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## FROM THE PRESIDENT

**Robin Shreeve**
**President, AVETRA**

Hi all

Colleagues – especially those with an interest in careers education – may be interested in the terms of reference for the review of the NSW VET sector to be led by Peter Shergold and David Gonski. It refers to issues of falling participation rates; weak course completion rates and the need for better information to help people transition into careers or jobs where there are skills shortages.

Just a personal view. In around 2008 Professor Sue Richardson and colleagues at Flinders University wrote a paper for the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) which pointed out that professional jobs are dominated by those with university qualifications; trade jobs by those with VET qualifications; supervisory jobs shared by those with University or VET qualifications and operative jobs largely held by people without post-compulsory qualifications. Some might say 'a blinding flash of the obvious'. But we seem to have ignored the implications.

> "It seems that the size, growth or decline of the different sectors of education is determined by the structure of the labour market."

It seems that the size, growth or decline of the different sectors of education is determined by the structure of the labour market. Professional and managerial job numbers are growing, although the labour market modelling I have been involved with in my time at the Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency and with various infrastructure projects since, has forecast shortages in some trade occupations. These predicted shortages were not as severe as shortages in STEM-related professional jobs in areas like engineering, this partly due to the automation of some trade tasks. So, one wonders whether increasing the promotion of VET will significantly drive up student numbers.

I also wonder if we take sufficient note of the fact that where only around 10% of students in VET are full time, over 70% of students in university are full time. Data from the NCVER also indicates that nearly 50% of VET students are not following a whole course; rather they are doing single or groups of subjects. Does this mean that the VET sector, more so than the university sector, is engaged in upskilling existing workers for particular tasks rather than in preparing students for careers? Both sectors do both – but the proportions may be radically different.

You can read the **Review on the NSW vocational education and training sector** here.

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# Bridging the gap: an investigation into developing strategies to improve student engagement, retention and learning outcomes

**By Clint van der Bergh, Goulburn Ovens Institute of TAFE (GOTAFE)**

**Karen Seccombe, Universal College of Learning (UCOL)**

Student engagement and achievement in their chosen Vocational Education and Training (VET) program remains a key focus for VET institutions. Engagement directly affects student retention and increases their achievement. There is, therefore, a balanced tension between engagement, retention and achievement, and strategies to support students should always consider these three aspects and the interaction between them (Forbes et al., 2019). Engagement in the learning process starts with the manner and style in which the institution chooses to communicate with prospective students and continue to do so throughout the student learning journey. The institution's communication style needs to appeal to all student demographics and be social and encouraging by nature. This directly influences the student's perception of their probable progress in the program, their perceived self-efficacy, and self-belief in their motivation and competence (Zepke & Leach, 2010) and therefore directly impacts their attendance (Van gent 2014). Communication with prospective and enrolled students needs to be a dialogue where information is shared with the student but vital information is also obtained from the student, particularly information that would have direct relevance to determining their likely engagement, learning ability and achievement.

Student conceptions of learning, motivations for study, regulation strategies, and cognitive processing strategies affect their success (Vermunt, Donche, & Be, 2017). While academic secondary school grades are not consistent predictors of tertiary performance, they do provide important measures of information relevant to ensuring a student commences their programme of study at the same level of foundational knowledge as that of their peers (Mckenzie & Schweitzer). The ease of entry into the tertiary environment and pre-existing study skills have been found to affect academic performance (Mckenzie & Schweitzer, 2001). Inadequate levels of advice, guidance and support, and uncertainty around the required levels of academic and practical preparedness during the enrolment and admission process are a barrier for students, particularly indigenous students, and have an impact on feelings of competence and ability (Chittick, 2017). When looking into intervention strategies, it is important to ensure that measures are in place to increase a student's level of confidence in achievement, as a confident student is more engaged in their learning (Van Gent, 2014). Engaged students have higher levels of attendance and higher levels of successful completions.

Clarity in allocation of the responsibility the institution has in providing support services for their students, and in turn what is expected of their students, is essential in addressing learning development strategies (ATLAANZ Vol 9, 2013). Support services should be clear and communicated to students and staff prior to, and during, the admission process. Increasingly high volumes of students accessing support services, decreased income due to the decline in enrolments, and no substantive increase in funding, leaves VET institutions with no option other than redesigning their support strategies to meet demands. While it is possible to identify general guidelines to help institutions and teachers improve student retention and achievement, it is also clear from the data that individual institutions face specific retention issues (Fishman, Ludgate, & Tutak, 2017). It is, therefore, essential that each institution identifies and acts on its unique retention issues in addition to using general guidelines for improving retention (Zepke et al., 2005). Whatever strategies are developed to improve student learning outcomes, measures need to move from a traditional deficit approach (Van Gent, 2014) for supporting and developing students.

