

Enhancing the status of vocational education and the occupations it serves

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GRIFFITH UNIVERSITY RESEARCH TEAM

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INTRODUCTION

The relatively low status of vocational education and training (VET) and the occupations it serves is a significant impediment for realising VET's economic and employment goals. This status influences young people and parents' decision-making about post-school pathways, and government, community and employer support.

In an era of high aspiration, VET is often seen as an option only for those unable to secure university entry. This perception can lead to mismatches amongst the kinds of skills young people are learning and employment opportunities, with what employers seek in employees, and potentially lengthy and sometimes unproductive tertiary education experiences.

So, enhancing the status of VET as a worthwhile post-school pathway for young Australians is important for them individually, for communities whose needs their skills will serve and the workplaces whose continuity is premised on their employability.

The project

This bulletin summarises the findings of a research project on how to improve that status of VET so that it can be viewed a more worthwhile and viable post-school option by both young people and those who influence their decision-making about post-school pathways.

Research questions

What factors influence young people's decisions about participation in vocational education and training (VET) to prepare for future careers?

How can the status of VET be enhanced to increase uptake by young people?

Phases of project

Phase 1 - interviews and focus groups to secure perceptions and suggestions of parents, school and VET students, and teachers in metropolitan and regional communities.

Phase 2 – a survey to verify and extend Phase 1 findings.

Phases 3/4 – workshops, focus groups and roundtable discussions to review the findings from Phases 1 and 2 and specific interventions to promote VET as an option.





PHASE 1 FINDINGS (INTERVIEWS)

School students' decisions about post-school pathways are shaped by **familiars** (i.e. parents, teachers and peers) and **indirect suggestions** (e.g. electronic and broadcast media).

These sources of influence differ in: i) how well informed they are about post-school pathways ii) their level of influence and iii) degree of engagement.

For school students **who had identified their future occupations**, there were differences by schools and year-level (e.g. as might be expected, more Year 11 than 10 identify a preferred occupation).

School students **who were undecided about their occupational pathway** often reported being drawn to universities' breadth of options and learning pathway, and their social and institutional attractiveness. On the other hand, VET's specific occupational focus limited future options for those who were undecided.

PHASE 2 FINDINGS (SURVEY)

In this research phase, school and VET students suggested actions for schools to take, what VET institutions might do to attract young people and how governments might support their engagement in VET. Informants shown here include 162 school-age students, 143 school teachers, 230 parents, and 298 VET teachers.¹

Influences on decision-making

Students ranked a list of influences on decision-making as: i) parents, ii) school teachers, iii) the school iv) school guidance officers, v) peers and vi) community, as shown in Table 1.

There were differences between school students' views about who what was influential and adult informants views (i.e. parents, school and VET teachers) about strategies for enhancing the status of VET as indicated in Table 1. In this table, and the others that follow, the students' ranking is used as a basis for comparisons with other informants. For example, while all categories of respondents ranked **parents** as the strongest influence on students' decisions about whether or not to undertake VET studies post-school, only school students and VET teachers ranked **school teachers** as the second-strongest influence; school teachers themselves and parents ranked the influence of school teachers on those decisions at 5, well down the scale. Table 1 also shows that students rated the influence of career advisers and fellow students quite lowly.



Table 1 Ranking of the importance of the advice from others to students' decisions to engage in VET post-school (e.g. studying at TAFE)

Influences	School students	School teachers	Parents	VET teachers
Parents	1	1	1	1
School teachers	2	5	5	2
Schools in general	3	3	3	5
School-based career counsellors/guidance officers	4	2	2	4
Students	5	4	4	3
The community (everybody)	6	6	6	6

For school students, parents are key partners in decision-making, therefore their engagement in enhancing the status of VET is vital, along with teachers.

¹ i.e. employed in VET institutions (RTOs)



Important desired outcomes

Table 2 Ranking of the importance of job and occupation factors for young people when considering further study and future careers

Desired outcomes	School students	School teachers	Parents	VET teachers
Future job satisfaction	1	2	2	2
Future job security and stability	2	4	4	4
Personal interests and passions	3	1	1	1
High paying work in the future	4	6	6	6
Future prospects	5	3	3	3
Status of the future occupation	6	7	7	7
Status of the qualification	7	8	8	8
Other lifestyle benefits (e.g. travel)	8	5	5	5

All categories of respondents are generally agreed that job satisfaction is a key motivation for school students in choosing a career, but the students and adults differ considerably over the attractiveness of job security, personal interest, and high paying work. Both cohorts claim that status of qualification and of occupation are relatively unimportant.

