

NATIONAL VOCATIONAL EDUCATION
AND TRAINING RESEARCH PROGRAM
RESEARCH REPORT

Entry to vocations: the efficacy of VET in schools

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UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE



Australian Government
Department of Industry, Innovation
Science, Research and Tertiary Education



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This document should be attributed as Clarke, K 2012, *Entry to vocations: the efficacy of VET in Schools*, NCVER, Adelaide.

COVER IMAGE: GETTY IMAGES/THINKSTOCK

ISBN 978 1 922056 40 5

TD/TNC 110.23

Published by NCVER, ABN 87 007 967 311

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About the research

Entry to vocations: the efficacy of VET in Schools

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This report is part of a wider three-year program of research, 'Vocations: the link between post compulsory education and the labour market', which is investigating the educational and occupational paths that people take and how their study relates to their work. It is specifically interested in exploring the relationship between vocational education and training (VET) in schools and the labour market.

The author uses four models of VET in Schools provision as case studies – a technical education centre, a partnership between a government secondary college and a TAFE (technical and further education) institute, a catholic senior secondary college and a government vocational college – to detail the practices and approaches to delivering the programs. Of particular interest were how the role of VET is conceptualised and the success of the programs in promoting entry into specific occupations and further VET study. Interviews and surveys were also used to gather feedback from a range of stakeholders on ways to strengthen the programs.

Key messages

- The way VET in Schools is incorporated in senior secondary school certificates varies across jurisdictions. The jurisdictions have varying ideas on its role, with the difference essentially relating to the balance between broader education and more instrumental vocational training.
- Industry is not convinced that the vocational qualifications obtained at school equip students for the workforce. The main perceived deficiency is insufficient experience in the workplace.
- Secondary school students are provided with copious advice on university pathways relative to advice on vocational pathways, thus providing an unbalanced view of post-school opportunities.

The author argues that VET in Schools needs to be reconceptualised with the distinct aim of providing a clear pathway to post-school vocational training (including apprenticeships) rather than preparing students for direct entry into the workforce.

Tom Karmel
Managing Director, NCVER

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Executive summary

Recent policy changes have facilitated an expanded role for VET in Schools in supporting school completion, with vocational education and training (VET) in schools qualifications and subjects receiving increasing recognition in senior secondary certificates. Despite increased attainment of VET qualifications amongst 15 to 19-year-olds (Australian Curriculum, Reporting and Assessment Authority 2011), the outcomes of vocational learning within Australian senior secondary certificates are still problematic (Rothman et al. 2011; Queensland Department of Education and Training 2011). As a broad observation, the systems of VET in Schools in Australian states and territories do not provide coherent, structured pathways to work and/or to higher-level vocational education, while the foundational nature of VET in Schools does not effectively support student transition to entry-level occupations. At regional and school levels, VET in Schools is weakened by a lack of trust and investment from employers and industry, misconceptions about the validity and rigour of schools' vocational programs and a lack of capacity in schools to provide the necessary career advice to support effective vocational choices. With increasing numbers of senior secondary students engaging in VET in Schools and expecting to benefit from the attainment of qualifications, it is of great concern that existing systems fail to provide a coherent and effective pathway to sustainable occupational careers.

This report has been prepared as part of the consortium research program, 'Vocations: the link between post-compulsory education and the labour market'. There are three strands in the project. This report is part of Strand 1,¹ which focuses on entry to vocations and how to improve occupational and further study outcomes from entry-level vocational education and training. The key research question being addressed is: What are the main variables shaping the relationship between VET, employment and occupations at the entry-level?

Entry-level VET is taken here to encompass both VET at certificate levels I and II and all VET that is completed through VET in Schools as part of a senior secondary certificate. Nationally, students studying entry-level qualifications make up more than one in five of all VET students (NCVER 2011b), while participation in VET in Schools makes up more than a third of all VET participation of 15 to 19-year-olds (NCVER 2011b), with the vast majority (79.6%) of the participation in entry-level qualifications. This study focuses on VET in Schools, specifically because of the increasing role it has in entry-level skills provision.

Methodology

The researcher conducted four case studies of VET in Schools to examine in detail the practices and approaches to delivering effective VET in Schools programs.

The key questions guiding the case studies were:

- How is the role of VET in Schools *conceptualised* in the different jurisdictional education and training systems? What is the perceived role of VET in Schools?

¹ Strand 2 focuses on the role of educational institutions in fostering vocations and how to improve occupational outcomes and educational pathways within and between VET and higher education. Strand 3 focuses on understanding the nature of vocations, their potential improvement and the development and use of skills in four broad industry areas.

- In what ways are the four case study models of VET in Schools *maximising* the occupational and further VET study outcomes for students?
- What more needs to be done to improve the *effectiveness* of VET in Schools?

The four models of VET in Schools included a technical education centre in regional Victoria, a partnership between a government secondary college and a TAFE (technical and further education) institute in far north Queensland, a catholic senior secondary college in outer western Sydney and a government vocational college in north-eastern Adelaide. Feedback was gathered through interviews and surveys from a range of stakeholders (n = 86) at the system and policy levels, with TAFE institutes and private training providers, group training organisations, adult and community education (ACE) centres, schools and other VET in Schools stakeholder organisations.

Strengthening models of VET in Schools

A coherent purpose and role for VET in Schools

Despite policy intentions and established recognition of its provision in senior secondary certificates, VET in Schools does not result in strong pathways to occupational outcomes. Is it time to rethink its role as a pathway to work and focus instead on it being a pathway to further vocational education? There is a need to re-evaluate VET in Schools to ensure that it leads to a substantial destination and does not deliver students into low-skilled, casualised and unsustainable employment. A consistent pathways approach is needed to bolster the capacity of vocational programs in schools to provide effective transition for young people. This may mean emphasising the foundational nature of VET in Schools as a pathway to higher-level vocational studies, resulting in post-school vocational qualifications.

Qualification levels in VET in Schools

Different industry areas have different expectations and requirements for entry to apprenticeships and traineeships. While the current approaches to VET in Schools appear to recognise these variations, more needs to be done to clarify the pathway outcomes of VET in Schools qualifications and programs. Given the diversity of industry areas now encompassed by VET in Schools, it is impossible to apply blanket rulings on the level of higher-level qualifications pursued (for example, certificate III and above).

Expansion of employment-based training pathways

Students participating in school-based apprenticeship and traineeship qualifications are at risk of weak outcomes and unrewarding transitions. Stakeholders highlighted industry concern about certificate II trades qualifications lacking credibility since students undertaking these had received little industry exposure, and for this reason some school-based apprenticeship and traineeship students are being excluded from entry to full-time apprenticeships by employers; that is, although they have reached stage 2 of their theoretical learning they have minimal industry experience. More needs to be done to strengthen school-based apprenticeships and traineeships by building communities of trust with employers and ensuring that these effectively facilitate entry to full-time apprenticeships and traineeships following school.

Career advice to support vocational pathways

Students undertaking an academic university pathway in senior secondary school receive ample information about the subject prerequisites and entry requirements for different university programs. Students pursuing a vocational or occupational pathway need access to equally relevant, comprehensive and clear information about post-school VET. The role of schools in supporting young people to construct meaningful pathways that achieve both a breadth and depth of learning needs to be clearly articulated as a policy objective and as a performance requirement for schools.

VET in Schools within the senior secondary certificates

A discussion of VET in Schools and its role as an entry to vocations for school leavers/completers is inherently linked to how the senior secondary certificates operate and how the structures of those certificates provide disincentives to students and schools to use and access vocational programs. The time may have come to proactively encourage and facilitate post-school VET pathways as the key aim and outcome of VET in Schools. All schools could benefit from a more clearly articulated approach to VET in Schools from state/territory training departments and boards of study.

A systemic approach to working with industry

Clearly visible in the case studies was a concern for the industry credibility of VET in Schools. Justified or not, the lack of trust in VET in Schools has a significant impact on its efficacy as an occupational pathway. For many schools, engaging with employers and industry in a coordinated way is new territory. State/territory education and training departments have a role to play in supporting schools to build communities of trust with industry and employers.

Moving beyond work placements to a systemic workplace learning approach

There is a need for a more coordinated and systematic approach to workplace learning in VET in Schools programs. Providing access to structured workplace learning opportunities for all students undertaking vocational education in schools is a substantial goal and one that requires significant resourcing. The issue of financial incentives to employers is problematic, but perhaps needs to be considered, given the rapidly growing number of VET in Schools students requiring workplace learning. Structured workplace learning supports and is integrated with the VET in Schools curriculum, and financial support for employers to offer workplace learning should only be considered if the workplace learning fulfils these conditions.

