Shedding light: private 'for profit' training providers and young early school leavers

George Myconos
Brotherhood of St Laurence

Kira Clarke
University of Melbourne

Kitty te Riele
Victoria University

Publisher's note

About the research

Shedding light: private 'for profit' training providers and young early school leavers

George Myconos, Brotherhood of St Laurence, Kira Clarke, Melbourne University, and Kitty te Riele, Victoria University

This research aims to shed light on the role of private providers in delivering training to a particular cohort of learners, young people who have left school early. The authors surveyed 130 private, for-profit registered training organisations (RTOs) to find out their perspectives on teaching and learning practices, engaging with early school leavers, and the educational and wellbeing support services provided to these young learners.

Key messages

- Young early school leaver learners face a range of barriers to participating in education and completing their qualifications. The extent and persistence of these barriers is not always evident until after enrolment. Given the often small size of private RTOs, there remain challenges as to how they can help address barriers to participation in and completion of VET.

- The size of private RTOs is important, with private RTOs claiming their small scale appeals to early school leavers who may have struggled in larger institutional settings. However, the size of many private RTOs can also cause problems as they may be too small to provide adequate infrastructure and support services to the learners.

- The strengths identified by the surveyed private RTOs include:
  - mentoring and pathways support staff
  - language
  - literacy and numeracy programs and support
  - strong employer/industry connections to facilitate workplace-based training.

- The private RTOs in the study were eager to show a commitment to early school leavers and a willingness to support these learners to complete their qualifications. However, unsurprisingly, this is limited by the commercial realities of running a business in the ever-changing VET landscape and funding regimes.

The practices of private RTOs have come under intense scrutiny in recent times. With the introduction of the total VET activity (TVA) data collection, it will be useful to glean more information over the coming years and hopefully help shed more light on private RTOs and the training they provide to all learners.

Dr Craig Fowler
Managing Director, NCVER

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Executive summary

In this research we investigate an oft-criticised segment of the vocational education and training (VET) sector in Australia — private, for-profit registered training organisations (RTOs) — with the aim of gaining a clearer understanding of the approaches they adopt in training 15 to 19-year-olds who have left school early. Through a nationwide survey of private RTOs and a series of consultations with providers and industry stakeholders in Victoria, South Australia and Queensland, we set out to reveal the nature of training provided by private RTOs to those young people seeking to complete their initial qualification and the ways by which they respond to the needs of their young learners. On the basis of the findings we consider the changes that may be needed in order to improve the training outcomes for this growing cohort of learners.

The research is set against a background of federal, state and territory-based training entitlement regimes, which ensure a greater role for the VET sector in supporting the initial qualification attainment of young Australians. It has also been undertaken at a time when state and national governments are promoting a marketised and, consequently, highly competitive provider environment, prompted largely by the 2012 National Agreement for Skills and Workforce Development and the National Partnership Agreement on Skills Reform. These initiatives saw an expansion in both the number of private RTOs accessing government-funding, which now comprise approximately 3000 of Australia's 4200 registered training providers[1], and the number of private RTOs delivering vocational education to early school leavers.

In this context we see a convergence of two trends: a high number of private RTOs that often lack the infrastructure, economies of scale and student supports found in TAFE (technical and further education) institutions; and a high number of young early school leavers relying on such providers to help them to renew or continue their education.

While the numbers of young people undertaking vocational education have increased, the completion rates of publicly subsidised courses remain very low. Data from the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) indicate that, for those aged under 25 years in full-time study with no prior post school qualification, the estimated completion rate is 51.6% (NCVER 2016). This suggests that catering to the needs of young people in VET — across all provider types and settings — remains a significant challenge. It is for this reason that we focus on the private RTOs, who now represent a prominent segment of the VET landscape.

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1   Source: 2015 National VET Provider Collection, extracted from
    <http://www.ncver.edu.au/resources/vocstats.html> on 3 August 2016.

Findings

The characteristics of private RTOs catering to the 15 to 19-year-old cohort

- Private RTOs consider their small-scale, intimate and relatively informal learning settings to be distinctive characteristics. They regard their ability to engage learners face-to-face, either in small groups or individually, as a distinct advantage.

- Private RTOs report that their relatively close connections with employers, including their capacity to facilitate training in a workplace context, are of great benefit to young learners as they respond positively to practical, hands-on, real-world learning.

- In addition to the size and scale of delivery, a frequent benefit identified by the provider interviewees was their focused 'scope of delivery' in a limited range of fields of education. This specialisation enables strong links with employers and the capacity to contextualise student support services for particular industry and occupational needs.

Identifying the private RTOs' early school leaver cohort and their needs

- A significant proportion of the early school leavers gravitating towards private RTOs and, in all likelihood to vocational education in general, have experienced a range of social and educational challenges. The cohort in question can, by most measures, be regarded as disadvantaged.

- While providers are aware of the many needs of their young students — arising from personal, familial, and social problems, which in many cases also contribute to their disengagement from mainstream secondary schooling — the scale and complexity of the needs become evident to trainers gradually, and subsequent to enrolment.

- Barriers that are likely to impede completion were ranked by the survey respondents, with the most prominent being disengagement, low motivation and commitment, lack of support when experiencing relationship problems, health, drug and alcohol problems, and learning difficulties.

- Other barriers identified were poor social and communication skills, confusion about career goals and financial, transport and housing stress. Although concerns with language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) skills deficiencies did not rank as the most pressing concern for survey respondents, they did figure prominently in interviews with private RTO staff.

- Providers conveyed what they felt were widely held views among employers: in essence, that students lack the social skills needed to engage in the workplace, as well as an understanding of the basic expectations of that setting.

Lessons from a review of how private RTOs address student needs

- Providers are ill-equipped to address complex personal and social barriers to learning, more often limiting their assistance to the provision of the internet, study spaces, computers and some academic skills support.

- Remedial language, literacy and numeracy programs are available in many instances, but the approach across those private RTOs consulted is inconsistent. For many, 'literacy' is

a context-specific term, with the key determinant being the expectations of the industry associated with the qualification.

- Developing positive interpersonal relations with students is considered vital. Therefore the skills deemed essential for trainers were relationship-building, empathy, patience, humour, behaviour management, planning and leadership, the capacity to mentor and act as a role model, as well as a sound knowledge of the chosen trade.

- Interviewees emphasised the importance of providing the guidance and stability that enables a young person to make informed decisions about their future, within or beyond the confines of the industry associated with their current training.

- Employment-based training, along with structured workplace learning, was ranked the most important of all formalised program-level student supports.

- External agencies, notably Job Services Australia agencies, play an important role in referring young people to the appropriate training; however, private RTOs are concerned that misjudgements often lead to training that is of little interest to the young person.

- Private RTOs have difficulty reconciling the needs of young early school leavers, who may be indecisive, confused and experiencing instability, with the requirements of a training system that is, by design, prescriptive. They spoke of a tension between ensuring progress is made towards qualifications and the need to provide support and guidance to those who are yet to articulate, let alone decide upon, a preferred pathway.

The role played by private RTOs and the challenges faced

- Young early school leavers constitute a growing cohort for private RTOs and the key driver of increasing enrolments is federal, state and territory government policy aimed at increasing educational attainments through the use of learner subsidies.

- Private RTOs expressed what seemed to be a shared sentiment: that efforts directed to mentoring and supporting young people go largely unrecognised and that private RTOs are not accorded due respect in the VET sector.

- There are concerns among private RTOs and industry stakeholders about low-quality training, resulting from poor regulation of the sector, and about the possible consequences not only for learners, but for those who may eventually be in the care of graduates still lacking essential skills.

Conclusion and recommendations

Although this research provides the perspectives of a significant number of private RTOs, it is not a definitive account of the interactions between young people and these providers, or of the interactions of these RTOs with the wider community of training providers. Nonetheless, we can say that, on the basis of the survey and interview feedback from private RTOs and stakeholders, there is a stated commitment on their part to assist the young early school leaver cohort in attaining vocational and broader life skills. It is equally apparent from feedback that the capacity to realise this commitment is diminished in large part by the commercial realities, policies and funding regimes that encourage 'short-termism'. Indeed, while the relatively small scale of most operations is an advantage, this very feature intensifies their commercial vulnerability and further reduces the capacity of

providers to develop the expertise and tailored programs needed to assist young learners. Based on these conclusions we submit the following recommendations:

- Government, industry, referral agencies, and those in education should regard private RTOs as partners in efforts to re-engage young people whose education has been disrupted.

- More effective career guidance — prior to and during training — should be provided by schools and referral agencies in order to assist young people to make better assessments of their goals and suitable training options.

- The apparent effectiveness of employment-based training, along with private RTOs' specialisations and their closer links with industry, should prompt governments to shape policies that maximise the potential of private RTOs.

- Incentives could be provided to employers hosting young learners to encourage closer collaboration with private RTOs in the provision of structured mentoring and support.

- The importance of small informal and welcoming learning settings must be acknowledged, as must their limitations. To maximise the advantages inherent in small-scale operations, targeted assistance should be provided to suitably qualified niche providers for the express purpose of increasing their capacity to address student needs.

- Intake and enrolment process requirements should be modified such that they have the capacity to identify a broad range of wellbeing needs, and the information gleaned should prompt cross-sector referrals by private RTOs and closer relations between private RTOs and specialist support agencies.

ⓘ Introduction

The principal question addressed in this research is: what role is played by private for-profit RTOs in supporting the attainment of an initial VET qualification for early school leavers? Three related questions flow from this:

- What are the characteristics of private RTOs catering to the 15 to 19-year-old early school leaver cohort, and what curriculum and qualifications are offered to the cohort?

- What are the characteristics of that cohort, and what do the private RTOs regard as the cohort's needs?

- What lessons emerge from a review of how private RTOs address these needs?

This research relies mainly on the perceptions of those employed in private RTOs across Australia, with supplementary observations from stakeholders across the community sector, government and industry. This approach enables a consideration of the ways by which private RTOs have responded to the needs of young people, the challenges encountered by providers and learners, and the changes that may be needed to improve the training outcomes for this cohort of often-disadvantaged learners.

In undertaking this research, the authors were cognisant of two recent trends: a significant increase in the number of private RTOs accessing government-funding; and a growing number of young people relying on such providers to help them to renew or continue an education that was headed toward a premature end. The research was conducted at a time when both the early school leaver cohort and private RTOs were the subject of widespread concern: the former for lamentably low completion rates in VET (Curtis 2008) and stagnant national school completion rates; the latter for the unscrupulous practices and low-quality provision that many have come to associate with private sector vocational training (Senate Standing Committee on Education and Employment 2015, p.2).

Background: students and system

Over the past decade the key role of the VET sector in assisting young people — and particularly those who leave school early — to remain engaged in education has been increasingly recognised by governments, educators and the young people themselves. Key policies have driven this shift, principal among them the National Partnership Agreement on Youth Attainment and Transitions (NPAYAT; 2009—13), established by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG), and the associated state/territory-based Learn or Earn initiatives, requiring young people to be fully engaged in education, training and/or employment until the age of 17 years.

In 2015, across Australia, more than 146 100[2] young people aged between 15 and 19 years who have not completed a senior school certificate were undertaking a VET qualification. These 15 to 19-year-old early school leavers far outnumber school completers of that age group in VET programs. While these non-school completers represent a minority within their

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2   Source: 2015 National VET Provider Collection, extracted from
    <http://www.ncver.edu.au/resources/vocstats.html> on 3 August 2016.

broader age cohort, their over-representation in the VET sector makes them a cohort of interest.

Three major issues have shaped the development and character of Australia's VET system: competency-based training, determined by training packages that prescribe the requisite skills; the responsiveness of the VET system to industry; and, increasingly, the use of market and quasi-market instruments, which have attracted unprecedented numbers of private providers (Ryan 2011). Concerns about these and many other aspects of the system have intensified in recent years. In particular, there is increasing disputation between federal, state and territory governments over the amount and share of funding, how the various jurisdictions fund their contributions, and the degree of decentralisation (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet 2014). These disputes have occurred at a time when concerns have also intensified over poor completion rates (particularly for students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds), the consequent levels of students' unpaid VET FEE-HELP debts,[3] the overall quality of provision, the skills mismatch for the labour market, and the regulatory frameworks needed to lift standards in a system in which the skills policies of the respective states and federal government are out of alignment (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet 2014; Norton 2015).

One of the more contentious and visible issues is the role of private RTOs. The enthusiasm on the part of federal, state and territory governments for competitive, market-based and demand-led funding has led to the increase in private RTOs (see below for details), this growth having potential implications for public providers. Industry stakeholders have also criticised funding arrangements that have fostered a preoccupation in the VET sector with government subsidies and training for qualifications that are not in demand by industry (Senate Standing Committee on Education and Employment 2015, p.15).

Private RTOs faced intense criticism during the period in which this research was undertaken. Dubious practices and poor provision featured regularly in media reporting,[4] and the widespread criticism was largely responsible for a succession of reviews looking into reform of the system's architecture, the regulation of standards, accountabilities, consumer safeguards, the design of skills packages, and penalties for unscrupulous and poor-quality providers. Reviews were conducted in major states. The most important in the context of this research were those held by the Victorian, South Australian, and Queensland governments. All the factors mentioned above combined to create a highly fluid governance landscape and, importantly, a very dynamic research environment, in which the principal actor in the research was subject to intense scrutiny by all sectors of the community.[5]

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3   VET FEE-HELP is available to support tuition for learners enrolled at diploma level and above.

4   Among these practices were the use of 'brokers' employing door-to-door selling techniques to entice vulnerable people to enrol, inducements such as iPads, 'cherry picking' government-subsidised and more profitable courses, and low-quality 'tick-flick' training. Responses from industry included blacklisting by childcare centres of 'graduates' from certain private RTOs. Furthermore, we are currently witnessing the withdrawal of thousands of certificates and refunds to government, as well as large sanctions coming into place for those that engage in unscrupulous behaviour.

5   We may add to this moving feast the changes witnessed in a brief period in government at federal level, and unexpectedly in both Victoria and Queensland (two of our sample states). At time of writing the governments of Victoria, South Australia and, to a lesser degree, Queensland were implementing reforms that would in large measure reinstate the TAFEs to their earlier privileged status, while also taking more punitive approaches to the regulation of private providers.

Review of the literature

Complex youth transitions

The literature focusing on youth transitions internationally paints an increasingly dire picture for young people. Little progress has occurred since 2009 in the employment prospects of young people in more developed economies. For example, International Labour Organization (ILO) research (2013) anticipated that youth unemployment in these more developed economies would remain above 17% through 2015. Between 2008 and 2012 the number of young unemployed Australians increased by 25%, with rates in excess of 15% in two-thirds of developed economies. Trends indicate that young people are spending a growing length of time unemployed, with lower job quality in more temporary and part-time work (International Labour Organization 2013). In considering the barriers to employment faced by young people, the recurring themes in the literature are early school leaving, weak demand, the absence of effective labour market programs and apprenticeship and internship opportunities, low foundation-level skills and overall job readiness (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] 2011, 2013; EFA Global Monitoring Report 2012; International Labour Organization 2015).

Early school leaving and its causes

Despite an increasing political focus on school completion and educational attainment as key features of a secure economy, each year young people leave or are excluded from the Australian schooling system before they have completed a senior secondary certificate. These 'early leavers' face not only an uncertain educational future, but are at risk of exclusion from the labour market and also at risk of a range of other social, health and economic disadvantages (Brotherhood of St Laurence & Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research 2015). While calculated differently in different education systems, early school leaving is most often conceptualised as that time when a young person exits from education 'without obtaining a minimal credential (most often a higher secondary education diploma)' (De Witte et al. 2013, p.14). This group is variously referred to in the literature as non-completers (Curtis & McMillan 2008; Ball & Lamb 2001; Sweet 2012), early school leavers (Robinson & Meredith 2013; Black, Polidano & Tseng 2011) or drop-outs (Mahuteau & Mavromaras 2013; Lyche 2010).

