

Unlocking the value of VET for school students

Submission to the *Review of VET
for School Students* in South Australia



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Introduction

The South Australian Government's 'Review of VET for School Students' (the Review) is timely, in the context of current debates about the changing purpose of schooling. Globalisation and technological change are reshaping the world of work, and the role and purpose of education (Pilcher & Torii, 2018). To succeed in a rapidly changing world, young people must stay in school longer and learn general capabilities such as problem solving and collaboration (Torii & O'Connell, 2017), in addition to acquiring strong literacy and numeracy skills and content knowledge.

Moreover, post-school education is becoming a necessity (Noonan & Pilcher, 2018). Most jobs of the future will require post-school education and training (Education Council, 2019). A majority of these are predicted to require a vocational education and training (VET) qualification rather than a bachelor's degree from university (Training and Skills Commission 2018; Australian Government Department of Employment, 2016). The importance of skills – technical, professional, and general – is increasingly recognised in all parts of the education system.

VET for school students is a key component of the South Australian education system's response to these challenges, both in increasing school completion and preparing students for pathways into further study and work. Year 12 completers fare much better in the employment market than do early school leavers (Lamb & Huo, 2017). They also have higher degrees of social participation (Buddelmeyer & Polidano 2016). Strategies to retain students in school are therefore essential for improving economic and social outcomes.

VET for school students is not only about school retention. Since its inception, it has provided a pathway that delivers benefits in areas in which mainstream curriculum has arguably fallen short. One benefit is in preparing students for employment, by equipping them with skills that have value in the labour market. A broader benefit is in providing a different approach to teaching and learning, involving a broad base of general capabilities as well as technical skills, and connecting students to relevant learning opportunities in industries and communities.

The need for these broader benefits is now being recognised more widely across the education system. Academic pathways through secondary school are being challenged, as discipline-specific learning geared towards university entry does not equip students with a broad base of skills. Greater attention is being given to the dual value of skills and knowledge in all forms of learning, including through the current review of the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF).

In a climate in which the purpose and structure of secondary and tertiary education are being challenged, we urge the Review to consider VET for school students as one component of a secondary education system that is in urgent need of redesign. For this reason, we have focused our submission on the first issue raised in the Issues Paper, in relation to perceptions of VET for school students and its purpose. We believe this issue best reveals the challenges facing senior secondary curriculum, to which the South Australian Government must respond.

The submission begins by summarising research in relation to three major tensions identified in the Issues Paper, to help build the evidence base for reform. It then proposes a way forward, in which VET is positioned as an integral component of a coherent and integrated suite of senior secondary curriculum offerings in which students develop a broad range of knowledge and skills, which then flow seamlessly into an equally coherent tertiary education sector.

The evidence base

The Issues Paper notes several tensions in relation to perceptions of VET for school students. These tensions are evident in research on VET for school students, as outlined below:

1. VET for school students is often seen as a low-value pathway, despite data indicating positive post-school outcomes for many VET students.

The research confirms that VET is regarded as a lower-status pathway. VET for school students suffers from ‘a problem of low esteem’ (Polesel, 2010). It is often viewed as an option only for students at risk of disengaging from school rather than an option for all students to pursue a productive and fulfilling career (GSADE, 2019). Parents, students, and schools tend to view VET as a less prestigious and valuable pathway compared to the academic pathway that leads to university (Torii & O’Connell, 2017).

Concerns about VET quality and content intensify perceptions of its lower status.

Concerns about the quality of the content and delivery of VET for school students are apparent in research (GSADE, 2019; Polesel, 2008). These concerns may arise from a perceived lack of depth in VET subjects (Clarke, 2013) or from the relatively high proportion of low-level VET courses. In South Australia, just over half (50.3%) of VET courses undertaken by students in school are at certificate levels I or II (NCVER, 2017). Schools’ capacity to deliver certificate III and higher programs is limited (Misko et al., 2019), in part due to the prohibitive costs of on-site facilities or ‘buying in’ provision from a TAFE or other provider (Polesel et al., 2004).

Students’ perceptions of VET for school students courses are mixed. Polesel et al. (2004) concluded that VET students did not view these courses negatively, and that they were seen to provide essential opportunities and pathways, and catered to their diverse needs and learning styles. Another study, however, found that VET for school students described these courses as the ‘dumping ground’ for ‘troublemakers, drop kicks, dropouts, and bludgers’. These courses were perceived as being for the non-academic ‘doers’ of physical and undervalued work, whereas the non-VET subjects were for the doers of valued and mentally rigorous work. VET for school students courses were described as not ‘real’ school courses, and as a waste of time and not leading to anything (Dalley-Trim et al., 2008).