## Intervention strategies

### Bridging the transition gap

Students enrolling into VET institutions have transition requirements relative to their previous learning experiences. Institutions should recognise these experiences and respond accordingly to ensure the expectations of both the institution's teaching and learning outcomes as well as those of the students are better aligned. Transitioning students are likely to experience a discrepancy between their subjective expectations of and objective realities at the institution (Sotardi & Friesen, 2017). A difficult transition can introduce serious risks to not only academic performance but also mental health and personal wellbeing (Sotardi & Brig, 2018).

The start of a student's transition into the institution commences with the provision of advice, guidance and support provided to the student during the enrolment process and commencement of their study program. Chittick (2017) observes that inadequate levels of support, together with uncertainty around the levels of academic preparedness during the enrolment and admission process, have a direct impact on feelings of competence and ability. The outcome of which is an almost immediate decline in engagement as students in this position are deterred from their learning.

In 2018, 63% of The Goulburn Ovens Institute of TAFE's (GOTAFE) student population were aged 20 years old and older. 5.7% of all enrolled students in the same year had completed Year 8 or below at secondary school, 19% with Year 9 or equivalent, 28.6% with Year 10, 21.7% with Year 11 and 25.1% with Year 12. A total of 4.52% of the total enrolled students at GOTAFE identified as indigenous Australians. This data strongly suggests that transition programs are important as most of the older student population had not engaged in education or formal training for at least two years prior to enrolling, therefore returning to a formal learning environment may require transition and development support. Additionally, minority student populations' viz. indigenous students and students from Pacific Island nations, recent immigrants and refugees, also have significant cultural transition requirements. The advantages of institutions focusing on catering to the requirements for these minority and diverse student populations have been found to improve the retention for all student population groups (Prebble, Hargreaves, Leach et

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al, 2004). Transition strategies would do well in promoting academic services and achievement workshops and study groups which may shift student thinking around study life and the transition into improving retention (McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2001).

Through interviewing teaching staff at GOTAFE, it was clear all agree that student interview processes that work need to be embedded in the admission process with articulate questioning to assess gaps in the prospective student's foundation skills and learning ability. Most felt that it was important to effectively identify competencies and gaps in adult students who do not have Victoria Certificate of Education (VCE) results, which has shown to impact the student from the beginning of the program.

An extended induction process (Crosling, Thomas & Heagney, 2008) and the provision of pre-entry strategies, competency based student program (Barth, Godemann, Reickmann & Stoltenberg, 2007), scaffolding of transferable study skills (Sotardi & Friesen, 2017), and supplemental instruction (Prebble & Hargraves, 2004) are all beneficial in transitioning and supporting students in a new learning environment.

## Bridging the engagement gap

The factors affecting student engagement measured through attendance are complex and varied. For the purposes of this investigation, student attendance is approached as a means of identifying their ability to participate effectively in their learning. Self-efficacy and self-belief impact on motivation (Zepke & Leach, 2010) and attendance (Van Gent, 2014) therefore it is important to include these in a strategy targeted at improving student attendance. A holistic and contextual understanding of issues preventing attendance are needed (Te Atakura, 2018). Monitoring and responding to attendance in the first three to four weeks of a student's study program may provide early warning signs that can easily be identified and addressed (Van Gent, 2014). The teaching staff interviewed had noticed a distinct effect on student motivation impacted by instances of failure during the learning journey, and the student's ability to recover from these setbacks. This was evident from the earliest formative assessment, and it is suggested that there needs to be a shift on the sense of shame and academic incompetency around failure in order to positively impact attendance and engagement.

In 2015 UCOL established a small team of Engagement Coordinators in targeted programs between Levels 2 and 4, with the primary focus on monitoring and increasing student engagement through attendance monitoring activities. A trialed program was reviewed between 2017 and 2018 in the New Zealand Certificate in Construction Trade Skills (Carpentry), a level 3 program. Reviewing previous cohorts, the program generally had an enrolment of an average of 40 Equivalent Full-Time Students (EFTS) with an attrition rate of 8-9 EFTS (approx. 20%). The pilot trial using an Engagement Coordinator service resulted in 2 non-engaged students (representing a negative outcome) for the program, 5 students leaving to enter employment where they will complete their qualification through an apprenticeship program (representing a positive outcome), and the remaining students completing the program. The result was a net change of a four-fold decrease in attrition resulting in only a 5% negative outcome.

## Bridging the knowledge and skills gap

Given the demographic of the enrolled students identified for this investigation, it is noticeably clear that not all students commence their study program with the same base knowledge required. To identify strategies to address these gaps, VET institutions need to develop predictors of academic performance and indicators should include academic, cognitive, demographic and psychosocial information of enrolled students (McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2001). Academic secondary school grades and the ease of entry into the tertiary environment and pre-existing study skills have been found to affect academic performance (McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2001).

