners. Plotting performance in VET participation against VET completion by disadvantaged learners revealed important regional differences. Some regions were able to deliver higher-than-expected participation rates but not completion, while others had low levels of VET participation associated with high completion rates for disadvantaged learners. Importantly, certain regions did well on both participation and completion, after controlling for differences in regional characteristics. The analysis identified 13 regions that achieved high participation and high completion, all else being equal. These regions formed the focus of the case studies. The regions of focus were: Bendigo and Shepparton in Victoria, Albany and the 'Great South West' region, and Perth in Western Australia, Huon and Bruny Island in Tasmania, the Yorke Peninsula in South Australia, Rocklea and Acacia Ridge in Queensland, and Lithgow and Mudgee in New South Wales.

### Practices and strategies supporting high levels of participation and completion

What practices and policies help some regions to achieve exceptional results, from which other regions might learn? A national online survey of registered training organisations (RTOs) was undertaken in July and August of 2016 to collect information that could help address this question. In total, 994 individual RTOs of the 3704 contacted participated in the national online survey, with 1009 unique respondents. In addition to this, 28 in-depth interviews were conducted with RTOs across 11 of the 13 high-performing regions to help identify the effective practices used with disadvantaged learners at the regional and individual provider levels. These RTOs were a mix of TAFE institutes/universities,

community providers and private providers. The interviews were able to flesh out the themes generated by the data and survey analyses and to address the key research questions on effective practices for disadvantaged learners.

The results of the survey were mapped against regional performance on participation and completion (the first stage of the study) to show that a combination of course and learner-based strategies are used by training organisations to improve outcomes for disadvantaged learners.

*Course-based strategies* are used across courses and are available for all learners. At this level, the most common strategies for supporting learner participation and completion are:

- the use of flexible delivery options (for example, offering program delivery outside the provider in community contexts)
- partnering in the delivery of training
- having specific staff positions dedicated to understanding and meeting the needs of learners
- building relationships with employers to help learners to gain work experience in their individual areas
- customising articulation arrangements to promote employment or further training opportunities.

*Learner-level support* is more likely to be conceived in terms of individual wellbeing, with strategies geared to the provision of interventions on a case-by-case basis. Effective strategies at the learner level include case management and counselling. However, a number of strategies were identified as being particularly useful in supporting positive outcomes for certain categories of learners. For example:

- over 60% of the training organisations in the regions with the highest rates of completion for unemployed learners use mentoring;
- many had partnerships with community agencies for the provision of auxiliary support such as housing, transport and material assistance;
- many had support units for particular groups of learners with specific needs;
- some employed dedicated staff to manage the needs of specific groups of disadvantaged learners.

Training providers in high-performing regions more often adopt the following strategies:

- using community member programs and engaging in community partnerships
- co-locating education and training with other community services
- delivering programs in community settings
- tailoring programs specifically for learners with low skills
- building relationships with local employers to help learners gain work experience
- providing intensive course and career guidance.

The case studies of TAFE providers in regions where disadvantaged groups have high rates of participation and completion reveal many useful strategies. These include:

- having an institution-wide commitment to supporting disadvantaged learners
- providing learning-related and auxiliary supports
- ensuring supports are available when and where learners need them
- matching experienced staff with high-need learners
- tailoring delivery to learner need and context.

The central role given to individualised support confirms the importance of learner-level strategies for fostering enhanced outcomes for disadvantaged learners, at least from the provider point of view. The case studies conducted with community organisations and private providers revealed other positive strategies, including:

- establishing a close connection with the community
- demonstrating responsiveness and flexibility in meeting the needs of individuals and their communities
- valuing partnerships with other providers (although constraints to such partnerships were also raised)
- adopting a learner-centred approach to provision.

## Conclusion

VET plays a crucial role in improving the education and work opportunities of disadvantaged Australians. Some regions have succeeded in achieving high levels of participation in and completion by disadvantaged learners, demonstrating that it would be possible for other regions to improve the VET opportunities and outcomes of disadvantaged learners. While some regional differences in economy, population and context account for the performance differences, some regions achieve better-than-expected success as a result of the strategies and practices they adopt, some of which are organised regionally.

Among the different approaches adopted by providers in the high-performing regions, the most successful include:

- building an institution-wide commitment to supporting disadvantaged learners (as opposed to relying on ad hoc initiatives)
- building strong community relationships with local employers and service agencies
- developing mechanisms for individualised support, taking into account the personal situation and needs of the learner.

These findings have important implications for VET policy and practice:

- Regions are an appropriate frame of reference for both analysing VET performance and developing policies, strategies and practices to support disadvantaged learners. Provision is often organised administratively by governments and communities along regional lines. The case studies showed that collaboration between VET providers, external agencies and community networks helps to develop a comprehensive and coherent approach to the engagement of disadvantaged learners. Such collaboration tended to occur amongst

the smaller RTOs, both community-owned and private. Community-owned providers had a particularly good understanding of local labour market needs, often through long-term association with the community or locality. They also had reputations for trustworthiness and success in engaging high-need learners.

- VET providers can make a difference to their local communities when they adopt an institutional commitment to supporting the groups who need it most. Whole-of-staff approaches that take learner circumstances into consideration are critical, as is ensuring that staff are appropriately qualified.
- While strategies for improving the participation of disadvantaged learners in VET are not always the same as those that support completion, successful VET providers focus on improving *both* participation and completion for disadvantaged learners.
- Disadvantaged learners are not a homogeneous group, and effective VET providers develop tailored strategies for addressing the various forms of disadvantage. For instance, offering a relevant range of basic qualifications can be particularly important for people with low levels of prior educational attainment.

# Introduction

Vocational education and training plays a vital role in promoting opportunity for disadvantaged Australians. It is a stepping stone for many into further education, training and work. It is also an essential tool for tackling a range of barriers to workforce participation, which include long-term unemployment, early school leaving, low literacy or numeracy skills, and the need to retrain or upskill. As a result, VET is a fundamental contributor to productivity, workforce development and social inclusion.

Despite this, learner participation and completion in VET across regions of Australia is uneven, and efforts are needed to improve outcomes, particularly for disadvantaged learners. Through the implementation of effective interventions and the formulation of supportive policy, VET providers and policymakers can improve learner engagement and success. This study identifies regions which succeed in supporting participation and completion for disadvantaged learners. It then examines the strategies likely to support enhanced participation and completion in VET for disadvantaged groups.

Monitoring the participation and outcomes of groups of learners for whom opportunities have traditionally been poorer can gauge how well VET systems and processes promote inclusion. Consistent with the groups identified some years ago by the National VET Equity Advisory Council (NVEAC 2009), this study defines disadvantaged learners as:

- Indigenous learners
- learners with a disability
- learners from a culturally and linguistically diverse background (CALD)
- unemployed learners
- learners with low levels of prior educational attainment, defined here as having not completed Year 12 or a certificate III or above.

These categories are not mutually exclusive, as disadvantage can be compounding and composite. However, participation and completion rates are provided separately for each of the main categories of learners.

## Improving participation and success in VET

The VET sector in Australia, which is relatively diverse, includes a network of TAFE (technical and further education) institutions, with over 1300 campuses across the country. TAFE, as the main public provider, has had a long commitment and record of providing opportunities for learners experiencing disadvantage. TAFE's scale of provision and wide geographical reach means that it has links to communities across regional Australia, where it often plays a central role. The Australian VET system also supports a large network of private providers (over 3000), many of which have developed a strong track record in meeting the learning needs of particular groups of disadvantaged learners. Enterprise registered training organisations (ERTOs) provide opportunities for learning and skill development built into the job. For people who have experienced disadvantage in their lives, this gives an opportunity to re-engage in learning after gaining confidence

through their participation in the workforce. Adult and community education (ACE) providers also contribute to the engagement of learners who experience disadvantage or who are disengaged from learning. They offer access to foundation skills and provide pathways into further learning, community participation and work.

Collectively, the VET sector in Australia enrolls learners from a wide variety of backgrounds in a diverse range of settings, fields of study and program levels, but learner participation and success is uneven. Previous studies have shown that there are large regional variations in the take-up of VET across Australia (Walstab & Lamb 2008), and that regional frameworks provide a useful mechanism for identifying and reporting effective characteristics and practice in VET institutions (Walstab & Lamb).

Much current work explores ways to widen the participation and success of disadvantaged populations in Australian higher education (Beltman, Samani & Ala'i 2017; Nelson et al. 2017; Zacharias 2017; Zacharias et al. 2016). In the VET sector, the participation and outcomes of groups such as Indigenous Australians (Windley 2017), skilled migrant women (Webb, Beale & Faine 2013), early school leavers (Myconos, Clarke & te Riele 2016), and learners with a disability or limited English language skills (McVicar & Tabasso 2016) have also been investigated. However, the role of regional and training provider characteristics and strategies has received less attention. This research addresses this gap in the current understanding of patterns of VET participation and completion for disadvantaged learners. In investigating how VET participation and learner outcomes vary across types of providers and locations, it generates findings on how learners from all backgrounds and locations may successfully engage in and complete the VET programs most appropriate to their needs.

National and state and territory policy agendas explicitly aim to increase the levels of educational attainment of the adult population (COAG 2009). This objective is particularly important for disadvantaged groups. For instance, one of the goals of the national 'Closing the Gap' initiative is to 'halve the gap for Indigenous Australians aged 20–24 in Year 12 attainment or equivalent attainment rates (by 2020)' (Commonwealth of Australia 2017, p.43). VET is pivotal to meeting those aims, especially in lifting the qualification levels of disadvantaged groups.

To understand and extend the use of good practice, the initial step is to identify VET providers with greater success in engaging different groups of disadvantaged learners and helping them to attain qualifications. However, as noted above, research into completion and retention in VET is not as well developed as in other areas of education and training (such as higher education and schools), partly because of methodological challenges. Defining completion in VET is more complex than in the school system, given the intentions of learners and the lifelong learning continuum (Bednarz 2012; Lamb & Walstab 2010). For VET learners (and particularly for diverse cohorts), measures of satisfactory completion may involve broader consideration of learner engagement and pathway outcomes.

Recognising which VET characteristics and interventions work best in engaging learners and promoting learner success is important, in that it assists providers to improve the quality of their VET delivery so that VET works well for all. It also assists system authorities to target support for providers and therefore raise the levels of performance in learner retention and completion.

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**There are large regional variations in the take-up of VET across Australia.**

This study seeks to use national, regional and provider data on VET delivery and practice to:

- identify the characteristics associated with stronger participation and outcomes at the regional and provider levels for disadvantaged groups;
- examine successful provider strategies for supporting higher levels of participation and completion of disadvantaged learners.

## Previous work

### Regional differences in VET

Most research into VET in Australia is conducted at the national or state and territory levels. Quantitative research in VET often provides state- or national-level overviews of certain aspects of the VET system, while qualitative research, even when focused on local contexts, is often used to draw implications for the VET sector as a whole. The organisation of VET systems, the availability of data and resources, and the reporting mechanisms currently in place explain why these levels of analyses have become predominant. Research at the national and state levels is important, including as an accountability and policy-development instrument (for example, Atkinson & Stanwick 2016; Noonan 2016). However, one of the implications is that regional and local differences are less visible.

Understanding regional differences in VET is important, since skill needs and their application can vary across different areas of the country. Recent research described the existence of 'regional occupational trends' (Snell, Gekara & Gatt 2016, p.21) to account for the differentiated ways by which labour markets change in different regions. Buchanan et al. (2001, p.11) coined the term 'skill ecosystem' to refer to the 'clusters of high, intermediate and low level competencies in a particular region or industry shaped by interlocking networks of firms, markets and institutions'. A focus on VET at the regional level can help to understand these ecosystems and the extent to which they facilitate the participation and completion of disadvantaged learners.

Regional diversity in Australian VET has received heightened attention in recent years, with state-based initiatives established to understand the need for VET at a regional level. In Victoria, for instance, the state is committed to investing in regions with specific training needs and where the market model of provision does not deliver sufficient or relevant training (Victorian Department of Education and Training 2016). Researchers have also contributed to understanding this diversity. For instance, Guenther et al. (2017) studied Indigenous learning in remote locations. Webb et al. (2017a) examined the role of race and ethnicity in the experience of skilled humanitarian migrants in Australian VET, including in regional Australia. A comparison of higher vocational education participation in Australia and England also revealed that living in regional Australia is a disadvantage for participation in VET (Webb et al. 2017b). Researchers focusing specifically on disadvantaged students in higher education have also studied regional and remote locations (Cardak et al. 2017; Nelson et al. 2017).

The growing body of research on education and training in remote or rural areas is essential for shedding light on often-overlooked regions of Australia. Most of this research, however, does not intend to *compare* regions with one another. The various studies of specific regions (for example, remote or rural) can thus be thought of as specific case studies positioned within a broader project designed to grasp the diversity of VET across Australia. A direct

comparison of the participation and success of disadvantaged learners across all regions of Australia can thus provide an original contribution to this broader project. In identifying regions that are successful in supporting VET participation and completion for disadvantaged learners, a comparison such as this also makes it possible to engage in further research to identify the positive practices and strategies used in these regions. This reflection underpins the three-stage research design used in this research.

## Wide range of benefits provided by VET

VET is the largest education and training sector in Australia (Atkinson & Stanwick 2016). Its reach into the regions across Australia is vital, given that it affords individuals and their families various benefits, especially for disadvantaged groups (Richardson & Teese 2008). A recent paper using longitudinal data showed that individuals typically benefit from undertaking a VET qualification, 'especially a first post-school qualification or a new higher one', and that their 'economic outcomes are better after they complete their qualification than they were before them' (Polidano & Ryan 2016, p.24). This finding is supported by other research reporting a good return from the investment at the individual level for higher-level VET qualifications such as advanced diplomas, diplomas, and certificates III and IV (Griffin 2016). These employment and economic benefits are important, particularly for disadvantaged learners with limited workforce opportunities.

Education and training facilitates greater levels of social inclusion, and VET plays a significant contributing role as it is 'highly accessible and adaptable' (Buddelmeyer & Polidano 2016, p.2). VET can contribute to the development of socio-emotional skills, learner confidence and an overall improvement in social cohesion and positive communities. For instance, an improvement to learner wellbeing and outlook through VET qualifications is found across all levels of training (Griffin 2016). This improvement is particularly evident in lower-level qualifications such as certificates I and II. Although they result in lower financial returns by comparison with the higher qualifications, 'these qualifications may result in other, non-financial, benefits to training to learners, such as leading to further study or improved self-esteem, self-confidence and wellbeing' (Griffin 2016, p.7). Using regional case studies of depressed economic areas, Snell, Gekara and Gatt's (2016) report that a key benefit that retrenched workers in residual industries found in VET is its capacity to support the development of transferable skills.

## VET and disadvantaged learners

The importance of VET for disadvantaged learners has meant that this cohort has been a focus of VET research for some time. The National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) has previously released annual reports containing the participation and outcome statistics for the different categories of disadvantaged learners (for example, NCVER 2015a). These statistics highlight the labour market benefits of VET for disadvantaged groups. In 2016, the improvement in level of employment after training compared with pre-training was superior for Indigenous as opposed to non-Indigenous VET graduates; for learners with a disability as opposed to learners without a disability; and for CALD learners as opposed to learners with English as their primary language (NCVER 2016a).

Data published by NCVER are also useful to show that 'disadvantaged learners' are not a unified group, and there are variations in participation and completion between categories of disadvantaged learners. For instance, students from remote and rural localities made up

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**The four types of effective interventions – outreach, pedagogy, wellbeing and pathways – are seen as equally important in the process of supporting disengaged or disadvantaged learners through an education and training pathway.**

14% of all VET learners in 2014, while Indigenous learners represented less than 4% (NCVER 2015a). Subject-completion rates were also lower for Indigenous learners than for learners from rural or remote regions (NCVER 2015a). At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that some learners experience multiple forms of disadvantage, which can affect their engagement in VET. For instance, while participation in VET has increased over the years for Indigenous learners in remote locations, their completion rates and employment outcomes remain weak (Guenther et al. 2017).

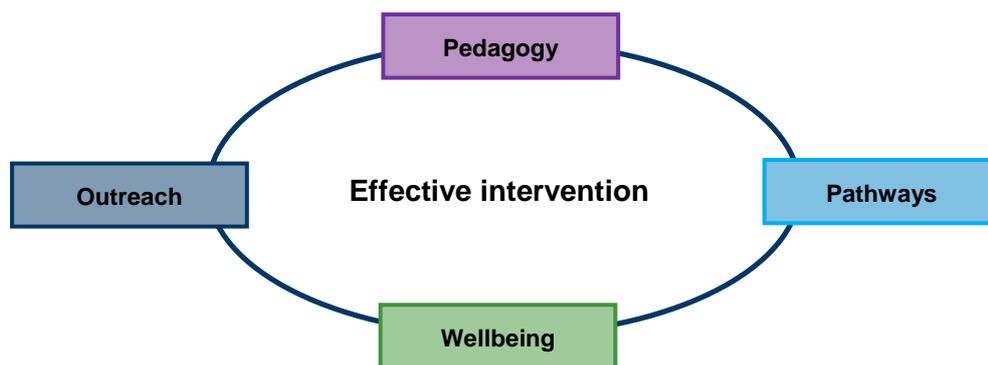
Disadvantaged learners have been found to be under-represented in higher-level vocational education (Gale et al. 2013). Webb et al. (2017a) found that the impact of higher vocational education on social mobility for disadvantaged learners was characterised by both opportunities (scope for mobility) and uncertainties (low take-up and completion). Recent research also focused on a broader range of VET outcomes for disadvantaged learners. McVicar and Tabasso (2016) specifically examined the impact of disadvantage on VET completion and employment gaps, thus assessing the transitions of disadvantaged learners from training to work. They revealed a 'completion gap' between disadvantaged learners and other VET learners, but also highlighted the fact that employment gaps are not reducible to and aligned with completion gaps (McVicar & Tabasso 2016). The authors also noted the importance of the pre-VET work situation of disadvantaged learners (as opposed to their course-completion rates only) to explain their post-VET outcomes. Finally, although this study focuses on participation and completion, positive outcomes from VET can go beyond training and work. For Indigenous learners, for example, VET training can result in enhanced self-confidence and identity, the development of foundational skills and an improvement in local community ownership (Guenther et al. 2017), representing positive personal, cultural and social transformation.

