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UA Response to Jobs and Skills Australia's National Skills Taxonomy Discussion Paper

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As the peak body representing Australia's 39 comprehensive universities, Universities Australia (UA) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to a new National Skills Taxonomy (NST). UA is committed to enhancing opportunities for lifelong learning and enabling Australians to engage in education that develops skills for their chosen professions, occupations and interests. Universities play a pivotal role in delivering skills and responding to workforce needs nationwide.

The proposed NST, which will replace the Australian Skills Classification, has the potential to facilitate Australian-specific learner-focussed improvements across the education sector and provide benefits to employees, industry and governments. In developing an NST, Jobs and Skills Australia should focus on one group of stakeholders at a time, over a 10-year period, to ensure a strong foundation with relevant benchmarks for the taxonomy's success. The success of an NST will be measured through its applicability to learner- and employee-focussed programs, rather than it being used as a taxonomy of skills alone. Accordingly, measures to benchmark the success of an NST should be embedded in future education initiatives that consider a skills component.

JSA must clearly identify what gap in recruiting, establishing, and fostering workforce talent for Australia's largely SME economy the NST will fill. This gap will inform the purpose that drives many of the development decisions the discussion paper seeks answers to. Identifying this response to need will be essential in developing a NST that stands the test of time and provides benefit to the nation.

Many of the questions in the discussion paper are technical and individual providers may be better placed to answer. In this paper, UA provides three key recommendations for consideration of the objective and broad considerations for an NST. First that it takes a learner-focussed approach to skills development, second it is based in principles of interoperability, integration, and accessibility, and third it is developed and implemented with a long-term vision.

Critically, an NST must clearly articulate its relevance for various stakeholders (including schools, learners, employers, employees and government agencies), which may require different versions/platforms to enable accessibility and functionality.

Recommendations

- A taxonomy that puts learners at the centre of skills development and acts as a facilitator for important changes that improve education opportunity.

- An interoperable, integrative, and accessible taxonomy that gives learners, workers, and employers an understanding of the skills they have and need in a format that is most appropriate to their needs.

- A long-term vision with a staged implementation plan that incorporates ongoing input from across the sector to remain relevant to the evolving nature of education and skills development.

- Prioritise the implementation of the Australian Qualifications Framework reforms to underpin the NST.

Contextualising a National Skills Taxonomy

The development of a new NST sits within a context of broader reform across the tertiary education system. An NST cannot operate in isolation from these reforms, including the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) review, the Universities Accord, the National Skills Agreement and ANZSCO changes. An NST must work alongside these reforms to improve education opportunity for learners and educators.

Given the evolving context of the tertiary education sector and global employment trends, Jobs and Skills Australia (JSA) needs to continue to engage closely with stakeholders across the sector to refine the understanding and application of skills over time. Furthermore, a long-term and staged approach will be necessary to deliver an effective taxonomy that sits within rather than works against the education reform landscape.

The risk of siloing an NST is the continuation of a fractured environment where providers are unable to meet a shared vision for tertiary education. Critical reforms, such as the AQF, must be prioritised; however, an NST can be developed alongside it, and as part of future pilot programs, to enable other programs to use the taxonomy to improve education opportunity for learners and educators.

Principles

A proposed vision for an NST is "to improve connections between education and employment pathways, enabling future system needed for lifelong learning, enhanced occupational mobility and career transitions, to address skills gaps and adapt to evolving economic and community need". Delivery of this broad vision requires several underpinning principles that enable responsive measures for the different stakeholder needs to be interoperable, integrative, and accessible.

Interoperable

To effectively meet the aspiration of a shared understanding and language for skills that enable a more responsive and flexible system, the new skills taxonomy must align with the existing frameworks that contribute to communicating acquired skills and knowledge. For higher education, this means alignment between the skills taxonomy and the AQF and occupational and industry classifications. Currently, gaps between such make it difficult to fully understand skills gaps, workforce needs and the best ways to address them.

