Choosing VET as a post-school activity: What are some influences on non-metropolitan students?

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Abstract

This paper draws on data from recently-completed research funded by the Victorian Department of Education and Training (DET) and undertaken in the State of Victoria, in six non-metropolitan communities: three in rural/regional areas and three in peri-urban areas. The rationale for the research was that, despite decades of effort, education outcomes for rural and regional areas in Australia remain well under the Australian average (Napthine et al, 2019), partly because so many young people need to leave home to attend tertiary education (McKenzie, 2014). There is almost no specific research on peri-urban areas. For this paper we have extracted data, from selected phases of the project, specifically to find out why young people may or may not make VET choices. The method for this paper comprised analysis of data from each site, consisting of:

- Interviews with VET-sector organisations;
- 'Snapshot surveys', completed, prior to interviews and focus groups, by 80 young people in schools and 32 in their second-year out;
- Publicly-available government 'On-Track' data (DET, 2018), of young people in their first year out of school.

Recent related literature looks at VET choices in terms of the perceived and actual financial rewards of VET choices (e.g. Norton & Charastidtham, 2019); or in terms of the perceived status of VET choices (e.g. Billett, Choy & Hodge, 2019). Our research showed a complex picture with a number of factors (personal, environmental, cultural background and geographic) influencing choices; and also a perception that VET means apprenticeships, almost to the exclusion of traineeships or full-time VET. The agency of individual schools and of VET providers or apprenticeship organisations was also found to be important. The findings have clear implications for both policy and practice.

Introduction

The movement of young people from school into post-school activities including further education and/or the full-time workforce is a perennial topic of discussion. It is well accepted that young people outside cities face particular challenges. The paper reports on finding from a research project called 'Young futures: Education, training and employment decision-making in non-metropolitan areas', which was funded by the Victorian Department of Education and Training (DET) and carried out during 2018-19. The project as a whole aimed to provide a better understanding of the transition process, and develop good practice models for wider applicability, as well as assisting communities and the employers within them to better retain and utilise the talents of their young people. This paper uses data from the project to focus specifically on VET choices. This is of interest as VET appears to be becoming less popular as a choice for young people, potentially because of higher rates of entry to university study (Trow & Burrage, 2010) in Australia as in other countries. The paper asks three research questions: What VET choices do young people make when leaving school? Why do they choose VET? Why do they not choose VET?

Literature review and background

The project is set against the policy contexts of widening participation in higher education and persisting rural disadvantage in access to both education (Harvey *et al*, 2012) and employment (Brotherhood of St Laurence, 2018). The literature on transitions from school suggests that young people in Australia are likely to be guided by a range of features such as advice from significant others (parents, careers teachers, peers) (Stokes & Wyn, 2007); gender; socio-economic status (Lamb *et al*, 2018); rurality (Quixley, 1992; MacKenzie, 2014; Napthine, Graham, Lee & Wills, 2019); ethnic background or Aboriginality; and family history of progression to further education, higher education or apprenticeship (Osborne & Circelli, 2018).

Transitions have altered over recent decades. According to Te Riele and Wyn (2005), attention to youth transitions gained momentum in the early 80s with the rise of youth unemployment and the increased retention of young people in education systems, arguing that 'new patterns of transition and new relationships between education and the labour market for young people emerged' (Stokes & Wyn, 2007 p. 496). Since then, school retention rates have increased, but most young people are still entering the labour force at an early age as a greater proportion work part-time while at school (Smith & Patton, 2013).

Young people in regional, rural and peri-urban communities face particular challenges in 'imagining' and navigating their post-school futures, as choices are affected by industrial and agricultural structural adjustment, distance, and community or cultural pressures. For regional and rural communities, distance from main centres and vocational interests are cited (Athanasou, 2001). Geldens (2007) refers to depiction by young people of 'success' and failure', in which 'the successful leave [the town] and do not return' (p. 80). While there is increasing academic attention to peri-urban areas, there have been no specific studies of post-school outcomes for peri-urban young people. This could be partly due to arguments about the definition of the term peri-urban (Iaquinta & Drescher, 2000; Choy et al, 2008) making it difficult to identify these areas. In general, the term refers to the urbanisation of formerly rural land, and the areas are often characterised by mixed land-use. As Melbourne expands, the peri-urban fringe is rapidly moving outwards. Iaquinta and Drescher (2000) maintain that the manner in which areas are absorbed into the city affects the attitudes of those in the peri-urban areas and this seems likely to have an impact on the aspirations of young people.