Where should VET in Schools be heading to enhance the effectiveness of provision for young people?

More needs to be done to support students' transition from the foundational vocational learning achieved in their senior secondary certificates to intermediate-level vocational learning that supports occupational entry and career progression. It is inappropriate for VET in Schools to be viewed as a *direct* employment pathway for young people when the majority of qualifications offered and attained through this model remain at the entry or foundational level (certificates I and II). In re-evaluating a role and purpose for VET in Schools as part of senior secondary schooling in Australia, it should be more accurately branded and delivered to students as the foundational component of a post-school education and training pathway (for example, higher-level VET and apprenticeships).

Introduction

In 2010 more than 230 000 Australian senior secondary students participated in VET in Schools (NCVER 2011a). This accounts for half of all VET undertaken by 15 to 19-year-olds (VOCSTATS Students & courses 2010 database). One in four 16-year-olds and one in five 17-year-olds participated in VET in Schools, with an additional 2% of each age group engaged in school-based apprenticeships or traineeships (Australian Curriculum, Reporting and Assessment Authority 2011). The rapid growth in VET in Schools participation has contributed to the increased attainment of VET qualifications, with one in four 15 to 19-year-olds having successfully completed one or more units of competency at certificate II level or above (Australian Curriculum, Reporting and Assessment Authority 2011).

The vision for VET in Schools laid out by the then Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA; 2000, p.11) called for an approach to VET in Schools in which:

Vocational education in schools assists all young people to secure their own futures by enhancing their transition to a broad range of post-school options and pathways. It engages students in work related learning built on strategic partnerships between schools, business, industry and the wider community.

In the context of this purpose envisaged for VET in Schools, recent policy changes have facilitated an expanded role for this form of delivery in supporting school completion and post-school transitions. VET in Schools qualifications and subjects are receiving increasing recognition in senior secondary certificates. However, doubt remains about the extent to which VET in Schools is *securing* and *enhancing* transition to a *broad range* of post-school options. Despite rapidly increasing participation in VET in Schools, the outcomes from vocational learning in Australian senior secondary certificates are still problematic. One in four (24.9%) Victorian VET in Schools students and almost half of Queensland VET in Schools students (42.9%) enter the labour market without any further education and training (Rothman et al. 2011; Queensland Department of Education and Training 2011). Transition to higher-level post-school VET has decreased (Rothman et al. 2011).

As a broad observation, VET in Schools does not provide coherent, structured pathways to work and/or higher-level vocational education. Current senior secondary curriculum structures limit the effectiveness of VET in Schools programs in supporting student transitions to work and further study. At regional and school levels, VET in Schools provision is weakened by a lack of trust and investment from employers and industry, ongoing misconceptions about the validity and rigour of vocational programs in schools and a lack of capacity in schools to provide the necessary career advice to support effective vocational choices. The sporadic inclusion of substantial and coherent components of workplace learning in VET in Schools programs contributes to the perceived lack of credibility of qualifications and skills developed through VET in Schools. While students engaged in employment-based VET in Schools (that is, school-based apprenticeships or traineeships) benefit from clearer transitions pathways and stronger links with employers, for the majority of VET in Schools students, the efficacy of their vocational programs does not match their own expectations and aspirations.

The foundational nature of VET in Schools does not effectively support direct student transition to entry-level occupations, which increasingly demand intermediate and above level qualifications. The low rates of transition to higher-level VET post-school are an indication of the dominant patterns of usage of VET in Schools. Young people are predominantly using VET in Schools as a pathway to an immediate post-school job rather than as part of longer-term occupational trajectory. Current

mainstream models of VET in Schools do not provide strong pathways to higher-level vocational education that supports occupations requiring intermediate skills. The limitations placed on the depth of vocational learning that VET in Schools students can undertake in an industry area is a key weakness of the current system and establishes barriers to both employment and further study outcomes. With increasing numbers of senior secondary students engaging in VET in Schools and expecting to benefit from both the skills acquisition and attainment of qualifications, it is of great concern that existing provision falls short in offering a coherent and effective pathway to post-school education and training and sustainable occupational careers.²

This report has been prepared as part of the consortium research program, 'Vocations: the link between post-compulsory education and the labour market'. There are three strands in the project. The first focuses on entry to vocations and how to improve occupational and further study outcomes from entry-level vocational education and training. The second focuses on the role of educational institutions in fostering vocations and how to improve occupational outcomes and educational pathways within and between VET and higher education. The third focuses on understanding the nature of vocations, their potential improvement and the development and use of skills in four broad industry areas. This report is part of Strand 1. The key research question being addressed by Strand 1 is: What are the main variables shaping the relationship between VET, employment and occupations at the entry-level?

In broad terms, entry-level VET is taken here to encompass both VET at certificate levels I and II and all VET that is completed through VET in Schools as part of a senior secondary certificate, which in limited (but growing) instances includes certificate III and above. Nationally, students studying entry-level qualifications make up more than one in five of all VET students (NCVER 2011b). Participation in VET in Schools makes up more than a third of all the VET participation of 15 to 19-year-olds (NCVER 2011b), with the vast majority (79.6%) participating in entry-level qualifications. In the context of the increasing role of VET in Schools as a system of entry-level skills provision, the study, in addressing the Strand 1 research question, has focused specifically on VET in Schools programs for 15 to 19-year-olds.

Although the Strand 1 research focuses on VET in Schools programs, it is important to acknowledge the role of entry-level vocational programs in TAFE institutes, private providers and adult community settings, particularly for young people who have left school early and are undertaking VET certificates outside or in lieu of senior secondary certificate studies and school completion. Learners aged 15 to 19 now make up a quarter of all VET students nationally (VOCSTATS Students & courses 2010 database). The majority of 15 to 19-year-old VET learners engaged in non-school VET as an alternative to completing school (that is, they have not completed a senior secondary certificate) are participating at certificate levels II (23.1%) and III (52.6%; VOCSTATS Students & courses 2010 database).

It is clear that there are significant numbers of young people engaging in non-school VET as an alternative to completing senior secondary education and this raises questions about the effectiveness of current approaches to VET in Schools in retaining students in the senior secondary certificates and providing relevant, attractive and coherent pathways to occupations and further study.

In answering the Strand 1 question, the researchers conducted four case studies of VET in Schools. The case studies sought to examine in detail the practices and approaches to delivering vocational programs that provide successful pathways to further study and occupations.

² Employment accessed by school completers who do not engage in post-school learning is most often low-skilled, low-paid and casualised. Sustainable occupational careers are those which constitute a learning and employment trajectory, one in which young people have access to higher levels of skilled development.

The key questions guiding the case studies were:

- How is the role of VET in Schools *conceptualised* within the different jurisdictional education and training systems? What is the perceived role of VET in Schools?
- In what ways are the four case study models of VET in Schools *maximising* the occupational and further VET study outcomes for students?
- What more needs to be done to improve the *effectiveness* of VET in Schools?

A key aim of the case studies was to examine how the system-level conceptualisation/s of the role of VET in Schools is interpreted and realised in schools. How are schools working within the limitations of the senior secondary certificate structures to develop and deliver VET in Schools programs with the depth and intensity needed to provide strong pathways to occupations and further VET study destinations?

