



Shop Distributive and Allied Employees' Association

**THE UNION FOR WORKERS IN
RETAIL. FAST FOOD. WAREHOUSING.**

SUBMISSION

Inquiry into School to Work Transition

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A critical feature of the school to work transition process is the delivery of vocational education and training in schools. Students are often led by their schools to believe that successful completion of vocational education and training programs in schools will materially aid those students seeking employment and or further training post school. It is therefore important to consider whether such advice and the delivery of such programs does assist students in the ways they expect.

In the view of the SDA vocational education and training at any level has two fundamental roles. Those roles are economic and social. On one hand there needs to be an emphasis upon developing the knowledge and skills base of the nation so as to meet the needs of employers to have a workforce which can maximise productivity. On the other hand, and at least as equally important, there must also be an emphasis upon developing the knowledge and skills of individuals so that they can pursue rewarding careers.

Our educational and training institutions have a key role to play in synchronising these demands and producing outcomes in line with them. This general principle applies to vocational education and training in schools (VETIS).

The delivery of VETIS must be undertaken in ways which maintain a balance between pedagogical interests and industry requirements.

Essentially VETIS falls into two broad areas:

- acquainting students with the world of work; and
- equipping students to have the capacity to seek and obtain employment post school in a way which gives recognition and value to their VETIS achievements and qualifications.

This submission is principally concerned with the latter area or goal.

The SDA is concerned to ensure that vocational education and training in schools equips students with either the skills to obtain meaningful on-going employment upon leaving school or with the basic educational foundation upon which they can build through further study.

Underpinning this submission is a position which asserts that whilst supporting the principle of VETIS, unless employers regard a VETIS qualification as being at least equal in value to a post school achieved qualification, they will give preference in employment to the person who has achieved their qualification post school and while active in the paid workforce.

There is widespread concern in industry (both employers and unions) that VETIS students, whilst having a comparable qualification often do not have comparable skills and abilities to others with the same qualification who have obtained their qualification post school.

Employers are exhibiting a clear preference for people who have obtained their qualifications after leaving school and while being employed.

For VETIS to have broad industry support this fundamental problem must be addressed. Unless it is effectively addressed then there will continue to be a major question mark over the utility of VETIS as a mechanism to aid school to work transitions.

Employers must be brought to a position whereby they regard a VETIS qualification as being at least equal in value to a qualification achieved by some other means such as by combining paid work with study in a post school setting. Unless this is achieved employers, individuals and the community in general will regard VETIS qualifications as "second best".

If VETIS is to be seen as more than an exercise designed to keep young people at school beyond the time they would normally leave, then changes need to be introduced which will establish VETIS in the eyes of all as a pathway of real educational merit.

There is considerable concern as to whether the current system is producing consistent quality outcomes.

There is no long-term value in maintaining a system which does not indisputably produce a quality outcome which is recognised as such by industry.

Australia has an industry-led training system. Training Packages are developed with the active involvement of industry and reflect industry's views as to what is required in the area of skill development. Training Packages are regularly reviewed to ensure they remain reflective of industry views and needs. The Training Package specifies the outcome required by industry.

It is unrealistic to expect that industry will embrace students whose training is not in line with Training Package requirements or where it is clear that there is a significant gap between actual skill and credentialed skill.

To achieve a quality outcome where the standard of a VETIS qualification is regarded as comparable to the same qualification achieved elsewhere, VETIS must be delivered in conformity with the Australian Quality Training Framework and the relevant National Training Package.

This requires those delivering VETIS, and/or assessing students, to hold the trainer and/or assessor skills, as specified in the Training Package. The human and physical resource requirements stipulated in Training Packages must also be met.

There is widespread concern at industry level that many of those delivering VETIS do not meet the trainer and/or assessor requirements set out in the Training Package and/or that teachers often lack a practical understanding of the workplace and the industry concerned.

Teachers of VETIS programs must meet the industry requirements regarding knowledge and skills. This requires such teachers having reasonably current workplace experience. In order for teachers to have current workplace experience there is a need for them to have access to regular industrial release.

However, in order to assuage the fear of existing workers that industrial release will be used to replace them, it is important that it be implemented in agreement with workers and their unions. Where teachers undergo industrial release, it must be during school term and hours.

No teacher should undertake more than 10 school days of industrial release in any year and then only with the agreement of the relevant union.