The rates of early school leaving vary across OECD countries, with 16% of young people failing to complete school (OECD 2013). Across the European Union, almost 12% of young people leave school early, without completing an upper secondary qualification (European Commission 2013). Early school leaving rates are lower in the United States, where 6.6% of the 16 to 24-year-old population are not enrolled in and have not completed upper secondary education (Kena et al. 2015). Overall, the data on early school leaving across Europe, in the United States and OECD countries indicate a steady downward trend in early leaving rates (European Commission 2013; Kena et al. 2015).

Australia stands out in the international context. Where other education systems are experiencing a downward trend in early school leaving rates, the rate of early leaving in Australia has remained steady over the last two decades. A recent study by Lamb and colleagues (2015) indicates that more than one in four (26%) young Australians do not achieve a Year 12 or equivalent qualification by the age of 19 years. Despite significant

Trends indicate that young people are spending a growing length of time unemployed, with lower job quality in more temporary and part-time work.

Young people leaving school before completing a senior secondary certificate in Victoria are predominantly from the two lowest socioeconomic status quartiles.

changes to senior secondary curriculum and qualification provision in the last decade (Polesel 2008; Clarke & Polesel 2013; Clarke & Volkoff 2012) and a national focus on increasing school completion (COAG 2009), school completion rates and secondary school retention rates have failed to change significantly, with school completion rates among low-socioeconomic status young people lagging (COAG 2013).

Research shows that early school leaving is often a result of cumulative disengagements (Nevala, Hawley & GHK Consulting 2012) and it entails a decision that 'is influenced by factors that are at work for a long period of time' (Manni & Kalb 2003, p.22). Policy responses to early leaving are often criticised for failing to acknowledge how these decisions to leave school early are formed gradually and over an extended period of time. The early school leaving literature, or 'drop-out discourse' (De Witte et al. 2013, p.15), cites a range of individual demographic, contextual and environmental factors that may contribute to early school leaving.

Evidence from studies of early school leaving in international systems has also identified gender (European Commission 2013; European Commission & Eurostat 2012), ethnicity (Kena et al. 2015; Rumberger & Lamb 1998; Battin-Pearson et al. 2000; Marks & Fleming 1998) and language background (Rumberger & Lamb 1998) as impacting on the rates of retention and early school leaving. The literature is consistent in its finding that young men outnumber young women in early school leaving (Kena et al. 2015) in many developed nations. A 1999 study by Marks and Fleming (1998) revealed that gender had a stronger correlation with early school leaving than many of the other factors associated with student characteristics. The link between ethnicity and language background and early school leaving varies by ethnic group and language spoken. In the United States, early school leaving rates are higher for African-American, Hispanic and Native American students than for Caucasian and Asian students (Kena et al. 2015). Within European Union member states, the rates of early school leaving amongst foreign-born young people is more than double the rate for native-born young people (European Commission & Eurostat 2012).

Living in rural and non-urban geographic locations is another factor commonly identified in the literature as being associated with higher rates of early school leaving in developed economies (Vinson, Rawsthorne & Cooper 2007; Vinson et al. 2015; Marks & Fleming 1998). There is also evidence of social class or socioeconomic status having a particularly strong impact on early leaving (Lamb et al. 2015; Teese 2004). Using the SEIFA[6] Index of Relative Socio-economic Advantage and Disadvantage, Lamb and colleagues (2015) demonstrate that, while almost 90% of 19-year-olds in the highest decile completed Year 12 or equivalent, this was the case for only 60% of those from the lowest decile.

The patterns of early leaving in Victoria — one of the few Australian states with a well-established survey tracking early school leavers — further highlight the realities of intergenerational disadvantage and exclusion from education. Young people leaving school before completing a senior secondary certificate in Victoria are predominantly from the two lowest socioeconomic status quartiles (59.9%) (Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development 2012). Others have shown how this disadvantaged context, in which

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6   SEIFA, or Socioeconomic Index for Areas, is the measurement of relative advantage and/or disadvantage used by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), drawing on national census data for Australian postcodes.

young people are both economically and academically vulnerable (Teese 2004), contributes to lower academic achievement and overall motivation for schooling, both major drivers for students leaving school early (Pienaar 2006; Lamb et al. 2015; DiPrete & Eirich 2006).

In Australia, the group least likely to complete Year 12 or an equivalent qualification are Indigenous people: 56% of Indigenous 19-year-olds have not attained such a qualification, compared with 25% of non-Indigenous youth (Lamb et al. 2015). Low parental education can also be considered important in the mix of factors impacting on completion rates. It is significant that those in the 'middle years' whose parents did not complete year 12 are considered to be 3.72 times more likely to be missing out on attaining key 'learner academic' milestones, than those with at least one parent with a university degree (Lamb et al. 2015, pp.18-19). This, in turn, represents an important precursor to early school leaving.

Policy response to early school leaving and the role of VET

The responses by governments internationally to this continuing dilemma of early school leaving vary. De Witte and colleagues (2013) argue there is a sharp contrast between the government-articulated social and economic objectives of education and training in Western countries and the persistently high early school leaving rates observed in many European and Anglophone countries.

Policy-makers in the European Union have identified three types of response to the early school leaving issue: prevention, intervention and compensation (European Commission 2013). Prevention and intervention policies both aim to reduce early school leaving by responding early to the needs of students considered at risk of disengaging from school. The broadening of the senior secondary curriculum in many of Australia's school-completion qualifications (for example, Higher School Certificate and Queensland Certificate of Education etc.) and the growth of VET in Schools programs are seen as such early interventions by policy-makers to stem the consistent pattern of early school leaving.

Conversely, compensatory approaches are those that enable access to further education and training for those who have already exited education (European Commission 2013). In Australia, as part of the COAG (2009) targets, the now discontinued nationally funded Youth Connections services were set up for all three purposes and were aimed at 'eligible young people who are at risk of disengaging, or already disengaged from education, and/or family and the community' (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations 2010, p.11). However, in practice, intervention and compensation responses were dominant, as 70% of Youth Connections participants fell into the category of being 'disengaged from schooling' (dandolopartners 2014, p.68).

Although the VET sector is often conceptualised as an adult sector providing post-school and higher-level training, it is increasingly cast in the role of a 'second-chance' learning setting for early school leavers. Consequently researchers are focusing on how VET; that is, formal accredited vocational training, has been used to respond to the needs of that cohort (Acquah & Huddleston 2014). This change is reflected in the increasing numbers of students participating in Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) qualifications, and the decreasing numbers of students participating in non-accredited courses.

School completion is regarded in current policy to constitute a key measure of system, organisation and individual success.

Efforts to address early school leaving and youth unemployment through the use of vocational education and training have been informed by research and human capital agendas highlighting the importance of improved foundation-level skills to labour market access and mobility. Training that is more responsive to the needs of the labour market, greater use of work-based training and the use of social partnerships are also seen as crucial for developing broader employability skills (Sherman 2006; OECD 2010; EFA Global Monitoring Report 2012). Research in the Australian context has also affirmed the importance in the VET system of support for disadvantaged, hard-to-reach and low-achieving learners through the medium of partnerships and wider community networks (Brown & North 2010; Considine, Watson & Hall 2005).

The language used in current education policy, both in Australia and more widely across more developed economies, suggests a utilitarian role for the VET sector, one focusing on the provision of qualifications as needed *in* the labour market and *by* employers. As articulated in the Australian context in the landmark Melbourne Declaration:

> Skilled jobs now dominate jobs, growth and people, with university or vocational education and training qualifications faring much better in the employment market than early school leavers. To maximise their opportunities for healthy, productive and rewarding futures, Australia's young people must be encouraged not only to complete secondary education, but also to proceed into further training or education.

> (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, Barr et al. 2008, p.5)

School completion is thus regarded in current policy to constitute a key measure of system, organisation and individual success.

Across Anglophone countries in particular there has been a renewed policy focus on the role of vocational education for 15 to 19-year-olds (Agbola & Lambert 2010). For those young people who have left school early, employment has been found to be the most common motivating factor for their taking up a place in a VET course or program. The labour market benefits of participation in these programs are often jeopardised by attrition and non-completion (Stanwick 2005).

The VET sector can and does play a compensatory and re-engagement role for these early leavers (te Riele & Crump 2002), with evidence that early school leavers who have a period of unemployment for six months or more but then complete a VET course achieve higher full-time employment rates than those who do not (Gorgens & Ryan 2006). Yet Australian and international labour markets demand ever-increasing levels of skills, with 'credential inflation' and increasing demands for higher levels of education placing early school leavers further and further behind in their capacity to access meaningful employment (van Alphen 2012).

The prominence of private RTOs

Across the globe systemic imperatives are reshaping vocational training and these are inextricably linked to the prevailing neoliberal agenda, which regards competition and profitability as the key to progress (Avis 2012). Beyond Australia, private providers of post-compulsory education have been playing an increasingly visible and important role in education systems across the OECD (Agbola & Lambert 2010; Shar & Nair 2013). As Levy (2013) shows, this is the case, notwithstanding some fluctuation in the level of provision, prompted by social factors (demographic changes and changes to the distinctiveness of learner cohorts) and political factors (policies that reaffirm the centrality of public sector education). Dandolopartners (2011) conclude that global trends have important implications for vocational training providers, reinforcing their need for greater flexibility, more innovative trans-institution/sector partnerships, and greater investment in the human resources, processes and infrastructure required to better cater for disadvantaged students.

In research into the Australian system and, in particular, into its for-profit private providers, Pasura (2014) also notes the impact of this market-based, neoliberal landscape, and the implications for pedagogy and learning. A key finding here is that institutional relationships are being fundamentally recast, as providers attempt to reconcile business imperatives with the need to maintain high standards of provision. Likewise, Simons and Harris show how leaders of private training organisations often have difficulty striking the desired balance between educational and business imperatives (Simons & Harris 2014).

Anderson (2006) provides a good account of how the Australian VET sector has evolved into a competitive training market, prompted by the government reforms of the late 1980s such as the National Training Framework and subsequently the Deveson Review (Deveson 1990). He also shows how a focus on the role of industry and client flexibility have been key features of the marketising policy agenda.

Private RTOs have now been operating alongside the TAFE sector for many years (Anderson 1998). In the late 1980s and early 1990s the role of the private sector in the broader VET sector came into sharper focus in several key government policy reviews (for example, Dawkins 1989; Deveson 1990; Finn 1991). The demand-driven model is now in place across Australia, with all states implementing variants of this model. Government funding to non-TAFE providers increased from \$450m in 2008, to \$1.4b in 2012. While funding and policy regimes are in a constant state of flux, at the time of writing approximately 2800 of Australia's 3800 RTOs were private, with 2000 attracting government subsidies (Yu and Oliver 2015).

Debates about the merits of private provision are not new (Anderson 1995a; Fooks 1995; Kell 1993; Kell, Balatti & Muspratt 1995; Yu & Oliver 2015). There have been many vocal opponents of market-based reforms in the Australian VET sector. Some have expressed concern that 'market reforms have exacerbated existing social and economic disadvantage' (Anderson 1998, p.348), with some proponents also conceding that some of the dimensions of market reform, such as fees and competitive tendering, may indeed be counter to the equity and public interest objectives (Selby Smith & Ferrier 1996).

The tensions arising out of a highly marketised training environment are also considered by Anderson, whose research explores the difficulties encountered in the Australian setting by private RTOs who must utilise the prescribed competency frameworks — or 'training

Leaders of private training organisations often have difficulty striking the desired balance between educational and business imperatives.

packages' — which are designed more for the needs of industry and domestic learners than for the providers' primary market of international students (Anderson 2008). For others, flexibility seems to be a defining characteristic of such provider types, with McPhee, for example, highlighting their capacity to respond to the learning environment's demands (McPhee 2008). Hetherington and Rust, for their part, also consider the impacts of the highly marketised VET environment, dwelling on the deleterious effects it has had on previously well-resourced publicly funded training institutions, whose very purpose included the obligation to help the disadvantaged overcome access and equity challenges (Hetherington & Rust 2013).

Wheelahan (2005, 2006) has drawn attention to how learners are now constructed as consumers. The consumerist process within neoliberal markets has, she argues, fundamentally recast the concepts of 'learner', 'teacher', 'education' and 'work' and has introduced an instrumentalism that she argues distorts the decision-making of learners as they consider their educational pathways. She asserts that support for this marketised training culture rests on, and reinforces, the problematic assumption that learners choose their provider based on an informed understanding.

Summary

Early school leavers constitute a significant minority of learners in VET broadly and in private VET specifically. Yet, the role of private RTOs in responding to the dilemma of low-skilled early school leavers remains unclear (Shah & Nair 2013). This opacity is compounded by the closure in 2014 of the National VET Equity Advisory Council (NVEAC), a key source of and repository for research into VET provision to disadvantaged groups. The educational and labour market vulnerability of the young early leaver cohort, and the response to their needs by private RTOs, is thus a phenomenon in need of further examination.

Private RTO market share and young early school leaver enrolments

As shown in figure 1, the market share of private RTOs varies considerably across different states and territories, with Victoria, Queensland and South Australia experiencing the largest growth in market share.

Figure 1   Early school leavers in VET, 15–19 years, by provider type, 2015
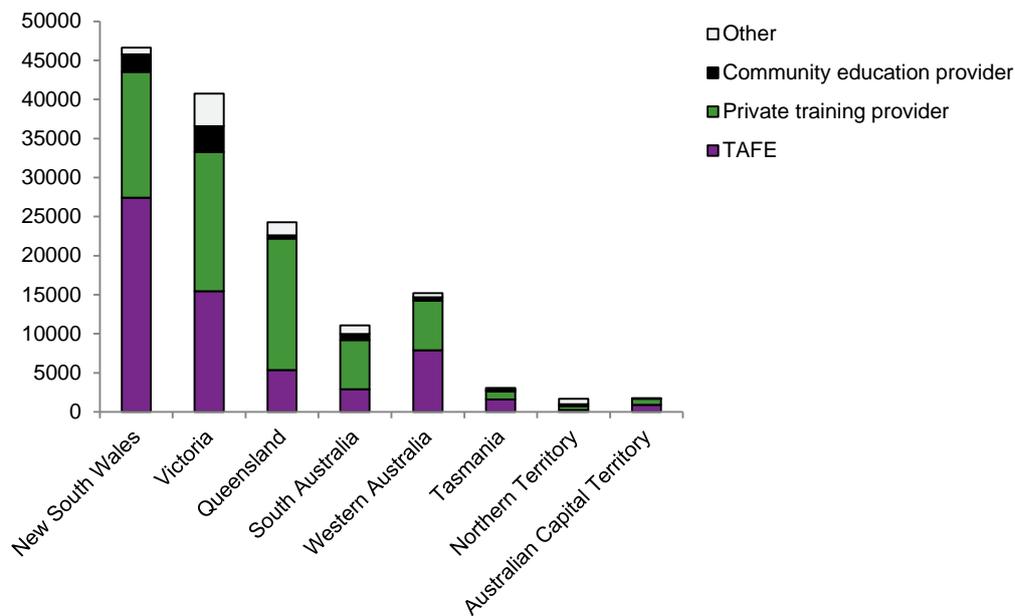
Source: 2015 National VET Provider Collection, extracted from <http://www.ncver.edu.au/resources/vocstats.html> on 3 August 2016.

Table 1 highlights the significant market share for private RTOs across the three sample states. While historically the role of private RTOs was considered more niche and tended to focus on provision in specialised areas, the breadth of the qualifications delivered by such providers has grown exponentially, with their market influence and presence growing considerably since 2009.

Table 1   Private RTO market share of 15 to 19-year-old early school leavers in three sample states

State/territory of delivery location	TAFE	Private training provider	Community education provider	Other
Victoria	15400	17900	3300	4200
Queensland	5300	16900	400	1700
South Australia	2900	6300	800	1100

Source: 2015 National VET Provider Collection, extracted from <http://www.ncver.edu.au/resources/vocstats.html> on 3 August 2016.

