

The Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning in TAFE: Challenges, issues and implications for teachers

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Abstract

In recent times, governments have introduced new policies and programs to address the needs of early school leavers. One such initiative is the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL), which aims to provide a vocationally-oriented alternative to the academic senior school certificate. Since the implementation of VCAL in the Technical and Further Education (TAFE) sector from 2003, TAFE institutes have been experiencing an influx of young learners for whom most teachers have not traditionally catered. To date, however, there has been inadequate research on the impact and implications of the VCAL in TAFE. This paper begins to address this gap by examining the challenges posed by the VCAL in TAFE from a teacher perspective. Based on a small-scale research study at one TAFE institute, the paper draws primarily upon data from in-depth interviews with key teaching and support staff. It finds that TAFE teachers face a number of significant issues which need to be addressed if the VCAL is to be delivered effectively in TAFE on an ongoing basis.

Introduction

Over the past two decades, governments have pursued two broad policy goals through the vocational education and training (VET) system: to promote improved national economic growth and social cohesion, specifically via the creation of an industry-driven VET system and a substantial increase in participation and completion rates in post-compulsory education and training, particularly of young people. Australian federal and state governments have introduced a range of policies and initiatives aimed at improving and enhancing Australia's skills base to meet the changing demands of industry, driven by strong competition in world markets, and the new 'knowledge economy'. The current federal government's policy paper for VET, *Skilling Australia for the Future* (ALP, 2007), notes that skills shortages, an ageing population and lagging productivity growth are constraining Australia's economic performance. Older workers are being encouraged to remain in the workforce and update their skills; and traditional modes of employment are rapidly altering with an increase in part-time, casual and contract work. Industry is introducing new technologies and innovations, with a growing demand for 'knowledge intensive' workers.

The VET system, including the Technical and Further Education (TAFE) sector, is being called upon to help meet government educational priorities by responding more directly to industry's skill needs. This means that TAFE institutes must be able to provide a more highly skilled and capable workforce. Now, more than ever before, TAFE institutes are under pressure to keep abreast of rapid change in the nature of work and workers in the new knowledge economy.

Since the late 1980s, federal and state governments have adopted targets and implemented a range of program initiatives to increase the participation of young people in post-compulsory education and training. The collapse of traditional career paths for young people during the 1970s, particularly apprenticeships, growing youth unemployment, and the social problems associated with early school leaving have been a source of major concern to government and the Australian community. Significant attention has been devoted to the development of new pathways and programs that provide an alternative to traditional academic schooling for young people considered to be 'at risk' of early school leaving. As a major avenue for 'second chance' education and non-academic or applied learning, TAFE has been given a prominent role in programs catering for early school leavers (McKenzie, 2002; House of Representatives, 1998).

Due to such initiatives, TAFE Directors Australia (2004a) noted that there has been a marked increase in young people aged 15-19 years entering TAFE over

the past decade. Many of these students were early school leavers who had not completed their senior secondary schooling. This was echoed in the Dusseldorp Skills Forum report, *How Young People are Faring* (2004, p.13), which found that 'as many as 40% of those who left secondary school in 2002 after completing Year 10 were enrolled in study in May 2003, mostly at TAFE institutes. Similarly for Year 11 completers 38% continued in education, again mostly in TAFE'.

In Victoria, significant work has been undertaken to meet the targets set in the Ministerial Statement, *Knowledge and Skills for the Innovation Economy* (Kosky, 2002), which focused on improving secondary school students' retention and completion rates. One of the measures that the Victorian government introduced in 2002 to enhance young people's study and career options was the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL), which was implemented in TAFE institutes in 2003. As a consequence, TAFE teachers need to understand new employment patterns, new technologies, and the different needs of older and younger learners. They are also required to update their own industry knowledge and skills currency, and to introduce and continuously improve innovative and flexible delivery methods for a range of settings: workplaces, simulated workplaces or classrooms.