There are examples of VET being viewed more positively. In a study of the TAFE sector, TAFE staff reported that schools and students were beginning to view VET in a more favourable light (Polesel, 2004), although whether this improved image extended to VET within schools is unclear. As the Issues Paper notes, recent figures demonstrating comparable starting incomes and employment status for VET graduates as compared with bachelor’s degree graduates (Skilling Australia Foundation, 2017) may contribute to an upturn. In addition, VET for school students may be held in higher esteem in regional and rural areas, which are less likely to have a strong university presence, or concentrations of advantaged families focused on channelling the curriculum towards academic success (Walstab, 2018).

The current focus on the ATAR score devalues other pathways. Ample evidence exists that a narrow focus on ATAR scores as the most desirable pathway through senior secondary school has adverse consequences. These include potential for negative impact on student wellbeing and engagement (Shiple & Stuble, 2018), or ‘gaming’ of curriculum to gain higher scores rather than

exploring individual interests (O’Connell, 2018; Shipley & Stublely, 2018). In addition, most students are not admitted to university based on their ATAR score (Pilcher & Torii, 2018). Approximately one-third of university offers to school completers are non ATAR-based (O’Connell, 2018). There is good reason to support students to consider other pathways.

Better evidence is needed on the impact of VET for school students. Evidence is mixed regarding the impact of VET for retention and pathways (see [Appendix A](#)), in part due to limitations in available data. Cross-sectional (single-year) data provides limited insight into student pathways over time; youth pathways are highly dynamic, and misleading impressions can be obtained from analysing single years in isolation (Lamb & Vickers, 2006). While the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth provide longitudinal data (e.g. Misko et al., 2019), they rely on self-reporting, which may be unreliable if students do not correctly identify that they are undertaking a VET for school students course (Dalley-Trim et al., 2008; Anlezark et al., 2006).

2. Contrasting views exist about the purpose of VET for school students: whether its main purpose is school retention, or preparation for work

Mixed views on the aims of VET for school students are intrinsic to its design. The current incarnation of VET for school students developed out of concerns about the school to work transition of young Australians, and the need for higher rates of Year 12 completion (Nguyen, 2010). The broad range of aims for VET have been widely recognised in research. They include increasing student engagement in school; providing a ‘safety net’ for students at risk of dropping out; preparing students for the world of work; developing students’ skills; and exploring career options (ACACA 2018; Clarke, 2015; Misko, et al. 2017; Clarke, 2013).

These tensions are similar to conflicting views about the aims of schooling in general, which can be characterised as preparing students for the world of work, or in broader terms around learning and development. The focus on preparing students for employability is evidenced in the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians:

The senior years of schooling should provide all students with the high-quality education necessary to complete their secondary school education and make the transition to further education, training or employment. Schooling should offer a range of pathways to meet the diverse needs and aspirations of all young Australians, encouraging them to pursue university or postsecondary vocational qualifications that increase their opportunities for rewarding and productive employment.

Preparation for work involves more than a narrow focus on specific vocational skills. The Melbourne Declaration argues for school to equip students for employment by enabling them to develop a broad base of general capabilities, not a narrow set of skills for a specific industry. All students require a mix of knowledge and skills, including a strong foundation in literacy and numeracy, ‘general capabilities’ such as problem solving and critical thinking, plus some combination of theoretical and disciplinary knowledge, and practical skills with ties to the world of work (Torii & O’Connell, 2017; Rosenstock and Steinbert, 2007).

Funding models for VET for school students are based on vocation-specific skills. Under South Australia’s ‘WorkReady’ program, school-based VET and other VET are treated alike for funding purposes – funding is provided only if the course content aligns with specific skills associated with identified economic needs. However, funding based on priority skills inhibits schools’ and other providers’ ability to plan their VET offerings (SEDA, 2015). It also does not recognise the broader benefits of VET for school students, in developing general capabilities.

All school students require learning that is applicable beyond the education system. Torii & O’Connell (2017), in their roundtable discussions with education practitioners, government leaders, policy specialists and researchers from across Australia, reported a shared belief in the importance of a model of education that embraces real-world and applied learning for all students. The current school system, however, artificially divides students into academic and vocational, or “head” versus “hand” learners (Downs 2018). While school students have the option of studying both academic and VET subjects, the two streams of learning are rarely interlinked, meaning students will learn either academic content-based knowledge or vocational technical skills, but rarely engage with both content and application (Torii & O’Connell, 2017).

