

VET in Schools : where is the value?

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Abstract

In the complex environment of an Independent secondary school in Darwin, boarding home to over two hundred Indigenous adolescents from remote communities of Northern Australia, the VET in Schools program provides one pathway to a meaningful outcome for students after six years of secondary level educational experiences. This paper reviews the dilemmas and tensions surrounding the management of this program and asks the question: Are we playing God in making pertinent decisions that affect students' lives and potentially their future earning capacity without them having full knowledge of the implications of this? This paper provokes and engages the reader to question the very fundamentals of a publicly funded and nationally accepted program.

Introduction

This paper is about the practicalities of what *now is* in terms of Vocational Education and Training (VET) in Schools, and what, if any, is the value of VET for secondary-level students from diverse backgrounds, with particular reference in this paper to Aboriginal students from remote areas and their academic and vocational journey through senior secondary school. Initially this paper will set the context for the results of my research, before then moving into presenting the *dilemmas and tensions* surrounding the management of the VET in Schools program in the Northern Territory, and by association South Australia.

May I say at the outset that some of my statements or recommendations will be controversial but they are my views only and presented in the hope that meaningful constructive dialogue may be the result.

The ideas contained in this paper arise from a combination of two factors: my experience as a VET practitioner in the Northern Territory for over twenty years and my experience as Deputy Principal at Kormilda College in Darwin for the past six years.

Twenty-four years ago Kormilda College emerged as an Independent secondary school in Darwin, indeed on another edge of our continent to the one where we now meet. The site on which Kormilda College stands is steeped in local history. Originally a World War II Army hospital that treated Australian soldiers and Japanese prisoners of war, the post-war property was converted to a QANTAS Transit Centre. For almost 20 years, thousands of international air passengers and crew were accommodated on site as they broke their journeys to Europe.

In 1967, the Commonwealth government acquired the property to create a post primary hostel and boarding school for Indigenous children from isolated locations. By early 1968 many of the buildings were renovated, repainted and converted into classrooms or bedrooms and the property

became Kormilda College. Initial enrolment totalled 121 students from 27 Territory communities, pastoral stations and missions. Following self-government, the management of the College was transferred to the Northern Territory government.

In February 1989 the ownership of the College transferred to the Anglican and Uniting Churches and Kormilda College Limited was formed and administered by a board of directors, appointed by the two churches.

The student population is now around 850 and representative of the wide variety of cultural backgrounds found in the Northern Territory. This includes both Day and Boarding enrolments such that one third are Indigenous students from remote areas of Northern Australia and mid Australia around Alice Springs.

In 1993 Kormilda College commenced teaching the International Baccalaureate Diploma program across Years 11-12 and in 2010 commenced the IB Middle Years Program from Years 6-10. The NTCET is still available as a choice in the senior years and this was expanded to include VET offerings in 2008 following an injection of Commonwealth funds to build VET Automotive, VET Metal Fabrication, VET Multimedia and VET Childcare training facilities.

Kormilda College continues to be committed to educating Indigenous students from remote Australian communities. It is our vision to ensure that Indigenous students have access to a high quality secondary education.

At the forefront of '*Closing the Gap*' for remote Indigenous secondary students, Kormilda's ambitious target is to ensure that all its graduates leave the College with the skills they require to become active citizens. Indigenous students are treated no differently than any other. To close the gap we must have equal expectations of all students. Intensive literacy and numeracy tuition in Middle School leads to mainstream, VET and apprenticeship opportunities in the Senior School. Or does it?

The marketing for Kormilda College states "The opportunities that a Kormilda College education brings are only limited by the aspirations and dreams of the students themselves". It would be fair to state that this ideal would be shared across the whole secondary school system. Questions we must ask: Is that truly the case? Does the rhetoric match the reality?

Indigenous students at Kormilda College, similarly to every other student in secondary school, are aspiring to be doctors, lawyers, nurses, childcare workers, engineers, construction trade workers, miners, policemen, teachers, politicians, rangers etc. They have open to them pathways through the NTCET, The IB Diploma and VETiS.

SACE Board chief executive Dr Paul Kilvert said recently to a gathering of School Principals in Darwin "We are building pathways for young people" but he added "Don't get daunted by the problems, Keep focused on what is going well".

In this paper, contrary to the line of thought in Dr Kilvert's statement, I challenge you to consider the dilemmas and tensions surrounding the management of VET in SACE (or NTCET).