Despite the high priority attached to addressing the needs of young people through the VCAL program in TAFE, very little research has been undertaken to investigate the challenges facing TAFE teachers involved in its implementation. To begin redressing this lacuna, this paper reports and analyses the findings of a small-scale study of the introduction of the VCAL in one TAFE institute, primarily from a teacher perspective. In-depth interviews were conducted in late 2005 with program coordinators/teachers and a youth programs worker involved in VCAL implementation at Outer Metropolitan Institute of TAFE in Victoria. The findings are set against the background of other research on TAFE teachers and young learners, including the Victorian Qualification Authority's VCAL Participation Report, *Pathways for a Better Future* (VQA, 2005). Although the research findings below provide some significant insights into teacher experiences and reactions to VCAL, the small scale of the study does not permit its findings to be generalised to the whole TAFE sector in Victoria.

The paper begins by outlining key features of the TAFE policy and program context in which VCAL was introduced. Research about the VCAL target group and program outcomes in general, and about VCAL in TAFE, is reviewed. Some initial observations about the specific TAFE VCAL program under examination are then made, after which the main research findings are presented. In light of these findings, key issues are explored in relation to teachers' work and teaching practices, teacher preparation, support and professional development. The paper concludes by highlighting some concerns about VCAL in TAFE and proposing areas for further research.

TAFE, young learners and VCAL

As reflected in its *National Youth Strategy*, TAFE Directors Australia (TDA) supports federal and state government attempts to increase access and vocational pathways in TAFE for young people:

TAFE is a key pathway for young Australians and it has the experience and expertise to respond in a supportive way to the range of youth needs and to lift skill levels. TAFE can provide an alternative education path for those not suited to traditional school environments. (TDA, 2004b, p.2)

The Strategy calls on the federal government to strengthen TAFE funding, which would enable TAFE to provide an effective second chance strategy for early school leavers disengaged from secondary school. The TDA claims that insufficient growth funding from government is severely hampering TAFE's capacity to cater for the increasing demand of this cohort.

TAFE institutes each serve a diverse community with different educational and support needs. In Victoria, most metropolitan TAFE institutes have a student population in excess of 30-35,000. Typically, the majority of students enrolled in a metropolitan TAFE fall into the 30-39 year age bracket, with younger students aged 20-24 years being in the minority. In the case of Outer Metropolitan Institute of TAFE, the 15-19 year age cohort accounts for 20% of the total student body, as reflected in Table 1.

Table 1: Student enrolments by age, Outer Metropolitan Institute of TAFE, 2005

Age group	Number of enrolments	% of total enrolments
15-19 years	7,285	20
20-24 years	6,260	17
30-39 years	7,500	21
Other	14,913	41
Total	35,958	100

Each TAFE institute has also developed its own unique culture and approach to teaching based on the diversity of learners in their respective geographical regions. Accordingly, Outer Metropolitan Institute of TAFE has tailored its teaching methodologies mainly to suit the needs of mature-aged learners. In its *National Youth Strategy*, TAFE Directors Australia (2004b) highlights this diversity and, rather than objecting to the added influx of younger learners, alerts the government to the distinctive needs of the cohort, and the additional costs that are incurred in meeting these needs.

Research has found that ‘one in four young people leaves school without completing his or her senior secondary certificate’ (Teese, 2004, p.184). According to Teese, the two major motives for early school leaving are student demand for work and a lack of interest in schoolwork. Within three years of leaving school early, between two-thirds and three quarters of these young people have some contact with VET, which is positive in terms of employment and other social benefits. Overall, Teese concludes that VET plays a major role in ensuring continued learning among young people.

Teese found that early school leavers felt that their experiences at school needed to be more socially supportive and geared to encourage a feeling of attachment. Also, a good rapport with teachers is often required to enable students to cope with the increasingly specialised, theoretical, individualistic and competitive nature of school work in the senior years. Notably, Teese found that good students, not just low achievers, drop out of school, while other low achievers stay on at school.

Generally, research has found that 15-19 year old students’ learning and support needs are different from those of older learners, particularly if they have not completed their senior secondary schooling, or re-entered education after an extended absence. This observation is confirmed in *Setting the Pace* (DSF, 2005), a report prepared for the Dusseldorp Skills Forum (DSF) on aspects of education, training and youth transitions in Australia. The DSF found that:

Literacy and numeracy is a central foundation on which successful learning and long term economic participation is built, but Victorian students at age 15 perform less well in achievement tests in mathematics and science and reading, relative to students in comparable states. (2005, p.1)

TAFE offers courses from Certificate I through to Advanced Diploma. However, most students enter at Certificate III level after completing their Year 12 senior secondary school certificate. TAFE in general has a mix of students in terms of age, gender, and ethnicity, and in the case of Outer Metropolitan Institute of TAFE there are major variations in socio-economic background. Due to this diversity, TAFE institutes have introduced student support workers and facilities to cater for the discrete needs of younger and older learners.

