National Skills Taxonomy Discussion Paper

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DEWR Consult hub

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9 Lessons from existing taxonomies

The Australian Education Union (AEU) represents 189,000 members employed in the public primary, secondary, special, early childhood, TAFE, Adult Migrant Education and Disability Education sectors throughout Australia.

For both TAFE and VET in Schools members there is a close relationship with taxonomies directly related to the vocational education sector. These skills taxonomies are the source of truth for registered training organisations (RTOs), teachers and support staff who work directly with training packages, collect and record national VET data as well as statutory student and RTO data. We have included several considerations and recommendations for the JSA in relations to TAFE and VET taxonomies.

For taxonomies of schools-based jobs, skills and roles, the AEU recommends that the JSA consult our submission to the ABS ANZSCO consultation.

The key benefits and limitations of existing skills taxonomies overall should be viewed considering their currency or lack thereof. Skills related taxonomies that were created before 2020 will not reflect the revolution in education that has occurred during and post COVID.

Similarly, the NST needs to be flexible enough to accommodate the emergence of new industries, jobs and skills resulting from the prioritisation of renewable energy and from the Future Made in Australia initiative. The rapidity of technological change, its development and use in classrooms, both in person and online, has far outstripped that which has occurred in an equivalent period prior to that time. The development of a NST must also reflect recent changes such as digital, technology, occupations and language that will continue to evolve in industry, skills and the tertiary sector

10 Potential use cases for a National Skills Taxonomy

The NST could and should add value for individuals, employers and educators in different online forums that meet their needs. Consideration should be given to the level of information required, the language used and what would be useful products for each group.

The following questions need to be addressed at the development stage:
- Is the language used common language understood by all the user groups and does

each group have the same understanding?
- Will individuals, employers and educators understand what a taxonomy is?
- Will they be curious enough to search the NST for useful information or will everyday Australians not relate to the NST?
- Would it be better for job seekers and those interested in upskilling to improve their career pathway to approach the NST another way?

Instead of presenting a taxonomy a better approach could be to present products based on and adhering to the NST that each end user group would access e.g. Individuals – career pathway planner, a resume builder or skills collator.

Individuals seeking work or qualifications leading to employment may be looking for ways to find the right qualification or training to meet their own or potential employer needs. The ability to enter their skills or skill sets and then search for employers or jobs that match or closely match those skills and interests may have merit. Consideration should be given to the value that is placed on lived experience and workplace acquired skills for particular jobs in each industry. How will this be framed in a way that will provide a useful skills or employment related outcome?

If a user case product such as a skills collator requires individuals to self-assess their skills this may not necessarily reflect true capability and accuracy. If self-assessment of skills is included in the NST or an end user product these skills must be validated if they were used in an official capacity.

Employers may need assistance to develop position descriptions both in format and content. How will the NST assist employers to identify the skills needed for new positions? Descriptions of those skills in industry-based language through the NST would be useful. Employers may also want to identify where their job might fit industrially including wage scales, prerequisite qualifications and/or experience etc.

Educators may find the NST beneficial if a recognition of prior learning (RPL) system could be developed using the information contained in the taxonomy. Determining RPL is a complex and time-consuming process for both teachers and students. Access to an RPL template that could be populated with qualification data from the NST to give to learners. Students could then gather evidence of their workplace and community-based skills and experience for assessment. Any RPL template must have the flexibility to be contextualised to local workplaces and niche occupations. A pilot project with the inclusion of educators such as TAFE teachers would be worthwhile if a less time consuming and effective RPL process could be designed for implementation.

TAFE teachers have a keen interest in accessing relevant professional development (PD) to continuously improve their teaching practice. There may be future potential for the NST to provide PD opportunities that would enhance teachers' professional work? Examples of best practice in blended teaching and learning, industry advancement and partnerships, and teacher's industry currency and competency.

The NST must not increase teachers' workload

It is essential that whatever is developed through the NST does not add to the administrative burden or workload for teachers. Any data requirements from education providers should first be assessed to whether that could be provided through current systems such as the Australian Vocational Education and Training Management Information Statistical Standard (AVETMISS) which includes other national VET data collections:

- the National VET Provider Collection
- the National Apprentice and Trainee Collection
- the National VET in Schools Collection
- the National VET Funding Data Collection.