In an investigation conducted on a program leading to the Diploma in Engineering, it was found that implementing predictive analytics and an early intervention program had a direct effect on academic performance, engagement and progression rates (Van der Bergh, Seccombe 2018). The entry criteria for this program included National Certificate in Educational Achievement Level 2 (NCEA), a Year 11 Australian equivalent, and a minimum total of 48 Credits at Level 2 in four subjects, including at least 12 Credits in Mathematics (preferably achievement standards in Algebra, Calculus or Trigonometry), or equivalent qualifications (e.g. International Baccalaureate or Cambridge), or equivalent credits from appropriate trades training and/or demonstrated skills and experience. For the 2018 enrolled student cohort, 60% were aged 20 years old and older, 53% had NCEA Level 2, 20% had NCEA Level 1, 20% NCEA Level 3 and only 7% had NCEA level 3 with University Entrance. Of the students enrolled into the first year mathematics course of this program, only 40% passed the examination for this course in the first attempt. A tutorial group was set up to provide additional support at the same level as the Level 4 mathematics course designed as a pre-entry course to ensure students have the underpinning knowledge and skills. The tutorial group was designed as an early intervention program to address academic and transition into tertiary deficits. The students who did not pass the first attempt at the examination attended the tutorial group. The students who attempted the second examination all showed an average 57% increase in actual result scoring. The additional passes brought the class average successful completion up by 20% to 70% successful completion rate: higher than the national average.

This trial suggests that the increase in successful completions is evident when ensuring a pre-entry program addressing skills and knowledge gaps are bridged. Faculty staff identified concerns on how the gaps of students who do not meet all the entry criteria are addressed. It was suggested that intervention strategies include a staircase support structure in order to give upfront strategies to overcome barriers (Van der Bergh, Seccombe 2018).

# Methodology

This study chose a qualitative approach specifically as it would answer the question, 'to what extent, if any, do agentic student service models affect student engagement, retention and achievement in the VET sector?' Additionally, this study will supplement previous quantitative studies in the Learning Advisory research literature. Two primary databases were included for the current literature search: ERIC and EBSCO, and a general search on the World Wide Web was also included.

Teaching staff were interviewed (n26) to gauge their perspectives on the

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impacts on students in the classroom. Each teaching staff member was given the same set of questions (Appendix A) and the responses were recorded before being coded to one of the three initiatives discussed in this investigation. The outcome did not identify one particular intervention above the other and leant support for the tensions each has on the other.

The approach to applying theories to practice in this investigation meant that some quantitative data relating to the VET sector and trialed initiatives are included. A limitation to this methodology is the lack of a longitudinal study to effectively measure the repeated outcomes of intervention strategies and their long-term value in a quantitative study, and a relatively small sample size.

## Conclusions and findings

The findings of this investigation revealed that prospective and admitted students should be engaged with early intervention in the student lifecycle, both prior to and on admission, to ascertain both expectations and development requirements. While this appears to already be a process in place in some priority programs, there is no formal structure to ensuring effective dialogue is had to obtain sufficient information from students to determine holistic support needs. Students who commence their program with significant learning gaps and few strategies to address these, disengage from their learning more readily and result in an unsuccessful outcome. The investigation also found that teaching staff have been attempting various measures to attend to critical issues within their classroom environment. However, this was not systemic nor was there a comprehensive institutional approach. Attendance is a major contributor to not only learning but developing successfully through the learning process, therefore, strategies to enhance attendance that also become the triage point for students requiring support are essential. Building in knowledge milestones (ATLAANZ Vol 9, 2013) through early intervention programs designed to scaffold foundation skills and knowledge, increases in self-efficacy and confidence in learning, and teaching problem solving skills in these programs improves retention (Prebble, Hargreaves, Leach, et al, 2004). There is clear evidence that all three strategies discussed in this investigation contribute to and enact on each other.

The strategies and follow-ups that suggest significant improvements are:

1. Pre-entry transition programs preparing students for life in tertiary or further study would increase the successful transition of older student populations and those entrants who have not been in formal education or training for at least two years prior to enrolment. These programs should be holistic in nature, informed through staff reflection, and include psychosocial as well as learning and academic development transitions.
2. Using predictive modelling, offer learning and development courses that are short, targeted and concise to benefit students who do not have the underpinning knowledge or skill to commence their program on the same level as that of their peers. These students may well have met the entry criteria, however, require specific development and learning capabilities.
3. Engage students in attendance initiatives to improve not only the learning experience, but also increase student engagement in their learning. Attendance is more often than not a symptom of learning deficits or a misalignment in expectations and ability.
4. Closely monitor the initiatives through a comprehensive learner analytics system allowing for agility in change management and flexible approaches to services.
5. Using a longitudinal study, reflect on the practices and ascertain the relevance of efforts.

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## Appendix A: Questions used in the study

Questions for faculty teaching staff relating to their perception of student cognitive and academic competences are listed below. For the purposes of this questionnaire, cognitive and academic competence is defined as multidimensional construct composed of the skills, attitudes, and behaviors of a learner that contribute to academic success in the classroom.

**1:** Which cognitive and academic competencies would be useful for your students to have before starting their program?

