



AUSTRALIAN TECHNICAL COLLEGES – A USEFUL MODEL FOR TRADES TRAINING IN SCHOOLS

Introduction

During last year’s federal election campaign, the Labor Party announced that it would maintain established Australian Technical Colleges (ATCs) until 31 December 2009 but also indicated that their management would be transferred to State and Territory Government and Catholic and Independent school sectors to “improve the coverage of vocational education training offered by schools nationally”.

This was to be done on a case by case basis through consultation with all interested parties and as contractual agreements allowed, given that the ATCs use different education and training models. Some Colleges were completely new, some stand-alone and others were in competition with State and Territory models. All had varying partnership arrangements with different combinations of State schools, Catholic and Independent schools, TAFEs, universities, individual business enterprises and some industry groups.

The Original Design of ATCs

The original idea of ATCs was to address skills shortages throughout Australia’s regions, where there were skills needs, a high youth population and a strong industry base.

The courses offered were to be developed with industry input to ensure that the training offered was relevant for local needs.

ATC Locations

Over the last three years, ATCs were established in locations all around Australia (see Figure 1).

Under the ATC model, students gain:

- a nationally recognised qualification up to Certificate III depending on local industry in one of the following areas:
 - metal and engineering (e.g. machinists, fabricators, toolmakers, welders, sheet metal workers);
 - automotive (mechanics, auto electricians, panel beaters, vehicle painters);
 - building and construction (bricklayers, plumbers, carpenters);
 - electrotechnology (including refrigeration, air conditioning and electricians); and
 - commercial cookery;
- a Year 12 certificate; and
- IT, employability and business skills.

Figure 1 - Australian Technical College Locations.

Region	Location	
NSW Region	Hunter Central Coast (Gosford) Queanbeyan	Port Macquarie Illawarra Western Sydney Central Western NSW
Northern Territory	Darwin	
Queensland	Gladstone North Brisbane	Gold Coast North Queensland (Townsville)
South Australia	Northern Adelaide Spencer Gulf and Outback (Port Augusta/Whyalla)	Adelaide South
Tasmania	Northern Tasmania	
Victoria	Gippsland (Bairnsdale/Sale) Bendigo Sunshine	Geelong Eastern Melbourne Wannon
Western Australia	Perth South	Pilbara

At the time, the Labor Party expressed concern at slow take off and low enrolment numbers.

However, there was a broad level of agreement about the concept of trade specialist schools linked to industry to build Australia's skills capability.

DEEWR Consultation

After last year's change of government, the federal Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) identified there would be a range of transition arrangements necessary, given the diverse ATC structures and undertook a consultation process with stakeholders about how the ATCs could be integrated effectively into each region's broader education and training system and meet the following objectives for each College:

- a. integration with the broader training effort, with a focus on nationally recognised Certificate III training;
- b. improving year 12 retention rates in line with the new national targets of 90% by 2020;
- c. raising the level and range of flexible and innovative training pathways to improve both participation and completion outcomes in the trades;
- d. strengthening industry leadership in the provision of trade training;
- e. accessibility to a wide range of students and employers; and
- f. demonstrating self sustainability over the longer-term in order to provide certainty for students and employers.

ACCI's 11 ATC Principles

Business and industry feedback to ACCI has been positive in acknowledging that the ATC model was relatively successful in encouraging the take-up of trades training by school students.

While enrolments were patchy, many of the ATCs were oversubscribed, surpassing enrolment expectations and providing a valuable training and employment pathway for many students.

In light of the Australian Government's current intention to integrate the ATCs into the broader education and training system, ACCI has developed a set of principles to provide a sound framework for this process.

ACCI considers that the integration of ATCs should:

1. maintain a clear focus on high quality, industry-focussed traditional trades training and not be integrated into general VET in Schools (VETiS) curriculum-based programmes;
2. streamline State and Federal funding for VET outcomes at schools, ensure appropriate use of existing infrastructure and reduce duplication of VETiS programmes;
3. maintain industry engagement and consultative mechanisms inherent in the existing ATC model;
4. meet regional industry demand for trained employees;
5. ensure that students in regional and rural areas have adequate access to training;
6. offer meaningful pathways through VET by allowing articulation from Certificate II to Certificate III depending upon industry standard for entry level training;
7. maintain a focus on meaningful structured workplace learning / on the job training for students;
8. ensure quality instruction and teaching competence in line with industry standards and in compliance with the Australian Quality Training Framework;
9. ensure that students are trained to current workplace standards using tools and equipment that reflect current industry practice;
10. incorporate the ITSE developed Star Rating System to boost industry confidence in school-based outcomes; and
11. maintain innovative practices in training delivery and workplace learning.