### **Strategies to support participation and completion for disadvantaged learners**

To identify successful strategies and practices for disadvantaged learners, the second and third stages of the project draw on a model of effective interventions developed in Davies, Lamb and Doecke (2011). The model groups the different strategies to support learner participation, retention and completion into four categories: outreach, wellbeing, pedagogy and pathways (see figure 1). Each of these is seen as equally important in the process of supporting disadvantaged learners through an education and training pathway.

*Outreach* strategies aim to create a connection with the individual to identify their needs and inform them of available options. *Wellbeing* strategies aim to overcome the personal obstacles disengaged learners may have to engage in learning. *Pedagogy* strategies aim to adapt the delivery of training to the needs and dispositions of the learner. *Pathways* strategies aim to help disengaged individuals to link education and training to goals and pathways beyond the training itself (Davies, Lamb & Doecke 2011).

**Figure 1 Effective intervention model for disengaged learners**



Source: Davies, Lamb and Doecke (2011).

The model was initially developed as an instrument for addressing the four types of challenges disengaged learners often experience: access (for example, poor knowledge of study options); application (for example, income-support needs, weak skills); aspiration (for example, limited career plans); and achievement (for example, poor prior experiences of learning or early school leaving). One of the strengths of the model is that it recognises that engaging disadvantaged learners is not sufficient to provide them with improved outcomes. Supporting them throughout their VET training is also important, and the model offers four types of strategies to assist in achieving this.

The model has proved effective for categorising the variety of interventions and strategies used to promote enhanced opportunities and outcomes for disadvantaged learners. Accordingly, its multifaceted structure was used for the second and third stages of this project. The survey of VET providers gave equal consideration to the four components of the model, with the aim of maximising the range of strategies and practices it could capture. The list of items included in the questionnaire was based on the strategies previously identified as forming effective interventions. At the same time, the inclusion of text fields in the survey allowed for the emergence of new types of strategies. Similarly, the interview schedule developed for the case studies addressed all four components of the model, and the choice of semi-structured interviews ensured that respondents would have the opportunity to reflect on their own ideas of successful interventions. The primary advantage of the model lies in its flexibility: it does not dictate the appropriate strategies but simply provides a framework for organising the diversity of strategies. It makes the emergence of new strategies possible and thus allows for a combination of deductive and inductive reasoning in the identification of successful strategies. It also leaves open the possibility of reorganising the framework (for example, adding a new category or merging two previously separated categories), if relevant.

Guenther et al. (2017) have recently developed a *retention* model to support Indigenous learners in VET. The model highlights the importance of: constructing relationships between the learners; the quality of training; family and community support; and training coordination and support (Guenther et al. 2017). These aspects align strongly with two of the categories from the model outlined above: *pedagogy* and *wellbeing*. The Guenther et al. (2017) model emphasises the importance of coordination with the local community and institution-level commitment to support disadvantaged learners.

## Methodology

This study combines national administrative and provider-based survey and interview data to identify effective practices for improving participation and learner success in VET. The three-stage design is layered, beginning with the highest level of coverage, using national population data to examine participation and completion rates. It then progresses to a survey of a national sample of providers to explore practices associated with differences in population rates. Finally, it provides examples of effective practice at regional and local levels using case studies of individual regions and VET providers. The accompanying support documents provide further details on the research framework (including the theoretical framework and methodology), data collection and analyses.

### Regional analysis of participation and outcomes using a national database

The first stage of the research involved building and analysing a national database of population, labour force statistics, and education and training data. The regional analysis draws on four data sources:

- the 2014 individual level 'total VET activity' database (supplied by NCVET as a confidentialised unit record file)
- the 2015 'Government-funded student outcomes survey' results (provided by NCVET as a confidentialised unit record file)
- 2014 Estimated Resident Population data (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS] 2015)
- 2011 Census of Population and Housing Data (ABS, 2012).

An account of this stage of research is provided in the next section of this report. The accompanying NCVET support document, *Improving participation and success in VET for disadvantaged learners: regional analysis* (available at <<https://www.ncvet.edu.au>>), outlines in more detail the data sources, methodology, findings and technical notes associated with this phase of the study.

The database was used to map the participation of the Australian population in training at a national and regional level. The objective was to assess the current levels of engagement by disadvantaged learners in VET (including by provider types and Australian Qualifications Framework [AQF] levels). The analysis was not restricted to participation but also extended to measures of success, which included completion, learner engagement and transition outcomes.

A synthesis of this national data involved modelling regional differences in VET participation and outcomes. Importantly, this permitted the identification of 13 regions with particularly high levels of participation and achievement for disadvantaged learners, after controlling for regional differences in community profiles and labour markets. From these 13 regions, it was possible to investigate further, through case study work, the practices and policies contributing to the high level of success.

### National survey of provider practice

The second stage of the study design was to undertake a national survey of VET providers to collect information on provider strategies and practices that support higher levels of participation and completion for disadvantaged learners. The use of a national survey made

it possible to map provider responses against regional success in enrolling disadvantaged learners and leading them to completion (identified in the next section).

While the first stage of the study focused on more objective measures of participation and completion using administrative data, the second stage focused more on subjective appraisals of success in supporting disadvantaged learners, taken from the provider point of view. Self-reports of successful practices and strategies need to be treated with some caution since the extent to which these strategies are effective is uncertain. Nevertheless, the reports are important for gleaning provider-level information on successful support strategies, made stronger by being compared with regional differences in learner experiences. Even if the strategies are only partially used by respondents, they represent informed reflections on fostering the participation and completion of disadvantaged learners.

The survey instrument was developed according to the four types of effective strategies for supporting learner engagement and completion identified in Davies, Lamb and Doecke (2011) and in light of the empirical results in the literature on VET participation and completion for disadvantaged learners. It contained four sections: the enrolment of disadvantaged learners at the RTO and strategies in place to support them; the use of specific resources to identify disadvantaged learners and their needs; support practices for disadvantaged learners' participation, progress and completion; and system-level policy support and strategies to promote further training and employment. Multiple-choice questions made up the majority of the questionnaire, with the last section covered by two open-ended questions.

Directors/CEOs of registered training organisations and their contact details were identified on the Training.gov website. They were contacted by email and invited to complete the survey or nominate a representative (for example, Equity Officer or Student Support Officer) to complete the survey on their behalf. When respondents were asked about their focus on or success with disadvantaged learners, they were asked to provide examples of what 'focus' or 'success' mean.

The survey was administered to all RTOs eligible to provide VET training to disadvantaged adult learners. These include three categories of training providers: TAFE institutes, skills institutes, polytechnics and universities; community-based adult education providers; and privately operated RTOs. Since the project focus was disadvantaged learners no longer in school, the sample excluded providers of school-based apprenticeships or traineeships. In the defined national RTO population for this study, private providers made up over 90% of VET providers, while TAFE institutes and assimilated providers made up less than 2%. However, in terms of numbers of learners, it must be noted that, in the VET sector as a whole, more than 20% of VET learners were in TAFE institutes in 2015 (NCVER 2016a).

The survey was undertaken over five weeks in mid-2016 and a total of 3704 RTOs were contacted. The final sample contains 994 cases, corresponding to a 27% response rate. Response rates were higher for TAFE institutes (55%) and private providers (47%) than for community-based adult education providers (25%).

The results of the survey are presented in the third section.

## Regional case studies of strong performance

The 13 regions identified from the national regional analysis as successful in fostering participation and completion in VET for disadvantaged learners were used as a source for the case studies of effective practice. The case studies comprised interviews with at least one of each of the three types of providers per region. Because it was not possible to identify specific RTOs working with disadvantaged learners in the region, two regions were excluded from this process for practical reasons. During the case study phase, several regions were aggregated (for example, three regions aggregated as one 'area' in Queensland) based on the common RTOs serving them. These procedures resulted in a total of 28 in-depth interviews across 11 regions (eight 'areas'). In six of the eight areas (that is, after aggregation of regions), at least one interview was conducted with each of the three types of training providers.

The interview schedule was initially constructed around the work of each training provider with all categories of disadvantaged learner. Interviewees were then asked to nominate one specific group they were particularly good at supporting. In order to provide a common framework for respondents to consider their successful strategies, the interviewer used the model of effective practice for disadvantaged learners presented in Davies, Lamb and Doecke (2011). Specific questions were then asked about the four types of strategies: pedagogy, pathways, wellbeing and outreach.

The results from this stage of the study are reported in the fourth section of the report.



# Regional analysis of VET participation and completion

Participation in vocational training varies markedly across the different regions of Australia.

This section of the report presents the findings from a regional analysis of VET participation and completion across Australia designed to identify communities exhibiting high levels of engagement and success with learners from disadvantaged backgrounds. The regions performing at higher-than-expected levels, in the context of the demographic and economic profile of their community, invite further subsequent investigation through case studies of effective practice carried out in the fourth section of the report. These high-performing regions are identified through a series of analyses. The method of estimating regional rates and measuring VET participation and completions is detailed in appendix A.

## VET participation rates

Participation in vocational training varies markedly across different regions of Australia. Table 1 shows the mean regional rates of participation across all SA3s for all students and for different groups of learners. As well as the mean rates, figures are provided showing the standard deviation, minimum and maximum rates, and the range of rates. The minimum and maximum rates show the spread of participation rates across regions.

The overall mean regional participation rate in the VET activity in scope for this study is 7%. The results show that, on average, 15.1% of the adult Indigenous population within regions are enrolled in VET. Furthermore, the mean rate of participation in VET across all regions is 6.6% for the culturally and linguistically diverse population, 19.4% for the unemployed and 7.5% for people with low levels of prior educational attainment.

**Table 1 Regional VET participation rates, for all learners and disadvantaged learners, 2014 (%)**

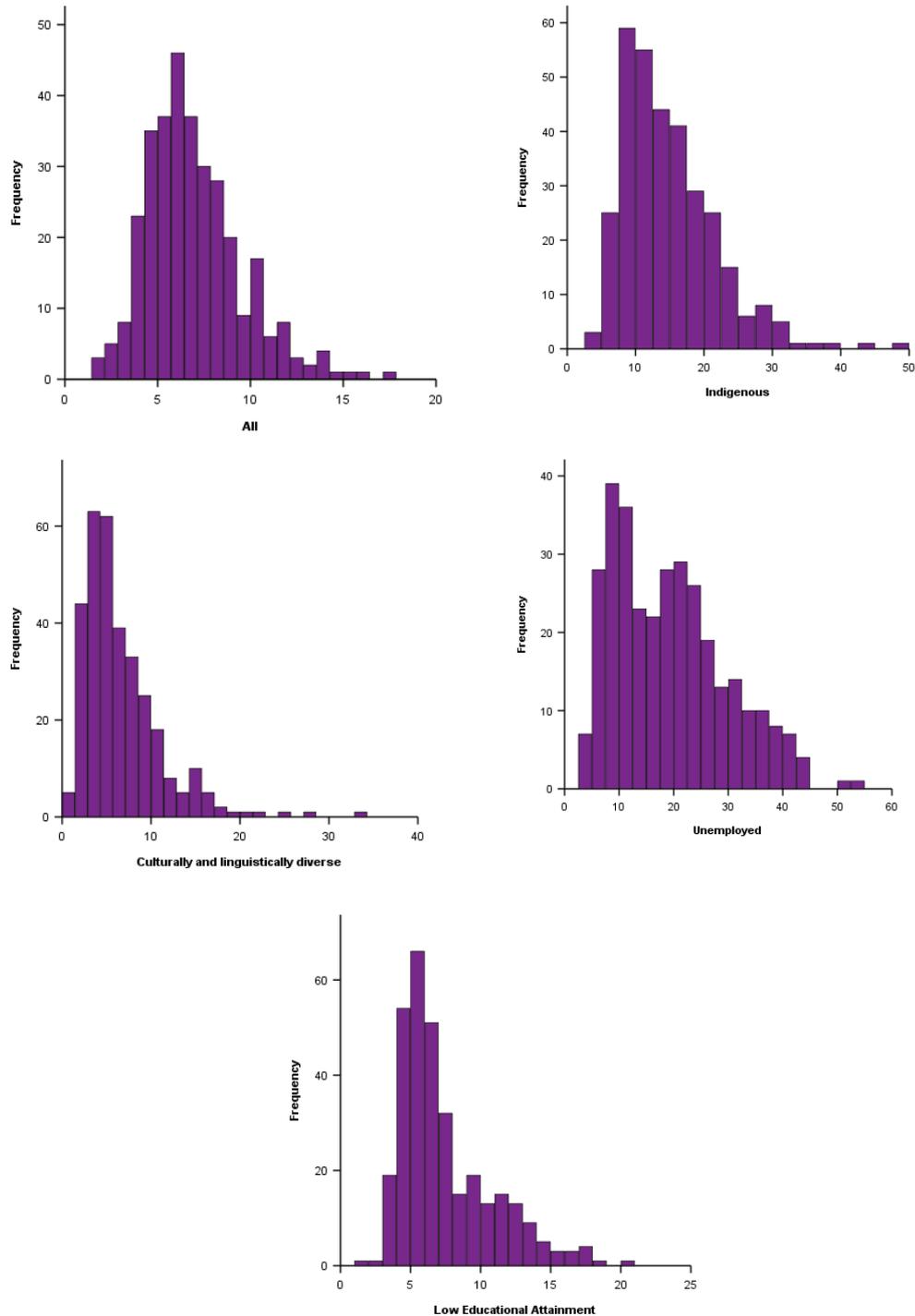
	Mean	Standard deviation	Minimum	Maximum	Range
All learners	7.0	2.6	2.0	17.2	15.1
Indigenous	15.1	7.6	3.0	57.2	54.2
CALD	6.6	4.4	1.1	34.2	33.1
Unemployed	19.4	10.3	3.8	53.7	50.0
Low prior educational attainment	7.5	3.3	1.9	20.9	19.0

Source: Calculations derived from the National VET Provider Collection (2014), unpublished.

The full extent of the variations across regions is shown in figure 2, which presents the distributions of regional VET participation rates for different groups of disadvantaged learners. The bars in each graph report the number of regions. The spread of bars reveals the differences in participation rates for each learner group. For example, the VET participation rates for learners who are unemployed range from 3.8% in six regions to over 50% in two regions. This range means that some regions are achieving high levels of engagement in VET for those members of their communities who are unemployed, while others are not. There is a wide spread for Indigenous populations as well. For Indigenous populations, the rates vary from under 5% to over 40%, depending on the region. For individuals with low educational attainment (mainly early school leavers), the rates vary from 2% to over 20%.

VET participation rates vary across regions and depend on the types of VET provision available, including the number of providers, the courses they offer (AQF levels), the types of providers (TAFE, private, community) and the mode of delivery (campus-based, online, workplace and community delivery). The relationship between participation and provision is evident in a series of correlation analyses which examine the associations between regional rates of VET participation for different learner groups and regional VET course and provider characteristics. These are reported in table 2.

**Figure 2 Distributions of regional VET participation rates, by learner population, 2014**



Source: Participation estimates derived using enrolment data supplied by NCVER from the National VET Provider Collection, and population data from the Estimated Resident Population data series (ABS, 2015) and the Census of Population and Housing (ABS, 2012).

The strength of the association can be identified by the level of statistical significance and the size of the correlation coefficient. Regions with relatively high concentrations of learners in TAFE institutes or universities, for example, correspond to higher rates of participation in VET by Indigenous learners (significant to 0.01 with positive correlation coefficients of 0.155). Conversely, regions with higher proportions of learners enrolled with private providers are associated with the lower engagement of Indigenous learners, learners with a disability, CALD and unemployed learners (significant to 0.01 with correlation coefficients of -0.265, -0.193, -0.144, -0.195 respectively). The reverse relationship exists for learners with low levels of educational attainment, as there is a positive association with more private provider activity and a negative association with TAFE and university activity (coefficients of 0.141 significant to 0.05, and -0.273 significant to 0.01 respectively).

