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What VET can offer to COVID-19 youth unemployment recovery

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INTRODUCTION

Australia entered the COVID-19 pandemic with a youth (15 to 24-year-old) unemployment rate of 11.6% in December 2019, three times higher than the 25 to 64-year-old unemployment rate of 3.6%. The strategies taken by governments to minimise the spread of COVID-19 have had widespread economic impacts. By July 2020, youth *unemployment* had risen to 15.8%. Youth *underemployment* rose by 11.1% between December 2019 and May 2020.

By examining responses to past economic downturns and recessions, both in Australia and internationally, this paper discusses the role of vocational education and training (VET) in mitigating the effects of economic downturns on young people and assisting them to move into employment. Vocational pathways in school, quality career guidance and work-based training are found to be critical to youth employability, especially for disadvantaged young people. VET qualifications with a work-based training component have been shown to protect youth from the scarring effects of unemployment but can be more effective when their training is linked to lasting employment, with the opportunity to progress.

There is nothing novel in these approaches, but the high rate of youth unemployment pre-pandemic indicates that the VET sector also needs to look at longer-term solutions. The opportunity VET offers to Australia's youth can only reach those who most need it when VET is adequately resourced to offer programs in tandem with holistic social services and industry support.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Vocational pathways in secondary school broaden young people's understanding of the types of jobs that potentially await them and smooth the school-to-work transition, but the experience must be meaningful and supported by personalised career guidance.
- Work-based training achieves the best lasting employment outcomes. Although apprenticeships and traineeships offer one mechanism, they are not the only effective work-based training approach.
- Career planning is essential for enabling youth to understand the breadth of occupations open to them. Individualised, ongoing support from an informed and objective person works best, especially for disadvantaged youth.
- The rapid digitisation of VET delivery is unique to this recession and has proved to be a double-edged sword: accessibility has improved for some learners, while those with limited access to the internet or electronic devices, or who lack digital skills, have been disadvantaged. High-quality online training and assessment experiences, those that support the most vulnerable unemployed youth, are resource-intensive approaches for training providers.

ENTERING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON THE BACK FOOT

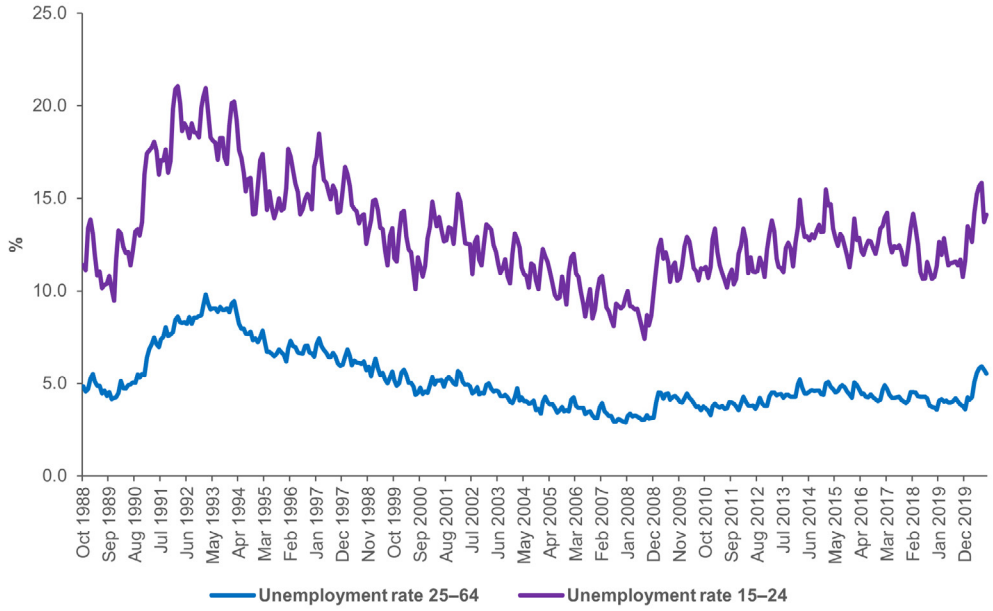
Australia entered the pandemic with a pre-existing youth unemployment problem that has since deteriorated.

The economic downturn prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic compounds an existing youth unemployment problem in Australia. Following the 2008—09 Global Financial Crisis (GFC), young people extended their tertiary study to delay entry to the workforce, but subsequently faced greater competition for jobs because they entered the job market at the same time as school leavers (Borland 2020a). This bottleneck effect is expected to be repeated and exacerbated after 2020, as temporary interventions cease and young people graduate from school. Additionally, pre-existing barriers to employment, such as socioeconomic disadvantage, compound the difficulty of navigating school-to-work pathways and contribute to an increase in the numbers of youth not in education, employment or training (NEET), a risk factor for poor long-term outcomes (Dawkins, Hurley & Lloyd 2020). Young people's employment experiences will shape the rest of their working lives, so promoting their employability is vital to Australia's future prosperity (Borland 2020b; Doiron & Gørgens 2008; Thomson & Hillman 2010).

