

Building foundations for occupations or one-way tickets to low skilled jobs? How effective is VET in Schools?

Kira Clarke, Melbourne Graduate School of Education, University of Melbourne

Abstract

Vocational Education and Training in Schools (VETiS) is playing an increasing role in the senior secondary education of Australian young people. Now more than ever before, large numbers of students in their final years of schooling are using and relying on VETiS programs to not only facilitate their school completion but also to enhance their successful transition to jobs and further study. As users of VETiS, they have expectations that the vocational skills and qualifications they attain will be building blocks for direct entry to sustainable employment and further and higher level study. With increasing numbers of young people selecting a VETiS pathway, the question must be asked, to what extent can current models of provision build effective foundations for access to the career and training futures to which VETiS students aspire.

This paper draws on findings from a current three year NCVET funded study of models of VETiS to analyse the capacity of VETiS to play an effective role in youth transitions. The discussion of the efficacy of VETiS for young people is centred around three key themes: the contested purpose of VETiS; the uneasy fit of VETiS within structures of senior secondary education; and the complexity of the inherently cross-sectoral nature of VETiS delivery.

Introduction

Vocational Education and Training in Schools (VET in Schools) enrolments have grown rapidly in recent years, increasing three fold between the mid-1990s and 2004 (Lamb & Vickers 2006; Service Skills Australia 2010). VET in Schools plays an increasingly visible role in shaping the landscape of senior secondary education in Australia (Te Riele & Crump 2002). More than ever before, large numbers of students in their final years of schooling are using and relying on VET in Schools programs to not only facilitate their school completion but also to enhance their successful transition to jobs and post-school education and training. As users of VET in Schools, students, and their families have expectations that the vocational skills and qualifications they attain while still at school, will be building blocks for direct entry to sustainable employment and further and higher level study (Clarke & Polesel 2013).

The question begs asking: to what extent are these expectations matched by the reality of VET in Schools' currency in the labour market and the potential for articulation from a certificate obtained during school to higher-level certificates post-school? Put simply, how effective is VET in Schools? This paper seeks to present an illustration of three key dilemmas for VET in Schools that are potentially undermining its capacity to provide the job and further training outcomes that young people expect. These dilemmas include: the contested purpose of VET in Schools, the uneasy fit of VET in Schools within structures of senior secondary education, and the complexity of the inherently cross-sectoral nature of VET in Schools delivery (Clarke, 2013 forthcoming).

