Serving multiple masters:
Reviewing the role and recognition of VET within the Victorian Senior Secondary School Certificates

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Abstract

This paper reviews a selection of the policy, curriculum, operational and research literature associated with the recognition of Vocational Education and Training (VET) within the Victorian senior secondary certificates – the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE), and the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL). The central tenet of our paper is that VET in Victorian schools serves multiple purposes and in doing so it offers both risks and opportunities. While the achieved outcomes of the Victorian VET programs achieve national recognition, the recognition of these programs for broader educational certification has become diverse and complex. We use statistical participation data to argue that the incorporation of VET into these senior secondary certificates, appeals to students and offers increased options and pathways in the post-compulsory years of schooling. A range of assessment strategies and procedures have been developed to assist in the recognition of VET within these senior secondary school certificates. In particular, scored assessment and its contribution to national tertiary entrance (ENTER) scores is at the centre of the debates over recognition of VET within VCE. Also in this mix for recognizing VET within the senior secondary certificates are pre-apprenticeship programs, (included as part of the VCE VET suite of programs), school-based apprenticeships and traineeships. The operational, procedural and research literature associated with the complexities of the tandem usage of competency-based and scored assessment are reviewed as they apply in the Victorian context. As with the VCE, VET is also incorporated into VCAL programs through the industry specific and work-related skills streams. VET is mandatory within the intermediate and senior levels of VCAL. Our paper tries to identify and discuss the complexities in this area of VET provision.

Introduction

This paper examines some of the curriculum and assessment practices that allow for VET programs in the state of Victoria, Australia to be recognized and incorporated into the senior secondary school certificates through the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) and the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL). It draws on a wide selection of policy, curriculum, operational and research literature and statistical data on participation associated with aspects of Vocational Education and Training (VET) in Victorian secondary schools. After setting out the various curriculum frameworks, the paper reviews the strategy and processes for the tandem usage of competency-based and scored assessment as they apply in the Victorian context. The purpose of the paper is to open up the balancing act that is occurring at the operational and policy levels between equity and quality.

A brief historical context

A balancing act between equity and quality can be argued to underpin secondary education in Victoria. For some hundred and fifty years there has been a striving for, greater equity between access to appropriate programs and the recognition of academic and the vocational outcomes and achievements with respect to status, opportunity and pathways. Strategies for fulfilling these aims though have oscillated between divided and unified systems of secondary schooling.

Victorian secondary education was until some two decades ago a split system comprising, high schools and technical schools. In nineteenth century Victoria the early high schools offered a very liberal education aimed at a smaller section of the population, with the curriculum for the senior years catering specifically for university entrance. In contrast secondary technical schools were conceived as extensions to primary schools, and were planned for 'the children of the working classes as they would ultimately have to support themselves by manual work' (Blake 1973: 437). Such schools were not intended for the young people destined for the professions but for those going into trades.

Importantly, the early distinctions between high schools and technical schools prevailed and established a divide across these sectors. The rationale for the structural divide was that the more academically orientated students went along to high schools and had their chance of entry to university and later the professions, while technical schools educated for the workforce in preparation for entry into manual trades. This was made abundantly clear with high schools offering six years of secondary education whilst technical schools terminated at Year 11. While some attempts were made to instigate a comparable educational pathway it was almost impossible for technical schools to provide a pathway for their students into university. This sectoral, and class-based divide (Connell et al 1982) was to remain in place until the disbandment of the Technical Division.

In 1986, the Victorian government set about rectifying the inequities of this divided system by abolishing technical schools, collapsing the differences between high schools and technical schools and proclaiming just one form of secondary schooling. The report commissioned by the Victorian state government and brought down by Jean Blackburn (1985) signaled the beginning of the end for sectorial rigidities and also introduced the notion of pathways. Rushbrook's historical policy analysis mirrors that of Connell when he explains this as a convergence between the economic need to increase the development of a local skill base with the imperatives of a long held social justice agenda (Rushbrook 1997).

In addition, Rushbrook (1997:3) explains that the industrial rhetoric at this time emphasized the need for students to have *both* job specific training *and* a good general education'. In 1988, as a result of much debate and as a part of numerous reform strategies, work begun on developing and implementing the new Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE). This was implemented in 1991-92 to replace the then cumbersome, and what was considered by many as the overly academic, Higher School Certificate (HSC) that marked the end of Year 12 (Polesel 2001).