I ask you to examine how closely aligned the rhetoric is to reality for an Indigenous student from a remote community whose family invests time and energy, and for whom the Government invests funds, concerning their participation in one of the possible pathways to a vocation – VET in Schools.

The VET pathway through School

Let's briefly recap on the administration of the SACE (or NTCET). The NTCET is based upon the South Australian Certification of Education (SACE) which is administered by the SACE Board of South Australia. There are two stages of the SACE:

- Stage 1, which most students do in Year 11, apart from the Personal Learning Plan subject, which most students do in Year 10
- Stage 2, which most students do in Year 12.

The SACE/NTCET is formal recognition that a student has successfully completed the requirements for senior secondary education in the Northern Territory. Students receive a record of achievement detailing subject grades; and, in many cases but not all, a Tertiary Education Statement including an Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR).

The ATAR is used specifically by universities for tertiary entrance purposes only. It is calculated by the South Australian Tertiary Admissions Centre. University aggregates are ranked and converted to an ATAR. The ATAR is an indicator of how well a particular student has performed relative to other students who have qualified for an ATAR in the same year.

For the purposes of this paper I will now move into focusing on a key feature of the SACE: *“the capacity it offers students to include vocational education and training in their study programs”* (Policy: Recognition Arrangements for VET in the SACE P.1).

The recognition arrangements for VET in the SACE, as set out in the above-mentioned policy, have the following strategic purposes:

- To increase the responsiveness of the SACE and senior secondary schooling to meet the needs and interests of individual students.
- To enable students to plan and undertake study programs consistent with their post-school ambitions and aspirations.
- To encourage more students to complete the SACE.
- To support students who seek to achieve other nationally recognised qualifications at the same time as they are studying for the SACE.

This policy has been framed in the context of the following South Australian legislation (p.2):

- The *SACE Board of South Australia Act 1983*, which governs the operation of the SACE Board and provides the legislative principles that underpin this policy.
- The *Training and Skills Development Act 2008*, which governs the operation of the Training and Skills Commission and, in particular, its role in regulating apprenticeships and traineeships, including school-based apprenticeships and traineeships.
- The *Education (Compulsory Education Age) Amendment Act 2007*, which provides the legislative framework for the compulsory participation in education of young people up to the age of 17 in South Australia.

The purpose of the recognition arrangements for VET in the SACE is to help students to build coherent and meaningful pathways in the SACE through VET. These arrangements encourage students to complete, or make significant progress towards completing, VET qualifications (p.2).

Students who want to include VET as part of their SACE are encouraged to carefully choose VET units of competency that are appropriate to their needs and interests, and that will advance their plans for post-SACE study and/or work (p.3).

To complete the SACE, students must achieve 200 SACE credits, 180 of which can be gained through the recognition arrangements for VET in the SACE.

Within these 180 VET-based credits students must also fulfil the literacy and numeracy requirements of the SACE. The remaining 10 (NT)-20 SACE credits are derived from the Personal Learning Plan (10 credits) and the Research Project (10 credits), the latter optional in the NT. Students can use a vocational context in completing these subjects.

Students can use Board-recognised courses to meet the literacy and numeracy requirements of the SACE (P.3). These courses must be consistent with the Australian Core Skills Framework (ACSF) level 3 descriptions in writing, reading, and numeracy. The SACE Board will provide a list of courses that meet these requirements.

Students can use a maximum of two qualifications at Certificate I level to gain credits towards the completion of the SACE. There is no limit to the number of qualifications at Certificate II level or higher that students can use to gain credits towards the completion of the SACE.

In most cases, a VET qualification will be recognised at either Stage 1 or at the Stage 2 level (P.4).

Let's regroup: to complete and gain the SACE or NTCET a student can, within the VETiS programs or elsewhere, use VET competencies or courses at Certificate 1 through to IV level (the latter, as a general principle, at Stage 2).

Board-recognised courses are to be found via the VET Recognition Register, a key tool in the recognition arrangements for VET and is a list posted on the SACE Board website so that schools and the public:

□ can identify whether the SACE credits granted for completed VET will be recognised towards Stage 1 or Stage 2 of the SACE.

□ can get an indication of how many SACE credits may be granted for the completion of a particular VET qualification.

Care is taken to mention in the list that schools are advised by Industry Skills Boards that care needs to be taken if selecting certain courses such as Certificate II in Captive Animals or Cert III in Home and Community Care as factors such as age-appropriateness, industrial implications, etc., are to be taken into account.