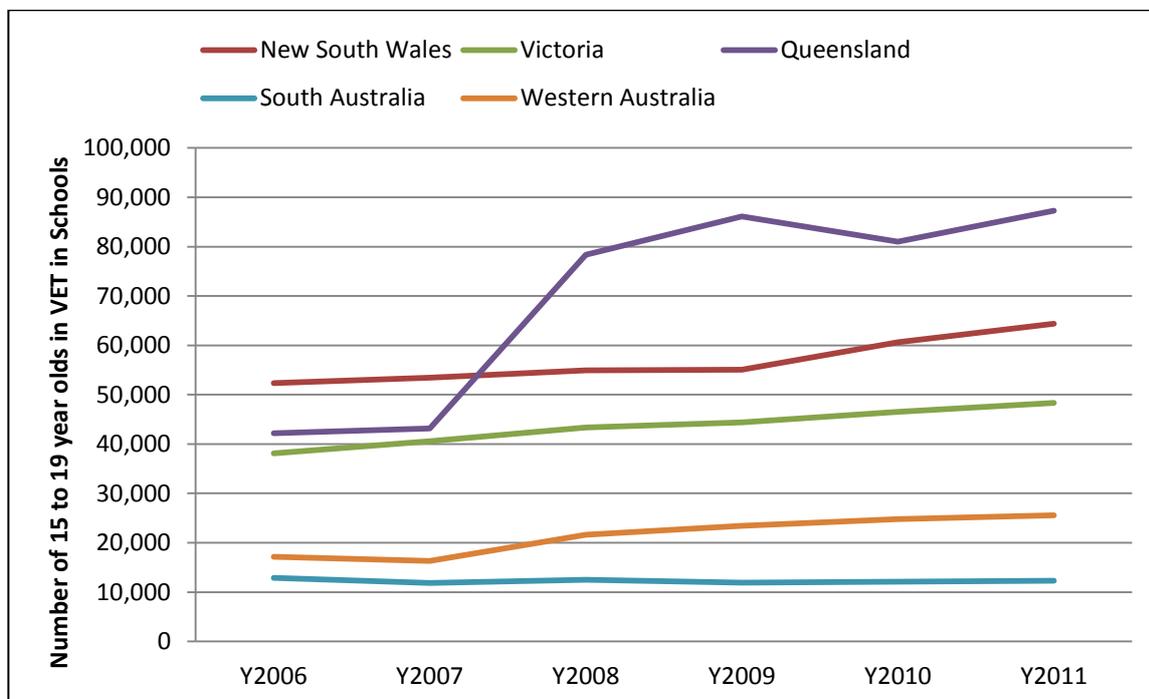
Setting the scene

In setting the scene for the discussion of the role of VET in Schools in enhancing outcomes for young people, it is important to consider the patterns and trends in participation. VET in Schools participation data provides an illustration of the current patterns of engagement in VET in Schools across different states and in relation to the broader educational context for young Australians. This participation data also highlights some flaws in commonly held perceptions and expectations of VET in Schools, namely its capacity for retention and engagement of students from low socio-economic backgrounds.

VET in Schools programs are available within the senior secondary certificates of all Australian states and territories and Australian senior secondary students are participating in VET in Schools in increasing numbers (see Figure 1 below).

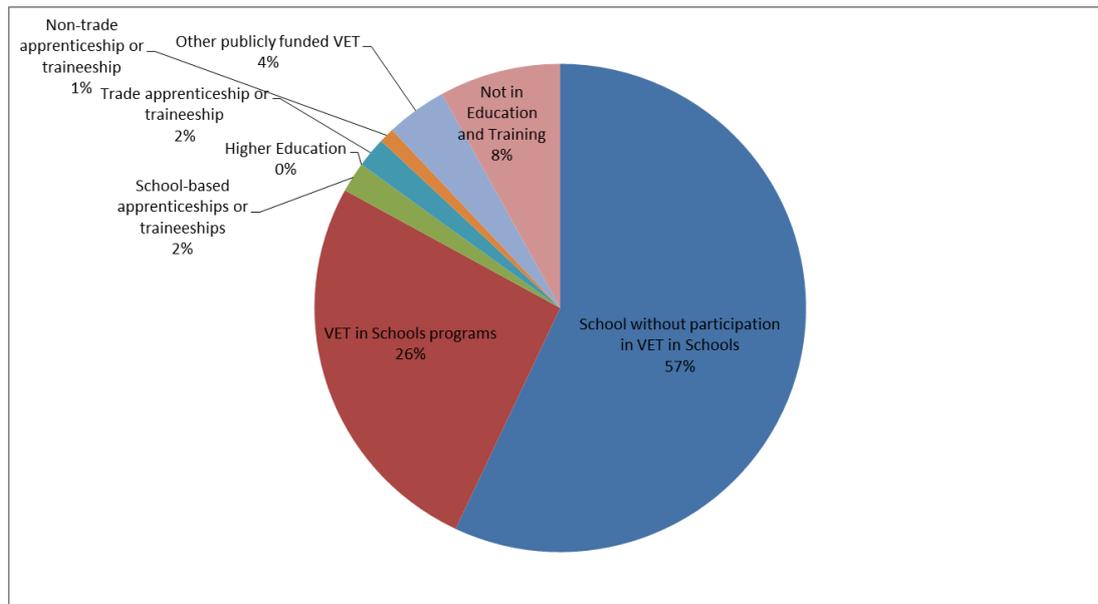
VET in Schools is just one part of the broader role of VET for 15 to 19 year olds. While the focus of this paper is on the ways in which VET in Schools may enhance outcomes for school completers, it is important to note the limited role that VET in Schools is playing for the 15 – 19 year old cohort overall. VET in Schools students and school-based apprentices and trainees account for only 14 per cent of the total Australian 15 to 19 year old cohort (ACARA 2011). Amongst 16 year olds, VET in Schools students and school-based apprentices and trainees in 2009 made up only 28 per cent of the age cohort (see Figure 2 below). The crucial point to recognise here is that there are more than 127,000 young people aged between 15 – 19 years who have not completed a senior school certificate who are studying VET outside schools (as early school leavers) (NCVER Vocstats 2011). These are young people who are opting out of a school completion certificate to engage in VET outside of school.