Effective means of presenting positive messages

Table 3 Ranking of the effectiveness of the following ways to present positive messages to young people about studying in VET

Means of presenting message	School students	School teachers	Parents	VET teachers
Schools providing more personalised career information about VET jobs	1	3	2	3
Exposure to a range of work situations while still at school, to help with career decisions	2	1	1	1
Exposure to different institutions and education facilities (e.g. visits to TAFE institutes)	3	4	5	4
Online materials that are easy to access	4	5	4	5
Promoting role models who have successful careers after completing VET qualifications	5	2	3	2
Wide advertising (e.g. TV, radio, social media)	6	6	6	6
Simple, easy to understand printed materials (e.g. brochures, guidebooks)	7	7	7	7

The first three preferred approaches of students essentially fall into the ambit of what schools can provide, although teachers are not as supportive as students of providing personalised information. There is a general perception that printed materials and media advertising are not as effective as more directed information.



Messages to be sent

Table 4 Ranking of the importance of each of messages to get more young people interested in VET (e.g. studying in TAFE) after finishing high-school

Strength of message to promote status	School students	School teachers	Parents	VET teachers
Leads to stable jobs	1	7	6	7
Students can study a wide range of courses	2	3	4	2
Leads to well-paid jobs	3	6	7	6
Leads to good job prospects	4	1	2	1
Is delivered in a friendly learning environment	5	9	5	9
Leads to interesting and worthwhile jobs	6	5	3	5
Courses suit all genders	7	10	8	10
Classes are practical	8	8	5	8
It is a high-quality, well-respected post-school option	9	2	1	3
It can be a stepping-stone to university.	10	4	10	4
Courses are easy to get into	11	12	13	12
Is a good first choice	12	11	8	11
Is a good option for smart students	13	13	9	13

There are some significant differences in rankings between students and adults in Table 4, particularly in the importance of promoting job stability through VET, and that VET itself should be a high-quality, respected post-school option. These differences have implications for the sorts of messages that might influence decision-making (e.g. parental advice, Senior Education and Training (SET) process).

PHASE 3/4 FINDINGS (WORKSHOPS) - VERIFICATION AND ELABORATION

The main points that emerged from workshops and consultations with teachers and parents about the findings from Phases 1 and 2 were:

- Parents often have a narrow and outdated view of VET and are not very knowledgeable about it;
- Most adults probably believe there are high quality, respected VET jobs, but will still promote university qualifications;
- There are misunderstandings about the roles/capacities/expectations of guidance officers – students have limited access to career advice, as the ‘guidance officer’ role tends to be more about student welfare. Also, guidance officers are perceived to have little understanding of the occupations served by VET;
- School students and teachers advising they need better/easier engagement/interaction with staff at VET institutions; students generally perceive such institutions as limited in course flexibility and in their social environment; undecided students tend to choose university as a more desirable option;
- School students rarely use printed materials for information – they want personalised materials – but schools report they normally do not have the staff to provide that level of support;
- Many students not bound for university view senior years as unhelpful, and are disengaged;
- For schools, engagement with parents and local employers is often difficult to foster and can be unproductive;
- Teachers and career advisers are often poorly informed about VET options post-school, partly through lack of time to access such information and partly because they have no personal experience of VET; and
- The extent to which VET is presented as an equal option with university study tends to depend on the attitudes of schools’ senior administrators.



FOUR POSSIBLE COURSES OF ACTION

The findings suggest positioning vocational education and training (VET) as a viable and worthwhile post-school option through:

- i) a public education process – e.g. give VET a ‘fair go’ – promoted by government;
- ii) actions by schools and VET institutions to holistically promote, inform and advise about post-school pathways;
- iii) VET institutions offering more attractive social and learning environments, smoother engagement with information and enrolment processes, and more broad-based program options; and
- iv) a concerted effort and leadership by government and industry sectors to promote the occupations VET serves.

i) Public education process

Given the range and multiplicity of sources of advice and influence on young people’s decisions about post-school pathways, more fully informing those decisions cannot be restricted to what occurs within schools. A public education process seems necessary to promote VET as an attractive alternative to university.



