THE BENEFITS OF ACCURATELY MEASURING NON-COMPLETIONS

Prepared for Service Skills Australia by

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SERVICESKILLS AUSTRALIA

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Report for Services Skills Australia
"Evaluation Frameworks for VET"

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Acronyms

Some commonly used acronyms in this report are:

- **AQTF:** Australian Qualifications Training Framework

- **AAC:** Australian Apprenticeship Centre

- **AVETMISS:** the Australian Vocational Education and Training Management Information Statistical Standard

- **COAG:** Council of Australian Governments

- **HE:** higher education

- **NCVER:** National Centre for Vocational Education Research

- **RTO:** registered training organisation

- **SSA:** Service Skills Australia

- **VET:** vocational education and training

Definitions

Key terms

- **AVETMISS:** The Australian Vocational Education and Training Management Information Statistical Standard (AVETMISS) for VET Providers is a national data standard that ensures the consistent and accurate capture of VET information about students.

- **VET provider collection:** AVETMISS applies to the VET provider collection which provides information on publicly funded training programs delivered by government funded and privately operated training providers.

Definitional issues

McInnis, Hartley, Polesel and Teese (2000) note the difficulties in defining non-completion in VET and Higher Education: "Analysis of non-completion in both the VET and HE sectors is confounded by problems of definition (p.5)."

They also identify different perspectives on and implicit definitions of non-completion: the institutional view, the system view and the student view. For instance, McInnes et al. (2000) quote Tinto (1993 p.132) who suggests that "if the student leaving does not define his or her behaviour as representing a form of failure, neither should the institution" (p.6). And it could be added, neither should the system.

This report reaffirms the view of McInnes et al. (2000) that the concepts of completion and non-completion are still contested, problematic and unresolved. NCVER Managing Director Karmel (2009, p.11) observes that "completion rates would appear to be important and have proved difficult to calculate". With a growing interest by government in measuring and reporting outcomes, this report shows that these concepts of completion and non-completion need to be analysed further and discussed more widely in the sector. This report is designed to inform further analysis and assist such discussion.

This report highlights the limited way in which AVETMISS currently acknowledges completions. AVETMISS records completions of modules and it infers completion of programs from the number of applications for a qualification. AVETMISS does not capture the reasons for non-completion. Another major limitation of AVETMISS is that it only captures data from government funded VET programs and fee for service programs from government funded organisations. Further limitations of AVETMISS are discussed in sections two and three and appendix four of the report.

For this study, in terms of the three case studies in sections five-seven, **a non-completion was taken to mean a student who had withdrawn from an accredited training program.**

The following commonsense terms are used interchangeably in the case studies: reasons for leaving, reasons for withdrawing, reasons for not completing.

Executive summary

From April 2010 to March 2011, Service Skills Australia (SSA) conducted a project entitled "Evaluation Frameworks for VET", focusing on the reasons for non-completion of qualifications and whether the measurement of non-completions is worthwhile.

The project was overseen by SSA General Manager Kit McMahon and managed by SSA's Research Writer David Squires and the research was undertaken by Dr John Mitchell and John Ward from John Mitchell & Associates and JMA Analytics.

The project showed that there are substantial benefits in monitoring non-completions and understanding the reasons for non-completions. Such measurement will benefit those students withdrawing, as well as providers, policy makers and enterprises who invest in training. For instance, a finding from this research is that some students withdraw and are recorded by the VET system as non-completions, but their reason is a "short term" one such as a pregnancy, an illness, a home relocation, a job change or the need to care for a relative with a temporary illness. The three training providers involved in this research project proved that there is much to be gained by the provider knowing about such "short term" reasons for withdrawal and informing the student of options, such as resuming the course of study in the near future or completing the program online.

Measuring non-completions and understanding the reasons for non-completion will:

- assist training providers to minimise the likelihood of withdrawals and increase the potential for students to resume later

- enable policy makers to frame better policies and develop better program guidelines

- provide valuable insights into the obstacles that students face in their learning journeys, for those enterprises who invest in their employees' training.

The project also showed that the reasons for non-completion are not captured in the national VET data system. This is a weakness in the sector, particularly if policy makers and funding bodies base their decisions on flawed and/or incomplete data.

Context and brief

The 2009 Service Skills Environmental Scan identified a range of issues with "completion rates". In particular and critically, the scan identified that industry overall and the service industry in particular, believe that they have been unnecessarily disadvantaged by the use of completion rates, as recorded nationally, as a measure of success of industry training.

Following the issue of the Environmental Scan, in 2009 SSA developed an issues paper "Evaluation Frameworks for VET on completion rates" in which a range of recommendations were identified. The Issues Paper focused on the development of nationally consistent data collection tools that will more accurately measure and evaluate course completion and non-completion rates.

The purpose of this work was to address recommendations highlighted in "Evaluation Frameworks for VET – issues paper on completion rates 2009" and to provide a report.

The specific issues to be researched were as follows:

- to determine in the first instance if the current assumptions about the reasons for non-completions are correct

- to determine if the student and where appropriate, the employer, have achieved their goals through the training that was completed i.e. was the training valued?

- to mount a case for a more consistent and accurate measurement system nationally.

Participating training providers

A key component of the research project was to monitor the experiences and findings of three registered training organisations (RTOs) who trialled a new approach to measuring non-completions:

- an enterprise RTO, Yum! Restaurants Australia, involving its retail training in SA, TAS and VIC

- a public RTO, The Gordon, and its retail training in Geelong, Victoria

- a private RTO, Integrity Business College and its retail training in regional Victoria and metropolitan Melbourne.

All three RTOs provided this project with extensive support, generously meeting and exceeding every request from the research team. Significantly, each of the three tracked and recorded the reasons for non-completion of every retail trainee in the six month period from mid-July 2010.

Research methods

The project involved the use of 'mixed method' research across three stages, beginning with stage one, the initial qualitative investigation, from April-June 2010. That stage included a literature review, stakeholder consultations, consultations with the National Centre for Vocational Education and Research (NCVER) and a critique of the Australian Vocational Education and Training Management Information Statistical System (AVETMISS).

Stage two of the project, trial evaluation, covered the period from 1 July – 13 December 2010. This stage focused on the development and trialling of a tool for three registered training organisations (RTOs) to use to record the reasons for non-completion in retail programs.

Stage three of the project, data analysis and final report, covered the period from 14 December – 7 March 2011. This stage included feedback from key stakeholders on the draft findings.

Findings in relation to key questions

This study focused in particular on the non-completions within the three RTOs listed above. 149 students at the three RTOs were non-completers in the six month period from mid-July 2010, representing a non-completion rate across the three providers of under 9.3%. This low figure varies substantially from some much higher figures quoted in the media (e.g. *The Australian*, 16 February 2011).

Are the current assumptions about the reasons for non-completions correct?

A number of assumptions about the reasons for non-completions were articulated in the consultations conducted with key stakeholders at the start of this project, as summarised in section two. Only some, not all, stakeholders held these assumptions

Based on this study of 1,600 retail trainees across three very different RTOs, the following assumptions can be challenged.

There is an assumption currently in some quarters within VET that students do not complete because they never intended to complete the program and gain the full qualification; they were only looking to acquire specific skills.

This assumption is not supported by the data collected from the three RTOs in 2010. Almost 100% of students withdrawing indicated that they intended, at the time of enrolment, to complete the full program. A similar proportion also indicated that they had not yet achieved their initial goal when they withdrew.

There is an assumption currently in some quarters within VET that students do not complete because retail training is of low value.

This assumption is disproved by the data. Almost all of the non-completers gave a concrete reason for non-completion which was unrelated to the value of the training. In the vast majority of cases, students do not complete because of work-related or home/family/relationship related issues.

There is an assumption currently in some quarters within VET that non-completions are the result of poor delivery by training providers.

This assumption is disproved by the data. Almost 100% of the students withdrawing indicated that they were withdrawing for a reason that had nothing to do with the quality of the training.

There is an assumption currently in some quarters within VET that students do not complete because retail training will lead to low paid employment.

This assumption is disproved by the data. Only one of the 149 students indicated that this was the reason for withdrawing.

Was the training valued?

The training was valued as the vast majority of the non-completing students indicated that they still had 'study' goals to reach, inferring they were withdrawing reluctantly. Their withdrawal prevented 98% of them from achieving what they wanted to achieve.

Their reason for withdrawing in almost every case was because 'life got in the way': that is, they were withdrawing because of a development in their life outside the control of the training provider, such as a promotion, resignation or job termination. This is similar to a comment by ex-Prime Minister Paul Keating in relation to VET student pathways, that 'lives are not linear' (*Campus Review*, 13 Sept 2010).

Analysis of the non-completion data from the three RTOs indicates that by far the three most commonly cited reasons for withdrawal related to a change in work circumstances. Just under 45% of all respondents indicated one of the following three reasons for withdrawal:

· Resigned from job (25.5%)

· Found employment elsewhere (12.8%)

· Job was terminated (6.7%).

Figure 1:
Reasons for withdrawing of the 149 non-completers in the three RTOs July-Dec 2010
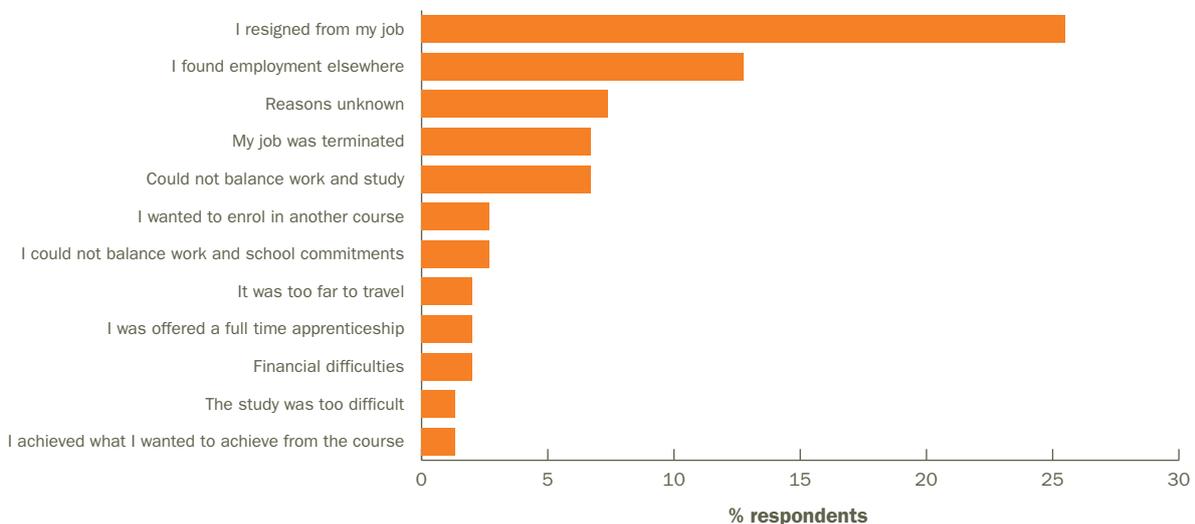
What is the case for a more consistent and accurate measurement system nationally?

The full case for a more consistent and accurate measurement nationally is made by this entire report, and summarised in the further key findings section below. In brief, the case includes the following points:

1. Many VET stakeholders believe the core problem with the national VET provider collection is the inadequacy of the data. Providers and others also want data that is easy to access, and from a provider perspective, the collection is not user friendly and most don't use it.

2. AVETMISS is the national data standard that is meant to ensure the consistent and accurate capture of VET information about students and is the standard that applies to the VET provider collection, however it captures limited data. It only captures data from government funded VET programs and fee for service programs from government funded organisations.

3. The use of qualification completion rates, as opposed to course completion rates, by AVETMISS has the potential to significantly underestimate the actual number of course completions in VET.

4. Pronouncements about high non-completion rates in VET programs, based on AVETMISS and the national VET provider collection, are injurious to the sector's reputation, deserve to be challenged and ideally should cease until the limitations of AVETMISS are fully rectified.

5. NCVER (2010b) recently released the outcomes of the discussion paper on AVETMISS (NCVER 2010b), but the recommendations did not address most of the issues around measuring non-completions with a view to improving the accuracy of completions data.

6. While AVETMISS records completions of modules and it infers completion of programs from the number of applications for a qualification, it does not capture the reasons for non-completion.

7. The reasons for non-completion of a VET course are diverse and complex and this is not being captured in the current national VET data collection.

8. This research shows that the reasons for non-completion are almost always job-related or related to other life events of the student, such as an illness, pregnancy or change of location.

9. While the reasons for non-completion are almost always outside of the control of the training provider, if the training provider is aware of the reasons for non-completion it may be able to play a role in assisting the non-completer to return to study later.

10. An understanding of the full range of reasons for non-completion could assist multiple stakeholders including policy makers, industry bodies, training providers and VET students.

11. This project involved the trialling of a possible AVETMISS data file on non-completions that could be added to the current AVETMISS. The design of the data file is based on the normal AVETMISS structure and on the findings from this research project. Technically, the data file could be easily slotted into AVETMISS.

12. In this age of powerful computer databases and a client-driven and transparent VET system, "reason unknown" is now an inadequate notation for a non-completing student. Capturing reasons for non-completion and acting on the basis of the data is both feasible and essential.

Further key findings

Set out below is a summary of the findings in each section of the report.

Issues identified in the literature (section one)

Researchers continually stress that a non-completion of a VET course does not necessarily mean that a student has not achieved what that individual set out to achieve from undertaking the course. Hence, a sole focus on measuring completion rates might be underestimating the positive impact of VET on students.

AVETMISS does not capture all the reasons for non-completion although the Student Outcomes Survey does capture some reasons for 'module completers' not continuing training. AVETMISS only captures data from government funded VET programs and fee for service programs from government funded organisations

Other limitations of AVETMISS include the following:

- Course enrolment can only be inferred from module enrolments; and not all students have the intention of completing the whole course.

- No distinction is made between an application for a qualification and course completion. Students might complete a course and not apply for their qualification, or take their time in applying for a qualification.

- The data does not capture those students who are awarded qualifications for courses other than those in which they were originally enrolled.

It is possible to improve the measurement of non-completion in VET, and governments acknowledge this fact: for example, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) is looking to the National VET Data Strategy to provide new output and outcome measures for VET. Additionally, NCVER is reviewing AVETMISS, but its recent paper (NCVER 2010b) does not recommend direct changes to the collection of data about non-completions.

Issues identified by an analysis of AVETMISS (section two and appendix 4)

As Grant (2002) noted, there is no systematic national or state measurement of course completion rates. However, NCVER publishes a number of qualification completions tables as part of their annual 'Students and Courses' series.

NCVER undertakes ad hoc research into completion rates. While these approaches produce research of the highest quality, the advanced methodology is not feasible for wide-scale use. The irregular publication of non-completion data makes it difficult to monitor course completion rates on a continual basis.

The research undertaken for this project indicates that two primary issues in relation to AVETMISS are accuracy and the possibility of using alternative approaches to measure non-completions. Regarding data accuracy there exist certain problems with the national VET provider collection that have the potential to create significant inaccuracies in the statistics reported. For instance, the use of qualification completion rates, as opposed to course completion rates, has the potential to significantly underestimate the actual number of course completions.

Even if the issues concerning the accuracy of data within the national VET provider collection are solved, consultations reveal the view that qualification non-completion is not necessarily a negative outcome, for example, some students may change employers or receive a promotion and decide not to continue with the program.

Last year NCVER (2010a) issued a discussion paper on AVETMISS and a report (NCVER 2010b) on the outcomes of the discussion paper, containing a number of recommendations. In relation to many of the other issues around measuring non-completions with a view to improving the accuracy of completions data, no specific recommendations were made.

Issues identified by stakeholders (section three)

Stakeholders stressed that the core problem is the lack of data, the inadequacy of the data, in the VET national data collection. Providers and others also want data that is easy to access.

The AVETMISS method for recording non-completions is flawed, for instance in the apprenticeship area, where the system tracks contracts, not people. Non-completion does not always mean a student 'dropped out' in the sense of failing. Sometimes students don't complete because they are given insufficient information when they enrol about the potential outcomes of the training program. Students' circumstances sometimes change – for example, they leave the company or they leave the city where the program is conducted – and these non-completions are not negative.

Stakeholders in enterprises find that a frequent reason for non-completion is because the student receives a promotion. Sometimes managers identify management talent in students who are enrolled in Certificate II or III programs and pull them out of those programs and enrol them in management programs.

From a whole-of-system point of view, more accurate measurement of completion rates will enable policy planners to make informed judgments about where they allocate funding.

Stakeholders would value more information about peoples' intentions at the point of enrolment and the reasons why they exit. Enterprise RTOs in particular would value more information about who completes as well as who doesn't and why not. Measuring completions enables an enterprise to track the effectiveness of its training and to ensure that the training staff are doing their job correctly.

There are 'holes' in AVETMISS, and the national data collections, that need to be fixed. Currently, the lack of a unique student identifier artificially inflates the total of non-completions, although COAG plans to implement such an identifier in the near future. Many enterprise and other RTOs use their own tracking software and don't look at the national data collections, because they want to identify trends quickly.

The main disadvantage of AVETMISS and the national provider collection is that they don't measure and reflect the full national training effort. An improved AVETMISS could provide much more information about themes or trends or differences between levels of programs or between locations.

Policy changes, such as a move to a more demand-based system where the funding follows the individual, may change VET data systems dramatically. Generally, VET policies will drive an increase in transparent and publicly available data. More student destination data needs to be collected, as it might point out problems with the way programs are designed, rather than place the spotlight solely on non-completion.

The design and initial piloting of the new approach (section four)

An Excel tool for collecting data on non-completions was developed by the researchers in collaboration with three RTOs in July 2010 and trialled in the following six months. The tool was based on asking non-completers to answer five core questions, with subsidiary questions for question 5, offering respondents a choice of 15 reasons for leaving.

In relation to the total numbers of retail trainees, in the ten weeks from mid-July to 30 September 2010 the providers reported non-completion rates of 2%, 4% and 11%; or completion rates of 98%, 96% and 89%.

At this point in the project, after three months, improvements to the tool suggested by the providers included the addition of a comments column for capturing additional information about an individual's reason for leaving, as this might enable the provider to offer suggestions for how the person could resume later with the same or a new provider. Some examples recorded in a comments column by one provider were: "extended period of leave due to family illness" and "moved to Queensland".

All three providers reported that they found the data generated by the tool made them more conscious of steps they could take to minimise or remove the chances of non-completion. Each of the providers was considering additional actions they could take to identify potential non-completers such as specific surveys, not general surveys on student satisfaction.

The providers noted that the data they are required to provide for AVETMISS purposes, such as data about student satisfaction, is quite broad and not as specific or helpful as this data on non-completions.

The providers identified the different parties within and outside their organisation who could be involved in a collaborative approach to ensuring low numbers of or nil non-completions. For example, within the organisation it might include the quality, student administration, general administration and training services sections. Parties outside the provider organisation who could be involved in collaborative activities included Australian Apprenticeship Centres, state governments and NCVER.

Some of the providers believe that a major reason for non-completion is the inappropriate choice of study program: that is, the trainee was signed up for the wrong qualification. Australian Apprenticeship Centres were perhaps over-zealous in signing up new students.

Providers also find that a frequent reason for non-completion is that staff hours are reduced, sometimes because the business is downsizing.

Importantly, the tool has already clarified for the providers that:

- all their non-completing students originally intended to complete the program

- the reasons for non-completion are many and varied. Examples from one provider included: "I resigned from my job" ("to return to home town"); "I wanted to enrol in another course" ("moved to Melb to go to uni")

- the reason for non-completion rarely (and never, in this sample of three providers) seems to be that the training and assessing is low quality in the view of the student

- one reason for non-completion is that the trainee has moved on to a higher qualification, most often from a Certificate II to III, yet this is classified as a non-completion

- the reason for a non-completion within these three RTOs was rarely because the trainees were disillusioned by the eventual wage in that profession.

The Gordon case study (section five)

The Gordon had around 570 retail trainees in the six month period when the new approach to monitoring non-completions was trialled. 51 or 8.9% of students withdrew in this period.

Of the 51 who withdrew from retail training, 18 left because they resigned from their job (six because of pregnancy), 14 because they found work elsewhere, six because their job was terminated, two because they wanted to enrol in another program (university; nursing), one was offered a full-time apprenticeship and one found the study too difficult because of a mother's illness. Of the nine who cited "reason unknown" as the reason for withdrawing, further investigation revealed that one was going overseas, one had experienced a marriage breakdown, and another had become pregnant. All of these reasons for withdrawal were beyond the control of the Institute.

Internally, and despite the reasons being beyond their control, the Gordon staff found the process of investigating non-completions encouraged them to reflect on their current programs and possible improvements to their processes, for example:

- to be alert to what they called "short term" reasons for withdrawing, such as a family illness, and counsel those students to resume their study later

- to offer students who leave because of, say, a shift in location, the option of completing the program online

- to identify new ways for different sections of the Institute to jointly monitor and respond to non-completions

- to communicate options and messages to their student cohort in ways that suit this cohort, most of whom are under 20 years.

Externally, the Gordon staff also found the process of investigating non-completions encouraged them to examine their current collaborative processes with Australian Apprenticeship Centres. They now intend to work even more closely with the Centres, to seek more detailed data about students when they sign up. The Gordon will then conduct a more thorough induction for students when they begin their course, discussing options available to them in the case they withdraw later.

The Gordon demonstrated very strongly the value of asking an additional question or two after asking the primary reason for withdrawal. For instance, if the student said the reason for withdrawing was resignation from the job, and further questioning revealed the reason was a pregnancy, the Gordon staff offered suggestions about how the student could continue the program in the future.

Integrity Business College (IBC) case study (section six)

IBC normally has a low level of withdrawals, on average around 5%; a low percentage which IBC believes is due to the quality of delivery and its strong relationships with businesses and students. In the six months covered by this project, IBC had 36 withdrawals from its retail programs, representing around 12.85% of the group, mainly in one specific funded program area. However, 14 of the 36 signed up and did not commence the training, so the actual withdrawal rate after commencement was under 8%. A further 4 of the 36 were signed up incorrectly by the Australian Apprenticeship Centre, reducing the number to 18, or 6.4%.

The SSA tool helped IBC to identify four sets of reasons for non-completions of traineeships, mainly Skills for Growth traineeships in regional, rural and some CBD areas of Victoria: incorrect sign-ups by Australian Apprenticeship Centres (e.g. signed up for the wrong qualification); businesses reduced hours due to increase in competitors; businesses downsizing; and students' health, financial and family issues.

As a result of involvement in this project, IBC has developed the following ideas about turning this information about withdrawals into an increase in completions:

- develop closer relationship with Australian Apprenticeship Centres

- upscale the communication between the RTO, the business and potential students

- place more emphasis on the pre-training interview – intensify the interview information gathering process, ensuring the qualification or units of competency are the appropriate training for the participants

- reframe the pre-training interview more along the lines of a training needs analysis with the employer and employee with regards to traineeships or Skills for Growth type programs.

- develop closer relationships with Job Services Australia (JSA) in order to establish the true career pathway of a job seeker rather than in some instances an ad hoc decision by JSA or job seeker.

IBC pointed out that the SSA tool is useful but that problems remain in the VET system for reporting. As experts in understanding funding programs, IBC can provide detailed examples of the problems of reporting accurately, given the implementation of various government funded programs and given the challenge of correctly reporting the training and assessment activity within those programs.

IBC has substantial experience in the field of retail training and the meeting reporting requirements, and finds that the challenges involved in trying to report correctly are increasing. These systemic issues need addressing.

Yum! Restaurants Australia case study (section seven)

Counter to the myth that training is compulsory in many restaurants, the training in Yum! Restaurants is voluntary and the RTO has low withdrawal rates. In the six months covered by this SSA pilot project, 62 people withdrew from a total of around 750, a non-completion rate of 8.3%.

Yum! RTO people in Tasmania, South Australia and Victoria found the SSA tool easy to use and intended to keep using a customised version of it. Where appropriate, they intend to ask more questions beyond the question in the SSA tool about the primary reason for withdrawal.

In using the tool during the 2010 trial, staff found that individuals' primary reason for leaving is a lot more varied than what they thought it would be. Use of the tool has encouraged RTO people at Yum! to speak directly to any trainee considering withdrawing, to find out more information about their reasons for considering withdrawal, rather than waiting till the withdrawal had occurred.

Involvement in the SSA project has encouraged the RTO people at Yum! to look more closely at the data about non-completion, even though there are so few withdrawals. They will remain alert in the future to any trends that could be investigated.

The Yum! case study is also an example of experienced RTO managers finding unexpected value in non-completion data, such the finding that people withdraw for a range of reasons not just resignation from the job.

Findings about the pilot approach – from quantitative data (section eight)

149 students at the three RTOs were non-completers in the six month period from mid-July 2010, representing a non-completion rate across the three providers of 9.3%.

The top three reasons why students initially enrolled in a retail training course in these three RTOs were work-related: to improve skills in the current job (46.3%), to get a job/career (23.5%), or to get a raise or promotion (11.4%).

85.2% of the non-completing students indicated that at the time of enrolment that they did intend to complete the course – implying that other factors, not existing at the time of enrolment, prevented completion.

Knowing what exactly these factors are will greatly assist in the better management of non-completions within retail skills training and the SSA tool has worked well in identifying these factors. Just under 45% of all respondents indicated one of the following three work-related reasons for withdrawal: resigned from job (25.5%), found employment elsewhere (12.8%), job was terminated (6.7%)

This finding has significant bearing upon the understanding of an RTO's ability to manage non-completions amongst retail enrolments, for RTOs have little or no influence over the dynamics of change within their student's workplace, such as resignation, job change or job termination. That is, RTOs have no influence over the decisions of the majority of those who terminate their enrolment prior to completion.

Significantly, 82.6% of non-completing students indicated that they had not achieved their intended goal prior to completion of training – once again implying that other factors prevented this completion.

Findings from an analysis of qualitative data (section nine)

The three RTOs found the tool easy to use and effective in prompting a focus on reducing non-completions. The RTOs in some cases encouraged other stakeholders such as employers and Australian Apprenticeship Centre to be more attentive to the reasons for non-completion and to look for signals that a person might seek to withdraw.

The reason 'I resigned from my job' needed following up with more questioning because, although the reason for the resignation normally had nothing to do with the training, the trainer might be able to offer supportive suggestions to the person, such as had they considered continuing the program when they returned to the workforce.

