A REVIEW OF VET FOR SCHOOL STUDENTS

Consultation outcomes report
OVERVIEW

On 13 June 2019 the Minister for Education released *Vocational Pathways to Employment: A review of VET for School Students*, an issues paper highlighting the challenges facing vocational education and training (VET) and how it is delivered to South Australian secondary school students. The launch of the issues paper opened a six-week community consultation period, which closed on Friday 26 July 2019. During this consultation process, feedback was captured through online surveys, written submissions, targeted engagement with industry and open consultation forums across regional and metropolitan South Australia.

To complement the consultation process, a youth online survey were also undertaken by Year13.

The outcomes of these reviews, along with learnings from national and international practice, have formed the basis of the *VET for School Students* policy.

DISCUSSION

This report includes three key elements:

1. **Review of VET for School Students – Summary of findings**
   A summary of the findings and benchmarking examples captured from the *Review of VET for School Students*. This comprehensive independent consultation process was undertaken by Price Waterhouse Cooper (PwC) and focused on the four key themes described in the Issues Paper:
   - perception
   - access
   - quality
   - relevance.

2. **Student voice – VET pathways online survey**
   A summary of the findings from the online survey conducted by youth engagement organisation Year13 to find out how young students view VET and how they choose their pathways.

3. **International best practice**
   Investigation of international best practice in the area of vocational education and training, with particular learnings taken from Germany, Switzerland, England and Canada.
PERCEPTION

The negative perception of VET for school students is common across stakeholder groups.

Stakeholder feedback strongly indicated that the poor perception of VET for school students is held by a range of stakeholders. However, the underlying reasons for these perceptions vary for each stakeholder group.

Students

Parents, teachers and training providers who attended the sessions indicated that students are often only encouraged to engage in VET when they reach year 10. At this point students were reported to have already formed an opinion of VET pathways being inferior to university. Several stakeholders suggested introducing course counselling discussions from year 7/8 onwards may have a positive impact on this perception.

Parents

Many parents see VET as trade-orientated and their views can be influenced by their own engagement with vocational pathways and historical perceptions of VET. As a result, their views may not accurately represent the modern VET landscape. Stakeholders also commented that engaging with certain cohorts of parents, such as migrant families, can be particularly difficult due to cultural perceptions around post-secondary education. It was also noted that parents often use the phrases ‘VET’ and ‘TAFE’ interchangeably to refer to vocational pathways. As a result, numerous stakeholders flagged that the 2017 TAFE SA issues had damaged the perception of VET in the state.

Career counsellors and VET coordinators

These stakeholders were seen as having inconsistent understandings of VET, with several people in these roles surmising that they ‘don’t know what they don’t know.’ VET coordination often only comprises a small portion of an individual’s job role and they may not have received sufficient upskilling to allow them to effectively engage in the nuances of the VET system. As summarised by a stakeholder responding to the open submissions, ‘There is simply not time within school roles to manage VET well.’ Additionally, individuals in these job roles are generally university educated and may have a personal bias towards an academic pathway.

School leadership

Feedback suggested that school leaders who genuinely understand vocational pathways are in the minority. Stakeholders informed us that principals and school leaders can fall into a range of categories including, ‘active academics’, ‘those that are ignorant of VET’, ‘under-estimators of VET’ and ‘those who understand what is required to deliver it well and the students to whom it should be delivered.’ Principals and school leaders may also be driven by metrics and key performance indicators (KPIs) that emphasise university pathways over VET pathways.
Employers

Training providers, teachers and employers who engaged with the consultations indicated that VET for school students is often perceived by industry to be delivered and assessed at a lower level of quality. As noted by one stakeholder ‘...the VET sector, including VET in Schools has an ingrained history of being seen as a second-class education to a university degree’.

It was also reported that some employers believe these programs do not teach students the basic work readiness skills required to operate in the workplace and are therefore uncertain about engaging with these students. A sentiment that was echoed in the written submissions, with industry identifying a strong need to strengthen literacy and financial literacy programs in the school curriculum which include topics such as managing budgets, paying tax, mobile phone contracts and taking out loans.

While addressing the poor perception of VET held by each of the above groups is important, stakeholders suggested that it is equally important to upskill and engage school leaders in the VET discussion. This is because an accurate understanding of the VET landscape and the opportunities and pathways available is critical to dispelling misconceptions, and the influence these stakeholders have over student pathways is significant.