Youth unemployment before COVID-19

In December 2019, before the arrival of the pandemic, youth unemployment in Australia was three times higher than that of the 25 to 64-year-old workforce. Before the GFC in August 2008, the youth unemployment rate was 2.4 times higher than that of older workers. After the GFC, the gap between the unemployment rates of young people and older workers increased to over 10 percentage points in January 2015 and was 8 percentage points in December 2019 (see figure 1; ABS 2020).

Figure 1 Unemployment rate, Australia 1988–2020



Source: ABS labour force status, October 2020, seasonally adjusted rate (ABS 2020).

As had been typical after previous recessions, the GFC impacted upon youth unemployment more than upon older worker unemployment. However, unlike past recessions, youth unemployment did not recover in the decade following the GFC (Anlezark 2011; Australian Department of Employment 2013).

Since 2011, young people have increasingly taken part-time work and endured lengthier periods of unemployment (ABS 2020; Brotherhood of St Laurence 2019). Even before 2020, with COVID-19 and the concomitant implications for youth unemployment, concerns had been voiced about persistent youth unemployment hotspots and youth underutilisation as a risk to Australia's productivity (Arakkal 2020; Atkins et al. 2020; Brotherhood of St Laurence 2019; Gilfillan 2016).

The impact of COVID-19 on youth unemployment

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit Australia, the strategies established by governments to mitigate the spread of the virus affected many occupations that employed high numbers of young people and had high levels of part-time and casual workers; namely, hospitality, retail and recreational activities (Atkins et al. 2020). Between December 2019 and May 2020 the number of young people leaving the labour force increased by 38%, amounting to 1 299 000 young people who were neither working nor seeking work (ABS 2020). At the same time, there were 417 000 underemployed youth, an 11.1% increase on the December 2019 figure (ABS 2020). NCVER's Student Outcomes Survey showed that, at the time of the May 2020 survey, 12% of young students who had found work after completing a VET qualification in 2019 had been stood down due to COVID-19 compared with 5% of students aged 25 and over (NCVER 2021).

History has shown that financial crises disproportionately affect youth, not only in the immediate aftermath, but in the years that follow. This pattern is caused by a confluence of factors, beginning with greater unemployment during the downturn or recession and subsequently exacerbated by delayed entry to the workforce, extended periods of underemployment, and a lack of skills-matched job opportunities (Anlezark 2011; Borland 2020c; Chesters 2020; Doiron & Gørgens 2008; Taylor et al. 2012). The implications of the COVID-19-led economic downturn on young people are likely to be similar.

Periods of unemployment increase the likelihood of later unemployment (Borland 2020c) and make finding full-time work more difficult (Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth 2020); reduce medium-term earnings (Andrews et al. 2020; Kelly & McGuinness 2015); increase the time spent transitioning from school to work (Foundation for Young Australians 2018; Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth 2020); and reduce social and health wellbeing (Brotherhood of St Laurence 2020). Vulnerable groups are likely to take even longer to bounce back (Borland 2020c; Brown et al. 2020, Goss 2020).

Some young people are more vulnerable than others

The number of persistently NEET youth (that is, not in education, employment or training for six months or more) will likely increase over the medium-term as young people compete for employment in a limited job market (Dawkins, Hurley & Lloyd 2020; Tetlow, Pope & Dalton 2020). Indigenous youth in particular may be even more vulnerable, given that, before the pandemic, Indigenous Australians of all ages were about 2.3 times more likely than other Australians to have been continuously unemployed for two years, while after past recessions this group had been more easily discouraged from participating in the labour market than the non-Indigenous population (Dinku, Hunter & Markham 2020, Hunter & Gray 2012). Similarly, prior to the pandemic, people with a disability were twice as likely to be unemployed than people without a disability and face barriers accessing education (Brown 2020). In recessions and downturns, young people with the least resources are the least likely to transition into lasting employment (Borland 2020c; Brown et al. 2020; Goss 2020). It is these groups that policies should attempt to target (Stanwick, Forrest & Skujins 2017).

Young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds are also highly vulnerable, facing challenges in securing employment. Moreover, many young women in this cohort are called upon to fulfil family caring roles, sacrificing their own educational and employment opportunities to do so (Kellock & Ntalianis 2020). And, of those employed before the pandemic, a larger share were employed in the lower-skilled and casual jobs vulnerable to losses, a vulnerability that also applied to Indigenous youth and those with a disability (Brown 2020; Dinku, Hunter & Markham 2020; Kellock & Ntalianis 2020).