The NST may be an asset in the development of credit transfer arrangements between vocational RTOs and higher education providers. Credit transfer applied to more qualifications would increase access to students to gain credit for previous study and reduce the dual barriers of both cost and study time required for future studies.

Student movement between vocational and higher education works both ways. Some students who gain a bachelor's degree or above seek practical experience to enhance their theoretical knowledge to add value in the eyes of future employers. People with vocational qualifications may enrol in higher qualifications through the university sector for career progression and to increase personal and family incomes to address the ongoing cost of living crisis.

Student Counsellors and Career Counsellors may find it useful to have a platform that enables the identification of known and emerging careers including the qualifications, skills and experience needed by students or job seekers. Identifying or linking individuals to the appropriate employer in that field or registered training provider offering the skills and qualifications for that industry would also be an advantage.

The NST should have clearly identifiable and changeable views (individual, learner, employer, educator, researcher) so that the user can search for what they need. The end

product must be presented as attractive, practical, useable and accessible. Building the end products to encompass equity, gender and cultural diversity is essential. Searchability – the NST must have the ability to find the information at the level required by users from low to high skills levels and on multiple digital devices including mobile phones.

Some factors for inclusion in the design:

- Cultural safety inclusive of First Nations, gender and multicultural backgrounds.
- Future proofing – what will prevent the NST from becoming outdated?
- Data must be both human and machine readable such as rich skill descriptors for interoperability.
- Avoid ambiguity in the request or provision of information for the NST.
- Users should be asked when they finish their session if there was anything missing that would make the NST or product more user or information friendly.
- Consideration must be given to licencing, certification, industry specific/generic skills and vocational education systems including knowledge and how each part interacts with the other.
- Does the individual have clear employability and customer skills? How transferable are they across a range of employment career paths?
- Practical examples and visual aids should be used such as videos, images, stories and examples to improve the user experience especially for those who need visual or audible prompts.
- Consider solutions for those with lower language literacy numeracy and digital literacy (LLND) skills.
- Make available the salary expectations for each job, potential career pathway and what experience and/or qualifications are needed?
- Map skills to training products.
- Link the NST to the Unique Student Identifier (USI), Training.gov.au the national register of vocational education and training (VET) and Australian Vocational Education and Training Management Information Statistical Standard (AVETMISS)

11   Building a National Skills Taxonomy – design considerations
Design considerations for building the NST:

- Definition - the NST should include applied skills and knowledge, critical thinking and innovation, social and emotional skills and practical skills.
- Structure – Easy to navigate for all users and sectors. Identify what are valuable core skills that may be used in many occupations and what are additional skills that are more industry specific.

- Granularity – the NST needs to consider neurodiversity and other diversity issues during development.
- Proficiency and levelling – identify proficiency levels within skills e.g. beginner through to expert (not so many levels that this becomes too difficult) and how they apply to education and employment. Also, where proficiency aligns to responsibilities that jobs may have.
- Information about skills and experience that will assist with career progression and professional development.
- Descriptors attached to each skill and linked to occupations.

Skills Gender Gaps

Regarding women and diversity:

The membership of the AEU is more than 75% women and workers are not a homogenous cohort. How will the NST recognise the impact of gender in the workplace, and extending to the attraction and retention of workers? In the discussion paper materials provided there were no references to the diversity of the individuals for which the NST is being developed. The NST discussion paper informs interested parties about the labour market and references it as if a single entity under strain. Gender segregation is a longstanding and well-documented feature of the Australian labour market. It is both a source and symptom of strain on the labour market.

Thus, identifying and establishing gender segregation as a key determinant must be a central factor in any NST.
Whilst gender is a significant determinant in skills and the workplace, it is not the sole one. The impact of intersectionality must also be considered in the NST, specifically Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander background, culturally and linguistically diverse, disability, age, and LGBTIQ+ status.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) 2023 Gender, Education and Skills Report, The Persistence of Gender Gaps in Education and Skills states that gender plays a distinct role in women's career decisions which then impacts on future earnings and continuation of the gender pay gap.