The perception of VET is exacerbated by school reporting and the notion of what constitutes a ‘good’ school.

Stakeholders commented that the perception of VET within schools as inferior to university is exacerbated by common factors used to measure a school’s success. For example, the success and performance of a school is typically measured by South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE) completions and student Australian Tertiary Admission Ranks (ATARs). The value and contributions of VET completions are often not recognised.

This focus on ATARs was highlighted by a stakeholder, noting: ‘The need to raise the profile of VET is reinforced by a focus in schools on ATAR that has impacted both the perception and awareness of vocational careers. In research conducted, a significant number of VET Coordinators and Career Advisors spoke of an increased focus on ATAR scores which they reported had impacted their ability to help students explore other career options. With a rise in university enrolment rates and a community focus on ATAR, this increased attention in schools is unsurprising. However the effect of this is that more schools and students are becoming set in a university centric thinking that prioritises academic outcomes over supporting the skills and options that best align with the interests of the student and future workforce and skill demands.’

Similarly, another stakeholder noted that university placements are measured with more transparency and that ‘schools are recognised for achieving greater university placements, but equivalent recognition for achieving VET outcomes does not occur in the same way, if at all’.

Students are guided towards VET for school students for the ‘wrong’ reasons

Stakeholders noted that VET is often put forward as a pathway for non-academic students and students at risk of disengaging from the school system. For example, if a student is struggling with core school curriculum, VET programs may be encouraged as a replacement. This practice was referenced in a submission highlighting that ‘...often students with behaviour issues or slow learners are directed towards the VET programs.’ Without
appropriate consideration of the student’s interests and core skills, this can result in the student being enrolled in an unsuitable program.

The flow on consequences of using VET in this manner are significant, with stakeholders commenting that:

- other students may interpret the value of VET programs by assessing the ‘types’ of students involved. If they only see ‘non-academic’ students engaged, they may be deterred from seeking out VET opportunities
- the students engaged in VET are more likely to drop out before completion or struggle with the course content, as they are not interested in it or don’t have the core skills to engage with the subject matter
- employers receive work placement students that may have limited interest in the subject matter and lack commitment to the program. This can cause employers to withdraw from VET for school student programs altogether
- the capacity for VET to be used as a building block for higher education pathways and careers is obscured.

In addition to the above, stakeholders noted that VET for school students can sometimes be used as an easy way to gain SACE credits and increase ATAR scores. This can distort the purpose of VET, with students utilising VET programs with no intention of pursuing the vocation upon completion of school.

**Personal Learning Plan (PLP)**

Consultations continually referred to the need for consistent and meaningful careers advice for secondary students. Stakeholders commented that the Personal Learning Plan (PLP) SACE subject in South Australia provides students with a sound starting point for careers advice in secondary school. However, the quality of the conversation around the PLP may impact the student’s perception of VET.

Stakeholders suggested that the PLP should be used to establish clear pathways and goals for students that they will use to guide their final years of school. Stakeholders also suggested this should be a living document that is regularly revisited as the student undertakes their learning journey.

A desktop review of the guidance for the PLP (on the SACE website) shows that it is not deficient in achieving this aim. Consequently, the implementation of the PLP should be a focus. This may include additional resources and time dedicated to the PLP conversation as well as upskilling for staff who are undertaking those conversations so they are acquainted with all the pathways and goals available to a student.

Other states have similar forms of individual student learning plans.

Feedback indicated a need to broaden the existing process for developing the PLP into a holistic careers advice program that supports South Australian students from years 10 to 12. The structure of the program should include:

- Year 10: Students undertake the existing PLP program to determine personal and learning goals; students engage in at least one portion of workplace training; individual career counselling scheduled mid-year.
- Year 11: Students revise their PLP to reflect new goals; students engage in at least one portion of workplace training; individual career counselling scheduled mid-year.
- Year 12: Students revise their PLP to reflect new goals; students engage in at least one portion of workplace training; individual career counselling scheduled twice throughout the year.
The target state of this three year program is the facilitation of a careers advice ecosystem in each school that supports students to make all learning and career decisions. To support this ecosystem, it was also proposed that an app be developed to track student information and provide students with a quick, accessible point of contact.