Importantly in the COVID-19 context, prior to the pandemic a substantial digital divide between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians had been identified, whereby Indigenous youth were prevented from engaging in work and study remotely (Dinku, Hunter & Markham 2020). The digital divide also means that young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds, people with a disability and low-income youth are more susceptible to unemployment (Barraket & Wilson 2020; European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training 2020). Young people who live in non-metropolitan areas with thin labour markets are also vulnerable to becoming NEET. Youth in regional areas are twice as likely to be early school leavers as their metropolitan peers, but VET completion rates are generally higher, indicating the value that regional VET providers can deliver (Houghton 2019).

In contrast to previous economic downturns, during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, between March and June 2020, the employment-to-population ratio, the labour force participation rate and hours worked all decreased more for female than male workers (Borland 2020d). This is of concern, as young women tend to experience greater scarring effects from periods of unemployment than young men (Buddelmeyer & Hérault 2010) and were more likely to report negative mental health during the pandemic (Kabatek 2020).

Other COVID-19 impacts on youth

Typically, unemployment can increase the risk of poor mental health and financial strain, and the social isolation necessitated by the public health response to COVID-19 has compounded these problems, leading to young people who are more stressed, anxious and financially stretched than ever. In 2020, 38% of 15 to 17-year-olds and 34% of 22 to 25-year-olds reported high or very high psychological distress, an increase of 5 and 3 percentage points respectively from 2018 (headspace 2020). In Victoria, 55% of 18 to 24-year-olds expressed concern about employment and income (Youth Affairs Council Victoria 2020). This pattern is reflected internationally, with an OECD survey of 48 countries identifying that the biggest concerns for youth were mental health, employment, disposable income and education (OECD 2020a).

Damage to the future earnings of young Australians whose education has been interrupted due to COVID-19 has been estimated at $50—100 million. However, this estimate did not consider other barriers to learning that may compound disadvantage, such as domestic instability, stress or social isolation (Foster 2020), nor that the pandemic is ongoing at the time of writing.

WHY IS VET IMPORTANT IN THE YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT STORY?

VET offers valuable mechanisms to address youth unemployment if implemented in tandem with holistic support services.

In 2019, young people in VET represented a little under a third of all VET students, and of these around a quarter were unemployed (figure 2). Further, greater proportions of unemployed than employed youth identified with at least one of the reported equity characteristics. From the 2020 Student Outcomes Survey we see that 39% of young people[1] who were unemployed before starting their qualification found work upon completion. In 2019, this proportion was 47%. This decline may reflect the impact of COVID-19 on employment opportunities for youth.

Figure 2 Characteristics and outcomes of unemployed youth in VET, 2019 and 2020

In 2019 there were

1.3m youth aged 15–24 enrolled in nationally recognised VET

31% of all VET students~

Around **1 in 4** (26%) youth were unemployed while training, of these

16% were unemployed but seeking work

10% were not in the labour force

Characteristics of youth enrolled in programs~

	Unemployed	Employed
People with disability	13%	6%
Indigenous	9%	6%
Non-English speaking background	22%	11%
Lowest socioeconomic areas	23%	18%
Remote or very remote	2%	3%

Top 3 fields of education by volume of program enrolments~

Unemployed aged 15–24

- Society & culture
- Management & commerce
- Engineering & related technologies

Unemployed aged 25–64

- Society & culture
- Mixed field programmes
- Management & commerce

How did numbers of government-funded students in 2020 compare with 2019?

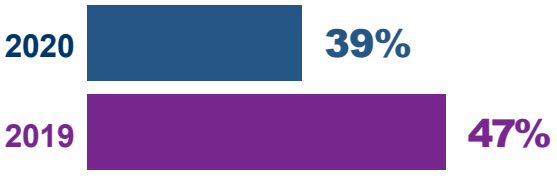
1% decline in youth but **7%** growth in those aged over 24^

4% decline in unemployed youth from areas of highest socioeconomic disadvantage

15% increase in unemployed youth from areas of lowest socioeconomic disadvantage.

How did youth who completed a VET qualification in 2019 fare in 2020?

In mid-2020, 39% of qualification completers aged 18–24 who were not employed before training were employed after training*



An 8 percentage point decrease on 2019

Sources: ~Total VET students and courses 2019, *VET student outcomes 2019 & 2020, ^Government-funded students and courses Jan-Jun 2019 & Jan-Jun 2020.