**2:** What gaps in these competencies are you identifying on entry?

**3:** How are questions being asked in the pre-entry conversations/ interviews that are being used to address the identified gaps?

**4:** What information is not coming through in the conversations/ interviews that needs to be?

**5:** How are identified gaps communicated with the student pre-entry?

**6:** What support is currently offered to students to address these gaps before they start their program?

**7:** Where do you feel the institution is doing well/letting down students in the entry process?

**8:** What academic support or direct teaching of these competencies would be useful for students pre-entry?

**9:** How could you see this happening? ■

# Young futures: Education, training and employment decision-making in non-metropolitan areas

**Erica Smith and Annette Foley, Federation University, with acknowledgements to Tim Harrison, Helen Weadon and Marlon Gonsalves**

This study examined the processes that young people in rural, regional and peri-urban areas go through as they make choices about their post-school trajectories, and set out to develop good practice models for communities, employers and education providers to support them.

The project set out to answer the following questions:

1. How do young people navigate decisions related to post-school education, training and work and what decisions do they make?
2. Who and what are the influencers and how do they affect the decisions?
3. What could change to provide better post-school outcomes for a larger proportion of young people?

## Rationale

Young people in regional, rural and peri-urban communities face particular challenges in imagining and navigating their post-school futures. In particular geographical areas, choices may be constrained by economic dislocation, distance, and community or cultural issues. These locational factors may be compounded by individual disadvantage. Regional/rural communities also suffer if they are not fully utilising the considerable resource available in their young people. While there has been other research into young people's transition from school in rural and regional areas, both in Australia and overseas, the project is believed to be the first to specifically examine peri-urban areas. As the population of Victoria continues to grow, these areas will continue to be of vital importance.

## Methodology summary

The research was carried out in six communities across the State of Victoria, during the third quarter of 2018 and the first half of 2019. The locations were determined in conjunction with the Victorian Department of Education and Training. Three were rural/regional towns, each being two to three hours' drive from Melbourne; three were peri-urban areas on the outskirts of Melbourne, two with rapidly growing populations with high migrant diversity, and one a rural town with an industrial history just outside the city boundaries.

- Rural/regional towns: Horsham, Sale, Shepparton.
- Peri-urban sites: Berwick, Hastings, Werribee.

Only one location had higher than the Victorian average household income; and four were below the State average for progression of school-leavers to further or higher education.

In total, 212 people participated in the research, including 112 young people. The contribution of all participants is deeply appreciated. This is a significant number of participants, but represents a small number compared with relevant populations in Victoria. However, trustworthiness of the findings is increased by the multi-site nature of the research, multiple triangulations among different participant groups and triangulation against On Track reports.

At each site, three phases of qualitative research were undertaken; and a fourth phase of the project was a desk analysis of publicly-available 'On Track' statistical reports. The four phases were:

1. **58 interviews with community stakeholders** who worked with young people aged 15-24, an average of 9.5 per site. Significant stakeholders were selected according to a defined protocol. These included organisations working with young people, including intermediary apprenticeship providers, local and nearby higher and further education providers, employers of young people, and Aboriginal and/or migrant organisations.
2. **Interviews and focus groups at two schools** at each site. At all schools, the Principal or delegate and at least one careers staff member were interviewed, a total of 32 interviews.

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At the government schools, separate focus groups of Year 11 and Year 12 were held, a total of 90 students. Each student also completed a pre-focus group 'snapshot survey' of demographic and other details, and intended post-school destinations.

3. **Interviews with 32 young people**, who had left school in 2017, in their home town location, at university or Technical and Further Education (TAFE), or by phone; in small groups or individually. These young people were accessed with the help of local stakeholders and, in some cases, education providers at the education institutions which the young people were attending. As with Phase 2, each young person also completed pre-focus group/interview 'snapshot survey', this time also including intended and actual post-school destinations.
4. **Analysis** of the relevant Victorian Government 'On Track' survey reports for 2018, to garner further information and also to triangulate the qualitative findings. The publicly available reports for the relevant local government areas were analysed for key variables, including destinations and views about career advice received at school.

Separate case studies were written for each site, synthesising the data from each of phases 1 and 2 and 3, to aid analysis. These were then combined into 'compound' case studies for each site.

For the final analysis, syntheses of each of the three fieldwork phases and the On Track data were combined in a short overview, and implications for each of the following stakeholder groups were drawn out: Policy-makers, schools, community organisations, tertiary providers, and young people and their families. The findings are drawn from the views of all participants, not just young people's.