In the early 1990s, youth unemployment rose abruptly. This was partly as a consequence of substantial structural adjustment of the labour market but mainly an effect of the economic recession. As stated in the Kirby Report (2000), in the period between 1978 and 1995, about half of the full time jobs for young men aged between 15 and 19 disappeared, while for young women some two thirds of the full time jobs disappeared over the same period. Part time jobs for women in this age bracket grew by three times while for young men part time jobs grew by a factor of 2.5. Therefore as a consequence of full time jobs disappearing and being replaced by part time work, young people were forced to stay on longer at school. This change in the structure of the youth labour market coincided with research on labour market participation which showed that the more years that students completed of initial schooling, and the higher the levels of attainment achieved, greatly increased a student's chances of staying employed once they entered the workforce (Jarvie 2005).

Following on from the economic downturn and structural adjustments, federal and state governments made a commitment to young people throughout Australia that they should have access to twelve years of initial schooling. Strategies and targets were put in place by the federal government through reports like those developed under the chairmanship of Finn (AEC 1991) and Carmichael (ESFC 1992), to increase and support retention in education and training. However those students who were not considered academic needed realistic and broader options if they were going to have their needs meet and succeed within secondary schools (Keating 1995; Kirby 2000).

Following the Blackburn report of the mid 1980s and the Deveson report of the early 1990s, at state level, and the national strategies instigated by the federal Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET) and specifically arising from the Finn and Carmichael reports, VET in schools was originally instigated in Victoria in 1994 as the Dual Recognition Program. Three programs were initially trialed. These were Electronics, Hospitality and Office Administration (Polesel, Helme, Davies, Teese, Nicholas and Vickers 2004). In Victoria at least, VET in schools was a success from the start. This was greatly assisted by changes to the national recognition framework (Keating 1995). Dual recognition became possible following much research and debate on the assessment and certification of competency and later, the ability to provide a differentiating score that could be used in determining a ranking for tertiary entrance.

Enrolments in the VET in schools programs grew quickly and substantially. Polesel et al (2004) explain that the number of Year 11 students doing VET in Schools in 1994 was 324, and for Year 12 students the number was 137. Some three years later, in 1997, enrolments had grown to 7052 and 2609 respectively.

The 1997 Review of the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) built on the ground opened up by Blackburn, Deveson, Finn and Carmichael and made extensive recommendations 'concerning the much needed enhancement of the status of VET programs within the VCE; and the exploration of ways in which students may be granted full recognition for their achievements in VET programs within the VCE' (VCAA 2007:1). Yet to achieve the reforms required, VET programs had to be comparable in all ways with the other traditional academic subjects offered at VCE. The then Board of Studies, and forerunner to the Victorian Curriculum and

Assessment Authority (VCAA), was well aware of the need to enhance the status of VET and responded to these recommendations by redeveloping VET programs to place them in the VCE Unit 1-4 format and structure (unitization), and to identify Unit 3 and 4 sequences (BOS 1999). From 1999, two VCE VET Unit 3-4 programs could be counted within the VCE for satisfactory completion purposes. While this recognition was a start, these studies however, remained un-scored.

The Board of Studies, aware of these shortcomings, instigated a VCE VET study score project. In 1999 guidelines and procedures for deriving study scores for VCE VET Units 3-4 were developed and trialed in two programs (BOS 1999). These were the Certificate 11 in Hospitality (Operations) and the Certificate 11 in Business (Office Administration). Both were based on the recently introduced national 'Training Packages'. Training packages are defined by Smith and Keating (2003) as consisting of a number of units of competency (competency standards), and instructions as to how they can be packaged to make qualifications (p.147). Each of the programs was piloted across six different secondary schools.

At the heart of the VCE VET initiative from this time onwards is a methodology for dual assessment that both assesses competency, and which synthesises evidence gathered from a range of different tasks with an exam, leading to a Year 12 study score that can be used for comparison purposes to obtain university entry, the Equivalent National Tertiary Entrance Rank (ENTER) score.