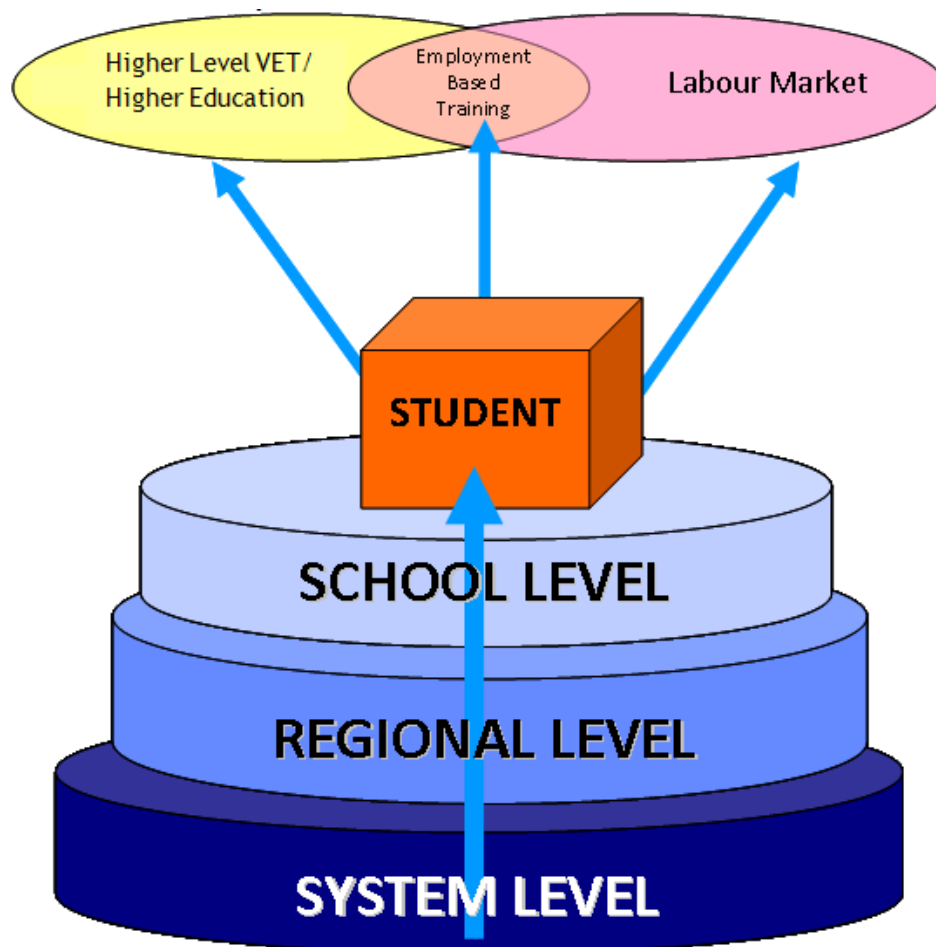
Conceptual framework

Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework that underpinned Strand 1's research. This framework has been used to examine the variables shaping the relationships between VET, employment and further vocational training. This framework is procedural and illustrates the complex context in which VET in Schools operates. The movement of VET in Schools students into one of the three destinations (higher-level VET/higher education, employment-based training, the labour market) is alternatively influenced, facilitated and/or hindered by the system and regional and school-level factors.

Since VET in Schools operates within the senior secondary certificate structures of each jurisdiction, its efficacy is influenced by the system-level policies relating to vocational learning in the still-dominant academic senior secondary curriculum and the system-level landscape (for example, the role of public and private registered training organisations). There is a tension between the educational logic inherent in the Australian senior secondary certificates and the message being presented to students that VET in their senior secondary certificate is a viable and effective employment pathway.

The project's Strand 1 discussion paper (Clarke & Volkoff 2012) examined the system-level variables and the extent to which vocational learning is located and credited in the senior secondary certificates. While the case studies in this report have focused primarily on the school-level variables, the regional and system-level variables have also been considered to assist understanding of the extent to which school/provider-level approaches to VET in Schools reflect and interact with regional labour and training needs and opportunities and with the system-level conceptualisation of VET in Schools. The hypothesis developed from the discussion paper in preparing these case studies argued that there is a disconnect between VET in Schools provision and the skills, labour and training needs of regional industry and employers. This disconnect weakens the efficacy of VET in Schools as an effective pathway for young people.

Figure 1 Strand 1 conceptual framework



Methodology

The fieldwork from the four case study regions and their system-level jurisdictions was based on four key areas:

- the conceptualised and perceived role of VET in Schools
- the barriers to the employment and occupational outcomes from VET in Schools and what needs to be done to address those barriers
- the barriers to further study outcomes from VET in Schools and the measures that need to be taken to address them
- the impact of the structure of the senior secondary certificates on facilitating quality VET in Schools.

In addition to face-to-face and phone interviews with stakeholders in each of the case study jurisdictions and regions, the researchers also conducted an online survey to gather further feedback and evidence from system-level (n = 24) and school level (n = 19) respondents as well as from TAFE/registered training organisations (RTOs)/group training organisations (n = 15). An invitation to participate in the survey was sent to interview participants, who distributed the invitation among their colleagues.

Table 1 provides a summary of the interviewees and survey respondents consulted for the Strand 1 case studies.

Table 1 Case study interviews and survey respondents by organisation and jurisdiction

Organisations	Case study jurisdictions				Total
	NSW	Victoria	Queensland	South Australia	
Education department	1		1	4	6
Training department	1	1		1	3
Board of studies			1	1	2
Catholic Education Office	1		2	2	5
Independent sector				1	1
Training and Skills Commission				1	1
TAFE: central	1			1	2
TAFE: institute level	6	3	3	9	21
Private RTO	1	4	1	1	7
Group training company	1	1	2	1	5
ACE provider	1		1	4	6
School	6	9		12	27
Other			1		
Total	19	18	12	38	86

Framing the discussion

The examination of the provision of VET in Schools in this report includes both institutional or campus-based VET in Schools and school-based apprenticeships and traineeships (see also Clarke & Volkoff 2012). The case study sites chosen for this research illustrate the diverse environments at which young people are accessing vocational learning as part of their senior secondary certificates and the different delivery models that have been adopted. The sites include an outer urban senior secondary college, a school–TAFE partnership model in a large regional centre, a technical education centre based at a regional TAFE institute and a metropolitan secondary college.

While in each case study region students are enrolled in a senior secondary certificate, the pathway into VET in Schools study and the location of their vocational learning within their senior secondary certificates vary markedly. The case studies have sought to examine how, at the school level, the evolving role of VET in Schools in the senior secondary certificates is practised and realised within different regional and system-level frameworks.

The following section provides an overview of each of the four case study approaches to VET in Schools. This will include a discussion of the breadth of provision, the type of institution/s delivering the training and some of the strengths and weaknesses of this model in the context of the jurisdictional approach to VET in Schools. This section will draw substantially on the interviews with the stakeholders at each case study site.

The second section of this report will tease out the elements in each of the case studies that appear to support or inhibit effective VET in Schools provision, with a view to drawing some conclusions about where VET in Schools needs to be heading to enhance the effectiveness of provision for young people.

Case studies

This section provides an overview of four case studies of approaches to VET in Schools. The case study sites are:

- a technical education centre located in regional Victoria
- a partnership between a government secondary college and a TAFE institute in far north Queensland
- a Catholic senior secondary college in outer western Sydney
- a government vocational college offering Years 8–12 in north-eastern Adelaide.

These models were identified through an environmental scan and were selected according to their location in disadvantaged communities in metropolitan and regional centres and their reputation as sites of innovation and quality provision.

A summary of the key aspects of each VET in Schools model is provided, followed by feedback from a range of stakeholders in response to the key case study areas identified in the methodology above (p.13).

Each case study jurisdiction accommodates VET in Schools in its senior secondary certificates in slightly different ways (Clarke & Volkoff 2012). While VET in Schools contributes to the completion of the senior secondary certificate in each system, there are several structural differences between the states that have an impact on the way VET in Schools is delivered, the breadth and depth of VET in Schools and the possible and the potential outcomes of VET in Schools. These differences, highlighted in each case study below, demonstrate how aspects of each system's approach to VET in Schools act to constrain and/or facilitate effective VET in Schools.

Regional Victoria

The Victorian case study site is a technical education centre based at a TAFE institute in a large regional centre in north-eastern Victoria. Accommodating more than 400 students drawn from a range of local secondary colleges, the technical education centre delivers predominantly to Year 11 and 12 students but does allow a small number of 'early start' Year 10 students to attend.

Students at the technical education centre enrol in either the Intermediate or Senior Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) in one of 15 industry-themed programs. The Certificate of Applied Learning is one of two Victorian senior school certificates. The other is the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE). The former is a vocationally oriented qualification, while the latter is designed to prepare students for entry to university as well as to higher-level VET. Students in Victoria can therefore also undertake vocational subjects as part of the VCE. Each of the industry programs provides a pathway to an occupational or employment-based training outcome, in some cases awarding credit towards an apprenticeship or traineeship. Some provide students with the knowledge and skills they need to access an apprenticeship or traineeship, while others provide entry to and credit towards apprenticeships and traineeships, or into VET certificate III, certificate IV or diploma qualifications. Table 2 outlines the areas in which industrial programs are offered.