New practices stimulated by using the SSA tool and approach included reviewing the wording and use of current withdrawal forms at the both the RTO and the AAC. All three RTOs would like to make their own customised variations to the existing SSA Excel tool. All three wanted to add a comments column attached to the reasons for withdrawing. One RTO is intending to use the tool as a start on developing a systematic approach to non-completions across the whole faculty or 'enterprise'.

Initial trialling confirmed that the SSA data collection tool for non-completions has intrinsic and immediate value to providers, so there would seem to be sense in SSA releasing a mature version of the tool after this project concludes. If SSA decides to provide this tool and approach to training providers, key messages it can convey are that the data will disprove the view that retail programs have high withdrawal rates, the data will show that withdrawals are mostly not due to the training, the data will provide valuable insights into previous customers, and the data will encourage providers to remove any barriers to student completion that are within the reach of providers.

The interviewees understood that AVETMISS does not collect useful data about non-completions so they all intend to keep using the SSA tool, particularly so that they can provide appropriate advice and support when people withdraw, such as what options are open to them to continue training. Use of the SSA tool may also identify that some funded programs result in the majority of non-completions, and this information needs to be fed back to the funding body.

Design of a possible AVETMISS data file on non-completions (section ten)

This section sets out the design of a possible AVETMISS data file on non-completions that could be added to the current AVETMISS. The design of the data file is based on the normal AVETMISS structure. The design is also based on the findings from this research project.

The SSA non-completion data file has been designed for incorporation into the AVETMISS data collection. It requires one record for each student who withdraws from a course of study/qualification. Each record consists of the following five variables:

- Unique identifier

- Intention to complete

- Primary reason for enrolling

- Achieved intended goal

- Primary reason for withdrawing.

Because the SSA non-completion data file is designed to be incorporated within the AVETMISS data collection, each of the five variables in the non-completion data can be defined within the framework of the AVETMISS Data Element Definitions.

The likelihood of NCVER adopting this file in the near future is low, given that it has announced its proposed changes to AVETMISS for the next three years. Hence, SSA is encouraged to investigate whether the VET data work being undertaken by COAG could take on board this recommendation. SSA is also encouraged to promote the principles of this file to individual providers and those technology companies that supply data systems to providers.

The current design of the tool could be viewed as a first draft. A second draft could see the following change: the ordering of the 15 possible reasons for non-completions into say 5 categories with sub-categories. If this tool is adapted and modified by individual RTOs, it is recommended that they add a comments column to adjoin the 'primary reason for withdrawing' column.

An idea existed at the commencement of this project that a main goal of this project might be to have the tool approved as an additional NAT file for AVETMISS collection purposes. This priority is now being challenged by fact that many providers have their own data collection systems and the best use of the SSA tool might be if providers embedded it, or a version of it, in their collection systems. The 2010 trials suggest that tool has immediate use as an inspiration or encouragement to providers to gather more data about non-completions and be more proactive in reducing the number of non-completions.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: That Services Skills Australia promotes to VET stakeholders the benefits of understanding all the factors impacting on the measurement of completions and non-completions, to inform improvements to AVETMISS and the national VET provider collection.

Recommendation 2: That Services Skills Australia promotes in VET the findings from this research project about the major reasons for students not completing.

Recommendation 3: That Service Skills Australia draws on this report to publicly challenge some false assumptions about non-completion: for example, that students do not complete because retail training is of low value; or that non-completions are the result of poor delivery by training providers.

Recommendation 4: That Services Skills Australia use the findings from this research about the limitations of AVETMISS and the national VET provider collection to discourage the public use of data about completion rates based on that national VET provider collection.

Recommendation 5. That Service Skills Australia promote collaboration between such groups as Australian Apprenticeship Centres, State Governments, NCVER and training providers, in order to improve the recording and exchange of data about reasons for non-completions beyond the bland category of "reason unknown".

Recommendation 6. That Service Skills Australia uses the best practice of the three providers cited in this report to promote new practices within other providers with regard to monitoring and understanding the reasons for non-completion and ways to reduce them.

Recommendation 7. That Service Skills Australia highlight to providers that most of the reasons for non-completion are work and home/family related and most are "short term", such as an illness or job promotion, and hence providers can encourage non-completers with "short term" reasons for withdrawing to consider resuming their study program in the near future.

Recommendation 8. That Service Skills Australia consider the release a version of the Excel tool, badged say as 'The SSA Optimising Completions Approach' or similar title, for the free use of interested RTOs, encouraging users to read this report in order to understand the origins, purpose and value of the tool and the approach.

Recommendation 9. That if Service Skills Australia provides this tool and approach to training providers, key messages it can convey are that the data will disprove the view that retail programs have high withdrawal rates, the data will show that withdrawals are mostly not due to the training, the data will provide valuable insights into previous customers, and the data will encourage providers to remove any barriers to student completion that are within the reach of providers.

Recommendation 10. That Service Skills Australia request of NCVER that it consider the incorporation into AVETMISS of the draft NAT file on reasons for non-completion.

Recommendation 11. That Service Skills Australia encourages COAG to consider the issue of measuring non-completions as part of its work on improving VET data.

Recommendation 12. That Service Skills Australia discuss with NCVER the view of stakeholders and a key finding from the case studies that the national VET provider collection is not user friendly for RTOs and there would be value in making it more accessible for providers.

Recommendation 13: That Services Skills Australia support COAG's establishment of an Australia wide unique student identifier.

Recommendation 14: That Service Skills Australia support and monitor the implementation of NCVER's Student Intention Survey, to determine the extent to which the survey adds value to the process of measuring and evaluating student outcomes.

1. Issues identified in the literature

This section sets out some major issues identified in the literature.

Key findings

Key findings in this section are as follows.

- The reasons for non-completion of a VET course are diverse and complex and this diversity and complexity is not being captured in the current national VET data collection. For example, researchers continually stress that a non-completion of a VET course does not necessarily mean that a student has not achieved what that individual set out to achieve from undertaking the course. Hence, a sole focus on measuring completion rates is underestimating the positive impact of VET on students.

- It is therefore important to research the full range of reasons for non-completion in order to identify different stakeholder perspectives, assumptions and goals. Such research and the consequent unpacking of issues could assist multiple stakeholders including policy makers, industry bodies, training providers and VET students.

- In relation to non-completions, an examination of AVETMISS raises the following issues:

  – Limited scope: AVETMISS does not capture all the reasons for non-completion although the Student Outcomes Survey does capture some reasons for 'module completers' not continuing training

  – Limited inclusion: AVETMISS only captures data from government funded VET programs and fee for service programs from government funded organisations

  – Internal limitations of the data:

    - Course enrolment can only be inferred from module enrolments. Not all students have the intention of completing the whole course.

    - No distinction is made between an application for a qualification and course completion. Students might complete a course and not apply for their qualification, or at least take their time in applying for a qualification.

    - The data does not capture those students who are awarded qualifications for courses other than those in which they were originally enrolled.

- Clearly, it is possible to improve the measurement of non-completion in VET, and governments acknowledge this fact: for example, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) is looking to the National VET Data Strategy to provide new output and outcome measures for VET. Additionally, NCVER is reviewing AVETMISS, although it's recent paper 'Review of the AVETMISS Standard for VET Providers: outcomes from the discussion paper' (NCVER 2010b) focuses on other areas of improvement to the Standard and does not recommend direct changes to the collection of data about non-completions.

- Ongoing research is required. There is a small body of VET research around the reasons why people do or don't complete their training and this could be augmented by further studies. However, there are only a handful of items in the literature that directly suggest ways to improve the data collection methods in the sector. This project generally adds to the first body of work and directly adds to the second.

1.1 Preamble

Two points need to be made at the start of this literature review. First, in the literature on student completions in the vocational education and training (VET) sector, the voice of industry stakeholders such as employers and employees is a minor one. Some views of employers and employees are quoted in the literature reviewed below, but the major voices in the literature are those of researchers and policy makers. This literature review and the subsequent section on stakeholder consultations attempt to turn up the volume on the views of employers and employees and show that they have a wide range of views about completions and non-completions and what they would like measured and recognised.

Second, this literature review and this project deliberately put the spotlight on student non-completions, but this is not meant to oppose those who champion and promote student completions of full qualifications. Far from it: student completions of full qualifications deserve to be honoured and respected. However, industry stakeholders have indicated to Service Skills Australia that the reasons for student non-completions deserve much more attention than they have received to date. This project is designed to unpack the wide range of reasons why people do not complete a course, to ensure that these reasons are also respected.

1.2 Focus of literature review

The literature review makes a start on the actions recommended in the SSA paper "Evaluation Frameworks for VET on completion rates – issues paper on completion rates 2009", including the following:

- to determine in the first instance if the current assumptions about the reasons for non-completions are correct

- to determine if the student and, where appropriate, the employer, have achieved their goals through the training that was completed, that is, was the training valued

- to mount a case for a more consistent and accurate measurement system nationally.

In relation to challenging assumptions about non-completions, McInnis, Hartley, Polesel and Teese (2000) provide some summary comments about why assumptions need to be questioned:

There seem to be three prevailing assumptions underlying the lack of interest in this area in VET:

- Attrition is due to factors beyond the control of the institutes/ colleges and therefore cannot be influenced or addressed (Martinez 1995).

- Attrition is due to normal processes of over-enrolment, based on the expectation that large numbers will drop out early in their course (McGivney 1996).

- There is diversity in student motivations and expectations that is beyond the control of the institutions.

These assumptions are now being questioned. Accountability requirements, the need for increased efficiency in resource allocation and the diminishing pool of funds in the tertiary sector have led to increasing concern about the levels of non-completion (Kenwright 1997). As yet, however, they have not led to an increase in research in Australia into the processes associated with non-completion in the VET sector. (p.4)

In relation to whether the student and, where appropriate, the employer, have achieved their goals through the training that was completed, McInnis et al. (2000) make the point that non-completion does not mean failure:

Non-completion may signify the achievement of desired goals, either in the sense that skills have been gained, employment outcomes realised or articulation to further or higher studies successfully negotiated. (p.1)

In relation to mounting a case for a more consistent and accurate measurement system nationally, they also provide a view that remains largely unchallenged a decade later: "The current data sources on non-completion are far from adequate if they are to serve the needs of multiple stakeholders" (p.1).

The brief quotations above indicate that Service Skills Australia's implicit concerns about the assumptions about non-completions and the accuracy of national data, as set out above and validated by further research cited below, are well founded and worthy of further investigation.

1.3 Definitions

Some brief comments on key terms used in this literature review are as follows:

- **Completion.** A number of different definitions exist for the concept of completion in VET. Grant (2003, p.17) quotes Foyster et al. (1999) who defined course completion as 'completing the number of distinct hours of study equivalent to the specified curriculum hours for a course', but Grant then points out the limitations of this definition. Grant himself then offers an alternative definition and immediately follows up with a list of limitations:

  Course completion occurs at that stage when a student completes the requirements for the award of a nationally-recognised qualification.

  It is recognised that there are many shortcomings with this definition. In practice, course completion is likely to be made more complex by factors such as:

  – students being awarded an approved exit qualification prior to completing the course in which they originally enrolled

  – students completing the requirements of a course as the result of an approved recognition process

  – students of unknown enrolment status who may or may not be continuing in a course

  – students transferring out of one course into another, or into one course from another

  – policy differences and local practices in various contexts. (p.19)

- **Non-completion.** McInnis et al. (2000) note some difficulties in defining non-completion:

  Analysis of non-completion in both the VET and HE sectors is confounded by problems of definition. Attrition, dropout, discontinuance, withdrawal and non-completion are often used interchangeably in the literature. (p.5)

They also identify different perspectives on and implicit definitions of non-completion:

> Different perspectives on non-completion might perhaps be characterised as the institutional view and the systems view. A student who leaves an institution and goes to another institution either soon after or some time later is a non-completer from the perspective of the original institution, but not from the perspective of the system. Price, Harte and Cole (1991) in fact suggest three categories of withdrawal: systems attrition, institutional attrition, and internal attrition, the latter referring to students who transfer between courses within the same institution. They are not lost to a particular institution but they contribute to course attrition in institutional and national statistics. And, as we note throughout the review, there is the perspective of the individual. Tinto (1993) suggests that if the leaver does not define his or her behaviour as representing a form of failure, neither should the institution (p. 132). (p.6)

In brief and as further illustrated in the discussion below, the concepts of completion and non-completion are contested, problematic and unresolved. Tellingly, McInnis et al. (2000) entitle their first chapter "Problems of Definition".

1.4 Why is it important to research the reasons for non-completions?

There are compelling reasons why non-completions deserve further investigation. The first reason is the national political goal, following on from the Bradley Review, of increasing the number of people completing full qualifications in VET. Skills Australia (2010, p.5) recently argued that Australia needs to expand tertiary enrolments so that 62% of employees hold Certificate III or above qualifications by 2015, rising to 70% by 2025. This Australian aspiration is not unique in the global economy: many other areas in the world such as Europe have a similar aspiration (Shreeve 2009; CEDEFOP 2009).

The second good reason to examine non-completions is the issue of equity. Much of the literature on non-completion is about equity groups and a concern that people with the least power are at risk by not completing their study programs. For example, Robinson and Bamblett (1998, in Dumbrell 2000, p.19) note that VET module outcomes for indigenous people still fall below the non-indigenous population, with lower pass rates and higher withdrawal rates.

To balance the national push for more people to acquire full qualifications, McInnis et al. (2000) caution against a negative view of those who don't complete programs: "non-completion is not necessarily negative" (p.8).

> In the VET sector, non-completion of modules does not necessarily signify a negative outcome, any more than non-completion of a course does for a student whose goal is a marketable skill rather than a qualification:

> ...completion is an institutional artefact...To the student who seeks a job in the field, completing the programme becomes irrelevant as soon as a job is available. The categories 'graduate' and 'dropout' lose much of their force when viewed in this light (Cohen and Brawer 1996). (p.9)

They reiterate that non-completion in both the VET and HE student experience "does not always equate with failure" (p.1).

> Non-completion may signify the achievement of desired goals, either in the sense that skills have been gained, employment outcomes realised or articulation to further or higher studies successfully negotiated. Given that many students return to study fairly soon after withdrawing from a course, and a substantial number return at some time later, the notion of non-completion from a lifelong learning perspective is less meaningful than it once was. However, for the most part, non-completion remains a serious problem, especially for students from disadvantaged circumstances and in particular fields of study and disciplines. (p.1)

Dumbrell (2000) adds that the VET system is liable to underestimate its impact if it takes too narrow a focus on course completion:

> … the VET system is probably considerably underestimating the dimension of its outputs (and hence the overall impact of its outcomes) because it has a significant emphasis on course completion. Because many students do not seek to complete courses, but simply aim to gain skills associated with individual modules, the system is distinct from other areas of education and probably requires an expansion of its outcome measures. (p.32)

Dumbrell adds that "partial completers" are both common and an important outcome for VET providers. "Partial completers" as those students "who, before leaving the course, successfully completed at their first attempt, the modules they enrolled in, and the sum of the hours for these modules was less than the hours specified for the course" (p.16).

> A large number of VET clients undertake selected modules rather than whole courses. In 1997 over 46 per cent of clients undertook one or two modules in the year (NCVER 1998b). As Foyster, Fai and Shah (2000) show in their study, the number of TAFE students partially completing a course also represents an important output from the TAFE system and a largely unrecognised outcome. They found that almost twice as many TAFE students would be 'partial completers' of courses as would complete a course. They found that completion was much more likely for shorter courses; that is, of one year or less, rather than for longer courses. (p.16)

McInnis et al. (2000) add that the significance of completion, then, depends on the views of the stakeholders:

> For an employer, acquired skills may be more important than an assessed qualification, but a funding body that depends on module completion rates to assess programme efficacy and efficiency will nevertheless view non-assessment as non-completion and consequently as a system failure (Cleary and Nicholls 1998). (p.9)

They note that in both HE and VET, a student may view a job placement as a successful outcome "regardless of whether or not the module or course has been completed" (p.9).

Lewis (2008) reports on a high-level VET seminar at which the view was put that low completion rates are not always a sign of failure:

> A number of participants remarked upon the low completion rates for VET courses — in some areas less than 20 per cent. However, it was pointed out that many people take only the number of modules sufficient to upgrade their skills — which allows them to get a better job, promotion or a higher salary — and then purposefully abandon the course. This strategy could be regarded as optimising behaviour as far as both the student and the training sector are concerned. (p.10)

However, at the same seminar, others expressed dissatisfaction with this view:

> This explanation, however, did not carry weight with others who insisted that completion rates of 20 per cent are unacceptable, particularly for entry level training. In fact, one participant presented figures that show how markedly apprenticeship completions differ across the states: there is a 20 percentage-point difference between the highest and lowest states. This suggests that some states are more successful at delivering programs that apprentices want to complete. (p.10)

McInnis et al. (2000) also warn about the danger of being too positive about non-completion:

> There is, however, considerable danger in being overly positive about non-completion. Grubb (1995) maintains that low completion rates remain a concern, 'especially because they are particularly low for minority students' (1995, p.28) and he argues that we should still be concerned about non-completion because the economic benefits of community colleges are much higher for students who do complete their programmes. (p.9)

A number of VET reports specifically examine the reasons why students may not complete VET programs or acquire qualifications. For example:

- Karmel and Virk (2006), Snell and Hart (2008) and Karmel and Mlotkowsk (2010) examined reasons for the non-completion of apprenticeships and traineeships.

- Balatti, Gargano, Goldman, Wood and Woodlock (2004) identified intra-institutional factors that affect Indigenous students learning experiences and their completion rates in VET.

- Polesel, Davies and Teese (2004) considered the factors that influenced VET students to continue or discontinue their studies.

- Callan (2005) looked more broadly across the sector at why students leave VET with no recorded achievement.

- Misko and Priest (2009) analysed VET students' suggestions for improving their vocational education and training experience.

The breadth of these studies suggests that the reasons for non-completion are multiple and varied, with much to be gained from researchers continuing to examine reasons in relation to different cohorts of students and possibly other factors such as program, location and duration (e.g. Karmel & Mlotkowski 2010 examine duration).

While some reasons for non-completion may be unique to a cohort, other reasons are cited frequently in the literature, such as a lack of information about a program before students enrol. McInnis et al. (2000) summarise some common reasons for non-completion and suggest some practical interventions:

> Factors such as wrong choice of course or subject, poor preparation and lack of readiness and commitment, figure prominently in the reasons for non-completion. These suggest the need for a closer examination of the information, recruitment and selection processes. A substantial number of students are not at all well-informed about the nature and demands of the courses for which they apply. The mismatch between student expectations and reality is a primary cause of confusion and uncertainty. (p.1)

Employers, not just training providers, can assist with optimising completion rates. Mitchell, Dobbs and Ward (2008; 2009) on behalf of the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCI) examined employers' attitudes to the attraction and retention of apprentices and identify a range of reasons why apprentices become disengaged and/or leave. They provide a raft of suggested strategies employers can use to ensure apprentices are retained and complete their programs. Their studies underline that the reasons for non-completion and the types of possible interventions are many and varied.

In summary, it is important to research the reasons for non-completion to identify different perspectives, assumptions and goals. Such research and the consequent unpacking of issues could assist multiple stakeholders including policy makers, training providers and large numbers of students.

1.5 What don't we know about non-completions?

The above discussion shows that the reasons why students don't complete a program of study or acquire a full qualification are difficult to identify and may differ from one person or group to the next. In an extensive literature review based on overseas studies, McInnis et al. (2000) find that there may be multiple reasons for non-completion:

> … it is clear that student withdrawal is complex and often a very individualised process involving the interplay of institutional, social and personal factors. Identifying single factors influencing withdrawal is risky since the research consistently demonstrates that it is rarely the case that any one factor is the cause for a given student deciding to leave. (p.1)

They also caution that students who withdraw and students who persist "are not necessarily distinct groups", making it difficult to predict who will withdraw.

> Concerns and attitudes that lead to withdrawal for some students are shared by others who persist. This makes prediction of possible withdrawal very difficult and suggests that broad institutional strategies, as well as strategies directed at particularly vulnerable groups of students, are likely to be most effective. (p.20)

Lewis (2008) acknowledges the commonly expressed view that VET students don't complete a program because they have achieved all they want from it:

> The reasons for non-completion are many. For instance, it could be that students can't cope, or that when they start studying they find the modules are not a worthwhile investment in terms of getting a better job. Some students also achieve the skills they require before they complete their course, and so it makes sense to leave the VET system. (p.10)

McInnis et al. (2000) challenge this "conventional wisdom" that "dropouts" leave because they have achieved their goals:

> Grubb questions what he describes as having developed into a 'conventional wisdom'—the belief that dropouts leave because they have attained what they set out to achieve on enrolment. This, he argues, assumes sophistication among students that we cannot take for granted. Not all dropouts enrol knowing exactly what benefits they can expect to get from their course and exactly when to maximise these benefits by a strategic withdrawal. (p.10)

Lewis (2008) identifies two different camps around the issue of non-completion – those who see it as not necessarily student failure and those who are concerned about national inefficiency. But the two camps seem to agree that more research is needed about non-completion:

> He (NCVER's Tom Karmel) also emphasised that it is important not to confuse non-completion with failure, since many of the students picked up useful skills which could earn them better money or better jobs. Others however still regard non-completions as a waste of public money. Given the diversity of the VET population, clearly there are groups for whom the sector has been highly successful, and others for whom the rates of non-completion are sufficiently concerning as to suggest the need for more research. (Lewis 2008, p.10)

Dumbrell (2000) focuses on non-completion among equity groups and warns about the assumption that all equity groups are liable to have low completion rates:

> There are significant differences among target groups when module load pass/completion rates are examined. Nationally, female students achieve slightly better pass and completion rates than males. Those in rural and remote regions also appear to record pass and completion rates at least the equal of those in urban areas. On the other hand, indigenous students, those from a non-English-speaking background and those with a disability generally record pass and completion rates 5–10 percentage points or more below persons not in those categories. (pp.18-19)

Finally, at the 2008 VET seminar of leading VET policy makers and researchers, the question was left on the table at the conclusion of the event as to whether non-completion is a significant issue or not:

> Is non-completion an issue (bearing in mind that 88 per cent of students in VET study part-time and many people go to VET to gain skills, not necessarily qualifications), and, if it is, who are the individuals who do not complete, why do they not complete, who is accountable and what do people who don't complete go on to do? (Lewis 2008, p.18)

In brief, there is still more to be discovered and debated about the topic of non-completions in VET.

1.6 How does VET currently measure completions and non-completions?

To provide a framework for the collection of statistical data on VET, AVETMISS was established. This is a nationally agreed set of rules that facilitates the collection of consistent and accurate information on the VET sector. It is managed and supported by NCVER, with the state and territory training authorities providing information to training providers on jurisdictional data collection requirements.

At present, the AVETMISS data collection is only required for government funded training programs, but this may change. NCVER has been charged with the responsibility to improve the coverage of the national VET provider collection by extending its coverage to include private fee-for-service activity. This is an acknowledgement by governments of a data gap (correspondence to SSA from C. Fowler, 2009).

In practice the reasons for non-completions are often not recorded for many government funded programs, nor are they captured for non-government funded non-completions, and in most cases the completion rates of partial qualifications, such as statements of completion, are not recorded (SSA 2009, p.5). McInnis et al. (2000) note that the data sources on non-completion in both VET and higher education are far from adequate:

> Local variations in the compilation and interpretation of data at the institutional level make trend and comparative analysis of non-completion difficult. System and institutional level understandings of non-completion require different approaches to monitoring patterns of student departure and, in many cases, re-enrolment. (p.1)

Further discussion on the VET provider collection is provided in Appendix 4. While that discussion acknowledges the attributes and limitations of the VET provider collection, it emphasises that AVETMISS files are not easily navigated or understood. In short, they are not user friendly.

1.7 Could non-completions be measured in a more consistent and accurate way, nationally?

Based on the literature, the short answer to this question is yes, and there is acknowledgement at government level that overall VET data collection could be improved. As part of the reform program of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG), the National Senior Officials Committee (NSOC), the administrative arm of the Ministerial Council of Tertiary Education and Employment (MCTEE), has carriage of the National VET Data Strategy, which is to develop output and outcome measures for VET. Currently the National VET Data Strategy Action Group is developing an implementation plan for NSOC that encompasses the initiatives in the Allen Consulting Group Report on the National VET data strategy (January 2009). The COAG reform agenda "will place increasing reliance on measuring and reporting outcomes as distinct from focusing on the resources used (that is, inputs)" (Karmel 2009, p.3).

As part of this coordinated national approach, the National Training Statistics Committee is developing a student intentions survey to better understand student intentions at the time of enrolment and in particular whether they intend to complete a full qualification or specific competencies (correspondence to SSA from C. Fowler, 2009). These government initiatives are timely, as there would only seem to be benefits from an improved data collection approach nationally.

The Australian Higher Education sector has had, since a government announcement in 2003, a web-based information system called the Higher Education Information Management System (HEIMS) that provides a point of comparison and inspiration for the VET sector. HEIMS effectively enables the collection of a range of data on course completion and non-completion rates. Input, output and outcome data is collected and analysed to give a reasonably comprehensive data set for evaluating the performance of the higher education provider sector (SSA 2009, p.7).

Currently, VET non-completions are measured in a haphazard and incomplete manner, so a more consistent, accurate and structured approach, such as that modelled by HEIMS, is desirable. However, the issues involved are difficult ones: NCVER's Managing Director Tom Karmel (2009) places the measurement of outcomes in the category of "Avoiding the hard issues" and notes that "Completion rates would appear to be important and these have proved difficult to calculate" (p.11).

Karmel (2009) also challenges the value of solely counting the number of people with qualifications:

> If we think of VET as adding to human capital, then we would want to know the rate at which Australia's human capital is increasing. Indicators about the proportion of people with qualifications are an obvious measure. However, such a measure is very partial. In particular, qualifications are of no use if they do not attract a return. So I would be looking for evidence that vocational qualifications are valued in the workforce. The measures of this are employment rates and wage rates. With some trouble these can be combined into a measure of workforce quality (akin to the Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS] measures of factor productivity). (p.12)

Karmel also observes that completion rates are more relevant to some groups than others:

> For example, we know that outcomes are generally better for people who are upgrading their qualifications, but not necessarily for those who are broadening their skills. Thus completion rates of new entrants to the labour market are most likely to be of more importance than completion rates of older people, who may or may not be upgrading qualifications. (p.13)

Karmel's comments are a caution against using too glibly or simply any single measure such as the completion rate. His comments reinforce a key theme in this paper, that considerable care is needed in both measuring and interpreting completion and non-completion rates.

2. Issues identified by an analysis of AVETMISS

This section sets out issues related to AVETMISS, based in part on consultations with representatives of NCVER and COAG's relevant VET data committee in May 2010.