In Australia, the norm is to complete 12 years of schooling; although students may leave school earlier, these are in the minority (less than 20%). After school, students may proceed directly (or with a gap year) to university (just over 40%, according to the 2016 census) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017); or they may enter vocational education and training (VET) or the labour force, sometimes combining VET and work via apprenticeships or traineeships. VET is offered by the public provider, TAFE (Technical and Further Education) and also in non-TAFE Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) which may be for-profit or not-for-profit (Smith & Keating, 2003).

Turning to VET specifically, it is generally accepted that VET is of lower perceived status than higher education, and this can affect the proportion of young people choosing VET (e.g. Deissinger & Gonon, 2015, in Germany). Billett, Choy and Hodge (2019) have identified

similar issues in Australia. Norton & Charastidtham (2019) find clear advantages of VET over higher education for some young people, yet VET still tends to be seen as a second-class choice. Students may undertake VET while at secondary school via what are known as 'VET in Schools' programs, or via school-based apprenticeships or traineeships.

There are two particularly Victorian issues potentially affecting VET choices. Firstly, Victoria has a particular VET-focused senior secondary (Years 11 and 12) curriculum, the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) which is an alternative to the more academic Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) (Blake, 2009). VCAL restricts - although does not remove - university entry possibilities. Around 24,000 students undertake VCAL compared with around 52,000 in VCE (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2019). The VCAL curriculum is currently under review, but the research was undertaken before the review was initiated. VET can also be undertaken as a choice in the more academic VCE curriculum.

Secondly, Victoria suffered particularly savage cuts, both general and targeted to specific qualifications, to VET funding during a national period of funding cuts from 2012-2015. This has the effect that delivery of certain qualifications, notably in non-apprenticed areas (e.g. retail, front of-house hospitality, fitness), ceased in many locations across the state, particularly in rural towns (Guthrie & Smith, 2015). At the same time traineeship funding from the Commonwealth was removed for some of these occupations. Despite the restoration of funding to TAFE colleges (the public provider) and the raising of some funding rates from 2016, many of these rural courses have not been reinstated.

Research method

The research was carried out in six communities across the State of Victoria (Table 1). The locations were determined in conjunction with the State government.

Table 1: Communities involved in the research

No	Town (pseudonym)	Type	Approx. population
1	East-town	Peri-urban	48,000
2	Sea-shore	Post-industrial rural	10,000
3	Wheat-town	Regional	15,000
4	Market-town	Regional	14,000
5	Fruit-town	Regional	46,000
6	West-town	Peri-urban	64,000

Three were regional towns, each being two to three hours' drive from Victoria's capital city, Melbourne (population 4.5 million); two were peri-urban areas on the outskirts of Melbourne with rapidly growing populations with high migrant diversity; and one (Sea-shore) was a post-industrial rural town, isolated yet just beyond the city limits of outer Melbourne. For the purposes of grouping sites for analysis, this site was included as peri-urban. Only one location (no. 1) had higher than the Victorian average household income; and only two (nos. 1 and 6) were at or near the State average for progression of school-leavers to further or higher education (Australian Bureau of Statistics data, 2016).

The project involved four phases, which proceeded after ethics approval was gained. The study was mainly qualitative, but some quantitative data were collected as described below, and a

final phase of secondary data analysis was added, primarily to triangulate the findings. The four phases are described below, together with information about the data that were analysed for this conference paper. The data were selected as those most relevant to the three research questions described earlier in this paper: What VET choices do young people make when leaving school? Why do they choose VET? Why do they not choose VET?

1. 58 interviews with community stakeholders who worked with young people aged 15-24, an average of 9.5 per site, in 2018 (with the exception of Wheat-town where some of the stakeholders were interviewed during 2016, as part of a pilot project.). Significant stakeholders were selected according to a defined protocol. These included the two types of intermediary apprenticeship providers, local and nearby higher and further education providers, employers, and Aboriginal and/or migrant organisations. For this paper, the TAFE, private registered training organisation (RTO) and apprenticeship organisation interviews (n=21) were analysed. Interviews were undertaken with senior managers in these organisations or their delegates. At most case study sites, there was only one possible candidate organisation for each type of interview, and where there was more than one, the nearest geographically was interviewed. As more than one participant was involved in some interviews, the total number of people involved was 27, of whom 14 were male and 13 female.