Let's look at a fact concerning this:

In 2011 the NT had 1700 students between the ages of 15-19 (across Middle and senior years of schooling) enrol in VETiS. 32.4 % were Indigenous students (or 550 students).

In the Northern Territory in 2012 there were 161 Aboriginal students out of a population of 963

Stage 2 students. Data would indicate that NT students significantly use VET to gain the NTCET qualification (510 students in 2012 studied a form of VET in Stage 2).

Let's look at another fact concerning this:

With the new SACE introduced in 2011 only completion of the VET level Cert 111 course counted if a Stage 2 SACE/NTCET student wished to receive an ATAR. The VET Recognition Register found on the SACE website acknowledged Certificate I and II at Stage 1 level for credit points (70 hours equates to ten credit points) and *almost only Certificate III (basic trade entry level course) at Stage 2*. As mentioned earlier, there is no limit to the number of qualifications at Certificate II level or higher that students can use to gain credits towards the completion of the SACE *but if a student wishes to receive an ATAR in addition to achieving the actual certificate then they must complete a Certificate III or higher level VET course*.

One must ask the question: What happened in 2012 with respect to Indigenous students and gaining of an ATAR? 61 Aboriginal students (38%) of the Indigenous cohort of 161 achieved an ATAR – this was a significant drop in Aboriginal achievement from 2011 when 60% of Stage 2 NT Aboriginal students achieved an ATAR.

The most obvious question to follow this is: How many students used the vocational pathway of Certificate level III to gain an ATAR? Recall earlier facts that, of the NTCET Completer cohort in 2012, 510 students (both Indigenous and non-Indigenous) at Stage 2 in the NT were studying some form of VET but, and this is incredible, only 32 students (18 female, 14 male) used Cert III level or higher to gain an ATAR. (0.06%) and only 8 students (5 female, 3 male) used only VET for 60 credits at Stage 2.

The 2005 SACE Review foreshadowed that for many students a *greater* (my emphasis) component of VET studies would be an appropriate aspect of their SACE. However, in the First

Year Evaluation of the (new) SACE (2012), there is a noticeable trend in SA against this aspiration (p. 110). I would add that there is a significant trend against this aspiration in the Northern Territory as well. I wish to now make a statement: I believe that the evidence is there to state explicitly that there is a disparity between the rhetoric and the reality with respect to VET in the SACE/NTCET.

You may at this point ask what all the fuss is about? Most of the NTCET Completers are getting a certificate. In fact 87.5% of the cohort of Aboriginal student potential NTCET Completers (140/161) completed Stage 2 with a certificate with, as mentioned previously, 61 of these students achieving an ATAR. Therefore, 80 Aboriginal students received an NTCET certificate in the NT without an ATAR. As an aside, within the general NT Stage 2 population in 2012, 185 students did not receive an NTCET even though they gained 200 credits towards it. They did not complete the compulsory requirements.

So I ask: Do students care about an ATAR? During the course of research undertaken for this paper a comprehensive 87% of students (total student cohort surveyed was 230 Stage 1 and 2 students) agreed that an ATAR was important, or very important, to them. One Aboriginal student commented,

“ We have to be treated the same as the other students; we need to show that we can get there. It is important for our families to see that we have made it the same way”.

Almost more importantly I ask: Is there the opportunity in the new SACE for all students to gain an ATAR using VET pathways?

Dr Paul Kilvert (2013) remarked *“Policy changes to include higher levels of VET is working. There are a wider range of pathways now as previously VETiS was at lower levels; no longer cherry-picking competencies, now we are beyond Certificate I and completing VET with purpose”.*

This paper proposes that the Stage 2 VET level restrictions placed in the new SACE for achievement of a certificate and an ATAR score has in fact marginalised the students who would otherwise have expected to have been accomplishing VET competencies at Stage 2 level. Indeed students in School Based Apprenticeships (SBAs) are indeed completing VET with purpose but they are in the minority, this is a fact.

A student who has English as their second or third language, such as an Aboriginal student from a remote community, who is counselled into VET competencies during Middle School and leaves behind mainstream subjects in such areas as Science and Humanities by Year 10 because of VET studies, will find themselves with a major dilemma at Year 12 or Stage 2 level. A number of factors mean that they are unable to receive an ATAR for their studies if that planned study includes a form of VET. Why? What choices do they have?

Let's consider a student and the reality of their VETiS experience “with purpose” within the Northern Territory/South Australian context.