NCVER released a discussion paper on AVETMISS in mid-2010 and a paper summarising outcomes from the discussion paper in late 2010. Consultations for this project also revealed that the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) is aware of and working on key issues discussed in this paper.

Key findings

Key findings in this section are as follows.

- As Grant (2002) noted, there is no systematic national or state measurement of course completion rates. However, NCVER publishes a number of qualification completions tables as part of their annual 'Students and Courses' series.

- Aware of the limitations of the data contained in the national VET provider collection, and the impact of these limitations upon statistics such as those in the above tables, NCVER also undertakes ad hoc research into completion rates. While these approaches produce research of the highest quality, the advanced methodology is not feasible for wide-scale use. The irregularity of such publications makes it difficult to monitor course completion rates on a continual basis.

- The research undertaken for this project indicates that two primary issues in relation to AVETMISS are accuracy and the possibility of using alternative approaches to measure non-completions, as follows:

  - **Data accuracy:** There exist certain problems with the national VET provider collection that have the potential to create significant inaccuracies in the statistics reported. For instance, the use of qualification completion rates, as opposed to course completion rates, has the potential to significantly underestimate the actual number of course completions.

  - **Alternative future approaches:** Even if the issues concerning the accuracy of data within the national VET provider collection are solved, consultations reveal the view that qualification non-completion is not necessarily a negative outcome, for example, some students may never intend to complete a program; others may change employers or receive a promotion and decide not to continue with the program. Some alternative future approaches that may address some aspects of this matter are improvements to the definitions of student outcomes, recording students' intentions prior to undertaking their program and using alternative data sources, notably the Student Outcome Survey and the Employer Views Survey.

- NCVER (2010a) issued a discussion paper on AVETMISS and a paper (NCVER 2010b) on the outcomes of the discussion paper, containing a number of recommendations. The first recommendation, "Skill sets are identified within the Standard", can be expected to improve the data about completions. Another recommendation – that student intentions be investigated further – may also improve the current understanding about whether students intended at the outset to complete a program or skills set.

- However, in relation to many of the other issues around measuring non-completions with a view to improving the accuracy of completions data, no recommendations were made.

- The non-response by NCVER to the SSA submission to its review of AVETMISS suggests that SSA may have more impact in the short term at the training provider level, advocating good practice in the collection of non-completions data, rather than seeking changes to AVETMISS as detailed in section ten. Additionally, SSA may be better advised liaising with and supporting COAG regarding its work on VET data.

2.1 Discussion of key findings

In relation to data accuracy, the research identified three issues:

- **Module/unit of competency completion rates versus qualification completion rates.** The use of qualification completion rates, as opposed to course completion rates, has the potential to significantly underestimate the actual number of course completions. There are significant technical hurdles in calculating course completion rates from module/unit of competency completions.

- **Lack of a universal student identifier.** The lack of an Australia-wide client identifier has the potential to significantly inflate the number of non-completions of qualification at both an industry level, as well as at an institutional level. Fortunately COAG proposes the introduction of such an identifier in 2012.

- **Completion time.** While most students take between one and four years to complete their program, many students take much longer. Given this substantial range in the time taken to complete a qualification, completion rates cannot be derived by simply subtracting qualifications from enrolments for any given year.

In relation to alternative future approaches, the research identified three issues:

- **Improving the understanding of reasons for non-completion.** Outside some broad descriptions of outcomes for module/unit enrolments such as 'withdrawn' or 'continuing enrolment', the national VET provider collection does not gather information about why students fail to complete their course or qualifications. In the future, understanding better the reasons why students fail to complete their course or qualifications may change the way in which the VET community perceives educational outcomes.

- **Recording student intent.** By recording students' intentions prior to undertaking their program, the VET sector will be able to determine whether or not the training outcome met the students' expectations. NCVER is currently working on a Student Intention Survey, for dissemination later this year.

- **Using alternative data sources.** A number of alternative data sources have been suggested to either augment data captured as part of the national VET provider collection, or to provide an alternative source for completion data. These alternative data sources are the Student Outcome Survey and the Employer Views Survey. While both can provide some insight into completion rates, neither will provide a comprehensive overview. Perhaps the most significant shortcoming of both these surveys concerns the populations from which their samples are drawn.

2.2. Overview of AVETMISS and VET statistics

The collection and dissemination of statistical information relating to the Australian vocational education and training (VET) system is undertaken within the framework of AVETMISS, a statistical standard designed to meet the following three objectives

- the provision of a comprehensive and high-quality information repository to support policy development, research and evaluation in VET

- the provision of an information source that highlights public accountability and measurement of the state and national VET systems

- encouraging the use of this data for analytical purposes by making the data widely available. (NCVER, 2009, p.4).

Two broad categories of data collection are managed in accordance with the AVETMISS standards. The first is the Australian VET statistical collections, of which there are four components. Each component of the Australian VET statistical collections is governed by a separate AVETMISS specification, as follows:

- National VET provider collection: collects information on students, the modules and courses they undertake, and student achievements in their studies

- MCEETYA VET in schools collection: collects information on modules and courses, as well as student achievement in recognized VET studies undertaken as part of a secondary school qualification

- National VET financial data collection: collected information on the finances of state training authorities

- National apprentice and trainee collection: collects information on apprentices and trainees and their employers. (NCVER, 2009, p.4)

The second category of AVETMISS data collection is comprised of sample-based surveys of VET graduates, employers and client groups. These surveys are conducted on issues related to outcomes and perceptions of vocational education and training. Regular surveys conducted under the AVETMISS framework include:

- Student Outcomes Survey

- Survey of Employers' Use

- Views of the VET System

- Delivery of VET Offshore by Public Providers.

Also collected under the AVETMISS framework are a number of one-off targeted surveys.

2.3 AVETMISS and student completion rates

The national VET provider collection provides data on nationally recognised training and assessment programs delivered through government-funded and privately operated training providers (registered and non-registered).

The data is organised into a relational database comprising eleven two-dimensional data tables, each of which has a structure that is similar to those tables used in popular spreadsheet packages such as Excel. A table therefore has a number of rows and a number of columns. Each row represents an individual entry into the table, while each column represents a specific attribute of the table. For example, each row of the Client (NAT00080) table represents one student, while each row represents a different attribute of that student – such as first name, last name, and student number.

Note that the AVETMISS standard refers to these attributes as data fields. All data fields within the national VET provider collection, and their associated tables, are presented in Figure 1 below.

The relationships between tables are created by data fields that are common to two or more tables. For example, the Enrolment (NAT00120) table, Client (NAT00080) table, the Disability (NAT00090) table, and the Prior Educational Achievement (NAT00100) table all have a common data field known as "Client Identifier". This common "Client Identifier" allows the user to link data across all of these tables. That is, the user can determine prior educational achievements, as well as the disabilities amongst clients enrolled in specific subjects by linking various disparate data fields through the Client Identifier data field. Figure 2 below shows the relationships between each of the tables in the national VET provider collection, and identifies those data fields that are common to two or more tables. Note that all but one table of the tables are linked, either directly or indirectly, to each other.

The national VET provider collection contains data that can be used to analyse student completion rates. This data is contained within five tables of the collection, as follows:

- Enrolment (NAT00120)

- Client (NAT00080)

- Module/Unit of Competency (NAT00060)

- Course (NAT00030)

- Qualifications Completed (NAT00130).

The next section of this paper discusses the issue of calculating completion rates from the national VET provider collection.

Table 1 shows the schema for each of the eleven national VET provider collection tables, and the data fields contained within each table. Note that only the national data fields are reproduced here.

Figure 1:
Schema for the eleven national VET provider collection tables

Training Organisation
(NAT00010)

Training Authority Identifier
Training Authority Name
Address First Line
Address Second Line
Address Location
Postcode
State Identifier

Delivery Location (NAT00020)

Training Organisation Identifier
Training Organisation Delivery Location Identifier
Training Organisation Delivery Location Name
Postcode
State Identifier
Address Location
Country Identifier

Enrolment
(NAT00120)

Training Organisation Identifier
Client Identifier
Module/Unit of Competency Identifier
Enrolment Activity Start Date
Enrolment Activity End Date
Delivery Mode Identifier
Outcome Identifier
Funding Source – National
Commencing Course Identifier
Training Contract Identifier – New Apprenticeships
Client Identifier – New Apprenticeships
Study Reason Identifier
Vet in School Flags

Disabilty

Client Identifier
Disability Type Identifier

Course
(NAT00030)

Qualification/Course Identifier
Qualification/Course Name
Normal Hours
Qualification/Course Recognition Identifier
Qualification/Course Level of Education Identifier
Qualification/Course Field of Education Identifier
ANZSCO Identifier
VET Flag

Prior Educational Achievement
(NAT00100)

Client Identifier
Prior Educational Achievement Identifier

Qualifications Completed
(NAT00130)

Training Organisation Identifier
Qualification/Course Identifier
Client Identifier
Year Program Completed
Qualification Issued Flag

Submission to Managing Agent
(NAT00005)

Training Authority Identifier
Training Authority Name
Address First Line
Address Second Line
Address Postal – Suburb, Location or Town
Postcode
State Identifier
Contact Name
Telephone Number
Facsimile Number
Email Address

Client Postal Details
(NAT00085)

Client Identifier
Client Title
Client First Given Name
Client Last Name
Address First Line
Address Second Line
Address Postal – Suburb, Location or Town
State Identifier
Telephone Number – Home
Telephone Number – Work
Telephone Number – Mobile
Email Address

Module/Unit of Competency
(NAT00060)

Module/Unit of Competency Flag
Module/Unit of Competency Identifier
Module/Unit of Competency Name
Module/Unit of Competency Field of Education Identifier
VET Flag
Normal Hours

Client
(NAT00080)

Client Identifier
Name for Encryption
Highest School Level Completed
Sex
Date of Birth
Postcode
Indigenous Status Identifier
Main Language Spoken at Home
Labour Force Status Identifier
Country Identifier
Disability Flag
Prior Educational Achievement Flag
At School Flag
Proficiency in Spoken English Identifier
Address Postal – Suburb, Location or Town

This diagram shows the relationship between the eleven national VET provider collection tables, as well as the data fields that link tables together.

Figure 2:
Entity Relationship Diagram (ERD) between the national VET provider collection tables
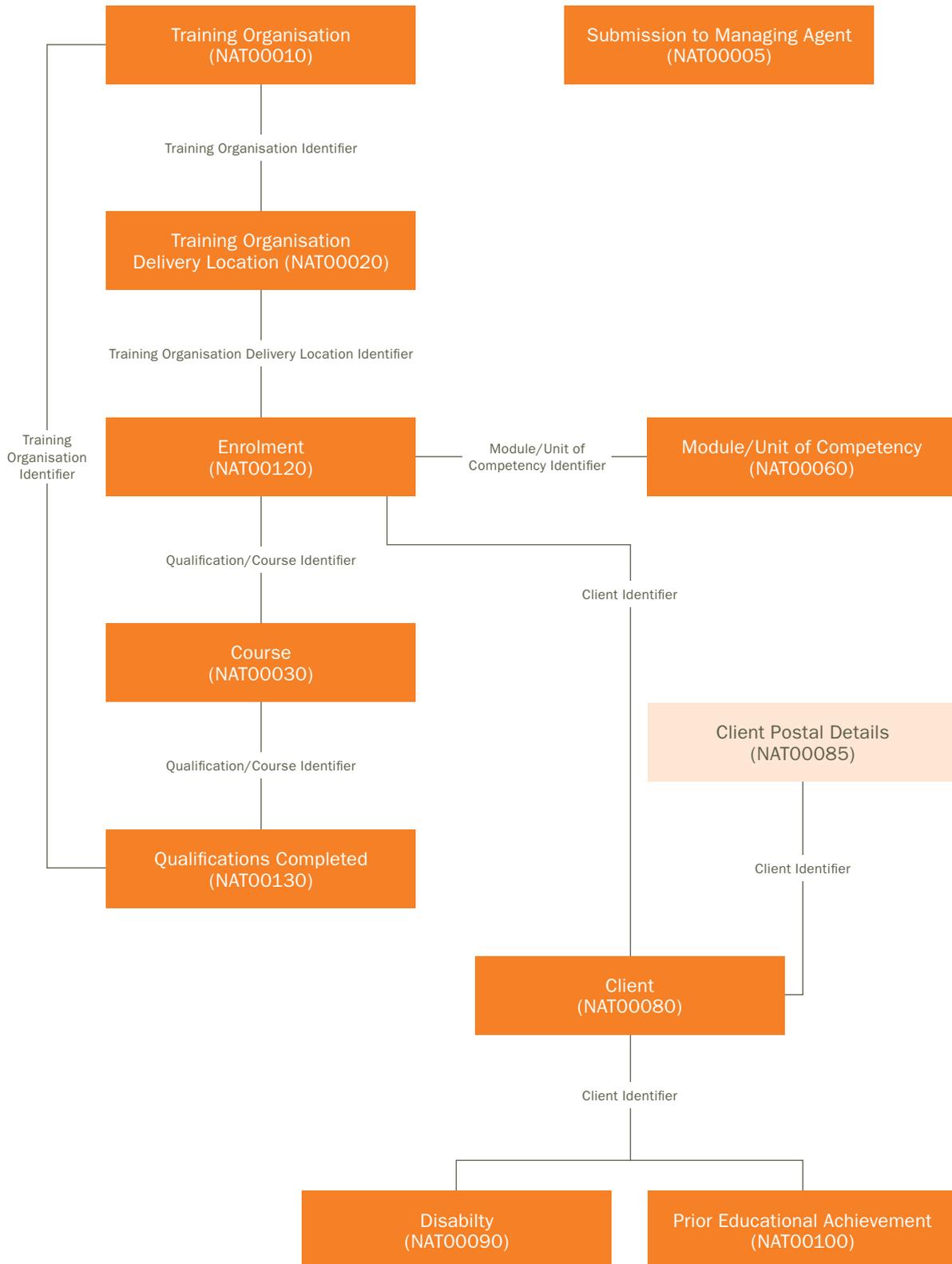
2.4. Calculating completion rates from the national VET provider collection

As Grant (2002) noted, there is no systematic national or state measurement of course completion rates. However, NCVER publishes a number of qualification completions tables as part of their annual 'Students and Courses' series. In the 2008 publication (NCVER, 2009a), three such qualification completion tables were provided, and are reproduced below.

Table 1:
Number ('000) of qualification completions, 2004-07 (NCVER, 2009a, p.17)

	2004 ('000)	2005 ('000)	2006 ('000)	2007 ('000)	2006–07 % changed
AQF qualifications[11]					
Diploma or higher	38.0	42.3	43.9	49.0	11.4
Certificate IV	53.0	58.5	51.0	59.2	16.2
Certificate III	102.6	112.5	112.1	121.3	8.2
Certificate II	64.2	64.7	64.9	78.3	20.7
Certificate I	16.8	20.1	21.5	27.2	26.5
Type of accreditation					
National training package[15] qualifications	211.7	237.8	237.0	277.8	17.2
Nationally and locally accredited courses	62.9	60.2	56.4	57.2	1.5
Total qualification completions[16,17]	**274.6**	**298.0**	**293.4**	**335.0**	**14.2**

Table 2:
Students ('000) by industry skills councils, 2004-2008 (NCVER, 2009a, p.13)

	2004	2005	2006	2007
Industry Skills Council				
Agri-Food	16.2	18.1	18.7	20.0
Community Services and Health	27.8	31.4	35.3	37.0
Construction and Property Services	12.1	14.2	16.2	17.1
Electrocomms and Energy Utilities	2.9	4.0	5.0	6.4
ForestWorks	0.7	0.6	0.4	0.4
Government	2.0	3.2	2.8	3.0
Innovation and Business	78.1	86.1	79.1	98.1
Manufacturing	9.3	12.0	12.3	15.1
Services	46.0	49.7	47.2	61.1
Skills DMC	1.4	1.4	1.5	1.9
Transport and Logistics	9.2	9.3	6.5	7.7
Totals				
Total Training packages assigned to industry skills councils	205.6	229.8	225.1	267.8
Total training packages not assigned to industry skills councils	6.1	8.0	11.9	9.9
Total training packages[15]	211.7	237.8	237.0	277.8
Total non-training packages	62.9	60.2	56.4	57.2
Total qualification completions	274.6	298.0	293.4	335.0

Table 3:
Qualification Completions ('000) in top 20 parent training packages, 2004-07
(NCVER, 2009a, p.13)

	2004 ('000)	2005 ('000)	2006 ('000)	2007 ('000)	%
Training package					
Business Services (BSA, BSB)	34.7	37.8	39.6	47.4	17.1
Community Services (CHC)	24.8	27.3	30.8	31.7	11.4
Tourism, Hospitality and Events (SIT, THH, THT)	21.0	23.6	21.5	31.6	11.4
Retail Services (SIR, WRR, WRP, WRW)	15.7	15.1	13.0	16.1	5.8
Information and Communications Technology (ICA)	13.1	12.8	11.7	15.2	5.5
Training and Assessment (BSZ, TAA)	13.7	15.1	8.6	12.9	4.7
Financial Services (FNA, FNB, FNS)	6.8	8.7	8.4	9.8	3.5
Automotive Industry Retail, Service and Repair (AUR)	5.1	7.6	11.7	9.8	3.5
General Construction (BCG)	3.8	5.7	6.6	9.0	3.2
Metal and Engineering (MEM)	4.2	5.9	6.8	7.7	2.8
Transport and Logistics (TDT, TLI)	8.2	8.2	5.1	6.1	2.2
Electrotechnology (UEE, UTE, UTL)	2.7	3.6	4.9	6.1	2.2
Health (HLT)	3.0	4.1	4.5	5.3	1.9
Amenity Horticulture (RTF, RUH)	4.5	4.7	4.5	4.6	1.7
Property Services (CPP, PRD, PRS)	4.0	4.8	6.2	4.6	1.6
Hairdressing (WRH)	2.4	3.1	4.0	4.1	1.5
Rural Production (RTE, RUA)	3.1	3.1	3.6	4.1	1.5
Australian Meat Industry (MTM)	2.5	3.0	3.8	3.9	1.4
Food Processing Industry (FDF)	3.2	3.6	3.1	3.6	1.3
Fitness Industry (SRF)	2.6	3.1	3.3	3.2	1.2
Qualification completions in top 20 training packages	**179.1**	**201.1**	**201.8**	**236.8**	**85.2**
Other training packages	32.6	36.7	35.2	41.0	14.8
Total training package completions	**211.7**	**237.8**	**237.0**	**277.8**	**100.0**

Aware of the limitations of the data contained in the national VET provider collection, and the impact of these limitations upon statistics such as those in the above tables, NCVER also undertakes ad hoc research into completion rates. As part of this research, data from the national VET provider collection is subjected to complex manipulations to minimise inconsistencies and error. The output is then run through complex statistical analyses to arrive at a somewhat more accurate estimation of completion rates (Mark and Karmel 2010). While these approaches produce research of the highest quality, the advanced methodology is not feasible for wide-scale use. The irregularity of such publications makes it difficult to monitor course completion rates on a continual basis.

From the broadest perspective, the use of national VET provider collection to calculate completion rates raises two sets of issues:

- **Data accuracy:** There exist certain problems with the national VET provider collection that have the potential to create significant inaccuracies in the statistics reported.

- **Alternative future approaches:** Even if the issues concerning the accuracy of data within the national VET provider collection are solved, consultations reveal that there still exists a view that qualification non-completion is not necessarily a negative outcome. For example, some students may never intend to complete a program; others may change employers or receive a promotion and decide not to continue with the program. Some alternative future approaches that may address some aspects of this matter are improvements to the definitions of student outcomes, recording students' intentions prior to undertaking their program and using alternative data sources, notably the Student Outcome Survey and the Employer Views Survey.

These sets of issues are discussed in the following two sub-sections.

2.5 Data accuracy

Statistical calculations are only as accurate as the data upon which they are based. The national VET provider collection provides a comprehensive data set that collects a broad range of VET data. While this data is invaluable to the understanding and evaluation of VET, there still exist a number of problems associated with its accuracy. Of particular importance are the following three issues:

- Module/unit of competency completion rates versus qualification completion rates

- Lack of a universal student identifier

- Completion time.

A discussion follows on these issues.

Module/unit of competency completion rates versus qualification completion rates

The national VET provider collection collects enrolment and completion data at the module/unit of competency level. This information is contained in the Enrolment (NAT00120) table. Specifically, enrolment and completion data can be used to monitor which students enrolled in which module/unit of competency, as well as which students either successfully completed or failed to complete a particular module/unit of competency. At this level, it is straightforward to subtract completions from enrolments to get a fairly accurate view of module/unit of competency completion rates.

The national VET provider collection also collects data on the issuance of qualifications; that is, data relating to students who apply for a qualification after having completed course requirements. This information is contained in the Qualifications Completed (NAT00130) table, and forms the basis for calculating qualification completion rates, as opposed to course completion rates.

It is important to note that the calculation of qualification completion rates is not dependent upon, nor is it linked to module/unit of competency completion rates. Rather, qualification completion rates are based upon records of those students who have applied for a qualification. It is generally understood that the number of successful qualification applications is not a good indication of course completion because not all students who finish their course will apply for a qualification. Further to this argument, the cost incurred in applying for a qualification can be a strong disincentive against making such an application.

The use of qualification completion rates, as opposed to course completion rates, has the potential to significantly underestimate the actual number of course completions. However, it should be acknowledged that there exist significant technical issues in calculating course completion rates from module/unit of competency completions. At the core of this problem is the complexity involved in monitoring the myriad relationships between modules/units of competency and courses. For example, different courses have different module/unit of competency requirements. Some courses are linked to embedded qualifications, while others are linked to dual qualifications. Some courses have work experience requirements, while others have practicum requirements.

There also exists the issue of recognition of prior learning (RPL) and credit for previous study and qualifications, to name a few. These and many more issues need to be overcome before an accurate link can be made between course/unit of competency completion rates and course completion rates.

Such complexity is not insurmountable. Moreover, the value gained by overcoming this problem can provide valuable information about the efficiency and effectiveness of VET.

Lack of an Australian-wide unique client identifier

All relational databases require unique identifiers to track items or individual. In order to track individual students through the VET system, each training organisation that contributes to the national VET provider collection provides a unique organisational 'client identifier' for each enrolled student – usually in the form of a student number. This organisational client identifier can be found within six of the eleven national VET provider collection tables, as follows:

- Enrolment (NAT00120)

- Client (NAT00080)

- Prior Educational Achievement (NAT00100)

- Qualifications Completed (NAT00130)

- Disability (NAT00090)

- Client Postal Details (NAT00085).

The proliferation of a client identifier throughout the various national VET provider collection tables indicates the importance placed upon linking data to individual students. Unfortunately, the client identifiers currently used in the national VET provider collection are only unique within each training organisation. There is no unique Australia wide client identifier that can track students across institutions.

This lack of a unique Australia wide client identifier can result in the multiple counting of a single student when such a student undertakes study across more than one training organisation. A student usually begins VET study by enrolling into a course with a training organisation. There are a number of students who, for many different reasons, choose to change their training providers at some point in their studies. If a student begins a course of study at one training institution, but finishes and obtains a qualification from another training organisation, that student will have two client identifiers in the national VET provider collection (one from each training organisation that they enrolled in). Because there is no Australia wide client identifier, there is no way of tracking students who have changed educational providers. The initial enrolment will therefore be calculated as a non-completion.

The lack of an Australia wide client identifier has the potential to significantly inflate the number of qualification non-completions at both an industry level, as well as at an institutional level. At an industry level, the multiple counting of student enrolments will lower the overall course completion rates. Similarly, at an institutional level, incomplete course enrolments will also lower the institutional course completion rate – even though these enrolments many have been accredited towards a qualification at another institution. Such anomalies make it difficult to accurately benchmark qualification completion rates between institutions, as well as between industry groups.

Note that COAG has announced the future implementation of an Australian-wide unique student identifier that will stay with an individual from primary school through to post-graduate studies. It is expected that this unique student identifier will be introduced by 2012 for Vocational Education and Training students (Communiqué from Council of Australian Governments, 7 December 2009).

Completion time

The way in which account is made for the time taken to complete a qualification has a critical impact upon the way in which course and qualification completion rates are viewed. Neither national nor state authorities have imposed a time period in which a qualification must be completed. While most students take between one and four years to complete their studies, a sizable portion of students take much longer. Given this substantial range in the time taken to complete a qualification, completion rates cannot be derived by simply subtracting qualifications from enrolments for a given year. It is well known that many students who qualified in the current year may have enrolled over one or more year previously. Similarly, those who enrolled in the current year may take two or more years to finish their course.

One way of overcoming this problem is to report qualifications over multiple expanding time periods: for example, simultaneously reporting qualification completions for the year 2008, as well as for the years 2008 and 2007, and for years 2008, 2007 and 2006. While NCVER has tried similar ways of accounting for the time factor in qualification completions, it is notable that there would seem to be no statistical convention for dealing with completion time.

2.6 Alternative future approaches

While the above issues concerning the accuracy of data within the national VET provider collection may be solved, consultations reveal that there still exists a belief that qualification non-completion is not necessarily a negative outcome – no matter how accurately it is measured. Anecdotal evidence suggests that there are a number of students that enrol into VET courses for the purpose of gaining some very specific skills and many of these students have no intention of completing their course. Alternatively, there are many students who fail to complete their course for a number of very positive reasons, such as having gained a promotion.

Currently, reasons for not completing a module/unit of competency are collected as part of the Enrolment (NAT00120) table. The 'Outcome Identifier' within this table collects data relating to "…the result or outcome of a client's participation in a unit of competency or module" (Australian Government, 2008, p.103). The choice of outcomes available within this identifier is limited to the topic of academic achievement, and contains the following options (Australian Government, 2008, p.103):

> 20 - Competency achieved/pass
>
> 30 - Competency not achieved/fail
>
> 40 - Withdrawn
>
> 51 - Recognition of prior learning granted
>
> 52 - Recognition of prior learning not granted
>
> 53 - Recognition of current competency granted
>
> 54 - Recognition of current competency not granted
>
> 60 - Credit transfer

70 - Continuing enrolment

81 - Non-assessed enrolment - Satisfactorily completed

82 - Non-assessed enrolment - Withdrawn or not satisfactorily completed

A fuller discussion of these issues is undertaken below, around the following topics:

- improving the understanding of reasons for non-completion

- recording student intent

- using alternative data sources.

