Teaching VET in Victorian secondary schools

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Abstract

This research paper focuses on the provision and teaching of Vocational Education and Training (VET) programs to young people within Victorian secondary schools. The study identifies and discusses the way that VET in schools programs are nuanced as they are made to fit the state system, then with the individual school settings and circumstances. These programs are important in offering a range of relevant and useful programs to a diverse range of senior secondary school students. The study found that when a VET program is provided to students through a secondary school setting in Victoria it will, (1) be made appropriate for students aged 15 to 21; (2) occurs as part of one of the two senior secondary school certificates, and (3) often have undergone some modifications to its authenticity with some flow on effect to its reliability and validity due to the limitations and nature of the school-based context. Accordingly, teachers and school administrators are required to be creative in fine-tuning their program provision as they work through issues that arise around costs, quality and effectiveness.

Introduction

This paper looks at a sample of VET in schools programs as they are being implemented in secondary schools across Victoria. Significantly, enrolment numbers in these programs continue to increase each year. The Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA) work to ensure the requirements of a national VET system are compatible and effective within state-based structures. Meanwhile, individual schools work out provision arrangements that are appropriate for their particular circumstances on a program by program basis. The first part of this paper reviews selected literature and identifies some key ideas that are related to VET pedagogy in the context of secondary schools in general. The second part draws on Victorian government policies and documents to build up an understanding of some of the specifics of VET in schools in Victoria. The third section of the paper provides discussion on the data gathered through the interviews with VET practitioners. This section provides insight into individual differences across schools and identifies some of the particulars in the practices that are being developed.

Methodology

The data and evidence for this study has been collected from, the analysis of Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) documents and information (DEECD 2010a,b&c); analysis of VCAA curriculum and related VET system documentation (VCAA 2010a,b&c); school and teacher based program documentation (unpublished); along with primary data obtained through interviews with twenty VET teachers, school based VET Program Co-ordinators and Curriculum Managers.

DEECD and VCAA documents are a significant source of data as these provide detailed information and guidance for different facets and parameters for VET

provision. The DEECD publish advice on such features as guidelines for purchasing training outside the school (DEECD 2010a), standard Contracts and Memorandums of Understandings for partnerships and external outsourcing (DEECD 2010b); and information on indicative funding for the different bands of provision that are applicable to these programs (DEECD 2010c). Likewise the VCAA publish specific advice on program content (VCAA 2010), forms of assessment (VCAA 2005 & 2010a), and enrolment and provider requirements (VCAA 2010b & VCAA 2010c). In addition to this, In November and December of each year the VCAA Curriculum managers for both VCAL and VETiS provide comprehensive briefings and release important provisional data on these respective programs. This includes data on the breakdown of the enrolments (VCAA 2010d).

The primary data for the study comes from VET practitioners. Twenty VET practitioners who were interviewed work in secondary schools and Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) located across metropolitan, regional and rural Victoria. A selection of practitioners were recruited to participate based on those who were building a reputation for innovation and good practice in some aspect of their VET in schools programs. The participants in the study represented schools from across all the regions of Victoria. All interviews were semi-structured and took place at the interviewee's place of employment. The interviews were fully transcribed and thematically analysed. This involved colour coding extracts of the transcripts to identify and describe themes. In some cases, in addition to this data, teachers shared copies of their own and internally produced programming and assessment documentation with the researcher. These were analysed and became part of the data matrix for the study (Miles & Huberman 1994). University based ethics clearance was approved for the study.

A limitation of the study is that while visual records of some students' work were collected and analysed, primary interview data was collected from teachers, co-ordinators, and curriculum managers - not from students. Therefore considerations about learning are based on the perceptions of the interviewees and existing understandings from key literature.