As previously stated, the VCAL is a qualification developed to provide additional pathways for Year 11 and 12 students who are interested in pursuing vocationally-oriented study options or moving straight into employment. As a senior secondary alternative to the academic Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE), the VCAL program provides a practical, ‘hands-on’ approach to learning and a clear vocational pathway. The VCAL is delivered at three levels – Foundation, Intermediate and Senior – and students enter the VCAL at the level that matches their needs and abilities. The curriculum combines

work experience with the development of literacy, numeracy and work-related skills and personal development. The VCAL provides post-course pathways to apprenticeships/traineeships, further education and employment. Piloted in 22 schools in 2002, the VCAL was rolled out state-wide in 2003 in over 200 providers, including government, Catholic, independent schools, Adult and Community Education centres, and TAFE institutes.

The VCAL differs from Access programs in TAFE in that the latter generally have a mix of older and younger students, although some programs are targeted to younger students. The VCAL usually comprises 15-19 years olds who have left school or are returning to study after leaving school early. The VCAL also differs from Access programs in providing an industry-specific skills stream of study, which allows students to apply their learning in a practical, hands-on manner in a range of vocational areas.

The VCAL Participation Project Report (VQA, 2005, p.1) finds that the VCAL has provided diverse pathways for students, improved school retention rates and is especially valuable for non-metropolitan students. The report found that, since its introduction in schools in 2002 and roll out in 2003, the VCAL program was responsible for the following successful outcomes:

- total VCAL enrolments increasing across the state, with the proportions of Intermediate and Senior levels rising, indicating progression and retention;
- most 2004 VCAL students were participating in either education or training or work in 2005;
- 31% of VCAL students would have left school had they not been engaged in VCAL; and
- VCAL is especially important for non-metropolitan students, who accounted for 42% of all VCAL students in 2004.

Research on VCAL in TAFE

As previously noted, there is a dearth of research about the impact and implications of VCAL programs for the TAFE sector in general, and TAFE teachers in particular. In a paper that primarily examines the pedagogical challenges posed by teaching young students in programs like VCAL in TAFE, McLean (2008) notes in passing that many and varied challenges arise at all levels of a TAFE institute in attempting to cater for the needs of this new cohort. He reports that when VCAL was being introduced at his TAFE institute:

Not only was there a need to seriously reconsider program structures but also teaching capabilities, resource development, communication, reporting and student

management. Many of the students had left secondary colleges dissatisfied or angry, some were described as 'school refusers'. There were large numbers of students that had been bullied mixed in with students that had instigated the bullying. This new mix was to be taught and coordinated by many staff holding the minimum TAFE teaching qualification, the Certificate IV in Workplace Assessment & Training with no experience of secondary teaching (McLean, 2008, p.5).

Lewanski also notes that one of the main issues encountered during the implementation of VCAL in TAFE is that relatively few teachers have had prior training or experience in dealing with younger students; particularly those who have been disengaged from formal learning, often for some considerable time, and whose prior experiences of schooling have often been negative:

TAFE in Victoria has seen an expansion of youth programs in 2003 with the roll out of the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) and (an) increase in a number of other personal development youth programs offered. TAFE teachers have been confronted with issues that have not been apparent teaching older cohorts of students. (Lewanski, 2004, p.1)

Among the few exceptions are teachers involved in TAFE Access programs, which are an entry point for students who wish to commence study at Certificate I level, and progress to the Certificate of General Adult Education, which leads to further options in either the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) or Certificate III level studies. Historically, these programs have been utilised by women returning to the workforce, people from non-English speaking backgrounds, and mature-aged adults who did not complete their senior secondary schooling. Other exceptions are the few remaining teachers who taught in the TAFE Vocational and Tertiary Orientation Programs and also labour market training programs for unemployed youth, such as those under the TAFE Participation and Equity Program, in the early to mid-1980s (Cashman & Scarfe 1984; Owen & Hartley 1986). The former were alternative Year 11 and 12 programs, which were dismantled in the mid-1980s when responsibility for delivering all senior secondary education to young people was transferred to secondary schools following the Blackburn Report (1985). Since then TAFE in Victoria has been largely dedicated to training mature-aged adults who are already in the workforce or seeking employment, with the result that the existing pool of TAFE teachers with knowledge and expertise in youth-oriented pedagogy and curriculum has diminished.