Student A in Year 11-12	Student B in Year 11	Student C in Year 12
Remote community NT	Remote community NT	Remote community NT
Year 11, been at KC 5 years	Year 11, been at KC 3 years	Year 12, been at KC 4 years
Two competencies from Certificate I in Food Processing (Retail Baking)	Competencies from Cert I in Business and Cert II in Retail Make-up and Skin Care	Certificate III in Media; 180 hours of competencies (one day/wk three terms) plus extra 60 hours of extra literacy tuition to complete, achieved an ATAR of 11.8.
Studies: Integrated Learning Creative Arts - Music	Issues: literacy requirements hard to meet -recognition of Aboriginal knowledge difficult	The students speak in language then translate to teacher; see page 5 Integrated Learning Subject Outline: recognition ATSI
English Pathways (18.3% in Sem1, 19% in Sem 2, NT students undertook this at Stage 1 in 2012)	They and their classmates do not have the literacy and numeracy skills to undertake a stage 2 program as yet but if they stay another year they may do.	Literacy for Work and Community Life (13.2% in Sem1, 14.9% in Sem 2, NT students undertook this at Stage 1 in 2012)
Maths Pathways (14.4% in Sem1, 11% in Sem 2, NT students undertook this at Stage 1 in 2012)	Meeting compulsory requirements. Students work really hard to satisfy these. Sometimes studying twelve months not one semester.	Numeracy for Work and Community Life (16.2% in Sem1, 26.2% in Sem 2, NT students undertook this at Stage 1 in 2012)
Workplace Practices Personal Learning Plan (PLP)		

These three examples indicate the variety in both literacy level and aspirations.

Now for a reality check: a discussion concerning funding for VET in Schools. It is indeed a complex area.

Length of courses: in order for a student to complete a Certificate III course, in most instances it would require them to begin their studies much earlier than Year 12/Stage 2. . If a student is counselled into studying VET competencies during Middle School then an *unintended consequence* of this is that he/she leaves behind mainstream subjects in such areas as Science and Humanities by Year 10 because of their VET studies. The NT Government is planning a Middle School VET Centre at Nightcliff MS where two VET practitioners will offer VET competencies. What subjects will be withdrawn or not available to them, and consequently absent from their sphere of academic knowledge? They can't fit in everything on the timetable. As mentioned earlier, such *unintended consequences*, as mentioned in the First Year Evaluation of the SACE (2012, P111) as potentially a longer term trend, are the reality unless we do something about it.

Funding base: funding is on an annual basis. Our remote students are unable to complete the programs on an annual basis for many academic and cultural reasons. An ACER publication in May 2010, the Investment in Vocational Education and Training Report to the Board of Skills Australia (Noonan, P *et al*) states that the issue of an inadequate (financial) framework for VETiS has been under debate but unresolved for well over a decade (p.39). This statement is followed by a number of recommendations and I believe some jurisdictions are picking them up. However, there remain a number of *dilemmas and tensions* associated with inadequate funding and the outcome is inevitably that the students miss out. Indeed, their *aspirations and dreams* are not met after 5-6 years of secondary schooling. What an indictment on our education system that is, in fact, an Education and Training system in 2013.

Let me give you an example: the NT Government provides an overview of RTOs funded to deliver VETiS in the Northern Territory. It can be found on the Dept. Education and Children's Services (DECS) website. However, we are yet to receive the 2013 allocation even though we are into 2013 Term 2 in a week's time. So I must rely on the 2012 Allocation of Funding for VETiS for the purpose of this paper. The anticipated number and variety of Certificate I and II programs are included. But the interesting point I wish to make is that out of 209 offerings (lots of double-ups due to geographic dispersion) there are only eight Certificate III programs publicly funded for our secondary students.

These eight courses in 2012 were:

Certificate III in Hospitality (Alice Springs), Media (Alice Springs), Music (Alice Springs), Children's Services (Alice Springs and Katherine), Tourism (Darwin), Beauty Services (Darwin), Fitness (Darwin and Katherine), Information Technology (Darwin) and Agriculture (Darwin).

Let me give you another example of a student's reality check: Student D is a Year 12 Aboriginal student in Darwin; she comes from a remote community; her aspiration is to study Health Worker training because that is how she sees that she can contribute to an improvement in the life of her community. But there is no funded Certificate in Health Worker training in VETiS. She cannot afford to pay fees, which is what a student must do in Stage 2 if their preferred Certificate III course is not publicly funded through the VETiS allocation. So what is she advised to do? She looks at the range of eight NT publicly funded courses (VETiS) and chooses Certificate III in Tourism, mainly because she can complete this program within the twelve months. It is a reasonably short course. She chooses this program because that is her only option. This is her reality. So she and a fellow peer are now undertaking a Certificate III program in Tourism order to get an ATAR in order to enter university to study their preferred vocation, Health Worker training, or even nursing. It would have been so much better had her schooling been able to prepare her for her chosen vocation.