**"While a great deal of information is available to young people, in school or from external sources, they do not find the way in which it is presented particularly useful."**

## Key findings of the project, derived from all phases of the research

1. Most young people experience considerable stress when deciding what to do after school, generally at the same time as studying hard for good Year 12 results. Decisions made under stress may be sub-optimal, and hence more reassurance about fallback choices and alternative outcomes needs to be provided.
2. A proportion of young people are clear from a young age what they want to do, those plans generally being associated with an occupation, or more broadly an industry; and sometimes with going to university or entering 'a trade' as non-specific destinations. These decisions are quite often gendered.
3. Parents are the most common influences on young people's decisions, often with contributions from other family members. These may involve high or low aspirations, gendered expectations, or may result more generally from family backgrounds in terms of socio-economic status, or employment and/or educational histories.
4. Options are narrower for young people in rural/regional locations, because of the financial implications of moving away, and those in peri-urban areas may also experience transport disadvantage. Where the desired destination is not easily accessible, extra effort and expense is incurred by the young people and/or their families. Young people and those who work with them may feel aggrieved about this.
5. Young people, especially males, displaying an interest in a career in trades are steered into VCAL and sometimes to early school-leaving, sometimes in apprenticeships; they may experience regret not to have completed school.
6. Gap years are a common response to financial issues and for a decision-making 'buffer'. Gap years may be intended, a back-up plan, or unintended. Considerable change may occur between the first-year out and second-year out.
7. The most useful careers advice to young people is personal time with a trusted adviser at school. They wish to retain this source of advice after leaving school, particularly at the time at which the ATAR results are issued, and during the first-year out when changes in circumstances often occur.
8. Part-time jobs while studying are fundamental parts of young people's lives, and often their school-days jobs continue well into their post-school careers. Little value is ascribed to these jobs by key players.
9. While a great deal of information is available to young people, in school or from external sources, they do not find the way in which it is presented particularly useful. External services are piecemeal, not always trusted, and not 'joined up.' First-hand information about study and jobs may be limited by distance or by lack of work experience opportunities.
10. Young people display considerable resourcefulness, resilience and responsibility in their planning and in their activities after leaving school.

## What could change to provide better post-school outcomes for more young people?

Suggestions derived from the interviews may be summarised as:

- Better and more 'joined-up' careers advice; better and more 'joined-up' support services;
- More resourcing of careers advice in schools, particularly access to individualised advice;
- More liaison between schools and employers, including but not confined to, more work experience opportunities;
- Specifically, more appreciation of the role of the employers who give jobs to young people while studying, and validation of the work that young people do in these jobs;

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- More focus on locational disadvantage, with practical measures to overcome it, rather than having young people put all the work in to combat the associated challenges;
- Harness local individuals and institutions who are able to assist in overcoming challenges in particular locations;
- Educate and support parents and grandparents from a wide range of backgrounds to assist young people;
- Provide careers advice after school-leaving, preferably from school careers staff;
- Take the stress out of Year 12; young people need a Plan B and even C;
- Avoid channeling young people into options that close off future pathways;
- Recognise and normalise all of the post-school pathways that occur;
- Exercise caution in out-sourcing employment services and apprenticeship intermediary services to for-profit companies, or at least institute additional monitoring activities.

The report concludes with a series of recommendations, derived from the key findings and the participant suggestions, for the following stakeholder groups: schools, community organisations including employers, tertiary education providers, young people and their families, and governments. It should be noted that much of the research took place before the new approach to careers education in Victorian schools began to be implemented, which is addressing some of the issues that the project found. ■

Link to report from which the summary is reproduced: https://federation.edu.au/schools/school-of-education/research/research-groups/rave-researching-adult-and-vocational-education

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# Online delivery of VET qualifications: current use and outcomes

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Online learning is well entrenched in Australian education, including in the vocational education and training (VET) sector. However, since the VET sector is underpinned by a competency-based training system, it may experience unique challenges in the use of online learning as a delivery mode. The integrity and ultimate success of the sector is based on students demonstrating they are competent in skills that can be transferred directly to the workplace, raising questions about how suitable online learning might be for VET, especially for those courses focused on practical or physical activities.

While the use of online learning has increased in all education sectors internationally and in Australia, there is a lack of evidence for how much is currently delivered online in Australian VET which this report seeks to fill. A particular focus are fully online courses where an entire qualification is completed online. In addition to the extent of full online qualification delivery, this report gives a better understanding of whether online qualifications provide students with the same experience and outcomes as do face-to-face courses. This study also identifies the elements that constitute good online delivery.

To get a picture of the levels of VET delivered online (defined as predominantly electronic-based in the National VET Provider Collection) over time, it is necessary to look at government-funded training since total VET activity has only been collected since 2014. Over time, for individual VET subjects, the extent of online delivery roughly doubled between 2010 and 2017 (from 6% to 13%).

While these figures demonstrate an increase in the online delivery of VET at the subject level, the key interest to this project is the online delivery of entire qualifications. For full qualifications (analysed for 2015—17), government-funded online delivery slightly increased as a proportion of all delivery, from around 5% to over 7%. However, for total VET activity, which includes fee-for-service and government-funded training, the online delivery of full qualifications decreased from around 10% of all delivery in 2015 to 8.6% in 2017. Hence, the growth in online learning for full qualifications appears to have slowed in recent years, largely due to a dramatic decrease in commencements for online fee-for-service diploma or higher qualifications over that three-year period, which may be associated with changes to the VET FEE-HELP scheme which focussed on higher qualification levels.