2. Interviews and focus groups at two schools at each site with staff and students in late 2018 and early 2019. At the government schools (one per site), separate focus groups of Year 11 and Year 12 were held, a total of 91 students. Each student also completed a pre-focus group 'snapshot survey' of demographic and other details, and intended post-school destinations. For this paper, the snapshot surveys were analysed. The school participants were selected by the schools; of the 91 students, 56.7% were female.

3. Interviews with 32 young people, who had left school in 2017, early in 2019; the study referred to the young people as 'second year out'. As with Phase 2, each young person also completed pre-focus group/interview 'snapshot surveys', this time also including intended and actual post-school destinations. Again, this paper analyses the surveys. 50% of the young people were male, and 50% female. Although their ages were not collected, they could be assumed to be aged 19 or 20.

4. Analysis of the Victorian Government 'On Track' survey reports for 2018. 'On Track', completed annually, interviews young people six months after leaving school. (https://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/research/pages/ontrack.aspx?&Redirect=1), 49% of Year 12 completers and 29% of non-year 12 completers responded for this year. Slightly more than this average was recorded at five of the six sites, with Wheat-town well above at 75%. The analysis of the 2018 publicly-available data for the six sites was undertaken to garner further information and also to triangulate the qualitative findings. The data were analysed for key variables, including destinations and views about career advice received at school. For this paper, data relevant to VET choices were extracted and analysed.

All interviews were recorded, with permission, and transcribed. Most interviews lasted around 45-60 minutes with a few shorter due to respondent availability. Nearly all were face to face.

Findings

This section reports on analysis of data from the four phases: the interviews with the 21 VET sector organisations in the six communities, 'snapshot survey' data collected from the 113 young people; and the Victorian government's 'On-Track' survey data for the six locations. A greater amount of information on <u>what</u> VET choices were made was found in the quantitative data, while the qualitative data provided more information about <u>why</u> VET choices were made.

What VET choices do young people make?

<u>Survey data from focus groups and 'second-year out' interviewees</u>. Data were collected from the 91 Year 11 and 12 young people, all in government schools except Fruit-town. The young people were asked to choose from six options which they thought they were most likely to do. Two VET options were included: 'full-time work in an apprenticeship and traineeship' and full-time study at TAFE or another training provider'. Results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Most likely destinations, as stated by Year 11 and 12 students

Most likely option	East-town		Sea-shore		Wheat-town		Market-town		Fruit-town		West-town		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Full-time work in an apprenticeship or traineeship	-	-	-	-	1	7.1	1	9.1	3	25.0	5	17.9	10	11.0
Other full-time work	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	18.2	3	25.0	2	7.1	7	7.7
Full-time study at TAFE or another training provider	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	16.7	-	-	2	2.2
Full-time study at university	9	75.0	7	50.0	7	50.0	5	45.5	3	25.0	16	57.1	47	51.6
Something else (Say what, if you like)	1	8.3	2	14.3	4	28.6	2	18.2	-	-	3	10.7	12	13.2
Really don't know!	2	16.7	5	35.7	2	14.3	1	9.1	1	8.3	2	7.1	13	14.3
Total	12		14		14		11		12		28		91	

Note: East-town was a selective high school

Table 2 shows that VET was not a preferred option. Only a miniscule proportion of the 91 young people – two, both at one location - expected to study full-time at a VET provider. A higher proportion – ten – expected to undertake an apprenticeship or traineeship. More expected to do this than to go into full-time work without training. Just over half the students expected to go to university, and a little over one-quarter had another plan (most of these involved working and/or a gap year) or did not have a clear idea. Analysis shows that there was no clear difference in the proportion expecting to do full-time VET or apprenticeships/traineeships by year level. Gender had an effect; although the sample was 56.7% female, of the twelve students citing a VET destination, only two were female. However, it would be dangerous to draw too many conclusions from the data, since the focus groups were selected by the school and some were predominantly those on an academic (VCE) track rather than on a VCAL track. In contrast, the West-town groups had quite a high proportion (almost 50%) of VCAL students.

Survey data from the second-year out interviewees showed greater engagement with VET than was expected by the focus groups in Years 11 and 12. Table 3 indicates the main activity at the time of the survey and interviews, 15 months after leaving school.

Table 3: Actual destinations of the 'second year out' young people in the study

Main activity / Site	Full-time work in an apprentice – ship/traineeship	Other work (full-time or part-time)	Full-time study-TAFE	Full-time study-Uni	'Something else'	Total
East-town				3		3
Sea-shore	1	1		4		6
Wheat-town	1	1	3	2		7
Market-town	3			3		6
Fruit-town	3					3
West-town			2	2	3*	7
Total	**8**	**2**	**5**	**14**	**3**	**32**

*Two respondents were repeating Year 12; one reported no activity.

