

Inquiry into Educational Attainment

Submission to the House of
Representatives Standing
Committee on Education

June 2026

**Skills
Insight**

JSC

Jobs and Skills Council
Agribusiness, Fibre, Furnishing, Food, Animal and Environment Care
An Australian Government Initiative

Skills Insight acknowledges that First Nations peoples have been living on and caring for Country for thousands of years. This is respected in our values and the way we work.



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About Skills Insight

Skills Insight is a Jobs and Skills Council funded by the Australian Government. We provide industry-led advice on skills and workforce needs across agribusiness, fibre, furnishing, food, animal and environmental care, and land management industries. These industries are foundational to Australia's regional, rural and remote (RRR) communities, and to food and biosecurity, environmental stewardship, and sovereign capability.

These sectors directly employ more than 667,800 workers (5% of the national workforce)¹ and generate more than \$240 billion in industry revenue². They also have substantial First Nations involvement as business owners, entrepreneurs, land and water managers, employees, and cultural custodians, including through the successful Indigenous Rangers Program.

The prosperity, security and resilience of all Australians also depend on these industries. They support national food security, environmental sustainability, climate adaptation, biosecurity, and sovereign capability. In particular, during periods of global instability or disruption, these enterprises help protect Australia's supply chains and communities. Their national significance extends well beyond their share of total employment.

Submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education

Inquiry into Educational Attainment

Submitted by: Skills Insight Jobs and Skills Council

Date: June 2026

Executive summary

Educational attainment in Australia will not improve equitably unless persistent structural barriers to education and training in Regional, Rural and Remote (RRR) Australia are addressed. For the industries represented by Skills Insight, these barriers are most visible in the availability, viability and quality of Vocational Education and Training (VET), of which more than a quarter of working-age population were enrolled in in 2024.ⁱ

Access to education, training and employment is a fundamental right. For many Australians in RRR areas, that right is not being realised. Limited local delivery, dispersed and unstable training markets, misaligned funding models, and declining provider viability constrain educational attainment and workforce participation, particularly in industries that are geographically spread, safety-critical, seasonal, and central to regional economies and national resilience.

The challenge is not only access but progression: 34% of VET enrolments in remote areas are at Certificate II or below, compared with 29% nationally.ⁱⁱ Educational attainment in RRR Australia should not be framed only as a schooling issue or a matter of individual aspiration. It is also shaped by systems and policies that limit regional economies, undermine productivity, and restrict social and intergenerational mobility.

This submission focuses on three connected issues:

- Improving educational attainment in RRR Australia by restoring equitable access to VET delivery, particularly for industries central to regional economies and national resilience;
- Recognising First Nations peoples, communities and organisations as leaders and drivers of educational attainment, based on free, prior and informed consent and genuine economic partnership; and
- Redesigning RRR VET funding and support structures to reflect real delivery costs and enable decent, sustainable educational outcomes.

Without reform in these areas, gaps in educational attainment will persist, regardless of aspiration-raising initiatives or downstream labour market programs.

Educational attainment in RRR Australia: a structural issue

Persistent differences in educational attainment between metropolitan and non-metropolitan Australians are well established. These differences widen at key transition points: from school to post-school education, from lower-level qualifications to higher-level skills, and from training into sustained employment.

In 2025, 80% of Australians in major cities held a Year 12 or above qualification, whereas only 70% of those in rural and remote areas had the same level of attainment. The inequity is most evident in First Nations people, where Year 12 or equivalent attainment falls from 62% in major cities to 47% in rural and remote areas.ⁱⁱⁱ

For many RRR learners, VET is not a second choice, but the primary and most appropriate pathway to skilled work, economic participation and community contribution: see the *National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy* (The Napthine Report 2019)^{iv}. However, the VET system has not been designed, funded or regulated to deliver equitably in dispersed and complex operating environments.

In Skills Insight industries, training frequently requires:

- access to workplaces, animals, plants, land and specialised equipment;
- delivery aligned to seasonal and operational rhythms rather than academic calendars; and
- experienced educators with both industry currency and training expertise.

Current policy and funding settings do not adequately accommodate these requirements, resulting in reduced local availability of training, lower participation and completion, and suppressed educational attainment outcomes in RRR Australia.

The Napthine Report notes that VET is the primary and most appropriate pathway to skilled work in RRR Australia. However, the figures below suggest that VET qualification enrolments in Skills Insight industries are lower in regional and remote areas relative to workforce share.

Skills Insight coverage	Major Cities of Australia	Inner Regional Australia	Outer Regional Australia	Remote Australia	Very Remote Australia
Industry workforce	41.7%	29.9%	22.4%	4.0%	1.9%
VET qualification enrolments	53.1%	27.5%	14.9%	2.5%	2.1%

Sources: a) ABS, 2021, Census of population and housing; b) NCVER, 2024, VOCSTATS: Total VET activity

Access to VET as a fundamental right

Skills Insight stakeholders consistently emphasise that access to education and employment is a fundamental right, not a market luxury.

Where training is unavailable locally, learners are forced to choose between relocation, deferral, or disengagement. For many, relocation is neither financially nor culturally viable.

The result is not a lack of aspiration, but a lack of practical opportunity.

In RRR Australia, limited access to VET has consequences that extend beyond individual learners. It constrains:

- workforce capability in essential industries;
- business succession and enterprise development;
- community sustainability and service continuity; and
- the ability of regions to adapt to economic, environmental and technological change.

Educational attainment policy must therefore address where and how training is delivered, not merely the volume of enrolments or qualifications issued.