Sample states: early school leavers and policy context

To better understand the role played by our state-based sample sites we provide here trends of early school leaving in each, along with a snapshot of the policy and reform agendas in those states. While in a state of constant flux, the state agendas should be understood as policy frameworks that complement the 2012 National Partnership Agreement

on Skills Reform (COAG 2012), which committed states to implementing student entitlement schemes, promoting competitive training markets, improving standards, and ensuring regulatory transparency. These state policy agendas should also be understood as complementing the National Partnership on Youth Attainment and Transitions agreement, which committed governments to funding significant increases in VET for young people (COAG 2009).

Victoria

According to NCVER data, in 2015, in Victoria, there were 40 800 early school leavers enrolled in vocational education and training. Non-school completers aged 15—19 years made up 3.6 per cent of the overall Victorian VET population in 2015. In 2015 almost one in three (30%) early school leavers in Victoria were undertaking apprenticeships and traineeships.[7]

Victoria's VET policies have made that state central to debates about the role of private RTOs across Australia. The introduction of the Victorian Training Guarantee (VTG) in 2008 introduced a demand-driven funding regime on a scale previously unknown in Australia. Under this regime all training providers — public or private — received the same funding rate, with no caps placed on the number of places to be subsidised. The entitlement gave access to subsidised training places to those without a post-school qualification, or who wanted to gain a higher-level qualification, and prompted the dramatic expansion of the VET sector: a 33% increase in the number of government-funded training providers, from 561 to more than 750; and a 44% increase in the number of enrolments (see Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development 2012). All of this imposed a significant burden on the state's finances, leading to funding cuts and other measures that impacted on TAFE institutes, as well as on private providers.[8]

Funding cuts further limited access to foundation skills category courses and to vocational preparation certificates.[9] These cuts were to some extent offset in April 2013 by a $200m injection of funds to be made available over four years. Following the election of a Labor government in Victoria, two reviews occurred which prompted significant shifts in Victoria's approach (Victorian Department of Education and Training 2015a, 2015b). These reviews considered sweeping changes to the subsidy regime, other funding mechanisms, concerns about the deteriorating quality of training, poor completion rates, the diminishing status of TAFEs, and the corresponding prominence of private providers.

Consequently, in 2015 the policy framework, Skills and Jobs in the Education State, was implemented. It comprised several initiatives of relevance to young early school leavers, which included incentives to employers who hire unemployed young people, as well as

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7 2015 National VET Provider Collection, extracted from
   <http://www.ncver.edu.au/resources/vocstats.html> on 3 August 2016.

8 Contentious reforms included: removal of funding ($170m) allocated to TAFEs as a public provider of education and training, with obligations to fulfil the 'community services obligation' and provide associated supports and infrastructure; and changes to course subsidies to better reflect skills gaps and future skills requirements. Programs such as business, hospitality, retail and fitness, those favoured by many young people, suffered major decreases in funding.

9 These courses provide the basic skills and aptitudes needed to enhance prospects for continuing education or employment. They often involve an introduction to a specific industry so more informed decisions about career paths are possible, enabling attainment of a recognised credential.

career and further education guidance for early school leavers. Substantial funds ($370m) were directed to reaffirming the prominent role of TAFE institutes in the VET landscape, incorporating measures aimed to provide greater support for young early school leavers (Victorian Department of Education and Training 2015b).

Queensland

In Queensland 24 300 early school leavers were enrolled in vocational education and training in 2014. Non-school completers aged 15—19 years made up more than a third of the total 15—19 year old VET population in 2015. Around two thirds of Queensland early school leavers are engaging in VET before completing Year 11.[10]

The policy reforms of greatest relevance to this research entailed changes in 2010 to the Queensland Skills Plan (2006), which ushered in the state's first demand-driven funding program for apprenticeships and traineeships. Its successor, the VET Investment Plan, featured a number of initiatives for young learners, notably, the 'Certificate 3 Guarantee' (which received a significant boost in funding for the 2015—16 period under the new Labor government), and 'user choice', focusing primarily on apprenticeships and traineeships. Certificate 3 Guarantee uses a student entitlement approach to assist learners to attain their first certificate III level course or allows a limited selection of lower-level qualifications at certificate I and II levels.

Government subsidies are paid directly to eligible 'pre-qualified suppliers' and are also determined by the priority level ascribed to the qualification. In addition, fee-free training is provided to Year 12 graduates, again on the condition that it is in a high-priority qualification and if undertaken within 12 months of completion of the Year 12 certificate. The suite of VET Investment Plan programs includes the Community Learning initiative, which facilitates collaborations between community-based organisations and training organisations who are required to provide entry-level (certificate I, II) training to highly disadvantaged learners in a community setting (Queensland Department of Education and Training 2015). The VET Investment Plan's demand-driven approach provided greater scope for private RTOs to increase their share of the student market. However, recent reforms (from July 2015) have featured measures aimed at substantially improving the TAFE sector's status, mainly through the injection of funds ($34.5m over four years) for the purpose of delivering foundation-level courses and an increase in qualifications accessed through VET in Schools.

South Australia

In South Australia 11 100 early school leavers aged 15—19 years were enrolled in vocational education and training in 2015.[11] There has been a steady decline in early school leaver enrolments in VET over the last decade. Since 2011, early school leavers who have completed Year 11 have been the largest early school leaver cohort enrolling in VET.

Queensland's VET Investment Plan's demand-driven approach provided greater scope for private RTOs to increase their share of the student market.

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10 2015 National VET Provider Collection, extracted from
     <http://www.ncver.edu.au/resources/vocstats.html> on 3 August 2016.
11 2015 National VET Provider Collection, extracted from
     <http://www.ncver.edu.au/resources/vocstats.html> on 3 August 2016.

Up until mid-2015 the prevailing VET policy framework in South Australia was Skills for All, which featured a number of initiatives of relevance to young learners. The most important of these are case management for Learner Support Services, and a fee-free certificate I and II qualification linked to a student entitlement, enabling access to both public and private training providers.

This policy led to substantial increases in enrolments, and particularly in private RTO enrolments, with private RTOs given access to unprecedented levels of public funds. A 2015 review led to the replacement of Skills for All with 'WorkReady' (ACIL Allen Consulting 2015). The latter provides more targeted assistance for those assessed for foundation-level courses, as well as two funded courses from a list of certificate III options (South Australian Department of State Development 2015). With the announcement of WorkReady, the vast majority of government-funded places were reallocated to the TAFE sector, with that share now reaching 75%. Following a backlash from the private providers, the Commonwealth Government achieved a scaling-back of this move, although a diminished role for private RTOs in South Australia is, in the short term at least, still likely.

Method

This research was conducted using a mixed-methods approach, which involved two key data-generation activities: a nationwide survey and interviews with representatives from private RTOs and key stakeholders.

National survey of private RTOs

Quantitative and qualitative data were gathered through an online survey of a sample of private RTOs from all states and territories across Australia and conducted between February and May 2015. These were identified through publicly accessible records — primarily through the Australian Department of Industry's website training.gov.au (the nation's main repository of information on training providers) — and accessed with the assistance of the Australian Council of Private Education and Training (ACPET). The sample of 183 training providers was chosen on the basis that the organisation:

- was operating on a commercial and 'for profit' basis

- had enrolments of more than 25 of those aged 15—19 years who had not attained a Year 12 certificate undertaking entry-level qualifications (up to certificate III).

Of those invited to complete the survey 130 responded.

The survey (see appendix A) comprised a series of questions derived from a framework used to illuminate key aspects of the private RTO—learner encounter. The framework's design was informed by the Victorian Department of Education and Training 'Student Engagement and Inclusion' guidelines, as well as by other research into learning for re-engagement (Seal 2009; Victorian Department of Education and Training 2014; Davies, Lamb & Doecke 2011; Myconos 2014; Thomson 2014; te Riele 2015). The framework provides four vantage points:

- *Teaching and learning*: the practices used to deliver training in differing private RTO contexts and the ways by which training is modified to respond to the specific needs of young people. This may include the use of individualised approaches to learning, adaptation of assessment processes, holistic programs that incorporate literacy and numeracy, and scaffolding with the aid of information and communication technologies.

- *Engagement and wellbeing*: how private RTOs identify the challenges faced by students and how they develop and implement the responses required. This may include establishing safe learning settings, the training of staff, learner support and partnerships with external agencies.

- *Pathway support*: this includes career guidance, goal setting, and life skills development.

- *Attainments and outcomes*: how progress is perceived beyond formal indicators (qualifications or units), and the extent to which both 'formal' and 'informal' ('soft skills', confidence levels, fluency, readiness for further training) are acknowledged.

The survey utilised this framework in combination with 32 Likert scale, multiple-choice, single-line text, and open-ended comment questions. Participants were asked about the:

- characteristics of their organisation (location, size, main mode of delivery, scope of qualifications, and the number of staff)

- profile of their early school leaver cohort (as a proportion, the cohort's relative importance to the business, and their backgrounds)

- nature of the barriers encountered by students and the associated difficulties for the training organisation

- decisive measures needed to ensure completion, including the practices employed, trainer skills needed, and supports provided

- role of partnerships and interagency collaboration.

Interviews with private RTO staff and key industry stakeholders

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with staff at eight private RTOs in the three sample states (Victoria, Queensland, South Australia) (see appendix B for profiles of the participating private RTOs). These states were selected to reflect private RTOs' growth in market share and their access to young people in comparable subsidy schemes: the Victorian Training Guarantee, Skills for All (South Australia), and Certificate 3 Guarantee (Queensland). Private RTOs in these three states were selected on the basis that they were:

- active in regions with the lowest quintile of socioeconomic status

- predominantly engaged in block training

- catering for a low proportion of early school leavers engaged in apprenticeships or traineeships

- specialised in training for qualifications in the fields most in demand by young early school leavers (hospitality, child and aged care, building and construction, retail, and business administration)

- catering for a mix of genders.

Given the highly dynamic nature of the training sector and the vast numbers of diverse private RTOs across Australia and in the three sample states, the researchers do not ascribe representative status to the chosen providers. Rather, this sampling served only to provide an additional vantage point from which to view the subject and through a dialogue not possible via surveys alone. Although these insights were to provide depth and nuance to the findings emerging from the survey data, they are not utilised for the purposes of comparison.

Participant private RTOs were selected from a shortlist compiled for each state. These private RTOs conformed to the criteria used for survey distribution and were also chosen with consideration to their accessibility, gender mix and range of provision. Initial communication was made using the publicly available details (from training.gov.au), with the principal point of contact being 'Chief executive' or 'Managerial agent'. Although in these early communications the capacity was given to these people to nominate suitable interviewees at their private RTO, researchers also emphasised the need to consult training and coordination staff.

In line with the survey, discussion with private RTOs followed the framework mentioned above and focused primarily on teaching and learning, engagement, wellbeing and pathway support, attainments and outcomes. The interviewees were also asked to reflect on the role of private RTOs in general in training young early school leavers and on how that role might evolve in coming years (see appendices C and D for the interview instruments used for providers and stakeholders).

In addition to private RTOs in these states, interviews were conducted with representatives of institutions and agencies playing important roles in the wider (state-based) VET landscape. Insights about the actual and perceived role of private RTOs were sought in order to provide a broad perspective on the trends evident in each setting. Related doctoral work by one of the authors also provided findings from interviews and longitudinal surveys of early school leavers in private RTOs in Victoria. Table 2 outlines the breadth of interviews that were conducted in all consultations:

Table 2   Interviewees

	Victoria	South Australia	Queensland	Total
Private RTO trainers	2	4	2	8
Private RTO coordinator/management	3	4	3	10
Government departments	1	1	1	3
Community sector		1	1	2
Industry	2	1	2	4
Other	1		1	2
Total	**9**	**11**	**9**	**29**

Limitations

As this is an initial investigation of private RTOs, the research is limited in a number of ways. Firstly, it privileges the vantage point of private RTOs and this with only a limited number in only in three states. Thus, it does not purport to represent the views of the diverse range of providers across Australia. Secondly, it provides little insight into the views of the young learners. Such insight would require comprehensive input primarily from young students, secondary schools, referral agencies and both public and not-for-profit private providers.

Finally, inaccuracies in the official profiles of the Queensland-based training organisations led to fieldwork in that state concentrating more than intended on private RTOs with higher numbers of school-based apprentice and trainee students, and with fewer 'early school leavers' per se. Hence, while discussions with Queensland-based private RTOs provided valuable insights into the training of young learners, the private RTO experience of early school leavers was sometimes limited or not 'first hand'.

⊙ Findings

The research aim of identifying the nature and role of private RTO vocational training for early school leavers is pursued here by examining the survey and interviewee responses to the following questions:

- What are the characteristics of private RTOs catering to the 15 to 19-year-old cohort, and what curriculum and qualifications are offered to the cohort?

- Who are the 15 to 19-year-old early school leavers using private RTOs and what do the private RTOs regard as the needs of the cohort?

- What lessons emerge from a review of how private RTOs address student needs?

The data presented below are taken from a nationwide survey of eligible training organisations conducted between February and May 2015. The survey findings are considered alongside reflections from interviews with training practitioners and stakeholders in industry, government agencies and the community sector in the three sample states, Victoria, Queensland, and South Australia. Given that the principal source of data is the survey responses, these findings precede insights gleaned from interviews throughout this section.

Private RTO characteristics

The initial phase of the analysis of the survey data set out to identify the key features of the private RTOs most active in providing vocational training to young early school leavers. The survey participants represented private RTOs delivering training across Australia (see figure 2; note that participants were asked to tick as many states as their organisation delivered in). Private RTOs were, unsurprisingly, more active in states with higher populations, although Queensland and Western Australia hosted more private RTOs than was anticipated.

Figure 2   Survey respondent jurisdictions of delivery

Shedding light: private 'for profit' training providers and young early school leavers
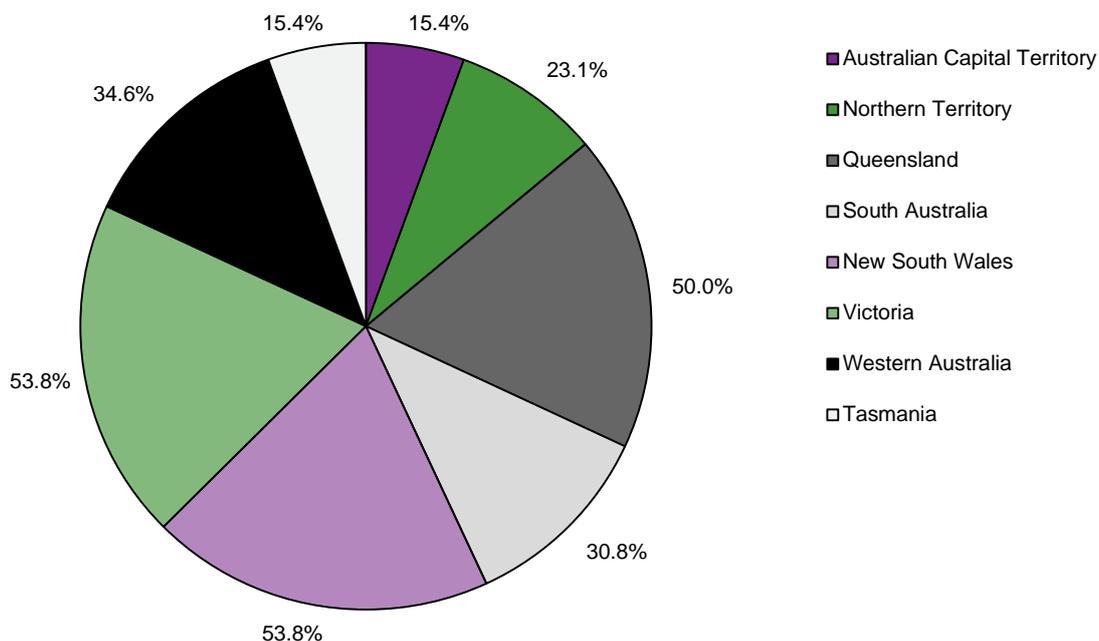
While all respondents indicated that they used 'face-to-face' delivery, they also indicated they were engaged in a range of delivery modes (see figure 3), including 'online' (50%), 'on the job' (42.3%) and 'distance education' (23.1%).