**Provision of clear, meaningful and consistent VET information for students and parents**

Stakeholders noted that both students and parents often have poor perceptions of VET for school students programs. Parents, who are broadly seen as ‘key influencers’, typically see VET as trade-orientated and their views can be influenced by their own engagement with vocational pathways and historical perceptions of VET. As a result, their views may not accurately represent the modern VET landscape.

Stakeholders also commented that engaging with certain cohorts of parents, such as migrant families, can be particularly difficult due to cultural perceptions around postsecondary education. Students were reported to be significantly influenced by their parents and caregivers, therefore, a perception of VET as a ‘second option’ by this group can have a significant impact.

Succinct, high quality information on the VET sector is sought by stakeholders and is necessary to help them understand vocational training, pathways and careers. Whilst stakeholders reported a significant quantity of VET resources currently available, they find it difficult to determine what is relevant and accurate. This was noted in one of the submissions, which highlighted ‘...the ‘impenetrable plethora’ of information that currently exists’ and the need to ‘create a single source of information with simplified, consistent messages about VET (especially apprenticeships) which has been tested with employers’.

The state governments in both Victoria and New South Wales have developed online collateral that outlines the benefit of VET careers and clearly identifies pathways for students in year 11 and 12. The NSW Department of Education VET page starts with the following statement: ‘Studying a vocational education and training (VET) course as part of the HSC is a smart choice. VET courses provide you with the knowledge and skills needed to make the most of your future.’ The page then continues by highlighting the benefits of VET for school students and referencing statistics in relation to the positive employment and remuneration figures for VET graduates. The New South Wales website also contains a direct link to ‘SkillsOne’, a website that houses hundreds of videos promoting VET and using students to speak directly about their experiences.

Similarly, the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority has developed a webpage called ‘Get VET’. It provides a holistic overview of VET for secondary students and even includes simple flow charts (‘Which VET are you?’) to assist students understand how they can map their interests to careers and relevant VET programs. The Get VET webpage also includes ‘success stories’ of past students that have utilised VET and have continued onto successful careers.

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**ACCESS**

Financial and geographical barriers can hinder access to VET for school students, particularly those in regional and remote areas.

Consultations hosted in regional and metro regions had broadly similar feedback regarding key access challenges for school students engaging in VET programs:

**Public transport**

Stakeholders in regional areas spoke highly of VET and its relevance to students in their areas, but highlighted the challenges associated with living in the regions, including accessing public transport. Stakeholders suggested that a lack of public transport sometimes led younger students to delay commencement of a VET course until they are old enough to drive. While public transport is more accessible in metropolitan areas, some training and work placements require learners to use multiple modes of transport and travel for long periods of time; a situation that is compounded where courses and work placements require early morning starts and may result in students relying on family members. This is exacerbated for rural students who are boarding in the city and do not have extended family in the area to assist with travel requirements. It is also a particular issue for students with disability, as the transport assistance program initiated by the Department only operates to transport students to and from school. Training providers are not encompassed within this, meaning that it is often left to schools or families to organise and finance.

**Employer availability**

Stakeholders indicated that regional students may be disadvantaged by limited availability and access to appropriate employers for work placements and industry engagement. Students may be unable to access relevant work experience due to thin markets and have to travel to other regional centres or to Adelaide to access relevant opportunities. While consultation indicated that regional schools and training providers are good at establishing links with available local businesses and industries – some stakeholders suggested more so than their metropolitan counterparts - consultees noted that a student’s postcode should not determine their career. For example, while a regional school may have a robust relationship with local agricultural businesses, this should not confine students to pursuing this option. The issue of finding appropriate employer partners was similarly noted in the metropolitan environment. Students in metropolitan areas, while having access to a larger number of businesses overall, can often find themselves in situations where their school or training provider may only offer certain courses and work placements due to the location of the school.

