



17 January 2025

Committee Secretary  
Senate Education and Employment Committee  
PO Box 6100  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

Email: [eec.sen@aph.gov.au](mailto:eec.sen@aph.gov.au)

Dear Senate and Education Employment Committee,

### **Inquiry into the Free TAFE Bill 2024 [Provisions]**

Independent Schools Australia (ISA) welcomes this opportunity to provide a submission to the Senate Education and Employment Committee's inquiry into the Free TAFE Bill 2024 [Provisions].

ISA supports the government's initiative to make vocational education and training (VET) more accessible to students across the nation. However, ISA has significant concerns with the proposed Bill and believes more evaluation and consultation is required.

ISA does not believe that enshrining programs such as these into legislation is appropriate. This approach reduces the ability to be responsive and flexible in future policy development, and to adapt and respond to changing approaches to education delivery and emerging situations and needs.

ISA is also concerned that the Bill fails to acknowledge and/or support the critical role of private Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) in delivering diverse and industry-relevant training programs.

### **About ISA and Independent schools**

ISA is the national peak body for Independent schooling in Australia. ISA represents the sector on national issues and engages with the Australian Government, national agencies, media, key stakeholders, and the wider Australian community.

Working with the eight state and territory Associations of Independent Schools (AISs), we represent 716,800 students, over 1,215 schools and a workforce of 122,000 people.

The Independent sector encompasses considerable diversity in size and location of schools, and the types of students enrolled. The latest available data shows that more than one in six Australian school students attends an Independent school. For secondary students, it is over one in five. Students at Independent schools reflect the full diversity of Australian society – including those who experience one or multiple forms of disadvantage.

Most Independent schools are set up and governed independently on an individual school basis. However, some schools with common aims and educational philosophies are governed and administered as systems, for example, Lutheran schools. Systemic schools account for 20 per cent of schools in the sector.

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The Independent school sector is a key contributor to VET and several Independent schools are RTOs themselves. Many Independent schools:

- provide vocational education services, training and assessment to their students, and to students of non-RTO schools.
- deliver VET and assessment to their students on behalf of external providers under an auspice arrangement.
- enable and support students to enrol in vocational courses and school-based apprenticeships with external providers and employers.
- provide VET onsite in partnership with an RTO and organise placements for students in external VET courses.
- offer careers advice to students and post-school study and employment options.
- form critical relations with industry and business to ensure robust and engaging VET courses and apprenticeships.

## CONTEXT

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VET qualifications are highly valued as they provide young people with educational opportunities to gain important knowledge and develop employment-based skills and certification.

VET is increasingly becoming a focal point for senior students, providing not only an opportunity to transition into apprenticeships and further education and training, but also to enter university through alternate entry programs, or directly into employment. As a result, a sustainable and high-quality school-based VET workforce is of increasing importance to the education sector<sup>1</sup>.

The proposed Free TAFE Bill 2024 would only offer support to TAFE and other public institutions. This limits the choice and availability of courses and pathways on offer to students seeking VET support – currently and into the future.

## EVALUATION OF CURRENT FREE TAFE ARRANGEMENTS

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ISA believes that an appropriate evaluation of the current Free TAFE arrangements and student graduation outcomes must be conducted before passing the proposed Bill.

The success of the Free TAFE initiative must be measured not just by enrolment numbers, but by other factors such as the impact of education provided, graduation rates, and the employability of graduates. A detailed assessment will provide data on whether the objectives of the program are being met and identify areas that require improvement.

## KEY EVALUATION METRICS

- Analysing the percentage of students who successfully complete their courses, compared to those undertaking paid TAFE courses.

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<sup>1</sup>[ISA Submission - VET Workforce Blueprint Consultation Paper](#)

- Tracking the employment status of graduates to ensure the courses are aligned with industry needs.
- Gathering feedback from students regarding the quality and relevance of their education, and if this is a course they were intending to undertake regardless of the cost.

This evaluation should be transparent and involve input from all stakeholders, including students, educators, and industry representatives. Furthermore, the results of this evaluation should guide any future programs to ensure that VET support programs truly benefit students and meets the needs of the Australian workforce.

### **CLARIFICATION ON 'FREE' TAFE**

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ISA is concerned that the term 'free' in the context of Free TAFE is misleading. Clause 5, #12 states that a Free TAFE place 'may not be free of all fees, and that the fees covered will depend on the terms and conditions of the relevant Free TAFE agreement'. It is crucial to provide clarity to students and their families about the actual costs involved. Transparency in the breakdown of fees will help manage expectations and ensure that students are fully informed about their financial commitments.

### **RECOMMENDED ACTIONS**

- Clearly communicate the costs that students will still be liable for, including any ancillary fees, materials, and other expenses.
- Consideration for providing additional financial support for students who may struggle with the remaining costs to ensure that no student is disadvantaged.

This clarity will reinforce trust in the program and further remove barriers to enrolment.

### **RECOGNITION OF HIGHLY VALUED RTOS**

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While TAFE institutions have historically provided a significant contribution to the VET sector, it is essential to acknowledge and support the many highly valued quality Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) in Australia. These RTOs play a crucial role in delivering diverse and industry-relevant training programs.

### **SUPPORTING ALL VET PROVIDERS**

- Develop funding models that support the student rather than being tied to specific institutions. This approach ensures that students have the freedom to choose the training provider and course that best meets their needs.
- Implement robust quality assurance mechanisms to ensure that all RTOs, including TAFEs, maintain high standards of education and training.
- Encourage collaboration between RTOs, TAFEs, and industry to develop training programs that are responsive to the evolving needs of the workforce.

By adopting a student-focused approach, VET providers can receive support to maintain the delivery of quality education and training, while also offering students a choice in education provider.

### **CONCLUSION**

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Independent Schools Australia's position is that while the Free TAFE Bill 2024 may improve access to some vocational education courses, for some students, not enough has

been done to assess whether the Bill's scope is comprehensive enough to achieve its intended goals.

A thorough evaluation of current arrangements, transparency in communication about costs, and a student-centric support model is needed to support the development of a more effective and equitable VET system in Australia.

ISA looks forward to working with the government and other stakeholders to refine and implement policies that truly benefit our students and prepare them for successful careers.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Graham Catt', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Graham Catt

**Chief Executive Officer**