Figure 3   Private RTO modes of delivery
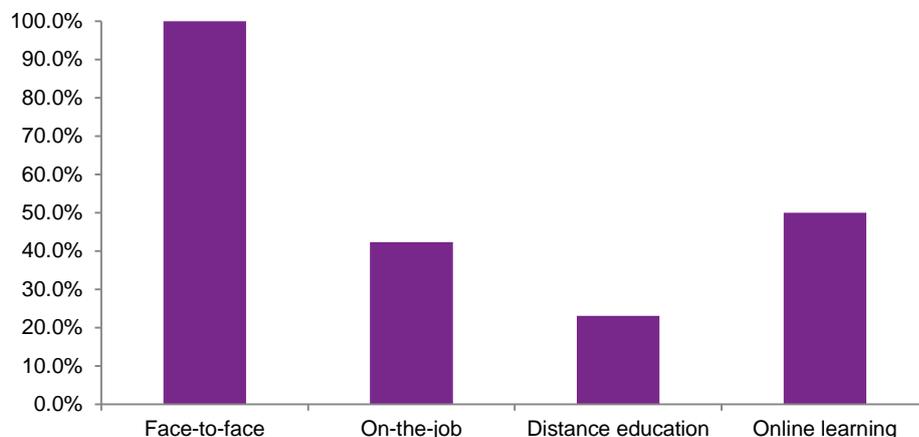
The participants included providers delivering programs in a broad range of fields of education, with management and commerce (42.3%), information technology (30.8%), health (26.9%), education (23.1%) and food, hospitality and personal services (23.1%), the dominant fields of education.

The subsequent fieldwork consultations pointed to a small divergence across private RTOs in the fields of education offered to early school leavers. While management and commerce, information technology, and health featured most prominently in surveys, those consulted in Queensland, Victorian and South Australia focused most of their training activity with early school leavers on food, hospitality and personal services, and retail.

Feedback from the interviews included observations about the composition of courses, the ways in which funding regimes affected the private RTOs' suite of course offerings and the role of Job Services Australia. Reflecting similar sentiments to Victorian provider participants, one South Australian respondent commented that there has been an increase in enrolments in short courses rather than full qualifications, observing that: 'where they're an early school leaver, I think what's happening, is that [Job Services Australia agencies] are more likely to enrol them in the short course' (South Australian private RTO interviewee).

One Queensland-based private RTO staff member engaged in providing training for school-based traineeships and apprenticeships spoke of how changes to subsidy regimes — offering less support for qualifications such as hospitality and retail — were significant factors in whether they continue training in the field.

The early school leaver cohort and their needs

Enrolments

The enrolment data for the private sector as a whole have demonstrated the increasing market share of private RTOs for young learners, particularly those aged 15—19 and 20—24 years. Survey respondents were asked to indicate the approximate proportion of their learners who were aged 15—19 years. The responses ranged from 1 to 95%, with the median response at 20%. Of this 15—19 years cohort, the majority of respondents indicated that between 20 and 45% were early school leavers.

A majority of the surveyed private RTOs confirmed this trend (see figure 4), indicating that over the previous five years they had experienced either 'significant increases' (23%) or 'slight increases' (36%) in enrolments from 15 to 19-year-old early school leavers. A small number of respondents (4%) reported a 'decline' in their enrolment patterns for these young learners.

Figure 4   Change in enrolment trends of 15 to 19-year-old early school leavers
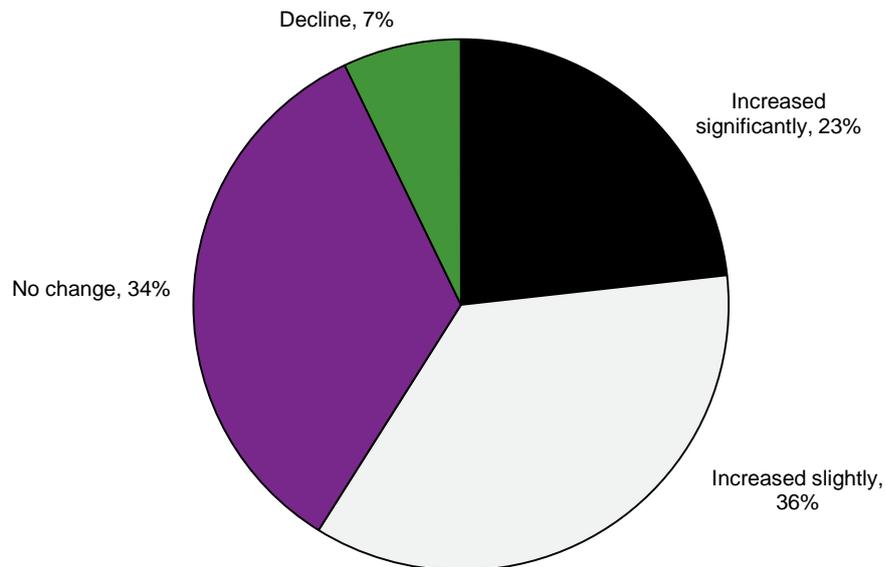
Learner characteristics

The survey respondents were asked to identify the extent to which a range of issues commonly associated with early school leavers were experienced by their young students. As shown in figure 5, 'Centrelink requirements to be learning or earning', general employability skills such as 'resume writing and interview skills', and a lack of clarity around career goals and learning pathways were considered to be of most importance.

Figure 5 Characteristics of the early school leaver learners

The private RTO interviewees later spoke of the range and complexity of difficulties that students face, and of the hardship in their lives:

> [we hear] mum's on drugs, dad's in jail, I'm living with grandma, or I'm couch-surfing.
>
> (South Australian private RTO interviewee)

> They come to us with any number of personal problems that make training them harder.
>
> (Victorian private RTO trainer)
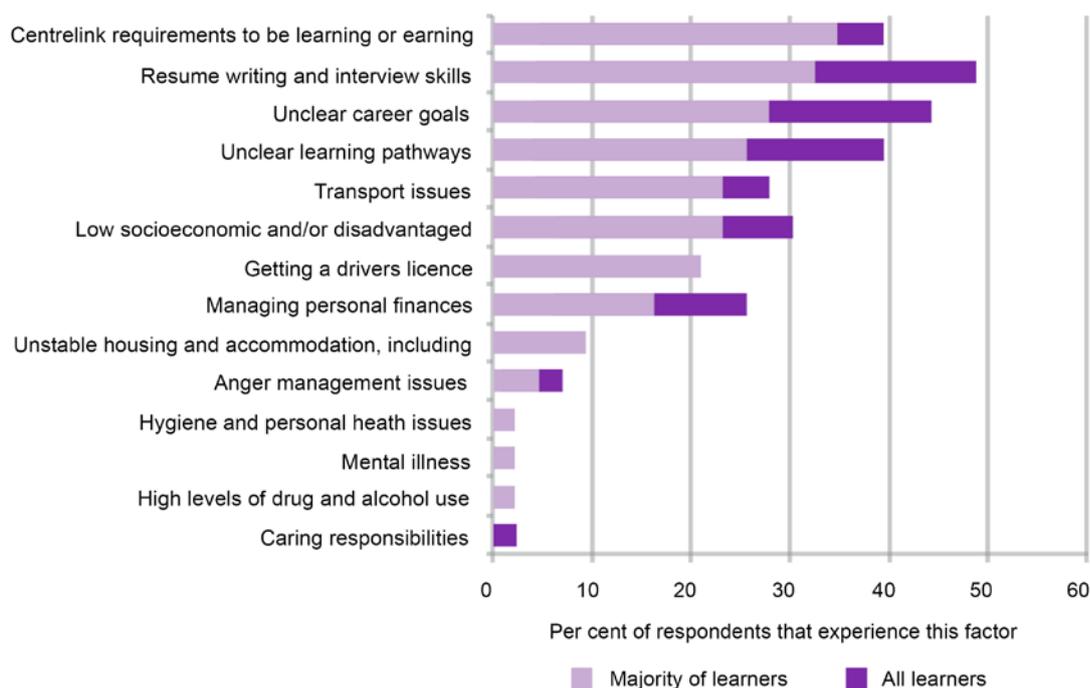
The interviewees across the sample sites spoke of the problems posed by insufficient language, literacy and numeracy skills. This concern with a lack of LLN skills was confirmed by those consulted in Queensland and Victoria. Indeed, interviewees expressed alarm and concern at the demands and pressure this placed on trainers. While not mirrored in the survey responses, LLN issues were regarded by one interviewee as 'the biggest hurdle and the root of most other problems' (Queensland private RTO interviewee) and another interviewee as 'not what they come to us to get but often the most important progress they make' (Victorian private RTO trainer). Low LLN skills were described by several interviewees as being of particular concern when training young people to work in the aged and child care sectors.

An important observation conveyed by multiple interviewees was that these barriers are often undisclosed at the time of enrolment, and that associated needs only gradually become apparent as the training or work placement proceeds. This issue would likely have informed one private RTO manager's observation that 'it's easy to attract students; harder to keep them' (Queensland private RTO interviewee).

Private RTO responses to non-completion and barriers faced by students

Completion and the barriers faced by students

The respondents to the survey were asked to identify the ways by which completion rates varied for different types of programs and among different types of learners (see figure 6). There was general agreement that completion rates were higher in trades-based programs, employment-based training (EBT) programs and programs with structured workplace learning (SWL). A third of the respondents agreed that completion rates were lower for learners with less than Year 11 school attainment.

Figure 6   Program-based factors impacting on completion rates
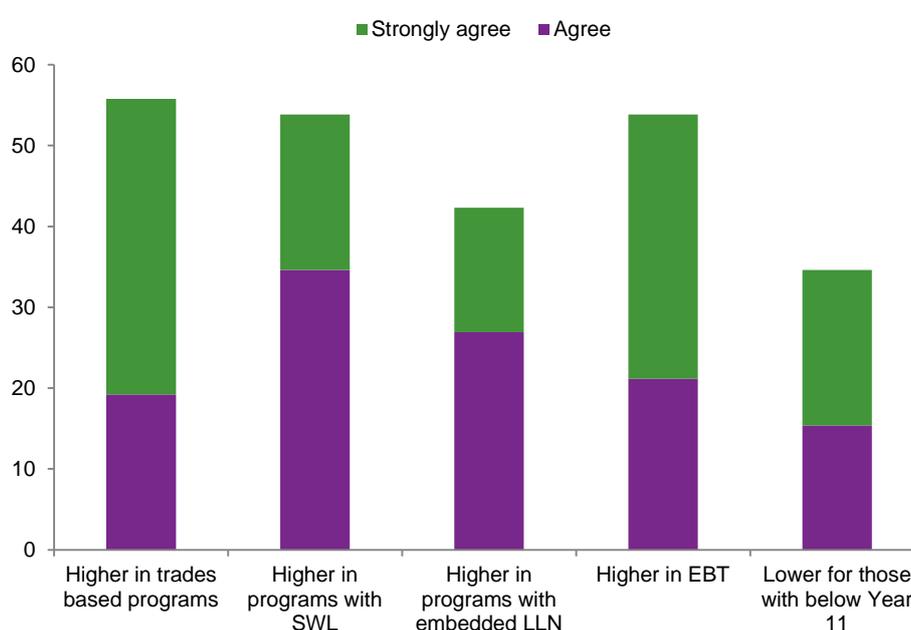
The respondents to the survey were asked to identify any further factors they perceived as having a substantial contribution to non-completion. A total of 44 respondents provided a written text response (see table 3). The most common response types were those identifying disengagement and a lack of commitment or motivation and those describing a lack of support from family and friends.

Table 3   Factors contributing to non-completion

	Number of respondents indicating its importance
Disengagement, lack of commitment, lack of motivation	16
Lack of support of issues with family and friends	13
Health, drug, alcohol	8
Employment conditions	8
Learning difficulties	6
Childcare	1

The survey respondents were asked to rank the importance of seven factors in learner non-completion. 'Personal communication skills' and 'general employability skills' were the

highest ranked factors, with 71% of respondents ranking each between 1 and 3. 'Confidence and self-efficacy' and 'disengagement/non-attendance' were the next most highly ranked factors (57% and 46% respectively).

The respondents were asked to describe the ways by which their RTO attempted to promote completion among their early school leaver cohorts (see table 4). A total of 43 respondents provided a text response to this question. 'Support officers, mentoring, individual care and support' were described by more than half of these respondents (n = 25) as being a key part of their promotion of completion rates among early school leavers. The next highest ranked were 'work placements' and 'real world learning'.

The importance of these approaches to learning was confirmed by interviewees in the private RTOs in our sample states:

> There's no one way to teach, but if there's a constant it's that learning is best while doing … and where most of the time will be spent … they have to think on their feet, not by [being] inert and passive and just listening.

> (Queensland private RTO interviewee)

> When they have little understanding of what goes on out there [in the world], everything we do with them has to have meaning and be connected to something real they might do on the job.

> (Victorian private RTO interviewee)

Table 4   Private RTO-based responses contributing to completion

	Respondents indicating its importance
Support officers, mentoring, individual care and support	25
Work placement, assistance finding work placement	13
Delivery based around real world learning	11
Engaging teaching and learning practices	10
Clearly defined learning goals, clear communication, realistic learning expectations	6
Flexible learning options	5
LLN support	5
Career guidance	4
Transport support	2
Pre-enrolment interview	1
Financial support access	1

In reflecting on the challenges faced by the cohort, private RTO interviewees across all three states emphasised the need to teach beyond the qualification and its competency framework. This meant nurturing, where possible, 'soft skills' such as confidence, public-speaking skills and approachability, each of which was described by interviewees as either 'highly transferable', 'generic' or 'skills for the workplace'. Such skills were deemed particularly important for those seeking employment in the retail and hospitality sectors.

No clear indication of the role of online learning was gained from interviews. The views were mixed, and it was evident that online delivery featured prominently in some training environments and much less so in others. When utilised, the online component was comprehensive and played an indispensable part of the delivery. There was a degree of

'Soft skills' such as confidence, public-speaking skills and approachability were deemed particularly important for those seeking employment in the retail and hospitality sectors.

ambivalence, however, with some feedback suggesting that a reliance on an online mode of delivery can be construed as a marker of training 'done on the cheap'.

Support strategies

The research also examined the nature and effectiveness of the responses to student needs, with the survey respondents asked to outline the nature of a range of common supports. Of particular interest to the researchers was whether services were provided in house to all students or targeted to specific students identified on a needs basis through referral to an external organisation or through visits by an external organisation to the provider. A total of 59 participants provided a response to this question.

The most commonly available in-house support strategies for all students were 'access to the internet' (n = 52), 'a study space' (n = 52) and 'computer facilities' (n = 49). Only a small number of respondents reported using targeted support services on a needs basis, with 'transport support' (n = 5), 'academic support skills' (n = 5) and 'job search support' (n = 3) being the three mostly commonly identified. These supports were more commonly made available in house to all students who self-identified for support.

'Financial counselling', 'interpreters and housing/accommodation services' were more likely to be made available through referral to an outside agency than in house. The support services that respondents most frequently identified as not being available — either in house or through referral — were 'childcare' (n = 42), 'housing/accommodation services' (n = 26) and 'transport support' (n = 27). 'Personal counselling' (n = 25) was the support strategy for which private RTOs appeared to be drawing on external referral and support agencies most frequently.