As schools operate independently, there appears to be little control over the decisions they make in the area of VETIS. Currently there seems to be limited willingness by the Department of Education to intervene in arrangements which schools make in VETIS programs, even when sometimes they are obviously not in the best interests of the students.

There is a wide belief that accountability mechanisms have been removed from the system and that there is an absence of effective checks and balances operating to ensure quality.

Minimum requirements for assessment are specified in most training packages. However, in a number of States there is no effective monitoring or audit process in place in regard to assessment. To the extent that such monitoring does take place, it generally fails to convince industry that it is rigorous or sufficient to ensure quality outcomes.

The lack of accountability of educational authorities and schools and their apparent lack of interest in ensuring trainers, teachers and assessors conform with the provisions of the Training Package leaves many in industry short of confidence in the performance of the overall system.

For students to get value from their training it is important that the school has facilities which mirror the workplace. In a number of states there is very limited audit procedures in place to ensure this.

If a quality outcome acceptable to industry is to be achieved, it is critical that the student be able to link the theoretical or academic with the practical. This requires workplace experience. While in part this may involve normal work in industry, VETIS also requires an element of structured workplace learning. In industries such as retail, there is little opportunity for such structured learning if the student is rostered to work during peak trading periods.

In many instances students can complete their on-the-job experience working late nights, public holidays and weekends. Although this may be advantageous in limited circumstances, it gives little opportunity for structured on the job learning. On occasions VETIS becomes little more than a source of cheap labor for employers.

An issue of concern for unions is the impact of VETIS programs on existing workers. There is no doubt that, especially where VETIS students are working outside of school hours in the retail industry, they are sometimes displacing existing workers. In order to avoid industrial relations issues arising there needs to be a recognition that limits will have to apply to the number of VETIS students in any particular workplace.

Employers do not always play their part in the effective delivery of VETIS. There are substantial gaps in the performances of some employers in regard to the provision of workplace training.

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Schools often struggle to convince employers to provide structured workplace training opportunities for students. Often, where such opportunities are provided, adequate

supervision, mentoring and appropriate structured on-job training, especially across all the competencies in the Training Package qualification, is not provided. Some employers see VETIS as a source of cheap labour. In some case this is due to inadequate commitment by employers but in others it is due to employers not understanding their obligations.

Employers are not always adequately briefed by schools, nor given appropriate support mechanisms by schools.

It should be a clearly mandated that if a school wishes to deliver a VETIS programme then it also has a responsibility to organise proper work placement for students. Schools, teachers, students and employers need to clearly understand and implement the purpose of work placement.

State education authorities should effectively monitor VETIS workplace training.

All students should be covered by a signed training agreement which specifies the agreed training plan, provides for proper structured on and off-job training and ensures equivalent educational outcomes and procedures for school students as for others undertaking the same certificate.

The current VETIS system can provide a student with a qualification based on a training package but that person may then be ineligible when they enter the workforce to attract a training subsidy for an employer. On one hand the person exiting school has a qualification which may not be sufficient to gain them employment, but the opportunity for them to enter a subsidised training arrangement with an employer has been removed. The exiting student loses both ways and any financial incentive for the employer to offer a job anyway is removed. It is imperative that schools understand this and act accordingly.

The following example of a young woman in Victoria highlights the problem:

The young woman is studying VCAL at a Victorian Secondary College. She is doing 2 VET courses: Certificate 3 in Hairdressing and Certificate 2 in Retail Makeup and Skin Care. She would like to become a hairdresser. Her mum has been trying to get a clear answer as to what year level of apprenticeship her daughter would need to start at upon leaving school. The school says first or second year but cannot give a clear answer and says the young woman could decide to do all the coursework again. If she did the coursework again she would be double-dipping the system of government funding. If she went in as a second-year apprentice she has already done much of the coursework but has only limited work experience and would not be able to work at the same level as a second-year apprentice who has already worked a full year in the industry. Her mum encouraged her daughter to stay at school, thinking this would be the right thing to do but now the young woman is disadvantaged whatever she does. This is a typical but classic case of how VETIS does not work for many young people unless the quality of the delivery matches workplace expectations.

Cost is also an issue for students. In some states schools are not funded to deliver particular VETIS courses . If schools then wish to deliver such courses they must divert funding from other programs which is generally not possible or charge the students (parents) for the

additional costs involved in arranging the delivery of the course, such as contracting a teacher to deliver.

Many VETIS programmes require students to purchase tools and equipment which add up to hundreds of dollars. This places substantial strains on family finances. It also acts to exclude poorer students from participation.