Improving the understanding of reasons for non-completion

Outside these academic outcomes for module/unit enrolments, the national VET provider collection does not gather information about why students fail to complete their course or qualifications. Significantly, understanding the reasons why students fail to complete their course or qualifications may change the way in which the VET community perceives educational outcomes.

No doubt many students fail to complete their studies for a host of negative reasons. These might include the inability to cope with the academic standards, financial stress or personal reasons. There are others, however, who fail to complete their studies for reasons that are positive. For example, a student might disengage from study because he or she has obtained suitable employment.

There are many reasons as to why students fail to complete their course of study - not all of them negative. Understanding these reasons will not only provide a greater ability to respond to non-completions, but might also provide a greater appreciation of the complexities surrounding non-completions.

There are a number of difficulties in the collection of data relating to course non-completions. Perhaps the most significant of these is the issue of actually recognising when a student has disengaged from a course. As outlined above, the national VET provider collection cannot link module/unit of competency completions to course completions. Rather, course completions are estimated by the number of qualifications issues. Are those students who have not applied for a qualification non-completers? Further to this problem is the issue of physically contacting all those who have disengaged. Not only may it take considerable time to identify such students (after which many are no longer contactable), but the resources required to contact each and every disengaged student is often beyond the capacity of many training organisations.

While these issues are significant, they are not insurmountable. Just having the ability to link module/unit of competency outcomes to course outcomes will help solve some of these problems.

Recording student intent

There are limitations associated with the national VET provider collection in regard to outcome data, as well as difficulties associated with collecting outcome data. One possible solution to this problem is understanding student 'intent'. That is, by understanding students' intentions prior to undertaking their studies, it could be possible to determine whether or not the training outcome met the student's expectations.

The collection of data relating to student intent should be undertaken prior to the commencement of the training, however such collection would be difficult to organise. A possible solution is to dissociate the collection of student intention data from the National VET provider collection, preferring to collect student intention data through a national survey. Notably, NCVER is currently working on a Student Intention Survey, to be disseminated later this year.

Using alternative data sources

A number of alternative data sources have been suggested to either augment data captured as part of the National VET provider collection, or to provide an alternative source for completion data. These alternative data sources are:

- Student Outcome Survey

- Employer Views Survey.

While both surveys can provide some insight into completion rates, neither will provide a comprehensive overview. Perhaps the most significant shortcoming of both these surveys concerns the populations from which their samples are drawn. Respondents to the Student Outcome Survey are restricted to VET graduates only. Those that did not graduate, but might have had a very positive outcome from their training, are not included in the survey sample. Similarly, the Employer Views survey is completed by Employers. Understandably, employers might have very different attitudes to that of students when evaluating training outcomes.

The two surveys are sample based surveys. This means that they do not include all members of their target populations. Rather, they include enough samples so as to allow accurate inferences about the target population to be made. However, inferences are subject to inaccuracies. Moreover, the nature of sample surveys is such that the more stratified the data, the less reliable are the inferences. That is, the more the population is divided by its composite parts, the less reliable is the data. For example, inferences about positive outcomes from training are more reliable at the State level than at the RTO level. And inferences relating to large RTOs are more reliable than inferences relating to smaller RTOs.

Despite these shortcomings, there may still be a role for these surveys in the reporting and monitoring of student outcomes.

2.7 Addendum: AVETMISS review 2010

The above analysis of AVETMISS was prepared at the start of the project, in May-June 2010, to inform the project's field research. Since then NCVER (2010a) issued a discussion paper on AVETMISS and a paper (NCVER 2010b) on the outcomes of the discussion paper.

NCVER recommendations

NCVER (2010b) noted that "feedback to the discussion paper identified a significant number of required changes. Some changes were clear cut, with minimal impact on training organisations, and could be made in the short-term. Other changes require longer-term consultation, planning, and implementation. Therefore a two-phase approach has been proposed. The first phase comes into effect from January 2012 and the second from January 2014."

NCVER (2010b) recommends that:

- "For 2012

    – Skill sets are identified within the Standard.

    – Information identifying Commonwealth programs should be included in the Standard.

    – Work should be undertaken with jurisdictions to define a set of pre-apprenticeship or prevocational courses.

- "For 2014 further investigation is required on:

    – students' intentions

    – the definition of socioeconomic status in VET

    – international students

    – alignment of the VET and higher education data standards.

- "Other recommendations:

    – The validation rules should be introduced progressively for new fee-for-service providers.

    – Work should be undertaken to present a cut-down version of the Standard for registered training organisations so that information that can be collected from other sources is not required from RTOs.

    – Multiple-file formats are supported as part of the current redesign of the NCVER Validation Software.

    – No changes are made to the Standard to capture partial recognition of prior learning.

    – Further work should be undertaken to define a Standard for VET Workforce information, separate from the Standard for VET Providers."
    (NCVER 2010b, pp.7-8)

Observation

These recommendations demonstrate that AVETMISS is a complex domain and that NCVER is actively responding to a range of suggestions from the field. The first recommendation, "Skill sets are identified within the Standard", can be expected to improve the data about completions. Another recommendation – that student intentions be investigated further – may also improve the current understanding about whether students intended at the outset to complete a program or skills set, but the paper also acknowledges that "considerable feedback did not support collecting intentions data routinely on enrolment forms" (p.9).

However, in relation to many of the other issues around measuring non-completions with a view to improving the accuracy of completions data, no recommendations were made. In the light of this SSA report, this is regrettable.

In its response to the NCVER (2010a) discussion paper, Service Skills Australia provided to NCVER the literature review similar to one in section one of this report and the full stakeholder consultation report which is summarised in section two of this report. The two consultants and the SSA project member also flew to Adelaide in May 2010 to brief NCVER on the SSA project. The non-response by NCVER to the SSA submission suggests that SSA may have more impact in the short term at the training provider level, advocating good practice in the collection of non-completions data, rather than seeking changes to AVETMISS as detailed in section ten. Additionally, SSA may be better advised liaising with and supporting COAG regarding its work on VET data.

3. Issues identified by stakeholders

This section sets out issues identified in the stakeholder consultations.

Key findings

Key findings in this section are as follows.

- The core problem is the lack of data; the inadequacy of the data in the VET national data collection. Providers and others also want data that is easy to access.

- The AVETMISS method for recording non-completions is flawed, for instance in the apprenticeship area, where the system tracks contracts, not people.

- Non-completion does not always mean a student 'dropped out' in the sense of failing. Sometimes students don't complete because they are given insufficient information when they enrol about the potential outcomes of the training program.

- Students' circumstances sometimes change – for example, they leave the company or they leave the city where the program is conducted – and these non-completions are not negative.

- Stakeholders in enterprises find that a frequent reason for non-completion is because the student receives a promotion. Sometimes managers identify management talent in students who are enrolled in Certificate II or III programs and pull them out of those programs and enrol them in management programs.

- From a whole-of-system point of view, more accurate measurement of completion rates will enable policy planners to make informed judgments about where they allocate funding.

- Enterprises value the measurement of completions. Measuring completions enables an enterprise to track the effectiveness of its training and to ensure that the training staff are doing their job correctly.

- Stakeholders would value more information about peoples' intentions at the point of enrolment and the reasons why they exit. Enterprise RTOs in particular would value more information about who completes as well as who doesn't and why not.

- There are 'holes' in AVETMISS, and the national data collections, that need to be fixed and it is an 'elderly' system. Currently, the lack of a unique student identifier artificially inflates the total of non-completions, but there are plans to implement such an identifier in the near future.

- Many enterprise RTOs use their own tracking software and don't look at AVETMISS, and the national data collections, because they want to identify trends quickly.

- The main disadvantage of AVETMISS (and the national data collections) is that it doesn't measure the full national training effort. AVETMISS could provide much more information about themes or trends or differences between levels of programs or between locations.

- More student destination data needs to be collected, as it might point out problems with the way programs are designed, rather than place the spotlight solely on non-completion.

- Policy changes, such as a move to a more demand-based system where the funding follows the individual, may change VET data systems dramatically. Generally, VET policies will drive an increase in transparent and publicly available data.

3.1 Aim and methods

Interviews were conducted with range of stakeholders to ascertain their views about the issues of completion, non-completion and the national VET data collection method. To focus the attention of interviewees, the interview was based around the earlier literature review produced by this project, "Why measure non-completions?"

The interview was semi-structured, in that all interviewees were asked the same questions, to enable some comparison and grouping of responses, but some additional questions were asked to follow lines of thought. The interview questions are set out in the body of this section, in bold.

The interviewees were selected by Service Skills Australia as a group that represented a range of stakeholder views, from enterprises, some of whom are training providers, to industry and policy makers.

3.2 Definitions

The Australian Vocational Education and Training Management Information Statistical Standard (AVETMISS) for vocational education and training (VET) is the Standard that underpins the National VET provider collection. The NCVER paper "Review of the AVETMISS Standard: Discussion Paper" (June 2010) explains that AVETMISS "provides consistency in data definitions, which ensures accurate data for use in national data collections, where information is compiled from many different sources" (p.5). The data from the collection is also used for a number of purposes such as to track funding, inform policy, monitor performance and as a basis for research (p.5).

A number of stakeholders who are quoted in this document sometimes use the term AVETMISS when they mean the national data collections. At other times they use the term AVETMISS as shorthand to mean both the Standard and the collections. However, their views are still noteworthy and relevant to this project, which is interested in both AVETMISS and the data collections.

3.3 Stakeholder views

These interviews identified the following range of stakeholder views. Please note this summary is designed to reflect the range of views, not to champion some over others. On the other hand, some views have widespread support while others are those of an individual or small number.

Q1. "After skimming the literature review 'Why measure non-completions?', what are some issues that come to mind?"

A common view among the stakeholders interviewed was that the core problem is the lack of data; the inadequacy of the data in the VET national data collection. People want more data made available, and data that is easy to access.

A number of stakeholder comments focused on the methodology and definitions used in recording non-completions. Their views included the following:

- The methodology used to record non-completions is flawed, for instance in the apprenticeship area, where the system tracks contracts, not people.

- The definition of a completion needs to be broadened to include not only course completion but also completion of a skills set. Where an individual completes an intended learning path, that should be measured as a completion. A distinction can be made between training for full-time students, where a focus on course completion is important, and enterprise-specific training where a focus on module completions or competency completions is appropriate.

Some other stakeholders highlighted what they perceived as the rigid timetables of some training providers and the inflexible guidelines of funding bodies, as follows:

- Funding mechanisms make it difficult to record high levels of completion, because programs sometimes end before people are able to complete them.

- Institutional providers sometimes make it difficult for some people to complete programs, for example by being inflexible about delivery times.

- Governments are also contributing to non completions in the way they provide funding for training but not for intervention strategies that might reduce non-completion rates.

- An unexpected consequence of new funding arrangements in some parts of Australia is that the non-completion rate is not going to have a funding impact on the provider.

Some stakeholders expressed the view that the national VET data collection system is unable to acknowledge that some people may enrol in a program saying they have every intention to do the qualification when all they want are the core subjects to lead to employment. Without destination data, the system is unclear about the benefits of such partial completion.

Balancing that point of view which emphasises the inadequacies of the data collection system, several stakeholders suggested that those people who argue for the value of people participating in training just to acquire skills, with no intention of completing,

might be inadvertently disguising poor practice by providers not committed to ensuring completions. One stakeholder made the point that if the student didn't perceive the training to be of high value, that also might lead to a non-completion.

Another defence of the ongoing use of the completion rate was the view that data issues 'can be fixed', and the completion rate is still a worthwhile indicator. Completion is a legitimate indicator of a range of factors and the focus needs to be on those individual factors.

Enterprise RTOs tend to prioritise the measurement of completions, not non-completions, as high completion rates are both expected and usually obtained. Notably, these enterprises monitor their own completion rates using their internal measurement systems, not the national system.

Q2. "In your experience, what are some of the reasons for non-completions by VET students?"

One common view put by stakeholders was that non-completion does not always mean a student 'dropped out' in the sense of failing. Sometimes students don't complete because they are given insufficient information when they enrol about the potential outcomes of the training program. These stakeholders generally believe that the data measurement system may not be using valid methods for recording non-completions.

In enterprises, students often don't complete for two main reasons: they leave the company and therefore the training program or they receive a promotion. In some enterprises, lack of commitment from the store management or the student might be the main reasons for non-completion.

Q3. "In relation to the service skills industry, what is an example you can think of where non-completion was not a negative outcome?"

One view put was that some people leave a program part way through it, soon after they obtain the skills they want. Another common view was that students' circumstances sometimes change – for example, they leave the company or they leave the city where the program is conducted – and these non-completions are not negative.

Stakeholders in enterprises find that a frequent reason for non-completion is because the student receives a promotion. Sometimes managers identify management talent in students who are enrolled in Certificate II or III programs and pull them out of those programs and enrol them in management programs.

On the other hand, for some enterprises, all non-completions are viewed as negatives, especially where the company offers a recognition of prior learning (RPL) alternative and convenient pathway if the student cannot attend or finish the training. One stakeholder commented that if the non-completion is due to poor delivery then the program should be abandoned and a non-completion accepted as the better of two evils.

Some enterprises look beyond completions and value the broader learning that occurs in training programs. They believe that the way people build on their training and skills is more important than solely the completion of a program. The view was put that sometimes it is a good process if a participant undertakes a program and finds, through that study, that the industry is not appropriate for them.

Q4. "Why do you think it is important that (1) completions and (2) non-completions be measured?"

Enterprises value the measurement of completions. Measuring completions enables an enterprise to track the effectiveness of its training and to ensure that the training staff are doing their job correctly. Measuring completions also enables an enterprise to detect whether any negative patterns are developing of high levels of students not completing their programs, and to address the reasons for any such pattern. Overall, measuring completions can indicate the level of return on investment in a training program, at the enterprise level.

From a whole-of-system point of view, more accurate measurement of completion rates will enable policy planners to make informed judgments about where they allocate funding. One stakeholder expressed the view that from the individual student's point of view, measuring completions is perhaps less important than an individual keeping a record of progress in study, over their full career.

Q5. "What types of information or details do you need about completions and non-completions?

Generally stakeholders would value more information about peoples' intentions at the point of enrolment and the reasons why they exit. Enterprises in particular would value more information about who completes as well as who doesn't and why not.

Many interviewees noted that benchmarking data about completion and non-completion rates would be useful for providers, enterprises and industry. This industry-wide data could be used to address, in part, the reasons for non-completion. Accurate data about completions is needed for workforce development purposes.

In a move that would impact positively on completion rates, policy makers want to provide people with useful information about their opportunities in the labour force. People can make better decisions about which industry to enter if they have clear information about future opportunities for themselves in that industry.

Q6. "Regarding completions and non-completions, what information do you believe the sector currently (a) receives and (b) doesn't receive?"

Some stakeholders acknowledged that there are 'holes' in AVETMISS, and the national data collections, that need to be fixed and that it is an 'elderly' system. In future versions of the data collections, newer programming languages will use simpler language. Currently, the lack of a unique student identifier artificially inflates the total of non-completions, but there are plans to implement such an identifier in the near future.

Many stakeholders expressed the wish that the national information that is disseminated widely be put in a language more easily understood by industry. Many enterprises use their own tracking software and don't look at AVETMISS, and the national data collections, because they want to identify trends quickly.

Q7. "What do you see as the advantages and limitations of the AVETMISS system?"

Many stakeholders noted that the main disadvantage of AVETMISS (and the national data collections) is that it doesn't measure the full national training effort. AVETMISS could be improved. It could provide much more information about themes or trends or differences between levels of programs or between locations. A specific limitation of AVETMISS and the national data collections is that most students can't be tracked across systems.

Some enterprises perceive the compulsory provision of data for the national data collections as a compliance matter and believe that the collections are of no use to them. Some users have had difficulty entering data, which adds to the low value attached to AVETMISS and some scepticism about the accuracy and relevance of the national data collections.

Another view expressed by some stakeholders is that it is unfair to blame all problems on AVETMISS. For instance, funding at State level is focused on course enrolment, not for instance on skills sets, and this skews the AVETMISS results. Additionally, administrative practices in some registered training organisations do not encourage students to register that they have completed the program.

The view was expressed that perhaps some students don't formally claim they have completed the program because they don't value the qualification. Some training is very broad and has a loose link with the actual job.

A number of stakeholders were confident that improvements to AVETMISS and the national data collections will occur, noting that policy changes will drive changes, particularly the COAG work on a national data strategy.

Q8. What would you like to see improved in the way data is provided to the sector?"

Most stakeholders would like to see an improvement in the way data is collected and reported nationally. As part of those improvements, more information could be made available including the reasons for non-completion.

Currently some enterprises see little or no value in AVETMISS and the national data collections. If the VET data collection system was as good as the higher education system, it would have more value. More student destination data needs to be collected, as it might point out problems with the way programs are designed, rather than place the spotlight solely on non-completion.

Policy changes, such as a move to a more demand-based system where the funding follows the individual, may change VET data systems dramatically. Generally, VET policies will drive an increase in transparent and publicly available data.

Q9. "Are there any other issues about measuring non-completions that you haven't mentioned and would like to table?"

Many stakeholders interviewed expressed the view that non-completions need to be measured to fill a gap in the system. With that data in hand, enterprise will be better able to lower the number of non-completions. Some enterprises do not rely on AVETMISS to monitor non-completions, preferring to use their own data systems for this purpose.

Another common view tabled in the interviews was that, in some instances, the rigidity of the data collection system exaggerates non-completions. Some programs understandably have low completion rates because of the characteristics of the student cohorts. Some providers may be using VET enrolments to trigger payments but may also be contributing to the low completion rates.

Some enterprises would like to be able to compare their own completions data with national benchmarks. However, other enterprises avidly collect their own data and are first looking to improve their internal systems, rather than look to a national system. The future provision of student intention data was generally welcomed.

While policy makers need more and better data about completions and non-completions in order to make evidenced-based decisions, they may never have enough useful data because of the complex nature of the VET sector.

4. The design and initial piloting of the new approach

This section describes the development and initial piloting of an Excel tool and an overall approach for measuring non-completions, in the first three months of the trial, from July-September 2010. Data covering the period from October-December 2010 is set out in section nine.

Key findings

Key findings in this section are as follows.

- The pilot Excel tool for collecting data on non-completions and developed by the researchers in collaboration with the three RTOs was based on the five core questions, with subsidiary questions for question 5, offering respondents a choice of 15 reasons for leaving.

- In relation to the total numbers of retail trainees, in the ten weeks from mid-July to 30 September 2010 the providers reported non-completion rates of 2%, 4% and 11%; or completion rates of 98%, 96% and 89%.

- Improvements to the tool suggested by the providers in late September 2010 included the addition of a comments column for capturing additional information about an individual's reason for leaving, as this might enable the provider to offer suggestions for how the person could resume later with the same or a new provider. Some examples recorded in a comments column by one provider were: "extended period of leave due to family illness" and "moved to Queensland".

- All three providers reported that they found the data generated by the tool made them more conscious of steps they could take to minimise or remove the chances of non-completion. Each of the providers was now considering additional actions they could take to identify potential non-completers such as specific surveys, not general surveys on student satisfaction.

- The providers noted that the data they are required to provide for AVETMISS purposes, such as data about student satisfaction, is quite broad and not as specific or helpful as this data on non-completions.

- The providers identified the different parties within and outside their organisation who could be involved in a collaborative approach to ensuring low numbers of or nil non-completions. For example, within the organisation it might include the quality, student administration, general administration and training services sections. Parties outside the provider organisation who could be involved in collaborative activities included Australian Apprenticeship Centres, state governments and NCVER.

- Some of the providers believe that a major reason for non-completion is the inappropriate choice of study program: that is, the trainee was signed up for the wrong qualification. Australian Apprenticeship Centres were perhaps over-zealous in signing up new students.

- Providers also find that a frequent reason for non-completion is that staff hours are reduced, sometimes because the business is downsizing.

- Importantly, the tool has already clarified for the providers that:

  – all their non-completing students originally intended to complete the program

  – the reasons for non-completion are many and varied. Examples from one provider included: "I resigned from my job" ("to return to home town"); "I wanted to enrol in another course" ("moved to Melb to go to uni")

  – the reason for non-completion rarely (and never, in this sample of three providers, for the six months from July 2010) seems to be that the training and assessing is low quality in the view of the student

  – one reason for non-completion is that the trainee has moved on to a higher qualification, most often from a Certificate II to III, yet this is classified as a non-completion.

  – the reason for a non-completion within these three RTOs is not primarily because the trainees are disillusioned by the eventual wage in that profession or by a low value attached to a retail qualification.

4.1 Briefing for providers

Following the preparation of the papers discussed in the previous section – the literature review, the critique of AVETMISS and the report on the stakeholder interviews – in early July 2010 the consultants met with and briefed each of the three training providers who accepted an invitation to be involved in the project.

The three providers who volunteered to pilot a new approach to measuring non-completions were:

- an enterprise RTO, Yum! Restaurants Australia, involving their training in SA, TAS and VIC

- a public RTO, The Gordon, and retail students in Geelong, Victoria

- a private RTO, Integrity Business College with its substantial training operations across regional Victoria and metropolitan Melbourne.

The three RTOs were selected because, collectively, they covered the following criteria:

- one private RTO, one public RTO, one enterprise RTO

- at least one large RTO and one medium sized RTO

- regional provision and metropolitan provision

- classroom delivery and workplace delivery

- single state and multi-state delivery.

Following a briefing for the training providers, the researchers developed the first version of the Excel tool to be used by the providers, with accompanying notes about how to use it. The training providers gave feedback on the draft tool and changes were made, resulting in Version 2 being implemented in mid-July 2010. A Word version of the tool is set out in Appendix 5.

4.2 Description of tool and approach

The Excel tool for collecting data on non-completions and developed by the researchers in collaboration with the three RTOs was provisionally entitled 'Non-completions data entry tool for SSA Project'. The tool is based on the following five core questions, with subsidiary questions for question 5, offering respondents a choice of 15 reasons for leaving.

Q1. Student Identity Number

Q2. When you enrolled, did you intend to finish the course?

Q3. What was your main reason for enrolling in the course?

Q4. Even though you did not complete, did you achieve what you intended to achieve from the course?

Q5. What was your primary reason for leaving the course? (fifteen possible reasons were then read out).

The fifteen reasons related to Q5 were as follows:

1. I achieved what I wanted to achieve from the course

2. I could not balance work and study

3. I could not balance work and school commitments

4. I received a work promotion

5. The study was too difficult

6. I had financial difficulties

7. The course was poorly organised and delivered

8. I wanted to enrol in another course

9. It was too far to travel

10. I was dismissed by the training organisation

11. My job was terminated

12. I resigned from my job

13. I was offered a full time apprenticeship

14. I found employment elsewhere

15. Reasons unknown.

Instructions for providers on how to use the tool are set out in Appendix 6.

4.3 Description of data collection, July-Sept 2010

Data on non-completions was collected over the period from July-September 2010 by the three providers. As far as possible, each of the providers contacted every person not completing a retail course, using the interview script set out in Appendix 7.

Simultaneously, the researchers monitored the findings of the providers as follows:

- At least half of the two hour meetings with each of the providers on 5/6 July and 30 Sept/1 Oct was conducted as a structured interview. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed, with key excerpts included in sections 4-7 and 9 of this report. Please see Appendices 8 and 9 for outlines of the interview questions.

- Informal phone discussions and email communications between the researchers and the providers were undertaken from July-September, to monitor the progress of the trial.

- At the meetings on 30 Sept/1 October 2010 all three providers tabled summary sheets of statistics produced from the use of the trial tool.

4.4 Key findings from the initial trial of the tool, July-Sept 2010

In relation to the total numbers of retail trainees, in the ten weeks from mid-July to 30 September 2010:

- one provider reported 12 non-completions from a total cohort of around 750

- another provider reported 23 non-completions from a cohort of around 570

- another provider reported 30 non-completions from July-September from a cohort of 280.

The figures above represent non-completion rates of 2%, 4% and 11%; or completion rates of 98%, 96% and 89%. The number of non-completions was expected to increase by 30 November 2010, but these results represent a very low non-completion rate.

All three providers reported that they found the Excel tool easy to use. In some cases the task of contacting the non-completing student was delegated to an administrative staff member, suggesting it was straightforward to use. Within one provider, Yum!, three different state coordinators (SA, VIC, TAS) used the tool. Hence, across the three providers around nine-ten different people tested and used the tool and all found it user friendly.

Improvements to the tool suggested by the providers in late September 2010 included the following:

- An additional comments column was helpful for capturing additional information such as idiosyncratic details about an individual. Some examples recorded in a comments column by one provider are: "extended period of leave due to family illness" and "moved to Queensland". This comments column allowed the provider to add a more specific reason for the non-completion. For example, one provider recorded this information about a non-completing student: "I resigned from my job" was the main reason and "for medical reasons" a further, specific explanation.

- One provider suggested the fifteen reasons for non-completion could be grouped into five categories, accompanied by sub-categories.

One provider noted that the only difficult part of the exercise was that sometimes the RTO was not fully aware of a non-completion for over two weeks, during which time the person may have moved. This gap occurred because an intermediary, normally an Australian Apprentice Centre, was involved and needed to pass on the information to the training provider.

All three providers reported that the data generated by the tool was easy to read and very useful in immediately identifying trends. For instance, one provider who works across multiple States noticed that five people did not complete for the same reason in one State, so she is now checking on why that happened. Another provider noticed that 13 (57%) of the 23 non-completions were due to "I resigned my job": a trend which has encouraged that provider to delve deeper into the meaning of "I resigned my job".

All three providers reported that they found the data generated by the tool made them more conscious of steps they could take to minimise or remove the chances of non-completion. "We have never looked at it [non-completions] this closely," said one. Each of the providers was now considering additional actions they could take to identify potential non-completers such as specific surveys, not general surveys on student satisfaction. Another commented: "One way to increase completions is better monitoring of students, 'resulting' on a regular basis, [and] good communication with all parties".

The providers noted that the data they are required to provide for AVETMISS purposes, such as data about student satisfaction, is quite broad and not as specific or helpful as this data on non-completions.

An observation from a provider was that non-completion 'fell between the cracks' in that the two sections of the organisation that follow students' experiences most closely, the quality assurance department and the student administration area, have not collected non-completion data to date because they have focused more on capturing attendance data and managing student progression. In brief, non-completers have been overlooked.

The providers spoke about the different parties within and outside their organisation who could be drawn into a collaborative approach to ensuring low numbers or nil non-completions. For example, within the organisation it might include the quality, student administration, general administration and training services sections. Parties outside the provider organisation who could be involved in collaborative activities included Australian Apprenticeship Centres, state governments and NCVER.