1 Students aged 15–17 were not surveyed in 2019 so, for this comparison, young people are defined as 18-24 years old.

In 2018, the Australian Government predicted that 45% of jobs growth up until 2023 would demand skills that VET delivers (Australian Department of Education, Skills and Employment 2018). The projected growth may have slowed due to COVID-19 but demand for skills in essential industries remains or has been heightened by COVID-19, for example, in healthcare and social assistance. Indeed, demand for certificate III-qualified workers has already rebounded to higher than 2019 demand (National Skills Commission 2020). It is clear that VET has a key role to play in addressing youth unemployment, but the type and nature of the training provided will prove crucial to achieving more than just a return to pre-pandemic youth unemployment levels.

VET qualifications can protect young people from the scarring effects of unemployment and reduce the likelihood of their remaining unemployed (Buddelmeyer & Hérault 2010; Karmel & Fieger 2012). Workers with VET qualifications have improved outcomes in terms of employment, income, hours worked and job quality, and these effects persist for up to five years (Lee & Coelli 2010; Polidano & Ryan 2016). Unemployed students however are the group *least likely to complete* their VET qualification (Ong & Circelli 2018).

Understanding the connection between VET qualifications and employment for young people highlights the importance of providing a supportive training environment, especially where online delivery is used, to help young people complete their training and connect with *lasting* work opportunities. The VET sector is well placed to offer that support through apprenticeships and traineeships and work-based training.

The youth response – learning from the past

There is broad agreement that VET offers valuable mechanisms that help in addressing youth unemployment, but policy evaluations warn that 'quick fix' approaches are unlikely to deliver truly meaningful results. Internationally, VET employment programs that went beyond merely incentivising study to feature targeted, coordinated support were found to be the most effective in reaching those likely to become and remain NEET. For example, the European 'Youth Guarantee' program (see box 1) has revealed that youth who stand to gain the most from VET study also need the most support in the form of assistance for job seeking, tailored training tied to labour market needs and job placements, and meaningful connection with other social services (Boeren, Mackie & Riddell 2020; Jackson 2020). This finding aligns with the recommendation of the National Youth Commission Australia enquiry into youth employment and transitions: to 'align and coordinate investment in training, skills and employment policies and programs' (National Youth Commission Australia 2020, p.3).

Post-GFC, under the Compact with Young Australians, the Australian Government implemented several initiatives[2] designed to boost youth employment via VET (Australian Department of Employment 2013). The key finding in the program's evaluation was that young people 'benefited but at significant financial cost, as it appears many would have achieved positive outcomes in the absence of this assistance' (Australian Department of Employment 2013, p.104). The persistently high youth unemployment rate following the GFC suggests that tackling this issue will demand a novel approach from VET.

To minimise the adverse economic impacts caused by widespread government responses to the pandemic, the federal government instituted a number of initiatives to assist those out of work, or those likely to lose their jobs. That said, the benefits of these initiatives for young people are yet to be fully assessed. The JobKeeper Payment Scheme[3], announced in March 2020, was designed to keep employees and employers connected through the period of restricted trade. However, Atkins et al. (2020) estimated that 42% of young people had been with the same employer for fewer than 12 months and half were employed on a casual basis (p.5), conditions that made them ineligible for JobKeeper. At the same time, the JobSeeker Payment for unemployed people looking for work[4] temporarily doubled the amount paid to job seekers and deferred the obligation to seek work. In December 2020, it was anticipated that the impending reduction of JobSeeker payments might drive more youth back into the job market, increasing the unemployment rate.

2 Pathways to Skills; Apprentice Kickstart; Securing Australian Apprenticeships; Learn or Earn; Entitlement to an education or training place.
3 The JobKeeper Payment Scheme was a subsidy for eligible businesses and not-for-profits significantly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. It commenced in March 2020 and was extended until 28 March 2021 (from an initial end point of 28 September 2020). Payment rates were reduced and eligibility criteria revised upon the extension of the scheme.
4 The JobSeeker payment is also available for those who are sick or injured and cannot do their usual work or study for a short period of time.

More time is needed to enable observation of how that effect interacts with the JobMaker Hiring Credit Scheme[5], which specifically targets younger people. The Commonwealth's JobTrainer[6] policy is also targeted at youth, the aim being to provide them with an opportunity to gain skills in areas in demand; the effect of this policy on youth unemployment and employability may be observed in coming years.