**Other geographical barriers**

In addition to the above, further geographical barriers experienced by students in regional areas include limited or expensive internet access and lack of course diversity due to low student engagement and diminished economies of scale. Regional schools often have less than 100 students from Reception to year 12 and need to partner with other schools to attain the critical mass required to run specific VET courses. Even if this does occur, it may still not be enough to establish a sufficiently large student cohort to make courses viable. Stakeholders noted that this may result in students undertaking their second or third course preference. If a rural student does undertake a course that requires travel, the financial burden of finding accommodation and funding the travel is typically up to the student. Stakeholder feedback noted that: ‘Recognition needs to be made that rural and remote students may need to relocate away from their usual residence and source accommodation while attending training for compulsory practicums and theory components. The availability for these students to receive some sort of Scholarship to assist with living away
from home costs to attend study would increase enrolment and completion of courses by students for whom distance/location is a barrier to successful education outcomes.’

Disadvantaged Cohorts

The challenges facing students from regional and remote areas was strongly reflected in the written submissions. Stakeholders noted that while students from disadvantage backgrounds faced similar barriers to those living in regional areas they frequently required additional support with language, literacy and numeracy as well as travel, clothing and equipment expenses. The importance of considering access for all cohorts in the development of occupational pathways was also raised. It was seen as a key element to ensure appropriate support is available to enable participation for all students, in particular, increased numbers of young women, Aboriginal students and those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Some stakeholders questioned the compatibility of secondary schools and the VET system

A common discussion amongst stakeholders centred on the differing primary purposes of core secondary schooling and the VET system. The educational perspective of schooling can sometimes see it focusing exclusively on core school subjects and opportunities that allow students to explore different higher education pathways and learning opportunities. On the other hand, VET typically includes a strong focus on job outcomes and clear pathways for learners, with less exploratory avenues.

Despite the above, feedback indicated that stakeholders do not feel the differing purposes make secondary school and VET incompatible. Stakeholders believe VET can be used by students to discover their passion in the same manner as core curriculum, provided there is a legitimate intention to pursue further studies or a career in the field. Stakeholders did note, however, that an insular focus on full qualifications by some schools and students as a means to attain SACE credits did hinder the relationship between the two education models. They noted that a focus on SACE credits can devalue courses and VET for school students more generally. There was some confusion amongst stakeholders as to what constituted a student legitimately pursuing a vocation, as compared to a student only undertaking a full qualification for the benefit of SACE credits. Stakeholders agreed that opportunities should be flexible enough to allow students to undertake unit clusters, short courses and skill sets instead of full qualifications as a mechanism to pursue a vocational career.

Stakeholders also identified timetabling as an area of incompatibility between schools and the VET system. Traditional subject slots (~60 minutes) in a school’s timetable are significantly shorter than a VET course typically allows for and do not leave sufficient time for training providers to deliver training or students to attend a work placement. Schools are able to overcome this barrier to access through active and early collaboration with training providers to establish a compatible timetable for VET students. While stakeholders noted that some regional schools are particularly adept at this due to strong relationships with training providers it was suggested that flexible timetabling and block training during school holidays would be particularly useful in regional and remote areas.
The VET for School Students funding model is complex and limited in places

Funding was consistently raised by stakeholders as a point of discussion, however, not on the basis that additional funding is needed. While stakeholders generally indicated that the level of government funding for VET for school students is sufficient, a lack of transparency in funding arrangements and inconsistent approaches between schools have meant that out of pocket costs and fee for service course fees have been a barrier in some cases.

The key issues raised with regard to funding included:

Lack of stakeholder understanding

Stakeholders noted that it is sometimes difficult for stakeholder groups, such as parents to understand the true cost of a VET for school students’ pathway given the different funding mechanisms and levers. This sentiment was echoed by one of the stakeholders, highlighting ‘...there is currently a considerable lack of transparency in how government funding for VET is provided and allocated’. The inability to engage with the sector and understand the financial implications was cited as being a major barrier to access, as parents often choose to go down the better understood higher education pathway, even when it is not the best choice for the learner. As summarised by a stakeholder, ‘We agree that funding arrangements and availability are unclear. It is difficult to find where to access information and then as a parent, decipher which is the best way forward for your child.’

Feedback also highlighted that the funding disparity between States across Australia is particularly confusion for businesses operating nationally.

Limitations and misuse of TGSS

Stakeholder commentary generally suggested that the funding attributed to the TGSS model (nominally $25 million) is appropriate. However, there are areas in which the system can be enhanced. Stakeholders also suggested the current structure enables students to receive funding for multiple qualifications, provided they have not fully completed one. Stakeholders acknowledged that it can drive negative behaviours.