In 2002, Box Hill Institute (BHI) was one of two TAFE institutes that trialled and evaluated the implementation of VCAL. Among the key themes that emerged in interviews with six VCAL program coordinators were 'teachers and teaching practices' and 'teacher professional development needs'. A need was identified for teachers who are 'passionate about this cohort of students' and able to 'set clear boundaries within a non-traditional environment', particularly where

occupational health and safety considerations are significant (BHI, 2003, p.25). The appointment of dedicated full-time VCAL teachers ensured that consistent and positive relationships with students could be established. The most effective delivery methods were found to be practically-oriented and learner-centred approaches, including: one-on-one delivery; facilitating rather than lecturing; building rapport; interesting, realistic and relevant project work; good role modelling by teachers; and allowing students to have input into the direction of the learning. However, it was also noted that 'Many of these students seemed to carry emotional and social problems; delivery involved taking a flexible approach and addressing their problems before getting to the learning' (p.25).

Reflecting on the conditions for successful implementation of VCAL programs, the Box Hill Institute report (2003) highlights the need for collaborative modes of program planning and development, involving the formation of staff networks across teaching centres and the provision of adequate time to develop and review new programs. Not only did this approach provide staff with a mutually supportive working environment, it also facilitated the cross-fertilisation of program ideas and fostered professional development. Also, 'it helped teachers develop new skills because it covered critical areas for teaching youth (such as bullying, duty of care, classroom management and sexual harassment issues) that may be new for TAFE staff and so gave them the instruments to use in the VCAL teaching and learning environment' (p.7). Other areas identified for professional development were: managing classroom behaviour; engaging disillusioned young people; alternative delivery and assessment strategies for young people, including holistic approaches; barriers to delivery (e.g. legal requirements and duty of care); and raising VCAL awareness among other staff members. Overall, the introduction of the VCAL program to Box Hill Institute had 'brought about significant change', largely because 'teachers were challenged in regard to their professional practice in order to make VCAL a success' (p.29).

VCAL at Outer Metropolitan Institute of TAFE

Outer Metropolitan Institute of TAFE (OMIT) is a large metropolitan TAFE provider that covers an extensive catchment consisting of six Local Government Areas. OMIT caters for approximately 36,000 students annually, the majority of whom are mature aged (30-39 years). However, for many years OMIT has provided a full range of trades courses to apprentices and trainees, the majority of whom are younger students aged 17-24 years. The introduction of VCAL at OMIT in 2003 caused some disquiet among teaching staff in the trades areas, as it was planned to offer the VCAL in the Automotive, Building and Construction, Hairdressing, Horticulture and Hospitality faculties. OMIT provides the VCAL at the Intermediate level, with the Industry Specific Skills Stream (Trades) taught from units from Certificate level II and the literacy and numeracy aimed ideally at students already functioning at year 10 level. When teachers learned

that the VCAL was to be pitched at the Intermediate level (equivalent to Year 11), they had doubts about the ability of VCAL students to ‘cope’ with TAFE curricula, due to their low prior educational attainment.

To better understand the VCAL experience at OMIT and the challenges it poses for TAFE teachers, in-depth interviews were conducted with a Trades program coordinator/teacher, an Access program coordinator/teacher, and a Youth Pathways Program worker. All three had been directly involved in the VCAL program at OMIT from its inception in 2003 through to late 2005, when this research was undertaken. The two program coordinator/teachers were happy to talk about their experiences, and were forthcoming with their views. The Youth Pathways Program worker was very enthusiastic about the VCAL program and her work therein. The role of the Youth Pathways Program worker is to assist young learners with the preparation of a training plan that identifies the training and support to be provided; and regularly review the training and support to ensure young learners achieve successful outcomes in terms of access to further training or gainful employment. According to her data, the OMIT VCAL program had achieved outcomes that are comparable with state-wide VCAL student outcomes in TAFE (see Tables 2 and 3).