By 2005, of the nearly half a million students enrolled in a senior secondary certificate across Australia, 37.4% were undertaking some form of VET in schools (NCVER 2006). In Victoria, the number of students doing VET was approx 36,000 with 4,000 of these doing School-Based Apprenticeships and Traineeships, leaving some 32,000 doing other forms of VET in schools programs. On 2007 figures, approximately three out of every ten Victorians aged 15 to 19 participates in VET, up from less than one quarter (23%) in 1999 (OTTE 2007).

The two Senior Secondary Certificates in Victoria

In 2008 there are two senior secondary certificates available in Victoria. These are the mainstream Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE), and the more recently developed Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL). VCAL was developed following the Victorian Ministerial Review of Post-compulsory Education chaired by Peter Kirby and whose report and recommendations were published in 2000. VCAL was first trialed in 2002. In 2006, there were over 79,000 students enrolled in the VCE of which around 49,000 were eligible to graduate, while approx 12,000 students were enrolled in VCAL (VCAA 2007).

The Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE)

The VCE usually runs across Years 11 and 12 of secondary school. Each of the subject areas offered is called 'a study'. Within the VCE there is a selection of approximately 90 study areas and some 30 VCE VET programs are available. Each study area is sub-divided into four units. A VCE program usually consists of approx 20 to 24 units taken over two years. Units 1 & 2 are generally considered to be Year 11 level and can be completed as single units or as part of a sequence. Units 3 & 4

are more difficult and generally considered to be equivalent to Year 12 level. Students undertaking Unit 3 in a study are usually expected to do the corresponding Unit 4 and therefore complete the Unit 3 & 4 sequence. The VCAA (2007) explain that the Unit 3 & 4 sequence in each VCE study has three graded assessments, either two school based assessments and one external examination, or one school based assessment and two external examinations.

To successfully complete the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE), a student must complete sixteen units, with a minimum of four, Unit 3-4 sequences. It is compulsory to do English as one of the study areas and each student must complete at least three units in English, and four units if they want to get an Equivalent National Tertiary Entrance Rank (ENTER) score. A student needs to complete English and three other Unit 3 & 4 sequences. As noted by the VCAA (2007), students can now successfully complete their VCE with 3 units of English and up to 13 VET units. These other units can even be drawn from different types of VET programs, for example, VCE VET, School-based apprenticeships (SBAs) and any other nationally recognized VET programs.

The Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL)

The VCAA (2007) estimates, that approximately 12,000 students undertook the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) in 2006. The VCAA literature describes VCAL, *'as a hands-on option for students in Years 11 and 12. The VCAL offers practical work-related experience, as well as literacy and numeracy skills and the opportunity to build personal skills that are important for life and work'*.

The VCAL was developed following recommendations made in the the Kirby Report. The report highlighted poor senior secondary outcomes for many students. Governments that encouraged retention within secondary schools needed to have appropriate programs to cover the diverse range of needs for all who attended. Consequently, the VCAL was developed and accredited in 2002 when it was piloted by 22 selected Victorian secondary schools and TAFE Institutes and organisations. Three years later in 2005, 10,692 students were enrolled into VCAL programs in 380 secondary schools, TAFE Institutes and Adult Community Education (ACE) organizations across the state. In 2006, there were 12,461 enrolments in VCAL programs and in 2007, this increased again to 13,790 students enrolled through 410 providers (VCAA 2007).

VCAL is often considered by school administrators and curriculum planners to take approximately 1000 hours and many students complete it in just one year. The VCAA website presents information that contrasts VCAL with VCE (VCAA 2007). This is reminiscent of the historical academic and vocational divide explained earlier, when it is stated,

> Unlike the VCE, which is widely used by students as a pathway to university, the VCAL focuses on 'hands on learning'. Students who do the VCAL are more likely to be interested in going on to training at TAFE, doing an apprenticeship, or getting a job after completing Year 12.