**Table 2 Correlations between regional VET participation rates for different learners and regional VET course and provider characteristics, 2014**

		Regional VET participation rates (Learner groups)				
		Indigenous	Disability	CALD	Unemployed	Low attainment
Provider type	% TAFE/university	.155**	.019	.046	.031	-.273**
	% Community providers	.372**	.620**	.311**	.544**	.453**
	% Private providers	-.265**	-.193**	-.144**	-.195**	.141*
AQF level	% Advanced	-.215**	-.264**	-.297**	-.097	-.291**
	% Middle	-.364**	-.392**	-.325**	-.363**	-.122*
	% Basic	.385**	.453**	.437**	.319**	.286**
Delivery mode	% Classroom	.118*	.096	.185**	.232**	.396**
	% Electronic	.140*	.024	-.051	.108	-.217**
	% Employment-based	.004	-.137*	-.134*	-.132*	-.231**
Delivery locations	N TAFE/university sites	-.013	.013	.028	-.031	.183**
	N Community provider sites	.309**	.398**	.355**	.436**	.531**
	N Private provider sites	-.099	-.185**	-.125*	-.190**	.024

Notes: \*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

Source: Estimates derived from the National VET Provider Collection, 2014, unpublished.

These associations, however, are eclipsed by the significant and large positive correlations found between regional participation in community providers and higher rates of participation across all disadvantaged learner groups (see table 2). Highlighting the role that community providers play in serving some of the most disadvantaged populations, the associations are strongest for learners with a disability, unemployed learners and learners with low prior educational attainment (all significant at the 0.01 level, coefficients 0.620, 0.544, 0.453 respectively).

This is mirrored in the significant and strong correlations between the number of community provider sites delivering VET in a region and the rates of participation of different groups of disadvantaged learners. Regions which have more delivery locations for community providers have stronger participation rates for every disadvantaged learner group.

Other interesting findings in table 2 concern the results for the regions with higher proportions of students undertaking basic-level VET courses (certificate I or certificate II). Across all disadvantaged learner groups, there is a significant positive association between

the amount of basic VET activity occurring in a region and VET participation rates. Other levels of VET (advanced, middle) see a negative relationship with participation.

There are also some differences across mode of delivery. Regions where there are relatively higher concentrations of learners undertaking classroom-based learning correspond to higher rates of participation by learners with low attainment, the unemployed, and CALD learners (significant to 0.01, correlation coefficients of 0.396, 0.232 and 0.185 respectively). This pattern carries through to Indigenous learners (significant to 0.05, coefficient 0.118), but not for people with a disability. Employment and online-based courses see a significant negative correlation between classroom-based learning and learners with low levels of prior educational attainment relative to other groups.

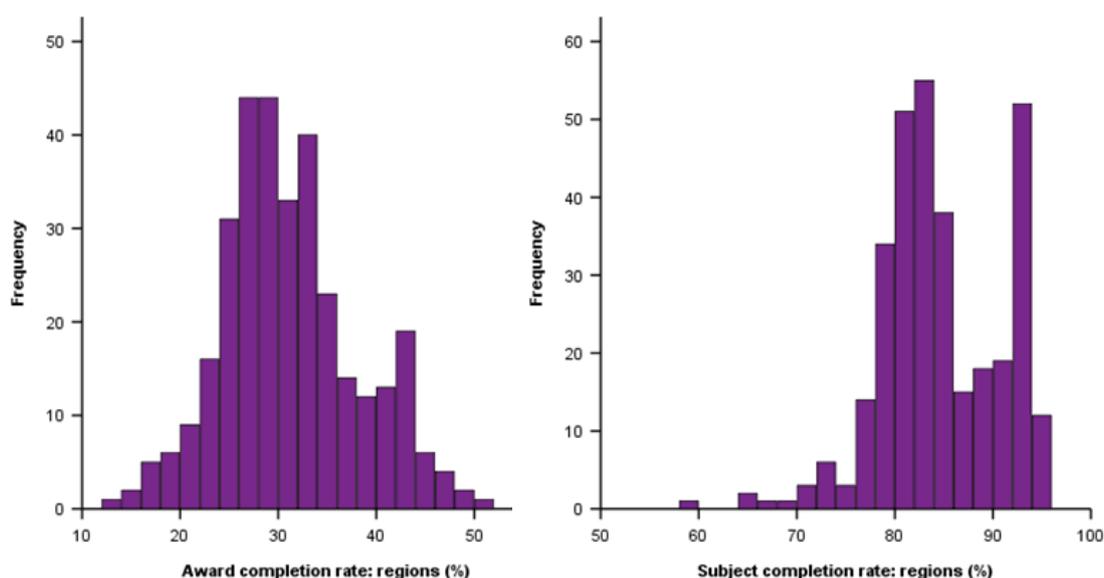
## VET completion rates

Engaging disadvantaged learners in VET is an important task for providers across Australia. Also important is ensuring good outcomes for those who do engage. The rates of completion of study and training are important indicators of performance in VET. However, defining and measuring completion can be complex, given the diversity of program offerings and differing student intentions (see McVicar & Tabasso 2016; Lamb & Walstab 2010). Some courses can be completed within months, while others take several years. The flexible nature of VET means that non-linear pathways are not unusual and many students enrol with the intention of completing a single module or subject rather than an entire qualification. This is particularly important in understanding patterns of participation for disadvantaged learners.

For this study, the calculation of national and regional VET completion rates involved learner-completion data for VET programs for 2014. Completion rates for both whole awards (award-completion rate) and for single modules (subject-completion rate) were derived.

Just as VET participation rates vary across regions, so do completion rates. Figure 3 shows the distribution of award-completion and subject-completion rates across regions. Award-completion rates range from 13.4% to 50.2%, while subject-completion rates vary from 58.2% to 94.9%.

**Figure 3 Regional distribution of award-completion rates and subject-completion rates, 2014**



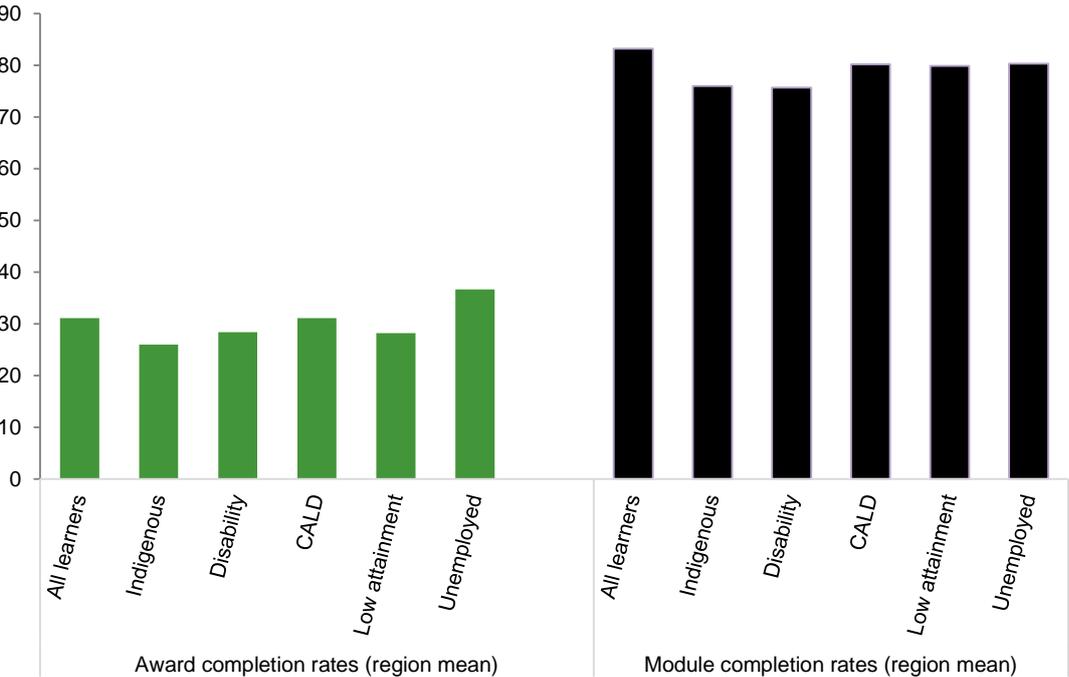
Source: Completion rate estimates derived using data supplied by NCVET from the National VET Provider Collection.

Variation also exists in the levels of completion for different groups of disadvantaged learners. Figure 4 shows the regional means for all learners and different groups of learners. The mean regional award-completion rate overall is 31.1%. The rate for CALD learners is the same as for all learners, while unemployed learners experience a higher rate at 36.7%. However, the completion rates for learners with a disability, low attainment and for Indigenous learners are lower than the overall rate at 28.4%, 28.2% and 26.0% respectively.

Some regions across Australia have relatively high levels of award completion, and some have relatively high levels of subject completion.

Figure 5 plots the award-completion rate against the subject-completion rate for each region. It shows in general a positive relationship between award completion and subject completion; that is, as award-completion rates increase so do subject-completion rates. But this is not the case for all regions. Some regions experiencing high rates of subject completion can simultaneously have low rates of award completion. On the other hand, some regions (shown on the top right-hand side of the chart in figure 5) manage to achieve high levels of both award completion and subject completion.

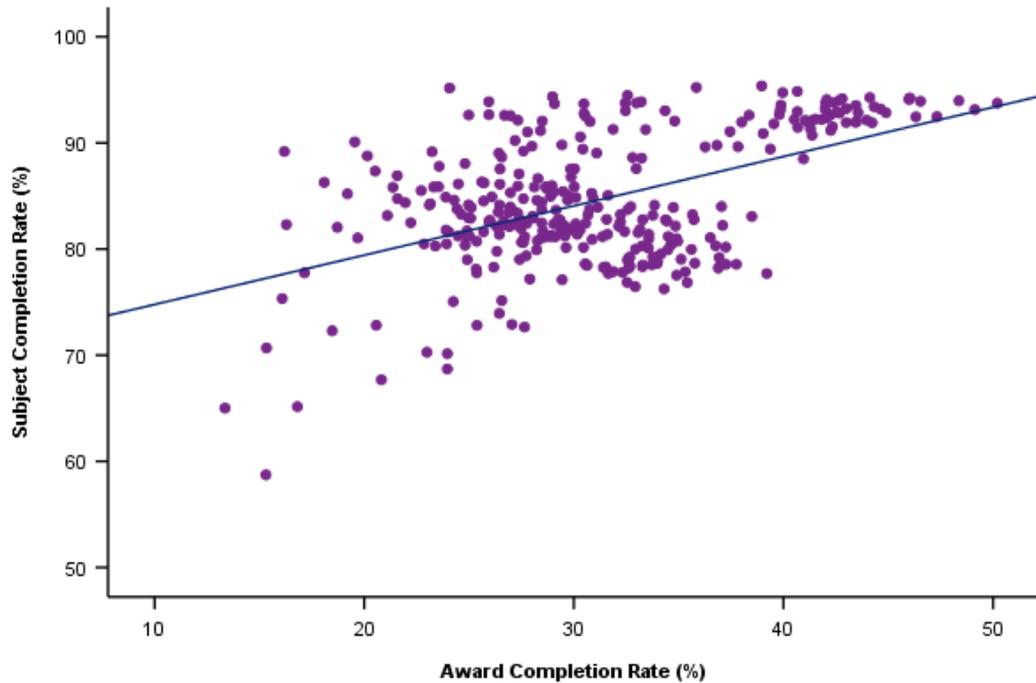
**Figure 4 Mean regional-completion rates for all learners and different groups of disadvantaged learners, 2014**



Source: Estimates derived from the National VET Provider Collection, 2014, unpublished.

VET students living in high-performing regions are more likely to be attending training delivered in the classroom and be enrolled at community providers.

Figure 5 Award-completion rate, by subject-completion rate, regions, 2014



Source: Completion rate estimates derived using data supplied by NCVET from the National VET Provider Collection.

## Identifying high-performing regions for case studies

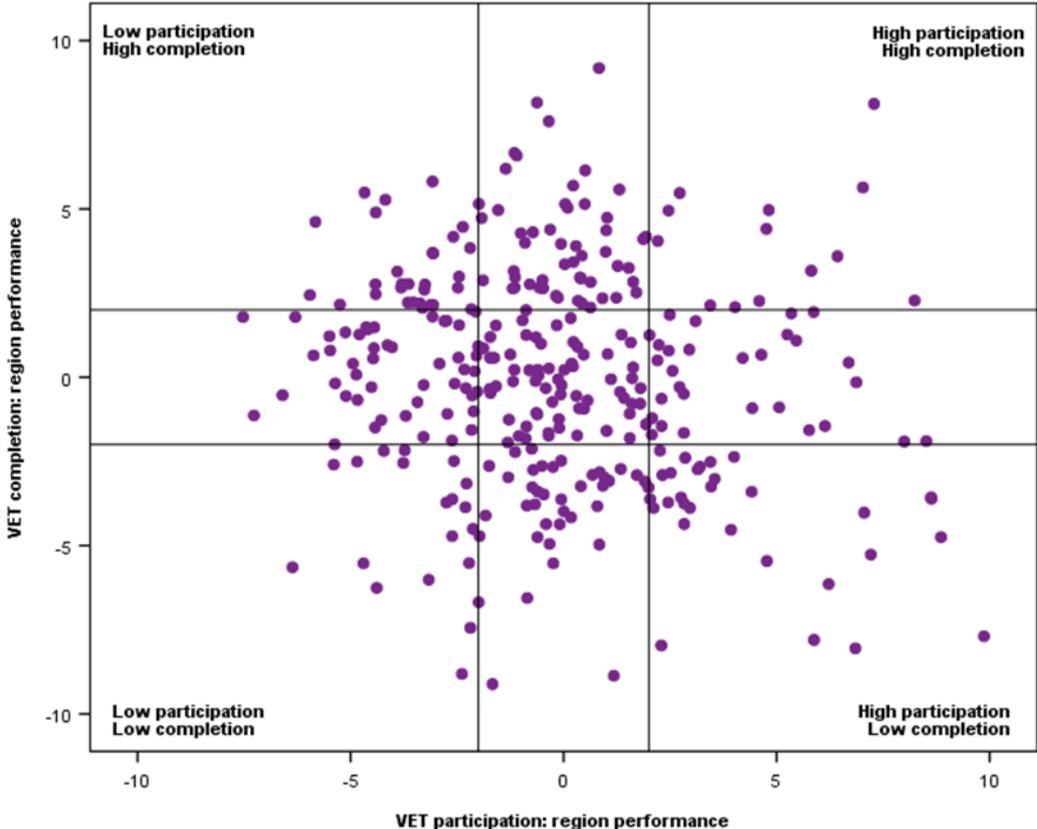
The previous results show that participation and completion in VET for different groups of disadvantaged learners varies markedly across regions of Australia. Some of the variations in levels of engagement and outcomes are due to features of the regions themselves, such as industry profiles, employment, VET provision, population characteristics and types of learners. However, not all variations are due to these influences. Some regions achieve comparatively high levels of participation and completion after taking account of these factors.

Regression models were employed to control for differences in regional characteristics (industry profiles, labour market and employment characteristics, learner characteristics, provider types) and to identify high-performing regions for different groups of disadvantaged learners. The models were designed to predict regional VET participation and completion rates for all learners, as well as for each of the different groups of disadvantaged learners. The participation rates and both sets of completion measures (award-completion rates and subject-completion rates) were modelled.

The models generated standardised residuals for each region, saved as measures of regional effect, to identify high-performing regions. Standardised residuals represent the amount of unexplained variance in units of standard deviation; that is, the difference between the observed regional level of performance and the mean predicted rate after controlling for regional characteristics (industry profiles, labour market and employment characteristics, learner characteristics and provider types).

Figure 6 maps the performance of the regions of Australia using this measure of regional effect. VET award completion is mapped against VET participation. The scales are in standard deviation units. Scores above zero show higher-than-expected or predicted participation and completion. Scores are aggregated across the six disadvantaged learner groups.

**Figure 6 Regional effect of VET participation and award completion based on standardised residuals, 2014**



Source: Participation and completion rate estimates derived using data supplied by NCVET from the National VET Provider Collection, and population data from the Estimated Resident Population data series (ABS, 2015).

The results show 13 regions (top right quadrant) where the rates of participation and completion are more than two standard deviations above predicted, all else equal – these are the regions achieving unexpectedly high participation and high completion.

VET students living in these high-performing regions are more likely to be attending training delivered in the classroom (67.9% against the overall regional mean 62.9%), enrolled with a community provider (9.6% against 4.9%), and studying at AQF level 'basic' (24.4% against 20.7%; see table 3).

**Table 3 Characteristics of VET activity in all regions and high-performing regions (regional means)**

		<b>High participation</b>	<b>All regions (%)</b>
		High-completion regions (N = 13) (%)	Regional mean
Provider type	TAFE/university	56.3	62.2
	Community providers	9.6	4.9
	Private providers	34.8	33.7
AQF level	Advanced	12.6	13.4
	Middle	70.2	70.7
	Basic	24.4	20.7
Delivery mode	Classroom	67.9	62.9
	Electronic	9.3	14.0
	Employment-based	18.7	21.2

Source: Participation and completion rate estimates derived using data supplied by NCVET from the National VET Provider Collection, and population data from the Estimated Resident Population data series (ABS, 2015).

The higher performing regions are drawn from across Australia, with two from New South Wales, four from Victoria, three from Queensland, one from South Australia, two from Western Australia and one from Tasmania. They include both metropolitan and non-metropolitan regions. The regions are:

- Albany (WA)
- Armidale (NSW)
- Bendigo (Vic.)
- Campaspe (Vic.)
- Huon – Bruny Island (Tas.)
- Kenmore – Brookfield – Moggill (Qld)
- Lithgow – Mudgee (NSW)
- Moira (Vic.)
- Moreland – North (Vic.)
- Perth City (WA)
- Rocklea – Acacia Ridge (Qld)
- Sunnybank (Qld)
- Yorke Peninsula (SA).