Box 1 - One to watch: European 'Youth Guarantee' program

The European Youth Guarantee scheme built on successful practices observed in Finland to offer young people employment, education or training within four months of leaving school or becoming unemployed. As its name suggests, the program supports school-to-work transitions by offering every person aged under 25-years-old a *guaranteed* place in work. The program combines support services, including job-seeking assistance, tailored training in occupations in demand and job placements. Supports were provided through either individual or group-based interventions, with most programs using a combination of the two; for example, career guidance and counselling were delivered one-on-one, while workshop interventions tended to be used for writing a CV or training in specific technical skills (Boeren, Mackie & Riddell 2020, pp.119–31). More than five million people per year have registered for the Youth Guarantee since 2014, and youth unemployment dropped from 24% in 2013 to 14.6% in February 2019. Although it is not possible to wholly attribute the decrease in youth unemployment to the scheme, the European Commission stated that it was a strong contributor (European Commission 2020). Closer examination of the regions that have had measurable success may inform a similar approach in Australia.

A VET-LED YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT RECOVERY

VET offers young people promising futures through vocational pathways in school, individualised career guidance and work-based training.

It is apparent that VET has a vital role to play in addressing youth unemployment through the provision of well-supported vocational education in schools, individualised career guidance and work based training. Furthermore, it is critical that VET refines and suitably resources the approaches with the best employment outcomes to support the most vulnerable young Australians to rebound during and after the pandemic.

Vocational pathways in schools

Youth transitions into the workforce are made more challenging by the limited work opportunities available during and after a recession, but even in 'normal' times a myriad of factors, including social, health, economic, systemic and personal circumstances, inform youth transitions. A European evaluation of measures to promote youth employment found that transition programs were valuable because they addressed the numerous socioeconomic and personal reasons why youth became disengaged before they became a NEET risk. Not only were preventative approaches found to have greater success, but they also tended to cost less than reintegration measures (Howley, Hall & Weber 2012).

Vocational education in schools is a key part of those school-to-work transitions. After the GFC, European countries used well-supported VET programs in secondary education to assist, specifically, those at risk of becoming persistently NEET (see box 2). Although international approaches to delivering VET to secondary school students differ from those undertaken in Australia, there are still lessons that may be learned. In Australia, VET study is typically recommended for those who under-perform academically in school, but, to flourish on this pathway, those who are already disengaged from school need more support than is currently offered.

5 The JobMaker Hiring Credit scheme is a Commonwealth Government incentive for businesses to employ additional young job seekers aged 16—35 years.

6 The JobTrainer fund commenced in October 2020 and uses a partnership arrangement between the Commonwealth Government and state/territory governments to deliver 320 000 training places in occupations in demand to people aged 17—24 and job seekers.

For example, Ranasinghe et al. (2019) found that a higher share of disadvantaged young people frequently moved in and out of education and employment and had a far lower employment rate by the age of 25 years compared with those whose transition to tertiary education or work had been more straightforward and stable. Vulnerable groups are over-represented amongst NEET youth and stand to gain the most from the kind of highly supported VET approach described in the Berlin case study (box 2).

Box 2 - Case study: Youth at Work!

The *Youth at Work!* program in Berlin, Germany, achieved a 13% drop in unemployed youth by prioritising support transition points: vocational education was identified as critical to this pathway. Germany has established vocational tracking in secondary school, but vulnerable youth were especially difficult to place with employers, echoing the feedback of employers in Australia that youth are not 'work-ready', despite study completion. Some of the features that improved outcomes for these youths were training for employers on how to train new workers and ensuring that supports were matched to the needs of both youth and employers (Bedürftig, Hieronimus & Klier 2015).

There are valid concerns that the vocational-tracking approach in international secondary school systems can be too restrictive, with young people often forced to choose a pathway before they know enough to make an appropriate choice. Clarke (2013) found that students who completed a VET program while at school were often working, post-school, in the same casual, low-paid and low-skilled jobs undertaken by university students, suggesting that many of the VET options available to school students were not necessarily a pathway to an occupation with upward mobility. That risk can be mitigated by introducing clustered pathways to VET programs delivered in school, those that allow students to gain a general education and transition to a range of related occupations (Wibrow & Waugh 2020).

Secondary school students undertaking VET in Australia

In 2019, 233 000 secondary students were undertaking VET study, representing 48% of the 485 000 senior secondary students in Australia and 18% of the youth VET population (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority 2019; NCVER 2020b). VET activity for secondary school students varies greatly by jurisdiction: Queensland had 33% of VET in School students with 21% of youth VET students, while New South Wales had 17% of VET in School students with 26% of youth VET students (NCVER 2020c).

For young people who struggle to gain employment after school, increasing the relevance of the vocational pathways available in school and improving the transferability of the skills gained in those pathways following school are critical. So too is increasing the quality of support for schools, students and parents in navigating career choices and completing VET study that is linked to lasting employment opportunities.