Figure 1 Number of VET in Schools students 2007-2011 by state (New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland, Western Australia and South Australia)



Source: Vocstats 2011

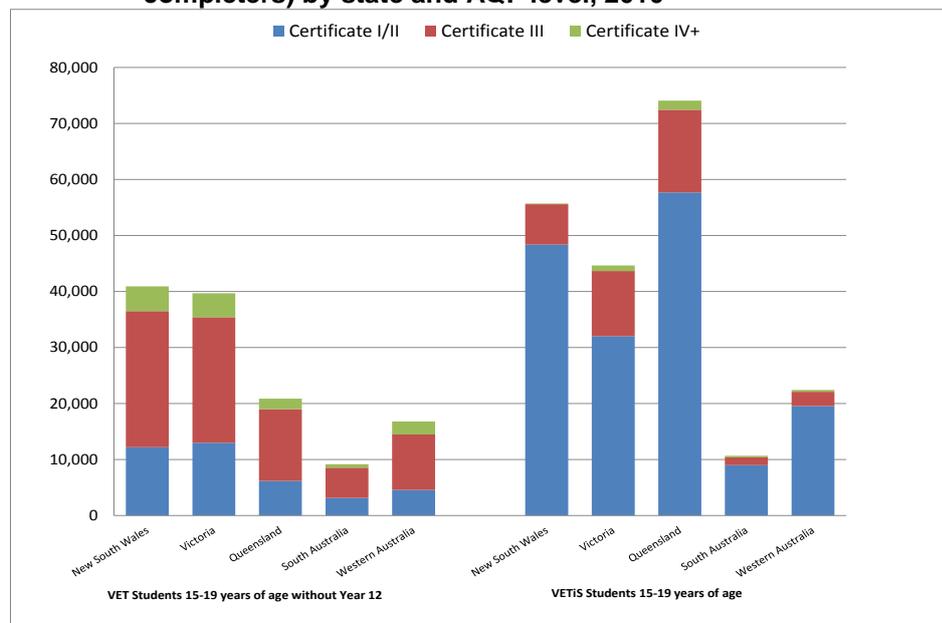
Figure 2 Estimate of participation of Australians, aged 16, in education and training by education and training activity, August 2009



Source: ACARA (2011) National Report on Schooling Additional Statistics 2009

If we narrow our focus and look in detail at the VET activity of 15 to 19 year olds (excluding school completers) we can see that VET in Schools students make up the majority of 15 to 19 year olds in VET (see Figure 3 below)¹. Participation in VET in Schools varies by state and by the level of Australian Qualification Framework (AQF) qualification levels in which 15 to 19 year olds participate, with Queensland and Victoria having larger numbers of students undertaking training at Certificate III and above.