After examining their own data on non-completions and reflecting on past experiences, some of the providers believe that a major reason for non-completion is the inappropriate choice of study program: that is, the trainee was signed up for the wrong qualification. The providers raised concerns about Australian Apprenticeship Centres perhaps being over zealous about signing up new students and, in their haste, not checking thoroughly whether the program was the best or appropriate fit with the new student. Providers also cited examples of the wrong paperwork being signed by the incoming student.

The view was put by the providers that the Australian Apprenticeship Centres could be encouraged to enter the actual reason for the cancellation of a traineeship, not just "reason unknown", as that is the standard but unhelpful information on the delta sheet that is sent through to the provider.

Providers also find that a frequent reason for non-completion is that staff hours are reduced, sometimes because the business is downsizing.

Importantly, the tool has already clarified for the providers that:

- all their non-completing students originally intended to complete the program

- the reasons for non-completion are many and varied. Examples from one provider included: "I resigned from my job" ("to return to home town"); "I wanted to enrol in another course" ("moved to Melb to go to uni")

- the reason for non-completion rarely (and never, in this sample of three providers, for the six months from July 2010) seems to be that the training and assessing is low quality in the view of the student

- one reason for non-completion is that the trainee has moved on to a higher qualification, most often from a Certificate II to III, yet this is classified as a non-completion.

Also, the tool clarified that the reason for a non-completion within these three RTOs is not primarily because the trainees are disillusioned by the eventual wage in that profession or by a low value attached to a retail qualification. This finding is at odds with recent NCVER research:

> For trade apprentices (specifically, electrotechnology and telecommunications, construction, and automotive and engineering) expected wages on completion significantly exceed expected wages in alternative employment. For most other occupations the value of completing the qualification is modest or even negative (notably, sales). This lack of a premium attached to completion suggests that there is a range of traineeships for which there is apparently little skills acquisition during the training job, or if there is the skills are not valued by the labour market over the general work experience obtained during the traineeship. (Karmel & Mlotkowski 2010, p.8). Bold added.

In contrast to this NCVER finding, set out in Table 1 below is a summary of the varied reasons for non-completion by 23 students from a group of 570 retail trainees at one of the three RTOs in the period July-Sept 2010. This brief summary demonstrates the dot points immediately above: for example, that the reasons for non-completion are many and varied.

Table 1.

Reasons for non-completion by 23 retail trainees at one RTO from July-Sept 2010

Intention to complete	Primary reason for enrolling	Achieved intended goal	Primary reason for leaving
23 x Yes	13 x To improve my skills in my current job	22 x No	13 x I resigned from my job · Medical reasons x 2 · Cancelled due to personal reasons · Moved to QLD · Returning to hometown · Left employment prior to first visit
	7 x To get a job	1 x Yes	3 x My job was terminated
	2 x Other		3 x I found employment elsewhere
	1 x unknown as never started		3 x Reasons unknown · Didn't want to continue with traineeship x 2 · Extended period of leave due to family illness
			1 x I wanted to enrol in another course · Went to University

Several observations about Table 1 data are as follows:

- all 23 students intended completing when they started the course

- only two trainees didn't want to continue with the traineeship and gave no further reason

- for 13 (57%) of the 23, resignation from the job was the reason for not completing the training.

4.5 Summary comment

Although a sample of three providers and around 1800 retail trainees is a modest sample, the high completion rates in these three providers suggests that NCVER might usefully revisit its view about the value of 'sales' training. These high completion rates indicate that trainees in these RTOs value retail training and that these three RTOs are providing high quality services.

5. The Gordon case study

This section describes the Gordon's experience in monitoring non-completions in retail programs from mid-July to mid-December 2010. The Gordon is the current award winner of the Victorian Large Provider of the year and in 2010 its trade apprenticeship commencements were up 46% and its traineeship commencements up 13%.

Key findings

Key findings in this section are as follows.

- The Gordon had around 570 retail trainees in the six month period when the new approach to monitoring non-completions was trialled. 51 or 8.9% of students withdrew in this period.

- Of the 51 who withdrew from retail training, 18 left because they resigned from their job (six because of pregnancy), 14 because they found work elsewhere, six because their job was terminated, two because they wanted to enrol in another program (university; nursing), one was offered a full-time apprenticeship and one found the study too difficult because of a mother's illness. Of the nine who cited "reason unknown" as the reason for withdrawing, further investigation revealed that one was going overseas, one had experienced a marriage breakdown, and another had become pregnant. All of these reasons for withdrawal were beyond the control of the Institute.

- Internally, and despite the reasons being beyond their control, the Gordon staff found the process of investigating non-completions encouraged them to reflect on their current programs and possible improvements to their processes, for example:

  - to be alert to what they called "short term" reasons for withdrawing, such as a family illness, and counsel those students to resume their study later

  - to offer students who leave because of, say, a shift in location, the option of completing the program online

  - to identify new ways for different sections of the Institute to jointly monitor and respond to non-completions

  - to communicate options and messages to their student cohort in ways that suit this cohort, most of whom are under 20 years.

- Externally, the Gordon staff also found the process of investigating non-completions encouraged them to examine their current collaborative processes with Australian Apprenticeship Centres and to seek more detailed data about students when they sign up. The Gordon will then conduct a more thorough induction for students, discussing options available to them in the case they withdraw later.

- The Gordon demonstrated very strongly the value of asking an additional question or two after asking the primary reason for withdrawal. For instance, if the student said the reason for withdrawing was resignation from the job, and further questioning revealed the reason was a pregnancy, the Gordon staff offered suggestions about how the student could continue the program in the future.

5.1 Overview of the Gordon

The Gordon is the current award winner of the Victorian Large Provider of the Year. It is the largest regional TAFE in Victoria, is over 120 years old, has a staff of 1,200 and enrols more than 26,000 students each year. Its students study on campus, off campus, in business or industry, and interstate and offshore Apprenticeship and traineeship programs, in many cases, are delivered on-site.

The Institute operates four campuses, two in Geelong, one in Colac and one at the Barwon Prison. It offers over 500 accredited courses and hundreds of short courses, including Australian School Based Apprenticeships, VET in schools, Certificate courses, Diplomas and Advanced Diplomas, Vocational Graduate Certificates, a Degree and pathway options to University.

Since the advent of the Victorian Skills Reform its Diploma and Advanced Diploma commencements have increased 10%.

5.2 Overview of retail training at the Gordon

To deliver retail training, the Gordon builds strong partnerships and works closely with industry. In the second half of 2010, during this SSA project, it had approximately 570 retail students involving ten major employers. Some of its trainers currently work in the retail industry.

The Gordon offers five accredited retail courses from Certificate I to Diploma level as well as the service of recognition of prior learning (RPL), skill sets, gap training and short courses. Additionally it conducted a WELL project involving cross collaboration of the common retail units of Retail and Personal Services.

In 2010 staff started developing the Diploma of Visual Merchandising containing online units that cross over all retail and personal services Diplomas. The Gordon is currently working with Deakin University on developing an articulation arrangement and dual qualifications.

The delivery and assessment is mainly in the workplace for traineeships, with blended and online learning offered for others. Staff have developed e-business practices for workplace delivery using Netbooks, with Sharepoint as the platform. This gives the staff mobility in the workplace by facilitating mobile access to training plans and award application, enabling digital signatures, allowing employer access to a customised portal site and offering trainees a 'study buddy' resource.

5.3 Findings from the implementation of the non-completions tool

Jane Trewin, Skill Centre Manager, Centre for Retail & Personal Services, the Gordon, reported that she and her colleagues enjoyed being involved in this project, and overall it encouraged staff to review courses and processes and to seek to identify ways of improving them:

> From collecting the data, it has given us an opportunity to get a clear picture of our courses, the processes and where we can improve.

These fresh insights included the realisation that the staff could market to those students who left courses for "short term reasons":

> We realise that we have been focused on the enrolment data collection and paperwork. But now see where we can utilise the chance to capitalise on marketing opportunities to those who have left courses for short term reasons.

> It will also show our clients that we understand their situation at the time, but can give them another opportunity to attend our courses again. Again we can look at the situation and offer other options where it may make it possible to avoid a non- completion, e.g. complete the course on-line.

The project has also helped the staff focus on the age profile of their student cohort and develop communication strategies and innovative learning resources to suit them:

> Another consideration we must note from this project is the age group of the non- completions (it is under 20 for 90%). We need to communicate with them the way they want us to.

> We have developed resources through innovative technology this year and it is being accepted by our youth cohort. It has made retail more appealing so it will be taken more seriously as a career, instead of a pathway to a career.

Staff found the tool easy to use, but sought additional information from students on some of the questions, especially on the primary reason for leaving.

Greg Waddell, Director, Living Well Enterprise, the Gordon, envisaged that the tool will be further customised in the centres within his Enterprise, including the centre Jane Trewin manages:

> From our point of view we will probably want to customise the tool for our purposes.

> The way we're now thinking about non-completion is something that we would look to take from Jane's skill centre across to the other skill centres in my enterprise. It's easier for us at the institute level to do that within an enterprise first.

He also envisaged the development of more than a tool, the development of an overall approach to non-completions:

> Based on our experience here, we will then look to utilise and develop the approach to the whole way we approach non-completion, probably as a pilot within my enterprise.

One part of this overall approach would be to develop a system for making contact with a non-completing student in the twelve months after they withdrew, said Greg:

> We've looked at standard strategies that we could apply. For example, with the ones which express short term reasons [for withdrawing]' we could build into our system that we would connect up with that person in twelve months' time. This would be a standard approach that we develop. And in a lot of cases we hope this work is going to be done by administrative staff and the more that we can make it easy for them to do, the better for us.

As part of this systematic procedure, the SSA tool needs to be customised, made into an approach and embedded in organisational strategy:

> We see it as an approach rather than a tool. We initially went to our staff in regard to a project that the Gordon was involved in. That probably has less strength in terms of getting commitment from staff than if you make it an approach which fits in with the strategy of the organisation. I think there's a whole narrative that we want to put this in.

5.4 Analysis of reasons for withdrawing

Table 1 below provides details of the 51 or 8.9% of retail trainee students who withdrew in the six month period from mid-July 2010, from a total cohort of around 570. Of this 51 who withdrew:

- 18 left their retail training because they resigned from their job

- 14 because they found work elsewhere

- six because their job was terminated

- two because they wanted to enrol in another program (university; nursing),

- one because of the offer of a full-time apprenticeship

- one because his/her mother had an illness, making the study too difficult.

Of the nine who cited "reason unknown" as the reason for withdrawing, further questioning by the Institute staff revealed that one was going overseas, another had experienced a marriage breakdown, and a number were pregnant.

Importantly, all of these reasons were beyond the control of the Institute.

Table 1:
Notes on 51 cases of non-completion by retail students at the Gordon,
mid-July - 7 December 2010

Intention to complete	Primary reason for enrolling	Achieved intended goal	Primary reason for leaving
51 students x Yes	28 x To improve my skills in my current job	49 x No	18 x I resigned from my job · Medical reasons (5 x pregnant) · Cancelled due to personal issues at home · Moved interstate or overseas · Returning to hometown · Left employment prior to first visit · Marriage breakup by employer · Only signed up to get a job –then saw pay rate · Retired · Walked out – abandoned duties
	16 x To get a job	2 x Yes	14 x I found employment elsewhere
	4 x Other		9 x reasons unknown. Additional follow up showed: · Didn't want to continue with traineeship/ going overseas · Extended period of leave due to family illness or pregnancy · Hours of employment reduced · Marriage breakup
	3 x unknown / never started (follow up showed found		6 x my job was terminated · Poor attendance and commitment / Not reliable
			2 x I wanted to enrol in another course · Went to University & Nursing
			1x offered a full time apprenticeship · Same employer different job
			1x study was too difficult · Mother had illness

Despite all these reasons being beyond the control of the Gordon, the staff still used the results to consider other ways they could assist students withdrawing, as cited above, for instance by encouraging students to complete online, or complete after the birth of their child, or, if they had moved location, to complete with another provider in their new location.

Externally, the Gordon staff also found the process of investigating non-completions encouraged them to examine their current collaborative processes with Australian Apprenticeship Centres. They now intend to work even more closely with the Centres, to seek more detailed data about students when they sign up. The Gordon will then conduct a more thorough induction for students when they begin their course, discussing options available to them in the case they withdraw later.

Jane Trewin noted:

> Being involved in this project has given our trainers more responsibility to follow up on data collection and not only rely on information from the Apprenticeship Centres. We are now looking at our processes with the Apprenticeship Centres where the data they collect for us could be made more detailed from the original sign up, and then we will conduct a more detailed induction.

5.5 Summary comment

The Gordon case study highlights the versatile response by staff. Instead of feeling affirmed by the finding that the reasons for non-completion were not their responsibility, the Gordon staff looked more deeply into the results and found ways they could offer more support to students. That is, they didn't rest when a student said they were withdrawing because, for instance, the student was moving to another location: the Gordon staff asked more questions to find out what they could do to assist that student.

The Gordon staff also demonstrated very strongly the value of asking an additional question after asking the reason for withdrawal. For instance, if the student said the reason for withdrawing was resignation from the job, and further questioning revealed the reason was personal issues at home, the Gordon staff offered suggestions about how the student could continue the program later.

6. Integrity Business College case study

This section describes the Integrity Business College (IBC) case study. IBC specialises in programs in the fields of retail, business, information technology and training and assessment and focuses on delivering mostly in the Melbourne metropolitan area and Victorian regional areas as well as Adelaide.

Key findings

Key findings in this section are as follows.

- IBC normally has a low level of withdrawals, on average around 5%, which IBC believes is due to the quality of delivery and its strong relationships with businesses and students. In the six months covered by this project, IBC had 36 withdrawals from its retail programs, representing around 12.85% of the group, mainly in one specific funded program area.

- The SSA tool helped IBC to identify four sets of reasons for non-completions of traineeships, mainly from Skills for Growth traineeships in regional, rural and some CBD areas of Victoria: incorrect sign-ups by Australian Apprenticeship Centres (e.g. signed up for the wrong qualification); businesses reduced hours due to increase in competitors; businesses downsizing; and students' health, financial and family issues.

- IBC has a significant IT strength and uses IT systems intensely to monitor students and programs. It found the SSA tool "is beneficial allowing for more detail to be captured for accurate reporting" and that it "is a great quality indicator tool in its own right".

- IBC has developed the following ideas about turning this information about withdrawals into an increase in completions:

  – develop closer relationship with Australian Apprenticeship Centres

  – upscale the communication between the RTO, the business and potential students

  – place more emphasis on the pre-training interview

  – reframe the pre-training interview more along the lines of a training needs analysis with the employer and employee

  – develop closer relationships with Job Services Australia (JSA)

- IBC pointed out that the SSA tool is useful but that problems remain in the VET system for reporting. As experts in understanding funding programs, IBC can provide detailed examples of the problems of reporting accurately, given the implementation of various government funded programs and given the challenge of correctly reporting the training and assessment activity within those programs.

- IBC has substantial experience in the field or retail training and the meeting reporting requirements, and finds that the challenges involved in trying to report correctly are increasing. These systemic issues need addressing.

6.1 Overview of Integrity Business College

Integrity Business College Australasia was established in 2005 due to increasing demand for accredited training by existing clients of its associate company Integrity Training Solutions. Integrity Training Solutions has been successfully operating since 1999 delivering specialised customised training as well as accredited training on behalf of existing registered training organisations such as the Australian Retail Association, Foodworks Supermarkets, Coles and employers within the retail and small business sector. Integrity Training Solutions remains a separate business identity servicing existing and new clients in non accredited programs and specialised consultancy areas.

Integrity Business College has established a reputation for delivering flexible, innovative, practical training throughout metropolitan and country Victoria. It has branch agencies in the following Victorian locations: Melbourne, Mildura, Gippsland and Colac. It also operates a branch in Adelaide, South Australia.

The College offers nationally recognised training in the areas of traineeships, business, information technology and retail. It also offers customised short courses in IT and retail. Additionally, it can provide specialist consultancy services.

The College has achieved Microsoft IT Academy Accreditation. As a Certified Partner, it specialises in delivering a range of information technology and developer training services based on Microsoft technology to small, medium, and enterprise business and government agencies, and individuals. As an Authorised Testing Centre for Microsoft Office Specialist, Microsoft Office Master, Adobe Certified Associate and Internet Core and Computing Certification, it conducts exams in those areas.

Some of its high profile clients include Harvey Norman, Mitre 10, Brown Brothers, IGA Supermarkets Victoria, Captain Snooze, BiLo, Collins Books, Coles, Betta Electrical and Mayne Logistics.

6.2 Overview of retail training by Integrity Business College

Specifically in the field of accredited training for retail, Integrity Business College provides training in Retail Operations from the level of Certificate II through to Diploma level. The courses are delivered around metropolitan and regional Victoria for small, medium and large organisations. The delivery is flexible, on-site and highly responsive to local needs.

It also offers customised short courses in retail and can provide specialist consultancy services in a range of retail fields including: Retail Merchandising Audits, Small Business Audits , Small Business Mentoring, Mystery Shopping, Policy and Procedure Development, Training Project Management, and Personality Profiling and Behavioural Analysis.

## 6.3 Findings from the implementation of the non-completions tool

IBC has a significant IT strength and uses IT systems intensely to monitor students and programs and it found the SSA tool "is beneficial allowing for more detail to be captured for accurate reporting" and that it "is a great quality indicator tool in its own right". Currently IBC gathers some of this information through the Quality Indicator Tool provided by Smart Surveys. IBC is of the view that "these (Smart) surveys could incorporate the questions from the SSA tool", particularly as Smart surveys already incorporate an employee and employer questionnaire.

The following Figure provides a snapshot of the withdrawals from IBC programs in the period mid-July to mid-November 2010. The results show that IBC has a low level of withdrawals, on average around 10%, an impressive result which IBC believes is due to the quality of delivery and its strong relationships with businesses and students.

Figure 1.
IBC enrolments compared with withdrawals mid-July to mid-November 2010

(BSB = accredited business programs, SIR = accredited retail programs, ICA = accredited IT programs, TAA = accredited program Training and Assessment)
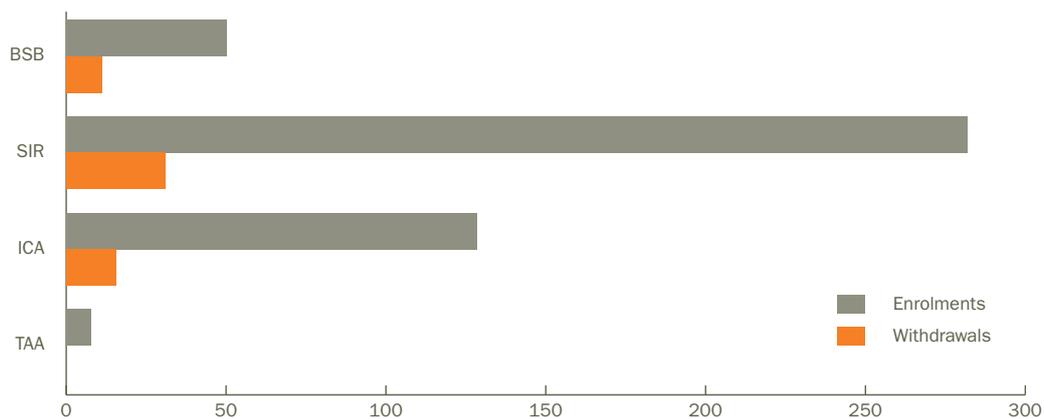
6.4 Analysis of reasons for withdrawing

In the six months covered by this project, IBC had 36 withdrawals from its retail programs, representing around 12.85% of the group, mainly in one specific funded program area, Skills for Growth. The SSA tool helped IBC to identify the following four sets of reasons for non-completions of traineeships, mainly Skills for Growth traineeships in regional, rural and some CBD areas of Victoria:

· incorrect signups by Australian Apprenticeship Centres (e.g. signed up for the wrong qualification)

· businesses reduced hours due to increase in competitors

· businesses downsizing

· health, financial and family issues.

These four reasons are prominent in Table 1 below. The table lists comments about why different individuals left their retail training.

Table 1.

Comments column, elaborating on 'Primary reason for leaving', for IBC cohort,
July-Dec 2010

Comments clarifying the primary reason for leaving
1. Skills for Growth traineeship - business reduced hours of staff due to large new competitor in town
2. Skills for Growth traineeship - business reduced hours of staff due to large new competitor in town
3. Skills for Growth trainee, moved to Wodonga very keen to continue training still discussing the options with IBC currently
4. Skills for Growth traineeship - signed but did not commence as he has decided to retire at the end of the year
5. Skills for Growth - no sign-up due to health concerns
6. Gained employment during the program
7. Dropped out of the program and not contactable
8. Withdrawn from the program due to issues with substances of abuse
9. Completed all the training but failed to submit final assessment
10. Moved away from area due to family issues and unable to attend due to travel distance
11. Withdrew after first session due to domestic issues (housing)
12. Had issues with Juvenile Justice Dept.
13. Was in the care of the State and had domestic issues
14. Skills for Growth Traineeship - business down-sized staff due to financial issues
15. After first few sessions realised retail not for him
16. Skills for Growth Traineeship - did not commence training - issues with required hours
17. Skills for Growth Traineeship - did not commence training - issues with required hours
18. Skills for Growth Traineeship - did not commence training - no reason given
19. Skills for Growth Traineeship - did not commence training - no reason given
20. Completed a Cert 2 qual, enrolled into a Cert 3, partly attended then became employed
21. Skills for Growth Traineeship - business down-sized staff - due to financial issues
22. Skills for Growth Traineeship - did not commence training - issues with required hours
23. Skills for Growth Traineeship - did not commence training - no reason given
24. Skills for Growth Traineeship - did not commence training - issues with required hours
25. Skills for Growth Traineeship - did not commence training - issues with required hours
26. Skills for Growth Traineeship - did not commence training - issues with required hours
27. Skills for Growth Traineeship - did not commence training - issues with required hours
28. Skills for Growth Traineeship - did not commence training - issues with required hours
29. Skills for Growth Traineeship - business down sized staff - due to financial issues
30. Skills for Growth - did not commence training due to other study commitments
31. Skills for Growth Traineeship - did not commence training - no reason given
32. Skills for Growth Traineeship - signed incorrectly by AAC to do a Cert 4 on a Fee for Service basis non traineeship
33. Skills for Growth Traineeship - did not commence training - issues with required hours
34. Skills for Growth Traineeship - Signed incorrectly by AAC
35. Skills for Growth Traineeship - Signed incorrectly by AAC
36. Skills for Growth Traineeship - Signed incorrectly by AAC

It is notable that all these reasons were not within the direct control of the College.

The two main reasons for non-completions for Victoria Training Guarantee programs were:

- trainee found employment

- specifically, the trainee completed AQF level II but withdrew from AQF level III due to finding employment.

With a focus on identifying best practice in reducing non-completions, IBC developed the following resolutions about turning this information about withdrawals into an increase in completions:

- develop closer relationship with Australian Apprenticeship Centres

- upscale the communication between the RTO, the business and potential students

- place more emphasis on the pre-training interview – intensify the interview information gathering process, ensuring the qualification or units of competency are the appropriate training for the participants

- reframe the pre-training interview more along the lines of a training needs analysis with the employer and employee with regards to traineeships or Skills for Growth type programs.

- develop closer relationships with Job Services Australia (JSA) in order to establish the true career pathway of a job seeker rather than in some instances an ad hoc decision by JSA or job seeker.

6.5 The reporting of completions and withdrawals

Managing Director Peter Venables was enthusiastic about participating in the SSA project as he is committed to improvement:

> We're interested in this project because one of the things we're focusing on is retention rates. I'm really interested and what I'd like to know is how can we do it better? What are we doing wrong? How can we improve?

IBC's Susie Simons, National RTO Compliance Manager, pointed out that the SSA tool is useful but that problems remain in the VET system for reporting:

> The SSA tool being implemented can help us with why people may be withdrawing from Retail training, but the actual reporting of training delivered and withdrawals [across the VET system] is possibly not being reported correctly.

Susie Simons provided a recent example of the problems of reporting accurately given the implementation of various government funded programs and given the challenge of correctly reporting the training and assessment activity within those programs. Susie Simons set out this case study:

I had an example of this myself recently within the Skills for Growth program with participants funded by the Victorian Training Guarantee. In this program we have people who have been enrolled in a full qualification (title only) Certificate III in Retail, but can select to only do one [unit of competency], five [units] or the full qualification if they are eligible.

> My question to Skills Victoria and our RMS vendor was how do we report this training correctly to ensure the training is not registered as a completion or as a withdrawal? Although the units of competency have been reported with the correct outcomes, what do we do with the reporting of the qualification, because a full qualification has not been completed?

> The answer could not be found in print anywhere: it was new codes and reporting in our RMS for uploading to Skills Victoria. The only way this answer was found was by asking the question of both Skills Victoria and our RMS vendor.

> We asked the question as we were uncertain as to how to report the results. If we had not asked the question these students, who were a sizable amount of retail students, their qualifications could have possibly been reported incorrectly.

Susie Simons adds that, with the Skills for Growth program, the retail participants were advised to report them as competent within the units of competency but the qualification is to be reported as an AVETMISS 6 commencing course identifier of "8" (new code) with an enrolment status of "Partial Attendance".

> With IBC's RMS a completion of a qualification means they have been issued with a full qualification certificate. I wonder how many RTOs may have reported these participants as having completed a qualification because they had completed the program they had been enrolled into. Or even reported them as Cancelled no penalty (withdraw) when they are not. Hopefully I have been able to emphasise the concern I have about the reporting via AVETMISS.

Susie Simons, who has deep experience in the field or retail training and the reporting requirements, added that the challenges involved in trying to report correctly are increasing:

> It is becoming increasingly harder each year, month or week to keep abreast of all of the changes being implemented, and it is quite evident that there are a lot of RTOs out there that do not understand what is required of them.

6.6 Summary comment

IBC has considerable capabilities in managing programs and offering quality training and a strong mix of highly experienced staff and an advanced capacity for using IT systems including for collecting student data. Hence it can effectively work its way through some of these challenges posed by the requirements of funded programs. As a result it can optimise completion rates and minimize withdrawals.

A question raised by this good practice case study is how can less experienced RTOs without the same in-house capabilities accurately record completion rates, where the program guidelines are unclear or ambiguous.

7. Yum! Restaurants Australia case study

This section describes the Yum! Restaurants Australia case study.

Yum! Restaurants Australia is a registered training organisation (RTO) offering nine qualifications from Certificate I through to Diploma of Retail Management to restaurants, including KFC and Pizza Hut.