From an education perspective, lack of alignment is the largest limitation of the existing skills taxonomies. An interoperable skills taxonomy would facilitate a more cogent ecosystem that brings together these related frameworks.

A skills taxonomy that is well aligned with the AQF would allow for more appropriate planning and preparation of education delivery that responds to pipeline needs.

Integrative and accessible

Education providers continuously develop and deliver new and innovative approaches to learning and education delivery that respond to 21st century learners and workforce skills and needs. Programs that combine learning or qualifications from both the VET and higher education sectors, shorter forms of learning such as microcredentials, increasing work-integrated learning opportunities, and raising emphasis on up- and re-skilling are all examples of this responsiveness to changing learning needs.

The landscape of education pathways and qualifications is becoming increasingly diverse. For workers, employers and providers to navigate this increasingly complex space an NST could be beneficial if it takes an integrative approach that focuses on allowing users to identify and communicate the skills they have acquired they can be applied to various contexts or be built upon to further their education and working careers in the most meaningful ways.

An approach like this puts users at the centre. Therefore, it will also be necessary to prioritise the accessibility of the taxonomy. If the shared language for skills that an NST provides is not understood by employers, learners, workers, and providers then they will not be able to utilise an NST effectively to make informed decisions for themselves or the wider systems of employment and education.

Particularly when considering accessibility, the development of a new NST should take care to avoid unintentionally reinforcing barriers to workforce or education participation. A lens of equity should be adopted to reduce the potential for embedding or continuing systemic bias for various groups through overly prescribed or defined skills.

A long-term vision

Acting effectively on the principles laid out above will require JSA to take an iterative and long-term approach, working with Jobs and Skills Councils (JSCs), TAFE Centres of Excellence and education

providers, including universities, to refine the understanding and application of skills over time. Furthermore, a successful NST that facilitates cross-sectoral programs will require JSA to work closely across multiple government portfolios, including commonwealth, state and territory departments.

This cross-sectoral engagement should not preference any particular education system; rather, it should be inclusive of education as a whole. This necessity should be emphasised in the vision and principles for the NST, as it currently operates within the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, which currently focusses on VET.

Enabling a future system with the capacity to meet Government's projected tertiary attainment rate of 80 per cent by 2050 will require support for both VET and higher education, in collaboration with industry. An NST could reduce barriers between the two sectors. However, this will require a staged approach over a 10-year period in which JSA regularly engages stakeholders across the sectors to evolve skills definitions, development and uses of the taxonomy.

Conclusion

Universities Australia emphasises a new taxonomy must not merely be a technical tool but a mechanism to enhance the alignment between educational outcomes and workforce needs. For an NST to fulfil its potential, it must be designed with a learner-centric approach, ensuring it effectively supports individuals throughout their educational and professional journeys. Critically, to deliver on this vision, JSA should begin with clearly articulating a gap in the connections between education and workforce talent that the NST can fill.

An NST aligned with interoperable, integrative, and accessible principles will facilitate a coherent and Australian-responsive educational environment, bridging existing gaps between qualifications and skills while accommodating the evolving needs of learners, educators, and employers.

The integration of the NST with other major reforms, notably the AQF review, will be critical in avoiding fragmentation and ensuring a unified approach to skills development. Moreover, the long-term vision for an NST necessitates a staged and iterative implementation strategy. This approach will ensure that the taxonomy remains relevant and adaptable to the rapidly changing educational and employment landscape. Continuous collaboration with stakeholders across the education and skills sectors will be essential for refining the taxonomy's effectiveness and maintaining its alignment with emerging needs and definitions of skills.

By prioritising a learner-focussed, interoperable, and accessible framework, the NST can enhance educational opportunities, support lifelong learning, and drive meaningful career transitions. Ultimately, the success of the NST will be measured by its ability to integrate seamlessly into the broader educational and workforce ecosystem, thereby contributing to a more agile and equitable system that benefits all Australians.