While the results were again dependent on the sample interviewed - often referred from school or the relevant Local Learning and Employment Network provider (LLEN) staff - these data do show a greater proportion undertaking VET (13 out of 32- 40.6%), either in full-time study or an apprenticeship/traineeship. To provide greater robustness, the data were analysed to see if there had been changes between what they had expected to do 'in the last few months before leaving school', another question in the survey. 18 respondents (43.75% of the sample) had expected to do full-time university study as their main activity, but of these, two of these had in fact gone on to do an apprenticeship or traineeship and two were undertaking full-time VET.

Survey data from the 'On Track' survey for 2017 school leavers: The On Track data captured much higher proportions of young people than the surveys in the project. (49% of year 12 completers and 29% of non-Year 12 Victorian completers responded in 2018). Table 4 was produced by analysing the published data to compare the destinations, six months after leaving school, of the 2017 school-leavers from which our small samples were drawn. In the Table the six sites are compared with the State average.

Table 4: Destinations of 2017 school leavers in first year out

Location / Post-school	East-town	Sea-shore	Wheat-town	Market-town	Fruit-town	West-town	Vic.
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Bachelor degree	53.2	42.9	37.1	43.5	35.9	54.5	54.9
Certificate/Dips	15.2	10.1	17.1	6.2	13.7	13.1	12.1
Apprentice/Trn	8.4	9.3	6.7	10.5	14.3	7.1	8.1
Employed	17.4	33.0	36.2	32.5	28.0	18.1	19.8
Jobseeking	4.8	3.9	np	7.2	5.9	6.1	4.3
NILFET	1.1	0.7	np	*not given*	2.2	1.1	0.8

Notes: (i) NILFET = Not in the labour force, employment or training; (ii) np = (not published) due to small number responding

In 'On Track', the data are presented by LGA (Local Government Area) which cover a larger area than the actual towns which were our case study sites. Moreover, analysis showed some problems in the On Track data, particularly with the way VET is described. Thus it is not possible to align the two sets of data directly. However, it is possible to make some general connections. As with our data, university was the largest destination; apprenticeships and traineeships attracted around 8% of school-leavers; while the proportion going to full-time VET (i.e. 'Certificates/Dips), reportedly around 12% across the State, appears to be higher than in our survey data. Other data analysis tables in the On Track data showed that more girls than boys proceeded to university, and boys were less likely to be employed in non-apprentice jobs than girls.

On Track records the specific TAFE destinations (On Track does not record non-TAFE VET study) of those in what is reported as 'on-campus study', which appears to exclude apprenticeships and traineeships. Table 5 shows our analysis of these data for our six sites.

Table 5: TAFE destinations, On Track data, 2017 school leavers.

East-town	Sea-shore	Wheat-town	Market-town	Fruit-town	West-town
Chisholm (4.6%) RMIT (1.9%) Holmesglen (1.4%) Swinb. (1.3%)	Chisholm (7.1%) Holmesglen (1.5%)	*Data too low for publication*	*Data too low for publication*	GOTAFE (10.3%)	RMIT (2.6%) Gordon (2.6%) VU (1.3%) Swinb. (0.9%)

The table indicates that two of the three rural sites had virtually no students going on to on-campus TAFE study. Fruit-town was an exception to this pattern. The data for the peri-urban sites indicates that these sites had a reasonably wide range of nearby TAFE colleges.

The overall project found that post-school gap years were important destinations, particularly in rural areas. In the On Track data, the proportions of school leavers 'deferring tertiary study' was found to be 10.0% across Victoria, with all of the sites in the current project except East-town and West-town showing considerably higher rates, ranging from 16.7% in Market-town to 19.1% in Sea-shore.

Findings from the interviews The interviews showed that some young people were making VET choices well before leaving school, by selecting VCAL, VET in Schools, or school-based apprenticeships, as part of their studies. For example, interviewees from Australian Apprenticeship Support Network (AASN) providers in Wheat-town and Market-town referred to the advantages of school-based apprenticeships (where young people commence apprenticeships or traineeships while still at school):

- 'School based apprenticeships really have taken off in our rural area; [they are] a real stepping stone'. (Wheat-town)
- School-based apprenticeships are 'a great tool, they can get a taster and an opportunity to work out if that's what they really want to do'(Market-town).