While the proportion of full VET qualifications conducted online appears relatively small, it is not insignificant. This is particularly true in New South Wales and Queensland, where more than 10% of delivery is conducted online. It is therefore important to understand how it is delivered and how the outcomes for students compare with other, more traditional, forms of delivery.

Teachers and trainers, when interviewed, indicated that online learning, like any form of learning, does not suit every individual or situation. It is inherently different from other delivery modes and comes with its own advantages and disadvantages. The disadvantages — such as feeling isolated, the requirement for high levels of self-discipline, or an incompatible learning style — may mean that some students find it more difficult to complete the training, or do not enjoy it. This mismatch for some individuals may partly be reflected in the higher subject withdrawal rates and lower course completion rates seen in online delivery.

Withdrawal rates were around 10% higher for online subjects and completion rates for courses delivered entirely online around 10% lower in 2016. Higher subject withdrawals and lower course completions may be due to a variety of reasons, such as the delivery mode not suiting the student, the student's inability to secure a work placement (if required), or the student not having the necessary tools or technology to participate in the course (for example, access to a computer, specific software or adequate internet access). Poor-quality delivery may also lead to higher subject withdrawals and lower course completions, but this analysis cannot differentiate between this and other non-quality related reasons.

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For those students who do complete online qualifications, satisfaction measures are lower for graduates of courses delivered online, although still relatively high. Qualifications in six different subject areas were also examined. Across many of these courses, graduates of online courses were less satisfied with the teaching although were often more likely to report they had achieved their main reason for doing the training. Across these six subject areas, the greatest number of differences in student satisfaction measures were noted in two fitness qualifications, where almost all satisfaction measures were lower for the courses delivered online. Notably, of the individual qualifications investigated, the fitness qualifications are those where training and assessment involve the most physical activity and, hence, may be less compatible with delivery in a fully online environment. It is important to note that, unlike for some of the community services qualifications (that are also quite practical in comparison to the other qualifications examined), work placement is only suggested, and not required, for these fitness qualifications. This leads to a further question of whether there is any difference in student satisfaction with fitness qualifications that include a work placement compared with those that do not. However, this cannot be determined from this analysis.

Employment outcomes for students who graduated from online courses are mostly similar to, or slightly higher than, those for courses delivered via other modes. These positive outcomes can be viewed as offsetting some of the more subjective satisfaction measures which were already quite mixed. Hence the evidence suggests that while students are less likely to complete an online qualification, if they do, their employment outcomes are comparable with graduates of non-online courses.

These course completion rates, student satisfaction measures and employment outcomes need to be considered in the light of the data limitations. The analysis of the National VET Provider Collection is limited by the proxy used for 'online delivery'; defined as delivery predominantly electronic-based. Moreover, this characteristic is collected at the subject level, with sophisticated matching techniques required to construct program-level data, a further limitation. Similarly, for the National Student Outcomes Survey, the analysis

**"The evidence suggests that while students are less likely to complete an online qualification, if they do, their employment outcomes are comparable with graduates of non-online courses."**

is limited by how online learning is defined and the coverage of the survey. A more accurate picture of the extent of online delivery in VET, as well as student satisfaction and employment outcomes, would require a more targeted and specific data collection. Overall, with these limitations, we cannot confirm or preclude quality issues or any other reasons for the higher subject withdrawals and lower course completion rates seen in online delivery.

Given that online delivery in VET is used by around a tenth of VET students at the program level, the quality is important. From the regulator's perspective, the quality of an online course is measured by its compliance with the 'Standards for RTOs 2015'. The Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA) reports that auditors use the same audit approach for registered training organisations (RTOs) whose students undertake online training as for those where courses are face-to-face. Specifically in regard to online delivery, ASQA advises that RTOs must ensure that the delivery mode is appropriate for the course and that the resources required to support online delivery are adequate.

Interviews with teachers/trainers and other RTO staff revealed, however, that some feel that RTOs delivering online programs are disadvantaged and that many auditors have a negative view of online delivery. These interviewees want online and face-to-face delivery to be judged fairly and equally and spoke very highly of the quality assurance procedures in place at their RTOs. To alleviate some of the challenges faced by RTOs in the delivery of online VET, a more risk-based approach to assessment requirements and the auditing process was suggested.

A number of the teachers and trainers interviewed for the research (from the qualification areas selected for examination) reported that online delivery has changed very little over the past 10 years, with the possible exception of the use of higher-quality graphics and chat bots. The online tools described by the teachers and trainers included:

- course content: text-based materials, videos, links to external sources of information and interactive elements
- engagement among students: online conferencing tools, forums and Facebook groups
- communication between the student and trainer: email, phone, Skype and the online learning messaging system
- assessment: short automated quizzes (not necessarily formal assessment), written work, recorded videos, virtual labs, live video and phone.