Work-based training

Apprenticeships and traineeships, the best understood category of work-based training[7] pathway, have strong employment outcomes for young people in Australia. In 2019, 76% of 18 to 19-year-olds and 90% of 20 to 24-year-old apprentices and trainees were employed after training. However, trade apprenticeships, which have the strongest employment outcomes, by comparison with other VET study, remain male-dominated and represent a lower share of students with a disability and those who speak a language other than English, unintentionally restricting opportunities for more vulnerable groups of young people (NCVER 2019).

7 'Work-based training' is defined as formal or structured programs that include learning through work, which can be accredited, resulting in a qualification, or unaccredited. These can include a range of scenarios such as apprenticeships and traineeships, work placements, internships, work experience etc. The terms 'work-based education', 'work-based learning' and 'work-integrated learning' are sometimes used to express this concept.

In Austria, where the apprenticeship system is established as a typical school-to-work pathway, the Integrative Vocational Training program was rolled out with the specific aim of helping those who did not thrive in their apprenticeship. This approach offers the young person the ability to complete study over a longer timeframe or to follow a partially accredited learning program in a work setting. An evaluation of various European programs found that alternative work-based training systems, such as the Austrian example, deliver excellent opportunities for those with personal, social or learning difficulties (Howley, Hall & Weber 2012).

Irrespective of accessibility issues, not all occupations are suited to a traditional apprenticeship or traineeship. Work-based training other than an apprenticeship or traineeship may be called 'internships', 'cadetships', or paid and unpaid 'work placements'. Osborne (2020) provides a comprehensive summary of those work-based training outcomes and the ways in which employers, training providers and policy-makers can promote best practice. Work-based training benefits youth by enabling them to: build a work history; develop occupational identity; learn to manage their work selves; build skills and knowledge in context; and gain an understanding of what the industry and employer will expect of them (p.3).

Targeted youth-at-risk programs tend to feature work placements, since this approach — supported by occupational and work-readiness training and the necessary income support — is recognised as an effective way of establishing pathways to employment for at-risk youth (Showalter & Spiker 2016). Evidence from the United States found that paid internships were associated with better employment outcomes for youth than unpaid internships, the latter being susceptible to exploitative practices (O'Higgins & Pinedo 2018).

In Australia recommendations for increasing the focus on work-based training have recently been made (Australian Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet 2019b). Cadetships have been offered as a method for embedding real work experience into vocational training. Dawkins, Hurley and Lloyd (2020) suggest two 'streams' for work-based training: first, expanding the occupations available under an apprenticeship or traineeship; and, second, supporting employment and customised training for already-qualified candidates. Internationally, similar work-based approaches have been suggested as a long-term solution to persistent youth unemployment: the United Kingdom, for example, has a fully funded program whereby youth at risk of becoming NEET are placed in highly supported six-month work and training placements in growth industries (Quilter-Pinner, Webster & Parkes 2020).

The challenge of engaging employers to fulfil the demand for work-based training places is acknowledged in the literature, but the evidence suggests that, over the long-term, spending resources to address this issue, rather than continuing to offer unsupported training or work placement options, would lead to stronger youth employment outcomes (Howley, Hall & Weber 2012).

An important aspect of work-based training is the inherent relevance the study then has to the employment outcome — it is more difficult for over-credentialism to take hold when training is so tightly linked to work experience (Ashenden 2016). VET graduates' work-readiness will continue to be questioned as long as students lack the opportunity to immediately apply their new technical skills in the context of real work (Social Ventures Australia 2019).

VET's role with regard to promoting work-based training is to facilitate the acquisition of skills in a work environment, which can be achieved through the provision of clear training package rules, greater partnership with industry during the qualification-development cycle, support for registered training organisations (RTOs) to match students with workplaces, and recognition of exemplary work-based training. Without targeted support for both learners and employers, the work-based training model remains unfit for those who stand to benefit most.

Career planning

In any economic downturn, carefully considered career guidance for young people becomes critical.The recent review of Australia's VET system led by Stephen Joyce acknowledged the importance of career guidance, specifying better careers information as a key component for a 'stronger skills sector' (Australian Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet 2019a, p.1). We know this works: countries with strong VET systems closely tied

to secondary education give youth a broader understanding of the work opportunities that await them, which translates to a better matching between future skills and jobs, and wage premiums of 10—20% (Mann et al. 2020; UNESCO et al. 2019).

Access to real work experience and supported vocational training in schools are central to youth career planning. Studies in Australia, the UK and the US have found that a lack of opportunity for young people at school to gain casual work can be detrimental to their later employability and inflate NEET youth figures (Mann et al. 2020). Undertaking part-time work while studying has been found to counter disadvantages in background and to promote better school-to-work transitions, which means: a lower likelihood of being out of the workforce; higher wages; greater apprenticeship engagement; and contentment in career progression (Mann et al. 2020). In an economic downturn, a time when older workers may replace youth in typical after-school jobs, finding alternatives to deliver that workplace experience is more important than ever.