VCAL was reported by some of the respondents (e.g. in Fruit-town) as being key to linking young people to VET pathways and assisting them to firm up their choices. These in-school VET choices were naturally more likely to lead into VET choices post-school.

Industry need was also cited as important for young people when making choices. For example, a TAFE manager (East-town) said that some students were drawn to VET by the growing need for workers in local health services and construction industries. However, a Group Training Organisation (GTO) manager whose GTO covered Sea-shore said that local employers there were not finding suitable applicants for the large volume of construction work.

'Pathwayed' qualifications were identified as an important factor in the choice of VET qualification. Specific pathways mentioned by participants were the pathway to nursing through the Diploma of Nursing TAFE qualification (Wheat-town, East-town); and more generally pathways via traineeships.

Why do students make VET choices?

Findings from quantitative data: The survey data from the 91 school students provides limited insight into the reasons why choices are made. These reasons, rather, emerged in the qualitative data. However, undertaking VCAL did show, in the survey data collected, as a likely indicator of moving on to VET post-school.

The On Track survey asked participants about the careers advice they had accessed while at school. They were provided with a list of 11 activities. In all six case study sites, the least-attended by a long way were 'TAFE taster or information sessions organised by the school' and 'an employer presentation organised by the school'. Moreover, the proportion of respondents who had attended a TAFE taster program or information session fell from 21.2 per cent in 2017 to 18.9 per cent in 2018 (DET, 2018), possibly indicating decreasing awareness of VET. The rural sites in the current study exhibited higher rates of attendance at VET information sessions than the State average (between 23.8% and 32.7%).

Thus, less than a third of young people at school attend sessions informing them about TAFE. This could show that only a small proportion of school students are interested in VET, or alternatively that communications about VET options are targeted to those whom it is felt are 'suited' to VET. Certainly those going into VET were less likely to complete school; in the analysis in the On Track data (DET, 2018), Year 12 non-school-completers were more likely to have attended TAFE information sessions than completers in all locations. On Track data also showed that those who had not completed school were less likely to find careers advice useful (DET 2018); thus VET is associated with 'failure' to a certain extent.

Findings from qualitative data: There was no specific question about VET in the interview protocols, and so VET information emerged during discussion. In the interviews with the community stakeholders, family background, socio-economic status (mentioned in five of the six locations), migrant, refugee status and indigenous status were all cited as factors influencing young people when they thought about and made choices. One interviewee from TAFE (East-town) referred to choices being 'inherited' from families – i.e. young people considered destinations of their parents or other family members.

Interviewees from the VET organisations tended to focus especially on young people's families. 'Students often follow siblings who have done a trade', as an RTO (registered training organisation – a private provider) staff member said in Wheat-town. VCAL, school-based apprenticeships, and VET in schools were mentioned as factors by VET interviewees. Also, VET interviewees talked about jobs that young people always 'dreamed about'. Apprenticed occupations were often mentioned as such imagined occupations. Proximity to home was seen

as an advantage for VET in the rural areas. Local needs such as the building trade, allied health and agriculture were all cited as occupations accessed through VET. VET pathways were described as a way for students to access programs in Higher Education such as nursing and allied health. Sporting club networks were cited in two rural sites as a way to find a job; apprenticeships were the jobs cited in these examples.

For some young people who were brought up on a farm the transition to farming was clear (RTO, Wheat-town) and for those students who knew business owners or had worked part-time in retail during school, jobs were available for them. However, these choices did not necessarily involve VET qualifications. One example where VET was involved, was provided. Wheat-town council asked for funding directly from the relevant Minister for 20 rural traineeships on 100% wage subsidy during the drought. 'When the rains came there were ready-trained staff to fill jobs.' (RTO, Wheat-town).

Some VET providers reported outreach activities that they undertook to make VET more prominent as a choice. The TAFE nearest to Sea-shore, for example, linked with a number of nearby schools and offered 'try a trade' type activities on campus for school students. In addition, this campus had recently commenced delivery of higher education qualifications particularly in areas such as nursing and early childhood which had a direct link to the VET programs. The RTO in Market-town, which specialised in nursing and aged care qualifications, offered free taster sessions, and had particularly close links with one school in the town.

Why do young people not choose VET?

Information about this topic was easier to find in the data than information about why young people did choose VET. The points generally revolved around the choice between VET or higher education. Socioeconomic status was said to play a part in choosing VET or university, affected not only individuals but the attitudes of schools. According to a TAFE manager (East-town) 'Affluent schools tend to promote their students to go to higher education, and non-affluent schools tend to head to vocational pathways.'