Teaching VET: a selection of ideas and themes from the literature

Central to the practice of teaching is the notion of pedagogy. Different people use the concept of pedagogy in slightly different ways. Alexander (2008) describes pedagogy as 'the big picture of teaching'. Watkins and Mortimer (1999) in a review of the research on pedagogy identified four different conceptualisations. They explain that pedagogy is variously used to mean a focus on: 1) the teacher; 2) contexts of teaching; 3) teaching and learning; and more recently as, 4) the complex, non-linear relationships between multiple elements, including context, content, the teacher and the learner. This fourth and more complex conceptualisation is used to guide analysis in this study. Subsequently, context is considered significant and in this case this is the Australian VET sector and more specifically, the context of the provision of VET programs within Victorian secondary schools. In these terms, this research is a study of 'the big picture of teaching' that includes 'the complex, non-linear relationships between multiple elements, including context, content, the teacher and the learner'.

The main features that tend to distinguish pedagogies in VET are that they are considered to be practical, and reflect the authentic work practices of the jobs for which the training is targeted. They are also developed as a competency-based approach to training. But as the VET sector involves the learning of job oriented work roles across a spectrum that spans very basic entry level jobs at AQF level 1 and 2 through to the learning of para-professional work roles at AQF levels 5 & 6, it becomes very difficult to distinguish much else about VET pedagogy that stands as definitive across this whole sector.

In other ways, VET pedagogy differs significantly with whether it occurs on or off the job (Billett 2001). Historically, much of how VET orientated knowledge and skills are developed on-the-job owes a debt to apprenticeship training, and the learning pathway from induction to expertness. While the pedagogies for off-the-job can be traced back to initiatives like the approach developed by Della Vos in Moscow during the nineteenth century (Bennett 1937). The later has some relevance to teaching within VET in schools in terms of teaching methods and approaches. Basically, the formula for 'teaching the trades' within a dedicated teaching and learning environment still occurs through demonstration and modelling (direct instruction), observation, and graduations of guided practice.

Recent research by Figgis (2009) has identified six trends in the development of innovative VET pedagogical practice. These are, the use of authentic learning tasks, the encouragement of peer learning, the application of e-learning, utilisation of workplace settings, personalising learning experiences and programs, and devolving the support and responsibility for teaching and learning so that it was closer to the influence of the practitioner. This study also found that the teachers most likely to be looking at instigating on-going improvement and change in their own work tended to be, reflective; respectful of their learners; networked in with local enterprises and with other practitioners.

In terms of beginning to understand the learners in VET in schools programs, McQueen (2009) describes eight 'new' rules for engagement with this current generation of students. These new 'rules of engagement' are useful for teachers to consider and are listed here as; put relationships before roles; use matrix learning; focus on outcomes over process; adopt a facilitators role; give regular positive feedback; set short term, challenging goals; use stories to make your point; and go for commitment, rather than compliance. The term matrix learning might need a brief explanation and is used by McQueen to refer to putting context around content. This is something that due to the many years of industrial experience that VET teachers bring to their programs - these teachers are well placed to do. Basically this involves emphasising the relevance and connectedness of the learning.

The provision of VET in schools in Victoria

In Victoria, VET programs that are run in secondary schools for students to obtain nationally recognised VET qualifications are run alongside and within the two state-based senior secondary school certificates. The first of these certificates is the more traditional and academic Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE). The other is the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL). The VCAL is promoted by the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA) as the 'hands on'

alternative to VCE. VCAL can be completed at three different levels. These are Foundation, Intermediate and Senior levels. VET is a compulsory component of the Intermediate and Senior Levels of VCAL (VCAA 2010a). At some secondary schools the students doing Years 9 & 10 also have access to VET and VET taster programs. Debate is apparent on what year level secondary students should first be offered access to VET programs, with Years 10, 11 & 12 being the most common.

All school based provision in Victoria comes under the umbrella of the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA). The role of the VET section of the VCAA involves; the development of the VET programs in a form that is suitable for delivery within secondary schools; the appropriate structure of the programs; appropriate credit arrangements for VET into VCE and VCAL; provision of administration advice and support; the implementation of scored assessment; the overseeing of block credit arrangements and the collection of VET enrolment statistics (Interview with VCAA staff member).

