

May 2020

Mr. John Firth
Chairperson
Vocational and Applied Learning (VCAL)
Pathways in Senior Secondary Schooling Review

Via email: Firth.John.E@edumail.vic.gov.au

Dear *John John*,

Re: Review into Vocational and Applied Learning (VCAL) Pathways in Senior Secondary Schooling

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss the Review with our Education Leaders Network at their meeting on February 28th. It was a robust exchange of views and, I trust, a productive session for you around TAFE perspectives on the objectives of the Review.

Clearly the environment in which the Review is now being undertaken has changed dramatically as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic and the pressure this has put on educational institutions of all types. It has exposed gaps in the preparedness of educational sectors to provide learning under significantly changed circumstances, and in other ways it will lead to shifts in the ways education, training, assessment and reporting can be and is provided into the future. It may well have a lasting impact on the design and delivery of vocational and applied learning.

I have taken up your invitation at our meeting not to be bound by the Review key questions and rather to comment on issues that are of direct relevance to our members the TAFE Institutes and Dual Sector Universities in Victoria. Our response therefore takes the opportunity to provide views informed by VTA policy positions on some issues and more generally addresses other broader themes.

As indicated at the meeting, VTA commissioned research shows that Victoria's TAFE institutes provide secondary education to around 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.¹ These young people are variously enrolled in VCAL, VCE, VETiS, SBATs and pre-apprenticeship courses either directly with the TAFE or under auspice arrangements in partnership with secondary schools.

Undertaking their senior secondary learning in a TAFE or dual sector university setting is for many young people a positive educational choice made by students who prefer a more adult learning environment, and those who have chosen a particular vocationally oriented career path. TAFEs offer authentic skilling and learning experiences across a range of industries which prepares the students for an informed choice of future career.

¹ 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.

With this in mind, we provide the following commentary on the themes of design, access and delivery, career advice, and reputation.

Design

The relative benefits and risks of either maintaining the dual-certificate framework or moving to a single-certificate framework with both academic and vocational pathways, are to a large extent subordinate to the esteem in which the courses or pathways, that sit within these frameworks, are held.

While the structure matters the status of the offerings also has great meaning. Ideally it should be possible to have a dual certificate framework or a single certificate framework without one having the stigma of being of lesser quality/benefit than the other.

A well-functioning senior secondary system should support and facilitate a student's development and contribute to the fulfilment of their 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 and profit from their 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 would be structured in a way that enables the student to identify, navigate and meet their future and ongoing education and skill needs as they arise.

The policy priorities of the VTA specifically address the issue of improving outcomes from VET in Schools qualifications.² Vocational and applied learning pathways offer important vocational study choices for students who can complete or gain credits towards a VET qualification and their senior secondary school certificate.

The VTA recommends that VETiS qualifications are reconfigured as vocationally focused preparatory programs as part of the VCE that emphasise foundation skills and preparation for work rather than specific standalone VET qualifications for a job.

The primary objectives of VCAL, VET delivered to school students and SBATs should be to expand the dimensions of a senior secondary learning program, complementing and – when done well – integrating with other academic subjects. The educational value of vocational, practical and applied learning should be articulated and celebrated.

Vocationally oriented learning should be highly regarded for the preparatory role it can play in the transition from school to tertiary education and/or employment. It is vital that VET and VCAL not be regarded as isolated pathways to employment, but that they sit within a comprehensive senior secondary learning program.

There is ample evidence to show that young people struggle to gain entry to the labour market with Certificate I and II qualifications, except when a Certificate II is recognised as an entry level qualification in pay structures. These qualifications are ideal as preparatory/prevocational courses for secondary school students, but their focus on basic technical skills for a job does not prepare young people for the broad capabilities they will need for successful 21st century careers.

² TAFE for Victoria – Five Policy Priorities for a strong VET sector, Victorian TAFE Association April, 2018.

The VTA recommends that VETiS pathways are strengthened in schools by developing new vocationally-focused preparatory qualifications within the VCE and VCAL that emphasise the broad-based capabilities for work and provide an appreciation of an industry through structured work experience. New VETiS qualifications would provide part-credit to a VET qualification but would not be full VET qualifications in themselves.

Access and delivery

The VTA agrees with the observation made in the Review discussion paper, that VCAL plays an important role in providing pathways for students with special needs or in special settings, and students reengaging with education.

The TAFE Network, along with the ACE sector in Victoria, are the major contributors to inclusive and equitable access to secondary and tertiary education for all Victorians including those from disadvantaged backgrounds, learners with disabilities, and disengaged youth.

The VTA believes that disadvantage should never be a barrier to enrolling in VET and achieving a qualification. However, VTA is concerned that current funding arrangements present inequities for some groups of VETiS and VCAL students studying in TAFE, which is impacting on these student's choice in educational pathways and learning experiences and outcomes.

Research (cited previously) by the VTA shows that secondary school students in TAFE completing VCAL or VCE face substantial disadvantage compared with their peers in traditional school settings under the Schools Resource Package (SRP). Existing arrangements mean that students in schools receive considerably more funding and support compared to students completing the same qualifications in TAFE.

Funding for secondary school students in TAFE has declined, whereas needs-based funding in schools has increased. The problem is intensifying as more and more school leavers choose TAFE and dual sector universities to undertake vocational learning as all or part of their senior school certificates.

For students with disabilities funding for schools under the Program for Students with Disabilities Management System (PSD) is unavailable to students with disabilities in TAFE regardless that the TAFE network accommodates the learning needs of most students with disabilities in Victoria and all of Victoria's deaf VET students.

Current levels of funding do not cover the full costs of the support needed to train these young people, particularly for deaf students. In addition, funding for students with a disability in secondary schools is not available to the same students in TAFE. We are also concerned that enrolment requirements for VET qualifications may deter potential students with a disability.