Key findings

Key findings in this section are as follows.

- The training in Yum! restaurants is voluntary and it has low withdrawal rates. In the six months covered by this SSA pilot project, 62 people withdrew from a total of 750, a non-completion rate of 8.3%.

- The top three reasons for enrolling in a retail training program with Yum!, for those who withdrew from their training in July-December 2011 in Victoria, Tasmania and South Australia, were vocational reasons: to gain skills or a job/career or a promotion.

- Yum! RTO people in Tasmania, South Australia and Victoria found the SSA tool easy to use and intended to keep using a customised version of it. Where appropriate, they intend to ask more questions beyond the question in the SSA tool about the primary reason for withdrawal.

- In using the tool during the 2010 trial, staff found that individuals' primary reason for leaving is a lot more varied than what they thought it would be.

- Use of the tool has encouraged RTO people at Yum! to speak directly to any trainee considering withdrawing, to find out more information about their reasons for considering withdrawal, rather than waiting till the withdrawal had occurred.

- Involvement in the SSA project has encouraged the RTO people at Yum! to look more closely at the data about non-completion, even though there are so few withdrawals. They will remain alert in the future to any trends that could be investigated.

- The Yum! case study is also an example of experienced RTO managers finding unexpected value in non-completion data, such the finding that people withdraw for a range of reasons not just resignation from the job.

7.1 Overview of Yum! Restaurants Australia and its retail training

As one of the largest Quick Service restaurant companies in Australia, Yum! Restaurants employ approximately 7,000 restaurant-based employees in over 189 outlets in Victoria and 10,700 in total, including the above store employees.

Internationally, Yum! Restaurants is one the largest restaurant companies in the world with over 37,000 stores in 110 countries. Some of its well-known brands are KFC, Pizza Hut, Taco Bell and Long John Silver's.

Yum! Restaurants Australia is a registered training organisation (RTO) offering nine qualifications from Certificate I through to Diploma of Retail Management.

7.2 Findings from the implementation of the non-completions tool

The top three reasons for enrolling in a retail training program with Yum!, for those who withdrew from training in July-December 2011, were as follows:

- to improve my skills in my current job: 40.3%

- to get a job/career: 14.5%

- to obtain a raise or promotion: 17.7%.

In response to the question, only 4.8% answered "To learn something new – no specific connection to my job or career". These results show the seriousness of the vast majority of staff in seeking vocational outcomes from their training, such as skills, a job, a career and/or a promotion.

Given this seriousness about improving in their jobs, their withdrawal must have been for a significant reason, and their chances of pursuing this retail training at some later point in time is high. This finding is reinforced by the finding that 75.8% of those withdrawing said they did not achieve their goals and only 1.6% did. (Notably, 22.6% did not answer this question, so potentially most of the respondents did not achieve their goals). In other words, almost all wanted to complete the training.

Leanne Morison, RTO Manager for Tasmania, South Australia and Victoria and her colleagues found the SSA tool easy to use. In Tasmania the coordinator used the tool and in South Australia and Victoria the lead workplace assessors.

She suggested that one question could be reworded to make the meaning clearer.

> It was fine for us. The only thing was that one person interpreted a question incorrectly, so you could probably just look at the wording of that question. That would be my only improvement. But other than that it's really easy to use it, it was no problem at all.

She said that in future she intended to ask more questions following the question in the SSA tool about the primary reason for withdrawal. She also indicated that the tool had encouraged her and her colleagues to speak directly to any trainee considering withdrawing rather than waiting till the withdrawal had occurred, to find out more information about their reasons for considering withdrawal.

She added that they will continue to use the SSA tool after the project completes because of the ideas generated during the trial:

> It was definitely very interesting for us. And we were glad to have been involved in it. It's helped us and got us thinking about a few things too.

She intends to discuss at monthly meetings with her state representatives the data gathered through the use of the SSA tool, and she anticipates that this will lead to more communication with the managers in restaurants.

7.3 Analysis of reasons for withdrawing

The use of the tool showed that the main reason people withdrew was because they resigned from their job and/or found another job. For Leanne Morison, this raised questions she wants to ask these people, such as why they left their job and whether it was because they found the retail system not to their liking or because they wanted to change employers.

However, using the tool she found that "the primary reason for leaving is a lot more varied than what I thought it would be." The variety is illustrated in Table 1, containing the data from the non-completing students from one its cohorts.

Table 1.
Results from one Yum! cohort of students withdrawing, demonstrating the varied
reasons for leaving

Original intention to complete?	Reason for enrolling?	Achieved intended goal?	Primary reason for leaving?
Yes	To get a raise or promotion	No	My job was terminated
Yes	To improve my skills in my current job	No	My job was terminated
Yes	To get a raise or promotion	No	I could not balance work and study
Yes	To improve my skills in my current job	No	I could not balance work and school commitments
Yes	To improve my skills in my current job	Yes	I could not balance work and school commitments
Yes	To improve my skills in my current job	No	I could not balance work and study
Yes	To improve my skills in my current job	No	I could not balance work and school commitments
Yes	To learn something new – no immediate connection to my job or career	No	I could not balance work and study
Yes	To improve my skills in my current job	No	I resigned from my job
Yes	To improve my skills in my current job	No	I resigned from my job
Yes	To improve my skills in my current job	No	I could not balance work and study
Yes	To improve my skills in my current job	No	I resigned from my job
Yes	To improve my skills in my current job	No	I resigned from my job
Yes	To get a raise or promotion	No	I could not balance work and study
Yes	To get a job/career	No	I could not balance work and school commitments
Yes	To improve my skills in my current job	No	I could not balance work and study
Yes	To get a raise or promotion	No	I resigned from my job
Yes	To get a job/career	No	I resigned from my job
Yes	To improve my skills in my current job	No	I resigned from my job
Yes	To get a raise or promotion	No	I wanted to enrol in another course

Given the wide range of reasons for students withdrawing, Leanne Morison said she is now aware that the assumptions she used to make regarding the reasons for withdrawal need to be examined:

> We've always made the assumption that the bulk of withdrawals are due to the fact that they have just resigned from the job. If you imagine you're 15, it's your first job; you're just going to have a crack at it, aren't you? You don't know if you're going to like it or not. You might sign up to a traineeship in the first month, first two months but then you might say 'I just hate this job' and four months later resign and not finish your traineeship. That was the assumption that we made. But it's [the reason for withdrawing] quite a bit more varied than what I thought it would be.

While she was surprised by the diversity of reasons for withdrawal, Leanne Morison is not surprised with the low withdrawal rate:

> We are an enterprise RTO and we actually choose these people first to be employees. So if they're not the right fit we're not going to employ them. We're wiser when we employ in the first place, which is another reason I think why we have such a small dropout rate.

However, she was keen to remove any misconception that people were compelled to undertake the training:

> A misconception is that all employers, especially the fast food industry, make all employees do a traineeship. We don't do that. It's actually up to the trainee if they want to do a traineeship or not. It's completely voluntary.

Prior to involvement in this SSA project, because withdrawal rates were always so low, withdrawals were not examined in great detail:

> It would just simply come up in conversation in the office that there's been a lot of withdrawals this month or it seems like it, or they've all happened on the one week or whatever and then we might look into it. But we've never looked at it this closely and I guess that's because we've never felt the need to because there are so few.

An accidental benefit of collecting the data about withdrawals in the second half of 2010 is that it confirms the low rate and this will have a positive impact internally:

> I think that our HR team would be quite interested in the data as well as training managers, area managers, HRDs, employee relations. I think everyone would be quite interested and pretty chuffed at the result as well. I think it's something to be proud of, to have so few withdrawals.

However, involvement in the SSA project has encouraged Leanne Morison and colleagues to look more closely at the data, even though there are so few withdrawals:

> When you look at the finer detail that this [SSA tool] provides, it also gives us something to think about and to take back to the training team to say 'Well okay, what's going on here, say in South Australia? We may need to look at the types of people you're putting into traineeships.'

She predicts that at different stages in the future the data may reveal some trends that could be investigated:

> Say if a South Australian trend proves to be true, what would be interesting to know is whether they [the withdrawals) are all from the same store. You might turn around and say 'Okay, that manager is putting the wrong types of kids into traineeships in some way. They're not being informed correctly in the first place perhaps about what it's all about.' They're the sorts of things we would consider if we got a result like that.

7.4 Summary comment

In summary, the Yum! case study is a good practice example of where an RTO which has very low non-completion rates is still very interested to monitor non-completion rates with a view to intervening before a person withdraws, in order to see if the withdrawal could be averted, and with a view to see if there are any trends emerging from the data, for instance one location might be signing up trainees who are not a good fit with the training.

The Yum! case study is also an example of experienced RTO managers finding unexpected value in non-completion data, such the finding that people withdraw for a range of reasons not just resignation from the job.

8. Summary findings about the pilot approach – from quantitative data

This section sets out the summary analysis of quantitative data collected by the three providers using the SSA Excel spreadsheet tool.

Key findings

Key findings in this section are as follows.

- 149 students at the three RTOs were non-completers in the six month period from mid-July 2010, representing a non-completion rate across the three providers of under 9.3%.

- The top three reasons why students initially enrolled in a retail training course in these three RTOs were work-related: to improve skills in the current job (46.3%), to get a job/career (23.5%), or to get a raise or promotion (11.4%).

- 85.2% of the non-completing students indicated that at the time of enrolment that they did intend to complete the course – implying that other factors, not existing at the time of enrolment, prevented completion.

- Knowing what exactly these factors are will greatly assist in the better management of non-completions within retail skills training and the SSA tool has worked well in identifying these factors. Just under 45% of all respondents indicated one of the following three work-related reasons for withdrawal: resigned from job (25.5%), found employment elsewhere (12.8%), job was terminated (6.7%)

- This finding has significant bearing upon the understanding of an RTO's ability to manage non-completions amongst retail enrolments, for RTOs have little or no influence over the dynamics of change within their student's workplace, such as resignation, job change or job termination. That is, RTOs have no influence over the decisions of the majority of those who terminate their enrolment prior to completion.

- Significantly, 82.6% of non-completing students indicated that they had not achieved their intended goal prior to completion of training – once again implying that other factors prevented this completion.

8.1 The non-completion data file pilot

The adequacy of the non-completion data file as set out as a survey tool in Appendix 5 and described in full in section 10 – and each of the five variables it contained – such as the primary reason for withdrawal – was trialled. This trial was undertaken by three RTOs, all of whom had retail Training Packages on their scope of registration, and all of whom had students enrolled in retail programs.

The trial was limited to students who were enrolled in retail training in the period mid-July to mid-December 2010 and the three RTO were Integrity Business College, the Gordon and Yum! Restaurants Australia.

Over a period of six months, all three RTO contacted students who had withdrawn from retail courses. Each student was asked five questions as set out in Appendices 6 and 7.

The total non-completion sample size was n = 149 and the sample size of non-completions for each RTO is set out in Table 1.

The overall number of retail students across these three RTOs in this six month period was around 1,600 so the non-completion rate was 9.3%.

Table 1.
No. of non-completions in retail programs by RTO, July-Dec 2010

RTO	No. of non-completions	Approx. no. of enrolments
IBC	36	280
The Gordon	51	570
Yum!	62	750
Total	**149**	**1,600**

An analysis of the results of this trial is set out below.

8.2 Reasons for enrolling

Analysis of the data set indicates that work-related issues were by far the most common reason for enrolling. Just over 81% of all respondents indicated one of the following three reasons for enrolling:

1. To improve skills in the current job (46.3%)

2. To get a job/career (23.5%)

3. To get a raise or promotion (11.4%).

Responses to this question provide strong evidence that aspirations related to improving job skills or gaining a job, career, raise or promotion are the primary reason why students initially enrol in a retail training course.

Figure 1:
Reasons for enrolling of students who later did not complete
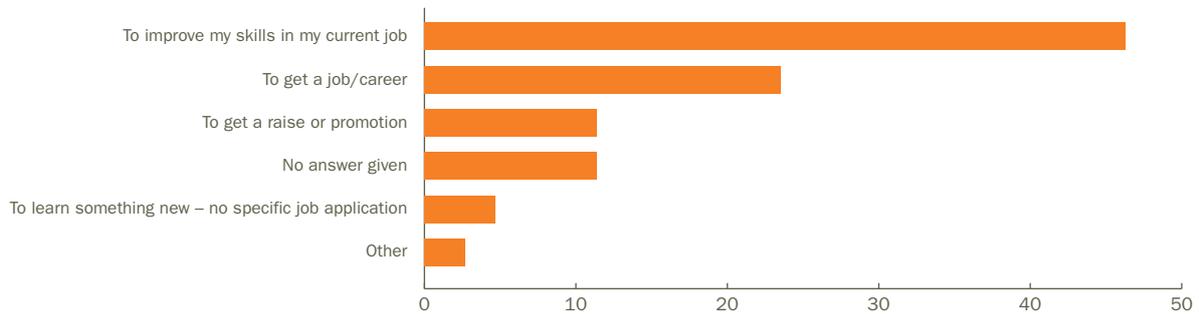
When cross-correlated across the three RTOs, results indicate some subtle differences between respondents within each of the three providers, which probably reflect the unique characteristics of the different cohorts of retail students within each RTO.

For example, students from the Gordon who did not complete place greater importance on getting a job/career than do clients from either IBC or Yum. This may be because many of IBC's and all of Yum! students are already employed while many of the Gordon's are younger and not yet in a full-time job.

Students from The Gordon and Yum! who did not complete rate the improvement of skills in their current job as the most important reason for them undertaking training, while for students from IBC, the most important reason for undertaking training is to get a raise or promotion. The reasons for this difference in response would need further investigation, but these small differences are valuable in that they provide the overall research project with a sample of test sites which are different.

The following table provides details of motivation for enrolling.

Table 2:
What were your reasons for enrolling?

	To get a job/career	To get a raise or promotion	To improve my skills in my current job	To learn something new – no specific connection to my job or career	Other	Not answered	Total
IBC	27.8%	16.7%	44.4%	11.1%	0.0%	0.0%	**100.0%**
The Gordon	31.4%	0.0%	54.9%	0.0%	7.8%	5.9%	**100.0%**
Yum	14.5%	17.7%	40.3%	4.8%	0.0%	22.6%	**100.0%**
Total	**23.5%**	**11.4%**	**46.3%**	**4.7%**	**2.7%**	**11.4%**	**100.0%**

8.3 Intention to complete

It has been suggested in various VET reports that non-completion may result from a lack on intention to actually complete the course (e.g. Dumbrell 2000, p.32). That is, the client had no intention of completing the course when they initially enrolled. Rather, they sought specific skills, and once those skills were obtained, the training was no longer relevant.

Data collected in this research project shows that only 3.4% of those non-completions had no intention to complete the training at the time they enrolled. Significantly, 85.2% of non-completions indicated that they did intend to complete the course – implying that other factors, not existing at the time of enrolment, got in the way of this completion. Knowing what exactly these factors are will greatly assist in the better management of non-completions within retail skills training.

Figure 2:
Do you intend to complete the training?


% respondents
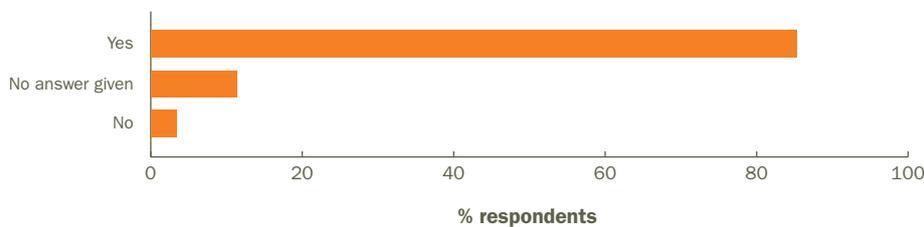
8.4 Achieved intended goal

It has also been discussed in the literature that non-completion may result from the client having achieved the intended goal, such as a promotion or a new job (e.g. Lewis 2008, p.10). If this goal is achieved prior to completion of training, then the training becomes no longer relevant. However, data from this sample partly contradicts that view.

Data collected shows that only 6% of those non-completions indicated that they had achieved their intended goal prior to withdrawing from the training. Significantly, 82.6% of non-completions indicated that they had not achieved their intended goal prior to completion of training – once again implying that other factors got in the way of this completion.

Figure 3:
Did you achieve your intended goal?

% respondents
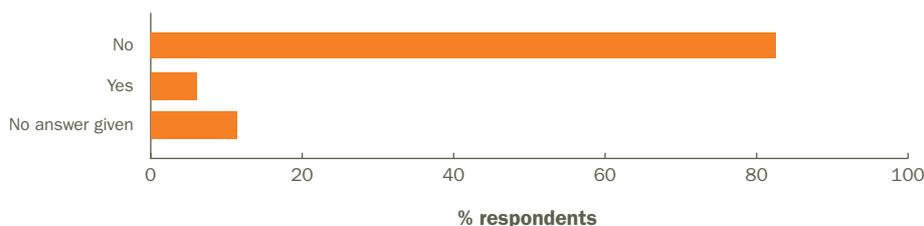
Significantly, while the majority of non-completing students indicated that they had not achieved their intended goal, cross correlation of results indicates that there might be variation in achievement across RTOs.

Table 3:
Did you achieve your intended goal?

	No	Yes	Not answered	Total
IBC	83.3%	16.7%	0.0%	100.0%
The Gordon	90.2%	3.9%	5.9%	100.0%
Yum	75.8%	1.6%	22.6%	100.0%
Total	82.6%	6.0%	11.4%	100.0%

Note that 17% of non-completions at IBC indicated that they had actually achieved their intended goal. This result provides evidence for the existence of a significant number of IBC students who withdraw from retail training courses before completion, having achieved their intended goals. As McInness et al. (2000) note, non-completion in both the VET and HE student experience "does not always equate with failure" (p.1).

> Non-completion may signify the achievement of desired goals, either in the sense that skills have been gained, employment outcomes realised or articulation to further or higher studies successfully negotiated. Given that many students return to study fairly soon after withdrawing from a course, and a substantial number return at some time later, the notion of non-completion from a lifelong learning perspective is less meaningful than it once was. (p.1)

8.5 Reasons for withdrawals

Analysis of the non-completion data from the three RTOs indicates that by far the three most common reasons for withdrawal related to a change in work circumstances. Just under 45% of all respondents indicated one of the following three reasons for withdrawal:

- Resigned from job (25.5%)

- Found employment elsewhere (12.8%)

- Job was terminated (6.7%).

When viewing these results, it is important to remember that evidence presented above provides strong evidence to suggest that work issues are the primary reason why students initially enrol into a retail training course. It should therefore come as no surprise that, as student's work circumstances change, so too will the levels of commitment to retail training.

This finding has significant bearing upon the understanding of an RTO's ability to manage non-completions amongst retail enrolments, for RTOs have little or no influence over the dynamics of change within their student's workplace, such as resignation or termination. It therefore follows that RTOs have little or no influence over the decisions of most of those that terminate their enrolment prior to completion. Putting it another way, RTOs have no influence over the top factors affecting non-completions.

Figure 4:
Reasons for withdrawing
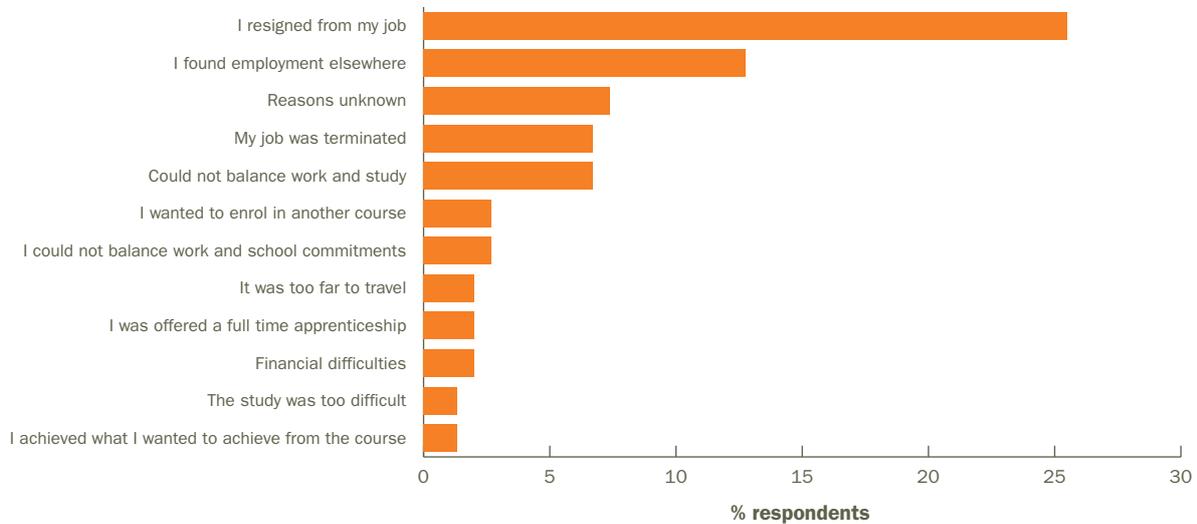
An observation on the above Figure is that VET spends considerable effort on student satisfaction surveys, checking particularly on whether the teaching is to the student's liking but, based on this study, more effort could be spent monitoring the likelihood of withdrawal and whether this could be averted or whether the student could be assisted in planning a temporary departure from formal study, to be resumed later.

8.6 Summary comment

In summary, the quantitative analysis of the non-completion data across the three providers shows that:

- most retail students at the point of enrolling intended to complete their programs

- they were primarily motivated by work-related goals

- they believed they had not achieved their goals when they withdrew

- most of the non-completions were due to work-related changes such as termination or resignation and so were beyond the control of the RTO.

On the surface, these findings suggest that providers should accept that they cannot play a role when they find that a student has resigned, been terminated or moved to another job. However, the next section contains the findings from the qualitative interviewing of the case study participants. A number of those participants now believe that even when a non-completing student says they have resigned or changed jobs, the RTO can usefully ask some follow-up questions which may provide the provider with new insights and new ways of assisting the student to perhaps finish the course later. Participants also note that they can encourage the student to either return to that RTO or another RTO to complete the study online or continue it in a new location.

9. Summary findings about the pilot approach – from qualitative data

This section sets out the summary findings from an analysis of qualitative data, based on structured interviews with representatives of the three RTOs.

Data on non-completions was collected by the three providers, IBC, the Gordon and Yum!, in the period from July-September 2010. The results for the first three months, July-September, were discussed in section five. This section focuses on the second phase of the trial, from September-December 2010.

Key findings

Key findings in this section are as follows.

- The three RTOs found the tool easy to use and effective in prompting a focus on reducing non-completions. The RTOs in some cases encouraged other stakeholders such as employers and Australian Apprenticeship Centre to be more attentive to the reasons for non-completion and to look for signals that a person might seek to withdraw.

- The reason 'I resigned from my job' needed following up with more questioning because, although the reason for the resignation normally had nothing to do with the training, the trainer might be able to offer supportive suggestions to the person, such as had they considered continuing the program when they returned to the workforce.

- New practices stimulated by using the SSA tool and approach included reviewing the wording and use of current withdrawal forms at the both the RTO and the AAC.

- In terms of improvements, all three RTOs would like to make their own customised variations to the existing SSA Excel tool. All three wanted to add a comments column attached to the reasons for withdrawing.

- One RTO is intending to use the tool as a start on developing a systematic approach to non-completions across the whole faculty or 'enterprise'.

- If SSA decides to provide this tool and approach to training providers, key messages it can convey are that the data will disprove the view that retail programs have high withdrawal rates, the data will show that withdrawals are mostly not due to the training, the data will provide valuable insights into previous customers, and the data will encourage providers to remove any barriers to student completion that are within the reach of providers.

- Data generated by the tool may show trends such as the reasons for withdrawal change in the last few months at the end of the year, because this is when people may be more likely to lose or change jobs.

- The interviewees understood that AVETMISS does not collect useful data about non-completions so they all intend to keep using the SSA tool, particularly so that they can provide appropriate advice and support when people withdraw, such as what options are open to them to continue training.

- Use of the SSA tool may also identify that some funded programs result in the majority of non-completions, and this information needs to be fed back to the funding body.

9.1 Description of qualitative data collection, September-December 2010

Each of the providers contacted, as far as possible, every person not completing a retail course, in the six months from mid-July 2010. The contact was often by phone, because the non-completing student had already left the program, and the caller used an interview script that underpinned the questions set out in Appendix 5.

Over the same period, and to evaluate the trial use of the SSA non-completions tool, the researchers collected data from the three providers, as follows:

- informal phone discussions and email communications between the researchers and the providers

- two of the three providers co-presented their interim findings with the lead researcher at a forum convened in Sydney by SSA on 19 November 2010 and the third provider sent extensive notes

- a teleconference of up to two hour meetings was conducted with each of the providers on 7-8 December 2010, as a structured interview. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed and form the basis of this section of the report. Please see Appendix 7 for the interview questions.

9.2 Key findings from the trial of the tool, September-December 2010

Set out below are comments made by the representatives of IBC, the Gordon and Yum! in the interviews at the end of the trial of the tool, in early December 2010. The questions are set out in italics.

Q1. Evaluation of tool/approach. How did you find the Excel tool/approach and script for the 'interview' and instructions for use, in terms of: ease of use; effectiveness; suggested improvements?

The three RTOs found the tool easy to use and effective in prompting a focus on reducing non-completions. For example:

> I think it is a tool that is of value to RTOs to use as an internal mechanism to support their own records management system that they may currently have.

One of the providers gave to an administrative person the task of phoning those people who had not completed, and this worked well: "it was a piece of cake". The other two providers asked trainers to assist in collecting the data for the tool.

One interviewee said that she would like to mirror the approach taken by the Gordon in asking some additional questions, about the reasons for non-completing, when telephoning the student not continuing:

> It's really easy to use; it was no problem at all. And in terms of effectiveness we found it pretty effective. In future I would probably go into some deeper questioning much like the Gordon people did: I quite liked hearing about the more detail that they went into. So in future we would perhaps spend a bit more time talking to each of the withdrawn participants to ascertain a little bit more detail. Because we had so few withdrawals anyway, we've got the time to do those phone calls.

The following interviewee found it useful to ask the non-completing person to elaborate, depending on the reason given for non-completion:

> Suggestion for improvement: with some of the reasons for leaving, I think we could probably be a bit more specific. When the reason was 'I resigned from my job' or 'reason unknown', we always had to get them to elaborate on that. So it was easy to use and when I did the breakdown of the data it really showed that there were four main categories [from the 14 questions asked about reasons for non-completion] that they fell into. So it was good, very good.

