

# **The Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning and young people in TAFE: welcome challenge or weary acceptance?**

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## **Abstract**

In a context of rapid economic and social change, federal and state governments have introduced a number of policies and programs to address the needs of early school leavers, increase retention rates in post-compulsory education and training, and improve young people's career prospects. One such initiative is the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL), which was implemented on a statewide basis in the Victorian vocational education and training (VET) sector, including Technical and Further Education (TAFE) institutes, from 2003. The VCAL aims to provide potential early school leavers and disengaged young people with an attractive, vocationally-oriented alternative to the academic senior school certificate.

With the roll-out of the VCAL program, TAFE institutes have been experiencing an influx of young learners, for whom most mainstream programs and teachers have not traditionally catered. Many of the young people entering VCAL programs in TAFE have had prior negative experiences of schooling, and have also often been disengaged from formal education and training for some time. Conversely, most TAFE teachers have had little, if any, prior experience of working with this new student cohort. To date, however, there has been little research into the impact and implications of VCAL implementation on TAFE institutes and their staff.

This paper examines the introduction of the VCAL in TAFE, and the challenges and issues that it poses, in particular for TAFE teachers. It is based on an analysis of existing research and also new data drawn from interviews with teaching and support staff at a large metropolitan TAFE institute. The paper suggests that if the VCAL is to be delivered effectively on an ongoing basis in TAFE, a number of significant issues relating to funding and teacher support and development need to be addressed.

## **Introduction**

Over the past two decades, governments have pursued two key policy goals through the vocational education and training (VET) system to promote improved national economic growth and social cohesion, specifically: the creation of an industry-driven VET system and a substantial increase in participation 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 federal government's recent policy paper for VET, *Skilling Australia* (2005), notes that skills shortages and ageing populations are global phenomena. In Australia, 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, in particular 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 teaching 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 also 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 learning, TAFE has been given a prominent role in programs catering for early school leavers (McKenzie 2002).

Due to such initiatives, TAFE Directors Australia (2004a) notes that there has been a marked increase in young people aged 15-19 years entering TAFE over the past decade. Many of these students are early school leavers who have not completed their senior secondary schooling. This is 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* (2002), which focus on improving secondary school students' retention and completion rates. One of the measures that the Victorian government introduced in 2002 to enhance secondary school students' study and career options was the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL), which was implemented in TAFE institutes in 2003.

In 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. Relatively few existing teachers in TAFE, however, have had prior training or experience in dealing with younger students who have been disengaged from formal learning, often for some considerable time, and whose prior experiences of schooling were often negative.

Among the few exceptions are teachers involved in TAFE Access programs, which are a good entry point for students who wish to commence study at Certificate I level, and progress to the Certificate of General Adult Education (CGEA), 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 people who did not complete their senior secondary schooling. The other minor exception are teachers who taught in the TAFE Vocational and Tertiary Orientation Programs (VOP/TOP) in the early 1980s – 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).

Despite the high priority attached to addressing the needs of young people through the VCAL in TAFE, almost no research has been undertaken to investigate the challenges facing TAFE teachers involved in its implementation. To begin addressing this gap, this paper examines the introduction of the VCAL in TAFE, its impact on teachers’ work, their teaching methods, skills and knowledge currency, and their responsiveness to the needs of young learners. To capture a typical TAFE teacher experience of the VCAL, interviews were conducted in late 2005 with program coordinators/teachers and a youth worker involved in VCAL implementation at Outer Metropolitan Institute of TAFE (OMIT) in Victoria. The findings are set against the background of other research on TAFE teachers and young learners, including the Victorian Qualification Authority’s (VQA, 2005) VCAL Participation Report, *Pathways for a Better Future*.

### **TAFE, young learners, and VCAL in context**

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. (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 the federal government’s failure to provide sufficient growth funding 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 being in the minority. In the case of OMIT, 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 group, Outer Metropolitan Institute of TAFE, 2005**

| <b>Age group</b> | <b>Number of enrolments</b> | <b>% of total enrolments</b> |
|------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------|
| 15-19 years      | 7,285                       | 20.3                         |
| 20-24 years      | 6,260                       | 17.4                         |
| 30-39 years      | 7,500                       | 21.0                         |
| Other            | 14,913                      | 41.3                         |
| <b>Total</b>     | <b>35,958</b>               | <b>100.0</b>                 |

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. OMIT therefore, has tailored its teaching methodologies mainly to suit the needs of mature-aged learners. In proposing its *National Youth Strategy*, TAFE Directors Australia is highlighting this diversity and, rather than objecting to the added influx of younger learners, is alerting the government to the distinctive needs of the cohort, and the additional costs that are incurred in meeting these needs.