According to the VCAA figures for 2008, there were 56,912 enrolments in some form of VET within VCE or VCAL. The following year, in 2009, there was a 5% increase on this number with 59,739 VET enrolments in these two senior secondary certificate programs (VCAA 2010d). This enrolment figure is believed by the VCAA to translate into approx. 38,000 individual students with some doing as little as fifteen or twenty hours to complete a First Aid course from the Health Services Training Package, or the Responsible Service of Alcohol (RSA) from the Hospitality Training Package. While other students such as some enrolled in the VCAL may be doing up to four different Certificate II and III VET qualifications.

In 2010 the enrolment figure increased again to 63,496 students doing some form of VET within Victorian secondary schools. As of November 2010, there are about twenty-five VCE VET programs on offer (VCAA 2010c). The 2010 enrolment numbers identify the eight most popular VCE VET programs across Victoria as Hospitality, Sport and Recreation, Building and Construction, Interactive Digital Media, Business, Music, Automotive, and Community Services. Not all VET in schools program cost the same amount to provide and therefore different industry qualifications are funded differently based on relative cost of provision. There are eight different levels of funding. A provider receives nearly $1000 in total for each student that completes a Certificate II in Building and Construction but only $290 in total for a student who completes a Certificate II in Retail or Business (DEECD 2010c). A further loading is added on to cover additional costs associated with rural provision.

VET in schools programs fit comfortably into the VCAL. One of the driving forces behind the original development of the VCAL was the recognition that students who stay on and successfully complete Year 12 are more likely not to have long periods of unemployment throughout their working lives (Jarvie 2005). In this way completion of Year 12 becomes an initial step in breaking an identified poverty cycle (Muir et al 2009; Edwards 2010). But in order to have a relevant and useful range of programs that will have appeal to the full range of students who stay on and get to senior secondary, there must be a diverse range of programs on offer. Hence the development of multiple offerings and options such as VCE, three levels of VCAL and a wide range of VET programs are made available to senior secondary students.

Some aspects of VET get modified from the Training Package version in order to provide a more appropriate pathway for secondary school students and/or, to become more structurally compatible with the VCE (VCAA 2010b&c). The assessment regime within VET programs is most often a binary decision of Competent or Not Yet Competent. Yet this does not always sit well with some of the stakeholders who have interests bound up with the grading system associated with VCE results. In some cases this leads to the VET programs being made compatible and comparable with other studies in the VCE. This involves replacing the binary grading system with provision of a final mark, or study score. This is known as scored assessment (VCAA 2010a). The mark or the score for the VET program can then be used alongside the final VCE marks from other subjects. These contribute directly towards an ATAR (Australian Tertiary Admission Ranking) score used for decisions about university entry. Scores and comparability of VET with other VCE studies is an attempt to address any perceived disadvantage that students might receive by undertaking an unscored VET program whereby such participation might eliminate or make difficult the possibility of selection for University entry (Brown 2008). Approximately fifteen of the twenty-five VCE VET programs offered in 2011 have a scored assessment option (VCAA 2010b).

As a general rule, VET Units undertaken as part of a Certificate II (Level 2 on the AQF) are recognised for credit towards Year 11, (VCE Unit 1 & 2) results. VET Units undertaken as part of a Certificate III (Level 3 on the AQF) contribute towards Year 12 (VCE Unit 3 & 4) results. In summary, provision has been made for some VETiS programs to have scored assessment; nevertheless mechanisms are in place to count all VET programs within both VCE and VCAL programs and qualifications. VETiS broadens the provision of secondary schools beyond the academic pathway and helps these schools to cater for and enable a wider diversity of students to complete Year 12.