The interviewees felt that it is unrealistic to expect private RTOs to have a wide range of welfare services at hand, but suggested nevertheless that they ought to work more closely with external agencies. For example:

> If there is a case manager involved in that young person's life that they [private RTOs] communicate regularly with them.
>
> (South Australian stakeholder interviewee)

> We often only hear that they have something going on in their lives through their youth worker or someone else. Often they won't tell us.
>
> (Victorian private RTO interviewee)

Despite the general awareness of the importance of working with external agencies, there was a concern among private RTO interviewees that this is not always possible due to the 'massive caseload' of many agency case workers (South Australian private RTO interviewee). This view was echoed by those in Queensland and Victoria, who believed that access to specialist youth services such as headspace (National Youth Mental Health Foundation) was rare and that broader efforts to address needs were hampered by the lack of early detection.

Language and literacy

Survey respondents were asked to describe the nature of their language, literacy and numeracy support for early school leaver learners (table 5). A total of 43 respondents

provided an open-text response describing their organisation's LLN practices. 'Diagnostic assessment' (n = 21) and 'LLN embedded by trainer' (n = 20) were the most commonly described LLN support practices.

Table 5   Type of LLN support

	Number of responses
Diagnostic assessment	21
LLN embedded by trainer	20
Stand-alone LLN support, tutoring	13
LLN support provided by specialist staff alongside training	6
Referral to external agencies	5
Not an issue for our learners	4

Private RTO interviewees pointed to the literacy requirements specific to qualifications. For example, when referring to training in auto repair one interviewee stated: 'it depends on which country the vehicle was made in as to what it was called. So when you go to the workshop manual, you've got to be aware of that terminology' (South Australian private RTO interviewee). At the same private RTO, young people attend an assessment interview before starting a course:

> At that time an aptitude assessment is done so we can ascertain a level of their current knowledge in regards to basic mathematics, numeracy, literacy, comprehension so we can identify how much extra support that person may need prior to them commencing any classes.

> (South Australian private RTO interviewee)

One Queensland-based interviewee whose private RTO trained students for the auto sector echoed these statements when they described a formal agreement on enrolment that entailed a comprehensive screening and assessment of LLN aptitudes, including computer skills. On the basis of this assessment, subsequent support was made available (Queensland private RTO interviewee). Conversely, some Victorian interviewees bemoaned the lack of information for private RTOs on how to develop advanced literacy and numeracy skills for certain fields of education, such as those related to allied health and business occupations.

Contextual factors played an important role when assessing the level of LLN competency. In particular, the specific sectors to which the training related largely determined what constituted LLN skills. Approaches varied according to the field. For example, those training in retail conducted 'low stress' intake assessments, which placed greater emphasis on verbal language skills — the skills deemed most important in the retail setting — than on literacy and numeracy (Queensland private RTO interviewee).

Skills and attributes of trainers

The survey respondents were asked about the importance of a range of trainer skills and attributes. Use of 'real world examples' (96.6%) and offering 'active learning' (96.6%) were the skills and attributes which respondents agreed or strongly agreed were the most important for trainers working with young early school leavers.

Use of 'real world examples' and offering 'active learning' were the skills and attributes which respondents agreed were the most important for trainers working with young early school leavers.

The interviewee feedback resonated with these survey findings, with real-world experience, mentoring, and coaching emphasised. There was awareness of the need to be attuned to the learners' preference for practical, workplace-based, and relevant training, in contrast to conventional and overly rigid training methods, which emphasised completion above all. When employing trainers, one coordinator spoke of the importance of 'looking beyond the credentials and industry experience — as important as these are — to the temperament and capacity for caring and supporting young people' (Queensland private RTO interviewee).

When reflecting on their approach to training, the interviewees spoke of the need to assume the role of a mentor or, in the words of one, of being 'coaches' (Queensland private RTO interviewee) of young learners during an important developmental phase. Thus, 'the temperament of the trainer is critically important: being patient, passionate, able to enliven the training through anecdotes and real world experience' (Queensland private RTO interviewee). Further, as one Victorian interviewee explained: 'we aren't just trainers for a job … we end up being a catch-all for introducing them to the world of work, how to survive and function as an adult'.

An important aspect of guiding a young learner to successful completion was keeping the student 'grounded', and to do so by dispelling misconceptions and perhaps even romantic notions of what working in their chosen industry would entail. One interviewee spoke of the need to convey a realistic image of the vocation, particularly if this meant reminding the learner that the work will ultimately be 'dull, dirty and uncomfortable' (Queensland private RTO interviewee).

Supporting successful pathways

Respondents were asked to identify and describe the ways by which their private RTO supported and promoted successful pathways for early school leavers. A total of 44 respondents (see table 6) provided an open-text response to this question. 'Mentoring, support structures and dedicated pathways staff' were identified by more than half of the respondents (n = 44) as the main approach to supporting successful pathways. 'Access to industry and work placements' (n = 18) and integration of 'foundation skills development alongside industry training' (n = 14) were also identified by several respondents.

Table 6   Private RTO strengths in promoting successful pathways

	Number of respondents
Mentoring, support structures, pathways staff	24
Access to industry, work placements	18
Foundation skills alongside industry training	14
Student-focused learning delivery, including flexibility	11
Understanding particular needs of the ESL [English as a second language] cohort	9
Industry experienced trainers	7

The private RTO survey respondents were asked to describe the feedback they receive from employers regarding the skills and employability of their early school leaver learners (table 7). A total of 37 respondents provided a text response. There was a contrast — if not a contradiction — in the two most commonly described employer views, as interpreted by private RTOs: on the one hand early school leavers were perceived by employers as lacking in motivation and interpersonal skills; on the other hand employers expressed a high degree of satisfaction with learners during work placements.

Table 7   Respondents on employers' views of early school leaver learners

	Number of respondents
Early school leavers perceived as unmotivated and lack interpersonal skills	12
Usually positive feedback from employers who host work placements and/or employ completer	12
Lack of understanding of the workplace and employment requirements	5
Employers want core skills more than specific work related skills, including LLN	2
Issues with older employers and 'Gen Y'	1

The interviewees later expressed some concern about post-training pathways. A stakeholder suggested that the focus not just of private RTOs but also of schools too often is solely on completing the qualification, and that planning for a transition to work or further study remains an afterthought (South Australian stakeholder interviewee). In addition, one private RTO manager saw a policy focus on 'earning or learning' as potentially counterproductive for achieving successful pathways:

> It's no good doing training for the sake of training. I really get nervous when once again the government system 'you learn and earn' and to get your Centrelink you've got to have your cert. II qual. So they'll enrol them in anything and if your [Job Services Australia agency] or your career development office or even your RTO or whatever isn't working with that person helping you do that career development and being honest and realistic about it, getting certificates to put on the wall unfortunately — as good as it might be for someone and it's the first time they've ever been recognised, it doesn't do them any good if with that certificate they can't go and get that next point of engagement.

<div align="right">(South Australian private RTO interviewee)</div>

The private RTO interviewees spoke of the measures taken to enhance students' transition to employment or further study after completion of the qualification. These included embedding employability skills across all units, resume-writing workshops, incorporating work experience opportunities, and (at one private RTO) employing 'a full-time staff member that coordinates traineeships and jobs for them. So she's hearing about jobs in the

industry and then matching people up to those jobs' (South Australian private RTO interviewee).

Some private RTO interviewees in Victoria and Queensland had quite different perspectives on both the meaning of, and need for, pathways support, with such differences of opinion linked to their respective levels of traineeship enrolments.

For one Queensland private RTO, pathways support was deemed irrelevant, if not disruptive. Their view was that the priority for the young person was to fulfil their traineeship or apprenticeship commitment to an employer (Queensland private RTO interviewee). The priority in this view was persistence, stability, and competence through familiarity with the given trade, before different employment options were canvassed. In contrast, a Victorian provider operating in a similar context saw pathways support as a key part of maintaining their reputation among employers: 'we have to been seen to be giving them [employers] good people'.

For a private RTO providing training in retail and hospitality, nurturing 'transferable life skills' was thought to provide the support needed to transition into future, and perhaps alternative, employment. This echoes a sentiment conveyed by participants in all three states: asserting that private RTOs assist the young person to develop generic skills and mature in a holistic sense.

Partnerships and interagency links

In light of the breadth and significance of the learner needs identified above, it was not surprising to find that private RTOs were engaged in a range of partnerships and relationships with other agencies and stakeholders. The survey responses revealed that private RTOs are engaging 157 agencies or agency types (see figure 7). These are categorised into 14 different agency categories. 'Employers' (n = 33), 'youth support agencies' (n = 15), 'Job Services Australia agencies' (n = 12) and 'schools' (n = 11) were the most commonly identified external agencies.

Figure 7   External agencies engaged with by responding private RTOs
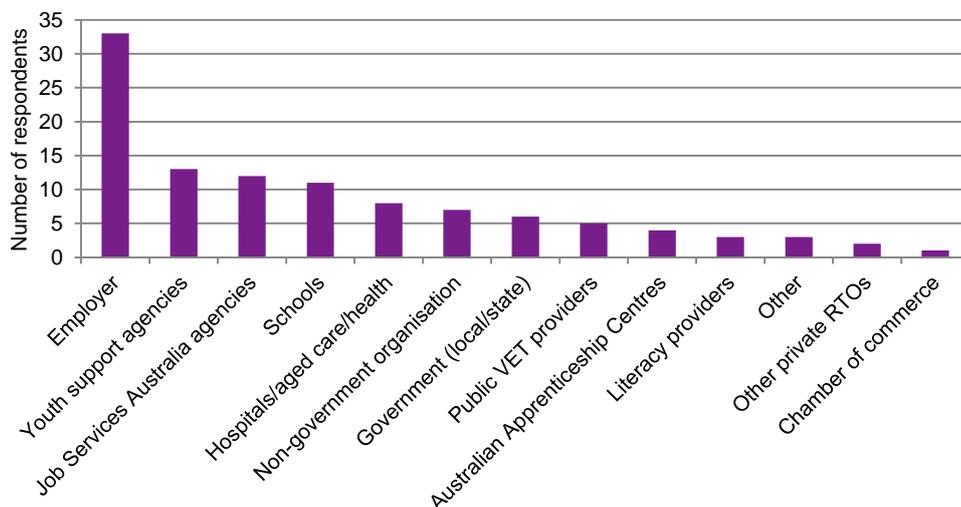
With the exception of the Queensland private RTO interviewees, interagency collaboration for the purposes of training or support did not feature strongly in interviews with private RTO staff. In Queensland a government-funded scheme enabled one participant provider to partner with a medical service provider to undertake (hospitality) block training to a small number of early school leavers. The interviewee was ambivalent about the initiative, given the unfamiliar setting, variable attendance, the students' needs, and, ultimately, the demands placed on their business:

> It's not profitable … [we] consider it a contribution to the community; because it does [our] reputation harm given the low completion rates. It's costly and challenging … and the funding doesn't reflect the barriers faced by the learner and the RTO.
>
> (Queensland private RTO interviewee)

Significantly, we learn from another interviewee about the ways commercial imperatives can act against collaboration:
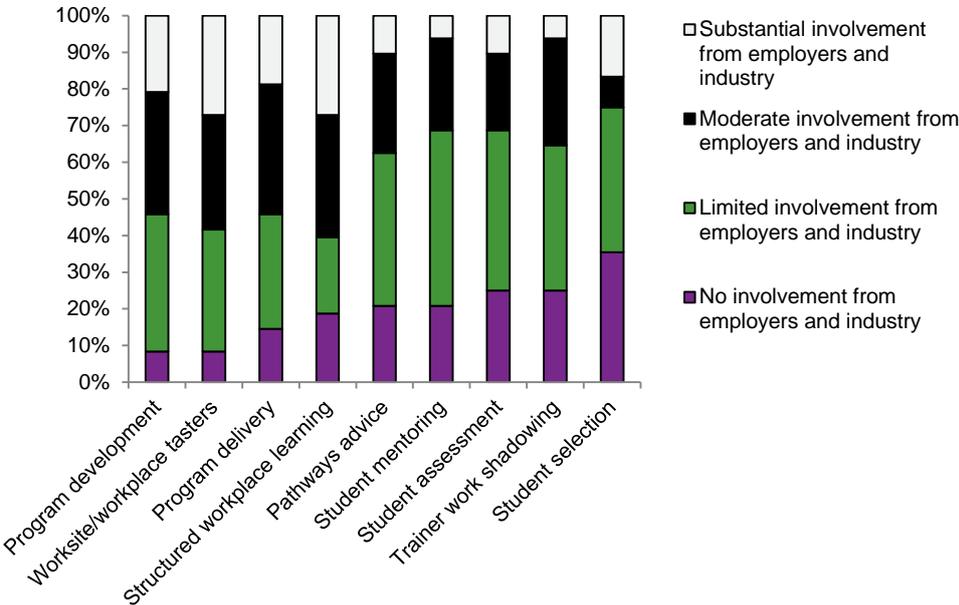
> …the downside of private training is that there is a tendency to withhold and not share training materials, products and approaches … and without sharing you can become insular.
>
> (Queensland private RTO interviewee).

The role of employers and industry

To explore the role of workplace partnerships in responding to learner needs, the survey respondents were asked about the role employers and industry played in a range of program areas (see figure 8). More than half of the survey respondents indicated that employers/industry was moderately or substantially involved in program development, workplace taster experiences, program delivery and structured workplace learning. More than two-thirds of respondents indicated that employers/industry had limited to no involvement in student mentoring, student assessment, trainer work shadowing and student selection.

Figure 8   Role of employers and industry

Given the strong emphasis on the provider—employer link that emerged from the survey (above), this aspect of the private RTO role for early school leavers was explored in further detail in the provider interviews. Interviewees spoke enthusiastically about their relationships with employers. There was particular emphasis on how private RTO staff attempt to help young people to secure work placements, which in turn also benefit employers seeking to fill vacancies with 'tried and true' young people. As one interviewee noted:

> We've got a number of hotel groups that we basically will contact when we find them and say 'We've got a goodie. You've got to look at this person'.

> (South Australian private RTO interviewee)

One private RTO manager, echoing the perspective of several interviewees across the three states, commented that overall 'we have very good and strong linkages with industry. It's our number one strength' (South Australian private RTO interviewee) and expressed some frustration that 'industry haven't been more [forthcoming] with support for private RTOs'. For trainees at the Queensland private RTOs, close partnerships came in the form of arrangements for work placements and, in one instance, the assignment of workplace mentors for the young trainees (Queensland private RTO interviewee).

In Victoria interviewees frequently cited the recent media coverage of low-quality private training as undermining the work they were doing and their credibility with key industries and employers. The need to advocate for the quality of their training in general was considered by several Victorian interviewees to be a major source of stress.

Distinctive features and the role of private RTOs

The survey respondents were asked to describe the most valuable attributes of private RTOs. They were asked to consider the characteristics of private for-profit provision that might attract or be of benefit to early school leaver learners.

Size and location were considered by more than three-quarters of the respondents to be important, with the respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statements 'The size of our RTO suits our early school leavers' and 'The majority of our early school leavers are from the local community'.

Similar views were expressed by the interviewees. Many spoke of the benefits of smaller-scale operations, a feature they thought to be typical of private RTOs. To paraphrase stakeholder and practitioner interviewees alike: private RTOs are considered to be very flexible for students and employers, more likely to make contact with students' parents or guardians to help support their students, and more likely to follow up students who drop out — and all at a lower cost to the state. Such views invariably involved comparisons with TAFE. One industry stakeholder observed that:

> Private RTOs in the main are closer to their clients. TAFE colleges are big infrastructure, they're big buildings … their campuses are large, they have large numbers of students. Private RTOs tend to have smaller numbers.