Figure 3 VET in Schools and VET participation of 15-19 year olds (excluding school completers) by state and AQF level, 2010

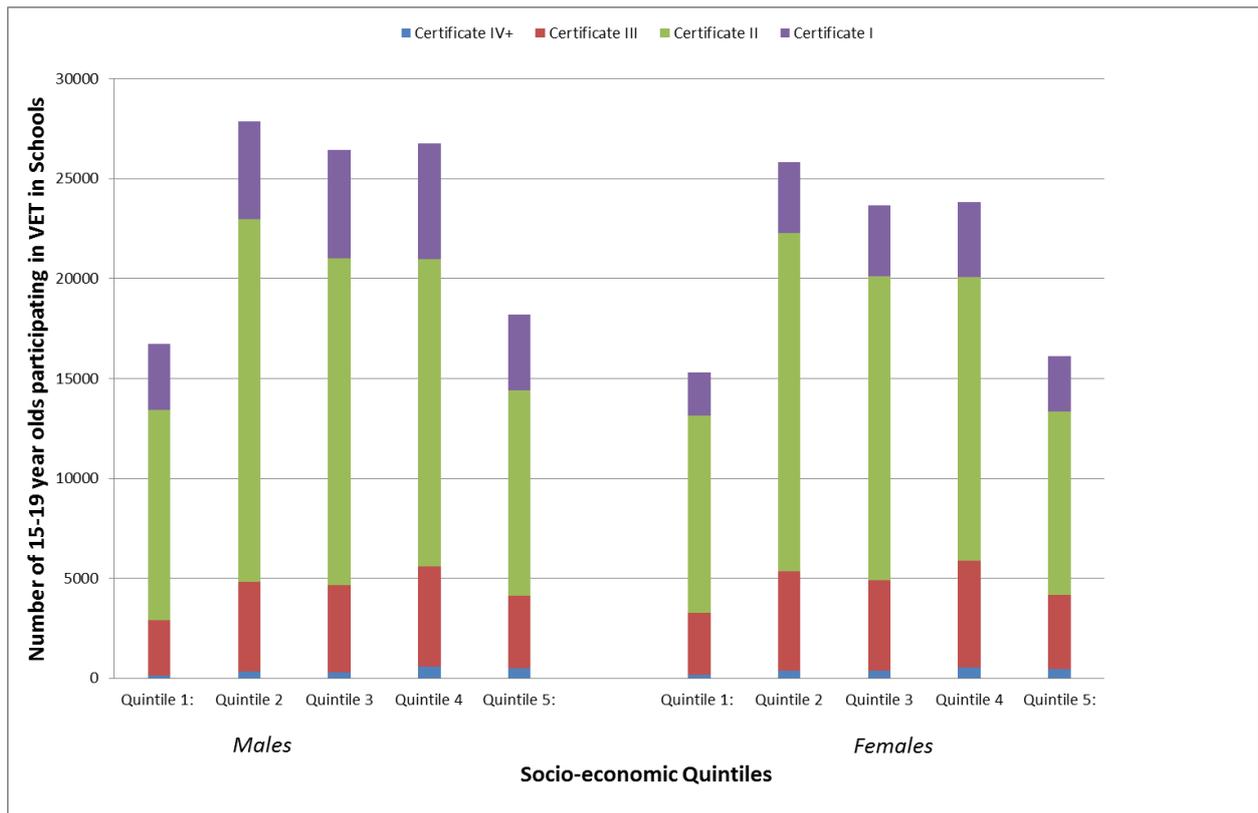


Source: NCVET Vocstats, 2011

¹ Queensland stands out in this context, with the overwhelming majority of the 15-19 year old participation in VET undertaken through VET in Schools. Queensland has a high rate of VET in Schools participation, with more than 60 per cent of school completers also completing a VET qualification (Queensland Department of Education 2012).

VET in Schools often suffers from a stigma of being a second-class option for school students (Goodson 1993; Ti Riele & Crump 2002). One factor often contributing to this stigma is the perception that VET in Schools is the ‘pathway of the working class’ and is dominated by the lowest socio-economic background students. As shown in Figure 4 below, these perceptions are not entirely accurate, with students from the lowest socio-economic quintile outnumbered in VET in Schools participation by students from the highest socio-economic quintile.