Victoria has sought to support the engagement of rural schools in VET programs, with a rural funding weighting for students from schools with a location index of 0.2 and above.2 This funding is in addition to the primary funding that is received through the core student learning component of the Student Resource Package (SRP). However, feedback from consultation with Victoria suggested that the funding model has not been reviewed in a number of years; notably, not since a significant number of school-based RTOs closed. Given it is cheaper to deliver in a school-based RTO setting and the VET supplement is based on the average cost of delivery, there is the potential that the current model may no longer be fit for purpose.

Out of pocket costs

Additional costs over and above enrolment fees were identified as a barrier to accessing VET for school students. Specifically, students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are disproportionately affected by the additional costs of transport, tools and materials. Stakeholders noted that currently there is no financial support available for these additional expenses and the costs are forwarded to the student or their family. This can be exacerbated when students are undertaking a Certificate III, as the school does not generally absorb the costs and they fall to the student.

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Fee for service costs

The issue of ‘cost’ of courses that are not government subsidised was a common theme noted among stakeholders as demonstrated by the following comments. ‘The biggest hurdle is often financial. Many courses not included in the Training Guarantee for SACE Students (TGSS) are very expensive if one does not have access to any form of discount or subsidy......this rules out many students’ ‘families don’t always have to pay, but schools do, it is becoming an issue’ and ‘In some schools, TAFE or VET providers directly invoice families. This is better for schools as it reduces the administrative burden, however many families struggle to pay the cost of tuition fees.’ However, it is noted that the cost of non-subsidised training is determined by the market.

Cross-sector collaboration

Stakeholder feedback indicated that there is strong collaboration across sectors in the VET for school students’ space. Stakeholders reported that Government, Catholic and Independent schools and bodies typically engage in frequent communication and provide support networks where appropriate. It was agreed that this collaborative approach is a strength of the VET for School Student space and should be capitalised on where possible.

Throughout the consultation process, stakeholders provided several examples of where VET is working well and a number of common themes emerged. This evidence clearly demonstrated that the best student outcomes are achieved where VET is based on a platform of collaboration between partners working across a common ‘regional footprint’ (both metropolitan and regional), leveraging knowledge, expertise and resources. This type of approach is of particular importance in areas of thin markets. An industry stakeholder summarised this by saying ‘The most advantageous model they were aware of is a ‘hub and spoke’ type system whereby a central school is fed by surrounding schools, or schools with similar objectives in terms of VET, to form a centre of excellence.’

Using cross-sector support, New South Wales has implemented a unique model for the coordination of work placements for VET school students. A network of ‘Work Placement Service Providers’ have been established to support and coordinate mandatory work placements for students doing HSC VET courses.³ The program is funded by the NSW Department of Education, Catholic Schools NSW and the Association of Independent Schools of NSW, with the aim of the program being that all HSC VET students have access to relevant work placements for the industry course they are undertaking.⁴ The function of a service provider is to liaise between schools/RTOs and employers to identify potential placements for students.

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QUALITY

Schools do not feel that industry has ‘bought in’ to VET for school students

Stakeholders identified the lack of strong industry engagement and relationships as a barrier to high quality VET for school students. Schools often rely on training providers to act as the link to industry partners and find relevant work placements for their students, despite this typically being a school’s responsibility. Stronger industry engagement and relationships allow both schools and training providers to demonstrate to industry the high quality delivery of VET for school students and allow industry to buy into the pathway as a legitimate labour force opportunity.

The majority of written submissions strongly emphasised the need for stronger engagement and partnerships with industry to ensure greater breadth of employment pathway opportunities were identified and improved outcomes for students were achieved.

Industry engagement in South Australia is particularly challenging given the large number of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs). It is likely these businesses will have limited capacity and resources to provide work placement opportunities for students. The size of businesses is not, however, an insurmountable barrier to industry engagement.

The knowledge and experience of key personnel is critical and can be a barrier to quality when poorly executed

A general lack of support for key personnel operating within schools was identified as a barrier to delivering high quality VET for school students. Specifically, career counsellors and VET coordinators were identified as needing greater support and access to relevant information. The absence of dedicated VET support personnel was identified as a barrier to the high quality delivery of VET for school students, ‘In some schools, school teachers run the VET courses….If school teachers are running the courses, they need to be supported to do so’. Stakeholders identified the need for additional skills and support for this cohort of VET coordinators, including access to professional development and opportunities to upskill. Skilled support staff that are comfortable with the vocational sector/language would allow schools to provide students and staff with more accurate information and deliver higher quality VET for School Student programs. The importance of this has been reiterated in several of the written submissions.