The reason 'I resigned from my job' needed following up with more questioning because, although the reason for the resignation normally had nothing to do with the training, the trainer might be able to assist in the future:

> The information in the new column [to the right of the fifth question on the reasons for leaving the course] is important because, for instance, they said I've resigned from my job, but it turned out that for one of them it was for medical reasons.

Such information was useful to the training provider, as discussed below, because it opened up the possibility of offering supportive suggestions to the person, such as had they considered continuing the program when their health recovered.

Q2. Good practice. In using the tool/approach to collect data on non-completions, what good practice in managing non-completions did you either develop or enhance? E.g. improvements to current systems related to non-completions; improved team communication about non-completions; improved communication with other stakeholders and partners (e.g. AAC) about non-completions

One interviewee said that one aspect of good practice she might encourage in future is a focus on identifying possible non-completers before they withdraw, and seeking a conversation with the employer when warning signals start flashing:

> Something that we would look at doing in the future is probably talking to the trainees at the time when they're thinking about withdrawing, that is going in a little bit earlier. Instead what we do now is just wait to get the information from the employer. The employer just says "Oh look this person's left or whatever". We will try and get in a little bit earlier and find out what the problems are, because maybe we can implement something at the time that might keep that person on board, at least so that they can gain their qualification.

Another interviewee expanded on some of those ideas, as follows. If the student says they are moving, say back to their home state, she wants her trainers to have a conversation with that student because of "the responsibility for us to ensure students

are made aware of the portability of any of the qualifications that they've already got". She said that if the student was withdrawing for a "short-term reason" such as pregnancy, "we need to do everything that we can to keep them in the family".

Another interviewee envisaged using the SSA tool to collect data on non-completions and then sending the data out, together with questions, to encourage other people in the organisation to be more attentive to students who may be about to withdraw:

> As part of my continuous improvement I do a lot of research and stats and I send it out to people but you get nothing back so the auditor said make it a question and as a type of scenario. With that in mind I'd like to try to use this tool to keep on asking more questions about people that look like they may be dropping out, so we can make them aware of their options and try and see if there's something that we can do to keep them involved. So I will try and use it as a continuous improvement tool.

All the RTOs found that the tool and the data it generated tended to encourage a number of conversations, for instance between RTO staff and other stakeholders. In one case the RTO staff are now talking more explicitly to Australian Apprenticeship Centre field officers:

> Since starting this SSA project, I've had meetings with the apprenticeship field officers about when they're doing a conversion or a termination, to make sure the data gets elaborated upon. They always just written "resigned"; that's the standard thing that they've always just put in.

Use of the non-completions tool has also encouraged more dialogue across an individual RTO and some changes to internal processes.

> I spoke to our customer service people about looking at the enrolment forms in a little bit more detail. Some of the things that we've wanted to do for enrolling we're also wanting to do on our withdrawal forms. So we're going to be putting some more of this information [from the SSA tool] into our withdrawal form.

Changes may be made in a range of areas of the RTO:

> I've been speaking to our customer service people, our apprenticeship area and traineeship areas. We're looking at the data there and where we can try and incorporate something like this [SSA tool] into it.

> A lot of us hadn't really done much about non-completion because we've been too busy and worried about enrolments. But I think this project has made everyone stop and think a bit. I spoke to our marketing area as well about how we can turn around and go back and tap into the non-completions data and what's appropriate and ethical.

Q3. Modifications to tool/approach. *If you intend to continue to use the SSA tool/ approach, broadly speaking how will you modify or adapt it to your systems?*

In terms of improvements, all three RTOs would like to make their own customised variations to the existing SSA Excel tool. For example, one wanted to add more possible reasons for enrolling as well as column identifying the employer and another one listing the trainer. The same interviewee wants to use the tool for different industries in order to monitor whether there are different levels of non-completions in different industries. She predicted that she will find that the reasons for non-completion will vary from one industry to the next because of the funding regime.

All three wanted to add a comments column attached to the reasons for withdrawing. In fact, one of the three RTOs felt that the question about reasons for not completing is by far the most important question: "We'll probably customise it by focusing on the reason for leaving, and then drill down from there."

The same RTO is intending to use the tool as a start on developing a systematic approach to non-completions across the whole faculty or 'enterprise':

> The way we're thinking about non-completion now is something that we would look to take from this skill centre across to the other skill centres in my enterprise, and have a focus on some of the things we've been talking about here with non-completion. We're imagining that what we would do is probably look to see whether we need to customise the tool a bit, based on our experience here, and then look to utilise and develop the approach to the whole way we approach non-completion, probably as a pilot almost within my enterprise.

> We've looked at standard strategies that we would build into the system, so that we would connect up with that [non-completing] person in 12 months time: a standard approach. Because in a lot of cases this work [of contacting people who withdrew from programs] we hope is going to be done by administrative staff, and the more that we can make it easy for them to do, the better for us.

One RTO recommended that the number of reasons for leaving, as set out in the SSA tool, be reduced from 14 to six: I resigned from my job, I found employment elsewhere, my job was terminated, I wanted to enrol in another course, offered a full time apprenticeship and study was too difficult. This interviewee also suggested the deletion of the question on initial intention, although the other two training providers did not suggest the same deletion.

Q4. Public release of tool/approach. *If SSA released the tool/approach to other providers, what advice do you have for either improvements or marketing/ communication of the tool/approach?*

One interviewee suggested that SSA needed to sell the benefits to RTOs of using the tool and approach:

> If you're marketing it to me, what is it going to help me establish is the question. The answer is that it gives me a better understanding of why people are actually withdrawing from a program and it's not necessarily anything that we're doing as an RTO, or about poor delivery.

> My suggestion would be that in regard to marketing and/or communicating it, there needs to be a heavy emphasis on the reasoning for actually implementing this tool: this is what we have found, it's not going to answer all of your problems but it is going to solve some, this tool is going to give you an understanding, if you don't already have one, of why people are withdrawing.

A second interviewee suggested that a finding from this project, that using this tool shows that the reasons for non-completion are mostly not to do with the quality of the training and mostly to do with other reasons, will appeal to providers.

> The data from AVETMISS [about high non-completion rates in retail] was incorrect and we've proved them totally wrong. I think that's a good selling point to get other providers interested.

A third interviewee recommended that SSA not just promote the tool but promote the concept that a comprehensive approach can be taken to non-completions, that this approach can be embedded in strategy and be accompanied by 'a whole narrative':

> It is an approach rather than a tool. In our case we initially went to our staff in regard to a project that we were involved in. That probably has less strength in terms of getting commitment from staff than if you make it an approach which fits in with the strategy of the organisation. And so when I talked about perhaps taking that to the next stage with my other three skill centres, we'd be looking at this as part of the strategy.

> And so [there is a need for] sufficient briefings for staff, whether they be trainers who might be collecting some of this information, or admin staff who are going to be involved in some of the data entry or maybe some of the telephone questioning. And even with some of the employers, I think there's a whole narrative around this that we want to put this in.

> And so I guess if you're taking it [the SSA tool and approach] to other providers that would be our advice. That's what we're going to do, it's probably worth consideration.

His colleague added that if this approach to non-completions is built into the organisation's regular processes, it is highly likely to be carried through:

> If you build it into your systems as much as you can, you'll find people think 'Oh, we have to do it'. And they will do it. And then you can monitor it. You just make it another process that you do, monthly or whatever.

One interviewee felt there were two marketing messages SSA could promote:

> I think there are probably two messages. One is that for an RTO from a business perspective it makes sense to see what you could do with customers who have been in your organization [and withdrew]. And then secondly a reflection that, for some of our students and learners, some of the barriers that stop them from studying are sometimes things that can be overcome [e.g. regaining health and returning to study]. This is taking our responsibility almost to a case management level almost. Do everything we can to try to get these students through.

Q5. Trends in the data. *How would you summarise the data you have collected on non-completions? Eg trends, anticipated and unanticipated results; other benefits of using the tool; other observations*

The major trend for one RTO involved in the project was that non-completions occurred because the students resigned from their job or they found another job. But by using a slightly expanded version of the tool and adding some questions, the RTO representatives all see high value in finding out more about this person and their future motivations.

> A lot of the non-completions were because they resigned from their job or they found another job. And that's another reason why we wanted to add in the extra column and say 'Well why did you leave your job? Was it because retail is not for you? What was your reason for resigning or what was your reason for finding other employment? 'It might show that they've chosen a different career path. Another question would be 'Do you intend to pick up the traineeship elsewhere?' That would be another good point to measure as well.

One RTO found that the reasons for non-completion changed in the second half of the project, in the final three months of the year.

> The thing that we found really interesting is that in the second half of the project, the primary reasons for leaving shifted. It was a lot more "found employment elsewhere". It's interesting from our perspective to look at why they left and some of the reasons, for instance they may have found another job.

Another finding was that the reasons were often what the interviewee called "short term reasons", such as illness or pregnancy:

> And another thing we found which was quite interesting and we'll be making the most of is that when we looked at a lot of the reasons for leaving, they were short term reasons. So we put the idea that we've got the ability to go get them back as students again. This is especially when the reason is illness or pregnancy, all those sort of reasons. We can tap back into those students and pick up where we left off, hopefully. That was interesting data we could never have known before.

One provider found that there seemed to be a seasonal trend in terms of the reasons people changed jobs towards the end of the year.

> With the reason "I found employment elsewhere" these people tended to change jobs later in the year. And with the reason "my job was terminated", they tended to get put off more at the end of the year. So those two reasons were a lot bigger increase than the other ones near the end of year, and I thought that was interesting.

Q6. Improving VET data collection. Having participated in this project for six months and collected the data on non-completions, what are some of your ideas about the following broad VET issues? What non-completion data is currently being collected in VET? What non-completion data is not being collected, but should be collected in VET? What is the preferred structure, frequency and collection methodology for data on non-completion rates in VET? What are some of your ideas about the factors impacting on the measurement of completions and non-completions, to inform the preparation of a positive case for the VET system to improve its measurement systems in order to:

- *increase completions (at course, module and other levels to be discussed)*

- *improve the way non-completions are measured*

- *decrease the rate of non-completions?*

All interviewees saw much value in non-completions data being collected in VET, but were not confident it could be done well within the AVETMISS framework, especially as they preferred to access data results easily and quickly. They all intended to continue to collect data internally about non-completions and expected to do this at least on a monthly basis or more often.

All interviews were comfortable with the prospect of adding several questions to the existing five main questions, so they could develop a more detailed understanding of why a person did not complete. And all interviewees saw the data as something they would share with stakeholders such as employers and the Australian Apprenticeship Centres, to improve the chances of preventing withdrawals. As one said:

> It's made us think more about perhaps going in and communicating a little bit earlier with participants, to keep them, to retain them until at least they just get their qualifications and then if they want to go they can go. Or we might be able to provide some flexible working or studying arrangements to help them through it. So that's one way of decreasing the number of non-completions.

One interviewee recommended that trainees withdrawing from programs could be asked to supply more information:

> When they're actually doing a withdrawal, they need to document more on the sign-off sheet. A lot of that would feed into this [SSA non-completions tool] better. And our withdrawal forms within the RTOs need to elaborate a bit more than they're doing now.

Such data would be invaluable for diagnosing issues:

> [with this data] you can track back to how you're delivering the course. If everyone's leaving because of the same reason, you could look back and it could be a teacher, it could be the course is too high, it could be the numeracy requirements, it could be anything.

One interviewee felt strongly that the major issue facing VET at the moment is the question mark hovering over the accuracy and the integrity of the data at the moment. And the weaknesses lie on both sides of the fence – the RTO side and the government side.

> The accuracy and the integrity of the data that actually is being collected, from being involved in a lot of workshops, is quite embarrassing sometimes, and I even believe embarrassing to the government, to actually hear people put their hands up and ask questions about things that they should know. The problems stem from lack of understanding by the actual end user of either the vendor programs [for records management] or even the relationships between government and the vendors and each individual's interpretation of all of the guidelines.

On the RTO side, knowledge is needed within the organisation about the definitions of data to be entered into AVETMISS: "One of the things about the improving the VET data collection is people having a better understanding of the backend of the collection of the data".

She gave an example of how the guidelines are misunderstood. A trainee told her RTO that she was withdrawing from a program because she was leaving her employer, but the RTO representative did not know that if the person left her employer she still "has three months to be able to do her traineeship out of that employment. That needs to be offered by the RTO as part of their performance agreement with the government".

> But more importantly the Australian Apprenticeship Centres should be advising the people okay, you're signed up on a retail traineeship but you're saying that you want to withdraw. But before they actually action that in the reporting data with Delta they should be making the trainee aware that you can actually still access training and I don't believe that that's happening. Nobody is telling these people, it's not the end of the road for you, there are other options, you still can do your training, it doesn't have to be with that RTO, doesn't have to be with that employer, and the government is willing to pay for your training for another three months to try and get you across the line.

Using the SSA tool was one of the triggers which alerted the above interviewee to this issue.

The same interviewee believes that the tool has high value in potentially identifying a possible withdrawal, and in some instances helping the person to change their mind:

> [In relation to non-completers, it encourages me to think] is there anything that I could have turned things around? Yes, possibly I could have if I'd been made aware of it sooner rather than later. I may have been able to go in there and market to the employer or to the student some other training opportunities.

> It may not have been necessarily in regard to the completion of that particular government-funded program but there may have been something else that I could have got them to train in retail via another government-funded program.

This interviewee saw benefits not so much in keeping students within their initial program, but in trying to find a new training option for disillusioned students.

Q7. Any other comments. *Would you like to comment on any other aspect of this project or the topic of non-completions or completions?*

One interviewee felt that if the SSA tool and approach was implemented widely it would show that non-completion rates have much to do with the funding program.

> The majority of our retail people that drop out, and I mean the majority, at least 90% of them that drop out, are Skills Growth funded. Nationally you've got the Productivity Places Program, where each state has a different type of funding and different ways of reporting.

The same interviewee said that in her RTO the SSA tool could bring about a wholly new practice of actively contacting people who have withdrawn to find out the reasons why, so those reasons can be addressed. She sees value in a designated person using the tool to contact those people.

> It's been an eye-opener and because we're a particular size RTO it makes you think twice about things and keep your ear more to the ground and ask why people are withdrawing. The designated task is actually ringing up these people and finding out why they are going to withdraw and then trying to turn them around and retain their training. The SSA project's been valuable for that.

9.3 Summary comment

Much of the this section is about the good practice of three retail training providers who are committed to helping students achieve their study goals and complete their training programs, even when a student says I have resigned my job and can't continue my studies, or makes a similar statement. After their involvement in this SSA project, and focusing for six months on non-completing students, these training providers are now seeking to try new ways of helping students complete programs either soon or later, either face to face or if possible online, either with them or another training provider. This highly flexible and supportive response from the providers is an unexpected but positive result of this project.

10. Design of a possible AVETMISS data file on non-completions, resulting from this project

This section sets out the design of a possible AVETMISS data file on non-completions that could be added to the current AVETMISS. The design of the data file is based on the AVETMISS structure. The design is also based on the findings from this research project.

The design of the tool, as set out below, could be viewed as a first draft. A second draft could see the following change: the ordering of the 15 possible reasons for non-completions into say 5 categories with sub-categories. If this tool is adapted and modified by individual RTOs, it is recommended that they add a comments column to adjoin the 'main reason for leaving' column.

Key findings

Key findings in this section are as follows.

- The SSA non-completion data file has been designed for incorporation into the AVETMISS data collection. It requires one record for each student who prematurely withdrew from a course of study/qualification. Each record consists of the following five variables:

  – Unique identifier

  – Intention to complete

  – Primary reason for enrolling

  – Achieved intended goal

  – Primary reason for leaving.

- Because the SSA non-completion data file is designed to be incorporated within the AVETMISS data collection, each of the five variables in the non-completion data can be defined within the framework of the AVETMISS Data Element Definitions, as illustrated below.

- The likelihood of NCVER adopting this file in the near future is low, given that it recently announced its proposed changes to AVETMISS for the next three years. Hence, SSA is encouraged to investigate whether the VET data work being undertaken by COAG could take on board this recommendation. SSA is also encouraged to promote the principles of this file to individual providers and those technology companies that supply data systems to providers.

- The design of the tool, as set out below, could be viewed as a first draft. A second draft could see the following change: the ordering of the 15 possible reasons for non-completions into say 5 categories with sub-categories. If this tool is adapted and modified by individual RTOs, it is recommended that they add a comments column to adjoin the 'primary reason for withdrawing' column.

10.1 AVETMISS and non-completion data

The AVETMISS data collection is a large relational database containing data pertaining to registered training organizations (RTOs), courses, modules/units of competency, clients' demographic and prior education background as well as enrolment and qualification completion details associated with VET delivery throughout Australia. Both government funded and fee-for-service VET activity are reported in the data. It is optional as to whether or not non-VET courses are reported. A full technical description of the AVETMISS data can be found in NCVER's (2006) AVETMISS VET Provider Collection Standards, Australian Vocational Education and Training Management Information Statistical Standard, Release 6.

Being a relational database, the AVETMISS data contains ten data files, each of which contain their own specific data elements. The following table lists the file name, the AVETMISS file number, and a brief description of the data elements contained within each file.

Table 1.
File name, AVETMISS file number, and a brief description of the data elements contained within each file

File Name	File Number	Description of elements
Training Organisation	NAT00010	One record.
Training Organisation Delivery Location	NAT00020	One record for each location where the RTO conducts the training.
Course	NAT00030	One record for each course that the RTO has conducted during the submission year
Module/Unit of Competency	NAT00060	One record for each module or unit of competency that the RTO has conducted in the submission year.
Client	NAT00080	One record for each student enrolled by the RTO during the submission year.
Client Postal Details	NAT00085	One record for each student whose record appears in the Client file (NAT00080).
Client Disability	NAT00090	One record for each disability claimed by a student.
Client Prior Educational Achievement	NAT00100	One record for each prior educational achievement declared by a student enrolled by the training organisation.
Enrolment	NAT00120	One record for each separate module or unit of competency enrolment by a student.
Qualification Completed	NAT00130	One record for each entitlement to a qualification by a student enrolled by the training organisation.

The above table was drawn from: Department of Innovation, Industry and Regional Development, 2009 Victorian VET Student Statistical Collection Guidelines, issued June 2009, Version 1.1. pp. 11-12.

The SSA non-completion data file has been designed for incorporation into the AVETMISS data collection. It requires one record for each student who prematurely withdrew from a course of study/qualification. Each record consists of the following five variables:

1. Unique identifier

2. Intention to complete

3. Primary reason for enrolling

4. Achieved intended goal

5. Primary reason for leaving.

10.2 Non-completion data file - definition

NCVER has developed the Australian Vocational Education and Training Management Information Statistical Standard Data Element Definitions (AVETMISS Data Element Definitions). These definitions ensure consistent and accurate measurement of VET information through the provision of a national framework for the collection and dissemination of data. The AVETMISS Data Element Definitions provide a national reference that includes definitions, context, rules, classifications schemes and format attributes pertaining to Australian VET data. Also included in these data definitions are the recommended questions, guidelines for the use of these questions, and the rules governing the recording of responses for each question.

Because the SSA non-completion data file is designed to be incorporated within the AVETMISS data collection, each of the five variables in the non-completion data can be defined within the framework of the Australian Vocational Education and Training Management Information Statistical Standard Data Element Definitions (AVETMISS Data Element Definitions). These definitions are as follows:

(1) Unique Client Identifier

Definitional Attributes

- **DEFINITION**
  Client Identifier uniquely distinguishes an individual within a training organisation.

- **CONTEXT**
  Client Identifier protects the individual's privacy and is required for analysis. It allows us to link the non-completion data with other NAT files within the AVETMISS data collection.

Relational Attributes

- **RULES**
  Client Identifier is assigned by the training organisation as a means of uniquely identifying the client for record-keeping purposes.

  Training organisations are required to use the same *Client Identifier* for an individual and not generate a different *Client Identifier* each time an individual re-enrols.

  Client Identifier will usually be the client's 'student number'.

  Client Identifier must not contain spaces.

Guidelines for use

- Records should be checked to ensure that two or more records with different Client Identifiers do not identify the same person.

Related data

- Not applicable

Type of relationship

- Not applicable

Classification scheme

Value	Description - error! No text of specified style in document.
text	Unique client identifier within the collection

Question

- Not applicable

Format Attributes

- Length – 10

- Type – alphanumeric

(2) Intention to Graduate

DEFINITIONAL ATTRIBUTES

- **DEFINITION**

  Intention to graduate indicates whether or not a client who has withdrawn early from their studies had the intention to graduate at the time of initial enrolment.

- **CONTEXT**

  Intention to graduate is used to identify client intention at the time of initial enrolment. That is, whether or not a client enrolled with the specific intention of graduating and applying for qualification. This data can be collected at the time a client officially withdraws from study, and may be included as part of an exit interview or survey.

Relational Attributes

- **RULES**

  Intention to graduate must be set to 'N - No' when the withdrawing client indicates that they had no intuition to complete their studies when they first enrolled. Such a result implies a client may have achieved their study goal, irrespective of whether they graduate or not.

Guidelines for use

- Responses for the Intention to graduate rely on the client's own perception of whether or not they intended to graduate at the time of initial enrolment.

Related data

- Not applicable

Type of relationship

- Not applicable

Classification scheme

Value	Description – intention to graduate
Y	Yes –The client had the intention to graduate at the time of initial enrolment
N	No – The client had no intention to graduate at the time of initial enrolment

Question

- At the time of initial enrolment, did you intend to complete your course of study and apply for graduation?

  ☐ No   ☐ Yes

Format attributes

- Length – 1

- Type – alphanumeric

(3) Primary Reason for Enrolling

Definitional Attributes

- **DEFINITION**
  Primary reason for enrolling describes a withdrawing student's primary reasons for initially enrolling into studies leading to a formal qualification.

- **CONTEXT**
  Primary reason for enrolling is used to identify the primary reason why a withdrawing student initially enrolled into studies leading to a formal qualification.

Relational Attributes

- **RULES**
  Clients must be classified to a single primary reason for enrolling.

Guidelines for use

- Responses for the Primary reason for enrolling rely on the client's own perception of their reasons for enrolling into a field of study.

Related data

- Not applicable

Type of relationship

- Not applicable

Classification scheme

Value	Description – primary reason for enrolling
01	To get a job/career
02	To get a raise or promotion
03	To improve my skills in my current job
04	To learn something new – no immediate connection to my job or career
05	To learn something new – no specific job application
06	Other

Question

Of the following categories, which BEST describes your primary reason for enrolling?

(Tick ONE box only.)	
☐ 01	To get a job/career
☐ 02	To get a raise or promotion
☐ 03	To improve my skills in my current job
☐ 04	To learn something new – no immediate connection to my job or career
☐ 05	To learn something new – no specific job application
☐ 06	Other

Format Attributes

- Length – 2

- Type – alphanumeric

(4) Achieved Intended Goal

Definitional Attributes

- **DEFINITION**
  Achieved intended goal indicates whether or not a client who withdraws early from their studies has achieved what they wanted to achieve from their studies.

- **CONTEXT**
  Achieved intended goal is used to identify whether or not a client has achieved what they wanted to achieve from their studies at the time of their early withdrawal. This data can be collected at the time a client officially withdraws from study, and may be included as part of an exit interview or survey.

Relational Attributes

- **RULES**
  Achieved intended goal must be set to 'Y - Yes' when the withdrawing client indicates that they have achieved what they set out to achieve from their studies – irrespective of whether or not they have graduated.

Guidelines for use

- Responses for the Achieved intended goal rely on the client's own perception of whether or not they achieve their intended goal from study.

Related data

- Not applicable

Type of relationship

- Not applicable

Classification scheme

Value	Description – intention to graduate
Y	Yes –The client had achieved what they intended to achieve from their studies
N	No – The client had not had achieved what they intended to achieve from their studies

Question

- Have you achieved those goals you set out to achieve – irrespective of whether you have graduated or not?

  ☐ No   ☐ Yes

Format attributes

- Length – 1

- Type – alphanumeric

(5) Primary Reason for Withdrawing

Definitional Attributes

- **DEFINITION**
  Primary reason for withdrawing describes a client's primary reasons for withdrawing from a course of study prior to completion and/or graduation.

- **CONTEXT**
  Primary reason for withdrawing is used to identify the primary reason why a student is withdrawing from a studies towards a qualification

Relational Attributes

- **RULES**
  Clients must be classified to a single primary reason for withdrawing.

Guidelines for use

- Responses for the Primary reason for enrolling rely on the client's own perception of their reasons for enrolling into a field of study.

Related Data

- Not applicable

Type of relationship

- Not applicable

Classification scheme

Value	Description – primary reason for withdrawing
01	I could not balance work and study
02	I had financial difficulties
03	I achieved what I wanted to achieve from the course
04	I could not balance work and school commitments
05	I received a work promotion
06	I found employment elsewhere
07	I resigned from my job
08	I wanted to enrol in another course
09	I was dismissed by the training organisation
10	I was offered a full time apprenticeship
11	It was too far to travel
12	My job was terminated
13	The course was poorly organised and delivered
14	The study was too difficult
15	Reasons unknown

Question

- Of the following categories, which BEST describes your reason for not completing your course?

(Tick ONE box only.)	
☐ 01	I could not balance work and study
☐ 02	I had financial difficulties
☐ 03	I achieved what I wanted to achieve from the course
☐ 04	I could not balance work and school commitments
☐ 05	I received a work promotion
☐ 06	I found employment elsewhere
☐ 07	I resigned from my job
☐ 08	I wanted to enrol in another course
☐ 09	I was dismissed by the training organisation
☐ 10	I was offered a full time apprenticeship
☐ 11	It was too far to travel
☐ 12	My job was terminated
☐ 13	The course was poorly organised and delivered
☐ 14	The study was too difficult
☐ 15	Reasons unknown

Format Attributes

- Length – 2

- Type – alphanumeric

10.3 Summary comment

The likelihood of NCVER adopting this file in the near future is low, given that it has announced its proposed changes to AVETMISS for the next three years. Hence, SSA is encouraged to invite NCVER to reconsider its proposed changes to AVETMISS and to investigate whether the VET data work being undertaken by COAG could take on board this recommendation. SSA is also encouraged to promote the principles of this file to individual providers and those technology companies that supply data systems to providers.

An idea existed at the commencement of this project that a main goal of this project might be to have the tool approved as an additional NAT file for AVETMISS collection purposes. This priority is now being challenged by fact that many providers have their own data collection systems and the best use of the SSA tool might be if providers embedded it, or a version of it, in their collection systems. The 2010 trials suggest that tool has immediate use as an inspiration or encouragement to providers to gather more data about non-completions and be more proactive in reducing the number of non-completions.

