



# Vocation, vocation

The rising popularity of vocational education has led to innovation and a new set of challenges for our schools, writes Jack Keating as he reviews the latest report from the House of Representatives Education Committee.

One of the earliest studies of Vocational Education and Training (VET) in Schools describes a coxswain course that was delivered by a high school in a coastal town in New South Wales. It involved students undertaking 180 hours at sea and led to a Coxswain Certificate of Competence. Such a course would cause nightmares for the wide variety of people that are now involved in VET in Schools\* across Australia. Duty of care, industrial health and safety, cost, and learning supervision are just some of the issues that would face such a program.

Yet this program is a good example of one of the major features of VET in Schools that has evolved with secondary education over the past decade. VET courses in schools have their origins in a collection of innovations by schools, industry, the VET sector and state education authorities. By the early 1990s all Australian states and territories had adopted 'common frameworks' for their upper secondary certificates. In all cases this meant a single certificate, and in most cases vocational subjects or courses had no or a weak presence. The VET programs that now form VET in Schools across Australia were a series of innovations that interacted with these certificates and eventually became absorbed or accommodated by them, in most cases.

The isolated and small scale vocational innovations that peppered upper secondary education in the early 1990s have now grown into a major educational institution. By 2002, 95% of all secondary schools had VET in Schools courses, and 44% of all students undertaking the senior secondary certificates were doing a VET in Schools course. The innovations also include School-based New Apprenticeships.

It is not surprising therefore that amongst the first observations of VET in Schools in Australia by the House of Representatives Education Committee, in its report *Learning to work*, is that there is a high degree of diversity across the states and territories. Programs differ in their industries, hours of study, requirements for work placements, incorporation within the school certificates, and relationships with the VET certificates or Training Packages.

This diversity also is a result of the federalist structure of schooling in Australia. The senior secondary certificates of each of the states and territories are quite different and, when mixed with the innovations, we now have a remarkable diversity of programs. This diversity and the issues that it raises need to be viewed from a national perspective as there has been an historical determination on the part of the Australian states to maintain their own distinctive certificates and reject attempts to establish a national certificate, which has been achieved in most other OECD countries.

So VET in Schools is a combination of innovations, different senior secondary certificates and a national VET system. The extraordinary array of issues that the House Education Committee has identified and made recommendations for is mostly a result of this mix.

VET in Schools might be regarded as a unique junction of the full range of interests in Australian education and training systems. It brings together the school sector and the training sector, and their respective qualifications. Apart from the different senior secondary certificates it also confronts the relationship between these certificates and the university sector. Given the complex funding

\*VET in Schools are accredited programs under the National Training Framework

*Learning to work*: Opposite page and overleaf, students from Erindale College (ACT) participating in vocational education programs. Photos: AUSPIC

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structure for education and training in Australia it also involves state and territory governments and the Commonwealth government. And finally it involves industry, which apart from its interest in VET in Australia also provides the work placements that are included in most VET in Schools programs.

As a consequence, the issues that have been identified by the Education Committee are multiple and complex. They include the need for greater national consistency in program areas, the structure of programs, levels of the certificates, contact hours of teaching, and the inclusion of work placements. The level of resourcing is a widespread issue, as is the capacity of schools to deliver programs, and their relationship with the TAFE sector and other VET providers. Further issues are the training, professional development and workload of teachers.

The committee's report has been fashioned from an extensive program of research that included 129 submissions and a very large number of hearings and witnesses in all states and territories. Its discussion and recommendations are wide ranging. They include the planning and design of courses, qualification types and levels, the means of delivery, and the resourcing of courses.

It also looks at the role of VET in Schools in serving different groups of students, including Indigenous students, students with disabilities, and students that are at risk of early school leaving. The report notes that the rapid growth of VET in Schools has led to a drain on the time of careers counsellors in schools, and that there is a need for schools to be introducing vocational programs in the middle years.

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The myriad issues raised are rather daunting. If the report has a fault it would be that there are simply too many issues and many of them are so large that it would be difficult to know where to begin implementing what appear to be a very sensible and well researched set of 41 recommendations. Apart from the considerable costs that would be involved, recommendations concerning national consistency, funding responsibilities, cooperation between the school and VET



sectors, and university recognition of VET qualifications have been on the table for the better part of a decade. They all have run up against the tortoise paced change and the high degree of sector autonomy that characterise education and training in Australia, and for that matter most other countries.

The set of recommendations of the report is incisive. It arguably constitutes the most comprehensive analysis of VET in Schools in Australia to date. However, the committee might have been more forthright in locating some priority issues. Four that are discussed in the report might be starters: the purpose of the VET in Schools programs; the core content of vocational education in schools; the place and administration of workplace learning; and the delivery of programs.