Specific promotion strategies

- Promote VET on social media – high school students make limited use of printed materials;
- Show authentic job satisfaction ads in the media which show what jobs actually entail; and
- Use successful VET graduates or other influential people as models or champions who might speak directly to school students about their experiences or via social and mass media.

ii) Actions by schools

The findings imply that schooling systems and schools need performance indicators, curriculum practices and guidance through processes (such as SET) that consciously promote VET as a viable post-school option, and act to counter social biases in schools that may, unintentionally, work against the provision of impartial advice and guidance.

Specific school-based strategies

- Include more subjects in the school curriculum that allow students to experience VET;
- Provide more personalised career information about VET jobs;
- Expose students and teachers to a range of work situations to inform career decisions; encourage undecided students to participate in work and work experience while they consider their options for a future career;
- Expose students to different institutes and education facilities (e.g. visits to TAFE and private training institutes); when arranging tours of training facilities, group students based on their interests, to promote better engagement with VET staff;
- Educate parents about what contemporary trade occupations involve; consider new ways to encourage more parents along to career events;
- Equip career advisers and teachers to provide holistic advice about post-school options, e.g. expose teachers and career advisers to TAFE and private RTOs, as well as to parents in VET-related industries, because most school staff have no experience of VET;
- Encourage selected work experience students talk about those experiences; encourage students from different years share work experience with other years;
- Begin to provide information early in the high school years, but leave deciding about post-school career options open as long as possible – many school students typically do not look too far ahead;
- Support VET students in lower-socioeconomic schools for industry-related experiences where they are otherwise limited by lack of funding; and
- Acknowledge the contributions of VET and VET teachers to a school’s curriculum and allow sufficient time for discussion with students and parents re VET options and pathways prior to and during the SET process.



iii) Actions by VET institutions (RTOs)

As many young people remain undecided about their preferred occupations, there need to be post-school VET programs that are less occupation-specific, to broaden the choices. These provisions might be further enhanced by closer collaborations with industry and enterprises, and by improving student engagement through easier access to courses and a contemporary learning environment.

Specific VET-based strategies

- Review how TAFE currently engages with school staff and prospective students, to overcome the perceptions that personalised TAFE advice is difficult and time-consuming to access both online and in person; consider a dedicated phone line for schools;
- Consider ways of engaging more pro-actively with schools, e.g.: hold open-campus days for VET-related careers; offer summer programs for high school students the way universities do; expand offerings of TAFE 'trade taster' courses for Year 10;
- Promote the positive outcomes from undertaking a VET course, including acquiring practical skills for life, being paid while they learn (apprentices), strong employability in many fields, and therefore immediate income on graduation, and the option for further study later; but be open with teachers, parents and students about courses with limited employment opportunities;
- Market VET as an alternative to university as well as a pathway to it; offer cadetships in VET;
- Provide more flexible options for post-school VET, e.g. start with a basic diploma or other non-career-specific courses, that provide pathways to options; and
- Promote university to TAFE pathways, for university graduates who lack the hard skills required in the labour market.



iv) Leadership strategies

The findings suggest that without enhancing the status of the occupations that VET serves, participation in vocational education risks being seen as a second, poor or last resort choice. Consequently, concerted effort and leadership by government and industry sectors are needed to inform about these occupations and present them fairly and realistically to young people and their parents.

Specific strategies

- Review VET marketing strategies, including representation at career events and school visits, to ensure VET maintains a high profile among post-school options;
- Promote VET as an attractive educational option, e.g. a more mature learning environment than high school, shorter courses, potential for subsidies while studying, and good salaries on completion;
- Promote the national need for skilled workers and hence the strong chances of employment in high-demand VET-related occupations;
- Promote VET as practical and applied education with direct links to employers; large industries with high potential for employability, such as Allied Health, should be represented at careers events;
- Review the level of financial support provided to VET to ensure it is not disadvantaged in the higher education sector by continually being seen as relatively under-funded;
- Review the support provided to students with special needs, esp. those who have difficulty learning online, and those in regional areas who may need financial support to move to study at a VET institution; and
- Consider how the social and learning environments of TAFE/VET institutions might be modified to be perceived as more attractive by young people, e.g. improving facilities, modernising buildings, ensuring high quality teaching skills.

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