VET for school students can play a valuable role in developing general capabilities. There is evidence that many VET for school students courses include the teaching of general competencies that enable students to learn the key non-technical skills required to enter modern workplaces (Misko et al., 2019). This emphasis on general capabilities is evident in the stated aims of the South Australia Senior Secondary Certificate (SACE), which is designed to “equip students with the skills, knowledge, and personal capabilities to successfully participate in our fast-paced global society” (<https://www.sace.sa.edu.au/about>).

These tensions are best navigated by focusing on the value VET delivers to students. The Education Council (2014), in its updated framework for vocational learning and VET delivered to secondary students, states that students must be at the centre of vocational learning and VET, with decisions guided by their long-term interests. Lamb et al (2018), in their examination of VET providers in high performing regions (i.e. high VET participation and completion, holding other variables constant), found that one of the most successful approaches was developing mechanisms for individualised support, considering the personal situation and needs of the learner. Arguably the same best practice approach holds for the senior secondary years – with individually designed, coherent student pathways, based on strengths, interests, and aspirations (Dawkins et al., 2019; Clarke & Polesel, 2013).

Available research suggests that students perceive value from VET participation. Few studies have captured the views of VET school students about the value that they derive from their participation. One of the few qualitative studies conducted with VET for school students concluded that many found the VET courses more enjoyable than the regular academic classes and provided a welcome relief from the more taxing academic subjects. This study also found that VET for school students felt the courses provided valuable qualifications and a ‘head start’ in terms of post school pursuits (Dalley-Trim et al., 2008). VET for school students also appears to have positive effects on attitudes towards and satisfaction with school (Nguyen, 2010; Lamb & Vickers 2006), suggesting it has immediate as well as longer-term value.

All parts of schooling need to engage a broad spectrum of students. Certain groups of students are overrepresented in VET for school students, including young people from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds, students who attend low-SES schools, Indigenous young people, and young people who live in non-metropolitan areas – even after controlling for their prior academic achievement (Clarke & Polesel, 2013; Curtis, 2011; Polesel, 2008; Chambers, 2018; Chesters, 2015). This suggests that the divide between academic and VET streams in schools may be exacerbating existing inequalities, given that students from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to be encouraged to pursue vocational pathways (Torii & O’Connell, 2017). VET for school students may be carrying the consequences of failure of mainstream curriculum to engage vulnerable cohorts. This in turn suggests that the key priority for reform may in fact lie in the mainstream school curriculum.

3. Information is available about VET options and pathways but can be complex, resulting in low levels of awareness of VET among students

Research confirms a gap in students’ understanding of VET pathways in schools. A recent survey of secondary students indicated that students’ thinking about career and pathways is heavily influenced by the experiences and knowledge of their parents/carers. Only 16% of respondents, however, believed their parents have a well-rounded understanding of vocational education (Shiple & Stuble, 2018). Research also indicates that students and parents have much less understanding of the VET system as compared with university (Shiple & Stuble, 2018), perhaps reflecting perceptions that higher education has greater value.

The availability of guidance about VET might also be limited by teachers’ perceptions. Some teachers seemingly devalue VET as a viable pathway for good students (Dalley-Trim et al., 2008). Other research suggests that some teachers view VET for school students as disruptive and not needed (Polesel et al., 2004). This may affect teachers’ willingness to promote VET pathways.

Costs of VET for school students may also inhibit participation. Currently, funding does not always cover the actual cost of providing the course, particularly if purchased from a VET provider outside of the school. As a result, schools are often forced to either charge higher student fees, which exacerbates inequalities based on income, or not offer the course at all (Polesel et al., 2004).

Lack of understanding between schools and industry inhibits partnership approaches. Schools (including in South Australia) have described a lack of awareness of industry and employer needs, while industry stakeholders described a lack of understanding of how schools operate, including the place of VET within the school curriculum, and structural and logistic arrangements for VET provision in schools (Clarke, 2013). This may be a particular issue for South Australia, where engaging stakeholders and managing partnerships has remained the schools’ responsibility (unlike, for example, in New South Wales) (Polesel et al., 2017).

VET may reach disengaged students too late to re-engage them in school. In South Australia, the current earliest age of entry to VET for school students is Year 10. By Year 10, patterns of disengagement or dissatisfaction with schooling are often already entrenched. Moreover, by the senior secondary years, changes to subject or program choice can often have implications for school completion or access to post-school study, limiting the effectiveness of VET for school students as a taster or career exploration program (Clarke, 2013).

