

Review of senior secondary pathways into work, further education and training



Victorian TAFE Association Response
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Introduction

The Victorian TAFE Association is the peak body for Victoria's public providers of Vocational Education and Training (VET), including 12 TAFE institutes, four Victorian dual sector universities, and an Associate member, AMES Australia.

The Victorian TAFE Association welcomes this opportunity to provide input to the review of senior secondary pathways into work, further education and training. Our response is built around seven themes, including:

- The dominance of the university narrative
- Senior secondary structures
- Regional drain
- Equal treatment of sectors
- Career advice
- The breadth of the VET sector
- Youth in TAFE
- Senior secondary pathways and lifelong learning

The dominance of the university narrative

Australia's post-compulsory education sector is made up of higher education and vocational education and training. Properly functioning pathways would ensure that students embarking on a post-compulsory pathway can do so in a manner that ensures the realisation of their aspirations and meets their learning and career needs. For some, this would mean pursuing higher education, while for others, this would suggest that a vocational education and training course is more suited. And indeed, increasingly, and as noted elsewhere, lifelong learning means pathways into and out of education and training will be a feature throughout their lives.

Yet despite this, Australia is currently dominated by a narrative that (on the whole) views a singular 'right' course of action: namely, the pursuit of a university education. A consequence of this narrative is a vocational education and training sector seen not as an equal to higher education, but as an educator of last resort whose role is to 'capture' those students unable to make the trek from secondary education to university. And so, for the student weighing up options at the end of senior secondary schooling, there is one optimal choice, and a poorer second option. Those pursuing the second option may be perceived to be failures who were unable to meet some putative social standard.

Importantly, the student's view is reinforced by the way in which this narrative manifests in the real ways and the real impacts it has on the relative experience of students in the two sectors. From inequitable funding treatment for the VET sector, to the relative paucity of government support for institutions and students, to biases in the provision of career advice, students are told everywhere that the proper and better choice is to 'go to uni'. It is also reinforced by an artificial and unhelpful hierarchy in post-compulsory education espoused by government and policy makers that too often relegates both VET and secondary education as subordinates in the service of higher education, as 'factories' whose function is to produce graduates for a pathway to university.

The Victorian TAFE Association considers that the first requirement for this review is to give consideration to the factors that give succour to this narrative, and to develop recommendations and propose initiatives that challenge it. To be sure, the factors feeding into this narrative are numerous, ranging from social institutional hangovers and hierarchies to the impact of contemporary government decision making. Given the numerous factors

contributing to this narrative, we recommend that programs developed to address the dominant view be multifaceted, and couched in terms of the particular contributing cause.

Senior secondary structures

A well-functioning senior secondary system would support and facilitate a student's development and contribute to the fulfilment of his or her aspirations. Such a system would provide students with access to many and varied activities, providing a holistic experience that contributes to the development of well-rounded citizens, and impart knowledge and skills to confidently navigate future life choices, whatever they may be. Such a system would also, ideally, be absent biases that lead in any particular direction, allowing the student to find the course that best suits his or her needs and aspirations. And it should be structured in a way that enables said student to identify, navigate and meet their future and ongoing education and skill needs as they arise.

Against this paragon is Australia's senior secondary system. It would be fair to say that senior secondary education in Australia is structurally biased, moving overwhelmingly to the attainment of a senior secondary certificate of education that is, on the whole, focused on the preparation of students for a life at university. Non-university offerings (such as vocational education and training or the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning) are available, but are often countenanced as a stop-gap for those unable (or unlikely) to access university higher education.

Some of the ways in which this structural bias towards university higher education manifests include:

- Courses of study: the courses (or units) or study available to senior secondary students are overwhelmingly 'academically' oriented, with much fewer vocational options available. As such, students are given little opportunity to get a feel for options beyond the academic, and so are limited in their ability to experiment with non-academic options.
- Limited perspectives: when a student undertakes studies in history or geography, there is no suggestion that said student is expected to pursue a career as an historian or geographer. Instead, these studies are seen as part of a whole, contributing to his or her development as both a student and engaged citizen. But when a student pursues a vocational unit (such as woodworking), its undertaking is seen not as part of a whole but only in the pursuit of a future related career (such as a carpenter). And so, vocational units are considered suitable for students who are not academically inclined and expected to pursue a trade career. The Victorian TAFE Association considers that this approach should change, and that vocational units should (like their more 'traditional' academic counterparts) be appraised for their ability to improve the outcomes for all students. Like history or geography, vocational units should be seen as part of a whole, contributing to the development of well-rounded students. We consider that they should be made available to and encouraged for all students, irrespective of their academic standing.
- Trades focus: as noted elsewhere in this document, vocational education and training is often viewed within a single lens: that of an apprenticeship in the traditional trades. But Australia's VET sector is so much more than this, and encompasses the service sectors of the economy as well as new and emerging areas such as cloud computing mechatronics, drone technology and cybersecurity. Despite this, vocational offerings

in school settings are, on the whole,¹ coloured by traditional views of vocational education that are limited to trades and apprenticeships. The Victorian TAFE Association considers that vocational offerings in senior secondary settings should be expanded and reflect the diversity available in the wider VET sector, as well as those relevant to new and emerging areas.