Figure 4 Number of 15 to 19 year old VET students, Australia wide, by AQF level, by quintile of relative disadvantage, 2011



Source: NCVET Vocstats, 2011

Methodology

This paper draws on findings and data from two studies of VET in Schools. The first is a recently completed three-year Australian Research Council Discovery Project (2010-2012) which tracked a cohort of 160 Year 11 VET in Schools students. This study involved interviews with students, school teachers and staff and policymakers.

The second study is part of the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) Consortium Research Program, ‘*Vocations: the link between post-compulsory education and the labour market*’. The three-year (2011-2013) strand of that program from which this paper stems is focused on ‘Entry to Vocations’ and how to improve occupational and further study outcomes from entry-level VET. This study has included consultations with VET in Schools policymakers and case studies of four models of VET in Schools, one each from Victoria, South Australia, New South Wales and Queensland (see Clarke and Volkoff 2012; Clarke 2012). The research team conducted a series of half-day roundtables with VET in Schools stakeholders in Victoria, South Australia, New South Wales, Queensland and Western

Australia. These roundtables, conducted during August 2012, brought together stakeholders from education and training authorities, boards of study, public and private registered training organisations (RTOs), group training organisations (GTOs), schools from all three sectors (public, Catholic and independent) and representatives of peak industry and skills advisory bodies (n=138). Targeted consultations with industry were also conducted, including with representatives from Industry Training Advisory Bodies (ITABs) and Industry Skills Councils (ISCs).

Findings and discussion

The contested purpose of VET in Schools

The key question of the purpose of VET in Schools relates to the expectations we have of the role of VET in Schools within the broader architecture of the senior secondary certificates and within our conceptualisation of Australian youth transitions. What is it we expect VET in Schools to do? And most importantly, are the purposes of VET in Schools congruent with the broader educational purposes of senior secondary schooling?

Feedback from VET in Schools stakeholders indicates that VET in Schools is currently performing many and varied roles and that there is a lack of consensus regarding the effectiveness with which current models could achieve success in these various roles. The roles that VET in Schools was described as currently performing included:

- An alternative way to complete school (retention strategy);
- Career exploration;
- Training for part-time work for future university students;
- A pathway to mid-level VET and tertiary study post school;
- A less demanding subject for those students taking predominantly academic senior secondary programs;
- A qualification for gaining employment post school; and
- Enhancing transition to employment based training (e.g. apprenticeships, traineeships, armed forces, police force) (Clarke 2013 forthcoming).

Evidence from tracking studies of school completers in Queensland (Queensland Department of Education and Training 2011 and Victoria (Rothman et al 2011) suggests that outcomes for VET in Schools students continue to be weak. Despite this, there is still a belief amongst stakeholders that VET in Schools can play a role for direct entry from school to the labour market. Problematising this perceived purpose of VET in Schools, there was an acknowledgement amongst stakeholders that current provision of VET in Schools was not providing strong links and pathways to employment, particularly full-time employment and/or employment requiring mid-level skills.

Several other of these purposes identified above are also problematic. The capacity of VET in Schools to be an effective retention strategy is an example of this. The significant numbers of young people continuing to leave school early and accessing VET without completing a senior secondary certificate, indicate that while VET in Schools may be working as a retention strategy for some, there is still a significant cohort of young people for whom it is not necessarily the effective retention strategy that it is perceived to be (NCVER Vocstats 2011).

