

1 March 2023

Committee Members,
c/- Committee Secretariat
Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

By email: ee.reps@aph.gov.au

Dear Committee Members

Inquiry into the Perceptions and Status of Vocational Education and Training

The Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees' Association (the **SDA**) is one of Australia's largest trade unions with over 210,000 members. SDA members work in retail, warehousing, fast food, hairdressing, beauty, pharmacy, online retailing, and modelling. The SDA supports the submission made by the ACTU and adds these industry specific remarks –

1. The SDA welcomes the Inquiry into the Perceptions and Status of Vocational Education and Training (**VET**) and looks forward to recommendations that improve perception and status of VET and in doing so also improve the perception and status of work in industries served by VET.
2. SDA members experiences of skills and training systems vary widely. Some SDA members finished school early and others have completed compulsory studies. Others have trade and trade-style qualifications, such as hairdressers and beauty therapists as well as bakers and butchers in supermarkets. Others again study throughout their career, including those on a pathway to business, financial, human resource, and retail qualifications and senior roles in the country's leading retailers. There is also high turnover in these industries, and many are seeking to work in them during study for a career elsewhere. However, for most in these industries, their engagement and investment in the future skills of their workforce is limited and revolves around on the job training and mandated workplace training such as workplace inductions, First Aid, and workplace health and safety.
3. Most of the industries in which SDA members work do not require fully qualified staff at all levels but are suffering from a lack of critical mass of formally qualified staff, especially at mid-management levels. This manifests for staff as dysfunctional workplaces (unreasonable workloads, bullying and harassment, sexual harassment and customer abuse and violence), undervalued teams with significant underemployment (workers seeking more hours), and implementation of change

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without effective transition plans (for example, restructures not considering the impact on apprenticeships). The SDA has a range of research reports confirming these workplace challenges. There can be a perception that retail is a place to work when there are no better options, but there are great careers in retail.

4. Career opportunities in these industries are often overlooked. The pathways in these industries were traditionally from checkout to store management, sales to buying, picking and packing to receivables and warehousing supervision, from window dressing to visual merchandising or marketing, from apprentice hairdresser to senior stylist or small business owner, from pharmacy assistant to community pharmacy manager. These are changing and varied careers and with the rise of online retail new roles are emerging such as the high demand for merchandise planners and allocators. These are great jobs and for them to operate effectively in the economy, they need VET to provide a pathway to entry from the workers in retail, distributive and allied industries who know these environments best.
5. The need for improvement in perception of work, not just training, is the focus of a project funded by the Australian Government's National Careers Institute called "Careers in everyday industries: Potential benefits of increased visibility". Professor Erica Smith and her team are investigating the low prestige retail and hospitality industries which employ around 20 per cent of the Australian workforce. In the researchers' words, "This historically low perception discourages people from imagining worthwhile careers in those sectors and can contribute to poor self-image for those working in the industries. Yet the COVID-19 crisis has shown just how vital both of these sectors are for the Australian public and the national economy. They are recognised internationally as low-status occupations which have become more valued during the crisis." The SDA are partners in this research as and have a representative in on the research Reference Group.
6. In addition to the clear need for improved perception of the careers served by VET, there is a need to improve the economic and training systems. The two biggest issues facing retail industries are dependence on a strong economy and the growth of digitization and automation. Workers in these industries are at the front line of an important economic indicators – retail sales and jobs/employment participation - and at the front line of the need for skilled workers contributing to Australia's economy. Workers in these industries are also a source of labour for other industries and – if given the opportunity – could turn the economy around. If Australia responds to the growth in digitization, automation and predictive analytics with investment in skills and other labour standards, workers in these areas including merchandising, sales and warehousing will have a better chance to get and keep good jobs. Unlike workers in higher paid industries, SDA members are rarely reimbursed for costs and time spent on study and the quality of study is dependent on funding for travel, learning and assessment tools, and decent career expos to highlight the career opportunities. Until there is a shift to qualifications being able to be gained during work in these industries, a large proportion of the workforce is at risk of displacement. In short, Australia needs these workers to get a job, engage in training and keep up with the economy so that all Australians prosper.
7. The SDA is a partner in two research projects currently underway related to the automation and digitisation of work of its members.