- Funding constraints and availability: increasingly, the pursuit of vocational offerings in schools is beyond the reach of many, due to costs associated with materials and tools required by students, many of which are borne by the students themselves. Similarly, schools are unable to provide vocational units because the costs of establishment, maintenance and provision is prohibitive. It should be noted that the costs of vocational unit provision would be similar to those associated with the teaching of academic units such as chemistry or biology, but while chemistry and biology labs are unlikely to be cut in the face of funding constraints, the same cannot be said of vocational units.
- Qualification equality: in Victoria, a student may complete the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE), or the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL). The former is for students pursuing traditional academic studies, while the latter is for those undertaking a vocational focus. We support the continued existence of VCAL since it provides a valuable option for students preferring a vocational learning experience. But it is essential that multiple qualifications do not lead to hierarchies (which they sometimes do), where academic secondary qualifications are (implicitly or explicitly) treated as superior to their vocational counterparts. In short, measures must be taken to ensure equal stature of secondary qualifications.
- ATAR: it is not unreasonable to say that the ATAR dominates much reporting and discussion of senior secondary schooling. And for many, the aim of senior schooling is not the certificate *per se* but the ATAR score. At its core, the ATAR is designed for entry into university. Further, the ATAR ranking approach does not lend itself well to vocational units, with only a select few vocational units contributing towards one's ATAR score.

The factors listed above are by no means exhaustive, but serve to illustrate some of the ways in which senior secondary schooling is structured to promote a university higher education pathway. We consider that a fuller exploration is warranted to identify and address the biases in the system, and to develop and replace it with one that instead recognises a student's abilities and strengths and which places the fulfilment of his or her aspirations and dreams as paramount.

Regional drain

In recent years, the Commonwealth Government has undertaken two reviews² of education and training provision for communities in regional, rural and remote settings. These reviews were driven by a desire to ensure adequate education provision for regional communities; to raise participation in tertiary education; and to lessen the effects or even reverse the regional diaspora.

¹ A notable exception is information technology, which is available as a vocational unit in some schools.

² These include the 2019 Regional Education Expert Advisory Group review of the National Regional, Rural and Remote Education Strategy Victorian and the 2017 Independent review into regional, rural and remote education.

The Victorian TAFE Association considers that current senior secondary pathways directed towards a university end-point contribute to the regional diaspora. A school system where university education is the end-result leads to more and more students pursuing university higher education. But on the whole, university education (particularly at undergraduate level) requires attendance at a university campus,³ and since most of campuses are located in the major cities, pursuing further study requires young people to move to metropolitan centres, in many cases never to return to their regional homes.

By contrast, and by way of example, about half of Victoria's TAFE network is situated in regional Victoria, with their presence contributing to participation in tertiary education and training for regional students who may otherwise be disenfranchised. But the option offered by TAFE is blunted by narratives and senior secondary programs and pathways that do not lead easily towards TAFE's educational offerings. And so, TAFE's ability to the lessen the regional drain is hampered.

The Victorian TAFE Association therefore recommends that some thought be given to the impact of current pathways on regional drain. It would be fair to say that senior secondary pathways would be only one of many factors that contribute to the drain, but the Victorian TAFE Association considers it and the magnitude of its contribution worth exploring.

The Victorian TAFE Association also recommends that the review consider the implications for the regional student pathways resulting from the smaller number of units and/or course offerings available in regional settings. We recommend that options be canvassed to ensure regional students have choices similar to those available to their city cousins. Policies and funding could be provided to encourage greater synergies and cooperation between secondary, VET and higher education providers operating in regional settings to reduce costs of provision and raise efficiencies, thereby increasing course and unit offerings and maximising pathway options. The cooperation could operate on multiple levels, including through the development and co-location of facilities and the sharing and pooling of teaching resources to reduce the costs of course provision.

Equal treatment of sectors

TAFE and the wider VET sector currently do not have access to Commonwealth Supported Places, while students attending university can afford themselves of this support program. Similarly, the imposition of an Eligible Course List for students accessing the VET Student Loan program inflicts a restriction on VET student liberty to choose the education and training that best meets and serves their personal circumstances. It is worth noting that no such imposition or restriction is levied upon students in higher education,⁴ who are free to choose the education of their choice, all of which has the benefit of subsidy and support.

