

Status of VET and VET teachers in schools in Australia

Submission to the *Inquiry into the Perception and Status of Vocational Education and Training*
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Today, there are an estimated 251,200 Vocational Education and Training (VET) in Schools students in Australia including 20,500 students employed in school-based apprenticeships and traineeships (SBATs), and 230,700 students engaged in other VET programs (NCVER., 2022). Using ACARA (2021) figures for senior secondary enrolments in Australian schools in 2021, almost 50% of senior secondary students are engaged in VET programs.

Notwithstanding, there are widespread VET teacher shortages and a dearth of undergraduate Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programs for tradespeople and other vocationally qualified and industry experienced experts to become qualified VET secondary school teachers. This situation deprives schools and young people from benefiting from potentially high-quality vocational teaching provision, and the expertise and authenticity that only VET teachers with significant industry experience and passion possess to pass on. It further impedes any prospect of rectifying VET in Schools teacher shortages.

Without appropriate ITE courses, VET trainers with only a Certificate IV Training and assessment (i.e., a low-level training qualification) do not have the appropriate pedagogical knowledge and teaching skills, nor opportunity to even work towards a teaching qualification in a timely manner. This situation has created a tier of second-class teachers who have been given permission to work in schools, but who have not been pedagogically prepared or qualified to teach young people. Training adults is very different to engaging young teenagers in meaningful education. This state of affairs is not only detrimental for learning, but also deprives the trainer from achieving parity with registered schoolteachers. For example, unregistered trainers are not eligible for the same pay, conditions, and professional opportunities as the registered teachers they work alongside in schools. This scenario reinforces the status divide between 'academic' and 'VET' streams of learning in schools, ensuring that VET trainers remain 'less than' other teachers in schools, and VET in general is doomed to be perceived as 'less than' traditional academic subjects by students and the school community. Barriers that prevent vocationally

trained professionals from accessing an appropriate ITE program that lead to a professional VET teacher qualification is argued here as a weakness in the Australian education system, and a problem in need of rectifying for the advantage of young people and the nation.

Education demands much more than training. Teachers are role models who influence students to make choices about their future. The National Partnership on Improving Teacher Quality (COAG., 2012) argues that high-quality teachers are needed to boost Australia's participation and productivity by helping young people make the transition from school to work and further study. Teachers "have the greatest impact on student learning, far outweighing the impact of any other education program or policy" (AITSL., 2011; 2018, p. 2). Hattie (2003) posits that what professionally trained teachers know, do and care about, has the most powerful impact on students' learning. This applies to all teachers and all subjects, including VET. ITE qualified teachers with vocational and industry expertise are best positioned to impart the lived experience of working productively in industry to young people in schools (AITSL., 2021).

In secondary teaching, discipline expertise in specialist subject areas and the pedagogical knowledge to teach specialist subject areas are dual, interdependent skills. High-quality teaching provision requires schoolteachers who are not only specialists, but who are also aware of the overarching purposes of school education and who are pedagogically proficient to engage young people in consequential education in school settings. High-quality, qualified teachers form an essential part of improving student accomplishment.

The difficulties schools encounter because of VET teacher shortages leave many Australian secondary schools desperate to find teachers to run their VET programs. Significant numbers of secondary students studying VET are being deprived of quality teaching and the quality VET provision they deserve. The resulting desperation of many principals has forced them to implement poor-quality work-around solutions (O'Reilly-Briggs et al., 2021). Work-around solutions include practices such as (a) placing out-of-field teachers in front of VET classes (e.g., using the geography teacher to teach VET), (b) offering a temporary authority to non-ITE qualified VET trainers without a pedagogical qualification (i.e., Permission to Teach) so they can 'train' young people in schools, or (c) closing programs altogether. These work-around solutions only serve to reinforce poor quality provision and low-standards in secondary education, and arguably, also do a great deal of harm to the quality, reputation, effectiveness, and status of VET in Schools programs, VET and applied learning areas in schools more generally.

National solutions are needed to create pathways for tradespeople and other industry experts to become VET secondary school teachers to not only improve the quality of teaching and learning available to VET students, but also to operationalise intentions for a skills-led economic recovery (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet., 2020). The current dearth of VET ITE degree courses for vocationally qualified and industry experienced tradespeople to upskill to become VET secondary school teachers is generating conditions that are reinforcing the low social status of VET, VET teachers and vocational occupations.

An International Specialised Skills Fellowship report currently being prepared by one of the authors of this submission is due to be published in 2023. This report investigates the Initial Teacher Education of VET upper secondary teachers in Norway and Finland to understand how these countries manage to sustain ITE programs to produce a supply of industry experienced VET teachers to resource their nation's schools. The report explains how this is achieved, but also discusses the high status and professional esteem afforded VET and VET teachers in these countries. Australia would do well to investigate Norway and Finland for real-world examples of what high status and high-quality VET systems look like in action.

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