The expectations that disadvantaged young people hold for themselves are lower than their advantaged peers, even when studies control for school performance (Mann et al. 2020). Having high aspirations for their future careers is more important than being academically gifted for low-SES background and disadvantaged students, meaning that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds with poor family support are most in need of targeted support to enlighten and inform them about the possibilities for their future, as well as appropriate further education pathways for them (Mann et al. 2020; Schoon & Mann 2020). Mackenzie and King (2020) found that in countries with strong VET systems embedded in the compulsory secondary education years, for example, Switzerland and Germany, students hold a far broader range of career aspirations than countries that do not. Teenage career aspirations are key to matching skilled workers with future jobs because they tend to be predictive (Mann et al. 2020).

Australia's young people most at risk of unemployment need to be made aware of the breadth of industry-informed work options and adequately supported to follow the pathways into them. VET's core business may not be career guidance, but as the education sector most used by low-SES and disadvantaged youth, VET can support career choices by providing study pathways that are closely matched to future skills needs, delivering high-quality work-based training opportunities and ensuring targeted support to vulnerable learners as they navigate educational pathways into secure work.

In the 2020 Skillsroad COVID-19 Youth Survey, respondents expressed concern about identifying the right career, reporting a critical need for informed guidance and connection with opportunities to secure their futures (Skillsroad 2020). Career guidance works best when it is client-centred and serves to support students with more than just career guidance (Howley, Hall & Weber 2012). For example, Sweden's Navigator Centres provide integrated employment, education and healthcare support to youth (Howley, Hall & Weber 2012). Such a holistic approach addresses all the personal and social barriers that influence post-school choices, benefits all young people and is critical to reaching the cohort that is likely to become persistently NEET.

Research shows that career guidance must:

- form a regular part of education and training
- respond to individual needs
- make use of trained professionals
- be connected with the world of work: 'authentic, frequent, personalised, varied employer engagement activities are vital and allow young people to develop trusted information to broaden career aspirations' (UNESCO et al. 2019).

Challenges to implementation

One essential component in each of the approaches described above is the need for services to be client-centred and coordinated. This presents challenges to VET in Australia, which is notable for its lack of a single coordination entity. The following table summarises the roles of VET stakeholders and the current challenges or barriers to implementing the coordinated and nuanced services required for reaching the most vulnerable unemployed youth.

Table 1 Summary of the challenges and barriers to coordination for Australian VET stakeholders

Sector	Role	Current barriers/challenges
Vocational pathways in schools		
Governments	• VET and education policy • School funding • Support services coordination • VET pathways promotion • Skills forecasts	• Coordination of national education funding and policy • National consistency in VET available to school students, including remote–metro divide • Consistency in policy across government and non-government school systems for vocational pathways
Industry	• Connect with schools and school associations to facilitate engagement with young people seeking VET-skilled careers • Offer entry-level position for young people, supported by supervisors • Career pathways	• Employer investment in training and understanding of VET • Industry value placed on VET qualifications • Employer resources to train and support young people • Employer understanding of future skills needs • Weak or no industry peak/representative body
Training providers	• Industry-informed training and assessment, contextualised to the workplace and student • Quality trainers • Student support • VET promotion	• Resourcing: financial, material and human • Access to industry/employers and schools • Industry currency of trainer and assessor skills
Schools	• Career advice • Student support • Equitable VET pathways promotion • Career education curriculum	• Resources to support students and families and link with industry and training providers
Work-based training		
Governments	• VET and industrial relations policy • Funding for employers and support services • Support services provision and coordination	• Unpaid internships and cadetships • Coordinating state/territory and federal support service provision nationally • Delivering client-centred services within broad service models
Industry	• Quality, paid work-based training • Supervision for students • Collaboration with training providers	• Time and resources to develop programs and supervise work-based training • Resistance to taking on unskilled or workers needing support • Understanding of future skills needs: workforce planning • More costly for SMEs to plan and implement • Lack of understanding of VET and training generally

Sector	Role	Current barriers/challenges
Training system	• Training experiences responsive to industry and student needs • Quality training and assessment practices • Student support • Matching students with workplaces	• Training provider resources to match students with workplaces • Efficiency and industry engagement in training product-development process • Currency of trainer and assessor skills
Other	• GTOs: pastoral care of students, training for workplace supervisors	• Access to workplace and time with employees • Resources to deliver client-centred services • Current remit is apprenticeships and traineeships
Career planning		
Governments	• Skills forecasts • Career services support and coordination • Career advisory services: expert advice based on current trends	• Capturing regional nuance in skills needs • Equitable access to services • Lack of careers information informing the development of Training Packages • Lack of specialist career advisors • Lack of a framework and professional standards for career advice standards • Work health and safety (WHS) and insurance requirements can make work experience difficult to arrange
Industry	• Career pathways • Connection with schools and advisory services • Work experience placements	• Employer resources and time to inform career advisory services and provide work experiences
Training providers	• Training that meets industry needs • Student support for study choices	• Resources to counsel students effectively on study choices
Schools	• Work experience, career education curriculum and VET promotion to school students	• Schools lack time and resources to deliver quality career advice in a student-centred way