- (a) The AutoWork Project is a collaboration between the Norwegian University of Science and Technology and Monash University. Part of the research is examining digitalisation and automation in the retail and service sector and is conducted by researchers in the School of Media, Film and Journalism, Monash University, in collaboration with SDA. The main goals of the AUTOWORK project are to learn about and provide solutions to societal changes arising from the automation and digitalisation of work-life. There have been bold predictions about the impacts of automation and digitalization; however, little research has engaged with the experiences and opinions of workers themselves. SDA members will be invited to participate in interviews.
 - (b) Warehousing - Addressing Changing Skills Needs is a collaboration between the Victoria University and the Victorian Skills Authority, in partnership with Service Skills Victoria, Australian Retailers Association, and SDA. The aims for the Changing Skills Needs project are to specify the role of warehousing in the economy, to describe the change and its likelihood and extent, to articulate the skills needed and gaps including the role in raising awareness of the skills that will be needed and how to work with those skills, and to identify the organisations with a role to play in the transition of the industry. The SDA chairs the Project Advisory Group and members will be invited to complete surveys.
8. There are great careers in retail, warehousing and fast-food – sales and stores, administration and management, visual merchandising and marketing, small and large business, merchandise planning and buying, online retailing, and warehousing. And these industries keep the economy afloat – retail is the second largest industry in nearly every community in terms of jobs. It's necessary for your inquiry to respond to both the perception of VET and the jobs and careers it serves.

Recommendation: Make it broadly known that there are great careers in retail; you don't have to start with a qualification; and TAFE can get you on a rewarding career like no other.

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Gerard Dwyer', written in a cursive style.

Gerard Dwyer
National Secretary-Treasurer

About the SDA



The Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees' Association (the **SDA**) is one of Australia's largest trade unions with over 210,000 members. Our members work in retail, warehousing, fast food, hairdressing, beauty, pharmacy, online retailing, and modelling.

The majority of SDA members are women (60%, approximately 131,000), under 35 years (57%, approximately 120,000 workers), and low-income. Retail and food services are two of the three lowest industries for median weekly earnings.

The SDA has a long history of advocating on behalf of members. We do this through enterprise bargaining; making submissions regarding Awards and the National Employment Standards to provide a relevant safety net; and through numerous submissions made to parliamentary and government inquiries and other important reviews.

The SDA has 10 policy principles that guide our engagement in these reviews. For a list of these, see Attachment 2.

Rationale for SDA policy positions



SDA policy is driven by providing value to our members whose work is regulated by a broken industrial framework. We seek an economic system that supports, protects and advances the interests of working people in this country.

Our predecessors built the conciliation and arbitration system which provided the foundations to our nations prosperity over a century ago, it is now our responsibility to build a system for the next generation.

Since the introduction of the Fair Work Act 2009 and subsequent radical changes to the financial and digital context inequality has grown and economic and political power has concentrated in the hands of a few.

We believe that fundamental not incremental change is needed. In contributing to policy, we seek to drive a new system that acknowledges the change that has occurred and will withstand the emerging world of work.

We engage in topics that help us drive this agenda and are guided by ten principles that we believe will create value for our members. Those principles are:

1. **Address Inequality & Enshrine Fairness**
Minimum expectations must be set and adhered to.
2. **Equity & Empowerment**
All workers must be supported to progress so that no-one is left behind.
3. **Mobility & Security**
A socially successful economy must provide opportunity for all, regardless of their background. Systems must be built in a way that support success and adaptation in a rapidly changing world of work.
4. **Delivering Prosperity & Growth For All**
A foundation for prosperity and economic growth must be achieved.
5. **Protection in Work & Beyond**
Workplaces and the community must be healthy and safe for all workers and their families during and beyond their working lives.
6. **Workers Capital & Superannuation**
Workers capital and superannuation must be an industrial right for all workers and treated as deferred earnings designed for dignity and justice in retirement.
7. **A Strong Independent Umpire**
A strong, independent, cost effective and accessible industrial umpire and regulator must be central to the future system of work in Australia.
8. **Protection & Support for Our Future**
Protecting and supporting our future requires a strong and vibrant retail industry and supply

chain providing jobs with fair and just remuneration and contributing to the economy including through skilled workers.

9. **Work & Community**

Work is a fundamental human activity that provides for personal, social and economic development. Work as it operates in community must build and protect a balance between life at work and life so that workers can contribute to society through the wider community.

10. **Institutional Support for Collective Agents**

Institutional support must provide for collective agents (registered organisations) so that they are recognised, enshrined and explicitly supported as central to the effective functioning of the system.

Details of specific policy positions can be discussed by contacting the SDA National Office