The Youth Pathways Program worker indicated that the main reason that VCAL students choose to study at TAFE is that they feel they are treated like adults by teachers and other students. The main reasons they succeed at TAFE are that: they feel more supported at TAFE than school; and TAFE provides them with skills and knowledge relevant to work. The VQA *On-Track 2005* survey collected information from year 12 VCAL students who had completed a VCAL Intermediate or Senior certificate in 2004. Eighty-nine per cent of the students agreed that the VCAL program had been an important factor in their decision to stay at school. Table 3 shows that in 2005, 40% gained an apprenticeship/traineeship, 24% were in further study, and 23% were working.

Table 2: VCAL student outcomes, Outer Metropolitan Institute of TAFE (%)

Post-course outcome	First intake (2003)	Second intake (2004)
Part-time and full-time work	60	55
Further study	10	8
Apprenticeship	20	30
Unknown	10	7
Total	100	100

Source: Youth Pathways Program, OMIT

Table 3: VCAL student outcomes, Victoria 2005

Destinations	Number of students	% of total students
University	14	1
TAFE/VET	246	23
Apprentice/trainee	432	40
Working	241	23
Unemployed	134	13
Deferred	6	1
Total	1073	100

Source: VQA (2005) *Pathways to a Better Future*.

Teacher experiences and reactions to VCAL

The reactions of TAFE teachers to students in the VCAL program at OMIT are reported and discussed in three subsections below, dealing with: teacher perceptions of young learners; teachers' workloads and resources; and changing teachers' roles. A number of key issues and implications arising from the teachers' perceptions and experiences of VCAL are then discussed in the following section.

Teacher perceptions of young learners

The Youth Pathways Program worker views the VCAL as an opportunity to change teachers' perceptions of the youth cohort, and to support her work at the institute by raising awareness of young students as an entity in their own right. She felt that this recognition of young people might raise teachers' understanding of, and tolerance for, the range of complex issues and choices that young people confront in adolescence. The Youth Pathways Program worker said that problems of 'culture' associated with the teaching staff were still evident. Many teachers continued to be resistant towards the presence of 'youth at risk', and 'labelled' the VCAL as a program for 'school drop-outs'. Trades teachers appeared to struggle most with the VCAL students who were seen to be 'totally unlike apprentices', with whom they felt most comfortable.

The reactions of trade teachers to the influx of young VCAL students were, however, to some extent coloured by their 'change fatigue', which began in the mid-1980s with the Blackburn Report (1985). According to the Trades program coordinator/teacher, the VCAL:

... is another change by government, which is just recycling. This certificate has been done before, remember the TOP [Tertiary Orientation Program]? ... We are all just

changed out! What are they going to ask us to do next? ... I don't agree that TAFE is the place for early school leavers. We have spent the last 10 to 20 years improving and building on our status and purpose as an adult learning facility. We were once told that we couldn't teach VCE, only to adults. Now it's to the young kids. Why? Can't the schools do their job and teach them the basics? We have to re-teach them before we can teach our own training packages.

In contrast, the Access program coordinator/teacher had seen the writing on the wall, and recognised the need for a TAFE pathway for VCAL students:

This has been coming for some time. Access programs have been accepting young people into CGEA [Certificate of General Adult Education] and pre-apprenticeships programs for years, and being successful with it too. ... TAFE is a better place for some of these kids. They weren't supported at school, sometimes they are quite bright, but school doesn't give them enough support. It's too much one size fits all, too generalist for many of these young people.

During the interview with the Trades program coordinator/teacher, it became apparent that trades teachers' attitudes towards 'youth at risk' were indicative of an initial lack of understanding of, and preparedness for, the target group. VCAL students presented trades teachers with a range of issues with which they were generally unaccustomed and ill-equipped to deal with high absenteeism and disruptive classroom behaviour. However, by the end of the second year of implementation, it appeared that the VCAL experience had increased trades teachers' understanding of the special needs and circumstances of this young student cohort. The Trades program coordinator/teacher, for instance, recognised that many of the VCAL students had been disengaged from learning for some time, possessed low literacy and numeracy skills, 'detested' the classroom environment, preferred to be treated as adults, and in some cases were dealing with obviously difficult financial and personal issues – including drug abuse, homelessness, and family problems.

