
Communiqué for the Ministerial Council for Tertiary Education and Employment (MCTEE) Meeting – 20 November 2009

Today, Ministers meeting at MCTEE agreed to strengthen the tertiary education sector and its capacity to meet Australia's future demands for a highly skilled workforce. Ministers agreed on key reforms and structures to improve the quality and integrity of Australia's tertiary education sector and agreed to steps to mitigate the current economic climate. Australia is one step closer to a stronger more inter-connected tertiary sector as a result of today's Ministerial Council.

Regulatory Arrangements

In a significant decision, the majority of Ministers agreed to a new independent national regulator for the vocational education and training sector through a limited referral of powers to the Commonwealth. Victoria and Western Australia supported the consideration of other models to achieve national regulation and the retention of the principles of State accountability.

MCTEE also agreed to the development of a new foundation for quality in higher education through the establishment of the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) and its location in Melbourne.

Ministers agreed that TEQSA will be an independent body and noted that the Commonwealth Minister intends to establish TEQSA as a statutory authority. Ministers will further discuss the governance arrangements for the authority in the coming months.

The regulatory arrangements were considered in the context of a potential merger in 2013, as Ministers work to achieve a more interconnected tertiary sector.

These major reforms will build a stronger national training system focused on high standards and quality delivery. Ministers also agreed to strengthen the accountability of registered providers for the behaviour of international education agents they engage.

Ministers also heard of the progress that the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) Council is making on a revised AQF to underpin the quality assurance arrangements into the future. The AQFC will finalise its advice in 2010.

International Education

MCTEE noted that the new National Foundation Programs Standards scheduled to commence 1 January 2010, will, for the first time, provide nationally consistent standards for the programs that prepare international students for entry to Australian universities. Under these arrangements, all providers must ensure their Foundation Program courses meet national standards in key areas such as curriculum, entry level for students, English language proficiency, assessment procedures and teacher qualifications.

Substantial progress has also been made on the development of a nation-wide International Student Strategy to be implemented during the 2010 academic year. A rapid audit of identified high risk providers is underway and there have been significant improvements in student services and information to students.

The Baird Review will be asked to investigate what arrangements could be made to better protect students' interests when colleges become insolvent.

Economic Demands

Ministers agreed that more needs to be done to deliver better integrated training and employment services for unemployed Australians and plan for the skills needed for economic recovery.

Ministers agreed to continue negotiations to ensure that the Productivity Places Program is refined to better meet the needs of local jobseekers, Job Services Australia (JSA) providers and Local Employment Coordinators.

Ministers also agreed that the formal review of the Productivity Places Program will be brought forward to commence immediately. The review will be informed by timely evidence, including data, on current training demands in the Australian economy.

Green Skills

Ministers agreed a new National Green Skills Agreement that will ensure that Australia's VET system delivers the skills for sustainability that will enable individuals and businesses to contribute to a sustainable, low carbon economy in their workplaces and communities.

Members have agreed to work collaboratively with employer and employee representatives, the VET sector and community organisations to:

- embed skills for sustainability practice and teaching in vocational education and training;
- up-skill VET instructors and teachers to deliver skills for sustainability;
- review Training Packages to embed sustainability knowledge, skills and principles; and
- implement a transition strategy to re-skill vulnerable workers.

Higher education

The Australian Government's Transforming Australia's Higher Education System package received the valued support of state and territory Ministers on a range of collaborative initiatives undertaken in jurisdictions to support the attainment of national higher education targets.

Members agreed to cooperative analysis of key systemic factors and identify the most effective interventions in implementing coordinated support across jurisdictions for achievement of the targets.

Progress on equity outcomes

Ministers reaffirmed their commitment to improving outcomes for disadvantaged learners. The establishment of the National VET Equity Advisory Council (NVEAC) will provide high level strategic advice to Ministers to guide equity reform in the national training system and represents a new direction in addressing disadvantage in the VET sector. Ministers endorsed NVEAC's plans to develop an 'equity blueprint' for driving the changes necessary to improve outcomes for disadvantaged learners.

A more effective Ministerial Council

In line with the expansion of MCTEE to a tertiary focus, the governance arrangements for the Council have been reviewed and proposed changes agreed.

These changes will ensure MCTEE remains a forum of strategic significance, is focused on issues requiring national action and maximises its efficient operation. Ministers noted the complexity of these changes and look forward to further advice from officials in early 2010.