Students in the VET sector are further impacted by the lack of funding available to support vulnerable cohorts. While programs exist at the Commonwealth level to support vulnerable student cohorts in the school and higher education sector,⁵ no such programs exist for VET. What support is provided to VET students is generally created at the institute level and funded by the institute through sources such as general revenues.

³ Although advances in technology have enabled some limited provision to take place in regional and remote settings.

⁴ Who also do not face the burden of an administrative levy on their loans, unlike their VET counterparts.

⁵ For example, higher education providers can access support through the Higher Education Disability Support Program (see <https://www.education.gov.au/higher-education-disability-support-programme>, accessed 22 January 2019)

VET students are also disadvantaged by more onerous regulatory requirements than those in higher education. For example, students enrolling in a VET program in Victoria must complete a number of steps, including a language, literacy and numeracy test. They are also required to demonstrate computer skills and undergo individual interviews. These requirements are applied irrespective of the student or his or her ability to demonstrate the required proficiency through other, more efficient means (through, for example, attainment of the senior secondary certificate of education). But no such barrier is imposed upon higher education students. As such, it is not uncommon to learn that a student, faced with the burden and hurdles of TAFE and VET enrolment processes, chooses instead to pursue a similar course of study at a university.

Further, once enrolled, VET students face impositions not borne by their higher education counterparts. For example, a student enrolling in a higher education course does not, on the whole (though there are exceptions), need to prove attendance. Instead, the student is treated as an adult, and is given free choice to attend classes or otherwise. But a student in VET is required to demonstrate attendance, with VET providers required to maintain records of attendance. The different treatment impacts upon the learning environment, with implications for pathway choices as well as rates of student retention and attrition.

These instances are raised to demonstrate the impact of funding and regulatory practice on pathways. In the case of CSP, funding disparities create pricing distortions, which inevitably impact upon student choice. Similarly, the barriers erected by VET Student Loans and the Eligible course list limit the pathways available to a given student. And for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, the choices regarding courses of study can be determined by whether or not they will have access to support that makes their education and training feasible. The favourable treatment given to higher education also contributes to negative views of the VET sector and serves to bolster the narrative mentioned earlier in this document, creating biases in student pathway choices.

We recommend that these inequities be resolved to create equal standing between the sectors, which would remove artificial barriers, resolve distortions and enable students to make choices driven first and foremost by their talents, needs and aspirations.

Career advice

In his 2017 report, *Rebalance and Relaunch: Supporting Victoria's economy by enhancing apprenticeship and traineeship pathways as a mechanism for skilling the future workforce*, the Victorian Skills Commissioner noted "the challenge to attract capable apprentices to many industries". The Commissioner highlighted a number of reasons for this, including negative narratives on future employment and social pressures that push students away from VET programs towards university.⁶

The Victorian TAFE Association considers that the issues highlighted by the Skills Commissioner can in part be traced (as noted elsewhere) to a misapprehension of the nature and breadth of the VET sector and to the kinds of rewarding and fulfilling careers that are opened by VET learning. We recommend that thought be given to measures to counter these views, including to the role of career advice.

⁶ Victorian Skills Commissioner (October 2017), *Rebalance and Relaunch: Supporting Victoria's economy by enhancing apprenticeship and traineeship pathways as a mechanism for skilling the future workforce*, <http://www.vsc.vic.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Victorian-Apprenticeship-and-Traineeship-Taskforce-Report.pdf>, accessed 15 November 2019.

Among the many highly influential voices providing career advice are careers advisers, families, teachers and peers. But when advice is biased, inaccurate or based on outmoded notions, it can prove deleterious to an individual's best interest. Countering these influential and ill-informed voices can prove highly problematic and is particularly difficult when the individual is a young person who lacks the confidence or maturity to navigate career options or challenge the assertions of older peers. For the VET sector, the result of this poor advice is a difficulty in growing numbers, but for Australia as a whole, the results are (among other things) skills shortages for industry, individuals with education and training unsuited to their strengths and needs, and an impact on their social and economic prosperity.

To counter these effects, the Victorian TAFE Association recommends the development of 'peer' education and engagement strategies to increase awareness and provide an accurate understanding of career options. Thought should be given to how existing programs (such as the Apprentice Employment Network's Multi Industry Pre-Apprentice project) can be extended to help tackle misinformation and remove the stigma associated with VET qualifications.⁷ Resources should be allocated to enable the development of a robust and expert career adviser workforce who would be provided with training that enables them to more effectively challenge the biases and misapprehensions that present to senior secondary students.