In terms of developing a VCAL program, there are numerous options and great flexibility available to each student and the providers. VCAL students are able to

select from accredited VCE and VET modules and units, though they need to be arranged and justified as part of one of the four compulsory strands. The strands are, (i) Literacy and Numeracy Skills; (ii) Work Related Skills; (iii) Industry Specific Skills; (iv) Personal Development Skills (VCAA 2007). The VCAL can be undertaken on three different levels. These are Foundation, Intermediate and Senior. The four compulsory strands and three possible levels make up a matrix type program design. The four strands remain common across the three different levels. Approximately half of the students undertake the program at the intermediate level (VCAA 2007a).

To satisfy the minimum requirements for a VCAL certificate at foundation level a student needs to complete a minimum of 10 units. A unit of study can be a designated VCAL unit, a VCE unit, or approximately 100 hours for VET modules/units of competence and/or Further Education (FE) modules. Each unit of study must be justified against the purpose statement and assigned to one of the four VCAL curriculum strands. The VCAA website provides additional information about the minimum requirements for a student's learning program. Such a program must include:

> … a minimum of two VCAL units; at least one literacy unit; at least one numeracy unit; at least one unit from the Industry Specific Skills strand. (at the intermediate and Senior levels this must include a unit of study from a VET qualifications); at least one unit from the Work Related Skills strand; at least one unit from the Personal Development Skills strand; and at least six credits at the level or above, of which one must be literacy and one VCAL Personal Development Skills unit.
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> (VCAA 2007; VCAL Handbook)

VCAL units are assessed by the teacher at the school and/or a Registered Training Organisation (RTO). To be able to assess students doing VET units of competency, the minimum qualifications needed by the assessor are, the TAA04 Certificate IV in Training and Assessment or its equivalent, and their own competence in the units of competency being assessed (VCAA Bulletin 2007; AQTF 2007).

VET in the senior Secondary certificates

Polesel et al (2004) state that 'VET in schools is probably the most substantial change that has occurred in post-compulsory schooling in the past decade, (p.14). As of October 2007, there were 52,611 enrolments in some component of VET as part of VCE and VCAL (VCAA 2007a). These VET components can take one of three forms. They can either be VCE VET programs (including approved pre-apprenticeships), School-Based Apprenticeships and Traineeships (SBAs), all other VET programs. Mechanisms are in place so that all three forms of VET can feed into and be recognized within both of the two senior secondary certificates (VCE and VCAL). This allows for senior secondary school students to achieve dual recognition and complete VET as part of the VCE and VCAL certificates, gain the school certificate and qualify for a VET qualification at the same time. In fact, VET units are a mandatory component of the intermediate and senior level VCAL certificates. The VCAA provide a general guide that VCAL students undertake Certificate 1 at Foundation level, Certificate 1 and 11 at Intermediate level and Certificate 11 and 111 at the senior level.

VCE VET programs:
A VCE VET program can provide credit in the VCE for a Units 1 and 2 sequence or Units 1 - 4 sequence. There are twenty four VCE VET programs generally listed as available in Victoria though a few, very specific additional enterprise-based, qualifications increases to thirty. Fourteen of these thirty programs provide students with scored assessment. The six most popular VCE VET programs are Hospitality, Sports and Recreation, Information Technology, Building and Construction, Automotive and Business. Four of these offer scored assessment, while the more traditional trade areas of Building and Construction and Automotive do not. Rather these two areas maintain the binary, 'competent', or 'not yet competent' designations as practiced throughout their industry sector.

Pre-apprenticeship courses exist in some fields and these are run and recognized within the suite of VCE VET programs. The VCAA explain that a pre-apprenticeship program is a nationally recognized qualification that may provide a reduction in the nominal duration of the apprenticeship training contract in the same industry area. These training programs prepare the student for entry into an apprenticeship by equipping the student with foundation knowledge and skills. Currently there are a number of VCE VET programs that are endorsed as pre-apprenticeships. The VCE VET programs in Automotive, Engineering Technology, Furnishing, Building and Construction, Printing and Graphic Arts, and Community Services are all endorsed as pre-apprenticeships (and give dual recognition for a corresponding Certificate 11 Pre-Apprenticeship qualification).