> (South Australian stakeholder interviewee)

Smaller private RTOs are also perceived as specialists in certain training packages and able to provide a more comfortable environment for early school leavers. This view was very evident among Victorian and South Australian interviewees. Private RTO staff believed that one advantage of their small-scale operations was their ability to provide a high level of personalised attention through smaller class sizes. For example:

> We have a single trainer working sometimes with two students in a project team to try to bring them up to speed. Our classes are not 40 people or 30 people. Usually at the beginning the highest numbers we have is 15 and … you're going to have two trainers in the workshop, which is a very manageable number.
>
> (South Australian private RTO interviewee)

The qualities of the training staff were also described as a feature of private RTOs. Persistence and patience — listed earlier among the essential qualities for training staff — also came into play in a broader context, with interviewees speaking of the extent to which their private RTO gave great latitude to their 'second-chance' learners:

> We would suspend somebody or give them a written warning [and] if somebody comes back and, let's say, apologises and says sorry I was wrong, [we would] give them another chance. We are always trying to get them back in and not to waste that opportunity that they really already paid for, or the taxpayer and the government paid.
>
> (South Australian private RTO interviewee)

In addition, private RTO interviewees considered strong linkages with industry and a clear focus on 'real world' employability skills, as well as insight into the expectations of employers, as distinctive features of their training. For example:

> I don't mean to be disrespectful to TAFE, I've dealt with TAFE for the best part of 35-odd years. [But] they don't work in industry most of them … Our world is reality and if we're going to get them a job we've got to teach them that employers aren't always good. If you're ten minutes late you probably don't even bother going in because you won't have a job. If you can't give them the courtesy of a phone call, don't even bother. And they're the skills that we teach them … I think that's the difference.
>
> (South Australian private RTO interviewee)

More considered views also emerged from the interviews about the impact that commercial realities have on practice. Staff and stakeholder interviewees discussed the challenges facing private RTOs in engaging early school leavers. Among these was the previously mentioned tendency to withhold rather than share knowledge. Also highlighted was the inability to provide courses of most relevance to students where low enrolments made the courses economically unviable. The interviewees emphasised their susceptibility to fluctuating 'market forces', contrasting their circumstances with those of TAFE institutes, where they believed there existed far greater scope for cross-subsidisation (South Australian stakeholder interviewee).

Smaller private RTOs are also perceived as specialists in certain training packages and able to provide a more comfortable environment for early school leavers.

💬 Discussion

This research was prompted by the emergence of two concurrent and closely related trends: the growing prominence of private training providers and the growing numbers of young early school leavers relying on such providers — indeed, on the VET system in general — to resume their education. The researchers were motivated to enquire into the somewhat opaque world of 'for profit' provision of vocational training in order to better understand how private RTOs experience their engagement with young early school leavers. More specifically, the researchers were motivated by the need to determine how private RTOs respond to the needs of the cohort, the nature of the training provided and, ultimately, the role they play for the cohort in the context of the wider VET landscape. The research presents the viewpoints of private RTOs at a time of intense public debate about the market-driven approach to provision and, ironically, when the absence of private RTOs' perspectives becomes more apparent.

Contextual influences on provision

The responses from all participants on the context in which the training is provided reveal immediately the extent to which private RTOs operate in a highly dynamic landscape, one subject to the changes ushered in by federal, state and territory policies. The most notable of these, the Learn or Earn reforms and associated state-based demand-driven measures, were perceived by participants in the research as the main reason for the reported increases over recent years in enrolments of early school leavers. While the survey did not enquire into the reasons for the relatively high numbers of young students enrolled, those interviewed in the three sample states were very cognisant of how enrolments could fluctuate as a result of policy reforms. It is worth noting here that, while the numbers of young people in private RTOs across Australia are significant, they may have reached a plateau, and if this is the case it corresponds with a recent scaling-back of government subsidies for learners, particularly in Victoria.

When seen alongside earlier reforms, most notably in Victoria, which embraced a marketised system-wide model of provision, open to a limitless number of providers, we can appreciate the concerns voiced by interviewees about the contingent nature of government support and, most importantly, of how that impacts on their provision. The interviewees highlighted difficulties with funding regimes that — when considered in the context of an already prescriptive framework determined by training packages — made it difficult to adapt to the needs of early school leavers. So, in spite of an awareness of the need for a pedagogy tailored to the needs of the early school leaver cohort, a consistent theme emerging from the data is that the impetus to adapt is undermined by system-wide 'short-termism'.

A recurring, if underlying, theme in interviews was that systemic factors resulted in a training provider culture in which the search for subsidised students often became the principal imperative, with the requirements of students or those of industry neglected. Also described was a system that encouraged hasty decision-making by all parties — providers, students, and parents — which in turn led to poor choices, poor guidance, and

poor training. The respondents also noted the toll exacted by the highly publicised controversies over unscrupulous and poor-quality provision, by the resulting scrutiny, and by ongoing reviews of state and national VET systems. One inevitable outcome was the damage to the reputation of private RTOs and a negative impact on the morale of private RTO staff.

This is all the more important if we consider what appears to be a shared sentiment among the interviewees: that their work with young people is not accorded due respect in the VET sector, a sector that is itself undervalued within society in general. This, it is felt, is partly due to the practices of 'rogue' providers, as well as a widespread misconception based on the assumption that 'private' education denotes elitism and privilege.

While not invited, interviewees' views of TAFE institutes were instructive, not only for what they revealed about how those across diverse training environments approach engagement with young people, but about the perceived advantages TAFEs enjoy by virtue of their scale, their access to resources and, hence, their capacity to endure market pressures.

Characteristics of private RTOs catering to the 15 to 19-year-old cohort

It was clear that private RTO participants saw their relatively small-scale operations as permitting greater flexibility and a capacity to be more accessible and responsive to learners. Although a significant number of private RTOs engaged with students online, this mode of delivery did not make face-to-face learning redundant: indeed, all survey respondents engaged directly with their young cohorts in situ. This intimate engagement with young students, more often in small groups, in relatively confined settings was described by interviewees as differentiating private RTO provision from the delivery models characteristic of large institutional settings. Indeed, several interviewees suggested that this feature constituted an advantage over larger training settings, which were described as imposing or alienating for many young people.

In addition to the benefits of small-scale operations, the interviewees also looked upon a more focused scope of delivery as advantageous. That is, in all three states, the interviewees ascribed benefit and strength to the tendency of private RTOs to have only a limited range of fields of education or training packages on scope. There was a view that this form of specialisation enabled staff to establish strong links with employers and to contextualise student support services so they relate to particular industry and occupational needs.

Identifying the private RTOs' early school leaver cohort and their needs

Profiles and perceptions of the cohort emerged, revealing the barriers many face at the time of their enrolment and the factors that would most hinder successful completion. The surveys and interviews confirmed that early school leavers undertaking VET with private RTOs face a myriad of challenges. While there exists no universally accepted definition of disadvantage, there is a growing recognition that it is a complex, multifaceted concept that goes beyond income poverty and material deprivation. A wide spectrum of issues was thus considered in our questioning and we conclude that this

cohort can reasonably be considered disadvantaged. The respondents also confirmed that the barriers were significant factors in determining success for the duration of the course. It was to be expected that low literacy, language and numeracy skills would feature as a concern and that indeed proved to be the case.

Certainly, issues relating to poor LLN were mentioned routinely in the interviews. However, the survey results pointed to a more complex picture and to how a range of barriers all seemingly related to a young person's capacity to communicate clearly. This is not to diminish the importance of LLN skills, for there was little doubt among private RTO staff that poor LLN skills impede progression. Such acknowledgment was found in the survey responses, reflecting concern with poor resume-writing and interview skills and, for that matter, students' difficulties in 'managing personal finances'.

Also of significance were concerns over low motivation, lack of commitment and disengagement, along with confusion and unclear career goals. These concerns were also said by respondents to be shared by their employer contacts although, again, the responses seemed equivocal. These issues take on greater meaning in light of the survey responses to a request to rank barriers to learning, where a high ranking was given to the recent government requirement that young people undertake training as part of Learn or Earn obligations. This would suggest that a proportion of young people resent being compelled to study, and that this is manifested by a degree of indifference towards learning and confusion about vocational pathways. This also lends some weight to the views that VET is now utilised as a tool to improve education retention rates at a time when prospects for early school leavers in the current labour market are dire.

A more comprehensive study of student attitudes is necessary to determine levels of motivation. Indeed, here we risk casting this young cohort as inherently lacking — and lapsing into a deficit approach to analysis — while turning our gaze from systemic factors of great importance. On the basis of the present findings we are prompted to question whether the VET system provides an appropriate setting for some young early school leavers; whether, for example, referrals from agencies such as Jobs Service Australia are appropriate; and whether feedback from private RTOs has provided a glimpse of the initial phases in the process of 'training churn'. This, in turn, suggests that better guidance and support prior to VET involvement is of pressing importance.

A high percentage of the survey respondents were also cognisant of a range of additional challenges faced by students and which affected the prospects of successful completion. These ranged from low socioeconomic status and disadvantage, transport issues and the attendant problem of gaining a driver's licence, unstable housing, anger management, and instability and disruption in relationships with family and friends. Less prominent, at least in the students known to the private RTO, were barriers such as hygiene and personal health issues, caring responsibilities, drug and alcohol abuse, and mental health issues. The relatively low ranking for the latter was surprising, given the concern throughout society with the state of youth mental health and the use of drugs and alcohol. One possible reason for under-reporting — if it is such — may be that private RTOs, along with virtually all training providers, are seldom equipped to undertake diagnostic testing of the kind required.

How private RTOs address the needs of the cohort and the lessons that emerge

The researchers noted a range of responses to student needs, as well as the perceived constraints on private RTOs. Despite the breadth and nature of the barriers encountered by early leaver learners, the in-house support services and amenities provided by many private RTOs in this research were more often limited to learning-focused resources such as the internet, study spaces, computers, and some academic skills support.

A significant issue raised in the fieldwork was that the complex challenges faced by students and which emanate from beyond the learning setting become apparent, if at all, very gradually. Indeed, they quite often went undetected. This is not surprising, given that many courses are of a relatively short duration. A number of the interviewees spoke of the complex social issues and hardship that become learning barriers for students and which are beyond any single entity to address. Indeed, some frustration was evident with the expectation that the training provider be held responsible for addressing complex needs with root causes elsewhere — in the family, in the labour market or wider culture, in the mainstream education system, or in a combination thereof. A key observation here is that while TAFE providers — historically larger and with a breadth of in-house provision of student support infrastructure — might reasonably be expected to cater for complex needs, private RTOs are perhaps still catching up in response to a sudden increase in high-need or at-risk learners. It is useful to note that Youth Support Agencies were the second most identified partnership agency after employers in the survey of private RTOs. The researchers are keen to observe the extent to which private RTOs continue to adapt their in-house and ongoing support strategies to the increasing prominence of early school leavers amongst their cohort of learners.

The participants in this research pointed to difficulties in reconciling the needs of young early school leavers with the requirements of a training system that is, in its design, not equipped to cater for those who may be indecisive, confused and experiencing instability and sudden developmental change. There is, by this account, a tension between helping a young person progress through a qualification and the need to provide supportive well-rounded guidance to a young person who is yet to articulate, let alone decide upon, a preferred vocational pathway.

While diagnostic assessments of language, literacy and numeracy skills were common, and tailored specialised LLN support were available in some instances, there was a heavy reliance on trainers to embed LLN in the course. As noted, the concept of 'literacy' was context-specific, determined largely by the industry setting and its needs. This gives food for thought when contemplating 'soft skills', and when the notion of literacy has become quite malleable (for example, cultural literacy and digital literacy).

It was evident that formal specialised support was uneven and sporadic in nature. Of the specialist wellbeing support provided, most was through the use of external services who either visited students where training was being undertaken, or who attended to students referred to them by the private RTO. Employers played a significant role in providing workplace opportunities, but on the basis of the responses we suggest that

there is much more that employers can contribute, particularly in the form of formal mentoring.

Yet the feedback on responses to students' needs also revealed a commitment to addressing some of the motivational issues mentioned earlier. Indeed, there is much invested in attending to interpersonal factors and, indeed, to the responsibility to assist young people who are experiencing often bewildering change and instability. Interviewees emphasised the importance of providing guidance, stability and an orientation that enables a young person to make informed decisions about their future, within or beyond the confines of the industry and profession associated with their current training. Such support is manifested in formal practices that involve access to support officers, mentoring, individual care, work placement assistance and assistance in goal setting. Perhaps the most important program-level support in use by the private RTOs, however, was the reliance on employment-based training, along with structured workplace learning, where human interaction and 'learning-while-doing' was emphasised. Importantly, many interviewees were convinced of the efficacy of this approach, particularly when contrasted with 'block' training in a classroom setting, a mode of education which most of the young people had earlier rejected in the context of mainstream schooling.

The importance of strong and positive relationships in the learning experience was further underscored by survey feedback on the qualities sought in trainers working with the early school leaving cohort. The qualities deemed necessary were a capacity for relationship-building, empathy, patience, humour, behaviour management, planning and leadership and the ability to mentor and act as a role model, in addition to a sound and current knowledge of the chosen trade. Such recognition of the importance of human interaction may go some way to explaining why some participants were ambivalent about the use of online learning, which, by definition, places great emphasis on distant interaction.

In considering the views of private RTOs on the appropriate responses for meeting the needs of early school leavers, we are left with the impression that there is commitment on the part of practitioners to effective teaching and support, particularly through relationship-building with young people, and yet the constraints mentioned above reduce their capacity to respond. The question arising therefore is: what might reasonably be expected of private RTOs or, indeed, of any educational institution that has intermittent contact with often disadvantaged people? More specifically, how are expectations raised and/or supported by the prevailing funding or accountability regimes?

Distinctive features and the role of private RTOs

Given the concerted efforts on the part of policy-makers to promote demand-driven and marketised vocational training across state and federal levels, it is little surprise to find the significant growth in the private RTOs' market share relative to TAFEs and other provider groups (that is, community education, enterprise, professional association, and mixed providers). This market share is represented by the presence of over 31 000 early school leavers aged 15—19 years in our sample states, and a significant role for private RTOs in helping these young people to resume their education and gain qualifications that will enhance their chances of securing employment.

We also learn that private RTOs are active across all jurisdictions and that the degree of activity usually reflects the population densities of the respective states. However, we note that both Queensland and Western Australia have a greater proportion of private RTOs relative to their population size, with one likely explanation being the demand from mining and exploration industries for site-specific training, far removed from metropolitan regions. Private, niche, and highly mobile providers have thus become a fixture because of their capacity to relocate according to need. The survey respondents and interviewees also regarded this mobility and adaptability as key to fostering close connections with employers and, hence, their capacity to provide practical hands-on training to their younger cohort within a workplace context.

Yet, the very features private RTOs ascribe to themselves and which they consider to be most advantageous when engaging early school leavers — most notably small-scale and adaptable operations — may also be vulnerabilities. The early school leaver 'niche' is necessarily associated with complex needs and there is an imperative to provide appropriate supports. Few would deny that these supports are labour- and capital-intensive, and we might question, for example, whether private RTOs and their partner employers are able to devote the staffing resources needed to attend adequately to the cohort before, during, and after work-based training. Indeed, we might question whether small-scale private RTOs in particular have the capacity to address students' needs in other than an ad hoc manner.

Private RTOs expressed that their commitment to assisting the young early school leaver cohort is affected by a wide range of factors.

⚖ Conclusion

In seeking to examine the role of private RTOs for early school leaving 15 to 19-year-olds, this research has drawn on the survey responses of private RTOs from across Australia and interviews with provider staff in a sample of private RTOs in Victoria, South Australia and Queensland. Participants in this research provided their perspectives not only on the nature of the interactions between provider staff and young people, but also on the external conditions that affect their practice and responsiveness to the particular needs of this at-risk cohort. The private RTOs consulted in this research expressed a commitment to assisting the young early school leaver cohort. They also took the opportunity to suggest that their capacity to realise this commitment is affected by a wide range of factors, many of which lay beyond their control.

Vocational training in Australia presupposes a clear intent and purpose on the part of the learner. In the context of Australia's complex and, many would argue, bewildering, system, early school leavers are the least likely of all cohorts to possess such knowledge and clear intent. On the basis of this research it would seem that private RTOs are attuned to the difficulties in reconciling the personal needs of young people at a vital stage in their development with an often imposed career pathway via vocational training. The challenge for private RTOs and, doubtless, all providers engaging with younger learners, is to work within the parameters of training packages and curriculum frameworks to enable growth and personal development in the absence of a clear vision for the future.