First Nations leadership and educational attainment

Educational attainment in RRR Australia cannot be improved without First Nations leadership, authority and consent. First Nations peoples are not simply priority cohorts to be included; they are economic leaders, land and water managers, educators and employers across Skills Insight industries.

Regional VET systems carry a disproportionate equity load, where 2024 data showed that indigenous learners can form more than 50% of all enrolments in very remote areas, compared to 5% nationally.^v

Effective approaches to educational attainment must:

- be grounded in free, prior and informed consent;
- support on-Country, place-based training delivery;
- recognise and value Country-based knowledge and skills;
- enable First Nations enterprises to shape training pathways aligned to their economic priorities; and
- ensure benefits, recognition and compensation flow to knowledge holders and communities.

Models that treat First Nations participation as an add-on to mainstream delivery consistently fail. Leadership-driven, co-designed approaches are necessary to achieve genuine attainment outcomes.

Consideration should be given to the potential role of First Nations-owned and controlled RTOs in providing mainstream VET delivery across RRR Australia, where they choose to do so freely and are properly supported.

RRR VET funding and investment: the need for structural redesign

Current approaches to funding and investment in VET delivery in RRR Australia are structurally deficient. Loadings, thin-market descriptors and short-term programs do not reflect the real costs, risks and capital requirements of delivery in dispersed regions. State and territory

Governments take inconsistent approaches to RRR funding, and industry, enterprise and private investment are difficult to attract when training accessibility is in doubt.

This matters because it directly affects the viability of RTOs, which the *Exploring Training Demand and Supply Challenges Research Report* identifies as a major barrier to RRR delivery^{vi}.

For Skills Insight industries, costs are driven by many factors that are not fully recognised in funding and investment approaches, including:

- travel time and expense;
- low learner density;
- higher safety and insurance requirements;
- investment in specialised facilities and equipment; and
- difficulties attracting and retaining suitably qualified trainers.

Current work in NSW, expected to be available in June 2026, is identifying the range of cost centres for RTO delivery in regional NSW. This may help inform broader systemic reform.

Insufficient funding and limited investment contribute to provider exits, reduced learner choice, substitution with inappropriate qualifications, and the erosion of local training ecosystems. This directly affects equitable access and educational attainment.

Having listened to and worked with stakeholders on this key issue for several years, Skills Insight considers that RRR funding reform is not optional. It is necessary to meet equity objectives, workforce needs and national priorities in food security, biosecurity, environmental management and regional development.

A practical starting point is to identify the main cost differences in RRR delivery at national, state, territory and local levels, and to rebalance tertiary education funding on the basis of equitable access, government priorities, and industry growth strategies, including food security and sovereign capability.

Connecting educational attainment to work and place

Educational attainment improves when learning is connected to work, experience and local opportunity. In many Skills Insight industries, competency and confidence are achieved through workplace-based and hybrid delivery models, not classroom-only approaches.

Policies that discourage or do not adequately support workplace-based delivery undermine attainment, particularly in safety-critical and highly contextualised occupations. Conversely, where learners can see clear links between training, employment and contribution to their community, engagement and attainment improve.

Educational attainment policy should therefore:

- support flexible delivery models aligned to industry rhythm;
- recognise staged and experience-based competency development;
- value completion where it delivers meaningful capability, while recognising legitimate intermediate outcomes; and

- ensure training connects learners to employment pathways in their region.

Recommendations

Skills Insight recommends that the Committee consider the following actions to improve educational attainment:

1. **Adopt a rights-based framework** for educational attainment that recognises equitable access to VET as fundamental.
2. **Prioritise RRR VET delivery reform**, including funding models based on real costs and delivery conditions, and re-balancing funding across the tertiary sector.
3. **Embed First Nations leadership** in educational attainment policy, grounded in free, prior and informed consent.
4. **Support workplace-based, on-Country and hybrid VET delivery** as central mechanisms for attainment in RRR Australia.
5. **Measure attainment in ways that reflect capability, participation and sustainability**, not just enrolments and completions.
6. **Align education policy with regional development, workforce planning and national priorities**, including food security and environmental stewardship.

Conclusion

Educational attainment in Australia will not improve equitably without addressing how and where VET is delivered in Regional, Rural and Remote communities. For the industries represented by Skills Insight, access to training is inseparable from economic participation, community resilience and national interest. Achieving national food security and sovereign capability will require safe, effective and productive workers who are properly trained and independently assessed, including with evidence of attainment that allows Australian industry to meet international market requirements.

Improving attainment requires systemic reform in funding, policy design, and decision-making. It also requires recognising regional Australians and First Nations peoples as central contributors to Australia's future, not peripheral beneficiaries of metropolitan systems.

Skills Insight welcomes the opportunity to continue contributing evidence and industry-led advice to this inquiry.

Contact for further information

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ⁱ NCVER Total VET students and courses, 2024

ⁱⁱ JSA *Vocational education and training in regional, rural and remote Australia* report, 2023

ⁱⁱⁱ ABS Education and Work, Australia, 2025

^{iv} National Regional Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy (the Napthine Report), 2019, accessed 7 January 2026 <https://www.education.gov.au/download/4663/national-regional-rural-and-remote-tertiary-education-strategy-final-report/6981/document/pdf>

^v NCVER Total VET students and courses, 2024

^{vi} Exploring Training demand and Supply Challenges, 2025, Skills Insight Jobs and Skills Council, available at <https://skillsinsight.com.au/resources/>