With experience, trade teachers had also developed an awareness of how to respond effectively to such needs and motivate the VCAL students:

You need to hit the ground running with this lot. They have a short attention span, so the learning has to mean something to them and it needs to be fun. ... We had more success with the second years as we got smarter and ensured a pre-enrolment session and assessment.

Nonetheless, the Trades program coordinator/teacher readily acknowledged that the successful outcomes achieved at OMIT were due in no small part to the dedication of the Access teachers and the considerable effort and support of the Youth Pathways Program worker:

There is no doubt that the VCAL kids need support. We have been able to get them helped by the YPP [Youth Pathways Program] worker and she has been very good with them.

The Access program coordinator/teacher was more familiar with the youth target group and the VCAL, probably due to the fact that TAFE Access programs have been undertaken by young people for many years. Access teachers were 'constantly battling with the trades areas over attendance and completion', and the Youth Pathways Program worker had also struggled 'in getting them to be more flexible and understanding of the VCAL group'.

Teacher workloads and resources

Although 'the VQA has been helpful', the lack of additional staff and resources for VCAL implementation was a major issue for both program coordinator/teachers:

I can understand that OMIT had to offer the VCAL, but it's been 'get on with the job' with no more resources or staff.

Both program coordinators complained at length about the increased workload that the 'resource hungry' VCAL had created for them, over and above their normal teaching loads, due to: the additional VCAL administrative work, attendance at VCAL network meetings (e.g. with local school teachers), counselling staff and students, 'putting out fires', and the time and difficulties involved in coaching and supervising other teachers, and organising appropriate work placements for the students.

The Trades program coordinator/teacher was particularly concerned about a perceived lack of attention to the issue of skilled staff replacements:

... we need younger teachers in the trades areas (as) teachers' skills transfer is a big issue in the trades areas. We are all well into our 50s. We must bring in some younger teachers, especially now that we have more and more young students. ... I'm getting too old to train this youth profile, as they are very draining on your time.

Moreover, he was finding it very difficult to attract sessional teachers with up-to-date industrial skills, relevant resources, and an interest in teaching young people: The Trades program coordinator/teacher complained that 'I'm constantly looking for good sessionals that aren't burnt out, and that understand the learning needs of this group'.

Both program coordinator/teachers admitted that they had learned about the VCAL 'as they taught it'. Very little new curriculum was developed for the VCAL program in the first year. The program coordinators commented that

there had been no time to do this, even though they had been funded to do so, as they had been delivering the programs themselves, and there were no extra staff to assist, due to skilled teacher shortages. However, this situation improved in the second and third years, with funding being allocated to ensure that new curriculum was developed.

Changing teachers' roles

Both program coordinator/teachers recognised that they needed to keep up with changes in the workplace if they were to fulfil their VCAL responsibilities effectively. Both stated that the task of finding work placements for the VCAL students had pushed them out into industry and into other teacher networks. In their opinion, this had had the dual effect of providing them with access to current 'industry knowledge' and contacts, and opportunities for sharing professional experiences:

It's made me rethink my approach. I have discussed this with other teachers, and we all know that we should be updating and visiting industry, but it's just too difficult with increased teacher loads, working at nights, and shortages of good quality sessional staff. ... Changes for me are mainly in having to make adjustments to my teaching delivery and re-engage with industry so that I can get these kids into work placements. (Trades program coordinator/teacher)

I have been forced out of my comfort zone, and had to inter-relate with the trades areas and secondary school teachers in the network meetings – this has been a great experience for me. ... My skills currency has increased as has my knowledge of technology, which I have to use more often as program coordinator. ... I have also learned more about industry due to gaining practical placements for the VCAL kids. (Access program coordinator/teacher)

When questioned about the issue of professional development, both program coordinators were sceptical, reasoning that they were stretched for time as it was, and that their coordination and administration workload was often completed after hours, as well as having to attend meetings. Therefore, there was little or no time for professional development. Lewanski (2004) reports similar sentiments among VCAL teachers at another Victorian TAFE institute, the result of which has been the development of an online community of practice:

The CoP [community of practice] will expand opportunities for internal and external networking by imparting new knowledge, building partnerships with external organisations, agencies and other Institutes. It will expand professional development opportunities that will improve the skill needs of teachers, trainers and support staff. (Lewanski, 2004, pp.1-2)