School-Based New Apprenticeships (SBAs)
A school-based new apprenticeship (SBA) is when a school student undertakes an apprenticeship or traineeship on a part time basis during normal school hours. Any school student doing an SBA must be 15 years or more. DEST national guidelines recommend the duration for an SBA to be 200 days, the equivalent of five days a week for 40 weeks; this includes both the employment and training components in total. It is also suggested that OH&S training needs to occur early on in the training. There are twelve SBAs supported and promoted centrally by the VCAA but many more are possible. Other possibilities exist such as, enterprise-based apprenticeships and traineeships through such industries as fast food and major retail stores where many senior school students are employed part time and out of school hours. Some cross recognition is also possible for SBAs back into VCE VET programs.

Other VET programs
Block credit recognition arrangements are also available for any other units or modules undertaken from other VET certificates. For VCAL this includes all Certificate 1 and above programs. For VCE, students must be enrolled in VCE and recognition can be made of any Certificate 11 and above which are not part of the suites of VCE VET or SBA programs. A formula is applied to determine the credit which is based on nominal hours of training completed and the AQF level of the units of competencies. For example, a student who is enrolled in VCE and who undertakes 220 hours of the Certificate 11 in Health Support Services is eligible for two units at Unit 1-2. Likewise, a student who completes 230 hours in a Certificate III in E-Business in units that are identifiable as being at AQF level 3 means that the student is eligible for recognition for a Unit 3-4 sequence.

Scored Assessment in VCE VET programs

VET assessment in Australia has traditionally been competency-based. Where competency is defined as being the designated standard of what is considered the acceptable and expected standard or ability in the workplace. Mostly, competency-based assessment has consisted of a binary designation of either competent, or not yet competent. However the binary designations disadvantage any student who is attempting to compete with others for a tertiary ranking for entry to a university. In contrast to competency-based assessment, university entry has traditionally been based on rankings derived from scores obtained through scored assessment. However, practitioners, researchers and policy writers alike have advocated for, raising the status of VET programs and genuinely integrating VET into the mainstream, thereby making VET an equitable and valuable option for all students. Subsequently, in an effort to enhance the status of VET programs and make them more equitable, more acceptable and appealing to a broader cohort of secondary school students, an approach needed to be developed that would allow for scored assessment within VET programs. Much effort has been expended on developing an approach, that on the face of it reconciles and integrates these two seemingly contradictory purposes and approaches to assessment.

Consequently, an approach to assessment is being used that can ascertain competency and yet differentiate, score and rank student achievements in the VCE for university entrance via the ENTER score. This approach has been dubbed by some working on this issue as 'developing competence and quality'. Quality in this sense refers to differentiation of and within performance (Griffin & Gillis 2001; Griffin, Gillis & Calvitto 2004). Clearly, for equity reasons, it is desirable that all Unit 3 -4 sequences in the VCE be comparable. However for VET programs this occurs in conjunction with the process of ascertaining competency and through the overlaying of a scoring regime.

The VCAA publication, *Support Advice for Assessors in VCE VET Programs* explains what the VCAA describe as the three phases of the scored assessment process. They caution that this document needs to be read in conjunction with the relevant training package or curriculum document, the purchasing guide, and the VCE VET assessment guide for each program. The general idea though, is to group units of competency together and develop a set of two or three different types of 'rich tasks' that can be assessed using different but complimentary forms of evidence. The VCAA suggests that scored assessment be done using the following three phase process.

Phase 1: The Assessment Plan
This first phase is divided into four sub-stages. First, the advice is to begin by grouping the units of competence into either three or four batches. The second step is to consider the various components of each unit of competence, the title, the elements, the performance criteria, the range statements and the evidence guide for the purposes of identifying and considering what constitutes appropriate, sufficient and valid evidence for the assessment of the individual, and the grouped, units of competency. Third, selection is made from the four designated task types. The task type appropriate for producing and gathering the required evidence is assigned for the batched units being assessed. The four task types are work performance, work

project, work product and portfolio. These types have been selected because they were found to be the most utilized task types for assessing within VET programs. Only a maximum of two of the tasks can be of the same type. The fourth sub-stage is to develop and write up an assessment plan. A pro-forma is provided in each VCE VET Assessment guide mirrors the VASS software used for reporting. Each task type has five identified scoring criteria. The final stage in this first phase is to review the links between the evidence for each unit of competence and the scoring criteria for the task type selected. All the units of competency in the Unit 3-4 sequence must be assigned to one of the tasks.