The next sections of the report explore the contexts and strategies that have enabled these regions to engage with and achieve strong outcomes for their most vulnerable learner populations.



# Effective practices underpinning success for disadvantaged learners

This section of the report builds on the regional analysis of VET participation and completion by describing the successful strategies reported by training providers in a national survey of education and training practices. It examines regional differences in survey responses to reveal what training providers do differently in regions with higher levels of disadvantaged learner participation and completion.

## National survey of providers

The national survey of RTOs focused on practices associated with the arrangements and delivery of programs for disadvantaged learners. It aimed to elicit provider information on practices, policies, provision and initiatives that contribute to participation and outcomes for groups of disadvantaged learners.

A thematic approach was used to design the questionnaire, based on the four types of strategies for supporting disadvantaged learners derived from Davies, Lamb and Doecke (2011). The objective of the questionnaire was to collect information on: the types of learners enrolled by RTOs and the types of strategies that work to promote their access; facilitate engagement and wellbeing; support participation, course progress and completion; and improve their pathway planning. Further details on the administration of the survey are provided in the Methodology section in the Introduction of the report, as well as in the support document, *Improving participation and success in VET for disadvantaged learners – provider survey findings*.

## Survey responses

The dataset provides a national sample of training providers. Table 4 shows that from a total base of the 3704 RTOs contacted to participate in the survey, 994 RTOs from all states and territories responded to the survey. This provided an achieved sample of 26.8%. The achieved sample size was highest for private RTOs (822 of a possible 3349), followed by community-based training providers (137 of a possible 291) and then TAFE institutes (35 of a possible 64).

**Table 4 Training provider population, projected sample and achieved sample, number of providers (N) and response rate (%)**

	Base	Achieved sample	
	N	N	%
Community-based training provider	291	137	47.1
Private RTO	3349	822	24.8
TAFE institute or assimilated	64	35	54.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>3704</b>	<b>994</b>	<b>26.8</b>

Source: 2016 Australian RTO survey administered by the Centre for International Research on Education Systems (CIRES).

The survey was primarily completed by staff in administrative and leadership positions (RTO managers, directors and CEOs). Responses were received from providers in 10 of the 13 high-performing regions identified in the second section of the report. From these regions, the survey gathered 51 responses from 50 different training providers<sup>2</sup>, including seven community-based RTOs, 41 private RTOs and two TAFE providers. No statistical missing data strategies were implemented.

The survey collected information from training providers across most regions of Australia, allowing comparisons against regional performance.

## Experience with disadvantaged learners

There are both similarities and differences in the enrolment of disadvantaged learners in RTOs when high-performing regions are compared with all other regions as a group. Similar proportions of RTOs in both groups declared enrolling learners with a disability (47% vs 46%). On the other hand, fewer RTOs in high-performing regions enrolled CALD learners (61% vs 69%) and unemployed learners (59% vs 66%) than in all regions. Conversely, more RTOs enrolled Indigenous learners in high-performing regions than in Australia in general (59% vs 52%). These differences may be partly due to the relatively small size of the sample of RTOs drawn from the high-performing regions. However, the fact that most of the enrolment gaps for disadvantaged learners between high-performing regions and all regions are contained within 10 percentage points is a positive indicator of the comparability of both samples.

A similar pattern of responses can be observed when training providers were asked if they specifically focus on or have success with these groups of disadvantaged learners. The RTOs in high-performing regions were more likely to focus or declare success in training Indigenous learners (35% vs 32%) or learners with a disability (33% vs 29%) than RTOs in all regions, but less likely to respond about having a particular focus or success with learners with low levels of prior educational attainment (33% vs 41%) or CALD learners (37% vs 44%).

## Identifying disadvantaged learners and needs

Training providers were asked about their use of instruments and strategies for identifying learner backgrounds and needs. Table 5 shows the results for high-performing regions and for all others as a group. Across Australia, most RTOs make use of a range of tools and practices to identify their learner profiles and needs. Amongst the instruments and strategies presented in the survey, the most commonly used was self-completed enrolment forms (96% of respondents), while the least commonly used was referrals from external agencies (68%).

In general, training providers in high-performing regions more often used tools and strategies for identifying their learner profiles and needs. The percentage-point difference is largest for 'referrals from external agencies' (74% vs 68%), 'interview on entry' (91% vs 87%) and 'student surveys' (100% vs 95%). The RTOs in high-performing regions thus seem to collaborate with external agencies and collect learner data more systematically, but they

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<sup>2</sup> One training provider provided interviews with two key staff.

also tend to adopt an individualised approach to learners more often, with the use of interviews. These differences may mean that the RTOs in high-performing regions do better in identifying disadvantage and its possible influence on the learner's training experience.

**Training providers in high-performing regions tended to use instruments, such as student surveys and ongoing in-program monitoring, more systematically than training providers in other regions.**

**Table 5 Training provider strategies used to identify learner profiles and needs (%)**

	High-performing regions			Other regions of Australia		
	Always	Selectively	Total	Always	Selectively	Total
Self-completed enrolment forms	91.1	6.7	<b>97.8</b>	89.0	7.4	<b>96.4</b>
Interview on entry	59.1	31.9	<b>90.9</b>	53.5	33.9	<b>87.4</b>
Referrals from external agencies	14.3	59.5	<b>73.8</b>	16.4	51.5	<b>67.9</b>
Literacy/numeracy assessment	66.7	22.2	<b>88.9</b>	67.3	22.8	<b>90.0</b>
Ongoing in-program monitoring	87.2	8.5	<b>95.7</b>	75.1	18.0	<b>93.1</b>
Individual coordinators' notes	69.6	21.7	<b>91.3</b>	62.6	27.3	<b>89.8</b>
Informal classroom observation	73.3	15.6	<b>88.9</b>	69.9	21.5	<b>91.5</b>
Student surveys	95.6	4.4	<b>100.0</b>	86.8	8.6	<b>95.3</b>

Source: 2016 Australian RTO survey administered by CIRES.

Another interesting difference between high-performing regions and other regions is the way these instruments were used. The training providers in high-performing regions tended to use these instruments more *systematically* than training providers in other regions, who were more likely to use them on a case-by-case basis. The largest differences can be observed in the systematic use of student surveys (96% vs 87%) and ongoing in-program monitoring (87% vs 75%). RTOs in high-performing regions were much more likely to *always* use ongoing monitoring of learners during training than RTOs in other regions. It is probable that this difference contributes to explaining why high-performing regions were more successful in promoting retention and completion for disadvantaged learners: the systematic use of ongoing monitoring can support disadvantaged learners as they experience difficulties during training.

## Fostering participation through outreach

Training providers were asked about their outreach and access practices to enable investigation of whether differences in outreach practices between high-performing regions and other regions were associated with differences in participation and completion for disadvantaged learners. A variety of possible practices and tools were identified prior to the survey, ranging from collaborative practices and flexible training, to specific advertising practices. Table 6 compares the results in high-performing regions with that of other regions as a group.

As with the practices of identification of learner profiles and needs, RTOs in high-performing regions tended to be more engaged in outreach and access promotion than RTOs in other regions. Except for their collaboration with schools and other RTOs in the provision of course information and the use of targeted advertising to specific groups or communities, all outreach and access practices and tools were more commonly used by RTOs in high-performing regions than in other regions. The difference is particularly striking in the use of local community groups to advertise courses (65% vs 57%) and the establishment of local partnerships with community organisations to promote training (77% vs 70%).

Community networks are of prime importance in training providers' outreach and access strategies.

**Table 6 Training provider practices and instruments to foster participation (%)**

	High-performing regions	Other regions of Australia
Print, radio or online media advertising	76.7	72.8
Information events for local communities	57.5	53.0
Course advertisement through local community groups	65.0	57.2
Collaboration with schools and other RTOs	55.3	57.8
Classes in community or informal settings	56.4	52.8
Flexible learning schedules (e.g. evening classes)	79.1	77.8
Targeted advertising to specific groups/communities	65.0	66.5
Flexible courses/programs to adapt to local needs	90.7	87.5
Local partnerships with community organisations	77.3	70.0
Use of course/program outcomes in advertisings	66.7	64.9

Source: 2016 Australian RTO survey administered by CIRES.

When these results are put in the context of RTO success in fostering disadvantaged learners' participation in these regions, it appears that community networks are of prime importance in training providers' outreach and access strategies. When training organisations draw on the resources of local communities and consider VET training as part of a broader network of local organisations, they appear to be more successful in engaging disadvantaged learners.

## Supporting retention and completion

Two of the four strategies outlined in the Davies, Lamb and Doecke (2011) model can prove particularly useful in supporting disadvantaged learners to remain engaged and complete their VET training. *Wellbeing* and *pedagogy* strategies can contribute to improving retention and completion rates for disadvantaged learners.

### Wellbeing strategies

Training providers were asked about their use of strategies to support learner engagement and wellbeing. Wellbeing strategies include auxiliary support (for example, counselling, housing and transport support), collaboration with external agencies, and organisational strategies to provide both organisation-level support (for example, Indigenous unit, disability officers, and community liaison officers) and program-level support (for example, mentoring programs). Table 7 presents the results for high-performing regions compared with other regions of Australia.

For all of the strategies and practices described in the survey, except the provision of joint delivery with external agencies, RTOs in high-performing regions more commonly claimed that they utilised wellbeing strategies. The most significant differences were evident for four types of strategies: referrals to external agencies (76% vs 62%); the provision of auxiliary support such as housing, transport, and material assistance (50% vs 40%); support units for particular groups of learners with specific needs (51% vs 42%); and the existence of staff positions dedicated to meeting the needs of specific – and often disadvantaged – populations (57% vs 48%).

**Table 7 Training provider wellbeing strategies and practices to promote retention and completion (%)**

	High-performing regions			Other regions of Australia		
	Always	Selectively	Total	Always	Selectively	Total
Case management	34.2	28.9	<b>63.2</b>	34.3	23.8	<b>58.1</b>
Counselling	41.7	16.7	<b>58.3</b>	37.1	20.4	<b>57.5</b>
Auxiliary support (e.g. housing, transport, material resources)	31.3	18.8	<b>50.0</b>	21.9	18.4	<b>40.3</b>
Support units (e.g. Indigenous unit)	17.1	34.3	<b>51.4</b>	15.6	26.1	<b>41.7</b>
Staff positions (e.g. disability officer)	42.9	14.3	<b>57.1</b>	30.4	17.6	<b>48.0</b>
Mentoring programs	31.4	25.7	<b>57.1</b>	23.1	32.9	<b>56.0</b>
Co-location of training and other services	16.1	12.9	<b>29.0</b>	9.5	17.2	<b>26.8</b>
Participation of community members in program delivery	12.5	37.5	<b>50.0</b>	13.0	32.7	<b>45.7</b>
Disability support strategies	56.8	16.2	<b>73.0</b>	47.0	22.8	<b>69.8</b>
Referrals to external agencies	27.0	48.6	<b>75.7</b>	31.9	29.6	<b>61.5</b>
Joined service delivery with external agencies	8.6	28.6	<b>37.1</b>	9.9	27.8	<b>37.7</b>

Source: 2016 Australian RTO survey administered by CIRES.

One of the main lessons to be learned from these results is that *wellbeing* strategies that aimed to support learners beyond their training seem to make a difference for disadvantaged learners' VET participation and completion. These wellbeing strategies appear to address the 'extra training' needs<sup>3</sup> of learners who may not be able to commit to – and succeed in – VET if these needs are not met. The use of wellbeing strategies and practices helps to ensure that the preconditions for a sustained engagement in VET are met for learners, and these strategies may prove particularly important for enhancing disadvantaged learners' retention and completion. These results also support the idea that considering the needs of learners in a holistic way can help them to succeed.

Differences in the use of wellbeing strategies also reveal that RTOs in high-performing regions more often declared involving community members in program delivery than RTOs in other regions (table 7). This finding, coupled with the facts that the most significant difference in practices between high-performing and other regions was in the more frequent use of referrals to external agencies (table 7), shows that the use of community resources is an essential factor for promoting disadvantaged learners' *retention and completion*. The wellbeing strategy and practice relationships established by training providers with the local community thus appear to be one of the key determining factors for both disadvantaged learners' participation and completion.

## Pedagogy strategies

Table 8 provides information on the types of pedagogy that RTOs use. Pedagogical strategies include program-based (that is, adapting the program itself to learner needs) and delivery-based strategies (that is, adapting the place, time, duration and mode of delivery). Importantly, all the pedagogy and wellbeing strategies presented in the survey aim to respond to the specific needs of learners and can thus be considered to be *learner-centred* strategies.

<sup>3</sup> Needs located outside the training relationship.

Adaptations made to the training programs and the ways training is delivered may both be important to support disadvantaged learners' participation and completion.

**Table 8 Training provider pedagogy strategies and practices to promote retention and completion (%)**

	High-performing regions			Other regions of Australia		
	Always	Selectively	Total	Always	Selectively	Total
Recognition of learner prior knowledge	92.5	5.0	<b>97.5</b>	86.0	10.2	<b>96.2</b>
Flexible learning options (e.g. off campus)	51.4	35.1	<b>86.5</b>	46.4	33.8	<b>80.1</b>
Program delivery in community settings	29.7	37.8	<b>67.6</b>	24.3	37.5	<b>61.9</b>
Partnerships in program delivery	8.6	45.7	<b>54.3</b>	11.3	42.5	<b>53.8</b>
Note-taking assistance for learners with a disability	31.4	17.1	<b>48.6</b>	18.6	22.0	<b>40.6</b>
Adaptation to low-academic skill learners	34.2	50.0	<b>84.2</b>	36.4	36.2	<b>72.6</b>
Adaptation to specific groups of learners	29.3	48.8	<b>78.0</b>	30.8	43.7	<b>74.5</b>
Additional contact hours	56.4	35.9	<b>92.3</b>	50.7	37.7	<b>88.4</b>
Flexible assessment formats for learners with a disability	59.0	25.6	<b>84.6</b>	49.4	28.0	<b>77.4</b>
Work experience opportunities	35.1	43.2	<b>78.4</b>	31.1	39.4	<b>70.5</b>

Source: 2016 Australian RTO survey administered by CIRES.

The pedagogy strategies used by RTOs differ when the high-performing regions are compared with other regions. High-performing regions were more likely to have RTOs tailoring their programs for learners with low levels of academic skills (84% vs 73%) and providing flexible learning options (87% vs 80%) and work experience opportunities (78% vs 71%) than other regions. These findings suggest that adaptations made to the training *programs* and adaptations made to the *ways* training is delivered may both be important in supporting disadvantaged learners' participation and completion.

Overall, it is noteworthy that the differences between high-performing and other regions in the use of wellbeing and pedagogy strategies are more significant than the differences in the use of outreach strategies. In other words, RTOs' practices differ more significantly between regions in their retention and completion support strategies than in their participation and access strategies. At the same time, in order to improve the participation *and* completion rates of disadvantaged learners across Australia, it is important to focus on both categories of strategies.

## Improving outcomes through pathway strategies

The last category of strategies and practices to support the VET participation and completion of disadvantaged learners is *pathway* strategies. While pathway strategies may not affect the participation and completion rates of disadvantaged learners *directly*, the successful articulation of VET training to further training and employment may result in a better reputation for the training organisation and thus indirectly support participation from disadvantaged groups. These strategies may also help to foster retention and completion, as pathway strategies may help learners to see the benefits of VET training.

Table 9 presents the results for four of the main strategies used. Pathway strategies include both training-related strategies (for example, establishing arrangements with other training organisations or higher education institutions) and employment-related strategies (for example, building relationships with local employers). They can take place during training (for example, course and career guidance) or after training (for example, tracking learner destinations).

**Table 9 Training provider pathway strategies and practices (%)**

	High-performing regions			Other regions of Australia		
	Always	Selectively	Total	Always	Selectively	Total
Course and career guidance	59.5	24.3	<b>83.8</b>	56.7	26.2	<b>82.8</b>
Relationships with employers	50.0	34.2	<b>84.2</b>	44.4	35.6	<b>79.9</b>
Arrangement with other education and training institutions	26.5	29.4	<b>55.9</b>	21.0	30.7	<b>51.7</b>
Tracking of learner destinations	21.9	37.5	<b>59.4</b>	26.4	33.0	<b>59.3</b>

The pathway strategies used by training providers from high-performing and other regions did not differ significantly.

Source: 2016 Australian RTO survey administered by CIRES.

The pathway strategies used by training providers from high-performing and other regions did not differ significantly. Therefore, it is likely that pathway strategies are not a key factor for fostering disadvantaged learners' VET participation and completion. However, leading disadvantaged learners towards VET completion is only one dimension of enhanced outcomes, and pathway strategies may be particularly important in improving other aspects of the outcomes of VET training (for example, post-VET outcomes in the workforce or further training).

## Refining the model of effective practice

The survey of VET providers was undertaken to identify the practices being used by providers across Australia to facilitate participation in and completion of VET by adult Australians from disadvantaged backgrounds. The survey was designed around a practice interventions framework containing a four-pronged approach to supporting learners in undertaking education or training (Davies, Lamb & Doecke 2011). The framework groups the strategies for supporting learner participation and completion into four categories: outreach; wellbeing; pedagogy; and pathways.

