

9 August 2024



Jobs and Skills Australia  
Department of Employment and Workplace Relations  
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Sirs

A National Skills Taxonomy (an NST) is an important foundational element for a joined-up tertiary education system. Individuals may achieve better outcomes in education and training systems, and employment, with an informed understanding of how the education and training systems in Australia are designed (and why they operate the way they do).

The Federal Department of Education's response (July 2024) to my letter (12 June 2024) regarding the *Review of the Australian Qualifications Framework Final Report 2019* illustrates the bits and pieces or sub-systems that need to be in sync. My letter was aiming to ensure students are never alone in the education system with face-to-face support whenever needed prior to enrolment in tertiary education, and during their tertiary studies through to completion and attainment of their qualification. I enclose the Department's response and my letter.

This letter provides four suggestions along the same vein, attempting to ensure that young people are better informed about, and engaged with, an NST throughout their learning career including high school.

First, Jobs and Skills Australia must create a deeper understanding of the building block elements of the skills framework across a broader stakeholder network. As a starting point, universities, TAFEs and community colleges should be invited to develop and deliver micro courses for career advisors in secondary education, presenting the most up-to-date, relevant information on the published NST and elements of its framework, the context and explanation for developing the NST, the value it should create (from different perspectives, key stages in its implementation as achieved, and its application in practice).

Career advisors must then return to their school with a commitment to sharing their knowledge of the NST with students and demonstrate its practical application to individual students when planning their career, the qualifications they will need and the range of different courses they may choose or hope to qualify to do.

Second, Jobs and Skills Australia should launch an education campaign to explain the NST to secondary and tertiary education students, when key milestones for implementing the NST have been achieved. Young people and students would be reminded they will acquire transferable skills in every course, in addition to specialist or technical skills specific to a role or industry. In relation to transferable skills, they may be

reassured there is less risk regarding the debt they will incur and the time they will spend on any study.

The education campaign would extend to peak bodies, thought leaders or business-led advocacy bodies representing CEOs and business leaders, like the Business Council of Australia, Chambers of Commerce, and the AICD as well as regulators (the ACNC and ASIC).

My third suggestion is that Jobs and Skills Australia should create a mechanism that enables the input of elected tertiary education students in a hybrid governance model for the NST. The Discussion Paper reflects the considerable expertise within JSA which should be retained with primary responsibility for governance and accountability for delivery of the NST, building buy-in across governments and achieving the broadest possible stakeholder participation and collaboration.

Buy-in across employer groups in addition to union support is important. However, young people will be on the receiving end of the NST when enrolling in courses and seeking skills-based employment. Therefore, JSA would benefit from establishing an 'internal' working group that meets quarterly with its membership comprising (for successive short periods) an elected university student representative, an elected TAFE student representative, an elected high school student representative, an elected representative of small business, an elected representative of a medium size business and an elected representative from a large business employer. For example, the National Union of Students typically has a President elected for one term of one year so there are existing election processes for some member categories provided these representatives are engaged and willing to participate on a working group that contributes to NST governance.

In addition to the above three suggestions, I wish to offer the following comments.

Upskilling existing CEOs and business leaders. I note that the Australian business community, CEOs and Boards frequently lack knowledge and skills in workforce planning, development and recruitment. Staff turnover in some sectors particularly the not-for-profit sector would provide this data. Indeed, I have worked for organisations for more than 30 years most of whom did not discuss workforce planning and development with its board of directors with the exception of a large government-owned utility which implemented best practice. It will be a challenge to address this issue in a systemic manner.

In contrast, I was exposed to the discussion of workforce training and development for many years as an undergraduate when my father was

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]. I wonder whether education providers, employers, and peak bodies

need to establish these centres for learning and acquiring workforce planning and development skills.

Vision for the NST. My view is that the NST will enable individuals, employers, government, and educators to work together to create and share effective training, development and education programs and strategies that will meet and utilise the different interests, skills, talents and needs of our diverse society. Therefore a vision for the NST may be something along the following lines:

*As business, enterprises and government invest more in training, development and education, individuals will be inspired, understanding and tolerance will increase, and individual, enterprise, national and regional productivity will improve.*

Additional features for an effective design of the NST to support its use. One purpose of my (enclosed) letter to the Department of Education was to request greater face to face (less website dependent) interaction between career advisors, TAFE and students (prospective and existing). This would give the AQF and students a voice and give career advisors and TAFE a way to interact with existing and future students to achieve better study and employment outcomes. A second purpose was to ensure young people would not traverse the employment selection and training process alone when they needed support or otherwise had high support needs in their study experience.

I proposed that the Department of Education consider whether it is possible to co-opt the Jobs and Skills Australia website and data regarding the current Skills Priority List, the NST and occupation shortage data and map it to fields of study across education and training sub-systems. This suggestion is made under the heading Data and Information in my letter to the Department of Education. This would bring the NST to life to some extent although whether NST or JSA data can be exported and manipulated for planning purposes of the individual user is beyond my knowledge.

Skills definition. The National Skills Taxonomy Discussion Paper dated 27 June 2024 provides example definitions of skills. Although you are not asking for comments on the definitions, I prefer the AQF Review definition because action has a clear, broadly understood meaning whereas the accurate meaning of the term “processes” in the OECD definition is not always known or understood and “responsible way” introduces a subjective, judgmental element. Combining ability and capacity does not accommodate lack of capacity for reasons beyond the individual’s control e.g. capacity limited or excluded by a delegation of authority or a manager’s discretion. The inclusion of both skill and competence with the described meaning is confusing in the ESCO definition. Because the preceding definitions equate skills with abilities it is difficult to accept a definition under which skills and abilities are different. I like the way the Singapore Skills Framework introduces a framework that deals with categories of different types of skills which is important from a user perspective particularly for training and course design purposes. On the other hand, I like the inclusion of values, complex demands, and social and emotional skills in the OECD definition. Soft skills like collaboration are critical to both performance and completion of an action or task.

One final comment. We live in a society that frequently values people by the work they do. This can have disastrous consequences for people seeking work at the beginning of their lifelong working and learning journey. The hierarchy in the NST and the AQF must avoid any value judgment or “lesser” language in its drafting, terminology or structure. For the same reason I have some concerns with the proposal for a National Skills Passport. Although I understand why it would be helpful for education providers to outsource the cost of its design, implementation and administration as a shared resource, there is a power imbalance between tertiary education providers and employers who will use the skills passport and young people who are already burdened with the practice of creating a highly competitive resume. To what extent will a National Skills Passport be another gated community that excludes or demeans young people? Instead, the National Skills Passport system could be an across education sector system, its use limited to credit recognition purposes with a smaller group of users namely education and training providers like TAFEs and universities.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit these suggestions and comments.

Yours sincerely

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