Phase 2: Design the assessment task
This phase is divided into three sub-stages. The first is to design the task within the design rules of the task types. Each task type has its own set of design rules. The assessment for a **work performance** needs to include observation of the student's performance through clearly defined activities in a workplace or appropriate simulated workplace environment. Assessment is to be conducted, in two different contexts. In conjunction with, and to compliment the observations there is also a need for students to show understanding of underpinning knowledge through their responses to supporting oral and written questions. The VCAA suggests eleven design rules to be considered for the design of the work performance category of tasks. For 'work performance' tasks there are five scoring criteria. It is through these criteria where the differentiation of quality of performance is made and appropriate scores assigned. Five levels of performance are distinguished. The scoring criteria for the work performance task type are the application of underpinning knowledge; communication, language and interpersonal skills; techniques and processes; work organization and supervision and performance of work tasks.

The **work project** task type can involve an investigation of work procedures and operations; and/or a planning exercise; a problem solving exercise and/or a research exercise. There are ten design rules for this task type and five scoring criteria listed in the VCAA checklist for this task type. The scoring criteria are application of underpinning knowledge; expressing ideas and information; planning, organizing and implementation; collecting and analysing ideas and information; and coherence and coverage (VCAA 2007, p.52).

The **product** task type comprises of a design and produce task and might include an event, an object, or a visual presentation. This task requires a plan, the production of an object or event, and a series of questions regarding the planning and production and problem solving processes used. This task type has eleven design rules and five scoring criteria. The scoring criteria for product tasks are application of underpinning knowledge; planning, organization and implementation; problem solving; evaluation of product against plan or intended outcome and techniques and processes.

The **portfolio** task type may be selected from, practical exercises and activities; written or oral short answers; documentation of a work performance; visual display; topic tests; logbooks/journal/diary; and /or workbooks. The portfolio is to include an index indicating which evidence relates to the appropriate units. The VCAA provides nine design rules to consider on their checklist leading to five scoring criteria. These criteria are application of underpinning knowledge; planning and organization; expressing ideas and information; content; and independence.

To ensure the collection of a range of different forms of evidence, at least two different task types need to be used. In most cases, with the exception of Dance (50:50), the eventual scores for the tasks make up two thirds (66%) of the final score and 34% is still derived from an externally set examination Once the task has been designed it should be reviewed using the VCAA checklist of the design rules and scoring criteria. Explicit links need to be identified between the scoring criteria for the task type and the industry specific evidence that is gathered from each of the units of competence in the grouping of units. Finally, as part of the overall assessment processes, the tasks must be validated by the certifying RTO. In summary, this phase involves designing the task within the rules of the task types, and linking the task to the scoring criteria, and linking both of these to the elements, performance criteria and the evidence guides of the units.

Phase 3: Conduct the assessment
In this third phase, the evidence needs to be collected and the assessment decisions made. The tasks are designed to ensure that both assessment purposes can be met; specificallythe judgment of the achievement of competence and the assessment of the student's level of performance for the Unit 3-4 sequence of the program. In this way the task is used to determine competence and to judge the quality of performance. To assist this decision, generic scoring criteria or a contextualization of them is used. The assessment result is recorded. Finally, the assessor can reflect on the design of the rich task and decide whether this was the most appropriate type, whether the evidence was provided as expected and on how this could be improved in subsequent assessment events.

This process is reiterated in summary to teachers in each of the various assessment guides. For example, the study design for VCE VET Information Technology provides an eight step linear flow chart for the assessment process (VCAA 2007b: 5). These are listed as,
1. Develop the assessment plan by assigning units of competence to tasks
2. Design the specific assessment task
3. Explain the assessment task to the student and provide information
4. Organize the time, resources and context for the assessment
5. Conduct the assessment and record the outcome
6. Provide feedback to the student
7. Document and retain all evidence used in the assessment
8. Complete all VCAA documentation and recording procedures.