The free-text responses in the provider survey, seeking descriptions or examples of effective practice for different learners, can highlight the usefulness of the framework. Providers listed a range of practices they adopted to support learners and they were largely consistent with the framework. A summary of some key examples under each of the framework categories is provided below:

### Outreach practices

- Aboriginal coordinator using community outreach and engagement to help local Aboriginal population overcome their distrust of government-run agencies
- flexible recognition of prior learning (RPL)
- arrangements for courses to be delivered where there is an interest, which may be a remote location
- strong marketing and admissions focus
- ongoing partnerships to reach community
- outreach programs through other partners
- partnerships with other agencies to reach the relevant groups
- referrals from local communities.

## Wellbeing practices

- Aboriginal support officer
- individualised one-on-one support
- coaching and mentoring/case management
- disability officers working with staff and students; includes staff professional development and training
- provision of transport
- provision of a range of wrap-around services to remove barriers, such as access to programs that provide financial assistance for travel, accommodation and meals while away from home for study
- provision of counselling support with learning issues, and with fees and pastoral care
- specialised and individual support coaching/mentoring
- provision of student lunches for social connection, ongoing use of trainers who have built a rapport with the students (very important) and an Indigenous liaison officer on site.

## Pedagogy practices

- a range of strategies: one-to-one and small group literacy and numeracy support, specialised learning groups catering to students with limited English
- access to online studies and support networks without needing to travel
- adapted training and assessment tools to include the student's range of abilities
- blended delivery methodology
- course delivered in language other than English
- flexible and practical approach to learning and assessment, on-the-job assessments, observations
- individualised learning and assessment programs
- modified training materials
- delivery of face-to-face classroom training supplemented with on-the-job training and assessment
- small number in standard classes to enable one-on-one assistance
- matching of trainers and learners and ensuring trainers have appropriate training and background
- mix of classroom, online and workplace.

## Pathways practices

- continuous careers advice and planning
- careers counselling/career and job-related workshops
- certificate qualifications, career guidance via centre for work and learning, trade taster programs and skills gap programs, tutor support and volunteer support

- collaboration with job networks to assist participants to become job-ready
- employment pathway training through strong partnerships with employers
- employment skills embedded in courses
- pathway planning, resume writing
- ready-for-work programs incorporating work experience.

Yet, the free-text responses also highlighted a category of strategies and practices not readily covered by the framework. Many providers reported modifying or providing courses or programs specific to the needs of learners and these were important to provider success with particular groups of learners. This fifth category, based on curriculum and focused on the implementation of specially designed programs or courses, was raised by providers as being important in addressing learner needs and encouraging them to participate, as well as complete.

Examples of this additional category of curriculum strategies are provided below:

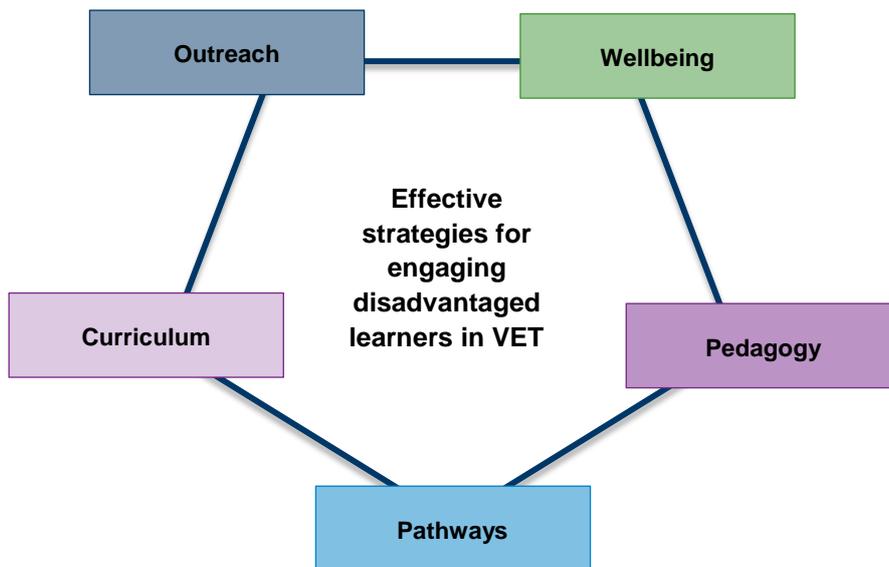
- Indigenous tailored programs which focus on Indigenous culture, hospitality, information technology, language, literacy and numeracy skills, foundation skills and job-searching techniques; the courses have to be a mix of theory and practical
- for learners with minimal or no language skills, specifically designed courses focused on language development in Auslan and English
- programs developed to include work placement, resume writing, personal presentation and attributes to gain employment
- tailored courses to get learners engaged
- provision of basic entry-level skills training and job-search support
- provision of English language courses to bring students up to the required level of proficiency prior to their moving onto certificate programs
- provision of lower-level courses to assist students to progress to apprenticeships
- provision of short courses up-front to generate confidence
- special classes in foundation skills integrated into life skills programs such as cooking/computer usage
- start-up training programs
- tailored programs to remove barriers to participation, including delivery in the student's community
- delivery of Core Skills for Employment and Training (CSET) and also foundation skills qualifications as pathways to further education or employment
- prevocational and access programs for people who haven't been employed
- pre-accredited skill-building courses in employability skills, particularly computer-based skills such as Excel, MYOB and Bookkeeping etc.
- provision of a basic literacy and numeracy course for most students prior to other study
- adult migrant programs to prepare learners

- basic computer courses to engage people
- entry-level accredited courses, pre-enrolment courses.

## Curriculum design in good practice interventions

The feedback from providers on effective practices for disadvantaged learners suggests that curriculum design (programs and courses) is an important category for VET providers to consider in their efforts to engage disadvantaged populations in VET more successfully. Figure 7 presents a modified framework taking account of the new category.

**Figure 7 Good practice interventions framework for VET provision**



The framework presents the main categories of effective practice required for improvement in the participation and completion in VET of disadvantaged populations.

These strategies are further explored in the next section of the report through the case studies in the high-performing regions.



# Case studies of effective practice in generating learner success

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**Strong outcomes in these regions can be linked in part to the capacity and responsiveness of VET providers to address the challenges of the various social, economic and geographic contexts.**

The regional analysis identified 13 regions across Australia where groups of disadvantaged learners were achieving particularly well in VET, in terms of both high levels of participation and high levels of completion. What practices and policies contributed to these results? To address this question, relevant personnel in each of the three types of RTOs (TAFE institutes, private providers and community providers) in the 13 regions were interviewed. They were selected to maximise the diversity in the types of providers represented in the case studies. Overall, 28 in-depth interviews were conducted across 11 of the 13 regions, to develop case studies of effective practice.

This section of the report presents general findings based on the case studies. Some common features observed across the regions are outlined and linked to their success, followed by a discussion of the features of good practice identified in TAFE institutes and then in community and private providers. Fuller and more detailed descriptions of examples of individual regions and providers are provided in appendix B.

## Common challenges, shared understanding

All of the high-performing regions are different in terms of state context, location and industry and employment base. However, similarities across the regions became apparent in the interviews, where the challenges faced and the responses developed were outlined. Case study findings suggested that strong outcomes in these regions can be linked in part to the capacity and responsiveness of VET providers to address the challenges of the various social, economic and geographic contexts.

### Challenges

Limited service provision was one common challenge, particularly evident in non-metropolitan regions. One of the key strengths of VET is its reach into communities outside major metropolitan centres, and many of the high-performing areas identified in this study were rural or regional locations. Economic poverty is sometimes more pronounced in rural and regional areas by comparison with urban areas (National Rural Health Alliance & ACOSS 2013). Rural and remote learners in Australia typically have reduced access to educational services, more frequently leave school before completing Year 12, are less likely to attend university and more likely to drop out (Lamb et al. 2015). The 'thin' provision of education, training and employment opportunities was noted by many interviewees in such regions. For example, one respondent described how often the TAFE with which they were involved was 'part of the last presence of government service' left.

Many of the top-performing regions face similar macroeconomic challenges. Providers interviewed in Queensland and Western Australia, for example, described the challenges associated with the residual effects of the downside of the mining boom. Their learners included individuals who were previously commanding significant salaries in low-skill work in mining or construction; however, in the post-boom environment, these individuals had lost employment and were not well placed for future training pathways and careers. Providers in

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**The high-performing regions were characterised by a responsive VET sector and a shared understanding across providers, along with a strong connection to local communities and their needs.**

Tasmania and South Australia described the long-term depressed economic climate and intergenerational poverty. Some Victorian regions explained how a continued dependence on an industry now in decline had exerted a widespread community impact. These regions are all dealing with challenging economic environments and are currently adjusting to structural change. Arguably such transitions are also experienced more keenly in non-metropolitan contexts, where retraining and alternative employment options may be more circumscribed.

## Shared understanding

Many providers in interviews described their approaches in the context of having a comprehensive understanding of their community, the needs of the population and employment and labour markets. They all 'knew' their community. They often saw themselves as responding strategically to common macroeconomic challenges. As one respondent explained, 'if you are not responding to community needs [of which you are aware] there are problems'. One provider described their processes of consultations in a region that had experienced retrenchments: particular and localised needs were flagged by the community, with targeted retraining subsequently provided. This example supports other recent case study research which has looked at how VET plays a key role in these circumstances by ensuring skill transfer during employment transition, through strategic training, recognition of prior learning and careers counselling (Snell, Gekara & Gatt 2016).

The high-performing regions were characterised by a responsive VET sector and a shared understanding across providers, along with a strong connection to local communities and their needs. One region had recently been successful in obtaining a defence force manufacturing contract, and the largest VET training provider had already realigned its course offerings to meet the projected population growth and training demand. Other providers in areas with pockets of gentrification due to retirees moving into the area were strategically connecting to growth in the health services and care industries. This pattern aligns with wider Australian economic trends, which show how traditional industries such as manufacturing are decreasing, while service-oriented industry sectors are growing (Snell, Gekara & Gatt 2016). Many examples emerged of VET providers picking up labour market indicators and working at the intersection of community and industry to deliver successful learner outcomes.

## Effective practice: TAFE perspective

The case studies across the regions emphasised the role of TAFE in anchoring VET provision at a regional level. Where this works well, TAFE plays a strong role in the delivery of VET for groups of disadvantaged learners, incorporating strategies covering all areas of need:

- providing outreach
- wrap-around services to address individual need
- flexible and responsive pedagogy
- personalised pathways planning.

Part of this focus is mobilising and making use of other community agencies and services, where available. This means that some of the TAFE institutes tend to address the outreach and personal needs of learners with the help of other providers and agencies, allowing TAFE

teachers to focus more fully on the delivery of training. TAFE institutes reported that often they establish various partnerships and contracts with employment and government agencies, who bring disadvantaged learners to them. In other cases, they were working with welfare groups, which would broker these arrangements. TAFE institutes also work as a 'pathway' destination for some learners who make use of community providers to build confidence and capacity as adult learners.

Particularly effective practice with hard-to-reach learners was discussed in depth with representatives from providers working across the identified regions of high performance. The TAFE consultations identified six key practices and strategies as strongly linked to supporting successful learner outcomes, particularly for disadvantaged learners. The practices are:

- maintaining a whole-of-institution commitment to support disadvantaged learners
- targeting additional learner supports
- ensuring learner support is available at the point of need
- placing experienced teachers to work with hard-to-reach learners
- recognising that learners need different pathways
- ensuring curriculum provision matches learner need and context.

### Whole-of-institution commitment to support disadvantaged learners

Some providers highlighted their strong institutional focus on building the skills of disadvantaged learners, providing them with a 'pathway to employment and out of poverty' and 'building healthy communities'. The aims were operationalised and to a significant degree framed day-to-day institution-wide practices. One interviewee commented that:

There is a 'comprehensive student management process' across the college. It is important to understand that all lecturers have been trained in becoming the 'front line' workers for engagement and wellbeing; they are able to identify students at risk (health/financial/other) and 'triage' for appropriate interventions and support.

Institution-wide practices remove the onus of providing learner support to individual teachers or trainers who lack adequate training or recognition. One TAFE described how all staff play a role in their organisation's success with disadvantaged learners: 'Every interaction is important – from the reception, to teaching staff, to common areas such as cafes and libraries'.

Another affirmed that 'we are one institution, one team. Retention, success and engagement is everyone's business'.

Institution-wide commitments to supporting disadvantaged learner achievement require appropriate workforce planning and professional development as well. One TAFE in Queensland described how their policies of inclusion and engagement were 'embedded in all aspects of our teacher training and planning' to ensure that all teachers consider inclusive approaches to training, assessment, delivery styles and accessibility. The provider's commitment to inclusion also informs its performance planning and development.

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**Some providers had a strong institutional focus on building the skills of disadvantaged learners.**

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**Having one specific learner group in one class or course has the additional benefit of ease in providing well-targeted support.**

## Effectively targeting additional learner supports

The provision of additional wrap-around supports ensures that overall learner wellbeing is integral to the institutions' business, particularly for disadvantaged learners for whom TAFE may be 'their last chance'. TAFE institutes provide various forms of support, including counselling, additional tuition, learner activities, child minding and specific spaces such as learner common rooms, amongst other supports. However, for these services to have maximum effectiveness, learners must be aware that they are available. Awareness-raising is particularly important in work with disadvantaged learners, who may not seek out these services themselves. TAFE institutes that sought to raise awareness of the various additional targeted support services they offered were found to be particularly effective.

For programs and courses that were run in conjunction with partners who engaged in outreach, the TAFE institutes were able to tailor training and target support to suit the known learner profile. For example, job agencies brought in the long-term unemployed to the TAFE for job-ready courses, and refugees on humanitarian visas through government-funded programs were taught English. Having one specific learner group in one class or course also has benefits of economy of scale. An example provided was working with recently arrived female migrants, such that the TAFE could schedule child-minding support to be available during the language program. This model of intervention works well for TAFE institutes, as they can use their understanding and experience of what works well with particular learners and reapply the principles to different courses and industry areas. Using the same wrap-around support model with proven effectiveness for specific learner groups ensures that TAFE institutes could continue to offer successful programs to meet industry need and learner interest.

Many TAFE institutes were proactive in their identification of learners with low skills in literacy and numeracy. One TAFE specialising in trade training offered pre-course counselling, as well as an up-front language and literacy assessment for all learners. During the course, learner data continues to be collected, as 'the Learning Support unit tracks the involved learners and every three months/quarterly they meet to discuss their module and program completion'. This extensive process enables the provider to continually target individuals who need additional support and tailor it to suit the learner. This means that effective support can be provided alongside course-specific learning and training experiences. In such a large organisation, this encompassing and consistent data-gathering would be resource-intensive and the initial screening perhaps may deter some learners from undertaking training. However, the provider felt that its results were overwhelmingly positive, with the support structure well managed and targeted to the benefit of learners.

## Ensuring learner support is available at the point of need

Across all the regions, TAFE institutes describe their experience of amalgamations and system restructures, a process that has created larger multi-campus institutions spanning a large geographic area (many of which are operating within low socioeconomic, rural and regional communities). The provision of learner support in larger education and training organisations can be difficult. The business pressures of TAFE institutes to amalgamate and engage in multi-campus provision have meant many learner services have been centralised as well. TAFE institutes described their work to ensure that learners requiring support aren't 'lost through the cracks' and discussed methods to provide their learners with personalised support and timely intervention.

Learner support needs to be located at the point of need to ensure that learners don't have to 'go from one door to the next'. Many TAFE institutes described how they continued to offer smaller learning support units at each campus. Others described how they were placing learner support staff into campus libraries, or they were offering learners with 24/7 web support to assist with queries. One provider described how multi-campus provision of learner support necessitated the introduction of a learner-management tool to assist their learner counselling service. This online tool was introduced so that the various campuses are linked and the information is on hand, ensuring that learners did not have to repeat their story at the start of each session.

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**'The work done by these teachers in engaging and holding students cannot be overestimated'.**

## Placing experienced teachers to work with hard-to-reach learners

Teachers are fundamental to the success of disadvantaged learner groups within TAFE institutes. A common strategy emphasised by TAFE institutes was team teaching, described as 'pedagogy and support going hand in hand'. One TAFE felt there was immense value in their state-wide model, the Western Australian Course in Applied Vocational Study Skills (CAVSS), which emphasises team teaching. Team-teaching, they explained, 'has long been recognised as an effective means of combining the individual skills and expertise of two people' to provide wholly learner-centred teaching. Team-teaching arrangements were used by TAFE institutes in many of the regions to offer learners concurrent literacy and numeracy support, with revision and strengthening of these skills in the sessions tailored to the course area. One TAFE described how they were using team teaching in their trade areas, with specialised literacy and numeracy teachers being involved in joint planning with the trades teachers to support classes that were known to prove difficult for learners with lower levels of literacy and numeracy. In these sessions, team teaching was used to great effect, and learners became confident in the additional support and that the class was less burdensome for them.

TAFE institutes emphasised how their learning support units were not regarded as an arm of administration; these units were staffed with experienced educators with high levels of training in support for high-needs learners. These teachers are high-quality and highly trained: 'the work done by these teachers in engaging and holding learners cannot be overestimated'. One TAFE reflected that their teachers gained a great deal of experience in knowing what strategies work best to engage and hold these learners, to apply their specialist knowledge at all stages of the program (outreach, engagement, pedagogy and pathways) and to understand the gradual nature of outcomes.