Table 2 Pathways to apprenticeships, traineeships and higher-level VET qualifications

Agriculture	IT, building and engineering	Hospitality and services industries
Agriculture	Building and construction	Cookery
Animal studies	CISCO Certified Network Associate	Hairdressing
Equine management	Electrical	Retail cosmetics
Horticulture	Engineering	
	Furnishing	
	Plumbing	
	Surveying	

A key feature of this technical education centre model is the focus on a pathway to successful employment-based training and higher-level VET outcomes. A full-time work placement coordinator works with students and liaises with employers to facilitate apprenticeship/traineeship transitions. As a sign of the importance of cross-sectoral collaboration in regional VET in Schools, the scope of certificates and the industry area programs provided at the technical education centre were negotiated to prevent overlap with the other main provider of VET in Schools in the town, a government secondary college. The technical education centre manager explained that the technical education centre was ‘focusing specifically on the trades or any other skills shortages area’.

Consultations and feedback from a range of stakeholders indicated that collaboration rather than competition was vital to the success of a model such as the technical education centre, which works closely with local secondary colleges to recruit students and provide information about the pathways available through it. The technical education centre manager indicated a preference for students who have had some exposure to their chosen industry prior to commencing at the centre, suggesting that those students who had completed work experience prior to commencing there were more likely to have successful outcomes.

Perceived purpose or role of VET in Schools in Victoria

Victoria has the highest VET participation rate (VET in Schools and post-school VET) amongst 15 to 19-year-olds of any state or territory in Australia (Australian Curriculum, Reporting and Assessment Authority 2011), with more than one in four (29%) of 15 to 19-year-olds successfully completing at least one unit of competency at Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) level II or above. Victoria also has the highest participation in VET in Schools at certificate III level (25.5%; NCVET 2011a). While overall VET in Schools participation in Victoria is growing, experiencing slightly less than a 5% increase from 2009 to 2010, school-based apprenticeships and traineeships are declining, with a 25% downturn in the same period. Victoria has the largest sectoral spread of VET in Schools students, with less than two-thirds (60%) of VET in Schools students in the government sector, one in five in the Catholic sector and almost one in ten students in the independent sector (NCVER 2011a).

Nearly a third of Year 12 students participated in VET in Schools in 2010, including one in four undertaking the Victorian Certificate of Education and a further 5% of students doing VET in the Certificate of Applied Learning (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority 2011). Victorian students undertake three broad categories of VET in Schools study: Victorian Certificate of Education VET subjects developed and endorsed by the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, stand-alone VET in Schools, which includes any qualifications outside those developed by the Curriculum and Assessment Authority and which at a Year 12 level may be awarded block credit towards the Victorian Certificate of Education or nominal hours towards the Certificate of Applied Learning, and school-based apprenticeships or traineeships. While the vast majority (62%) of the first two categories of

students undertaking VET in Schools are doing VCE VET subjects, almost a third (32%) choose stand-alone VET.

A range of system-level stakeholders were consulted in Victoria, either through interview and/or the online survey, about the way they conceptualised the purpose or role for VET in Schools. The perceived role for VET in Schools as articulated by these respondents varied markedly and ranged from being a retention strategy – to ‘increase the number of young people completing Year 12 or equivalent’ – to an economic imperative to ‘address emerging and current skill shortages and align with employer and industry needs’. A key theme that emerged from system-level feedback was also the intrinsic value of vocational learning and the generic skills developed through exposure to workplaces and industry learning. For example, one respondent explained that, as well as contributing to the Victorian Certificate of Education and providing students with access to a viable pathway, ‘participation in VET can be related to issues of motivation, self-esteem and self-awareness in addition to providing specific employment-related competencies’. Another said that VET provides students with practical experience of and skills for work in particular industries, and that it also helps them to build an understanding of why ‘academic learning in maths and English is important to future careers’.

Several survey respondents and interviewees referred to a ‘deficit view’ of the role of VET in Schools and an ‘underestimation of the importance of a pathways approach’ to VET in Schools. There was a concern that VET in Schools is still being viewed as an easy option and an engagement strategy for students under-achieving in the academic curriculum and that this misconception led to misinformation and poor counselling of students into vocational pathways. As one system interviewee described, ‘engagement is one side of things, but engagement is not the be all and end all’.

When asked about the impact of the certificate of education and the certificate of applied learning structures on the efficacy of Victorian VET in Schools programs, respondents frequently pointed out that there was untapped potential for a coherent pathways approach and that, while the structures were in place in both to facilitate a breadth and depth of VET in Schools study, the realities of the school environment could restrict and constrain effective provision. A common concern amongst respondents was that ‘the structure of [schools’] timetables restricts the opportunity [for] kids to do a batch or grouping of subjects that might be able to complement a particular pathway’.

Employment and further study outcomes

The researchers were keen to understand the relationships shaping the pathways from VET in Schools to occupations and employment for students at the technical education centre in the context of the regional labour market. The ‘collapse of the labour market’, ‘industry’s lack of understanding and confidence in VET in Schools’, ‘training credentials not viewed positively’, ‘a perception from industry and some VET training institutions that VET in Schools is not real VET’ and ‘a lack of career development support due to an over-emphasis by career practitioners on higher education pathways’ were commonly identified as factors limiting the efficacy of VET in Schools as an employment pathway.

In addition to these systemic and structural factors, individual student factors, including socioeconomic background, rural or remote isolation and level of maturity, were also cited as barriers to successful transition to employment post-VET in Schools. A respondent from a local registered training organisation highlighted the impact of low socioeconomic family background and parental unemployment on VET in Schools students’ awareness of their pathway options.

The scepticism of VET in Schools amongst TAFE and industry, which has been well documented and discussed elsewhere (Polesel et al. 2004; Service Skills Australia 2010), was also evident in

consultations with Victorian system and TAFE or training organisation stakeholders. Despite extensive publicity and documentation, there appears to be ongoing confusion about how VET in Schools operates within and in relation to the broader VET system and a lack of understanding of the mechanisms that ensure quality of training. As one system-level respondent argued:

Industries have a lack of confidence in schools' ability to provide quality VET training even though major studies generally indicate no evidence of lower or different standards in schools than for other RTOs. The difference in delivery modes and auspicing³ models often creates a confusing and complex understanding of VETiS [VET in Schools]. Another key barrier is access to quality (assessed) workplace learning. (Online survey Victorian system respondent)

There was mixed feedback from Victorian system, registered training organisation and school respondents and interviewees about the effectiveness of VET in Schools as a pathway to further study, particularly higher-level VET. The traditional view of the Victorian certificate of education as a generalist higher education preparation certificate was seen to place limits on the extent to which VET in Schools was effectively accommodated in a way which strengthened pathways to post-school VET. Several respondents suggested that 'careers development is important' and expressed a concern that, where 'VET units do not support the overall development of the student or a specific pathway', the effectiveness of the VET in Schools as a pathway to post-school education and training can be undermined. Another perspective expressed by a small number of respondents was that because entry to post-school higher-level VET (for example, diploma) was through the Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre and often required and was based on the completion of the certificate of education, 'in this case VET in Schools is not at all relevant'. The inference here is that a generalist VCE is sufficient preparation for a vocational tertiary qualification. While this was a minority view among interviewees and survey respondents in this study, it suggests that the school pathways to higher-level VET and intermediate-level VET (for example, apprenticeships and traineeships) are viewed differently and that a hierarchy of VET in Schools exists that assumes that those pursuing higher-level VET post-school do not require exposure to VET during their senior secondary studies.

When asked to identify the elements of and strategies in VET in Schools that facilitate and support strong outcomes, the majority of Victorian respondents consistently identified two key areas:

- *Workplace learning*: particularly an emphasis on the benefits of school-based apprenticeships and traineeships and the need for students to be exposed to multiple industry environments. Respondents urged the need to 'liaise with industry where ever possible'.
- *Pathways approach to program design*: particularly a focus on coherence and clarity in the post-VET in Schools options for employment and further study. Closer links between careers education and vocational pathways was reported to be integral to an effective VET in Schools program design. As one TAFE respondent suggested, there needs to be 'clarity around transition arrangements between VET as a senior secondary pathway and higher-level VET'. There was also a perception amongst some TAFE and training organisation respondents that 'to some extent people in TAFE feel that the schools may not adequately inform the students about [VET] options'.

³ Auspicing is a process whereby an organisation works in partnership with a registered training organisation in order to have the training and assessment that it undertakes recognised under the National Training Framework.

North-east Adelaide, South Australia

The South Australian VET in Schools case study site is a government Year 8–12 vocational college established ten years ago in the north-eastern suburbs of Adelaide. It operates a model in which all Year 11 students are engaged in a pathway program. Currently, seven different pathway options are available to students at this school:

- Doorways to construction
- Skilled metals (engineering)
- Hospitality kitchen operations and restaurant operations
- Community services
- Virtual enterprise (business)
- Multimedia pathway
- University pathway (Certificate III in Laboratory Skills).