As a principle, there should not be any transfer of costs of VETIS to students. Effective funding arrangements must be put in place.

School based VETIS programs, including school based traineeships and apprenticeships, must be integrated into the industry-led vocational training system and not develop as a separate system.

The principle of normal work being counted for VETIS purposes should be encouraged. Where this does occur, then the student should be paid the award rate for the job. There is, however, a difference between normal work and structured workplace training and both are essential for the achievement of overall competence by the student. It is essential that school-to-work participants receive genuine training with an appropriate range of tasks and not spend most of their work time performing routine work such as working on a register during peak trading times.

This issue also raises the broader issue of recognition of prior learning. Especially in industries such as retail, young workers learn a wide range of skills on the job, undertaking normal rostered duties. Such workplace acquired skills should be recognized for VETIS purposes.

VETIS programs should expand opportunities for senior secondary students and, as far as practicable, keep open the option of participation in higher education. Careful consideration of subject selection is therefore required by students to ensure a proper matching of students' skills and interests and the training program while enabling them to keep their options open for the future.

The student is sometimes left trying to satisfy both requirements, in addition to carrying the heavy workload of Years 11 and 12. The result is that students either bear the additional pressure, fail, or reduce their secondary school subjects, thereby reducing their choices post Year 12 to only a vocational stream.

In undertaking VETIS, students should not have to carry a heavier workload in terms of time requirements than other students. Classes should be timetabled so that these students do not miss other classes.

There is a need for universities to accept VETIS as being legitimate for university entrance purposes.

Already there is a widespread attitude throughout the community that a university education is preferable to other options.

Engagement in VETIS programs should not have the effect of making it more difficult for students to gain entrance to university. Under such scenarios, many students, often with parental and teacher guidance, will choose to avoid VETIS. This has the effect of creating a

"streaming" situation where the brightest students avoid VETIS and those unlikely to gain university entrance undertake VETIS.

Under the current arrangements, we are on the way to creating a two-tier education system. Under such a scenario, this is and will continue to increase the division between public schools which have low levels of VETIS participation and government schools.

VETIS achievements should be counted fully for the purposes of university entrance scores.

VETIS should not be seen as, or by default become, a mechanism which operates just to keep young people at school longer. It should operate to positively contribute to the development of young people.

Schools have a responsibility not just to impart knowledge but also to ensure that their students have successful transitions. This is particularly important for VETIS students.

Every school which seeks to deliver VETIS should have a trained careers advisor on staff. This advisor must be able to give accurate advice to students and parents in regard to all aspects of school to work transition. Such advice would include advising students as to the likelihood of them gaining employment post school based upon their VETIS qualification, what post school level of employment they could expect to obtain because of their VETIS qualification, what post school training they could or could not access with fee help and what post school training they would need to complete in order to obtain employment at their desired level.

A designated person, who may or may not be the careers advisor, with appropriate expertise and adequate resources, should be appointed in each school to liaise between student/school/employer and RTO, co-ordinate on and off-the job delivery and keep all parties appropriately informed. Where students have been identified as "at risk", then additional support should be provided.

Objective career advice needs to be made available to all young people. Ideally this advice would be provided in an environment where vocational education and training is not presented as a second-class option, principally for those not "smart enough" to go to university. For this to be achieved, universities and careers teachers must be convinced to accept VET as a meritorious educational pathway.

The focus of universities to expand their student enrolments at almost any cost actively discourages many young people and careers teachers from considering VET as a viable alternative to university.

VET qualifications offer many people rewarding careers. It is time to move on from viewing VET as something to just keep kids at school or just for those who are not able to achieve university entrance.

More than half of all students starting a bachelor degree at an Australian university are now admitted on a basis other than their Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR). This cohort has one of the highest drop-out rates. There is a correlation between ATAR ranking and propensity to drop out before completing an undergraduate programme. Surely some of these students would have been better served had they been directed towards a VET qualification.

Effective school to work transition programs are an essential component of a modern educational system. VETIS can play a key role here but only if it begins to deliver on all the promises that have been made.

VETIS has much to offer students if it is delivered as a quality product, acceptable to industry. At the present time, the credibility of VETIS is under challenge. The test of the efficacy of VETIS will not be the numbers involved, but whether young people develop the knowledge and skills from VETIS programs sufficient to enable them to acquire and hold rewarding jobs and lead successful lives as part of our community.