Federal, state and territory reforms to the VET system have succeeded in facilitating access to vocational training — and to a dizzying number of providers — for young people whose education may well have ended prematurely. Yet the private RTOs consulted here acknowledge they face daunting challenges in adapting to the needs of this relatively new and emerging cohort, while simultaneously operating in a commercial and regulatory framework that makes difficult the long-term planning and development needed. It is perhaps ironic that the competitive advantage private RTOs accord themselves — small-scale, flexible, engaging, and well connected — also carries with it severe limitations. Without the capacity to provide the comprehensive suite of supports and strategies needed to overcome the barriers to successful completion for students, it seems unlikely that the potential benefits of private RTO provision can be maximised.

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📎 Appendix A – Survey instrument

The role of private RTOs for early school leavers

Plain Language Statement and Informed Consent

This research is funded by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) and is being conducted by the Brotherhood of St Laurence (Research and Policy Centre), and in collaboration with research partners at the University of Melbourne and Victoria University.

This study will explore the role of private registered training organisations (PRTOs) in delivering programs for 15 to 19 year olds who have left school early. Using nation-wide consultations with providers, and a series of case studies in Victoria, South Australia and Queensland, this research aims to examine the nature of the training provided by PRTOs, for those young people seeking to complete their initial qualification. This research will identify the ways in which PRTOs have responded to the needs of this cohort of early school leavers, as well as build a deeper understanding of changes that may yet be needed to support the role played by PRTOs in ensuring that this growing cohort of often disadvantaged learners achieve successful outcomes.

In this instance, we will seek your views on a range of subjects relating to the following themes:

1. Teaching and learning

2. Engagement and wellbeing

3. Pathway support

4. Structures

5. Attainments and outcomes

CONSENT FORM
I understand the nature of the project and what is expected of me, and I agree to participate on that basis.

1. I consent to participate in this project, the details of which have been explained to me, and I have been provided with a written plain language statement.

2. I understand that my participation will involve completion of this online survey.

3. I acknowledge that I -

a) have read the written information about the project and have received a copy of that information;

b) have received an adequate explanation of all likely risks, effects, discomforts or inconvenience arising from participation in the project;

c) understand participation is voluntary and I have the right to withdraw from participation at any time and that I may withdraw any data I have supplied (up to the point of analysis/publication);

d) am satisfied that the confidentiality of the information I have provided will be safeguarded subject to any legal limitations;

h) understand that I if I choose to provide my name and email address, I may be contacted again regarding this research.

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*1. Do you consent to participate in this research?

◯ Yes, I consent

◯ No, I do not consent

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Please identify the RTO with which you work

Organisation characteristics for all private RTOs with 15 to 19 year old enrolments have been obtained from publicly available data (AVETMISS, Vocstats, TRAINING.gov.au, MYSKILLS.gov.au).

By providing your organisation name, it will allow responses to the survey to be matched to organisation characteristics, such as size, scope, learner profile, location.

No responses you provide to this survey will be linked to your organisation name in any analysis or reporting. No responses will be linked to RTO characteristics that would make identification of an inidvidual RTO possible by stakeholders reading the final report.

If you would prefer **NOT** to identify your organisation within this survey, please complete questions 3 to 7 about your organisation's characteristics on the next page.

2. What is the name of your RTO? *(please select from the list)*

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RTO Characteristics

*3. In which states/territories do you deliver training?

(Tick as many as apply)

- [ ] Australian Capital Territory
- [ ] Northern Territory
- [ ] Queensland

- [ ] South Australia
- [ ] New South Wales
- [ ] Victoria

- [ ] Western Australia
- [ ] Tasmania

*4. What is the size of your RTO? Please indicate in either FTE or student numbers?

- ( ) 1-50 students
- ( ) 51-100 students
- ( ) 101-200 students
- ( ) 201-300 students
- ( ) 301-500 students
- ( ) 501-1000 students
- ( ) 1001-5000 students
- ( ) >5000 students

- ( ) 1-50 FTE
- ( ) 51-100 FTE
- ( ) 101-200 FTE
- ( ) 201-300
- ( ) 301-500 FTE
- ( ) 501-1000 FTE
- ( ) 1001-5000 FTE
- ( ) >5000 FTE

*5. Which of the following modes of delivery are used within your RTO?

- [ ] Face-to-face
- [ ] On-the-job
- [ ] Distance education
- [ ] Online learning

*6. Scope - please indicate what level qualifications you deliver within which fields of education

(Tick as many as apply)

	Certificate I	Certificate II	Certificate III	Certificate IV	Diploma	Advanced Diploma	Non-accredited programs	Statement of attainment
Natural And Physical Sciences	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Information Technology	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Engineering And Related Technologies	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Architecture And Building	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Agriculture, Environmental And Related Studies	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Health	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Education	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Management And Commerce	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Society And Culture	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Creative Arts	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Food, Hospitality And Personal Services	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Mixed Field Programmes (including CGEA)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Senior secondary certificates (e.g. VCE, HSC, QCE, SACE, WACE, TCE, SSC)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Other (please specify)

[   ]

7. We are interested in understanding the staffing profile of your RTO. Please indicate how many full-time and part-time staff work within your RTO.

	None	1-5 staff	6-10 staff	11-20 staff	21-50 staff	51-100 staff	101-1000 staff	>1000 staff
Full-time staff	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Part-time staff	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Structures and approaches to early leaver learners in your RTO

In thinking specifically about learners in **YOUR RTO** who have not completed secondary school (e.g. **EARLY LEAVER LEARNERS**), we are interested in your perspective on their learning needs and any other needs that may be impacting their access to, participation in and outcomes from **ENTRY-LEVEL TRAINING** (e.g. Certificates I-III, other foundational/preparatory courses). We are also interested in the administrative and organisational systems and procedures that are helpful in YOUR RTO for monitoring the progress, attendance and needs of your EARLY LEAVER LEARNERS.

8. We are interested in your EARLY LEAVER LEARNERS in particular and your 15 to 19 year old cohort more broadly. How many students within YOUR RTO fit in to each category?

	None	Less than 10%	11-20%	21-30%	31-40%	41-50%	51-60%	61-70%	71-80%	81-90%	91-100%
15 to 19 year olds	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
15 to 19 year olds who are early leaver learners	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

9. We are interested in understanding the characteristics of your early leaver learners. Please indicate the proportions of your EARLY LEAVER LEARNERS in the following categories.

	None	Less than 10%	11-20%	21-30%	31-40%	41-50%	51-60%	61-70%	71-80%	81-90%	91-100%
Female learners	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
From a language background other than English	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Have disclosed a disability	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Have identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Are unemployed and/or looking for work	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
From a low socioeconomic background	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Have below Year 11 attainment	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Studying full-time	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

10. In the last five years, what change, if any, has your RTO experienced in participation amongst 15 to 19 year old EARLY LEAVER LEARNERS?

○ It has increased significantly

○ It has increased but only slightly

○ We have not experienced any change in 15 to 19 year old early school leaver learners

○ We have experienced a decline in participation amongst 15 to 19 year old early school leaver learners

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11. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Low or limited English literacy is a significant issue for most of our early leaver learners	○	○	○	○
Low or limited numeracy is a significant issue for most of our early leaver learners	○	○	○	○
Low or limited ICT skills are a significant issue for most of our early leaver learners	○	○	○	○
Disengagement is a significant issue for many of our early leaver learners	○	○	○	○
Non-attendance is a significant issue for many of our early leaver learners	○	○	○	○

12. Early leavers learners in VET face a range of personal health and wellbeing, employment related, and life skills issues. How many of your EARLY LEAVER LEARNERS are experiencing the following challenges?

	No learners	Minority of learners	Half of learners	Majority of learners	All learners
High levels of drug and alcohol use	○	○	○	○	○
Mental illness	○	○	○	○	○
Unstable housing and accommodation, including homelessness	○	○	○	○	○
Hygeine and personal health issues	○	○	○	○	○
Centrelink requirements to be learning or earning	○	○	○	○	○
Resume writing and interview skills	○	○	○	○	○
Anger management issues	○	○	○	○	○
Managing personal finances	○	○	○	○	○
Getting a drivers licence	○	○	○	○	○
Transport issues	○	○	○	○	○
Caring responsibilities	○	○	○	○	○
Unclear career goals	○	○	○	○	○
Unclear learning pathways	○	○	○	○	○

13. Given some of the challenges facing EARLY LEAVER LEARNERS, there are particular skills that trainers may find useful when working with this cohort. Please indicate HOW IMPORTANT the following skills are for trainers in your RTO.

	Not at all important	Somewhat important	Important	Very important
Behaviour management	○	○	○	○
Duty of care awareness	○	○	○	○
Learner-centred pedagogy	○	○	○	○
A strength based approach	○	○	○	○
Use of real world, goal oriented learning	○	○	○	○
Offering active learning opportunities	○	○	○	○
Scaffolding the learning	○	○	○	○
Implementing flexible learning and assessment processes	○	○	○	○

14. Are there any other particular skills that VET trainers in YOUR RTO need when working with EARLY LEAVER LEARNERS?

15. What there any additional skills that VET trainers in YOUR RTO need when working with 15 to 19 year olds generally?

16. We are interested in the ways in which different learner groups may shape practice and policies within your RTO. What policies does YOUR RTO have that are relevant to the needs of EARLY LEAVER LEARNERS?

○ Personalised learning plans

○ Intake assessments for diagnostice purposes

○ Post-program support (e.g. once a program is completed)

○ Wellbeing monitoring

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17. How does your RTO conduct student tracking and follow up in the event of prolonged absences?

○ Informally by individual trainers

○ Centrally by student support staff

○ None

○ Other

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Teaching and Learning

The following questions relate to the practices used to deliver **ENTRY-LEVEL** programs (e.g. qualifications at Certificates I-III and other foundational/preparatory programs) in **YOUR RTO** context for **EARLY LEAVER LEARNERS**.

18. What are the strengths of your RTO in TEACHING & LEARNING early leaver learners?

19. We are interested in understanding the purposes and motivations that may bring early learner leavers to enrol in ENTRY-LEVEL programs. Please rank the following motivating factors from MOST IMPORTANT (Ranked 1) to LEAST IMPORTANT (Ranked 5) for your EARLY LEAVER LEARNERS.

	Getting a job in the occupation of their enrolled qualification
	Fulfilling Centrelink and/or Learn or Earn requirements
	Foundational/preparatory skills to support entry to further study
	Foundational/preparatory skills to support entry to an apprenticeship/traineeship
	Personal interest and/or personal development

20. We are interested in understanding the purposes and motivations that may bring early learner leavers to enrol within your RTO. Please rank the following motivating factors from MOST IMPORTANT (Ranked 1) to LEAST IMPORTANT (Ranked 5) for your EARLY LEAVER LEARNERS.

	Location - e.g. the RTO is close to where they live
	Referred - e.g. learners were referred by an external agency
	Word of mouth - e.g. a friend of family member of the learner already enrolled
	Prior enrolment - e.g. they studied at the RTO previously

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21. What other factors motivate EARLY LEAVER LEARNERS in YOUR RTO to undertake ENTRY-LEVEL programs?

22. Research suggests that differnt types of delivery work for different learner cohorts. How useful are the following delivery modes for EARLY LEAVER LEARNERS in ENTRY-LEVEL programs within YOUR RTO?

	Not at all useful	Somewhat useful	Useful	Very useful	Not applicable (not used within your RTO)
Face-to-Face	○	○	○	○	○
Online learning	○	○	○	○	○
Distance education	○	○	○	○	○
On-the-job	○	○	○	○	○

Other (please specify)

23. What proportion of your EARLY LEAVER LEARNERS enter YOUR RTO having already completed a VET qualification?

○ None

○ A minority

○ About half

○ A majority

○ All

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24. Completion rates for EARLY LEAVER LEARNERS in VET are, in some qualifications, quite low. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements, in relation to EARLY LEAVER LEARNERS within YOUR RTO.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Not applicable
Completion rates are lower in trades based programs	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Completion rates are higher in programs that include a structured workplace component	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Completion rates are higher in programs with embedded literacy and numeracy support	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Completion rates are higher for those in employment based training (e.g. apprenticeship/traineeships)	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Completion rates are lower for those with below Year 11 attainment	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

25. Within YOUR RTO, in what ways have you observed engagement and/or successful completion of programs by EARLY LEAVER LEARNERS varying in the following ways:

By qualification type (e.g. employment based, non-employment based)	
By qualification level (e.g. Certificate I, Certificate II)	
By field of study (e.g. Aged care, horticulture)	

26. What, in YOUR RTO, are the main factors leading to NON COMPLETION of entry-level qualifications amongst EARLY LEAVER LEARNERS?

27. What, in YOUR RTO, are the main factors that support successful COMPLETION of entry-level qualifications by EARLY LEAVER LEARNERS?

28. What teaching styles seem to work best for EARLY LEAVER LEARNERS in entry-level programs (e.g. Certificates I-III, foundational/preparatory programs) in YOUR RTO?

29. We are interested in understanding the role played by industry and employers in ENTRY-LEVEL programs for EARLY LEAVER LEARNERS in YOUR RTO. Please indicate the nature of the role played by industry and employers in the following areas of your programs.

	No involvement from employers and industry	Limited involvement from employers and industry	Moderate involvement from employers and industry	Substantial involvement from employers and industry
Program development	◯	◯	◯	◯
Program delivery	◯	◯	◯	◯
Student selection	◯	◯	◯	◯
Student assessment	◯	◯	◯	◯
Pathways advice	◯	◯	◯	◯
Structured workplace learning	◯	◯	◯	◯
Worksite/workplace tasters	◯	◯	◯	◯
Student mentoring	◯	◯	◯	◯
Trainer work shadowing	◯	◯	◯	◯

Engagement and Wellbeing

The following questions relate to how **YOUR RTO** might identify challenges faced by your **EARLY LEAVER LEARNERS** (personal, social, economic) and how you have developed and/or implemented responses within your context.

30. What are the strengths of your RTO in addressing ENGAGEMENT & WELLBEING issues amongst your early leaver learners?

31. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
The size of our RTO suits our early leaver learners	○	○	○	○
Deliverying programs for 15 to 19 year old early school leavers is core business for our RTO	○	○	○	○
Literacy and numeracy needs are more significant for our learners who are early school leavers than for our other learners	○	○	○	○
Engaging with parents is part of our approach to working with early leaver learners	○	○	○	○
The majority of our early leaver learners are from the local community	○	○	○	○
Many of our early leaver learners are referred to us by other stakeholders and agencies	○	○	○	○
Providing access to workplace opportunities is an important feature of our work with early leaver learners	○	○	○	○

32. Research suggests that many EARLY LEAVER LEARNERS experience language, literacy and numeracy issues within their VET study. Please indicate the nature of language, literacy and numeracy provision within ENTRY-LEVEL programs within YOUR RTO.

	All entry-level programs	Foundational/preparatory programs only	For identified/targeted students only	Not applicable
Diagnostic assessment of literacy needs on enrolment	○	○	○	○
Diagnostic assessment of numeracy needs on enrolment	○	○	○	○
Literacy support embedded in qualification delivery	○	○	○	○
Numeracy support embedded in qualification delivery	○	○	○	○
English language support embedded in qualification delivery	○	○	○	○
Literacy support available outside of qualification delivery	○	○	○	○
Numeracy support available outside of qualification delivery	○	○	○	○
English language support available outside of qualification delivery	○	○	○	○

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33. In what ways do trainers in YOUR RTO establish, develop and maintain relationships with EARLY LEAVER LEARNERS?