Teaching VET in schools

The VET teacher is considered to be juggling and synthesising two identities, one as a practitioner in a vocation and the other as a teacher of that vocation. The first requires them to develop and manage their vocational practice and the second requires them to develop ways of teaching these practices to others. As the VET in schools teacher is also developing their educational practice within the context of the senior secondary school, this brings a further contextual overlay to the requirement of developing a synthesis between the vocational and the educational practices. A further synthesis is required to be conducted between the contexts of VET and secondary schools. This straddling of educational sectors brings with it the need for the VET in schools teacher to understand VET, VCE VET and VET as a strand in VCAL.

Students are often drawn to take up VET in schools programs because they like the opportunity to learn in a 'hands on' approach, in effect learning by doing. The practical nature of learning in VET is mainly due to its close alignment with the authentic tasks that are undertaken in the work roles that the training is preparing the learners to take up. VET programs below Certificate IV are aligned to work roles associated with levels 1 to 3 on the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF). These are essentially work roles that are practical. For some, in and around education,

learning in this way and the take up of jobs that require hands on engagement is considered a lesser or lower option than those that are more knowledge based. This is the traditional divide between Universities from VET and between knowledge workers from those who do more practical orientated work.

The debate on the relative worth of VET and 'hands on' learning runs deep throughout the community. While one teacher explains, '*VET in schools keeps a lot of kids in school who would normally leave*'. Another spoke of how '*schools often put their kids in there ... because they are not going to do well in VCE and it gets that reputation*'. Yet another described how a student returning to the school for Year 12 was directed to continue on within VET programs that he had previously completed in the preceding year precisely because he had enjoyed it and succeeded. The teacher described this occurrence as an example of VET programs being used as '*a dumping ground for students that co-ordinators didn't know how to deal with*'.

Through their years of work and industry experience, VET teachers are very aware of the real world perceptions of 'hands on' work and have an appreciation of both ends of this argument. They often have direct experience of both that involves perceptions that trade experience based on vocational qualifications doing practical work is lesser than knowledge based work; and also, experience of trade work as offering a means for well paid secure work. VET teachers tend to emphasis the latter.

One VET teacher in a rural secondary school emphasized the prospect of apprenticeships in the Building and Engineering trades in his efforts to build awareness and motivate his VET students. He combined this with excursions onto building sites where students saw the work of different trades and got to speak directly with the tradespeople. These discussions ranged over descriptions of the different work roles, included insights into employer expectations and what employers looked for when interviewing young people for apprenticeships and other jobs. These experiences emphasized to the students the relevance and utility of the VET programs (Stevenson 1990).

The pedagogy within some VET in schools programs is found to be merely an instrumental and procedural pedagogy. But alongside these also stand examples of rich authentic pedagogy. One teacher explained that in some previous years, her students were sent off-site to the local TAFE where they were required to follow a program that concentrated on the development of skills. Students completed endless offerings of sewing exercises directed at being able to perform in industry but they never got to undertake the making of a whole garment. The students voted with their feet and dropped out of the program. The following year she designed what she considered to be a more age-appropriate learning program where the students could learn and practice the same content but while doing a series of garments and projects. This held the student's interest, provided motivation and built resilience amongst the students. This teacher spoke about the need to make the program suit the students and be appropriate for secondary school students rather than those seeking work in the industry.

Project-based learning was reported as common across the VET in schools programs. Some teachers reported that they considered some Certificate II qualifications as being very theory based. However rather than undertaking atomised Units of

competency, interesting projects were designed and developed as a means of learning the skills and underpinning knowledge through authentic and rich tasks. Students doing Building and Construction made scaled and actual wall framing, cubby houses and chook sheds; while cooks planned, prepared, cooked and served up meals; and garment producers made whole garments. These VET in schools teachers were creative and developed a way of embedding the skills development within projects to engage the interests of their students. Most teachers reported the need to keep their students interested and engaged. When asked directly about principles that underpin classroom behaviour and management a majority of the teachers interviewed responded with one word, respect. Some explained that they saw respect as being a two way process, respect for students and respect for teachers.