The way forward

The tensions discussed above point to a need to rethink South Australia's approach to VET for school students, in the broader context of a more coherent and equitable secondary curriculum. The following recommendations take a broad view of potential actions for the South Australian government to take, in the context of current national reform across the education system. These are supported by the Promising Practices at [Appendix B](#), which demonstrate that innovative, effective and equitable models of senior secondary curriculum are achievable.

- **That the South Australian Government attend to discussions and forthcoming recommendations of the AQF review in considering an optimal design for senior secondary curriculum**, in which all students are supported to develop a broad base of knowledge and skills. This approach would break down barriers between academically oriented and vocational courses, and instead provide an array of courses that mix theoretical and practical learning (Downs, 2018).
- **That the South Australian Government, through Education Council, advocate for a national agreement on greater coherence and equity in senior secondary education.** This may include expanding non-ATAR pathways into all forms of tertiary education, and including VET for school students as part of a portfolio of skills students may compile, to prepare them for all forms of tertiary learning. Ideally, this agreement would occur in parallel with national collaboration to improve coherence in tertiary education (Dawkins et al., 2019).
- **That the South Australian Government actively address perceptions of VET for school students as a pathway aimed at increasing retention for students at risk of disengagement**, and promote VET as a learning option for all students, to help them develop a broad base of skills, which are valuable for a range of post-school and employment pathways. This should include consideration of offering vocational learning options earlier in secondary schooling.
- **That the South Australian Government work with teachers and career advisors to integrate this message into advice provided to students and their families in choosing senior secondary pathways.** Rather than choosing between an 'academic track' or 'VET track', students should be assisted to take the combination of 'academic' and VET courses that best accords with their interests, style of learning, and goals for their future. These conversations must involve families wherever practicable, and be supported by straightforward advice about options and pathways.
- **That the South Australian Government implement a coherent, ongoing program of career and pathways exploration early** – perhaps starting from primary school – and continuing through Year 12. This would include exploration of students' interests and capabilities, to prepare them to navigate a range of future options, rather than to identify a single career. The Victorian Government's *Transforming career education* program, which begins in Year 7, may be an instructive model (Victoria Department of Education and Training, 2019). South Australia's planned review of best practice in career counselling will assist in pursuing this recommendation.

- **That the South Australian Government provide brokering support for schools to enter into partnerships with local industry and tertiary education providers**, drawing on best practice, in which all students (not only those in VET) have opportunities to apply their learning in the world outside of school. This may be especially important in communities facing local skills shortages, and communities in which many students engage in part-time work, to support connectivity between on-the-job and school-based learning.
- **That the South Australian Government reconsider the importance of certificate completion as a measure of the effectiveness of funding for VET for school students**, and instead look to emerging micro-credentialling arrangements as a potential means of recognising a broad range of general capabilities and skills clusters, as well as vocation-specific technical skills.
- **That the South Australian Government work with the research community to increase the evidence base about students' perceptions of VET for school students** and their motivations for undertaking VET, including students from a range of academic achievement levels and with a range of post-school aspirations. One option would be to extend the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) Graduate Outcomes Survey to school students enrolled in VET for school students courses. Reforms to the evidence base should include extending data collection to students undertaking VET programs that do not contribute to the secondary school certificate of education.
- **That the South Australian Government work with the research community to improve the availability of reliable longitudinal data about post-school pathways**, given limitations in cross-sectional data (such as the NCVER VET in Schools Statistical Collection), or data based on student self-report (such as the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth). This may involve implementation of a tracking survey of all Year 12 completers from South Australian schools, similar to those in Victoria (On Track) and Queensland (Next Step). It may also involve support for efforts to match the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) and NCVER VET for School Students datasets.
- **That the South Australian Government reconsider how VET for school students is funded**, with adequate funding allocated to cover the costs of providing a range of rigorous, high-quality courses based on student and industry needs now and in the future. Review of VET funding should include consultation with VET providers to design funding models that enable more efficient longer-term planning, and which reward genuine collaboration with South Australian schools.