**T**he report makes the point that the most significant change in Australian schooling has been the emergence of mass senior secondary education. The emergence of VET in Schools during the 1990s is a response to this change, and is in the context of the junior technical schools in all states in the previous decades. As the committee notes, VET in Schools is oriented towards students who in previous decades would not have completed secondary education. However, with

participation rates now approaching 50%, vocational programs now include a wide spread of students.

Increased subject choice, dual qualifications, vocational skills development, workplace preparation and VET pathways are amongst the stated purposes of VET in Schools courses. As the committee indicates, most students that do VET courses do not end up working in the particular industry area, and there is reluctance on the part of industry to recognise VET in Schools students as having workplace competence. Furthermore program areas are mostly based upon student interests and schools' capacities to deliver.

One of the earliest VET programs in schools was the Dusseldorp Skills Forum sponsored TRAC (Training in Retail and Commerce) programs. The basic philosophy behind it was that vocational studies and the workplace could allow students to learn in different ways. They allow experiential and practical learning, and problem solving, and they allow students to form different types of teaching and learning relationships with both their teachers and their workplace supervisors. These attributes, it was argued, led students to succeed in their learning and to become more motivated.

The committee possibly has undervalued this purpose. Although to be fair it has

recommended research into the outcomes and benefits of VET in Schools programs, and has indicated that clarification of purpose should be a priority.

The report notes that there is a wide and expanding range of VET in Schools program areas. This has added to the great diversity of programs and the confusion over purposes. Furthermore as participation levels approach 50% there is an emerging issue of



These placements compete with work experience programs (mostly year 10), TAFE and university industry placements. They can be demanding for firms, and especially small firms that have the responsibility of supervising and productively utilising the students. Yet there is good evidence of the great value of work placements.

The Commonwealth made a major investment in facilitating work placements

This issue goes to the heart of the structure of upper secondary schooling in Australia and how it is funded. There is a variety of innovations in school structures in Australia: senior secondary colleges, multi-campus colleges, and multi-sector educational precincts. All of these models make the delivery of a wider variety of programs, including VET in Schools, more feasible. The issues that are explored in the committee's report go to the question of



what is the core curriculum content that should be delivered through VET programs.

Twelve years ago the Mayer Committee delivered its recommendations for a set of seven generic 'Key Competencies' that it recommended should be built into post compulsory education in Australia. Despite a major investment by the Commonwealth government and the strong support of business and unions, with the exception of the VET sector, the Key Competencies failed to make much of an impression.

Interest in generic skills has increased across a number of countries in recent years. Given the raft of issues concerning purposes of VET in Schools, the range of programs, capacity to deliver, and VET sector and industry recognition of VET in Schools certificates, there is a good argument for revisiting this issue in Australia. The House Education Committee has put on the table the options of a specific VET certificate based upon generic skills, the incorporation of generic skills in all VET in Schools courses, and the incorporation of vocational programs and generic skills in the middle and early years of secondary education. These options should be debated.

Work placements, mostly of two to four weeks, are part of most VET in Schools programs. They also are a headache for most school authorities, and for industry.

through the Enterprise and Career Education Foundation, and the states and territories have made major investments through the work of careers teachers and VET in Schools coordinators. Industry, which provides the places, obviously has made a major contribution.

Much of the discussion in the *Learning to work* report concerns the amount of workplace experience that should be necessary for VET in Schools students to achieve workplace competence for the particular VET certificate that they receive. While this is an issue, it is suggested that the wider issues of workplace learning, workplace orientation and direct employment outcomes also should be considered. There is good evidence for all of these outcomes and they should be central to future decisions about support for work placements provided by both levels of government.

VET in Schools in Australia has proven to be resource expensive. Specialist facilities, trained and experienced teachers, transport, timetabling difficulties, class and group sizes, and work placements all add to these costs. Most schools are in some type of partnership arrangement with a TAFE institute or some other VET provider. Some are in partnership arrangements with other schools, such as the Southern Vocational College in Adelaide.

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whether the traditional standard secondary school is able to deliver the variety of programs that are needed to accommodate the range of students that now need to complete their schooling. The committee could have been more forthright in urging the school systems to confront this issue.

What next? The House of Representatives Education Committee's report is an exhaustive work, and a valuable contribution. The key question is how it will now be used. Hopefully all governments, industries and other stakeholders in VET in Schools will take it in good faith and work together to act on its recommendations. ■

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The report *Learning to work* is available at [www.apf.gov.au/house/committee/edt](http://www.apf.gov.au/house/committee/edt) or email [edt.reps@apf.gov.au](mailto:edt.reps@apf.gov.au) or phone (02) 6277 4573.