Going national with scored assessment

Each state and territory in Australia has separate and different curriculum and assessment approaches to senior secondary schooling. The ENTER score, derived from these different approaches, provides a national equivalence ranking. This means that various processes and methods for providing scored assessment are in place. This makes the scoring of assessment in VET programs a national issue. Equitable approaches to the ranking of VET students for university entry are at stake. Consequently, a recent project has been conducted that piloted scored assessment in VET programs in 50 colleges across all of the different school systems in all of Australian states and territories. The theoretical rationalizations and approach has

been published by Griffin, Gillis & Calvitto (2007). In short, these researchers developed rubrics depicting sets of quality criteria with assigned scores to correspond with each of the performance criteria in each unit of competency considered in the pilot programs. Importantly, they used stakeholder representatives from industry to develop the industry specific quality criteria.

Discussion

Research shows that young people who stay on longer at secondary school and complete Year 12 on average gain substantial insulation against unemployment. However in order to retain young people at school, the schools have needed to improve how they engage students and how they encourage and support them to stay on and complete the higher levels of secondary school. In terms of educational programs, the schools have needed to provide appropriate programs for a broader range and more diverse cohort of students beyond the more academic students looking to go on to university and into the professions. Vocational programs are filling this void and being used as the appropriate course of study for what have become the other two thirds of students who are not necessarily looking to, and don't, enter university courses straight from school.

Approximately one third of senior secondary students go onto university from school, but two thirds do not. On equity grounds, our schools don't want to overtly stream students. This would be a return to the split system of secondary schools. Rather schools want to provide, and be seen to be providing, appropriate and desired options and pathways. To be equitable, these options need to be comparable in as many ways as practicable. Hence, the call to raise the status of VET programs and to make VET programs part of the mainstream - not some lesser programming option for the less capable, non-academic, 'like to work with their hands' kind of students.

Hand in hand with providing choice and options, goes the provision of pathways. All the subjects undertaken by secondary students need to provide similar and comparable outcomes and lead to worthwhile options and pathways. Students cannot be disadvantaged by taking the vocational programs and then not be able to gain an ENTER score because of this choice. This would cut off the pathway and option of higher education to do otherwise would be to disadvantage the students doing vocational programs and identify them as doing a program of lesser worth. Developing scored assessment to supplement the binary assessment decision of competent or not yet competent as is the norm within the mainstream VET sector, is the main strategy to achieve comparability, at least in terms of providing ENTER ranking scores.

The reports of the various committees chaired by Blackburn, Finn, Carmichael, Deveson and Kirby demonstrate that governments of all persuasions and at both state and federal levels support these strategies and are developing policies and practices to bring this to fruition. In 1993, it was Jeff Kennett as the Victorian premier who repackaged the pathway work of the previous state labor government and announced it as their own. It was from this that dual recognition was approved and became possible for VET subjects to be recognized within the VCE.

Conclusion

The strategies of dual recognition and scored assessment represent a strategic pragmatism. The power of the universities to capture the curriculum of the senior secondary schools not only remains unchallenged but is also extended to vocational programs. The positive side of this is that effort is made to not disadvantage the students – they are retained to complete secondary school through engagement in appropriate programs and they get access to an ENTER score. However research and data is needed that will provide insight into the extent to which scored VET programs are actually contributing to access into higher education.

On the quality front, there are fundamental questions about the quality of the experience of doing VET in schools as opposed to participation within mainstream VET providers. Questions about nominal hours, currency of industrial experience, and access to industrial materials, processes and equipment lead the way in this regard. On the other hand, in terms of the quality, VET in schools programs has been 'recognized internationally as a model of good practice'. These claims are founded on such aspects as cooperative arrangements amongst clusters of schools and innovative delivery.

In summary, scored assessment stands to compliment the criterion based format of competency-based assessment in an effort to determine both competency, and quality of performance. Policies, processes and operational mechanisms put in place as part of the strategic compromise between competing interests seek to provide a balance between both equity and quality. These complex policies, processes and operational mechanisms are at once, strategic, and pragmatic, but also appear to some as problematic. This search for balance between equity and quality is a manifestation of the deeper and longer running equilibrium sought for between the traditions of academic programs and those of the more technical and vocational programs. It may be possible to describe the compromise and balance being achieved through these policies and procedures by re-using the same words that Connell (1985) used to describe the work of Jean Blackburn some twenty odd years ago – 'a mixture of conservativism, innovation and utility'.

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