The school has also recently begun offering a Certificate II in Sport and Recreation, a Certificate I in Retail and a Certificate III in Business. When the vocational college was established, the industry areas chosen for the pathways were designed to reflect industry and employer needs in the northern suburbs of Adelaide. As the VET coordinator explained, they ‘looked at workforce industry requirements ... and said well these are the industry areas that need development within the north’.

With a pathway made compulsory for all Year 11 students, the school has timetabled a full day per week for students to participate in vocational learning. As the VET coordinator explained, ‘on Thursdays students in Year 11 are not engaged in subjects like English, Maths, Science, the whole day is set aside for their pathway day’. A key aspect of the approach to vocational education at this school is a strong emphasis on career education. To inform and facilitate the pathway choices that Year 11 students make, students participate in a structured and staged process of careers exploration from Year 8 onwards. In Year 10, all students must present a case to pathways staff that justifies their choice of pathway and provides evidence that they have explored and been exposed to the industry area. The VET coordinator explained that Year 8 is about transition into school and ‘the philosophy of workplace practices ... starts as soon as they arrive here’. In Year 9, students focus on networking and how to present themselves. In Year 10, students have to develop a personal learning plan (PLP), through which they research their careers and pathways. Students must make a formal presentation in a roundtable meeting to their pathway teacher and other students about their plan, with a second presentation on the selection of their subjects to ensure they undertake the required subjects for their pathway in the senior school certificate. Students make a final presentation to the pathway teacher at which they present their case and choice of pathway.

As is the case with the vast majority of VET in Schools provision in South Australia, delivery at this school takes place through an auspicing arrangement, primarily with TAFE SA and a private registered training organisation. The relationship with the private training organisation was driven by reluctance by TAFE to provide certain courses at a certificate III level.

In response to demand from employers and industry, the school also operates a vocational maths option for students undertaking the South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE). The vocational maths program was developed by a maths teacher who participated in work-shadowing in industry in a job role involving estimation, consulted with group training organisations about their numeracy

testing for apprentices and trainees and looked at the numeracy requirements of the vocational pathways offered at the school.

A key strength of the pathways model is the 'alliance' with industry in each pathway area. Under a memorandum of agreement (MoA) with industry partners, VET teachers at the school can participate in work-shadowing and students have access to structured work placements. The VET coordinator explained that the MoAs were also about 'shared knowledge' to reinforce the validity and effectiveness of each pathway.

Exposure to vocational pathways and the understanding of the outcomes of vocational learning inherent in the pathways approach at this school appear to strengthen the pathway to further education logic. The discussion of apprenticeship and traineeship pathways in the school also appears to follow a consistent message: that vocational pathways at school lead to post-school learning (for example, employment-based training). Relationships with TAFE and with universities were described by several interviewees at this school as being vital to the effectiveness of a pathways approach. In certain pathways students who gain a certificate III by the end of their South Australian Certificate of Education gain entry to degrees at Flinders University and in some cases also gain advanced standing.

Perceived purpose or role of VET in Schools in South Australia

VET in Schools participation in South Australia has been stable for the past five years, with only a 2% increase from 2009 to 2010. Two-thirds of South Australian VET in Schools students are in the government sector, with fewer than one in five in each of the Catholic and independent sectors (NCVER 2011a).

Unlike the other three jurisdictions in this study, South Australian VET in Schools provision is not based on subjects or vocational curriculum frameworks developed by the SACE Board (South Australia's board of studies). VET in Schools is based on national training packages, which contain VET qualifications and are delivered by registered training organisations, predominantly TAFE SA. Students have the opportunity to complete the majority of their requirements for the South Australian Certificate of Education through VET in Schools subjects. Some limitations do exist: only certificate III level study (and a select number of trades-based certificates II) contributes to the Year 12 component of the certificate of education and only a completed certificate III can contribute to the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR). South Australia has also recently introduced a training guarantee, which provides and promotes access to higher-level VET programs for exiting VET in Schools students, again reinforcing the education logic apparent in the South Australian approach to VET in Schools.

Despite the expansion of the amount of VET in Schools that can be counted towards completion of SACE, there were still several school and TAFE respondents who expressed concern about ongoing limitations to the depth of VET in Schools available to students. One TAFE respondent argued that, by limiting credit for Year 12 to certificate III, the system limits the 'depth of understanding' of a chosen industry, as many students are restricted by cost and influenced by industry scepticism about certificate III acquired through VET in Schools. Some interviewees and respondents also expressed concern about the perceived inequity of the process of VET in Schools recognition and a bias towards the trades areas, which commonly attract more male enrolments.

A key characteristic of South Australian VET in Schools is the reliance on an auspicing model of delivery. Called the 'VET in Schools Agreement Schedules or VISA Schedules', the arrangement requires school staff to be qualified in their area and have a Certificate IV in Training and Assessment. There are also strict requirements for the equipment used in delivery and in facilities. A common theme emerging

from discussions with a range of system-level stakeholders and from feedback from the online survey was the notion of dual or multiple purposes or roles for VET in Schools provision. Respondents spoke about the need to provide for not only those with clear vocational aspirations but also for those who needed initial exposure and career exploration to ‘clarify career pathway decisions’. Respondents highlighted the importance of striking a balance between providing students with a ‘taste of industry’ and giving them the capacity to ‘tailor their secondary school studies in ways that have specific meaning to them’. Respondents also emphasised that ‘VET in Schools is not an end in itself’ and needs to be ‘relevant, engaging and focused on a specific vocation or training pathway’.

Employment and further study outcomes

One of the weaknesses evident in the South Australian approach to VET in Schools is the lack of a requirement for schools to arrange workplace learning for their students. Unlike some other jurisdictions, in South Australia workplace participation is not compulsory in VET in Schools programs and schools have autonomy in relation to the extent to which they provide students with structured workplace learning. A concern expressed by several stakeholder interviewees, particularly those in TAFE, was that where schools ‘leave structured workplace learning off the agenda entirely’, students exit school with a certificate II that includes very little industry exposure. Without workplace learning built into the VET in Schools model, it is therefore not surprising that the TAFE sector and employers show scepticism about the program. As one system respondent suggested, ‘some employers don’t want young people who have already completed a qualification – particularly in an institutional setting’. Workplace experience was also seen as important for ‘providing a socialisation process so that the change from school to work is something they can implement without too much angst’.

After speaking to a range of stakeholders at both the central system level and in TAFE, and with private providers and the case study school, it became apparent that there is a perception, at the system level at least, that the tools are there to enable students’ participation in and recognition of VET in Schools, but it is up to individual schools as to how VET in Schools is used in pathways. Given this level of school autonomy, school innovation in and support for VET in Schools is critical. When asked what more schools could be doing to enhance the pathways associated with VET in Schools, stakeholders called for ‘creation of more school-based apprenticeships and traineeships’, ‘increased incentives for employers’, ‘endorsement from industry’, ‘increased vocational guidance services in schools’, and ‘more rigorous processes around ensuring students are in the “right” course’.

Engagement with industry was also reported consistently amongst South Australian stakeholders as a vital component of an effective VET in Schools program. At a state level, industry skills councils have been involved in the development of the state’s industry pathway programs (IPPs) and, along with registered training organisations and employer groups, provide validation of the competencies and qualifications obtained in each industry area. As one system respondent explained, ‘[VET in Schools] courses are increasingly being developed with the direct involvement of business and industry, [which] have been carefully consulted about what VET could/should be done as part of VETiS programs’.

Outer Western Sydney, New South Wales

The case study site in New South Wales is a Catholic sector senior high school located in outer western Sydney. The local area is extremely socioeconomically disadvantaged, with high rates of youth unemployment, low levels of post-school qualification attainment and a significant proportion of families living on poverty-level household incomes (ABS 2006).

The senior college is connected with a cluster of Year 7–10 Catholic junior high schools that act as feeder schools. The school currently offers programs in hairdressing, hospitality, construction, electrotechnology and business services. A new trade training centre at the school will expand the provision to include carpentry and shopfitting.

Feedback from staff at this school suggests that the model has adopted a ‘taster’ approach to vocational learning rather than an in-depth pathway approach. As one school respondent explained, VET in Schools at the school is designed to ‘give students an insight to industry to make informed decisions regarding their future’. Another school staff member referred to research that highlights the benefits for university students of having done VET and enhancing the impact of ‘interesting, contextual and real life learning for every student’. There was also a concern at this school over a pervasive perception that VET in Schools was an easy option.