Inadequate funding also means higher fees for VETiS programs can exclude disadvantaged students from VETiS courses. The VTA urges that sufficient funding is provided to remove barriers to participation in VETiS for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Funding constraints increasingly put the pursuit of vocational offerings in schools 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.

The VTA has consistently advocated for equitable funding to support secondary school students in TAFE. The VTA policy priorities recommend that a comprehensive review should be undertaken of funding and support policies for secondary students studying VCAL or VCE in TAFE vis-a-vis their peers in school settings; and also, for students with a disability studying in TAFE.

The VTA also holds concerns about the range of challenges impacting the delivery of vocational and applied learning, for students in rural and regional areas.

The VTA considers that current senior secondary pathways directed towards a university end-point contribute to the need for regional students to leave home for their post-secondary education. 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 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 encourage or lead easily towards TAFE's educational offerings.

The VTA strongly suggests that the Review consider ways to ensure regional students have choices similar to those available to their city peers. 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 in order to increase course and unit offerings and maximise vocational pathway options.

Career advice

Views on senior student pathways are often coloured by traditional endpoint 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 VTA considers it important 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 or her career and life.

In the 2017 report, *Rebalance and Relaunch: Supporting Victoria's economy by enhancing apprenticeship and traineeship pathways as a mechanism for skilling the future workforce*,

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

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.⁴

The VTA considers that the issues highlighted by the Skills Commissioner can in part be traced to the lack of a clear understanding of the nature and breadth of the VET sector and to the kinds of rewarding and fulfilling careers that are opened by vocational learning. We recommend that thought be given to measures to counter these views, including to the role of career advice.

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 be counter to a student’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.

To counter these effects, the VTA supports 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 vocational pathways including VETiS and VCAL.⁵

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.

The VTA proposes that one way to counter the conscious or unconscious bias, of career advisers in schools to promote university pathways over what may be more suitable alternatives, would be 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 Program) and through programs currently in development (such as the National Careers Institute). We therefore recommend that the review consider these options, and the benefits arising from careers advice services provided by independent entities.

Reputation

The design of senior secondary education in Victoria (and 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 university entrance.

Non-university offerings, such as vocational education and training or the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning are often perceived and presented as a lesser alternative for those unable (or unlikely) to access university higher education.

⁴ 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>

⁵ <https://aen.org.au/multi-industry-school-based-pre-apprenticeship-support-project/>,

For generations schooling has been dominated by the university narrative. A narrative that (on the whole) views a singular 'right' course of action from schooling namely, the pursuit of a university education. A consequence of this narrative is that vocational education pathways are not seen as an equal to academic education, and deemed more suitable for those students unable to make the trek from secondary education to university.

And so, for the student weighing up options in their final years 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 assumed educational standard.

Importantly, the student's view is reinforced by the way in which this narrative is manifested in the real ways and the real impacts it has on the relative experience of students in the different senior secondary qualifications.

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, whose function is to produce graduates for a pathway to university.

The VTA considers that a function of this review is to challenge the factors that sustain this narrative, and to develop recommendations and propose initiatives that challenge it.

As a starting point, the VTA would suggest the following:

- The Review Issues paper asks What is a successful outcome for VCAL students, VET delivered to school students and SBAT students?

Why differentiate between these students and students undertaking the VCE? We would contend that a successful should be no different from that of all students. A successful outcome from 12 years of schooling for every young person should be the confidence, capacity and capability to reap a social and economic outcome from their education.

As previously stated, a successful outcome from a well- functioning senior secondary system should be the development of well-rounded citizens, with the knowledge and skills to confidently navigate and profit from their future life choices, whatever they may be.

- The issues paper gives the example of "is it a successful VCAL outcome if a student exits school early but successfully transitions into a full-time apprenticeship? Or is it a more desirable outcome for that student to complete their senior secondary certificate before transitioning into post-school education and training or work?"

We would ask the question more desirable for who? While the completion of a senior secondary certificate is an important and desirable outcome for many, (and as a metric for measuring the educational attainment of a community) if a student has successfully transitioned to an employment outcome that opens a desired career pathway and enables re-entry points to further and higher education and training in later life, then surely this is the measure of success?

- Re-imagining what outcome measures should be available for VCAL students beyond completion rates. VCAL students achieve much more than can be conveyed by the simple acknowledgement of completing their course. This is a very blunt measure of up to two years of schooling. More post-school destination data should be collected and monitored to help the system, parents, employers, higher and further education selection officers and the public to understand the personal, educational and skill development outcomes for vocational and applied learners.
- Unlike VCE students there is also a lack of graduate data about VCAL and VET students – it is difficult to promote the benefits of VET and VCAL or to see how effective these options are with limited data about the broader educational achievements and post-school destinations for these students. The VTA supports the suggestion in the issues paper that better, more granular senior secondary student data could support schools and the system to measure success for vocational and applied learners and drive accountability for outcomes.
- Outcomes or limited perspectives. When a student undertakes studies in history or geography, there is no suggestion that the 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 VTA 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.

- Shifting the trades focus. Vocational and applied learning is often viewed within a single lens: that of an apprenticeship in the traditional trades. But vocational and applied learning 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,⁶ 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.
- Qualification equality. The VTA supports 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 (or dual certificate frameworks) 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.

⁶ A notable exception is information technology, which is available as a vocational unit in some schools.

I am happy to discuss further any of the issues raised in this response.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in dark ink that reads "Pam Jonas". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Pam Jonas
Interim Director of Policy and Advocacy
Victorian TAFE Association
Level 3, 478 Albert Street,
East Melbourne Vic 3002

Email: pjonas@vta.vic.edu.au
Phone: 03 9639 8100
Mobile: 0429 531 596