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Appendix 1 – Evidence of impact

Evidence of the impact of VET for school retention is mixed, as outlined below:

- A study using three cohorts of Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) data and propensity score matching to compare like students concluded that participation in VET for school students improved the chances of school completion (Black et al., 2011).
- An earlier survey of NSW students also concluded that VET for school students contributed to student retention to Year 12 for students at risk of early leaving (Polesel et al., 2005). The same conclusion was drawn using more recent Victorian data (CIRES, 2018).
- Nguyen (2010), however, points out that while participation in VET for school students increased between its inception in the mid-1990s and 2009 when the research was conducted, Year 12 retention rates had stagnated, suggesting that VET for school students may have a limited sustained or ongoing impact on increasing retention.
- Anlezark et al. (2006), using LSAY data, found a positive effect from participation in school VET programs on retention from Year 10 to Year 11, but a negative effect on retention from Year 11 to Year 12 – after controlling for a wide range of personal characteristics, including academic ability and SES. The effects were larger for boys than for girls. Replacing Year 12 with the vocational equivalent (certificate II) did not materially change this result.
- Clarke (2013) comments that the significant numbers of young people continuing to leave school early and accessing VET without completing a senior secondary certificate indicate that there is still a significant cohort of young people for whom VET for school students is not necessarily the effective retention strategy that it is perceived to be.

Evidence of the value of VET for post-school pathways is also mixed:

- Graduates from VET for school students in NSW have been found to have a higher rate of transition into further education and training than non-VET graduates do, despite the latter group's higher achievement profile. The same study found a positive impact of VET for school students on providing pathways to higher-skilled and better-paid occupations, compared with students who did not participate in VET at school (Polesel et al., 2005).
- Another study using longitudinal data found that, amongst those students who did not go on to university, participating in VET for school students had a small positive impact on obtaining full-time employment (Lamb & Vickers 2006).
- Early school leavers who participated in VET prior to dropping out have been found to have better chances of successfully transferring into post-school VET (Walstab, 2018).
- In contrast, Black and colleagues' (2011) analysis of longitudinal data did not find that VET for school students resulted in increased levels of post-school study.
- Studies tracking the destinations of school completers in Victoria (Rothman et al., 2011) and Queensland (Queensland Department of Education and Training, 2011) indicate that VET for school students is playing a limited role in supporting entry to work, and to university (Clarke, 2015). The jobs accessed by VET and non-VET students in Victoria have also been found to be virtually identical (Polesel, 2007), and employment outcomes of VET for school students may be concentrated in low paid, largely casualised occupations (Clarke, 2013) – although these outcomes may reflect differences in students' previous achievement profiles.

Appendix 2 – Promising practices

The Nordic system of coherent, structured, flexible pathways

The current system of VET for school students in Australia often does not provide a coherent structure of learning or clear, strong pathway to positive outcomes. Students select courses from a menu of subjects or units that form part of a broader program of study. The result is often a random assortment of VET courses, limited by whatever courses are offered through the school (Lamb et al., 2018).

An alternative approach to the provision of VET for school students implemented by several of the Nordic countries consists of a number of separate, structured vocational programs organised around broad occupational fields (e.g. health and social care; engineering and mechanical) (Markussen, 2003; Jorgensen, 2019). These programs are offered in the post-compulsory years and retain links with general upper secondary education and provide avenues to higher education. Indications are that such an approach can result in positive outcomes regarding further education and training (including higher education) and full-time employment. These positive results seem to depend, however, on the level of focus and occupational specificity of the program (Lamb, 2008).

Such systems tend to have high rates of participation in VET for school students, high rates of school completion, and high standards of learning and achievement (based on PISA results) (Lamb, 2008). The South Australian government may want to consider whether a similar approach would be beneficial for its students.

School-based apprenticeships

Within the current Australian VET for school students system, school-based apprenticeships and, to a lesser extent, traineeships (SBATs), are a domestic example of how VET for school students can work well (Torii & O'Connell, 2017). Currently, just nine per cent of South Australian students participating in VET for school students are doing school-based apprentices and trainees (SBATs). This rate is somewhere in the middle compared with other states and territories, where rates range from 3.5% (WA) to 15.7% (Tas) (Misko et al., 2019).

Apprenticeships are positioned internationally as an essential ingredient of an efficient education system (OECD 2013, cited by Klatt et al. 2017). Within Australia, evidence indicates generally good outcomes for SBAT completers, particularly for boys and students from higher socio-economic status backgrounds (Lamb & Vickers, 2006; Lamb, 2001; Klatt et al., 2017). In addition, schools, apprentices, and their employers mostly view school-based apprenticeships positively (Helme et al., 2009; Smith and Wilson, 2004 – both cited by Klatt et al., 2017).

SBATs have been found to have some limitations, including over-representation of students from low-SES backgrounds in lower qualification levels; and over-representation of young women in service sector SBATs, which have poorer career prospects and lower pay (Klatt, et al., 2017). Implementation of SBATs must therefore give attention to equity issues, to avoid locking already disadvantaged young people into precarious employment pathways.



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