VCE VET as a state-wide initiative was considered very positively. Some teachers reported that initially they found scored assessment to be complicated but after talking to others and hearing how other teachers organised and managed the process it became much easier to understand and implement. Others who taught in programs which did not have access to scored assessment and were required to remain using the Competent or Not Yet Competent binary expressed a desire to have scored assessment. They reported that access to a score gave comparability with other VCE studies and they considered this to be more advantageous for their students. The decision about whether to develop a program with or without scored assessment though is one that is out of the influence of the teachers and remains with an industry based reference group where educators are but one of the representatives involved.

VET in schools teachers have to work at being creative and inventive as they fine-tune their programs to make them sit well within the actual and specific parameters of their particular environment and situations. The more creative VET practitioners work at maximising opportunities, situations and circumstances for the benefit of their students. One large regional senior secondary college visited had over 1200 students in Years 11 & 12. This school had five feeder schools. This allowed the school to develop a large number of program choices and provided their students with access to over 900 different VET Units of competency. Some of their students were doing short programs of less than 100 hours and other students were doing two and even three different VET programs.

A different teacher working in a metropolitan secondary school explained how his students received five qualifications for their one year of full time study. He explained,

The students enrol in a VCAL program. They all do a Certificate II in Manufacturing Technology in Semester 1 which gives them an introduction to how things are made essentially and also an opportunity to experience all the workshop technologies which we have here . . . so they make a piece of furniture for example, and make a couple of pieces in engineering. They make something in plastic. They use the CAD CAM equipment and there is a heavy emphasis on sustainability as well. In the 2nd Semester they specialise in either, Building & Construction, Electro-technology, Engineering or Automotive, an option of four different specialisations and the VCAL underpins the whole thing. . . .

These students also complete an industry 'White-card' issued by Worksafe and a Level 1 First Aid.

The VCAL has four strands. These are (i) Literacy and Numeracy Skills; (ii) Work Related Skills; (iii) Industry Specific Skills; and (iv) Personal Development Skills, (VCAA 2010b). The VET program is completed as part of the Industry Specific Skills and the Work-Related Skills strands. In the example above where the students complete the five qualifications in the year it is not immediately apparent how students satisfy the VCAL requirements for Literacy & Numeracy and the Personal Development Skills strands. The program co-ordinator who is also the main teacher who provides this program makes this clear, *'one of the benefits of our program is that they don't go to a different class, they don't go to an English class for example, we actually have specialist VCAL literacy and numeracy teachers that come into the VET classes so all the literacy and numeracy is related to the VET'.*

A leading limitation to the creativity and soundness of VET in schools programs is the timetabling. The weekly hours allotted to VET programs can be as low as 3 periods of 75 minutes or extend to full time as in the case of the 'five quals in a year' cited above. Some schools are offering 4 hours of VET a week and some are timetabling 8 hours. A VCAA Curriculum Manager stated in his interview that where he thinks VET programs are working best and being most effective is where they are integrated into the whole program of the students, and not being presented as an add on that is done on Wednesday afternoon each week.

The shape of the provision of VET in schools is diverse. Some classes have eight students and others have up to 26. Some are a few hours a week and some full time. Some are provided by the school's staff but auspiced under an off-site Registered Training Organisation (RTO). One teacher described an arrangement where he taught all the theory on-site in the school and the students went to the TAFE for just three days of the year to work on the equipment and do the practical exercises. Clearly this is not ideal but it is an example of the kind of compromises that need to be made in order for the program to run, and be offered and accessed by secondary students in that school. Access and diversity are important for provision of VET programs in schools; but so too, are cost, quality and effectiveness.