Of interest to this research was the approach adopted for non-online elements. The training packages for some courses specify the requirement (or a suggestion) for a work placement. Online delivery of these qualifications does not preclude these requirements, and interviewees described how students were required, and often supported, to find appropriate work placements. This demonstrates that, while these courses are considered and marketed as online, the work placement element ensures that students can learn and demonstrate competence of their skills in an authentic workplace.

The attributes of good practice in online delivery were identified from the interviews with trainers and other RTO staff and subsequently categorised into five components:

- **The training provider and staff:** the attitude and ethos of the training provider plays an important role in good online delivery. Good intentions of the provider and staff set the tone for high-quality training and assessment, regardless of the mode of delivery.
- **Before and on enrolment:** ensuring that students have realistic expectations of the course and delivery mode helps students to make informed decisions about their training. Informing students about any non-online elements, such as work placements, and what they'll need to do to complete the course will help to reduce the chance of students enrolling in a course that does not suit their learning style or situation.
- **The online learning platform, resources and assessment:** the system needs to be easy to navigate and use and the resources well-

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structured, up-to-date and engaging. Content should be delivered in a variety of ways to cater to different learning styles and should be developed specifically for online delivery.

- **Student support and communication:** an effective student support system is integral to good online delivery of VET. How support is provided may depend on student numbers and, hence, may be provided by an individual teacher/trainer, or by a dedicated support team. Support should be offered in a variety of ways to suit the communication style and the various commitments of the learners.

  Building a relationship between the teachers/trainers and the students was another element of good practice. This ensures that students feel less isolated – understanding that there is a trainer available to support them – and assists in identifying plagiarism and issues of authenticity.

- **Quality and the attributes of teachers/trainers:** the involvement of highly skilled and knowledgeable teachers and trainers, as well as displaying empathy and being creative problem-solvers, is an important attribute of good practice. The dedicated commitment of teachers and trainers to see students succeed helps to enable good outcomes for students.

Many of these attributes of good practice are not unique to the online delivery context but how they are implemented may be.

In conclusion, the characteristics of online delivery mean that it is not appropriate for all individuals or for all situations. However, high-quality online delivery can lead to a positive training experience and good employment outcomes for individuals who are suited to that delivery mode. ■

The full report (from which this summary is reproduced) is accessible at https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/publications/all-publications/online-delivery-of-vet-qualifications

# AVETRA 2020 CONFERENCE

## POSTPONED: DATE TO BE ADVISED

Dear Colleague,

I recently wrote to you about the need to postpone the 2020 AVETRA Conference that was due to be held on 23/24 April in Melbourne as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The AVETRA Executive has held several meetings to work out the best way forward for both the conference itself and the Annual General Meeting that was being held during the conference.

### For the conference

In view of the uncertainty surrounding the progress of the pandemic rather than cancel the conference or fix a firm new date now, the executive voted to wait until 10 August to make an announcement of a new date. We would like to be able to run the conference in October or November 2020.

We hope that people who have paid for existing conference registration and sponsorships may be willing for AVETRA to retain these until a decision on the rescheduled date is made. However, if this does not suit individual participants or sponsors could you please contact avetra@theassociationspecialists.com.au to discuss repayment options.

### For the Annual General Meeting

We intend to proceed with a "virtual AGM" using a video conference system. This will take place on the same date and time as originally planned, that is 4:45pm on 23 April 2020.

We will let members know of the connection details when we send out the AGM papers in the coming days.

Only current financial members can attend the AGM so only they will be getting further AGM information.

### In general

These are extraordinary times that few of us have experienced before. We hope not to experience them again. We thank you for your patience and look forward to resuming normal service and life as soon as practical.

For any queries please contact the Secretariat on: avetra@theassociationspecialists.com.au

Regards and stay safe

**Robin Shreeve**
AVETRA President

# Vocational Institutions, Undergraduate Degrees ARC Discovery Project

**Dr Steven Hodge, Griffith University**

*Vocational Institutions, Undergraduate Degrees* is a three-year Australian Research Council (ARC) Discovery Project that completes this year. The research team is led by Sue Webb (Monash University) and includes Shaun Rawolle (Deakin University) and Steven Hodge (Griffith University), Lizzie Knight (Victoria University) and UK researchers Ann-Marie Bathmaker and Trevor Gale.

At the heart of this ARC Discovery project is the desire to understand what new tertiary qualifications are being offered by Australia's TAFEs through the recent expansion of higher education in traditionally vocational institutions. Do these offerings of bachelor's degrees drive innovation and increase the participation of all equity groups in higher education, and what, if anything, is distinctive about these higher education offerings in TAFE Institutes? The work also explores the validity of claimed threats to quality in higher education as a result of this expansion.

A multiple-case study design is used in this study, with interviews and surveys conducted in extended case sites in two states, as well as interviews in other sites encompassing all TAFE Institutes providing Higher Education. Public data on higher education participation was also used, while the Commonwealth Government complied with data requests that allowed quantitative analysis.