The success and achievement of disadvantaged learners is strengthened when educators and support staff understand their circumstances (for example, learners with mental health issues who may not be suited to study full-time). One TAFE explained how teachers play a large role in the lives of recently arrived migrants or refugees, providing support akin to an extended family arrangement for their learners. The interviewee described how many of the educators were well suited to this, as they typically had grown-up families themselves and had a strong interest in other cultures. The educators played a substantial role in welcoming these individuals into Australian culture, one that went well above the course-mandated hours.

Understanding and connection between teachers and learners is important for all learners, but even more so for disadvantaged learner groups. One TAFE described how a key factor to their programs run with at-risk youth is that they have teachers who understand the needs

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**An employment outcome or pathway was not regarded by any TAFE as the sole metric of course and learner success.**

of learners and because of this can utilise appropriate and relevant behaviour-management strategies. Another provider described how their Indigenous support officer was vital to the success of Indigenous learners in their programs. The officer worked one-on-one with all learners, particularly to resolve housing issues and promote understanding about family in Indigenous cultures.

## Recognising that learners need pathways options

TAFE institutes typically orient their courses to assist their learners to find employment post-training, an undeniable strength of VET, with its vocational nature and connection to the labour market. However, TAFE institutes often reflect that no one model works for all learners and courses, and similarly there is no one pathway either. Providers typically discussed the range of metrics that should be used to measure course and learner success and all agreed that employment outcomes are important, but the wider range of benefits that VET brings to learners also require due consideration.

An appealing workforce and employment outcome serves as a learning hook or attractor for some learners. For example, short programs that provide learners with quick training in short modules were described by many TAFE institutes as successful. One provider with many recently retrenched males in their community provided courses in forklift driving, or units in information technology. These two approaches were regarded as useful 'toolkits' for these learners in future employment opportunities and had proved successful. The employment outcome was particularly important for reskilling courses or for working with the long-term unemployed. One interviewee described a linear model, of initial engagement, appropriate training and then pathway into a job. For courses tailored with an employment outcome in mind to be successful, a comprehensive understanding of local employment and industry opportunities is necessary. However, an employment outcome or pathway was not regarded by any TAFE as the sole metric of course and learner success. Many described how their programs for the long-term unemployed were equally concerned with the pre-employment courses offered alongside the industry training. These courses nurture employability skills and learner confidence and may offer more long-term benefit to learners than the short-term job/workforce outcome. The social elements of learning were emphasised for the newly arrived migrants and refugees, whose training served as the foundation for their learning and career pathways, as well as their lives in Australia.

## Ensuring curriculum provision matches learner need and context

Effective provision also encompassed TAFE institutes who tailored courses and curriculum delivery to suit learner need. Some TAFE institutes were active in developing provision suited to blended learning, which involved various methods, including videoconferencing, webinars, podcasts, mobile, online and distance delivery. This method of course delivery was regarded by TAFE institutes as advantageous to small and middle-sized regional communities, in that it provided them with access to high-quality recognised programs without the students having to travel to the provider all the time. In other regions, access to the internet was considered a challenge, and several TAFE institutes mentioned the limited usefulness of online programs, especially for disadvantaged learners. Many TAFE institutes were going out and delivering in the community, taking the learning to their learners and seeking local connections. These courses were held in community houses, neighbourhood houses, or on worksites. That said, the actual learner demand was scoped

very carefully, as ‘we don’t just schedule things on the basis that people might come – we have to be confident that if we turn up so will the learners!’

Some of these TAFE institutes were covering significant geographic areas as well, such as the Yorke Peninsula or Albany, making such local delivery even more pivotal to learner participation. The ability to tailor courses and alter curriculum delivery is also highly dependent on the industry area and type of course. Some courses are unable to be delivered flexibly, including those with a set workshop/seminar structure, which differs in topic each week and must be undertaken using the facilities on site. Other programs are more easily amended or could be delivered remotely. Some TAFE institutes felt that disadvantaged learners were well served by foundation courses or ‘taster’ programs, while others were less convinced. These views were also very dependent on the type of learner discussed. Early school leavers for example would particularly benefit from trialling various course pathways to determine what might suit their interests (potentially done as part of an equivalent school leaving certificate in some jurisdictions). Many young people need to begin at foundation levels to address gaps in their learning – particularly in literacy or numeracy – and the emergence of productive pathways may take time. Therefore ‘slow and gentle progress’ is a positive outcome ‘as many kids take a while’. Such sensitivities show provider recognition of learner need and that adaptability is fundamental.

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**Some TAFE institutes felt that disadvantaged learners were well served by foundation courses or ‘taster’ programs, while others were less convinced.**

## Effective practice: community and private provider perspective

The following key practices and strategies emerged through consultations with community/private providers:

- connection to community
- agility, responsiveness and flexibility
- learner-centred approaches
- limitations on partnerships with other providers.

### Connection to community

Whether community-owned or defined as private RTOs, these training bodies tended to share certain important traits. As generally they were not large organisations, they were locally focused and had a strong grasp of regional needs. Responses to questions about the region, for example, were extensive and thorough, reflecting their understanding of local issues. The interviews developed themes of local industry downturns and the impacts of drought and seasonal fluctuations, of industry restructure and of demographic change. Many highlighted the vulnerability of young people, especially early school leavers, in the face of significant social and economic change.

Community-owned providers, for example, emphasised their responsiveness to the needs of their learners but also their understanding of the realities of labour market needs:

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**Many providers reported taking on welfare responsibilities over and above their brief. They saw themselves as the last 'port of call' for highly 'damaged' individuals.**

Meeting the real needs of the learner is crucial; this needs to be negotiated between the learner and the trainer. This means that trainers must be adaptable and able to concentrate on the needs of the individual, as well as being able to work with pairs, groups and larger groupings. The trainer also should understand the needs of the employer and work with individuals to meet these needs. The trainer also must be flexible to adapt training needs to the lifestyle of the individual.

Many of the people interviewed emphasised their own long-term association with the community or locality, with most interviewees mentioning a close work and training association with their region of 10 years or more. They highlighted not only a strong understanding of local issues but also the importance of being trusted and reputational factors in successfully engaging high-need learners:

We have a good reputation in the region, we keep good staff. We are proud of the integrated approach we take to education and lifestyle skills. We are a growing organisation that has developed strong links with a range of political organisations in the area.

### Agility, responsiveness and flexibility

Private providers reported a similar understanding of community issues and highlighted the value of limiting the size of their organisation. One described the organisation as able to effect: 'Personal contact and follow up ... [we are] small enough to be persistent'. Another spoke in similar terms of the value of limiting organisation size, citing difficulties involved in undertaking case work with high volumes of high need learners: 'Caseloads for some big providers can be over 50. We try to keep ours as half that. Quality time is important. Customised service is lost with the larger providers'.

As such, the key strengths for most private providers across interviews involved 'flexibility and local focus', allowing for close connection to the needs of local industry and communities.

### Learner-centred approaches

These community and private providers were interviewed on the basis of their reputation for their potential contribution to strong regional outcomes, and almost all were able to itemise many instances of practice that would support strong participation and, ideally, strong completion outcomes. Many of these providers also had clear views on the practices of other providers that worked against the interests of their learners, highlighting in particular the vulnerability of many disadvantaged learners in a context of contestability. Smaller community and private providers prided themselves on their direct and efficient intervention strategies. They were able to set up rapid and responsive counselling support when needed. Many of their learners were described as having poor skill sets and bad work habits; they also tended to have low self-esteem, often due to their lack of success at school or, often, traumatic lives. As such these people needed close personal attention to help them break destructive lifestyle habits (drugs, sleeping patterns, poor self-talk, and aggressive responses to perceived threats).

Many providers reported taking on welfare responsibilities over and above their brief. They saw themselves as the last 'port of call' for highly 'damaged' individuals. Interviewees were very keen to recount longer-term success stories, which often involved considerable

investments of time and effort into troubled individuals until a breakthrough was reached. Having trainers or other staff members providing individual advice and care was an important component.

Economic, demographic and geographic differences played little role in the ways in which these community or private providers engaged with their learners. The interviews tended to highlight common strategies, including an often-expressed commitment to 'go the extra yard'. At the same time providers emphasised reluctance to 'push through' learners who cannot meet local industry requirements. In the longer term, such strategies are counter-productive for both learner and provider. In local environments, reputation and 'word of mouth' recommendations are crucial for the survival of smaller providers, while the processes underpinning their programs are well considered and often multi-layered:

We see ourselves as an organisation that captures those who have not had a good experience with the TAFE ... Many, many of our students are those who come to us halfway through a TAFE course because they do not get any traction with the TAFE. They say they do not get enough support. We have developed processes that suit the needs of the region. We plan to deliver courses in localities according to the timelines of the local needs. We have an integrated service as an employment agency so that trainees can transition. Once the student has finished they are assigned a social worker who acts as someone to help transition the young person into employment. We have a side to our business where disadvantaged people come in, long-term unemployed, disabled and so on. They have an assessment done and then a plan is made on what they want to do. We work with workplace consultants to discuss training options and the amount of hours that needs to be covered. We then design a training program to suit this. [We have] funded training courses that are attractive to people who just want to get a job. For example, there are a lot of cleaning jobs around, long-term unemployed people can't afford to pay for training; we set them up with a six-month program and then get them a job. This works for them.

Many of the smaller providers are also employment agencies. Learners go into training with the expectation that the training provider will follow up with employment offers. Training is often provided at prospective employers. This integrated model is well suited to small or geographically diverse communities. This is a possible reason why so many of the identified high-performing regions were rural.

### Limitations on partnerships with other providers

The case study interviews sought insights into the ecology of VET provision that may support certain regions in achieving strong participation and performance outcomes in VET. In the main, however, individual respondents were of limited assistance in shedding light on these patterns. Most providers had very little to say about other providers in their region, although several smaller providers were highly critical of the TAFE institutes. Small providers often see themselves as working with individuals not suited to a TAFE environment. This is especially true of higher-need learners, who require close support and attention (mentoring).

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**Providers tended to operate independently, with little knowledge or awareness of provision offered by other RTOs, apart from concern over predatory behaviours by external providers.**

Overall, the interviews supported a perception that providers tended to operate independently, with little knowledge or awareness of the provision offered by other RTOs, apart from concerns over the predatory behaviours of external providers. Private and community-based organisations, working long-term in their localities, were particularly critical of large RTOs, often from interstate or distant locations, and viewed them as opportunists. They mentioned instances where national organisations set up 'pop up' training sites in regional locations, 'push people through' and 'flood the market' with low-skilled graduates. Smaller organisations described themselves as then 'picking up the pieces' after these fly-by-night operators leave the area. The effect is damaging for individuals and their commitment to participation in VET more generally: 'There are quite a few RTOs that fly in and out of towns and locals are wary of their commitment'.

Few providers, however, reported local partnerships, networks or other relationships geared to a coordinated approach to region-level provision. In certain cases, changes to funding arrangements and other structural factors have led to providers joining ranks. In one instance, an RTO with a strong focus on the provision of training and services to learners with disabilities had merged with another provider of services to disadvantaged youth to provide substantial economies of scale.

It appears that a focus on learner needs, having the flexibility to respond, and knowledge of the community, are central to the improved participation and outcomes of disadvantaged learners at TAFE, private and community-based training providers.

## Conclusion

Improving VET participation in and outcomes for disadvantaged Australians is an important strategy for improving life and work opportunities. VET is a stepping stone for many into further education, training and work, and is an essential tool for tackling a range of barriers to workforce participation, including long-term unemployment, early school leaving, low literacy or numeracy skills, and the need to retrain or upskill. As a result, VET is a fundamental contributor to productivity, workforce development and participation. VET also provides personal benefits for learners, as well as social benefits to the community.

In seeking to examine good practice across Australia for promoting participation and outcomes in VET, particularly for low-skilled and disadvantaged learners, this research employed a three-stage research design:

- a national mapping of regional participation and performance in VET to identify regions achieving high levels of engagement and completion for different groups of disadvantaged learners
- a national survey of VET providers on the successful practices used to achieve engagement and better outcomes
- case studies documenting instances of strong regional and local practices contributing to their successful engagement and better outcomes.

### Effective practice for supporting disadvantaged learners in VET

The national mapping of Australian regions revealed that the regions which are most successful in engaging disadvantaged learners in VET and promoting completion are:

- more likely to be located in non-metropolitan areas
- reporting higher-than-average concentrations of community provision (especially important for learners with disabilities, unemployed and individuals with low prior educational attainment)
- enrolling significant proportions of VET learners in TAFE
- offering strong capacity for basic VET delivery (lower levels of AQF)
- focusing on classroom-based learning delivery.

The results highlight the importance of the *institutional* features of organisations (that is, the role of community providers and TAFE institutes), but they also point to important implications for policy and practice. An analysis of national data on modes of delivery and provision, undertaken in the first stage of the research, shows that that *pedagogy* strategies (based on the 'effective intervention' model), and classroom-based delivery in particular, play a pivotal role in supporting participation and completion for disadvantaged learners. While flexibility in the delivery of training has been highlighted in this study as an important feature, replacing classroom-based delivery with other delivery modes does not necessarily seem to benefit disadvantaged learners. To that end, an adequate policy framework would retain classroom-based delivery and supplement it with other flexible options.

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**Program-level initiatives, while often resource-intensive, are regarded as much more effective than initiatives linked to individual learner characteristics.**

The national survey of VET providers revealed further examples of *pedagogy* strategies to support VET completion for disadvantaged learners. Adaptations made to the training programs and delivery modes foster improved engagement by disadvantaged learners when they are developed to take account of the specific learner *needs* associated with given forms of disadvantage. In other words, program adaptability and flexible delivery work best when adjustments are informed by the specific needs of learners. One possible recommendation would be to systematise the assessment of learner needs in order to improve the efficacy and relevance of training flexibility.

Perhaps even more important than *pedagogy* in understanding what training providers do differently in successful regions are *wellbeing* strategies. The national survey highlighted that wellbeing strategies designed to support learners beyond their training are essential. Disadvantaged learners do not leave their disadvantage at the doorstep of the training centre, and issues not directly related to vocational education and training can impede learner engagement and completion. Therefore, strategies aimed at understanding the circumstances of individual learners and responding to their broader needs make a difference to VET participation and completion. Providing learner-centred training is a pedagogical principle, and adopting a holistic perspective on disadvantaged learners is a wellbeing principle that makes learner-centred practices possible. In this context, VET providers are not isolated because in successful regions, they are more adept at creating a strong network with the local community. Practices that support the development of local ties should be adopted more broadly. Engagement with the local community appears to be a fundamental principle for making VET training work better for disadvantaged learners.

Engaging with local communities is not only important in terms of learner wellbeing. It also constitutes an integral part of effective *outreach* strategies. Training providers in high-performing regions tend to be more engaged in the promotion of outreach and access than RTOs in other regions, even if regional differences in outreach practices were less marked than differences in pedagogy and wellbeing practices.

VET providers in high-performing regions more often think of their program delivery as only one component in a broader network of local organisations. Rather than seeing their institution as the centre of an ecosystem more or less favourable to VET training, their conception of VET training starts with the local community, with its social and economic needs. This suggests that knowledge of the local economy, the forms of disadvantage experienced by the community and the landscape of available training organisations may be a prerequisite for regions becoming more successful with disadvantaged learners.

The national survey of employers did not reveal significant differences in the self-declared use of *pathway* strategies – those linking the education and training to pathways beyond the training itself – between stronger and weaker regions. However, the training providers interviewed as part of the case studies still emphasised the role of such strategies in supporting disadvantaged learner participation and completion. They confirmed the crucial role of a community-centred approach and most demonstrated a thorough understanding of their local community and the needs of the population and employment and labour markets. Accordingly, VET providers with a long-standing presence in the region are probably better equipped to support participation and completion for disadvantaged learners. It follows that state- and nation-wide policies that support the *stability* of the VET provider market are likely to improve participation and completion for these social groups.

TAFE institutes, community providers and private providers reported adopting some similar and some different sets of strategies to support VET participation and completion for disadvantaged learners. For all VET providers, *wellbeing* and *pedagogy* strategies were the most commonly cited, with targeted additional support; the presence of experienced teachers for helping hard-to-reach learners; the availability of support at the (geographical) point of need; and the adoption of learner-centred approaches mentioned as vital. On the other hand, respondents from TAFE institutes more often highlighted *pathway and career planning* strategies, emphasising the importance of recognising that different learners may need alternative types of pathways and options. One possible explanation is that TAFE institutes may deal with a more diverse student population, which brings specific challenges. In a similar vein, the often-mentioned importance of an institution-wide commitment to supporting disadvantaged learners may be the result of the larger size of TAFE providers. This suggests that the relative usefulness of the four types of strategies comprising the 'effective intervention' model for supporting disadvantaged learners in VET may also depend on institutional configuration.

An unanticipated finding revealed by the free-text responses in the survey of VET providers was the importance of a tailored curriculum. Many providers reported modifying or providing courses or programs specific to the needs of learners and these were important to provider success with particular groups of learners. Providers saw the implementation of specially designed programs or courses as important in addressing learner needs and encouraging disadvantaged learners to participate in VET, as well as complete their studies. Such programs include those focused on developing language, literacy and numeracy skills and foundation skills for Indigenous and other learners with minimal or no language skills, or short introductory courses designed to generate confidence.