Stakeholders from schools and system level departments and authorities were vocal in their assertion that VET in Schools should play a role in supporting pathways from school directly into employment. Despite the evidence that employment outcomes of VET in Schools students were predominantly low skilled and low paid, employer and industry stakeholders described these initial post-school job experiences as an important stepping stone for young people and an opportunity for them to develop and demonstrate employability skills (e.g. communication skills, presentation, punctuality). Conversely, some consulted stakeholders, particularly policymakers, were sceptical as to the extent to which young people moved up and on from these low level initial jobs. Further complicating the role of VET in Schools as a pathway to work was the issue of structured workplace learning. There was overwhelming concern from stakeholders, particularly those from providers and industry bodies, that the limited access to and provision of integrated workplace learning within current models of VET in Schools weakened the role that VET in Schools could play in supporting entry to occupations directly from school. Stakeholders highlighted that the predominantly entry-level training completed through VET in Schools provided limited exposure to real work situations and resulted in limited capacity for students to enter the workplaces job ready. Stakeholders emphasised that workplace learning that is effectively integrated with the theoretical learning of VET is crucial to students' understanding of the occupational requirements in their chosen field. Currently there is no common approach to the integration of workplace learning in VET in Schools across Australia. Stakeholders from schools and VET providers described significant logistical challenges in arranging relevant workplace learning opportunities for their students. A historically limited knowledge within schools of industry expectations and requirements was seen to be a particular barrier to the provision of appropriate workplace learning opportunities.

VET in Schools within the architectures of the senior secondary certificates of education

While on the ground in schools, students may experience their VET in Schools programs in similar ways across Australian states and territories, how VET in Schools is located within the architecture of the senior secondary certificates varies significantly by jurisdiction. Despite reforms in the last decade to increase the recognition of vocational learning in schools within the senior secondary certificates, VET in Schools still struggles within the constraints of the senior secondary certificates, particularly in intensity and quality (Barnett & Ryan 2005a; Barnett & Ryan 2005b). Key differences that exist between states include the regulation/registration of schools to provide VET in Schools programs, the breadth and type of vocational programs available through VET in Schools, the contribution of VET in Schools programs to the completion of requirements for senior secondary certificates and the role, if any, that vocational programs play in the calculation of the Australian Tertiary Entrance Rank (ATAR) or equivalent.

In the stakeholders roundtables conducted in 2012, there was critical discussion of how VET in Schools was accommodated within the current structures of the senior secondary certificates. Criticism of the senior secondary certificates differed across the different states, however there were several points of consensus. The first point on which most stakeholders agreed was that vocational learning was needed earlier in secondary schooling. There were several reasons for this. By age 16 or 17, when most young people commence their senior secondary studies, patterns of disengagement or dissatisfaction with schooling can already be entrenched, therefore limiting the engagement or retention capacity of VET in Schools. By the senior secondary years, changes to subjects or program choice can often have

implications for school completion and/or access to post-school study, thereby limiting the effectiveness of VET in Schools as a taster or career exploration program. The opportunity to explore and experience vocational learning prior to making subject selections for a senior secondary program, was described by stakeholders as being important and currently lacking within most school programs. Research on the effectiveness of careers advice programs in Victoria, including for 15 to 19 year olds in VET revealed a serious lack of knowledge and understanding amongst young people about what employment in their chosen occupations involved in practice and required as preparation (Sweet et al. 2010). Earlier exposure to VET in Schools programs could go some way to addressing this lack of career knowledge amongst young people.

Of course, a key barrier to exposing younger secondary students to vocational programs is that current provision ties vocational learning to AQF qualifications and senior secondary units of study and in turn ties the participation in and completion of those qualifications and units of study to school completion. In contemplating earlier commencement of vocational learning, school-based stakeholders understandably expressed concern regarding the possibility of Year 8 students commencing their senior secondary studies at such a young age. Coherent approaches to vocational learning in the junior years of secondary school require VET in Schools models that do not use senior secondary units of study as the sole framework for vocational learning.