Many career advice services are provided in schools, often by teachers who deliver advice as an addendum to their usual duties. But this is problematic on two levels. Firstly, the career adviser may not be appraised of the latest knowledge and developments, and so the senior secondary student may be given advice that is not relevant. But further, provision by in-house staff members is subject to a tension between the needs of the students and those of the school. Many schools, driven by the dominant university narrative, promote the number of students from their school who access university in their marketing campaigns, due to a belief that this will increase enrolments. This creates an incentive, deliberate or otherwise, for career advisers in schools to promote university pathways over what may be more suitable alternatives. One way to address this incentive is for career advice services to instead be delivered by independent bodies that have no such vested interest but are driven primarily by the need to provide accurate advice to the benefit of the student. This could be achieved by expanding existing programs (such as Victoria's Skills and Jobs Centres Programs) and through programs currently in development (such as the National Careers Institute). We therefore recommend that the review consider these options, and to the benefits arising from careers advice services provided by independent entities.

The breadth of the VET sector

Too often, the VET sector is viewed through two limited and distorting prisms. The first is its caricature as the 'apprenticeship' sector, where its role is limited to the provision of training to apprentices in the traditional trades. The second view sees VET as sort of 'preparatory school', where it takes it takes students and provides training to prepare them for a pathway to university.

Whichever of these views holds, the consequence is the same. Namely, a diminishing of the VET sector and to the role that it can (and currently does) play in addressing policy issues, including those related to pathways for senior secondary students.

TAFE and the wider VET sector are much more than these caricatures suggest. Victoria's TAFE sector alone: has an expansive educational and training profile that operates across

⁷ <https://aen.org.au/multi-industry-school-based-pre-apprenticeship-support-project/>, accessed 15 November 2019.

industry sectors and AQF qualifications; is located in communities and regions across the state; and has a highly mixed, inclusive student cohort. Many TAFEs are also registered as higher education providers, while those that are not hold partnerships/agreements with universities and other higher education providers that create pathways and involve the delivery (at least in part) of higher education courses by TAFE institutes and other VET providers.

The point of this discussion is to ensure a nuanced and detailed awareness of the VET sector, to give an understanding of its breadth and the part it plays in education and training, and to maximise its role in the future career and life choices of senior secondary students.

Youth in TAFE

Much discussion on senior secondary pathways assumes a traditional approach, whereby a student obtained his or her education by attending a traditional secondary school, and moves from there to continue onto work or further education.

But this model does not serve some well, with some preferring instead to pursue study in non-traditional settings. One such setting is TAFE.

Victorian TAFE Association commissioned research shows that Victoria's TAFE institutes provide secondary education to almost 6,000 students each year, with increasing numbers of early school leavers completing their senior school certificates in Victoria's 12 TAFEs and four dual sector universities.⁸ TAFE is an attractive alternative to students who have struggled in school, have experienced disrupted learning for a variety of reasons and are from low socio-economic status. Such students typically face challenging learning backgrounds, which leads them to gravitate towards communities and professions that accept them. Importantly, such students also demonstrate difficulties with respect to literacy and numeracy, and the TAFE setting is often the last resort for a cohort that would otherwise be left disenfranchised from education.

Despite TAFE playing such a significant role in secondary education, anomalies in funding for programs to facilitate and/or support school attendance are denied to TAFE secondary students, placing them at an unfair disadvantage compared to those studying in more traditional settings.⁹ TAFE secondary students are often an afterthought in the design, implementation and disbursement of support and resources for students and in the development of initiatives to support literacy and numeracy.

These anomalies have a direct impact on their educational experience, with real impacts on their pathways and future choices.

The Victorian TAFE Association therefore recommends that this review give consideration to students in TAFE settings and to the broader question of learning, social supports and resources available to TAFE secondary students.

⁸ Jonas, Pam, Schultz, Nita and van Son, Jo (2017), Disadvantaged young people: senior secondary completion in Victorian TAFEs and dual sector Universities, Victorian TAFE Association.

⁹ Victorian examples include Transport and travelling allowances (TAFE institutes do not meet eligibility requirements for such programs, meaning TAFE secondary students are denied access to resources that make attending school easier); and scholarship programs (TAFE secondary students are ineligible to apply for programs to address financial barriers, such as the Lynne Kosky Memorial VCAL Scholarship).

Senior secondary pathways and lifelong learning

Views on pathways are often coloured by traditional models. In this model, a student who completes senior secondary schooling moves onto post-compulsory education, and from there moves into employment. But modern societies and economies are characterised by increasingly rapid change. To stay abreast and successfully navigate these changes requires citizens to regularly engage with education and training, and the traditional 'endpoint' model is increasingly replaced by one of lifelong learning.

The reality of lifelong learning has implications for the issues at hand in this review, for the ability to successfully navigate future courses can be impacted by the structure and design of senior secondary education. The Victorian TAFE Association therefore considers it essential that this review give thought to how the design of senior secondary pathways impact on a student's ability to engage with lifelong learning as he or she progresses along his career and life.

Key contact

The VTA welcomes the opportunity to speak further to the issues outlined in this submission. To do so, please contact:

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