

SUBMISSION TO INQUIRY INTO VOCATIONAL EDUCATION IN SCHOOLS

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 as 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.

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, do not have comparable skills and abilities to others with the same qualification who

have obtained their qualification post school, whilst part of the paid workforce.

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

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.

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.

Equally it is unrealistic to expect industry to accept students with a Training Package qualification where it is clear that there is a significant gap between actual skill and credentialled skill.

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.

There is also widespread concern that teachers often lack understanding of the workplace and the industry concerned.

Where VET is embedded in school certificate subjects, it is more likely that the person delivering the subject will be a normal teacher with limited or no practical workplace or industry experience. While the academic part of the subject is likely to be delivered competently, it is also likely that the linkage between the academic and the workplace will be deficient.

Consequently it follows that these concerns are better addressed when the delivery is done by an RTO which is separate from the school. It is also a more cost effective investment of the training dollar. RTO's already have the infrastructure, equipment and vocational teachers and are funded to provide these, usually across a range of vocational courses. Schools, even when they are RTO's, are not equipped always in the same way.

Schools also have the additional difficulty of providing a breadth of vocational training courses, due to insufficient numbers to make up classes in any single VETIS area. To overcome this problem, schools in a geographic area may form a "cluster". In this way they increase their ability to offer vocational courses to their students. This works well until one or more of the cluster schools decides to do something different from the rest. (For

example, change the day that students do vocational training.) This then may create a delivery problem for other schools in a cluster. There needs to be a better balance between the independence of schools and providing a system which is working in the best interests of students.

As schools operate independently, there seems to be little control over the decisions they make in the area of VETIS. Currently there is little willingness by the Departments 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 and are contrary to industry desires.

There is clearly considerable concern as to whether the current system is producing consistent quality outcomes. The problem is not, however, so much one of structural design, but rather of implementation. 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.

Training Packages generally do not specify standards for those delivering training, including VETIS. In part this is due to the fact that some states have used their position within the overall VET system to ensure that

training packages do not include prescriptive provisions for the delivery of training. However most packages have a provision "recommending" that deliverers meet the industry required standards.

Again it appears that there is no serious attempt by educational authorities to monitor those delivering VETIS to ensure that they do meet the provisions of the Training Package. 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.

This problem especially arises where schools deliver VETIS themselves. Many schools appear to have struggled to comply with the ARF or the AQTF. Yet if we are to have outcomes which are acceptable to industry, it is critical that VETIS be delivered as a quality product. This requires all VETIS teachers to understand and meet the requirements of Training Packages.

There appears to have been a focus on the "numbers game" at the expense of quality.

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 are compelled to complete their on the job training/work at peak operation times. In some cases, such as Victoria, school 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.

If the student is not being paid for their work or being paid only a nominal amount such as in Victoria where work placement is paid at \$5 per day, the attraction of cheap labour is even greater. In particular it is an encouragement to unscrupulous employers to be able to only provide work placement at times when they are required to pay normal employees penalty rates.

It should be a clearly spelt out responsibility of the school to organise proper work placement for students. Schools, teachers and students and employers need to clearly understand and implement the purpose of work placement.

The principle of normal work being counted for VETIS purposes should be supported but 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.

All students undergoing a part-time new apprenticeship while at school are covered by a signed training agreement but that is not the case for VET in school students on the unpaid pathway.

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.

Cost is also an issue for students. In some states schools are not funded to deliver particular VETIS courses (eg. Information Technology). 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. 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.

Generalised education about the world of work, including work placements, which are not related to endorsed competency standards, should be regarded as part of general education and not as VETIS.

VETIS should only describe those programs which deliver competencies endorsed within the national training framework and provide credit towards a credential within the Australian Qualifications Framework.

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.

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.

There are substantial gaps in the performances of some employers in regard to the provision of workplace training.