### ***Young learners***

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, the TAFE experience 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 by Long in *Setting the Pace* (Long 2005), a report prepared recently for the Dusseldorp Skills Forum on aspects of education, training and youth transitions in Australia. Long 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. (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 OMIT’s case 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.

### ***The Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL)***

As previously stated, the VCAL is a new 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 recently 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.

### **The VCAL at Outer Metropolitan Institute of TAFE**

Outer Metropolitan Institute of TAFE is a large metropolitan TAFE provider, which 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, interviews were conducted with a Trades Program Coordinator (PC)/teacher, an Access PC/teacher, and a Youth Pathways Program (YPP) 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 PC/teachers were happy to talk about their experiences, and were forthcoming with their views. The YPP worker was very enthusiastic about the VCAL program and her work therein. The role of the YPP 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 the following outcomes, which are comparable with other state-wide VCAL student outcomes:

**Table 2: OMIT VCAL student outcomes (%)**

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

The YPP 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.

**Table 3: VCAL student outcomes, Victoria 2005**

| <b>Destinations</b> | <b>Number of students</b> | <b>% of total students</b> |
|---------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------|
| University          | 14                        | 1.3                        |
| TAFE/VET            | 246                       | 22.9                       |
| Apprentice/trainee  | 432                       | 40.3                       |
| Working             | 241                       | 22.5                       |
| Unemployed          | 134                       | 12.5                       |
| Deferred            | 6                         | 0.6                        |
| <b>Total</b>        | <b>1073</b>               | <b>100</b>                 |

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

The VQA *On-Track 2005* survey collected information from year 12 VCAL students who had completed a VCAL Intermediate or Senior certificate in 2004. 89% 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.

### ***Teacher reactions to the VCAL***

The YPP 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 YPP 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'.

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 PC/teacher, the VCAL:

... is another change by government, which is just recycling. This certificate has been done before, remember the TOP? ... 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 own training packages.

In contrast, the Access PC/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 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. Its too much one size fits all, too generalist for many of these young people.

During the interview with the Trades PC/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 were 'totally unlike apprentices', and presented trades teachers with a range of issues with which they were generally unaccustomed and ill-equipped to deal with, including 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 PC/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 PC/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 YPP worker:

There is no doubt that the VCAL kids need support. We have been able to get them helped by the YPP Worker and she has been very good with them.

The Access PC/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 YPP 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 PC/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 PCs 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 PC/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 PC/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 PC/teachers admitted that they had learned about the VCAL ‘as they taught it’. Very little new curriculum developed for the VCAL program in the first year. The PCs 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 the funding being allocated to ensure that new curriculum was developed.



### ***Changes to teachers' roles***

Both PC/teachers recognised that they needed to keep up with changes in the workplace. 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 PC/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 PC/teacher)

When questioned on the issue of professional development, both PCs 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.

### **Discussion**

Much of this account is reflected in the Australian Education Union survey of TAFE teachers, *TAFE teachers: facing the challenge*, conducted in 2000 by Michaela Kronemann. 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.

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 far removed from 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.

Another challenge for TAFE institutes is the problem 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* (Clayton et al 2005), 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. (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 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' (p.7). 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 report, *Pathways for a Better Future* (2005), concludes that the VCAL has been a resounding success since its trial in 2002, and subsequent roll-out across the state in 2003. Clearly, the VCAL at OMIT has also proved to be successful. However, at what cost, and at whose expense, has this success been achieved?

In concluding his report on training and youth transitions, Long (2005) casts some doubt on the increased participation rate in post-compulsory education and training being the result of the VCAL program. He argues that:

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. (p.57)

The OMIT experience has shown that without the additional resources of the Youth Pathways Program, there might have been a very different result for the VCAL students. Staff at OMIT and other TAFE institutes are increasingly utilising the services of YPP Youth 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 YPP 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 YPP worker, view the VCAL as a welcome challenge, for most 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**

The perennial issue of adequate funding for VET must be addressed if Australia is to advance teachers' skills and knowledge currency. 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. Federal and state governments are mandating educational reform, yet seem unwilling to provide adequate funding to enable 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 lacking in sufficient professional development. Despite the success of the VCAL program, the research discussed above suggests that unless such issues are addressed effectively, future programs to assist early school leavers may be neither openly welcomed nor wearily accepted by TAFE teachers, but rather resented and devalued.

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