Correlation with State and Territory Senior School Certificates and Tertiary Entrance Rankings

The intended integrated ATC model should ensure promotion of the trades as a genuine alternative to university. It is equally important however that they do not pose a barrier to those wishing to undertake tertiary study on completion of school.

In some States, undertaking VETiS subjects can result in student being blocked from accessing university. Any integrated ATC model must not prevent students wishing to progress from VET into higher education.

ACCI also sees the need for Certificate II programs to be offered in some industry areas where a Certificate II qualification is seen as being an appropriate entry level qualification.

Some Certificate II qualifications can lead to a higher level qualification and are not always a “dead end” as portrayed by some stakeholders. One of the benefits of offering Certificate II level qualification is that it allows some students to graduate from school with a completed qualification as opposed to a partially completed higher level qualification. The availability of this option is important for the self esteem of all students but particularly those students at risk and who already suffer from low self esteem.

There are also positive resourcing benefits for schools through offering Certificate II programs, as the cost of offering Certificate III programs in some trade areas increases exponentially when a Certificate III is offered. This results from the high cost of additional equipment necessary for the higher level offering. As well, a student is not necessarily disadvantaged by choosing a Certificate II option as they can always complete a Certificate III in a post-school environment either through TAFE or some other provider.

School Retention

While all encouragement should be given to students to complete secondary school, it does not suit all students and all circumstances.

VETiS and the integrated ATCs should not be used as an artificial retention tool.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that many students undertaking training in ATCs are offered paid employment by their host employers whilst undertaking on the job training. This should not be discouraged as it can have very good results for students, boosting their self esteem and providing them with an income. An early employment opportunity does not shut any doors for future training and study and in the meantime the student gains valuable industry experience. Moves to increase retention rates must not prevent the flow of young people into meaningful employment.

Caution must also be exercised so that VETiS and the integrated ATC model are not used as a stream for underperforming students to remove them from mainstream classes while keeping them loosely engaged at school. ACCI business organisation members believe that it is imperative that the integrity of trades training be maintained and that the system not be used as a remedial education pathway to artificially boost school retention rates. This is particularly the case where funding models are based on student numbers and not student outcomes with the risk to schools that they lose funding once a student leaves school.

It must be a meaningful and quality vocational experience for students.

Ongoing Funding of ATCs

Many of the existing ATCs are independently incorporated bodies representing a cooperative effort between local schools (public or independent), training providers and local industry bodies.

A number of possibilities exist for the future of the ATCs. There is some correlation with the Federal Government’s Trades Training Centres in Schools policy, and existing ATCs could operate as Centres of Excellence servicing a number of schools within a region by providing facilities and staff to instruct in the traditional trades. Some ATCs might be integrated into the secondary schools system as stand-alone colleges or campuses of existing schools, and some may continue to operate as an RTO providing training under User Choice or fee for service arrangement.

ACCI believes that funding arrangements should be negotiated with each ATC to determine what will be most relevant for them and as they are registered schools, recurrent and capital funding available to all schools through Commonwealth and state and territory governments should continue to be administered to them.

A Variety of Pathways

ACCI member organisations support a variety of vocational pathways being available to secondary students that provide them with exposure to industry experience and relevant employment opportunities.

While parents see university study as providing better earning potential and future security for their children, vocational options can provide the same benefits and may be more suited to individual traits and interests.

ACCI believes that the current ATC model is an important component of what should be a wide range of vocational options available to Australian students. The ATC focus is trades training, the delivery of which has previously been difficult in schools compared with other vocational options. ACCI believes that the ATC model is a good model for trades training in schools.

Location of ATCs

The most successful ATCs are located in regions where there is an existing industry base to provide demand for future ATC graduates.

Direct employment linkages and smooth articulation support the expansion of regional skills capability to meet local workforce needs.

The Importance of an Industry-Led Approach

Successful outcomes for ATC students are being achieved because of direct ATC linkages with industry through membership of ATC governance structures and workplacement opportunities in enterprises.

Under the ATC model, industry has identified the need, the relevant qualification levels and courses, and has provided an industry specific learning environment as well as employment.

The direct involvement of employers and their local business networks has enabled this to happen.

ACCI urges the maintenance of this industry-led approach and encourages continued partnerships with education.

Conclusion

The Rudd Government is fulfilling its election promise to integrate ATCs back into the broader VET system and has consulted with industry about which options should be considered.

The implementation of this measure is likely to take some time as policy direction is finalised and then individual consultations with ATCs take place.

While there will not be a “one size fits all” approach possible, there is an opportunity to retain the best features of the current ATC model and ensure continued industry leadership.

ACCI will be actively involved in working with the government in relation to the implementation of its policy concerning ATCs, and on other skills issues.