## Towards holistic thinking on VET participation and completion

This study focused on VET participation and completion for disadvantaged learners as a means of improving opportunities. The effective intervention model (Davies, Lamb & Doecke 2011) has proved useful for understanding what successful regions do well: all four types of strategies (outreach, pedagogy, wellbeing and pathways) are used in these regions to a greater extent than by the less successful regions. In addition, a fifth strategy – curriculum – has emerged through the research. The case studies also revealed that the regions effective in supporting participation and completion for disadvantaged learners are flexible in their use of this panel of strategies and responsive to their local context of operation. In efforts to enhance VET participation and completion for disadvantaged learners, a number of practices and strategies described in this study would benefit from being adopted more broadly in other regions.

Another important finding to emerge from this research is the importance of *regional thinking* in VET provision. Participation and completion rates, despite their limitations, represent useful indicators for assessing how well the VET sector works for the various types of learners. However, participation and completion do not automatically translate into enhanced and relevant work opportunities (Moodie et al. 2013). Despite the fact that one of the main purposes of VET is to prepare learners for the workforce, the link between vocational qualifications and occupational destinations – outside regulated occupations – is often weak in Australia (Wheelahan & Moodie 2017). Fewer than 30% of VET graduates employed after training in 2015 were employed in the same occupation as their training

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**The development of regional frameworks, which coordinate the relationships between local community profiles, VET provision and regional labour markets, is likely to make VET participation and completion more beneficial for all those involved.**

course (NCVER 2015b). It is likely that part of the explanation for this also lies in the structure of the labour market and the use of qualifications by employers rather than being exclusively the responsibility of the organisation of the training system (Wheelahan & Moodie 2017). Success in converting engagement in VET into enhanced opportunities, therefore, cannot ignore the structure and functioning of regional labour markets. Since VET providers already operate on a regional basis, the development of *regional frameworks* – which *coordinate* the relationships between local community profiles, VET provision and regional labour markets – is likely to make VET participation and completion more beneficial for all involved (that is, local communities, VET providers and the regional economy). Coordinated regional frameworks would make an integrated approach to the reform of training systems and labour market structures possible and could strengthen the relationship between VET completion and relevant work opportunities (Wheelahan, Buchanan & Yu 2015).

On the other hand, thinking of the benefits of VET training exclusively in terms of employment is short-sighted. Workforce participation represents only one form of enhanced opportunity for disadvantaged learners (Guenther et al. 2017), and it is important to recognise the personal and social benefits arising from VET training for both learners and the community. At the societal level, failing to help disadvantaged learners engage in VET represents a 'lost opportunity', with costs to social progress, growth, productivity and creativity for Australia (Huo & Lamb 2017). At the personal level, education and training is a *transformative* experience, where individuals are changed. Throughout their engagement in VET, learners can build positive dispositions, attitudes and skills (irrespective of their employment status after completion), and these can result in improved participation in society (for example, in family, community and citizen roles). These societal and individual benefits to their local region are also what make VET important for disadvantaged learners, and the *individual and social value* of this experience deserves to be acknowledged and supported by policy and resources.

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# Appendix A – Estimating regional rates

## Measuring VET participation and completion

Assessments of regional differences in VET participation were achieved by calculating the numbers of enrolments in the designated areas for learners with identified disadvantage characteristics as a proportion of all 15 to 64-year-olds in those areas with the same characteristics. Participation is defined as enrolment in any VET program. VET participation, for the purposes of this research, always refers to an enrolment in a TAFE institute, university, community or private provider, in a government-funded VET course or program that is not part of a VET in Schools program, by learners aged between 15 and 64 who have supplied a home address on enrolment, and where delivery has not taken place in a correctional facility.

Completion is measured in two ways:

- A subject-completion rate represents the ratio of the number of reported hours for modules where competencies were achieved or passed to the reported hours for modules where competencies were achieved or passed, not achieved or failed, or withdrawn or discontinued. The rate is derived for the calendar year and is similar to the subject load pass rate used by NCVET.
- An award-completion rate is calculated by dividing the number of learners who completed any VET program in 2014 by the total number of learners enrolled across the year (including learners for whom the qualification has been issued, as well as those yet to have their qualification issued). This is different from the method used by NCVET to derive estimated completion rates, so it is important to note that, while the term 'award completion rate' is used in this report, it is not the same as the 'estimated completion rate' used by NCVET (see NCVET 2016b, for an outline of the NCVET method).

## Regions

The regions used in this study are defined by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Statistical Area Level 3 (SA3) boundaries (ABS 2011). SA3 regions have populations between 30 000 and 130 000 inhabitants; they reflect regional identity; and they have geographic and socioeconomic similarities (ABS 2011). Of the 351 SA3 areas in Australia, 328 are used in the analyses, with migratory, off-shore and shipping regions excluded. The 328 regions cover the whole of Australia without gaps or overlaps. The number of SA3 areas across Australian states and territories is given in table A1.

For deriving regional estimates, learners were allocated to the appropriate SA3, based on their home location. Aggregate learner counts were generated within each region or SA3. This approach allowed for learners who live in more than one SA3 across the calendar year to be included in the learner count for each of those regions. The sum of learners across the regions in 2014 was 1 085 027. SA3 regions where the number of VET learners was small (fewer than 200 learners) were excluded from the analyses. This resulted in the exclusion of two regions from the ACT and one region from NSW.

**Table A1 Number of SA3 regions by state and territory and metropolitan status**

	NSW	Vic.	Qld	SA	WA	Tas.	NT	ACT	AUS
Metropolitan	46	40	39	19	21	6	4	9	184
Non-metropolitan	43	25	41	9	12	9	5	0	144
Total	89	65	80	28	33	15	9	9	328

Note: Excludes Migratory – Offshore, Shipping and No Usual Address.

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (2011).

The number of VET learners from specific disadvantaged learner groups in each region was calculated in a similar way. The enrolments associated with each sub-population of VET learners, identified through background characteristics recorded at enrolment, were selected before aggregating learner counts within regions. This method was used to establish the number of VET learners living in each SA3 from Indigenous backgrounds, learners with a disability, CALD learners and learners with low levels of prior educational attainment. It must be noted that the self-reported nature of disadvantage represents a limitation of the data, as the reliability of self-reports can vary.

The selection of learners from these backgrounds revealed that 5.3% overall identified as Indigenous; 8.6% indicated they had a disability; 19.9% came from a culturally and linguistically diverse background; 12.6% were unemployed; and 34.2% had low levels of prior educational attainment; that is, they had not completed Year 12 or a certificate III or above prior to enrolment.

The participation rates are calculated by dividing the regional learner counts by the corresponding population of the SA3, or sub-population for disadvantaged learner groups, and then multiplying by 100. The data sources for regional population figures varied according to availability. For all students, regional residential population estimates for different age groups for 2014 were available from the ABS (ABS 2015) and were used to derive population figures for 15 to 64 year-olds at SA3 level.



## Appendix B – Regional case studies

This appendix provides details of eight regional case studies to provide texture and depth to the findings presented in the report. The case studies focus on the various strategies providers have in place to support disadvantaged learners. They draw on provider characterisations of their region, clients, aspirations and needs. They build on the work of Lamb and Walstab, which highlighted the importance of understanding the ecology of training provision within regions, and to understand how providers operate in relation to each other (Walstab & Lamb 2008; Lamb & Walstab 2010).

The regions selected for these case studies are the 13 successful regions that demonstrate high rates of participation and completion for disadvantaged learners. Twenty eight interviews were conducted in 11 of the 13 successful regions identified in the first section of the report. The 11 regions were aggregated into eight 'areas' based on their geographical proximity and because of the mobility of learners between these proximal regions (that is, learners residing in one region travelling to the adjacent region for VET training). These eight areas form the basis of the eight case studies. In this appendix, two of the case studies were aggregated and presented together due to their comparable features (see case studies one and two).

### Case studies one and two: a tale of two cities – Bendigo and Shepparton regions

#### Context

The cities of Greater Bendigo and Shepparton are located in Central Victoria. These regions overlap and both have high levels of participation and achievement of disadvantaged learners in VET programs.

Both regions are growing population centres. Bendigo has a population of over 100 000 inhabitants, with a growth of 20% since the turn of the twenty-first century. Shepparton's population is currently over 60 000. Bendigo was founded as a mining town in the mid-1900s and subsequently developed a manufacturing base, including a substantial defence component. Shepparton's economy is more closely bound to its agricultural and food-processing sector and the region is self-described as the 'food bowl' of Australia. A recent industry downturn has led to an increase in social welfare needs.

Both regions are low socioeconomic areas with school retention rates lower than the state average. Shepparton has a more diverse population than Bendigo, with a higher concentration of Indigenous families and more diversity of language groupings. Interviewees reported general health and wellbeing problems as significant concerns for populations in these regions.

Large TAFE providers dominate VET delivery in both regions. Bendigo has one large senior secondary college, delivering Year 11 and 12 programs to over 2000 young people and a single, recently amalgamated TAFE. Shepparton hosts the main campus of GoTAFE, the largest provider of VET courses in the region.

## Findings

A strength of VET delivery in both these regional areas involves the breadth of programs that the TAFE institutes offer. Since the recent reorganisations of both TAFE institutes, these very large entities see themselves as central to regional development and have devised engagement strategies with local communities, business development agencies and welfare organisations. Both are confident that their processes and resources are appropriate to support both the economic needs of the region and their learners, and they see themselves as having an *enabling role* in advancing the capacity of their disadvantaged learners to engage with vocational courses. The TAFE institutes also work to develop individualised pathways for learners and courses at levels appropriate to need, such as early school leavers involved in foundation programs.

Smaller providers in both centres have developed a strong model of 'personalised' service delivery, especially for individuals who do not have the skills to negotiate the organisational demands of a large provider. They see themselves as 'picking up' individuals who are less equipped to manage TAFE requirements and who need much more intensive and ongoing levels of support to succeed in training.

Some smaller organisations interviewed proposed *wellbeing programs* and *community linkages* to support the very basic life 'needs' of individuals. Some reported feeding their clients, helping them to obtain birth certificates and driver's licences, negotiating accommodation, providing counselling for drug or alcohol dependency and essentially acting as family support. These programs of support may not always be explicit: some interviewees commented that they merely 'do what needs to be done' to support their local community and learners.

Smaller RTOs with a specific industry focus were also keen to promote the targeted and flexible support they provide. They described themselves as strongly linked into community needs and positioned at the centre of a *three-way partnership*, with learners and prospective employers regarded as clients of equal importance. They see themselves as closer to a community coalface than the larger VET providers. These RTOs are more likely to work directly with families and community organisations.

As described, this is a functional ecology of provision but not without stress and tensions. Smaller providers in particular describe themselves as highly responsive and linked to community needs. They feel a strong sense of community obligation to provide services that they see as going beyond their funding model. They may have many years of experience in servicing their specific communities and/or client groups. They describe themselves as organisations under stress, burdened by the need to allocate scarce resources to compliance requirements, negatively impacted by the short-term nature of funding arrangements and beholden to community expectations to 'fix' or 'repair' highly disadvantaged clients.

Smaller providers were sometimes critical of large for-profit RTOs, often seen as coming 'from the city' with training approaches described as predatory, targeting vulnerable communities, offering poor-quality courses, and leaving in their wake under-trained but over-certified graduates with limited pathways.

The training and economic ecologies of both regions, while different, have produced partly similar effects. Large and smaller providers see themselves as responsive to both economic and social agendas. TAFE institutes are committed to adjusting their teaching practices,

developing new programs and increasing services to support individuals at risk. At the same time, some individuals still appear to need more concentrated levels of assistance. Smaller and more community-based providers emphasise their role in engaging with the whole learner, focusing in particular on the *wellbeing components* that keep the learner engaged with their training program. An argument put by smaller providers is that this assistance is often unrecognised within funding models and relies on a notion of community reciprocity: 'I live in this community; I must do all I can to support those I live with'.

## Case study three: Albany and the 'Great South West'

### Context

Albany, with a population of around 24 000, is a major town on the southern edge of the 'Greater South West' region, which extends from the north of Bunbury on the western coast and inland as far as Kalgoorlie in Western Australia. The wider region has a population of around 60 000. The core industries of the region are agriculture-related, with associated small-scale support industries such as engineering, tourism and welfare and training. The population demographics have shifted, with older people moving into the area for lifestyle reasons. This has had some effect on the development of retail and service industries. Consistent across the region is the absence of large-scale employers.

All VET providers agreed on key concerns, including the increased number of low-skilled and potentially disengaged young people in the region. Limited employment options in a post-boom period, combined with growing problems of drug and alcohol dependence across the region, exacerbate concerns for these groups.

The four VET providers interviewed for this study support different groups of learners, segmented by learning readiness and social need. The recently created regional TAFE, the largest provider of VET courses in the region, has been amalgamated into 12 campuses and caters to more mainstream learners. Of the smaller providers interviewed, one is the largest labour hire company in the region, with over 300 apprentices employed. Of the other two, one assists at-risk or potentially disengaged young people in the Bunbury region and the other supports a comparable group of young people in the region around Albany. All three of the smaller providers know of each other's practices and see their roles as complementary.

### Findings

Providers catering to the most disadvantaged groups see their role primarily as facilitating *welfare and wellbeing*, aiming to assist highly 'damaged' young people to function socially. These smaller providers offer a selective range of programs. They see themselves as 'picking up the pieces', supporting the individuals whose circumstances and limited preparation render them unsuited to the demands of a TAFE course. Engagement strategies include: scaling back needs-based course loads to accommodate the complexity of some learners' lives; integration of literacy and numeracy teaching into course content; and the strategic integration of work experiences in learning (where possible) to build workplace readiness. They emphasised that the most disadvantaged individuals take longer to make productive transitions and need support over at least 'a couple of years'.

All VET providers (including the TAFE) reported using social media to promote programs to provide linkages with potential learners. Their community profiles are strong and these

providers are known and trusted, by both other providers and the community. The three smaller providers all assign staff to act as transition support. They work with schools in particular to identify profiles of young people who are likely to disengage, or to access their services in the future.

The TAFE has general and structured learner support services. Its lecturers and instructors are given training to enable them to identify learners at risk of failing so that interventions can occur. Once individual learner profiles are developed for nominated learners, progress is monitored with regular updates and reviews. Smaller providers, lacking the institutional structures available at the TAFE level, stress the importance of developing relationships with young people as part of a supportive team structure. They also work to involve families to assist participation and develop family self-esteem. Modelling good social and work practice is seen by smaller organisations as a key element of their success. One provider used the term 'workplace model' to describe an environment where even the most challenging behaviours are modified by a strong workplace culture. Another provider explained that they 'provide tough love' to describe how they work with young people to shift entrenched habits.

The TAFE collaborates with regional authorities to provide courses that are linked with regional development plans, allowing learners to see *pathways* that are supported in local contexts. The smaller organisations employ field workers to maintain links with local employers. This also assists with developing pathways. Strong links with local providers are a key to sound job placements, with many leading to part- and full-time work. In a labour market that was described as 'soft', providers stressed the need for constant responsiveness and adjustments. Being closely in touch with regional dynamics is crucial to making these adjustments.

As with the previous case study, these providers identify challenges. Financially, they see themselves as 'just keeping their heads above water'. All claimed to provide services above and beyond what they are funded to do with their disadvantaged and high-need learners. The cost of courses remains an issue for disadvantaged young people, even though fees are kept as low as possible. Compliance requirements for RTOs are regarded as onerous, especially for the smaller organisations. Smaller community-focused organisations are also concerned that they must 'pick up the pieces' when young people are inappropriately certified, often by large private training companies, whom, they argue, make undertakings to vulnerable individuals and communities that are not fulfilled.

## Case study four: Huon – Bruny Island, Southern Tasmania

### Context

The Huon region of southern Tasmania is well known for its apple production and the conservation zones that dot the area, while the logging of plantation wood is an important industry. Bruny Island is a holiday destination with a small permanent population. Access to the island is by ferry. Interviewees for this study noted that many of the residents who live south of Hobart and commute to the city for work could be described as middle class.

Given that the population south of Hobart is of the order of only 25 000 people, a study of VET provision and participation in the region is essentially a study of what occurs in Hobart.

Three sets of interviews were secured: one with a senior manager of TAS TAFE, another with two managers of TAS TAFE and the third with an executive of a private provider.

Interviewees described their views of the overall education system in Tasmania, which they felt was challenging. The government school system runs its own RTO through the eight colleges across the state. Interviewees described senior school completion rates as poor and students will often move into TAFE without having completed their senior school certificate at school. The Tasmanian Certificate of Education (TCE) allows for TAFE-based courses to give credit towards TCE completion. One view was that TAS TAFE has little interaction with private providers and senior secondary schools. Trade training centres have recently been built and are attached to senior colleges, and issues around their utilisation were raised by all interviewees. TAS TAFE hires space in these centres from schools and the private provider is excluded from their use. It was suggested by one interviewee that a successful VET program run by the government secondary school in the small town of Huonville heavily influences the higher relative participation and completion rates in VET in the region.