As with all schools in New South Wales, this school is not a registered training organisation and relies heavily on the regional diocese registered training organisation for delivery of their VET in Schools programs.

Perceived purpose or role of VET in Schools in New South Wales

VET in Schools participation in New South Wales is growing, experiencing an increase of ten percentage points from 2009 to 2010 (NCVER 2011a). Almost three-quarters of VET in Schools students in New South Wales are in the government sector, with a further one in five participating in the Catholic sector (NCVER 2011a). According to a NSW VET in Schools system representative, ‘nearly half of the students in Years 11 and 12 undertake at least one VET course as part of their program of study’. Currently, 12 industry curriculum frameworks (ICFs) have been developed and endorsed by the New South Wales Board of Studies and provide access for Higher School Certificate (HSC) students to a range of vocational areas.

A significant difference between New South Wales and other jurisdictions is the location of the registered training organisations that deliver VET in Schools. In this state there are no school registered training organisations. Department of Education and Training regions and Catholic dioceses are registered training organisations and provide delivery to a regional cluster of schools. The motivation for this model of provision was described as ‘quality assurance’. One-system level interviewee when discussing this approach explained that it allowed them to have well-resourced and expert full-time registered training organisation managers who work with VET coordinators in school. The interviewee claimed that this model was superior to that adopted by other states that didn’t have these positions and who relied on VET in Schools coordinators in schools, who were ‘usually doing three other things as well in their employment’.

Students in New South Wales are required to complete a broad range of subjects as part of their Higher School Certificate. This places limitations on the breadth and depth of the vocational learning available to students who require eligibility for the Higher School Certificate. Similar limitations exist in relation to eligibility for an Australian Tertiary Admission Rank, with only one VET in Schools subject being eligible for inclusion in an ATAR calculation. Several respondents expressed concern about the impact these limitations have on the development of a pathways approach to VET in Schools in New South Wales and suggested it leads to VET in Schools being used primarily for retention and career exploration rather than as a fully conceptualised pathway. One system interviewee illustrated this dilemma for students by commenting that ‘there’s quite a lot of flexibility but you can’t sort of just do English and Construction, for example, and get an HSC’. It was explained that some students are so interested in their vocational pathways that they leave school and don’t finish their HSC, but

it's preferable for students to get their senior school certificate, because 'who knows what they might want to do in the future. It's a good thing to fall back on'.

Another system interviewee also suggested that, as only about one-third of students go straight from school to university, the other two-thirds need access to vocational pathways. With this in mind, the lack of access for this latter group of students to a breadth and depth of vocational learning is problematic. In discussion with two system representatives it was suggested that, 'the breadth of study requirements prevents to some degree a depth of study in any area – including VET' and 'limits students to low-level qualification outcomes as part of their school credential'. These limitations were seen as being reinforced by 'school timetables [which are] forced towards a traditional one where it is difficult to accommodate VET appropriately'.

When asked about the purpose of VET in Schools in the senior secondary curriculum, the key message emerging from system-level and TAFE/private provider respondents was that its purpose was to offer a broad educational pathway. VET in Schools was described as 'providing a great range of curriculum options for students while undertaking their HSC', 'offering an alternative pathway and an alternative way of learning', 'assist[ing] students find way of gaining detailed knowledge of industry' and leading to a 'great entry-level qualification'. The common theme in responses to this question suggests an emphasis in the New South Wales approach to VET in Schools on career exploration and exposure rather than a pathways approach. This 'taster' approach to VET in Schools may support decision-making about post-school options but is potentially weak in the facilitation of pathways to higher-level VET and employment-based training.

As noted earlier, a perennial issue, and one not limited to New South Wales, is the lack of trust of VET in Schools provision amongst employers and some in the TAFE sector. In New South Wales this relates to the provision of VET in Schools through frameworks developed and endorsed by the Board of Studies rather than national training packages. While the 12 industry curriculum frameworks currently available in New South Wales all include a mandatory work placement component, stakeholders consulted for this case study expressed concern about the lack of employer confidence in VET in Schools. One TAFE respondent suggested that 'schools are not able to provide exposure to contemporary equipment or training that TAFE is able to offer'. Another respondent was also concerned that 'the experience of teachers in schools teaching trades is not to the extent of TAFE'. It was these perceptions that were seen to contribute to the negative employer view of VET in Schools. As one TAFE/private provider respondent suggested, VET in Schools acts as a 'fill-in rather than gaining actual hand skills or technical skills'.

A lack of 'genuine work experience and knowledge of the industry' is seen as contributing to a lack of trust from employers and is also considered to be a key barrier to effective transition to the employment of VET in Schools students. Particularly amongst TAFE/private provider respondents there appeared to be continuing confusion about the role that VET in Schools plays by comparison with post-school VET provision in TAFE. As one TAFE respondent put it, 'They should be coming to TAFE as a pathway. Why are we setting up competition between sectors?'

Pathways to further study post-VET in Schools was a concern for several interviewees. Post-school tracking is not conducted in New South Wales, so comprehensive data for post-school transitions of VET in Schools students are not available. Anecdotal evidence from several respondents consulted suggested 'there is not a high level of articulation into further study' for VET in Schools students.

When asked to suggest what more should be done at both the school and system level to enhance the outcomes from VET in Schools, the most common responses were 'promotion of higher qualifications

as part of the school provision’, ‘more opportunity for school-based apprenticeship’, ‘stronger partnerships with employers and TAFE’ and ‘greater career guidance’.

Despite the perception that they provided stronger employment outcomes for students, school-based apprenticeships and traineeships were a particular point of contention amongst the stakeholders consulted. There was a concern that they encouraged early school leaving – at Year 11 – and negatively impacted on school funding. As one group training interviewee explained:

Potential school-based apprenticeships may be getting road blocked by, say school principals, and I think one of the major issues could be funding or may be a misconception of how the funding will impact on the school. I could give you an example, let’s say a local employer approaches a school and say I want to put on 20 School Based Apprentices, would you be supportive? I think the school principal would be going, hang on a minute, I think this could cost us a staff member and X amount of funding so they may be reluctant to support it. (Group training interviewee)

Consistent with the other case study jurisdictions, early exposure to vocational learning and career exploration were frequently cited by stakeholders in New South Wales as crucial to effective VET in Schools provision. Interviewees described an increasing focus on careers education in the junior years of high school. Given the current tendency in VET in Schools towards a taster approach, it is not known the extent to which career exploration earlier in secondary school would change or influence the perceived purpose of VET in Schools study in the senior secondary years.

Cairns, Queensland

The case study site for Queensland comprises a partnership between a government high school and a TAFE institute in Cairns, in far north Queensland. The model is focused on the marine tourism industry and combines the Queensland Certificate of Education (QCE) with an apprenticeship or traineeship pathway. To support and facilitate work placements and apprenticeship sign-ups, a group training company also contributes to the partnership.

Students accessing VET in Schools through this model attend a purpose-built marine technology campus of the TAFE institute for three to four days a week. They also complete an industry placement for one to two days a week. Staff from the government high school provide foundation skills. The Queensland Certificate of Education program accessed by students is structured in the following way:

- Queensland Certificate of Education (minimum 20 credits)
 - Maths A or Prevocational Maths (four credits)
 - English Communications (four credits)
 - Recreational Studies (four credits)
 - Certificate II in Tourism (four credits)
 - Educational pathway to obtain a Coxswain Certificate of Competency (Certificate II in Transport & Distribution) (four credits).

The educational pathway to obtain a Marine Engine Driver 3 (Certificate II in Transport & Distribution) involves enrolled students completing five days of work experience on board a tourist vessel, after which this learning is reinforced through one day a week of placement during the year. While the model has a strong pathways element, career exploration is still seen as an inherent part of the approach. The school principal described the program as ‘an opportunity to explore more, because

quite often these types of kids don't really know what they want to do next so they're exploring more about the career opportunities [available]'.

An obvious strength of this approach to the provision of VET in Schools is the close alignment with industry needs. The academic Queensland Certificate of Education curriculum is complementary to vocational delivery, allowing students to engage in a coherent program that offers both depth and breadth. As one TAFE respondent to the online survey claimed, the program 'enables school subjects and VET delivery to be delivered in a complementary way. Students don't miss school subjects when they are at "work" and the work is contextualised to support areas where they are having difficulty'.