Discussion

Much of this account is reflected in the Australian Education Union survey of TAFE teachers, *TAFE Teachers: Facing the Challenge*, conducted by Michaela Kronemann (2001). Her research showed that teachers saw funding cuts, staff reductions, increases in workload, and new delivery modes as the major issues affecting their work. Additionally, Kronemann found that teachers ranked preparation, administration, correction/assessments, and special responsibilities like coordination and attending meetings, as the most dominant factors in their increasing workload. Similar findings emerge from the more recent research by Harris, Simons and Clayton (2005), who report that the nature of VET practitioners' work is becoming more complex and multi-faceted, their roles and responsibilities are becoming more diversified, their work processes are becoming more regulated, and demands upon their working time are becoming more intensified, due in part to changing relationships with students. VET practitioners involved in their study reported that:

[T]here are ... more people leaving the schooling system and entering the VET sector with emotional and behavioural problems, and VET teacher/trainers are neither trained nor have the specialised resources to deal with them. These changes have resulted in different kinds of students ... and teachers have to spend a great deal more time and energy dealing with them. Increasing social pressures are also impacting on students, affecting their retention and completion of programs. (Harris et al., 2005, p.38)

Such trends are confirmed by the research findings from the present study about the new challenges confronting TAFE teachers attempting to cater for the different needs, backgrounds and circumstances of VCAL students.

These issues do not seem to have been taken into account by government in the process of developing its policies to cater for young learners' needs. The Victorian Learning and Employment Skills Commission (VLESC, 2003) Consultation Paper, *Towards a Post-compulsory Framework For Education and Training: Young People 15-24*, describes teachers' work as providing support to young learners through the use of active teaching and learning strategies. A focus on thinking skills and learning to learn, rather than what to learn, is considered to be of utmost importance if young learners who have been 'turned off' education are to be re-engaged. The development of curriculum content and new assessment regimes that cater for individual learning plans are also recommended. However, as suggested by the preceding research findings, such priorities and expectations are compromised by the reality of what is actually happening in TAFE institutes, which have experienced funding and staffing cuts, under-resourcing, increasing workloads and, as a result, low staff morale.

As highlighted in the above research finding about the inadequate supply of appropriately skilled and responsive teachers for VCAL in TAFE, another

challenge for TAFE institutes is that of replenishing the skills base of an ageing TAFE teacher workforce. A key message of the report, *Sustaining the Skill Base of Technical and Further Education Institutes: TAFE Managers' Perspectives*, is that TAFE institutes:

... have an ageing teacher workforce, whose impending departure endangers the institutes' skill base. This is at a time when workplace change demands (from TAFE and the broader vocational education and training sector) a more highly skilled teaching workforce than ever before. TAFE institutes greatly depend on the vocational competency of their teachers – their technical competency and currency, comprehensive industry know-how, networks and high level teaching skills – to maintain and build their credibility. (Clayton, Fisher & Hughes, 2005, p.1)

The report concludes that TAFE institutes need to pay more attention to this issue, and make a firm commitment to workforce renewal and retaining and developing current staff via targeted training and re-training. The more mature and experienced teachers need to be given incentives to stay on. Inadequate funding is the major inhibitor to planning and enabling TAFE workforce renewal: 'Such approaches need to be properly resourced, and supported by funding bodies, policy makers, TAFE management and teachers' (Clayton et al., 2005, p.7).

A discussion paper about raising youth engagement and attainment in post-compulsory education and training notes that over the past 25 years, 'The proportion of students that are "hard-to-teach" using traditional pedagogies has ... risen' and that 'There is ... a need for the TAFE ... workforce to be better geared to the needs, aspirations and cultures of young people' (Australian Industry Group & Dusseldorp Skills Forum, 2007, pp.36, 37). Accordingly, it recommends the adoption of appropriate workforce development strategies and practices to assist teachers to engage such students. As the above research suggests, inattention to such issues is likely to adversely affect the quality and outcomes of VCAL programs in TAFE.