The 2023 Gender, Education and Skills Report on the persistence of gender gaps in education and skills presents fresh insights on progress towards gender equality in education… These career choices are also reflected in gender disparities in the labour market: tertiary-educated women earn 76% of the earnings of their male peers. This could be possible because men are more likely than women to pursue studies in fields

associated with higher earnings, such as engineering, manufacturing and construction, and ICTs, while women still choose fields associated with lower earnings, including education, welfare, and arts and humanities.

Regarding skills and their perceived work value:

Work value is shaped by gendered stereotypes, cultural assumptions and social norms in relation to work, and the roles of men and women in work and at home. This in turn influences skills, and their value and level in the labour market. Australia institutions and culture retains patriarchal and sexist assumptions regarding skills: namely that invisible skills such as care, nurture, creativity and facilitation are inherently unpaid and done by women. The result of which has been the persistent gender undervaluation of occupations requiring these skills, and the value of those skills within occupations. This problem has been acknowledged by the Fair Work Commission.

How will the NST address the dominant and sexist hierarchy of skills? How will the NST ensure it does not reinforce sexist assumptions about skills and their relevant economic and social value?

The AEU recommends that the NST identifies gender an explicit determinant in skills, and further to this applies a gendered analysis in all research, design and evaluation.

12 Building a National Skills Taxonomy: Implementation considerations

The AEU's preference would be the first governance model option in the discussion paper1.

Managed within Jobs and Skills Australia (JSA) and existing governance (e.g. Ministerial Advisory Board (MAB) or commissioner approval). Expanding the current JSA governance to include representation from education peak bodies including education unions. This model would build on established relationships. The AEU is one of the stakeholders who have been involved with the JSA from the beginning. We value that relationship and the ability to contribute to the work of the JSA and reforms in the tertiary sector.

The governance model adopted for the NST must have representation from education peak bodies including union representation. Tripartism for the NST must include educators and unions responsible for the education sector representing the tertiary education workforce. TAFE and VET in schools teachers teach pre and post-employment skills and qualifications, work within training packages and have strong relationships with employers and industry groups. Educators can provide valuable insights into how

vocational skills can be valued for the NST.

NST updates should occur with some frequency as both jobs and skills are changing at an astounding rate. Updates cannot wait for an average of every 5 years as new skills and jobs are being created each and every year. Technology is changing frequently. It is essential that the NST is updated regularly enough to maintain the currency of the data in the taxonomy for the user groups. In addition, connectedness to other data could be built into the NST to maintain the flow of information updates for users.

The AEU recommends a combination of data driven and consultative approaches to maintain and update the NST. The transference of data to the NST from other taxonomies or systems would be driven by the timing of when they are updated rather than a set time period. Consultation approaches could be scheduled every 2 years so that emerging skill trends and employment based changes could be updated in the NST. Leaving updates for any longer would frustrate key users who rely on quality current data to plan workforce needs and skills development. During this process the collection and collation of new streams of data could be set up and initiated. The NST should schedule the uploading of data that reflects the current and emerging skills used in small to medium enterprises and large employers.

The key to skills being recognised across industries, careers, occupations and education sectors is the move to a common language for skills. Within the tertiary education sector vocational education revolves around competency while for higher education the term is capability. There is a common perception that vocational education teaches only skills (it is far more than this), and higher education focuses on knowledge. These views are too narrow and simple. Understanding of the depth of learning in both vocational and higher education must be expanded across the full tertiary sector. In vocational education higher qualifications such as certificate IV and above include knowledge and creative thinking as an intrinsic part of the learning.

The AEU makes the following recommendations to the National Skills Taxonomy in response to the discussion paper:

1.   Consider Workplace Gender Equality Agency data – to understand the gendered dynamics of the Australian labour market.
2.   Further as Workplace Gender Equality Agency has limited intersectional data sets, the NST should explore and seek to embed intersectionality in its data.
3.   Any data should be chosen purposefully for use, with consideration of issues around consent and sovereignty in relation to data on personal characteristics. Matters of consent should be central in governance of data.

4.   That First Nations data is protected and respects First Peoples' individual and collective interests.

5.   The governance model adopted for the NST must have representation from education peak bodies including unions.

6.   Tripartism consultation processes for the NST must include educators and unions responsible for the education sector that represents the tertiary education workforce.

7.   That systems are developed to enable greater use of recognition of prior learning and credit transfer across the tertiary sector.