Schools often struggle to convince employers to provide structured work place 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 not being adequately briefed by schools and not being given appropriate support mechanisms by schools

A designated person with appropriate expertise and adequate resources, who liaises between student/school/employer and RTO, co-ordinates on and off-the-job delivery and keeps all parties appropriately informed should be appointed in each school. Where students have been identified as “at risk”, then additional support should be provided.

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.

All key players have supported the creation of a more flexible system. However ‘flexibility’ has been used in a number of instances to effectively deregulate the system and to introduce highly questionable training processes.

There are fundamental problems across the board with training programmes that are delivered solely on the job. Such training is often characterised by inadequate regulation, inadequate delivery, inadequate supervision and inadequate assessment. It is too often indistinguishable from normal work. In many cases on-the-job training programmes are simply exercises in providing cheap and exploited labour. Abuse of on-job training by employers is widespread and too often neither providers nor governments make sufficient efforts to try and ensure quality outcomes.

There is a critical need for State Authorities to put in place processes which require training providers to adequately supervise on the job delivery with penalties applicable for both providers and employers who abrogate their responsibilities to delivery quality outcomes.

VETIS programs should complement key competency delivery, 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 programme while enabling them to keep their options open for the future.

There is a danger that the requirements of VETIS are so time consuming that they are placing extra strains and stresses upon VETIS students and restricting their capacities to devote adequate time to their other non VETIS school subjects. Some schools argue that VETIS also interferes with normal school timetabling, sometimes leaving VETIS students unable to enrol in, or attend, more academic subjects which may be scheduled at the same time as the VETIS subjects

Some Boards of Studies have argued for increases in the theoretical component of VET in schools programs, aiming to make the courses more "intellectually rigorous" and therefore, they say, worthy of an ENTER score. Industry wants employees who are competent in the workplace and is insisting that a reasonable number of hours on the job be retained.

The student is 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.

It is significant that in states where Boards of Studies have been the most rigid in assessing what VETIS subjects they will accept for Year 12 or university entrance purposes that VETIS has had a lower take up. The refusal of authorities to accept retail for Year 12 purposes in Victoria has resulted in the virtual absence of retail VETIS in that state.

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

This is not currently the case although some very small steps have been taken in recent times to address this issue. NSW is a case in point where a student can now sit a 2 hour exam, the results of which count in respect of university entrance. However one must ask why should students have to sit

exams in order for their VETIS subjects to be taken properly into account for university entrance purposes. 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. The current attitude of universities reinforces this.

Engagement in VETIS programmes 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 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.

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 VETIS as a meritorious educational pathway.

Increasingly industries and employers are operating on a national basis. People move more freely between States than ever before in our history, and consequently, require their skills to be portable. The need for a single national VET system seems apparent. The States and Territories, along with

the Commonwealth, have committed themselves to the concept of a national system. In practice there is still a considerable way to go.

In the VET in schools area each State education authority has different requirements and processes. For example, the Certificate II in Retail Operations attracts an ENTER score in one State and not in another, another State requires students to sit an additional written exam if they want the tertiary entrance ranking.

In practice, the differences between states acts to discourage industry from embracing VETIS. The issue here is not which state government is right or wrong but the breakdown in national consistency between States.

This fragmentation of the national system as a result of the actions of some state governments must be addressed. The cleanest solution would be for the states to hand over responsibility for the VET sector to the Commonwealth. Alternatively the Commonwealth should ensure that real co-operation from the states is forthcoming when negotiating future funding agreements. It is of concern that the Commonwealth government is prepared to enter into funding agreements where states pay lip service to a national system but in practice repeatedly do not deliver. State governments must be accountable for funds provided by the taxpayer!

The current incentives system also acts to discourage support for VETIS. Whilst recognising that substantial abuse of the incentives system has occurred, it should also be recognised that the same system has served as a major encouragement to employers to embrace training and to employ trainees.

The current VETIS system can provide a student with a qualification based on a training package but that person is then 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.

VETIS has much to offer students if it is delivered as a quality product. At the present time the credibility of VETIS is under challenge. It is time to move from a focus on numbers to a focus on meeting the short and long term goals of students. 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.