New horizons – digitisation during COVID-19

A unique aspect of the responses to, and impact of, COVID-19 has been the way in which it has acted as a catalyst for the rapid digitisation of VET training and assessment. An analysis of online delivery in 2017 found that 8.6% of VET qualifications were delivered fully online (Griffin & Mihelic 2019). This suggests that VET might have been under-prepared to move to fully online delivery during COVID-19.

Throughout 2020, VET programs and units that had never before seemed suited to online delivery had to be transformed to enable their online access. Early findings from European countries on the move to online learning for VET highlighted that it was vulnerable learners and those most prone to becoming NEET who were excluded from learning (European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training 2020). The reasons for this are complex, but some insights include:

- challenges accessing reliable devices and internet
- student familiarity and comfort with learning through digital modes
- access to suitable study spaces while isolating at home
- lack of family support
- additional language, literacy and numeracy needs.

Griffin and Mihelic (2019) demonstrated that, in Australia in 2017, online delivery was associated with lower qualification completion rates and higher subject withdrawal rates. This same study found that providers commonly mentioned that students who were 'motivated' probably enjoyed and had better success with online learning. Unpublished NCVER research revealed that, in 2020, according to RTOs, students with non-English speaking backgrounds struggled more with online delivery; this informal feedback reflects the European findings that vulnerable youth may be further disadvantaged by the move to online learning precipitated by COVID-19. Importantly, Griffin and Mihelic (2019) did find that students who completed their qualification online were just as likely to find employment as those who studied face to face or by mixed methods.

The pandemic response has challenged providers' training delivery and assessment practices,[8] and benefits may flow from this, in terms of improved access by regional and remote students to courses of interest or need. Low-enrolment programs may experience growth as digital access broadens the market. For training providers, these times present exciting opportunities to explore the applicability of innovative teaching and assessment approaches, such as the use of virtual or augmented reality, simulators or artificial intelligence (Organisation for Economic Co-operation Development 2020b).

As discussed earlier, work-based training is shown to be effective for post-employment outcomes, raising the question of how ongoing online-only delivery and assessment can be made compatible with work-based training. Indeed, jobs across a range of occupations may become permanently or predominantly 'work from home', which presents a further challenge to the concept of what constitutes 'work-based' learning (University Vocational Awards 2020).

On the student side, we know that many disadvantaged Australians lack reliable and affordable internet. Ensuring true accessibility of VET to that cohort is therefore paramount (Barraket & Wilson 2020; Dinku, Hunter & Markham 2020; European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training 2020). Consideration of the digital challenges VET providers and students face must inform the decisions associated with the funding and support provided to the VET sector.

IN SUMMARY

This paper has been written as the impacts of, and policy responses to, the COVID-19 pandemic unfold. But the VET strategies discussed potentially offer a longer-term and more targeted approach, one that is relevant irrespective of what lies ahead. Indeed, these strategies are already operating in Australia. VET qualifications with a work-based training component have been shown to protect young people from the scarring effects of unemployment but these can be made even more effective by strengthening the links between training and stable employment in industries where young people have an opportunity to progress. Vocational pathways in schools are being explored to a greater extent in some jurisdictions than others; a consistent and well-resourced approach across the board would increase the value to all school students. A key element of success for vocational pathways in schools is well-informed and personalised career guidance, another strategy that stands to gain significantly from client-centred and secure funding.

The challenges to implementing the VET approaches that best serve all young Australians are well recognised: coordination of policy and services; access to expertise in training and career advisory services; and resources to plan and develop long-term programs. Sweden's Navigator Centres provide an example of what can be achieved when services are coordinated. Tackling these challenges demands a collective approach with clear leadership. Finally, an important learning to take from evaluations of past VET policy, and one that must inform future policy and program design in Australian VET — irrespective of whether these are enacted in response to an acute economic situation — is that an evaluation of any proposed policy initiative must be built into the initiative at the planning stage. For many historical programs and policies, both in Australia and internationally, the failure to articulate how their effectiveness would be evaluated has hampered opportunities to learn from and improve on these initiatives, potentially leading to a repeat of past mistakes.

8 See NCVER's forthcoming work, 'The increasing role of online delivery during COVID-19', for further detail.

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