Cross-sectoral nature of VETiS delivery

VET in Schools involves and relies on many different stakeholders for its success. Despite VET in Schools reliance on inherently cross-sectoral cooperation and collaboration (e.g. between schools and industry, between schools and RTOs), there appears to be a lack of awareness of the role, contribution and needs of other stakeholders on all sides. During the consultations for the two research studies, schools described a lack of awareness of industry and employer needs, while industry stakeholders described a lack of understanding of how schools operated and where VET in Schools sat within the secondary school context. There was also confusion among some stakeholders, not only about the role played by different stakeholders but also about the structural and logistic requirements of provision of VET in Schools. One example of this lack of understanding was the description provided by one industry representative of VET qualifications in their industry area being offered within senior secondary programs despite the industry body highlighting and reporting on the limited employment and further study opportunities for students post-school. The response from the relevant school stakeholders was that schools are under pressure to provide the program that will engage and retain students, whether they effectively serve their long term education and employment goals or not. This tension highlights the range of roles that VET in Schools is expected to perform and the problematic relationship and tensions between these roles. Trust and understanding between VET in Schools stakeholders were described as vital to strengthening the outcomes of students using VET in Schools as a pathway. There was strong consensus at all roundtables that stronger relationships and better lines of communication were needed to enhance the effectiveness of the cross-sectoral models of VET in Schools.

Looking forward (Policy implications)

Current programs of VET in Schools are complicated by difficult relationships with the senior secondary certificates within which they sit and perceptions that as a model of school

level vocational learning, it play multiple roles effectively. A lack of understanding and trust between the various stakeholders is also weakening the efficacy of VET in Schools. With these challenges and dilemmas in mind, what does this mean for strengthening approaches to VET in Schools?

In light of the data highlighting poor labour market outcomes for VET in Schools students, VET in Schools could be strengthened through a stronger focus (at both a policy and practice level) on its role as a foundational pathway to further vocational training. There is great potential for strong links between school level vocational learning and post-school VET, and for stronger and collaborative links between schools and RTOs, particularly Technical and Further Education (TAFE) institutes.

Despite rapidly increasing uptake of VET in Schools programs within senior secondary certificates, there is still significant progress to be made in the integration of vocational curriculum with disciplinary learning. Providers and employers consulted as part of the NCVET study were vocal in their concern that VET in Schools students were leaving secondary school without sufficient disciplinary knowledge to support their vocational skills and/or vocational learning at a higher level. The introduction of vocational education programs earlier in secondary school offers some potential for innovative approaches to integration between vocational and disciplinary learning. This early exposure could be enhanced and capitalised on by a more thematic approach to senior secondary education, in which complementary vocational and academic subjects are packaged together to support access to further study post-school.

The expectation held by many students and their families that VET in Schools is the ticket to a job (Clarke & Polese 2013), is reinforced by the fact that VET in Schools programs use AQF qualifications as the structural basis for content of senior secondary vocational subjects. One possible shift to address is the development of a purpose built school-based VET curriculum that is not based on national training packages. A purpose built school-based vocational curriculum could strengthen VET in Schools by being more closely aligned to the broader preparatory role of the senior secondary certificates.

A key theme evident throughout the consultations for this research centred around concerns that VET in Schools students were not 'job ready'. This lack of job readiness was perceived to be due to both a lack of exposure to workplaces and to the low AQF level of qualifications that are available through VET in Schools. While many stakeholders expressed concerns about a lack of job readiness, there were very few solutions suggested. Increasing numbers of VET in Schools participants means increasing demand for structured workplace learning opportunities, and therefore an increased burden on both schools and employers to negotiate and maintain quality work placement arrangements. Putting aside the often controversial possibility of financial incentives for employers, one necessary element to addressing the employability and job readiness of VET in Schools students is the articulation, in policy, of a clear and explicit role for employers, and industry more broadly, in the development of vocational programs in schools.

A key issue emerging from the stakeholder consultations was an evident gap in understanding, communication and synergy between the vocational learning within schools and the vocational options available to students post-school. There also appeared to be an imbalance in effort between the relationships schools forge with universities and those with TAFE institutes, with evidently more focus on partnerships and relationships in support of

transitions to degree programs than in support of transitions to higher level VET programs. For this reason, a clearer and more defined role also is needed for RTOs. The role of RTOs in not only delivering the training but in informing and supporting student pathway choice is critical.