34. In what ways do trainers in YOUR RTO promote, enable and support relationships between EARLY LEAVER LEARNERS?

35. What are the challenges of building these relationships?

36. Please indicate which of the following services are available to your EARLY LEAVER LEARNERS AND whether these are provided internally (by YOUR RTO) or externally (through referral to another organsiation)

	Within the RTO	Through referral to an external organisation	Both within the RTO and through an external organisation	Not available
Career counselling	O	O	O	O
Personal counselling	O	O	O	O
Financial counselling	O	O	O	O
Accommodation and housing services	O	O	O	O
Transport support	O	O	O	O
Child care	O	O	O	O
Computer facilities	O	O	O	O
Internet access	O	O	O	O
Access to a study space	O	O	O	O
Library facilities	O	O	O	O
Academic skills support	O	O	O	O
English langauge support	O	O	O	O
Specific assistance for Indigenous learners	O	O	O	O
Specific assistance for learners with a disability	O	O	O	O
Interpreters	O	O	O	O
Job search support	O	O	O	O

37. We are interested to understand the types of organisations YOUR RTO works with to address the needs to your EARLY LEAVER LEARNERS. Please list up to 5 key organisations you collaborate within in addressing the needs of your EARLY LEAVER LEARNERS?

Organisation 1

Organisation 2

Organisation 3

Organisation 4

Organisation 5

38. What is the nature if the partnership/collaboration with each of these organisations in addressing the needs of EARLY LEAVER LEARNERS?

Organisation 1

Organisation 2

Organisation 3

Organisation 4

Organisation 5

The role of private RTOs for early school leavers

Pathways Support

The following questions relate to the administrative and organisational systems and procedures that you use to monitor and respond to progress, attendance and needs of **EARLY LEAVER LEANERS** within **YOUR RTO**.

39. What are the strengths of your RTO in supporting SUCCESSFUL PATHWAYS amongst your EARLY LEAVER LEARNERS?

40. We are interested in the extent to which the following factors are significant in impacting the post-completion transitions of your EARLY LEAVER LEARNERS. Please rank the following from MOST IMPORTANT (Ranked 1) to LEAST IMPORTANT (ranked 7) for EARLY LEAVER LEARNERS in YOUR RTO.

	Personal communication skills
	General employability skills
	Confidence and self-efficacy
	English language skills
	Lack of employment opportunities in field of study
	Achievement levels
	Disengagement

41. What assistance is provided within YOUR RTO to support transition for EARLY LEAVER LEARNERS at the completion of their program?

◯ Careers advice

◯ Mentoring

◯ Pairing with an employer

◯ Referrals to job search agencies

◯ Support articulating to higher level qualifications in your RTO

◯ Support articulating to higher level qualifications in another RTO

◯ Other (please specify)

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Attainment and Outcomes

The following questions relate to how **YOUR RTO** measures progress of **EARLY LEAVER LEARNERS** with formal indicators (i.e. qualifications and units) and informal indicators (i.e. soft skills, confidence levels, fluency, readiess for further training).

42. What are the challenges of developing 'hard skills' for EARLY LEAVER LEARNERS through ENTRY-LEVEL programs?

43. What are the challenges of developing 'soft skills' for EARLY LEAVER LEARNERS through ENTRY-LEVEL programs?

44. What feedback do you receive from employers about their expectations in relation EARLY LEAVER LEARNERS undertaking ENTRY-LEVEL programs?

45. What feedback do you receive from employers about their experiences of EARLY LEAVER LEARNERS entering the workplace having completed an ENTRY-LEVEL qualification?

Perspectives on the role of the private RTO sector for EARLY LEAVER LEARNER...

These final questions aim to understand the the role of the private RTO sector more broadly for **EARLY LEAVER LEARNERS**.

46. In what ways do learning environments for EARLY LEAVER LEARNERS in the private RTO sector, differ from those within the public RTO sector?

47. In what ways does the delivery of ENTRY-LEVEL programs for EARLY LEAVER LEARNERS in the private RTO sector, differ from delivery within the public RTO sector?

48. In what ways are private RTOs well placed to respond to the particular needs of EARLY LEAVER LEARNERS?

49. Research suggests that EARLY LEAVER LEARNERS in VET can struggle in articulating to further study and/or employment after the completion of their program. What role do you see private RTOs playing in supporting effective pathways through and from ENTRY-LEVEL VET programs?

The role of private RTOs for early school leavers

Thank You for your contribution to this research

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. Feedback from private RTOs is a very important component of this reserach. We appreciate your comments and insights.

If you would like any further information regading this research or if you would like to provide further comment, please contact one of the researchers:

George Myconos gmyconos@bsl.org.au (03) 9483 2439

Kira Clarke kirac@unimelb.edu.au (03) 8344 5828

Kitty te Riele Kitty.Teriele@vu.edu.au (03) 9919 4132

50. If you would like to be added to the mailing list for updates on this research, including access to the reports and invitations to the research seminars, please provide your contact details below.

Name

Organisation

State

Email Address

Thank you for your interest in this reserach

You have chosen not to participate in this survey.

If you would like any further information regading this research or if you would like to provide feedback outside of this survey, please contact one of the researchers:

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Appendix B – Sample provider profiles

The vignettes below provide an overview of the six private providers consulted as part of this research study. As discussed in the body of the report, this research study was conducted during a dynamic time in the Australian VET system, with particular scrutiny of private training providers. In line with the ethics approvals and participant consent for the collection of the data provided below, provider and participants names have been de-identified.

Victorian private RTO profiles

Victorian private RTO 1

Victorian private RTO 1, located in central Melbourne, has been active in hospitality and food service training for more than 18 years. This provider was catering to a large number of 15 to 19-year-old learners, with almost three-quarters of its enrolment having less than Year 12 school attainment. This includes almost 800 learners who had exited schooling with below Year 10 attainment. In addition to a training presence in Melbourne, Victorian private RTO 1 has training centres in Sydney and Brisbane, and also is also responsible for training delivery to apprentices in regional Victoria and New South Wales. It also provides short courses such as barista, cooking, first aid, food safety, RSA (responsible serving of alcohol), RSG (responsible service of gambling) and White Card, and also offers hospitality training at a Victorian university. In addition to the delivery of hospitality and food service qualifications, this provider also delivers short courses, employer-customised training and training in partnership with a higher education provider.

Victorian private RTO 2

Victorian private RTO 2 is a large provider, enrolling more than 20 000 students nationally each year. With training activities in all Australian states, this provider has a large number of qualifications on scope, including aged care and disability, business and management, children's services, civil construction, cleaning, community services, English studies, horticulture, hospitality and cookery, manufacturing, retail and transport and logistics. This provider caters to a small but growing cohort of 15 to 19-year-olds, including more than 750 early school leavers. Many of the early leaver learners with this provider have Year 10 or below school attainment. Consultations with a trainer and pathways support officer revealed that this provider offers a range of in-house support services, including career guidance, support for literacy and numeracy and IT skills, mentoring and access to job search and placement services.

Victorian private RTO 3

Victorian private RTO 3 is a medium-size provider located in an outer urban region of Melbourne. Specialising in training and qualifications for the building and construction industry, it also has satellite training locations in regional Victoria. Almost half of the annual enrolment comes from 15 to 19-year-olds, including almost 600 early school leavers. Many of the early school leaver learners at this provider have Year 10 or below school attainment. Consultations with trainers at this provider indicate that a strong apprenticeship delivery profile has contributed to the provider establishing and maintaining strong workplace and employer partnerships. Responding to employer needs includes a policy of rolling enrolments throughout the year and a preference for job-site delivery of training.

South Australian private RTO profiles

South Australian private RTO 1

South Australian private RTO1, operating for more than 15 years, also has training activities in two other Australian states (Queensland and New South Wales). Early school leavers make up one in four of this provider's enrolment, with the majority of those learners coming to the provider with Year 11 attainment. Specialising in food, hospitality and personal services qualifications, this provider also has a small number of business, management and retail programs on its scope. Consultations held with the managing director, a trainer and a pathways coordinator indicated that South Australian private RTO 1 has adopted a process of rolling enrolments through the year and flexible completion timelines through a 'self-pace' option.

South Australian private RTO 2

South Australian private RTO 2 is a comparatively new training provider, operating for 12 years in northern Adelaide and across rural South Australia, and specialising in automotive qualifications. Almost two-thirds of learners within this provider are early school leaver learners, many of whom have Year 10 or below school attainment. Consultations with the managing director, two trainers and an office manager revealed that this provider has a strong focus on recruiting qualified tradespeople from the automotive industry as trainers in the 11 different automotive qualifications on their scope. Consultations also revealed a focus on individualised learning and flexible course length to suit the needs of employers and working learners.

South Australian private RTO 3

South Australian private RTO 3 delivers training for the food, hospitality and personal services sectors and has been operating for ten years. Catering to slightly more than 110 early school leavers aged 15—19 years, this provider delivers training both in metropolitan Adelaide and across several regional locations in South Australia. Consultations with the provider's executive officer revealed a preference for a rolling enrolment intake throughout the year, recruitment of trainers directly from the hospitality sector and a focus on employment programs for Indigenous learners.

Queensland private RTO profiles

Queensland private RTO 1

Queensland private RTO 1 is a well-established provider, delivering training across the food and hospitality, aged care, business, retail and automotive sectors for more than 25 years. Slightly more than a third of this provider's intake is 15 to 19-year-olds. This includes more than 400 enrolments each year of 15 to 19-year-old early school leavers. The majority of these learners have Year 10 or below school attainment. Consultations with the operations manager indicated that this provider has developed a strong digital and online learning presence, allowing students to study remotely and to adapt qualification completion timelines in response to employment opportunities.

Queensland private RTO 2

Queensland private RTO 2 has been delivering training in the hospitality and tourism sectors for almost 25 years. This provider enrols a large number of students aged 15 to 19 years, accounting for more than half of their overall enrolment. More than 320 of their annual intake are 15—19 years old with Year 10 or below school attainment. Consultations with the general manager and trainers revealed a strong focus on training for work with club and gambling venues. In delivering this training, the provider employs a range of trainers, analysts, consultants and administration/IT staff to support the breadth of delivery on site, in workplaces and online. This provider also reported being heavily involved in apprenticeships and traineeships.

Queensland private RTO 3

Queensland private RTO 3 has been delivering retail and clerical training for more than 24 years in both metropolitan Brisbane and in regional locations across Queensland and elsewhere in Australia. More than half of the learners with this provider, who caters to a significant number of 15 to 19-year-olds, have Year 11 or below school attainment. This includes more than 350 learners aged 15—19 years with Year 10 or below attainment. Consultations with the business development manager indicated that flexible delivery options, including face-to-face and online delivery, are a key feature of program delivery. Consultations also revealed that this provider has developed articulation arrangements from some of its higher-level programs into related programs at a Queensland-based university.

Appendix C – Semi-structured interview instrument: private RTOs

Shedding light: private RTO training for young early school leavers

Provider interview questions

Context: On the wider landscape inhabited by training providers: trends, watersheds, and the role played by VET for early school leavers.

- Intro (about our research and the aims of the interview)

- Tell me about your RTO …

  - *How significant is the early school leaver cohort for your RTO?*

  - *Describe the cohort (gender mix, background etc.)*

  - *What are the qualifications that attract your YESL [young early school leavers]?*

Teaching and learning: On the practices and principles employed in differing private RTO contexts to respond to the needs of early school leavers.

- What have you learnt about the optimal way of teaching YESL?

  - *What factors specific to gender, culture, ethnicity, remote access, etc. affect the teaching and learning experience?*

  - *What teaching styles and techniques seem to work best for early school leavers in your RTO?*

    - *E.g. What is the role of online learning, industry experts play, variations in the learner settings? (real/simulated work, project-based activities, constructed scenarios, case studies or real-life situations).*

  - *Have you made [do you intend to make] any changes in the teaching of this cohort? What prompted that?*

- What skills are required of a trainer for this cohort?

  - *Do you provide any professional development?*

- Do training packages enable you to create content/materials relevant to early school leavers?

Assessment: On the measure of progress beyond formal indicators (i.e. qualifications or units), and the extent to which 'soft skills' such as confidence, and readiness for work.

- How do you go about assessing this cohort?

  - *Are there any specific challenges?*

- What are the assessment challenges you face?

Engagement and wellbeing: On identifying the challenges faced by students (personal, social and economic) and how they respond.

- What might attract a YESL student to a small commercial RTO?

    o *What role is there for engagement with parents, and does this feature in your approach?*

- What are the wellbeing barriers to the learning experience for early school leavers?

    o *Do young people vary in their levels of engagement according to qualification type?*

    o *Do you work in partnerships with other services and institutions, and do you think such partnerships are useful?*

    o *Have you made [do you intend to make] any changes re supporting the wellbeing of this cohort? What prompted that?*

Pathway support: Assistance with goal setting and transitions out of training.

- What assistance is needed/given to aid in the transition out of training?

    o *careers advice, mentorships etc.?*

- What role do partnerships play – with employers et al – in assisting YESLs to transition out of training?

- What kind of feedback do you hear from employers about their requirements of graduates, and how does this influence your training?

Procedures and structures: On the administrative and organisational systems and procedures required to monitor student needs, progress, attendance etc.

- Do you have any (other) policies or procedures that are particularly relevant for this cohort?

    o *(i.e. practice guides, wellbeing monitoring & referrals, learning plans, intake assessments, and post program support etc.)*

    o *Do you track student and follow up in the event of prolonged absences, or share information with others?*

To end...

- What's unique about the private RTO experience when compared, say, to TAFEs or enterprise-based provision?

- What role do you think private RTOs play, or might play in the future, for the YESL cohort?

Appendix D – Semi-structured interview instrument: other stakeholders

Shedding light: private RTO training for young early school leavers

Stakeholders interview questions

Context: On the wider landscape inhabited by training providers: trends, watersheds, and the role played by VET for early school leavers.

- How would you characterise your state's VET system and the changes that have/are taking place?

- What are the trends in early school leaving and what role is VET playing for the YESLs?

  o *What have you noticed across the system about the awareness of the issues faced by many early school leavers?*

- What role do or might the private 'for profit' RTOs play and what are the trends?

  o *Is the early school leaver cohort sought after by these RTOs: are they a growth area, a niche, or marginal?*

Teaching and learning: On the practices and principles employed in differing private RTO contexts to respond to the needs of early school leavers.

- What are the features of private RTOs that set them apart, and how do these affect YESL students?

  o *Is there such a thing as a private RTO pedagogy? If so, please describe it.*

- Do training packages allow providers – and particularly private providers – the scope to create relevant content and materials for YESLs?

- When considered alongside the need to acquire a broad-based education; how important is the (narrower) emphasis on the acquisition of skills

- Can you give any examples of innovative partnerships, methods, techniques or technologies, involving private RTOs that enhance learning?

Assessment and outcomes: Measuring progress beyond formal indicators (i.e. qualifications or units), to include 'soft skills' (confidence, fluency, work readiness).

- What assessment issues present in a context of private provision of VET?

  o *Is the adult-oriented competency-based assessment adequate for understanding student progress?*

Engagement and wellbeing: On how the system and private RTOs identify and respond to the challenges faced by students (personal, social and economic)

- What might attract a student to a commercial private RTO? (contrast with

TAFE et al.)

- What should our expectations of private RTOs be in terms of supports for young people?

- What is known about collaborations across sectors that can improve students' engagement?

Pathway support: Assistance with goal setting and transitions out of training.

- What support is needed for YESL students approaching completion?

- What do you regard as best practice in pathway support: any examples among private RTOs?

- What expectations should we have of private RTOs?

- What do you hear from industry/employers/affiliates about VET for YESLs, and about the role of private RTOs into the future?

  - *Completion rates for younger students in VET are, in some qualifications, quite low. What might explain this?*

Procedures and structures: On administrative and organisational systems/procedures required to monitor student progress, attendance, and respond to needs.

- How might your characterise this state's approach to regulation, support for, and governance of private RTOs?

- How do you regard the current/imminent changes to the regulation and governance of VET?

  - *How might, or ought, these affect private RTOs?*

To end...

- What's unique about the private RTO experience when compared, say, to TAFEs or enterprise based provision?

- What role do you think private RTOs play, or might play in the future, for the YESL cohort?