Perceived purpose or role of VET in Schools in Queensland

Queensland has the second highest VET participation rate amongst 15 to 19-year-olds of all states and territories in Australia, with more than one in four (26%) from this group successfully completing at least one unit of competency at AQF level II or above (Australian Curriculum, Reporting and Assessment Authority 2011). Although VET in Schools participation in Queensland has grown rapidly since 2007, it has experienced a slight downturn in the last two years (-5.9%), particularly in school-based apprenticeship and traineeship participation (-28%; NCVET 2011a). The vast majority of Queensland's VET in Schools students are in the government sector (79%).

The delivery of VET in Schools in Queensland has many similarities to Victoria, in that the vast majority of certificate I and II delivery is provided by schools that are also registered training organisations. Students completing their QCE also have the opportunity to complete a large proportion of the required credits through vocational learning. This certificate structure allows approaches such as the Cairns model described above to develop VET in Schools programs that provide both breadth and depth of learning. This is not to say that the approach to VET in Schools within the Queensland Certificate of Education is not without its detractors, who argue that tying the completion of vocational competencies in with the completion of the QCE is problematic. As one Queensland system-level respondent argued:

I think it is a terrible combination and there is often no actual work outcome for students. The system promotes schools 'fast tracking' students and providing false results. Schools will not deem students 'not yet competent' and will do 'whatever it takes' to get the 'points' so the student will receive their QCE by the end of year 12. I have seen this happen too often and would place no value on the work skills or capability of the student if their certificate showed they had completed a VET qualification as well. The system is just wrought with bias and ultimately driven by political and inter-state competition to be real or valid.

(Online survey, Queensland system respondent)

A common theme emerging from the interviews and survey responses in Queensland was that VET in Schools was positioned as an employment preparation pathway. The consultations revealed that the employment pathway aspect of VET in Schools was more strongly articulated in this state than in any other of the case study jurisdictions. When asked about the role or purpose of VET in Schools, the most common responses from stakeholders from the full spectrum of organisations included 'work ready skills and knowledge that underpins industry workplace requirements', 'facilitat[ing] a smoother transition for all young people into employment', 'pathways for students to full-time employment' and 'provid[ing] non-OP [university entrance] eligible students with a viable interacting transition to work'. Given that more than three-quarters of VET in Schools in Queensland is at certificate I and II levels, this apparent conceptualisation of VET in Schools as a pathway directly to

employment is problematic, as it does not enable them to gain access to sustainable occupational careers. While the focus of VET in Schools was on pathways to work, respondents described several challenges in providing school-based VET that leads to strong labour market outcomes. Respondents frequently referred to the risk of ‘pricing school leavers out of an apprenticeship’ by providing certificate II institutional training without the corresponding workplace experience and exposure.

When asked what more should be done to strengthen the employment and occupational outcomes for VET in Schools students, collaboration and partnership with industry was the most commonly raised issue. Respondents suggested that ‘liaising with industry’, ‘emulating what occurs in the workplace’, ‘set[ting] acceptable industry standards’ and ‘validation by industry representatives’ were all necessary for strengthening the currency of VET in Schools for students pursuing post-school occupational outcomes. In addition to enhancing industry links, early exposure and embedding VET in Schools as core business within the school culture were also highlighted as key steps to enhancing the effectiveness of VET in Schools.

A small number of respondents suggested a shift away from the focus on employment outcomes towards a more coherent pathways approach, one that emphasised the need for further training post-school; that limited VET in Schools to prevocational and low-level courses (certificate I and II); and which did not preclude students from further employer-assisted training.

Towards a strengthened approach to VET in Schools

Strand 1 is exploring the potential for a more systemic approach to advanced and intense programs of VET in Schools – programs that deliver stronger employment and occupational outcomes and further study outcomes, particularly to higher-level VET. Drawing on the feedback from case study participants, the following key elements of effective VET in Schools have emerged.

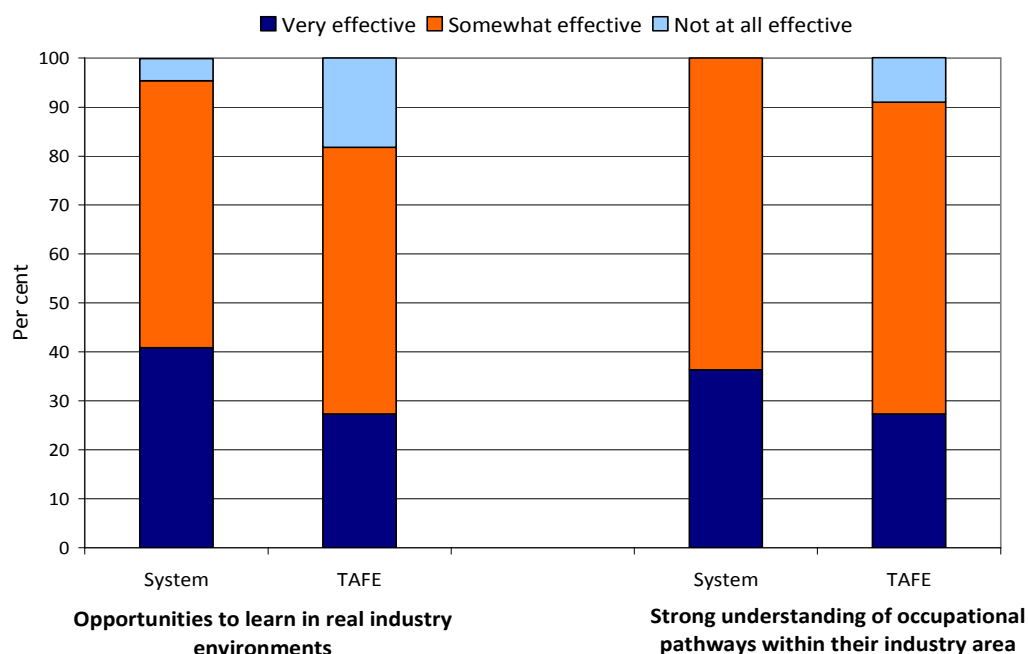
A coherent purpose and role for VET in Schools

Despite policy intentions and established recognition of VET in Schools provision in the senior secondary certificates, VET in Schools in the four jurisdictions studied here does not appear to result in coherent and strong pathways to occupational outcomes. The structure of the labour market and the increasing requirement for post-school qualifications for entry to occupations mean that VET in Schools may not have the capacity to provide strong occupational outcomes. Moreover, as an entry to vocations, VET in Schools does not link to intermediate skills training because the links with post-school VET are very weak. The increasing numbers of young people relying on VET in Schools programs as a core part of their transition pathway from school mean that there is a need to rethink VET in Schools to ensure that it leads to a substantial destination. Rather than relegating them to low-skilled, casualised and unsustainable employment, VET in Schools should be emphasised as a pathway to higher-level vocational studies, resulting in post-school vocational qualifications. However, ensuring that VET in Schools is able to achieve this will require stronger links between schools and work, as it is these that will more effectively support student transitions to higher-level VET. A consistent pathways approach is needed to bolster the capacity of vocational programs in schools to provide effective transition for young people. As an entry to vocations, VET in Schools largely fails to provide a link to intermediate skills training.

Even though a consistent approach is needed, it is not possible for VET in Schools to be a ‘one size fits all’ model. The case study consultations clearly illustrated that there are varying conceptualisations of the role that VET in Schools should be playing for senior secondary students. A core element of VET in Schools with the potential to benefit all students, both those exploring their post-school options and those already decided on their chosen field, is an approach that focuses on facilitating entry to post-school training rather than post-school employment. In three of the case studies there appeared a very weak understanding, particularly at the system-level approach, of how vocational learning in school was positioned and designed to support access to vocational learning after school.

Figure 2 presents findings from the online survey of system and TAFE/registered training organisation stakeholders. Respondents were asked to assess the extent to which VET in Schools provides students with an ‘opportunity to learn in real industry environments’ and a ‘strong understanding of occupational pathways within their industry area’. In both cases, less than a third of TAFE/registered training organisation respondents agreed that the current approaches to VET in Schools were ‘very effective’. System-level respondents viewed the current systems in a slightly more positive light, but there is clearly considerable room for improvement.

Figure 2 How effective is VET in Schools in your jurisdiction in providing the following for students?



Qualification levels in VET in Schools

Given the diversity of industry areas and vocational programs now encompassed by VET in Schools, it is impossible to apply blanket rulings on limitations to higher-level qualifications (for example, certificate III and above). As respondents from across the four jurisdictions have highlighted, different industry areas have different expectations and requirements for entry to apprenticeships and traineeships. While the current approaches to VET in Schools appear to recognise these variations, more needs to be done to clarify the pathway outcomes of VET in Schools qualifications and programs.