Appendix 1. Project brief

Project title

Evaluation Frameworks for VET

Project focus

The focus of this project is the collection of accurate and meaningful data pertaining to student non-completion of courses, and in particular:
- What non-completion data is currently being collected in VET?
- What non-completion data that is not being collected, but should be collected?
- What is the preferred structure, frequency and collection methodology for data on non-completion rates?

The initial investigation in this project will move along the following path:

1. Determination of data requirements
   a. What do SSA stakeholders want from completion rate data?
   b. This will require interviews with a number of SSA stakeholders and affiliated organisations, as well as interviews with people who are currently working with non-completion data
2. Determination of the extent to which current non-completion data meets SSA's requirements or preferences
3. Recommendation for new draft non-completion data standards that meet the requirements of SSA.

Once draft standards emerge from this literature review and industry consultations (stage 1), these standards will be tested with three registered training organisations in the second half of 2010 (stage 2). Then results from these field tests will be analysed and a report prepared (stage 3).

Project stages

Stage 1, April-June 2010. Initial qualitative investigation to determine:

a. user needs from non-completion data
b. issues with current non-completion data
c. issues emerging from a review of AVETMISS data collection approach
d. progress report on Stage 1

Stage 2, July-December 2010. Case studies of improving data collection approaches:

e. the RTOs used for this collection will be selected and briefed.
f. trial to run for six months within the RTOs, normally July-Dec 2010, with a progress report and analysis compiled part way through that six-month period

Stage 3, January-March 2011. Data analysis report and debrief:

g. final report and recommendations

Appendix 2. Project methodology and key actions

This attachment provides a summary of the methodology and key actions undertaken in the project.

Methodology

The research methodology was 'mixed methods' (Creswell, J. 2003, Research Design, Second Edition, Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks.), involving the collection and analysis of both qualitative and quantitative data. Qualitative data was obtained from interviews, meetings, and case studies, while quantitative data was obtained from statistical information provided by the three case study sites.

Regarding the methodology used for formal interviews with case study participants, the format of the interview to be used fits with the description of Patton's (1980, p.206 in Cohen and others 2000, p.271) standardized open-ended interviews: the exact wording and sequence of questions are determined in advance and all interviewees are asked the same basic questions in the same order. The strengths of this type of interview include the following: comparability is increased as the respondents answer the same questions; data are complete for each person on the topics addressed; and the standardised approach facilitates organisation and analysis of the data (Patton 1980, p.206).

Regarding the methodology for the case studies, techniques for case study construction advocated by Yin (2003) were used, following this sequence of activities: designing (research questions); conducting (preparation for data collection; conducting of interviews); analysis of data/evidence (using an explanation-building technique of theoretical framework, refinement, revision of proposition); and development of a written summary.

Regarding the methodology for the quantitative analysis of the non-completions data provided by the three case study sites, the following methods were used:

- Frequency count of categorical data. Most of the frequencies were presented as percentages of total count.

- Cross-Correlation of frequency counts. A number of cross-correlations of frequency counts were attempted.

The benefit of the mixed methods approach is that the researcher can be open to the full breadth of data and insights. Use of the mixed methods approach ensured that triangulation is achieved, that is the use of two or more different forms of evidence to validate findings.

Key papers completed and actions undertaken in the period 1 April- 30 June 2010

Four key papers were prepared in the first three months of the project, April-June 2010:

- literature review

- a report on the NCVER negotiations

- a review of issues with current AVETMISS data

- a report on the stakeholder interviews.

All key actions as set out in the project plan were completed on time by 30 June, 2010, including:

- Project team meeting by 6 April 2010 to launch project

- Project team meeting by 30 April to examine literature review and plan interviews with NCVER

- Conducting of meetings with NCVER and interviews with stakeholders by mid May 2010

- Conducting of analysis of current AVETMISS data collection procedures by mid May 2010.

Key actions undertaken in the period 1 July-30 Sept 2010

- The key actions in the three months from 1 July – 30 Sept 2010 were as follows:

- Clarify and confirm arrangements with the three RTOs selected by SSA as case studies.

- Advise RTOs on how to implement data collection approach and commencement of trials with RTOs by late July. Completed in on-site visits on 5-6 July.

- Monitor RTOs collection of data. Late August 2010. Completed with on-site visits 30 September, 1 October 2010.

- Attend debriefing and planning meetings with SSA. Undertaken on 22 July, 16 Sept 2010.

- Test new data and compare with previous data collection methods. Completed during on-site visits 30 September, 1 October 2010. Testing continued through to 13 December 2010.

Key actions undertaken in the period 1 October - 7 March 2011

The key actions in this period were as follows:

- Prepare and submit progress report on trial to date. Submitted 7 October

- Conduct interviews with 1-2 key representatives from RTOs. Interviews conducted 30 Sept/1 October. Further interviews conducted in November 2010.

- Conclude collection of data from RTOs and analysis of trial data, 13 December 2010.

- Dissemination and discussion of analysis of data with SSA and nominated stakeholders. February 2010.

- Attend meeting with SSA regarding draft analysis, proposals and interim recommendations. Discuss proposed structure of final report. February 2011.

- Development of proposals for improved methodologies for data analysis. February 2011.

- Develop and submit final report, 7 March 2011.

Project phases, tasks and timeline

Table 1 below provides a summary of the project activities. The table does not include the expected regular contacts and dialogue between SSA and the consultants, throughout the project.

Table 1.
Proposed project phases, tasks and timelines

Project phases	Tasks	Deliverables and milestones	Completion dates
1. Initial qualitative investigation to determine: a. user needs from non-completion data b. issues with current non-completion data c. review of AVETMISS data collection procedures	Briefing meeting with SSA: • confirmation of project plan including project phases, tasks and timeline, based on this proposal • confirmation of quality assurance processes regarding deliverables, and a risk management approach • confirmation of communication systems between SSA and consultants	**Milestone 1:** **Deliverable:** project plan. Project team launch planning meeting with SSA; Tabling of quality processes and risk management approach	Late March 2010
	Literature review - on the topics of student non-completion, and the collection of data relating to non-completion rates	**Milestone 2:** **Deliverable:** Literature review of no less than 4000 words	Late April 2010
	Debrief with SSA on literature review; planning with SSA re interviews and NCVER	Project team meeting with SSA re literature review	Early May 2010
	10 interviews with key stakeholders nominated by SSA		Mid May 2010
	One day of interviews and meetings with NCVER in Adelaide		Mid May 2010
	Negotiating with NCVER for access to non-completion data; and accessing of data		Mid May 2010
	Analysis of current AVETMISS data collection procedures – including an examination of sample data		Late May 2010
	Debrief with SSA on interviews and data inspection; planning with SSA re collaboration with 2 RTOs; and agreements re structure of the progress reports	Project team meeting with SSA on data and plans and structure of progress reports	Early June 2010
	Preparation of the first progress report on Phase one, of no less than 8,000 words, including: the literature review; a report on the stakeholder interviews; a report on the NCVER negotiations; and a review of issues with current AVETMISS data	**Milestone 3:** **Deliverable:** First progress report ; summarising existing sector knowledge, views and approaches about non-completion data	Mid June 2010

Project phases	Tasks	Deliverables and milestones	Completion dates
2. Trial evaluation of changes to AVETMISS data collection regime	Clarify and confirm arrangements with the two RTOs selected by SSA		Mid June 2010
	Develop data collection approach		Mid June 2010
	Advise RTOs on how to implement data collection approach	**Milestone 4:** Commencement of trials with RTOs	Late July 2010
	Monitor RTOs' collection of data		August 2010
	Debrief with SSA on RTO progress collecting data	Project team meeting with SSA on data collection	Late August 2010
	Test new data, and compare it to the previous data collection methods		Early September 2010
	Interviews with 1-2 key representatives from the participating RTOs for second progress report		Mid-September 2010
	Prepare progress report on trial	**Milestone 5:** **Deliverable:** Second progress report; focused on trial	Late September 2010
	Debrief meeting with SSA to discuss interim report on trial	Project team meeting with SSA on trial	Early October 2010
	Continue to monitor RTO data collection		Late October 2010
	Interviews with 1-2 key representatives from the participating RTOs, for final report		Late November 2010
	Conclude collection of data from 2 RTOs	**Milestone 6:** conclude data collection from RTOs	Mid December 2010
	Debrief with SSA re overview of RTO data collection	Project team meeting with SSA re trial overview	
	Analysis of RTO trial data		Late January 2011
3. Data analysis and final report and recommendations	Dissemination and discussion of analysis of data with SSA and nominated stakeholders		Early February 2011
	Development of proposals for improved methodologies for data analysis		Mid February 2011
	Meeting with SSA re draft analysis, proposals and interim recommendations; and proposed structure of final report	Project team meeting with SSA re drafts and interim recommendations; and structure of final report	Mid February 2011
	Develop of draft recommendations		Late February 2011
	Final report	**Milestone 7:** **Deliverable:** final report	Early March 2011

Appendix 3. Key project participants

Project Lead and Managers: Service Skills Australia

- Kit McMahon, Project Lead
- David Squires, Project Manager

Board Adviser: Service Skills Australia

- Ian Blandthorn, Deputy Chairperson

Researchers: John Mitchell & Associates/JMA Analytics

- Dr John Mitchell, Principal Consultant
- John Ward, Quantitative Analyst

Case study participants

- Greg Waddell, Director, Living Well Enterprise, the Gordon
- Jane Trewin, Skill Centre Manager, Centre for Retail & Personal Services, the Gordon
- Leanne Morison, RTO Manager VIC, TAS, SA, YUM! Restaurants International
- Peter Venables, Managing Director, Integrity Business College
- Ross Valentine, Operations Manager, Integrity Business College
- Susie Simons, National RTO Compliance Manager, Integrity Business College

Stakeholders interviewed for the consultations in May 2010

- Alison Briers, Manager - Training and Development, David Jones
- Dr Craig Fowler, Deputy Chief Executive - Planning, Policy and Innovation, SA Department of Further Education Employment Science and Technology (DFEEST)
- Graham Oades, Executive Officer, Service Skills South Australia
- Ian Blandthorn, National Assistant Secretary, Shop Distributive Allied Employees Association
- John Sutherland, Recruitment, Development and Traineeships Manager, Best and Less Pty Ltd
- Linda White, Branch Manager, Industry Engagement Group, Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR)
- Lisa Apthorpe, National Training Consultant, McDonalds Australia Ltd
- Richard Wallis, Employee Relations Director, Yum! Restaurants International Australia Pty Ltd
- Robin Shreeve, Chief Executive Officer, Skills Australia
- Tom Karmel, Managing Director, NCVER National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER)

Appendix 4: Brief discussion of the VET data collection system, based on the literature

The following brief discussion about the VET data collection system is based on the literature. It acknowledges the attributes and highlights the limitations of the VET data collection system, but ultimately suggests that AVETMISS files are not user friendly.

To open the discussion, Grant (2003) points out the limitations of AVETMISS in measuring course completion:

> At the national level, the closest measure of course completion at the whole course level is the 'qualification completed' file which is recorded in the national VET information system, AVETMISS11.
>
> *This file contains a record for each acknowledgement by the training organisation that a client has completed the requirements for a qualification, either during the collection period or in a year prior to the collection period (where that qualification has not previously been reported), regardless of whether or not the client has physically received the acknowledgement . . . The reported entitlement to a qualification must relate to a client's course of enrolment or an approved exit qualification, or result from an approved recognition process. (NAT00130, S2–12)*
>
> This measure provides a means of determining the total numbers of qualifications completed each year in Australia, figures which are published each year by NCVER.
>
> These figures by themselves provide no basis for estimating 'completion rates'. It is only when compared with course enrolment figures that we can start to get a picture of the rate at which students enrolling in courses are completing them. (p.18)

The AVETMISS data collection is a large relational database containing data pertaining to registered training organisations, courses, modules/units of competency and clients' demographic and prior education background as well as enrolment and qualification completion details associated with VET delivery throughout Australia. Both government funded and fee-for-service VET activity from government funded organisations are reported in the data. It is optional as to whether or not non-VET courses are reported.

NCVER's publication "AVETMISS VET Provider Collection Specifications. Release 6" is the authoritative national reference for VET providers. Another description of the AVETMISS data can be found in Department of Innovation, Industry and Regional Development (2009) and Department of Educational Science and Training (2006).

As a relational database, the AVETMISS data contains ten data files, each of which contains its own specific data elements. The following table lists the file name, the AVETMISS file number and a brief description of the data elements contained within each file.

Table 1.

AVETMISS: file name, the AVETMISS file number, and a brief description of elements

File Name	File Number	Description of elements
Training Organisation	NAT00010	One record
Training Organisation Delivery Location	NAT00020	One record for each location where the RTO conducts the training
Course	NAT00030	One record for each course that the RTO has conducted during the submission year
Module/Unit of Competency	NAT00060	One record for each module or unit of competency that the RTO has conducted in the submission year
Client	NAT00080	One record for each student enrolled by the RTO during the submission year
Client Postal Details	NAT00085	One record for each student whose record appears in the Client file (NAT00080)
Client Disability	NAT00090	One record for each disability claimed by a student
Client Prior Educational Achievement	NAT00100	One record for each prior educational achievement declared by a student enrolled by the training organisation
Enrolment	NAT00120	One record for each separate module or unit of competency enrolment by a student
Qualification Completed	NAT00130	One record for each entitlement to a qualification by a student enrolled by the training organisation

The above table was drawn from Department of Innovation, Industry and Regional Development 2009 'Victorian VET Student Statistical Collection Guidelines', issued June 2009, Version 1.1. pp. 11-12.

Any investigation into the ability of AVETMISS data to provide adequate information about completion rates would primarily focus upon two files, NAT00120 (enrolment) and NAT00130 (qualifications), and the relational properties between these two files.

Grant (2002) notes that the closest measure of course completion at the whole-course level is the Qualification Completed file (NAT00130).

> This measure provides a means of determining the total number of qualifications completed each year in Australia. (p.18)

However, as Grant observes, qualification completion data is no basis for estimating completion rates.

> It is only when compared with course enrolment figures that we can start to get a picture of the rate at which students enrolling in courses are completing them. (p.18)

This enrolment information is contained in the Information file (NAT00120).

Grant (2003 p.19) further argues that it is not possible to directly compare results derived from both NAT00130 and NAT000120 for the following two reasons:

- Tabulated data for both enrolments (derived from NAT000120) and qualifications (NAT000130) cannot be directly compared because the two tables do not represent the same cohorts of students. That is, if tables were produced for the year 2007, one cannot simply subtract qualifications from enrolments to estimate course completion. The primary reason for this is that many of the qualifications awarded will be to students who enrolled in courses earlier than

2007. Similarly, not all those enrolled in 2007 will complete their course in 2007, and will instead appear as having met the requirements for a qualification in subsequent years.

- Enrolment data in NAT000120 contains information about non-AQTF accredited subjects.

However, Grant's arguments can be challenged in two ways. First, Grant formulates these hypotheses on the basis of two tables – one drawn from the AVETMISS Enrolment file (NAT000120), and the other drawn from the Qualifications file (NAT000130). While it is correct to argue that completion rates cannot be inferred from a comparison of these tables, it is incorrect to assume that completion rates cannot be determined from these two files. As AVETMISS data is put together in a relational database, a quantitative analyst is able to link enrolment data from AVETMISS with qualifications data from AVETMISS. Both the AVETMISS Enrolment file (NAT000120) and the Qualifications file (NAT000130) have in common a "unique client (student) identifier". This common key allows the interrogation of the data in such a way that an analyst with adequate skills is able to determine overall completion rates for a given period of time.

Second, while the Enrolment file (NAT000120) contains information about non AQTF accredited subjects, the relational properties of the AVETMISS data allows the analyst to separate AQTF accredited subjects from non-AQTF accredited subjects. All subjects entered into the AVETMISS database are distinguished by a "qualification/course recognition identifier", informing the analyst about whether or not a subject is nationally accredited under the AQTF. This feature of the AVETMISS data allows a competent analyst to analyse completion rates of just those courses accredited under the AQTF.

It is noteworthy that advanced analytical and data skills are needed to undertake these two tasks with the VET data and also to challenge Grant.

On the other hand, Grant (2003 p. 19) puts forward the following arguments which are well made:

- VET course enrolments are only inferred from module enrolments. That is, not all students have the intention of completing the whole course.

- In most States, students need to apply for a qualification once having completed a course. As a result, many students might have completed a course, but not applied for a qualification. Therefore, NAT0013 (qualifications file) might under-represent the number of students who actually complete the requirements.

- Students may be awarded qualifications for courses other than those in which they were originally enrolled. In many cases, they might leave prematurely, happily settling for a lower qualification.

These latter arguments by Grant correctly draw attention to some problems with the VET data collection. The discussion above also suggests that the AVETMISS files are not easily understood or navigated.

Appendix 5: Word version of Excel tool for capturing basic data about people not completing

Dear RTOs, thanks again for your excellent suggested improvements to this tool. This is the revised and we hope the final version for the trial.

This a Word version of the Excel tool we have supplied to you to capture basic data about people not completing retail programs from July-December 2010. While we have kept the tool as simple as possible, it is seeking some data not currently collected for AVETMISS.

Basically it contains five short questions. There is a drop down box on the second row, which enables you to quickly click on the (ex) student's answer.

John Mitchell and John Ward
21 July 2010

Questions in the Excel tool

1. Student Id. Number
2. When you enrolled, did you intend to finish the course?
   a. Yes   b. No
3. What was your main reason for enrolling in the course:
   a. To get a job/career
   b. To improve my skills in my current job
   c. To get a raise or promotion
   d. To have more job security in the future
   e. To learn something new – no specific job application
   f. Other
4. Even though you did not complete, did you achieve what you intended to achieve from the course?
   a. Yes   b. No
5. What was your primary reason for leaving the course?
   1. I achieved what I wanted to achieve from the course
   2. I could not balance work and study
   3. I could not balance work and school commitments
   4. I received a work promotion
   5. The study was too difficult
   6. I had financial difficulties
   7. The course was poorly organised and delivered
   8. I wanted to enrol in another course
   9. It was too far to travel
   10. I was dismissed by the training organisation
   11. My job was terminated
   12. I resigned from my job
   13. I was offered a full time apprenticeship
   14. I found employment elsewhere
   15. Reasons unknown

Appendix 6: Instructions for use of the Excel data input sheet

These instructions are for relevant staff at the three RTOs participating in this national research project: Yum, The Gordon and Integrity Business College.

The Excel data input sheet is designed to collect data on the topic of student non-completions. To do so, it will be necessary to contact non-completing students and conduct a quick two to three minute survey. The results of this survey input directly into the Excel spreadsheet. A suggested script for this interview is provided in a second document.

The Excel spreadsheet contains five columns, each of which corresponds to a specific question about non-completions. For ease of data entry, four of the five columns have drop-down boxes (accessed on the row below the question row) that contain standard responses to each question. The drop-down boxes makes it easy for the interviewer to input the data while conducting the interview. Alternatively, the interviewer can manually complete the attached interview template and input the data later.

Each row contains all the necessary space for the data extracted from one person non-completing.

There are five columns in the spreadsheet, each designed to collect specific information about the reasons for non-completion:

- **Column A – Student ID?** Please enter the identification number of the non-completing student. Please note that the Student ID number will need to be filled in prior to the interview with the non-completing student. You will need to find this information in your student records.

- **Column B – Original Intention to complete?** This column collects information about whether or not the non-completing student had the intention to complete the course when he/she initially enrolled. This column contains a drop down box that assists easy data entry.

- **Column C – Primary reason for enrolling?** This column collects information about why the non-completing student enrolled in the course. This column contains a drop down box that assists in easy data entry.

- **Column D – Achieved intended goal?** This column collects information about whether or not the non-completing student achieved his/her intended goal from their enrolment (irrespective of the fact that they are non-completing students). This column contains a drop down box that assists in easy data entry.

- **Column E – Primary reason for leaving?** This column collects information about why the non-completing student withdrew from the course. This column contains a drop down box that assists in easy data entry.

Appendix 7: Suggested script for quick interview with non-completing student, version 21 July 2010

Following is a **suggested script** for the interview with a non-completing student, when using the Excel tool.

Preamble:

Hello, my name is <insert name> from <insert organisation name>.

I am contacting you today about your recent withdrawal from <course name>. Our organisation is very interested to understand why you did not complete this course, for research being conducted by Service Skills Australia, the national industry skills council for the retail industry.

Your name will not be revealed in any of the research reports, unless we ask for and gain your permission.

Would it be possible for us to take two-three minutes of your time to ask you a few questions about this topic?

　　　　If answer is YES:

Thank you for agreeing to this request. There are only four simple questions.

Questions:

Question 1. When you first enrolled into your course did you intend to complete this course? That is, did you know you would leave before you finished the course?

    A.   Yes, or

    B.   No

Question 2. Which of the following options best describes your PRIMARY reason for enrolling into the course?

    A.   To get a job/career

    B.   To improve my skills in my current job

    C.   To get a raise or promotion

    D.   To have more job security in the future

    E.   To learn something new – no immediate connection to my job

    F.   Other

Question 3. *Did you achieve what you intended to achieve from your enrolment in <course name>?*

    A.   Yes, or

    B.   No

Question 4. *Which of the following options best describes your PRIMARY reason for not completing your course? I will read out 15 options and I am happy to read them through a second time, if you wish.*

16.   I achieved what I wanted to achieve from the course

17.   I could not balance work and study

18.   I could not balance work and school commitments

19.   I received a work promotion

20.   The study was too difficult

21.   I had financial difficulties

22.   The course was poorly organised and delivered

23.   I wanted to enrol in another course

24.   It was too far to travel

25.   I was dismissed by the training organisation

26.   My job was terminated

27.   I resigned from my job

28.   I was offered a full time apprenticeship

29.   I found employment elsewhere

30.   Reasons unknown

Appendix 8: Agenda for meetings with 3 RTO re case studies 5-6 July 2010

Agenda items

1. Introductions and thanks

2. Overview of retail programs by RTO representatives

3. Overview of Service Skills Australia project: Brief; Steps to date

4. Papers produced to date by the project:

   · Literature review

   · Review of issues with AVETMISS

   · Draft document on stakeholder views about completions

5. Discussion of RTO case studies:

   3. Aims

   4. researchers' tasks – description of case study methodology

   5. requested RTO tasks – including use of tool

   6. protocols: e.g. confidentiality

   7. communication

   8. benefits – intended and others

   9. next steps

6. Any other topics

Appendix 9: Agenda for meetings with 3 RTO re case studies 30 Sept/1 Oct 2010

1. Introductions, thanks and overview of agenda and purpose of meeting: David Squires

2. Update on Service Skills Australia project: brief; papers; steps to date. Reference documents:

- Overview of the research project

- Information for the participating RTOs

3. Interview with RTO representatives on data collection to date (request to be tabled to tape this interview section of the meeting):

1. your critique of the Excel tool and script for the 'interview' and instructions for use: ease of use; effectiveness; suggested improvements

2. your summary of the data collected to date; trends, other observations

3. your ideas arising from collecting the data on non-completion: e.g.

    a. What non-completion data is currently being collected in VET?

    b. What non-completion data is not being collected, but should be collected in VET?

    c. What is the preferred structure, frequency and collection methodology for data on non-completion rates in VET?

    d. What are some of your ideas about the factors impacting on the measurement of completions and non-completions, to inform the preparation of a positive case for the VET system to improve its measurement systems in order to:

        i. increase completions
        (at course, module and other levels to be discussed)

        ii. improve the way non-completions are measured

        iii. decrease the rate of non-completions.

4. Request for access to Excel data collected to date to meet research task: "Test new data and compare it to the previous data collection methods"

5. Next steps in the research process:

1. RTO continuation of data collection to say late November, early December;

2. interviews with RTO representatives say late November;

3. interviews with a sample of non-completing students say in November, subject to approvals.

6. Discussion of RTO case studies:

1. Aims; and intended benefits

2. researchers' tasks – description of case study methodology

3. tasks requested of RTO– including use of tool

4. request to sight Excel data

5. request to interview a sample of non-completing students

6. protocols: e.g. confidentiality

7. communication

8. next steps

7. Description of possible structure of final report, March 2011:

1. context
   (locating project positively within completions and accountability agenda)

2. literature review (completed)

3. stakeholder consultations (completed)

4. critique of AVETMISS (completed)

5. piloting of tool and analysis of quantitative data from Excel tool

6. 3 case studies and analysis (including good practice findings on reducing non-completions; increasing completions). One full chapter on each case study.

7. refinements to tool based on feedback and public event
   (al la focus group)?

8. proposed new data collection tool on non-completions
   (e.g. NAT file for AVETMISS)

9. other findings, proposals or recommendations.

8. Discussion of possible reporting events

9. Any other issues

Appendix 10. Questions for final interviews, 7-8 December 2010

Following your good practice in the field, the tool now seems to be part of an approach to monitoring non-completions, so the terms tool and approach are used below.

1. Evaluation of tool/approach. How did you find the Excel tool/approach and script for the 'interview' and instructions for use, in terms of:

    1.   ease of use
    2.   effectiveness
    3.   suggested improvements?

2. Good practice. In using the tool/approach to collect data on non-completions, what good practice in managing non-completions did you either develop or enhance? E.g. improvements to current systems related to non-completions; improved team communication about non-completions; improved communication with other stakeholders and partners (e.g. AAC) about non-completions

3. Modifications to tool/approach. If you intend to continue to use the tool/approach, broadly speaking how will you modify or adapt it to your systems?

4. Public release of tool/approach. If SSA released the tool/approach to other providers, what advice do you have for either improvements or marketing/ communication of the tool/approach?

5. Trends in the data. How would you summarise the data you have collected on non-completions? E.g. trends, anticipated and unanticipated results; other benefits of using the tool; other observations

6. Improving VET data collection. Having participated in this project for six months and collected the data on non-completions, what are some of your ideas about the following broad VET issues?

    4.   What non-completion data is currently being collected in VET?
    5.   What non-completion data is not being collected, but should be collected in VET?
    6.   What is the preferred structure, frequency and collection methodology for data on non-completion rates in VET?
    7.   What are some of your ideas about the factors impacting on the measurement of completions and non-completions, to inform the preparation of a positive case for the VET system to improve its measurement systems in order to:
        a. increase completions (at course, module and other levels to be discussed)
        b. improve the way non-completions are measured
        c. decrease the rate of non-completions?

7. Any other comments. Would you like to comment on any other aspect of this project or the topic of non-completions or completions?

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