## Findings

TAS TAFE is the sole public provider of VET courses in Tasmania after a recent amalgamation of three separate providers. Over 90% of the state government budget allocated to VET goes to the TAFE. TAS TAFE is in the process of developing its structural identity and is evaluating its market and core offerings. The number of disengaged young people wanting to access TAFE courses is described as a major problem, with course structures and teaching skills being described as inappropriate for this growing group.

Apart from high numbers of unemployed and disengaged young people entering TAFE, there are increasing numbers of learners with mental health issues and students with low English skills who come from refugee backgrounds. Many of the campuses tender out for case managers and offer base-level support services in literacy and digital skills. TAS TAFE has a specific focus on four learning areas: literacy, technical trades, human services, and hospitality and tourism. High-need learners are supported in their literacy development before and during their transition into more vocational courses.

A major challenge identified by the interviewees is that high-need learners emerge from secondary schools with low levels of confidence and poor academic and social skills. One interviewee expressed concern at the high number of learners with poor presentation sent to their organisation by Job Services Australia. They regarded them as being unsuited to an industry reliant on good organisational and interpersonal skills. This organisation is a provider of quality apprentices for the growing hospitality industry. Support workers are employed to monitor all learners and to case-manage low-skilled learners. Programs are designed to provide 'difficult' learners with basic skills in areas such as teamwork, hygiene and fast food preparation (for example, sandwich making). This interviewee commented on their ability to modify courses and methods of delivery in a flexible way. They also stated that, within the small Tasmanian marketplace, networking is essential in order to recognise opportunities and trends. More broadly, interviewees noted the difficulty in building strong partnerships between different types of VET providers.

## Case study five: Yorke Peninsula

### Context

The Yorke Peninsula is bounded by the Spencer Gulf on its western side and Gulf St Vincent on the east. At the northern end of Spencer Gulf are the major industrial ports of Port Augusta, Port Pirie and Whyalla. The core economy of the region is agricultural, primarily based on grain. Coastal tourism and a 'sea change' lifestyle for retirees is promoted, based on beaches and fishing and villages that were once centres for the export of agricultural goods. Founded as a copper mining centre in the nineteenth century, Kadina, with a population of around 3000 people, is the largest town in the region, with a total population of 26 000. Students living within the region tend to access educational services in Adelaide and the larger industrial towns to its north.

Three VET providers were interviewed for this study. TAFE SA is the major provider of VET courses in South Australia and runs programs across the whole of the state. With centres in Kadina and the smaller town of Maitland, TAFE SA offers courses where sufficient enrolment numbers permits. Both the community and private providers interviewed have offices in Kadina and are part of larger business entities operating widely in southeastern Australia.

### Findings

Within the Yorke Peninsula the three interviewees acknowledged that there are no other VET providers. All were surprised by the data indicating that this region has strong participation and completion of VET programs. They all described their practices as being consistent with their practice at the other centres in which they operate. The distinguishing feature of the two smaller providers was that they were able to identify and describe their client base in great detail and were able to tailor courses and services accordingly. The TAFE interviewee spoke positively of the Flexible Learning Option (FLO) program through which potentially disengaged learners can access a case manager and flexible learning sites and are encouraged to participate in VET programs. The relatively limited number of TAFE courses offered in Kadina address basic skills, business, community services and horticulture. For Indigenous learners living in and around Maitland, there are specifically designed courses that are small in scope, flexible in design and timetabled around learners' ability to attend. Flexibility within this region is about setting timetables that make regular attendance possible. Public transport services are limited; as a result, learners with high need are supported by wrap-around welfare organisations, which offer 'pick-ups and drop offs'.

The community provider has developed a strong relationship with regional schools based around the state government-sponsored Training Guarantee Program for senior students enrolled in the South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE). For students who are unable to complete a certificate III prior to leaving school, this program funds them to complete it through a tertiary VET provider. This organisation assigns case workers to support learners who have not succeeded in the TAFE environment. All learners have a needs-based assessment on enrolment and an individual plan is developed that takes into account the distance they have to travel and their seasonal work commitments (for example, harvesting). This service has also employed workplace consultants to develop work placements and to support future employment.

The private provider primarily offers agribusiness programs designed to train graduates in skills appropriate to the region. This organisation describes itself as being totally integrated into the agribusiness industry of South Australia and committed to providing highly skilled graduates.

Professionals who see themselves as being responsive to local needs run both the community and private organisations. Interviewees described their practices as stemming from a strong sense of *community-based mutual obligation*. Formal and informal networks prescribe that individuals are supported through to clearly defined ends. Learners are welcomed, their needs assessed, and programs developed and monitored. Low-skilled individuals are supported with basic life skills (for example, accessing a driver's licence) in order to 'reshape their lives'. Successful graduates are supported to find work and the private provider encourages more highly skilled graduates to develop career plans. Both the private and community providers are *integrated into the social and economic networks of the area*, and both advocate around training issues and promote a strong sense of social commitment.

## Cast study six: Rocklea – Acacia Ridge

### Context

Rocklea – Acacia Ridge is an ABS statistical area that covers a number of suburbs between nine and 15 kilometres south of the Brisbane CBD. In the years after the Second World War, the area developed as a transport hub, sitting alongside heavy manufacturing industries. Workers and their families lived in adjacent residential suburbs. The industrial precinct still exists, with an emphasis on the storage and distribution of goods by road and rail. The current population of the region is close to 60 000. Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are over-represented in local schools and the most recent unemployment rate, at 6.7%, is at the high end of rates for the Brisbane metropolitan area.

Many of the issues mentioned by interview respondents could be seen as similar to those of any large metropolitan area in Australia. Common issues such as low literacy and numeracy, the need for individualised learner support and the importance of flexible programs were raised. Representatives from two TAFE institutes and three community and private providers were interviewed. Both TAFE institutes have many campuses spread throughout the greater metropolitan area of Brisbane. The case study also draws on another five survey respondents with learners from the Rocklea – Acacia ridge region. The TAFE institutes reported an increase of 17-year-old learners, for whom traditional high schools had not been successful. As is common in other major Australian metropolitan centres in 2017, courses in health services and hospitality are seen as attractive to many younger learners.

### Findings

Providers often discussed culturally and linguistically diverse populations. They commented on the high numbers of recent arrivals from overseas settling in the Rocklea – Acacia Ridge area. As adults, these individuals are often attracted to TAFE courses in order to gain employment (for example, in transport and logistics). TAFE respondents commented on the need to assess the literacy and numeracy skills of potential 'at risk' learners. In the region, some pre-TAFE support programs are run through outsourced providers. The Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) is used by TAFE institutes to support and service refugees with

limited English proficiency. These courses are generally provided by specialist staff in smaller community settings. Both TAFE institutes also expressed concern at the low literacy and numeracy levels of local applicants.

The cumulative effect of poor language skills of local, refugee and even full-fee paying international students has meant that identified at-risk groups of learners are assessed before they begin courses. If required, they then receive literacy support before and during training. Other outreach organisations such as 'yourtown' provide support for learners with emotional and psychological issues. The image of Acacia Ridge as an industrial area persists and 'southside' campuses of TAFE still offer what were described by providers as the 'older' or 'dirtier' industrial trades.

The private and community providers all commented on the numbers of newly arrived immigrants they were enrolling in courses aligned to the transport and logistics operations sectors in the industrial precinct of Acacia Ridge. All of the smaller providers interviewed prided themselves on their English language support. One organisation, operating primarily as an online deliverer of programs, made the point that in order to maintain credibility in the transport industry, all learners at risk of failing (mostly because of their language skills) received support and counselling from individual trainers. Another comment worth noting is that RTOs feel that local employers in the area are well aware of learners who have come from unreliable training organisations. The interviewees explained that, while these organisations may still exist, they are progressively exiting the marketplace.

On the one hand, the Rocklea – Acacia Ridge region is close to the centre of Brisbane, with access to a large number of VET providers offering a wide range of courses; on the other hand, the demographics of the area (with a high number of newly arrived immigrants), combined with the proximity of an area of employment in product distribution, has created a demand for particular courses. In this context, it seems that all VET providers have recognised the need to assess learners with low literacy skills and have subsequently developed what they see as supportive programs. All providers commented that their programs require high levels of personalised learner–teacher contact time and must be supportive of the welfare needs of learners. This level of support, although expensive from the point of view of VET providers, was also described as necessary to remain credible as training organisations.

## Case study seven: Lithgow – Mudgee

### Context

This case study is concerned with a region that has a range of regional centres with similar economic and social profiles and an extensive rural community. The major centres are Lithgow, at the western base of the Blue Mountains, with a current population of 22 000; Mudgee, in the north, with a population of 24 000; Orange, in the west, with a population of 41 000; and Bathurst, in the centre, with a population of 42 000. The combined regional population of around 150 000 increased by 15% between 2006 and 2015 and is forecast to grow at an even more rapid rate over the next 10 years.

While generally perceived as a low socioeconomic traditional working-class area, there are pockets of relative affluence. Some of the population increase in areas close to the Blue Mountains is ascribed to the arrival of so-called 'tree change' retirees. Tourism and viticulture are regarded as future growth industries. The western part of the region has a higher concentration of Indigenous communities, with their distinctive set of needs.

Two separate TAFE institutes were interviewed: one based in Western Sydney, with campuses on the western side of the mountains, and the other with 24 campuses spread over the whole of western New South Wales. The region has a history of mining and associated manufacturing industries, but can now be described as being in economic transition. In some locations, the old economy still persists; in others, there has been a spike in unemployment. Recently unemployed miners are described as a key market for smaller VET providers. The region was also presented by one interviewee as being 'in drought, [the latter] having an economic effect as well as one of [undermining] regional confidence'.

## Findings

The two TAFE institutes in the study focus on the needs of early school leavers and students who have recently completed their secondary education. There are TAFE campuses spread across a wide geographic area. All reported travel and distance as an issue for learners: TAFE campuses with good transport infrastructure tend to attract more learners, while in the more remote centres, learner numbers suffer, due to limited public transport and access to work placements. Campuses have developed 'learning hubs' for the consolidation of support services, and teaching staff are encouraged to deliver courses online through the software system Moodle. Both TAFE institutes recognise the need for innovation in the delivery of courses. Where travel is prohibitive, leadership roles have been developed so as to facilitate program delivery across a range of campuses.

A strong driver articulated by all VET providers is the development of courses that will assist and support community development. TAFE institutes are important institutions: in many communities, the TAFE centre is the largest government-funded organisation with an emphasis on community needs. It is expected that TAFE institutes develop linkages and provide pathways for young people, especially for those in disadvantaged areas, to help people move out of poverty. Courses in service industries (for example, tourism) are promoted alongside the more traditional technology and agriculture programs. An increasing number of learners with low skills are being enrolled in TAFE-run pre-employment programs, which concentrate on employability skills such as communication, organisation and the ability to work in a team. Links with local employers have been developed and continue to be expanded.

In terms of challenges, the two interviewees representing the private and community providers focused on problems associated with the recent mine closures in the region. Training opportunities have developed on the back of a rise in unemployment, especially for men in their 40s and 50s. The recently unemployed are more attracted to the two large community providers than to TAFE institutes, or have been referred to these providers by government-sponsored employment agencies. Importantly, one of the providers also acts as an employment agency, while the other focuses on the development of small business plans. Learners being taught to develop a small business plan were strongly encouraged to have a well-defined 'end game' to articulate their pathways into the workforce.

Community and private providers emphasised the need to develop *flexible programs* for men who strongly identify as miners and can be resistant to change. Providers have to offer courses that can appeal to these men, in sectors which are similar to their previous occupations. As reported by the interviewees, former miners are more comfortable enrolling in warehousing and logistics courses than in training programs in hospitality and small business development, for example.

Providers in the region also have to respond to the psychological needs of mature adults whom they assess as having, in some cases, lost control of their lives. Course times are adjusted to suit men in part-time work and foundation courses are offered to men who have low literacy skills but who are not comfortable in doing 'school-based' work. In certain cases, some units of competency have to be treated as 'prior learning'. The skills sets that these men bring to their courses need to be clearly acknowledged and understood by the teaching staff. Unless these men are taught by teachers whom they regard as having the right qualifications, a respectful and trusting relationship often cannot develop. A strong point was made, as noted in other case studies, that trainers need to have high levels of interpersonal skills, offer flexible assessment options, be recognised within their community and have good relations with potential employers.

The issue of *stability* was also raised on two fronts. From the point of view of long-standing training organisations, the arrival of new VET providers who deliver courses over a short period of time and leave the local community is damaging to the reputation of long-established RTOs, including community providers. Trust and goodwill are important, and they are achieved and maintained through strong local interactions and ties to community-based organisations such as Rotary and sporting clubs. At the same time, small providers also raised concerns in relation to the instability of the local economy. They reported that the economic situation implies a high degree of uncertainty, and the areas in which former miners train may not offer long-term employment solutions. In this context, the management and scope of regional economic planning was explicitly raised.

## Case study eight: Perth

### Context

Perth, the capital city of Western Australia, had a population approaching 2.2 million people in 2016. This case study focuses on the ABS statistical region of Perth, covering the central business district (CBD), which, in mid-2016, had a population just under 21 000 inhabitants. For many years, economic growth in Perth was predicated on exports of mined commodities. Growth trends in the prices of these commodities have slowed, as have levels of business investment. On the other hand, population growth is still strong, with an influx of many new arrivals, especially from Southeast Asia. This has created a situation, mirrored nationally, where demand for VET courses has been driven by the recently unemployed, as well as new immigrants.

As in many other regions of Australia, TAFE delivery in Perth has been radically restructured over the last few years. Where there once were four separate TAFE institutes in Perth, there are now two, each serving different populations to the north and south of the Swan River. Two of the northern campuses are based in the CBD and attract large proportions of learners with high levels of need. The relative ease of access to the CBD and the

concentration of support services are important reasons for the significant number of high-need learners.

In addition to the TAFE institutes, three smaller providers were interviewed, all located to the immediate north of the CBD: a private provider serving the needs of the intellectually disabled; a community provider with a clientele of mainly young people requiring high levels of individualised support; and a not-for-profit accommodation provider, which has developed a strong working relationship with the TAFE institute.

## Findings

During Western Australia's economic boom, TAFE qualifications at relatively low levels were sufficient for individuals to gain well-remunerated employment in mining, building and construction. Learners with physical and intellectual disabilities were also placed in specific courses designed around their needs. In some cases, instead of transitioning into employment after completing a TAFE course, individuals tended to stay in the TAFE system, enrolling in one course after another. In response to this situation, the newly restructured TAFE institutes have developed policies to 'mainstream' all forms of support, so that specific courses are no longer targeted to specific groups.

Interviewees acknowledged the challenge of providing sufficient levels of support to individuals with high needs in order to facilitate successful outcomes. It was clear that the ideal model of VET provision in TAFE would be the provision of tailored and individualised support to growing populations of learners with different levels of need. At the same time, identifying the arrangements and resources to provide a high level of personalised support to these learners can still prove challenging for these VET providers.

Recent changes to government policy have led to a redefinition of how monies in support of welfare and education are allocated. The smaller providers interviewed see themselves as delivering *an integrated approach to welfare and education*. The disability service provider, for instance, develops individualised programs and has strong VET completion rates. As part of this integrated approach, many learners proceed into small and productive manufacturing businesses run by this provider.

Through a government initiative, teams of participation coordinators have been assigned to 'education regions' to ensure that all learners at risk of not participating in education are placed with appropriate VET providers. The Western Australian Government has established a list of preferred agencies. At the same time, the monitoring and funding of providers is now tied to participation and completion rates.

A partnership has been developed between a consortium of charitable organisations and the northern TAFE. A purpose-built accommodation centre for homeless young people has been constructed close to the site of a TAFE campus in the northern suburbs. Yearlong contracts are proposed, under the management of case workers, whereby young people are expected to enrol in a suitable TAFE course as a condition of obtaining supported accommodation. Case managers also support learners with other welfare needs. In order to provide coherent support for learners, TAFE support staff are also co-located at the accommodation centre. It was argued that this level of wrap-around service develops trusting relationships, clear points of contact and the opportunity to develop personalised programs. Case managers can also advise on the best ways to access government funding and related forms of support services.

The provision of adequate training for a range of learners can be challenging for VET providers, especially when different learners experience various forms of disadvantage. TAFE courses, for example, are being used in different ways by different groups of high-need learners: while newly arrived and well-educated immigrants may quickly move into skilled employment, refugees from war zones can take a longer time to adapt and often move from foundation courses into job-specific programs. These different trajectories mean that low-level courses sometimes attract a broad range of disadvantaged learners, including low-skilled learners and the long-term unemployed, recently arrived refugees and individuals with intellectual disabilities. In this demanding context, one TAFE interviewee emphasised the challenging nature of providing both individualised, non-accredited programs to support skill development and accredited courses with clear occupational goals.

In light of these complex learning and training demands placed on VET providers, one interviewee reflected on the temporal horizon of participation of success for disadvantaged learners and the importance of *long-term stability* in the training relationship. Since high-need learners may experience multiple and compounded forms of disadvantage, it takes time to develop the trusting personal relationships that will allow for the progressive development of skills and personal growth. A strong argument was put that setting short-term goals in VET provision (with correspondingly short-term funding arrangements), especially for these organisations supporting highly disadvantaged individuals, may lead to failure (and force these organisations to close). Accordingly, a long-term perspective on the role of VET providers in enhancing the opportunities of disadvantaged learners is essential to foster success.





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