The VQA's (2005) report, *Pathways for a Better Future*, concludes that the VCAL has been a resounding success since its trial in 2002, and subsequent roll-out across the state in 2003. Similarly, the evidence reported above suggests that the VCAL program at OMIT has also produced effective outcomes for a considerable proportion of participants who may have otherwise never completed their post-compulsory education and training. However, at what cost, and at whose expense, has this success been achieved? Further, in the conclusion to its report on training and youth transitions, the DSF (2005) casts some doubt on whether the increased participation rate in post-compulsory education and training is the result of the VCAL program:

It may be that students are replacing other full time VET programs with the TAFE VCE and VCAL alternatives rather than increasing their overall participation. Similarly, VCAL may have expanded largely through students who would otherwise have

undertaken a VCE and that VCAL has not contributed as much as it may appear to Year 12 retention. (DSF, 2005, p.57)

The OMIT experience has shown that without the additional resources of the Youth Pathways Program, there might have been very different outcomes for the VCAL students. Staff at OMIT and other TAFE institutes are increasingly utilising the services of Youth Pathways Program workers in programs where there is a large number of young people. One of the main reasons why these particular young people are different from mainstream apprentices and young people in more advanced levels of study is that they are engaged in full-time study throughout their VCAL course, except for when they are involved in practical work placements.

Another important reason is that because these young people have the VCAL option, they are not being absorbed into VCE and VET in Schools programs, and therefore constitute a distinct group, identifiable by the 'problems' associated with early school leaving. Many of these students are receiving Centrelink income support, and fees assistance/concessions (another cost to the Institute). Some are from non-English speaking backgrounds, and most have learning difficulties. The support that the Youth Pathways Program workers can give these students is invaluable. This support, added to an adult learning environment where the VCAL students feel more comfortable, and where the learning is relevant to the world of work, are the keys to opening up a world of learning options and career paths to this cohort. While some TAFE staff, like the Youth Pathways Program worker, view the VCAL as a welcome challenge, for most however it is a case of weary acceptance.

The impact that the VCAL has had on teachers' work is complex and variable. Most mainstream teachers seem to regard the VCAL as just another change, and even imposition. However, the same teachers always seem to rise to the challenge. Even though they complain about the extra workload, they continue to perform at a level that enables their students to pass successfully and progress to work or further study.

Conclusion

This paper has examined teacher experiences of, and reactions to, the introduction of the VCAL program at one TAFE institute, and raised a number of issues and concerns that warrant attention. At a general level, it suggests that the knowledge and skills currency of TAFE teachers needs to be enriched if the special needs of disadvantaged young learners are to be addressed effectively. One threshold issue that should not be overlooked is the perennial problem of VET funding levels. In response to government policies, TAFE Directors Australia has commissioned several papers to investigate VET funding and costs, all of which have highlighted this as a major issue. The issue has also been raised frequently in other research. As Harris et al. (2005) find, funding

and financing and government policy reforms are two of the three main external drivers of change that have reshaped the roles and working lives of VET practitioners. Federal and state governments are mandating educational reform, yet seem unwilling to provide sufficient funding to enable and support effective implementation of their reforms by TAFE institutes and staff.

There are major issues of training and re-training teaching staff in TAFE, coupled with workforce sustainability and stability. Increasing pressure and responsibility are placed on TAFE teachers, who are expected to cope with higher workloads, gain new skills, interact with industry, develop and innovate new training products, understand and learn new pedagogies, respond to increasingly diverse learner needs, and in many cases cope with insecure contract and casual employment, in addition to their own changing life circumstances.

The question of how the introduction of the VCAL in TAFE has affected teachers' work requires further investigation. A major issue that needs to be examined is the extent to which teachers are able to continue coping with the pressures of change when they are apparently so under-resourced, unsupported and subject to increasingly complex and intensified work demands. Given that many TAFE teachers involved in VCAL programs are working with young disaffected learners for the first time, a pressing question for research concerns the types of professional development they require. For instance, the research findings reported in this paper suggest that TAFE teachers would benefit from exposure to pedagogical theories and approaches explicitly designed to re-engage young learners who have been disadvantaged by prior educational experiences. Clearly there is a place for a larger scale study of the impact and implications of VCAL programs for TAFE teachers, or a series of replication studies in a range of metropolitan and non-metropolitan TAFE institutes.

In large part, the success to date of the TAFE VCAL program as an alternative post-compulsory education and training pathway can be attributed to the effort and commitment of teaching and support staff often working against the odds. However, if the above-mentioned issues and concerns of teachers are not addressed effectively, there is a risk that future programs to assist early school leavers may be neither openly welcomed nor even wearily accepted by TAFE teachers, but rather resented and devalued.

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