Expansion of employment-based training pathways

VET in Schools qualifications leading to apprenticeships and traineeships in the trades at certificate II level seem particularly problematic, with students at risk of weak outcomes and transitions. Stakeholders in the four case study jurisdictions confirmed the message from industry: that certificate II trades qualifications lack credibility because students are unable to access the requisite industry exposure and workplace experience, with the senior secondary certificate framework unable to accommodate the work experience requirements. For this reason, some school-based apprenticeship and traineeship students are being excluded from entry to full-time apprenticeships by employers because they have reached stage 2 of their theoretical learning but have minimal industry experience. This is an area where more needs to be done to strengthen school-based apprenticeships and traineeships. Building communities of trust with employers and ensuring that school-based apprenticeships and traineeships effectively facilitate entry to full-time apprenticeships and traineeships following school will go some way to addressing this issue. Evidence suggests that, despite these existing weaknesses, the occupational outcomes from the school-based apprenticeship and traineeship model of VET in Schools participation are far more satisfactory than for institutional or campus-based VET in Schools. Consequently a case can be argued for the promotion and expansion of the school-based apprenticeship and traineeship model. Between 2009 and 2010 there was a worrying 19% decline in school-based apprenticeship and traineeship participation across Australia

(NCVER 2011b), indicating that students are turning away from this option, which has been shown to be effective in supporting strong transitions.

Career advice to support vocational pathways

Students undertaking an academic program for the purpose of university are flooded with information about the subject prerequisites and entry requirements for various university programs. Students pursuing a vocational or occupational pathway also require access to relevant, comprehensive and clear information about post-school VET. The need for more effective advice given in schools for post-school vocational pathways was mentioned time and again during the case study consultations. Both students actively pursuing a vocational pathway and those unsure of or seen as unsuited for an academic pathway are disadvantaged by the continuing focus in many schools on university pathways and entrance. Students pursuing an academic program in their senior secondary certificate with the aim of entering university are in many instances able to select subjects that build a program of study to support access to their chosen university course. Similar careers and pathways advice needs to be available for students aspiring to a vocational occupation.

There is significant potential and an imperative to expand the role of schools and the system in supporting and facilitating transitions to vocational destinations following school. Although vocational qualifications and curriculum choice exist within the senior secondary certificates, the availability of individual VET in Schools subjects in the senior secondary certificates is inadequate. The role of schools in supporting young people to construct meaningful pathways that achieve both a breadth and depth of learning needs to be clearly articulated as a policy objective and as a performance requirement for schools.

VET in Schools within the senior secondary certificates

A discussion of VET in Schools and its role as an entry to vocations for school leavers/completers is inherently linked to our understanding of how the senior secondary certificates operate and how the structures of those certificates provide disincentives to students and schools to use and access vocational programs. The adaptation of vocational programs to fit within academic curriculum structures can result in the exclusion of those students already underserved by the academic curriculum while simultaneously undermining the efficacy of pathways from VET in Schools to the labour market and higher-level VET.

While system-level respondents supported the architecture of their own certificates and the capacity for effective VET in Schools within them, the focus was more on occupational outcomes, rather than pathways to post-school VET. The labour market requires post-school qualifications for satisfactory work outcomes, which means that it may be timely for systems to proactively encourage and facilitate post-school VET pathways as the key purpose and outcome of VET in Schools. In particular, the vocational pathways that link with post-school education and training need to be promoted and encouraged within the structures of the senior certificate. An approach such as this would result in an increased emphasis at the system level on ensuring these outcomes and less emphasis on the tendencies of individual schools to develop their own localised pathways models, removed from policy support and direction. All schools could benefit from a more clearly articulated approach to VET in Schools from state/territory training departments and boards of study. While a clear policy direction is unlikely to solve problems for those schools with insufficient resources for responding to the rapidly growing demand for VET in Schools, at least they will be given clear guidance on allocating the existing resources in their budgets towards VET in Schools.

A systemic approach to working with industry

Clearly visible in the case studies is a concern for the industry credibility of VET in Schools. Whether this concern is justified or not, it has a significant impact on the efficacy of VET in Schools as an occupational pathway. As schools grow and expand their scope of VET in Schools provision, it is imperative that industry plays a role in supporting the currency of the programs and the industry experience of the students. For many schools, engaging with employers and industry in this coordinated way is new territory. State/territory education and training departments have a role to play in supporting schools to build communities of trust with industry and employers. The system stakeholders also have a role to play centrally, by ensuring that VET in Schools programs developed and endorsed by the boards of study draw on industry advice and meet employer and industry expectations.

Moving beyond work placements to a systemic workplace learning approach

A strong theme emerging from the case study consultations at all levels was the need for a more coordinated and systematic approach to workplace learning in VET in Schools programs. There is currently a wide spectrum of access and exposure to workplaces across the gamut of VET in Schools programs – from tokenistic work placements, to structured workplace learning that is integrated and linked with the theoretical components of the programs. Providing access to structured workplace learning opportunities for all VET in Schools students is a substantial target that requires substantial resourcing. The issue of employer and industry investment in and commitment to providing this type of workplace learning is contentious. Financial incentives to employers are problematic, but perhaps this approach should be considered, given the rapidly growing VET in Schools provision and the associated demands for workplace learning. Any consideration of support for employers to offer workplace learning would need to ensure that it was structured learning that supported the VET in Schools curriculum and resulted in meaningful learning outcomes for students. Regardless of whether financial incentives are adopted or not, the links between schools and employers need to be strengthened for the benefit of both.

In addition to the necessity for a more coherent and coordinated approach to structured workplace learning in VET in Schools programs, evidence from the case studies suggests that more opportunities for workplace and industry exposure are required in the junior and middle years of secondary schooling. By the time students reach their post-compulsory years, curriculum decisions become more crucial. While students selecting academic subjects towards a university pathway have benefited from exposure to and participation in academic learning throughout the junior and middle years, those considering their vocational options may be required to make their decisions ‘blind’ or without the benefit of exposure to vocational, applied and workplace learning. As shown through the case studies, VET in Schools continues to play a ‘taster’ role in the senior secondary years, but the inclusion of such opportunities earlier on would strengthen the role that VET in Schools could play in building a pathway to specific vocations.

Conclusion: VET in Schools as a pathway to further learning

Participation in VET in Schools continues to grow and the diversity of young people choosing VET in Schools as a pathway to a vocation broadens. Consequently, it is imperative that student transition be supported – both foundational vocational learning accommodated in senior secondary certificates and intermediate-level vocational learning that supports occupational entry and career progression. The existing limitations on the depth of vocational learning possible in VET in Schools arise from both the rigidity of the structure of the senior secondary certificates and a lack of expertise and experience in the schools sector to provide the necessary career development advice and scaffolding to support the transition from foundational to intermediate vocational learning.

It is inappropriate for VET in Schools to be viewed as a *direct* employment pathway for young people, when the majority of qualifications offered and attained through VET in Schools remains at the entry or foundational level (certificates I and II). As part of senior secondary schooling in Australia, VET in Schools should be more accurately branded and delivered to students as the foundational component of a post-school education and training pathway (for example, higher-level VET and apprenticeships). As it currently operates, VET in Schools is too often viewed by schools, students and parents as a ticket to full-time employment after school without any further investment or participation in education and training. This is incongruent with the reality faced by VET in Schools students entering an unforgiving labour market, where foundational VET in Schools certificates have little currency with employers.

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NVETR Program funding

This work has been produced by NCVET under the National Vocational Education and Training Research (NVETR) Program, which is coordinated and managed by NCVET on behalf of the Australian Government and state and territory governments. Funding is provided through the Department of Industry, Innovation, Science, Research and Tertiary Education.

The NVETR Program is based on national research priorities approved by ministers with responsibility for vocational education and training.

The author/project team was funded to undertake this research via a grant under the NVETR Program. The research grants are awarded to organisations through a competitive process, in which NCVET does not participate. To ensure the quality and relevance of the research, projects are selected using an independent and transparent process and research reports are double blind peer reviewed.

The NVETR research program aims to improve policy and practice in the VET sector. The research effort itself is a collaborative one, which requires strong relationships with the research community in Australia's universities and beyond. NCVET may also involve various stakeholders, including state and territory governments, industry and practitioners to inform the commissioned research, using a variety of mechanisms such as project roundtables and forums.

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