The costing of VET provision is a factor in hiring in expertise from an existing Registered Training Organisation (RTO) like a local TAFE Institute. The costing charged to schools can appear exorbitant. It has become common practice for the providing RTO to charge the cost of the program based on the nominal hours specified in the Purchasing Guide not the number of actual hours provided to students. One large regional secondary school utilises a range of provision options, amongst these were (1) the school being the RTO, (2) the VET program is auspiced through TAFE or another RTO, and (3) provision occurs through TAFE or Private RTOs. Choices about who provides the program are related to comparative costs, availability of suitable space and appropriately qualified teachers. One school reported doing a simple cost benefit analysis of the cost of provision by the local TAFE against the cost of employing a new teacher just to run a particular VET program. Under these circumstances the school would have the VET program placed on its scope of registration and become the RTO. An Assistant Principal at this school explained in her interview, *'previously the TAFE delivered it for us, but now we are taking it back because we have got four classes this year. Last year the TAFE wanted to charge me $90,000 for three classes, so for four I imagine we would be looking at well over*

$100,000 - and no teacher, not even me as Assistant Principal, earns that sort of money in a year'.

On an aspect of quality, there are examples becoming apparent of where secondary schools start off with a relationship such as a partnership or auspiced by the local TAFE Institute or RTO. However over time some of these relationships are deteriorating partly because of discrepancies over what constitutes 'competency'. This is partly due to how many nominal hours it takes to lift a student to a level of being competent to operate in industry at the standard required. As VET program providers and teachers who are recruited from industry, VET teachers have a lived experience of what competent performance looks like. However if the representatives of the TAFE or RTO begin to notice a discrepancy between the student's capabilities at the completion of a program undertaken at the TAFE/RTO with what the students are able to do on completion of the VET in schools program, they start to question the reliability and validity of the program. One of the first questions they ask is about the number of hours it takes on average to be able to demonstrate competency at the TAFE compared against the number of hours being offered to the students through the VET in schools program. Major discrepancies in numbers of hours being offered across the different providers raise questions about reliability and validity, and can lead to feelings of dissatisfaction and inequity.

If a VET in schools program is signing students off as competent in a much shorter time that what occurs for the same Unit of Competence being provided in a TAFE/RTO, then the auspicing TAFE/RTO, is very likely to conclude that the standard of outcome being obtained, is not the same. However secondary schools can face very real limitations to the number of hours they can offer and this is most likely to be less than those offered at other RTOs. As part of a bigger picture, this can lead to a questioning of national and mutual recognition, when comparability of quality in the outcomes cannot be assured across different providers.

In some instances where such disputes have arisen some of the coordinators of VET in schools programs reported shopping around to find an alternative RTO who will accept the standard of work coming out of the VET in schools program. The realities and limitation of VET programs being offered in schools is that they are rarely able to provide comparable nominal hours as the same program in a TAFE/RTO. The worst case scenario is where this leads to the VET in schools programs beginning to merely teach to produce the minimum amount of evidence needed to satisfy a potential audit. Determination of what constitutes competent is socially constructed and can be problematic. However reaching competency is a quality issue that needs to be addressed, otherwise VET in schools programs are in danger of becoming 'VET-Lite'.

Conclusion

This study identifies conditions that can encourage or inhibit good practice in VET in schools programs and it contributes to our current understandings of VET pedagogy within Victorian secondary schools. In particular it sheds further light on such aspects as scored assessment, budgetary factors, timetabling and issues around quality. In terms of scored assessment, initially this was confusing to teachers but through professional development and networking with colleagues it has become understood and now even preferred. It is considered to be an advantage to the students to be doing

a program which results in a score that can directly contribute to the ATAR. Costs and budget were a major consideration in planning the provision of all VET in schools programs. External RTOs know exactly how much they can charge secondary schools with information about standard bands of fees publicly available and even the availability of templates for contracts and Memorandums of Understanding; this limits the market possibilities. Timetabling or more accurately the number of total hours being provided to students in VET programs can become an issue. A reduction of hours for a school–based VET program compared to what is offered at other RTOs has in some cases led to poor regard for the quality of the school-based VET qualification. This has also been the basis of the fracturing of relationships between some external RTOs and some secondary schools. For their part the teachers and co-ordinators of the VET programs within schools continue to be creative, juggling and sometimes compromising on a range of considerations and constraints that contextualise their particular programs.

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