Conclusions

Growing numbers of young people rely on VET in Schools programs as an integral part of their navigation of a pathway from school. Available data and evidence suggest that despite policy rhetoric, the dominant outcome trends in VET in Schools are for young people to move into low skilled and low paid jobs. Feedback from stakeholders indicates that in seeking to enhance and strengthen VET in Schools programs, we need to take a step back and clarify the roles and purpose of VET in Schools. Stemming from a coherent understanding of the roles we do and do not expect VET in Schools to play, will be an opportunity to address some of the structural and systemic weaknesses of the current approaches. These include the location of VET in Schools within the architectures of the senior secondary certificates, the relationship between VET in Schools and the disciplinary curriculum, and the relationships and trust between VET in Schools stakeholders.

Underpinning all this however, needs to be a re-conceptualisation of VET in Schools, and the broader senior secondary certificate structures within which it sits, as not an educational end point, but the foundation stage to necessary post-school learning.

Acknowledgements

The author acknowledges the Chief Investigators of the Australian Research Council Discovery Project, Professor John Polesel, Dr Veronica Volkoff and Professor Jack Keating, and the lead Chief Investigator of the *Vocations* project, Associate Professor Leesa Wheelahan.

References

Australian Curriculum, Reporting and Assessment Authority (2011) National Report on Schooling in Australia 2009, Sydney, viewed 13 February 2012, http://www.acara.edu.au/verve/resources/National_Report_on_Schooling_in_Australia_2009.pdf.

Barnett, K & Ryan, R (2005a) *Lessons and challenges: Vocational education in schools – Research overview*, NCVET Adelaide.

Barnett, K & Ryan, R (2005b) 'Vocational education and training in Australia schools: Issues for practitioners' in *International Education Journal*, 5 (5) 89-104.

Clarke, K. (2013 forthcoming) *Entry to the vocations: strengthening VET in Schools*, NCVET, Adelaide.

Clarke, K. (2012) *Entry to vocations: efficacy of VET in Schools*, NCVET, Adelaide. <http://www.ncvet.edu.au/publications/2567.html>

- Clarke, K. and Polesel, J. (2013) 'Strong on retention, weak on outcomes: the impact of vocational education and training in schools', *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, iFirst, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01596306.2013.770251>
- Clarke, K. and Volkoff, V. (2012) *Entry to vocations: a discussion paper on current policy structures of VET in Schools*, for the NCVER Consortium Project 'Vocations: the link between post-compulsory education and the labour market'. <http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/2536.html>
- Goodson, I. (1993) *School subjects and curriculum changes: Studies in curriculum history*, London, Routledge.
- Lamb, S & Vickers, M (2006) *Variations in VET provision across Australian schools and their effects on student outcomes*, Longitudinal surveys of Australian Youth, research report n.48, Melbourne: ACER.
- National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) (2011) *Australian vocational education and training statistics: VET in Schools 2011 (Vocstats)*, NCVER, Adelaide..
- Queensland Department of Education and Training (2011) *Next Step 2010: A report on the destinations of Year 12 completers from 2010 in Queensland*, Brisbane, viewed 13 February 2012, <<http://education.qld.gov.au/nextstep/2010report.html>>.
- Rothman, S, Brown, J, Hillman, K, Marks, G, McKenzie, P, and Underwood, C (2011) *The On Track Survey 2010: Destinations of School Completers*, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, Melbourne, viewed 13 February 2012, <http://research.acer.edu.au/transitions_misc/10/>.
- Service Skills Australia (2010) *Services Industries: VET in Schools Project*, prepared by Services Skills SA.
- Sweet, R, Volkoff, V, Watts, AG, Keating, J, Helme, S., Rice, S. & Pannell, S (2010) *Making career development core business*, University of Melbourne for the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and the Department of Business and Innovation, State of Victoria, Melbourne.
- Te Riele, K & Crump, S (2002) 'Young people, education and hope: bringing VET in from the margins' in *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 6 (3), pp.251-266.