The irony in all this of course is that once you obtain a Certificate III in a vocation then you are well on the way in that vocation and will enter VET at tertiary level based on the achievement of the Certificate III and such entry is not dependent on achieving an ATAR. But this only applies to the vocation of that certificate.

Let's regroup: With the new SACE introduced in 2011 only completion of the VET level Cert 111 course counted if a Stage 2 SACE/NTCET student wished to receive an ATAR. This raises a further question: I ask you to consider how is an Aboriginal student, who is trying to enter university to study a course of their preference, currently at Year 12/Stage 2 of their secondary schooling after many years of perseverance and overcoming disadvantage, with their head full of aspirations and dreams, developed because of their motivation to raise themselves and their family out of the poverty and disillusionment that is the remote community of 2013 – how are they to complete the SACE/NTCET with an ATAR when they have been advised and channeled into completing VET competencies and non-mainstream subjects because of their developing English literacy? I will tell you what their reality is: they go back into the mainstream system and study mainstream minimum literacy level subjects such as Integrated Learning, Creative Arts, Workplace Practices, Numeracy for Work and Community Life etc. They do not get to study any further VET because it will not count towards an ATAR. They have done all they can in VET at Stage 1 and some at Stage 2 but the restriction to only consider Certificate level III as counting towards an ATAR at Stage 2 results in them leaving the VET system and returning to study a mixture of subjects that would not have been their first choice in Stage 2.

And that is the life of an Aboriginal student from a remote community whose family support them attending a boarding school for their secondary studies. I will leave it to your imagination to consider how well aware are both the student and their parents in the intricacies of their secondary schooling experience and the decisions that are made along the way because of bureaucratic restrictions placed on completing one's secondary schooling.

What of the *aspirations and dreams* of an Aboriginal student who remains on community because of family or isolation or cultural reasons. What hope have they to enter university or chase a preferred vocation on the basis of their personal endeavours and educational achievements? The NT Dept. Education and Children's Services is now an RTO (since 2012) and will be delivering VETiS programs to communities, but the only programs on their range of Scope are at Certificate I and II levels (see website). Again the remote and regional communities miss out on appropriate funding and course delivery that should be available for all Australians.

The last point I wish to make concerning funding of VETiS is the matter of English Literacy support: usually provided by the school with limited access to funding to support this for an extended length of time. During my research for this paper the point was raised across several fronts on the lack of recognition in SACE of Aboriginal knowledge and experience. I have seen examples of Integrated Learning being focussed on an Aboriginal or cultural aspect. This is a good teacher making use of the flexibility of these subjects to use the student's current underpinning knowledge. However this is not the point that has been raised as a comment in the survey undertaken for this paper. Students consider it discriminatory that they are expected to participate in very Western-style journal writing in English, give oral speeches of ten minutes or more and write lengthy essays with little or no consideration that they are very fluent in their mother tongue and knowledgeable of many things Aboriginal, which we have no ability to assess. At this point in time it is difficult for an educator to give credence to their students' knowledge of Aboriginal culture and life skills. Is there a way around this such that a student can receive a SACE/NTCET certificate that recognises their Aboriginal heritage, knowledge and

language skills? In their words, they feel marginalised, on the outer of our secondary schooling system of achievement.

Conclusion

I believe that the evidence indicates that an urgent review is necessary of the requirement for a Certificate III level for students who choose the VET pathway to gain an ATAR. There needs to be more research done on the effect of introducing VET courses on the provision of other mainstream subjects, given the limitations of the school timetable; and what the loss of those mainstream subjects means to student preparedness for further vocations and studies. In remote areas the effect of the new SACE on the ability of students choosing VETiS to gain an ATAR needs to be examined. A leaf from the book of the International Baccalaureate, which allows use of the student's mother tongue, could be taken in reframing assessment requirements in both VET and SACE in schools where there is a large attendance of Aboriginal students from remote areas. Experience with adult VET learners in Aboriginal communities shows that Training Package Cert I and II assessment requirements can already cope with this. Furthermore, there needs to be a greater nexus between the SACE Board and the funding and regulatory bodies, in order to avoid the situation we have where rules developed in theory are not able to be complied with in practice.

References

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