Stakeholders also noted that the requirements placed on qualified teachers to be able to train and assess VET, notably the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment and relevant industry experience under the 2015 Standards for RTOs, can be a constraint. Some school teachers may not have the time or capacity to attain the qualification, thus creating a barrier for teachers wanting to deliver VET for school students in an auspice arrangement. This barrier is further compounded by the requirement for industry currency in the Standards. Stakeholders noted that, whilst teachers often have sufficient subject matter/industry knowledge and experience to engage in the delivery of VET for school students, maintaining industry currency is difficult given they are working in a school day-to-day, not industry. This can present a compliance issue under the Standards for RTOs.

Interestingly, the capacity for qualified VET trainers and assessors to engage in the delivery of VET to school students was also discussed by a number of stakeholders. It was noted that, whilst trainers and assessors are qualified to teach in the VET sector with the TAE and industry currency, this does not mean they have the skills and experience to engage with school-age learners. Stakeholders commented that an ill-equipped trainer in this scenario could adversely impact the quality of VET delivered to school students.
Registered Training Organisations (RTOs)

The quality of RTOs delivering training to school students was consistently raised as a concern. It was observed that this is an issue faced by the VET Sector more broadly, however, quality training is of paramount importance in the school setting given the vulnerability of the school student cohort.

It was recognised that the primary responsibility for ensuring quality provision of training was for the national regulator, ASQA. However, there may be other measures South Australia can take to lift the standard of training delivery to school students.

NSW has developed a preferred RTO provider model that provides the Government with a degree of control over the RTOs delivering to school students and also reduces the administrative burden placed on schools to assess RTOs and identify those that are fit for purpose. The potential for a list of pre-approved RTOs has also been raised in Western Australia as a means to ensure consistent quality and reduce administrative burdens on schools.\(^5\) It was noted, however, by the Western Australian Education and Health Standing Committee that ‘the panel would need to be extensive enough to prevent a small number of providers from delivering to a large number of students, which presents a risk in the circumstances that an RTO collapses or is deregistered’.

Auspicing arrangements

Clear rules and regulations are required for auspicing training. While consultation found that there are still a range of benefits to be derived from auspicing arrangements, such as students having a familiar and skilled teacher delivering content to them in a comfortable school environment, RTOs and schools are both concerned with the risks of auspicing.

Auspicing arrangements were raised by number of jurisdictions as a factor that can negatively influence the quality of school-based VET. Feedback suggested that TAFEs in Victoria are withdrawing from auspicing arrangements due to concerns around teacher credibility and industry currency. Vic Polytechnic, for example, no longer undertakes any auspicing, and Kangan Institute is also in the process of withdrawing from auspicing arrangements and is focusing on delivering on campus. This commentary is similar to that heard in South Australia, with some RTOs noting concerns with auspicing arrangements and the associated liability for the RTO.

The availability of necessary facilities affects the quality of student learning

Facilities were identified as critical to the delivery of high quality VET for school students. Certain units and qualifications require access to specific equipment and facilities, and stakeholders noted that the inability to access these facilities and resources can act as a significant barrier to quality VET delivery, particularly in regional and remote areas. This is particularly challenging in relation to courses that require learners to be competent at operating heavy machinery, using specific tools or operating in a specific setting.

The South Australian Department for Education undertook an audit of Trade Training Centres (TTCs) in the regions and found that many facilities are either no longer fit for purpose, or are not the right facilities for the training requirements of the region. Stakeholders largely agreed with this finding, commenting that they don’t know what the purpose of the centres are or how they can engage with them.

In particular, stakeholders noted that the TTCs had previously facilitated access to high quality equipment and facilities, and that the sharing of these resources was beneficial, particularly in regional and remote areas.

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The Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA) has announced its intention to undertake a strategic review of VET in schools.

In discussion with the Commissioner of ASQA, it was clear that ASQA acknowledges the valuable opportunities VET can provide for secondary school students. ASQA has highlighted risks associated with its delivery and expressed concern that the value of VET for school students can be negatively affected when it used for the wrong purposes and courses do not meet the required standards.