Interim findings (and project data sources) include:

**Higher education offerings in TAFE Institutes attract specific cohorts of students:**

- Higher education offerings in TAFE Institutes attract specific cohorts of students (those looking for distinct/niche offerings, international students, those from non-English speaking backgrounds, mature-aged students, those seeking specific employment, and those preferring personalised, flexible learning).
- In 2016, 44% of all students enrolled in higher education courses at TAFEs were international students. Public universities have a third more domestic students than TAFEs. (HEIMS data 2018).
- Enrolments data also show that students enrolling in bachelor's degrees in TAFEs are more mature. In 2015, 36% of all students enrolled in bachelor's degree course at TAFE Institutes were 25 years or older. (HEIMS data 2018).
- Funding models mean that TAFEs do not outperform other types of institutions in terms of provision for students from low socio-economic households.
- There were higher than formally reported rates of students of non-English speaking background (NESB) and students from diverse language backgrounds studying in TAFE Institutes (Project data 2018).

**Students' reasons for selecting higher education courses in TAFE Institutes are diverse and emphasize the student experience:**

- Students see the distinctiveness and utility of higher education in TAFE Institutes (as opposed to university), and deliberately chose it, not as a 'fall back' but as a predetermined occupational aspiration. (Project data 2018).
- 64% of surveyed students indicated that they were studying because they enjoyed the subject/topic (Project data 2018).
- 59% indicated that the study would 'enable me to get a rewarding job' and 58% that the 'course is part of my longer-term career plans'. (Project data 2018).
- Some students were attracted to specific institutions for reasons that appeared to centre on learning styles (e.g. hands-on learning and smaller classes), or because of industry recommendations.
- 2016 TAFE Institute student satisfaction levels were very similar to those of university students (QILT data 2018).

> "Funding models mean that TAFEs do not outperform other types of institutions in terms of provision for students from low socio-economic households."

**Higher education offerings in TAFE Institutes have grown from within and in an organic way and the growth has responded to local contexts and institutional strengths:**

- In many cases, the development of higher education offerings in TAFE Institutes is driven by external and internal pressures and a response to local markets.
- Current TAFE Institutes higher education offerings are niche rather than mirroring the range of provision in a multi-faculty university.
- TAFE Institutes offer specific courses that are distinct from the range of courses offered by universities; they are niche offerings relating to areas of practice.

**Industry engagement varies between universities and TAFE Institutes and is culturally distinct:**

- The cultural difference between industry engagement drew on historic divisions between VET and higher education, the distinctions between transformational and transactional learning, and whether lecturers were perceived to need to 'walk the walk'.

**TAFE Institutes present degree offerings as part of a continuum of vocational qualifications:**

- There is a common language of pathways, with a continuum of vocational qualifications from certificates through to diplomas and degrees in specific areas of strengths and industry need.

**The sectoral distinction between VET and higher education is neither foregrounded nor downplayed by TAFE Institutes:**

- A Bachelor's degree is a valuable acquisition in its own right, not a characteristic of university or non-university higher education provision.
- Many universities do not consider higher education provision in TAFE Institutes as competition.

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**TAFE Institutes suggest that their degrees are oriented to industry needs and built on experiential and practical pedagogies:**

- TAFE Institutes see themselves as having a very close eye on industry, identifying any gaps in higher education provision and knowing about their competitors in niche areas.
- Interviewees indicated that students were looking for a different higher education experience that was closer to industry. By contrast, they argued, universities prioritise theory over practice.

**Degree provision in TAFE Institutes is suggested to provide distinctive learning environments:**

- Degree educators foreground that at TAFE Institutes higher education is accessible and educators know their students, adapting provision to individual needs.
- TAFE Institute staff suggest their higher education offer provides a comfortable, supportive environment, with smaller classes than universities.
- Degree assessment practices at TAFE Institutes is presented as flexible which accommodates the realities of students' lives, while meeting higher education standards.

**Higher Education provision in TAFE competes in a complex and precarious market:**

- Degrees in TAFE Institutes have different types of competitors, including other TAFEs, public universities, dual-sector institutes, and private higher education providers.
- This competition may be differentiated on a program by program basis.

**There is no strong policy intent supporting higher education in TAFE Institutes:**

- TAFE Institutes are providing degrees in a policy vacuum with little influence in higher education policy conversations.
- Given a lack of any national policy intent, expansion of higher education provision in TAFE Institutes varies across states and territories and no systematic approach across the country is noted.
- The lack of a national strategic imperative to expand higher education in TAFE Institutes impacts equity and access to higher education because of the different funding models between the sectors.
- Despite the debates on higher education sector expansion, there is little evidence of policy support for horizontal differentiation to meet market need.
- TAFE already has a place in the field but stronger advocacy is needed. ■

The final report from the project will be released at a special event on Tuesday, 5 May 2020 at Deakin Downtown, Docklands, Melbourne. Please visit the project website for more information:

monash.edu.au/hive