The perception of VET being 'lower status' was also mentioned as a factor that dissuaded young people from a VET choice. An RTO Manager in Wheat-town said that 'Many people feel they are getting a second-rate option when they do an apprenticeship'. Others said that VET was not a preferred option because young people want to "follow their dreams. [These are] shaped around university aspiration" (Manager, TAFE serving Sea-shore area). He said 'Although young people might identify with an occupation best served though VET, they are encouraged to aspire to university, and if they don't go to university it's almost a failure".

VET providers talked about lack of knowledge about VET and other educational options. One TAFE manager (West-town) wanted more education of young people and their families about what was available and what choices there were. An ASN worker in West-town said that 'the information given to kids is hit and miss. Young people's choices were formed in school, so 'it depends on the school to provide appropriate information'. There was incomplete or inadequate coverage by relevant apprenticeship services, especially in the rural areas. ASN services in particular were what one interviewee referred to as 'drive-in, drive out', with no base in the towns, and for the project the ASNs servicing two of the sites would not agree to interviews.

There were other reasons why young people might not choose VET. Distance from a training provider was cited by some when discussing young people's choices to access VET, just as it

was for higher education. Public transport was often poor; and some VET choices were simply not available in the local town. For example, Sea-shore did not have any TAFE or RTO campus; Market-town TAFE campus only offered a limited range of programs and there was only one, specialist, RTO in the town. An RTO serving Sea-shore said that some students found large TAFE campuses intimidating, especially if they needed to travel to them. This interviewee also said that some parents had poor experiences of TAFE, which they conveyed to their children. However, another Sea-shore interviewee, seemingly shifting the blame onto the young people themselves, said that young people simply 'aren't interested in getting up early' to take transport to the nearest TAFE college (Sea-shore). One TAFE mentioned the removal of funding for retail traineeships as closing a VET career option for young people, especially girls.

Analysis and conclusion

In general, the interviews and survey options showed that VET was not a preferred post-school option for most young people; its status is low, as has been noted previously (e.g. Billett et al, 2019; Deissinger & Gonon, 2015). VET was generally seen as attractive in two instances: when it led to a pathway to higher education (e.g. in nursing), and when it involved an apprenticeship. The latter, due to the nature of the occupations serviced by apprenticeship and also due to the sometimes restricted qualifications available locally, was mainly an option more available to boys than girls. However, the 'second-year out' surveys show that VET may be an unplanned post-school outcome, and more research is needed in this area.

In rural areas the lower status of VET was compounded by practical matters- i.e. lack of provision, or narrow provision, of VET (e.g. Market-town). One ASN interviewee said that living in rural areas added pressure to post-school decisions – 'There is more to weigh up in rural areas than in the city. The choices are constrained by consideration of needing to live away from home, transport difficulties etc – so it can make … a bit more pressure too in regard to deciding in which career path they want to go.' While the literature discusses these issues in relation to higher education access (e.g. McKenzie, 2014), it has not, before this project, emerged as a feature relating to VET choices. The VET funding cuts in Victoria have clearly had effects, as predicted by Guthrie and Smith (2015), but even putting these aside, access to either any or broad VET provision is a key factor.

Other new findings from the project follow. The jobs actually undertaken by young people while they were at school were disparaged by most interviewees; some investigation is needed as to how closely this is related to the unavailability of qualifications in those occupational areas or whether it is a more fundamental issue. The way in which VET choices within school leads to VET choices after school appears at first glance constructive, but could limit options for those young people and also prevent other young people from considering VET, both in terms of gender and in terms of perceived status. There could be major implications of the current State review of VCAL. Pathways to higher education qualifications from VET tends to relegate VET to something done on the way to somewhere else; and moreover is an option only in certain curriculum areas. For example, there is no direct pathway from plumbing to a degree. Hence there are a number of areas where the data can be used for government policy and for practice. The findings of the projects were fed back to the participants and other practitioners in four of the six sites during 2019; feedback the other sites have yet to be arranged and are now delayed due to the COVID-19 crisis. The findings, including points from the feedback visits, were presented in early 2020 to a substantial audience of staff at the Department of

Education and Training, Victoria; and have already fed into several government inquiries and consultations at both State and Commonwealth level, including a Victorian review of post-secondary education and the establishment of the Commonwealth Government's National Careers Institute.

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