While SACE includes flexibility to recognise VET and for VET to contribute towards a student’s ATAR, it is critical that the purpose of VET, to prepare students for work in a particular vocation, is not confused or undermined by using it merely as means to achieve or improve SACE and ATAR outcomes.

The historical practice of using VET for this purpose has contributed to the devaluing of VET’s overall status and damaged industry confidence in VET delivered to school students. Using VET as an engagement strategy for students who are considered less academically capable has had a similar effect. These practices, combined with poor quality assurance measures, increase the risk and incidence of students gaining VET qualifications without having developed the level of competency expected and required by industry. Most importantly, these practices do not prepare students for effective transitions to work.

**Capability building and support**

Feedback strongly indicated that a significant number of stakeholders, particularly in the school setting, do not accurately understand VET. For example, school leaders that genuinely understand vocational pathways were reported as being in the minority. Similarly, career counsellors and VET coordinators were assessed by stakeholders as having inconsistent understandings of VET.

Feedback suggested that the consequences of this lack of understanding results in cohorts of students being guided into VET for the ‘wrong’ reasons. For example, a student that is struggling with core school curriculum may be encouraged to engage in VET programs as it is seen as an ‘easy’ and ‘non-academic’ replacement.

Actively targeting and supporting key school stakeholders to understand VET is critical to ensure that each school is an ecosystem of good VET advice for students. This notion was supported in a submission, which noted that ‘Teachers need active support from and engagement with government and VET providers if they are to fully inform students about the opportunities that the VET sector has to offer.’

Research suggests that the perception and understanding of VET for school students in Queensland varies to some degree from that in other states. This is primarily due to the large number of Queensland schools that operate their own RTOs. While this model has strengths and weaknesses, one benefit of this structure is that school leadership and other key school personnel have established formal roles as leaders of the RTO. This ensures they are well acquainted with the VET system and understand its technicalities and purpose.

**Administration support**

A common discussion amongst stakeholders related to the administrative burden schools and training providers encounter when engaging in VET for school students. For example, depending on the arrangement a school enters into with an RTO, differing documents, contract arrangements and processes will be required. Navigating this landscape can be difficult and may fall to individuals that have limited experience engaging in the space.

The benefits of minimising this administrative burden on schools is dual faceted: it allows staff more time to dedicate to students, and reduces the likelihood of errors and inconsistencies in official documentation, meaning that the roles and responsibilities of parties are clear.
Victoria has developed a suite of standard contracts and agreements for government schools to use when engaging with external providers. Materials provided on the Department of Education website include:

- Standard VET purchasing contract
- Standard VET auspicing contract
- School to school purchasing agreement
- School to school VET access agreement.

Western Australia is similarly considering the development of standardised contracts as a way of ensuring quality and consistency of experience. The Education and Health Standing Committee report to the Parliament of Western Australia (2017) summarised that, ‘While schools like the auspicing arrangement because it gives them control over the learning environment, navigating and managing complex contracts is stressful.’

Data Collection

Meaningful data that accurately maps students from secondary education into further studies and employment is critical to understanding the success of the schooling system in preparing students for their futures. However, this kind of data is not available in South Australia.

Stakeholders noted that this lack of data limits the understanding of VET for School Student programs as the pathways that students go onto using their VET experience cannot be quantified. Poor information can make it difficult to combat misconceptions and refine initiatives aimed at improving VET for school students.

The need for data capture on student outcomes and journeys was highlighted in the Joyce Review, which noted that ‘...there is no nationwide student identifier mechanism for tracking the subsequent pathways and outcomes for all secondary students. This prevents governments from comparing the post-school outcomes for those who participate in VET as part of their secondary schooling and those who do not.’

Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)

Stakeholders overwhelmingly commented that the perception of VET within schools is inferior to university. This phenomenon is exacerbated by common metrics used to measure a school’s success. For example, the success and performance of a school is typically measured by SACE completions and student ATARs. While VET outcomes are encompassed within these metrics, the value and contributions of VET completions are often lost in the conversion to ATARs, which is used exclusively for university entrance. As summarised in a submission, ‘schools are recognised for achieving greater university placements, but equivalent recognition for achieving VET outcomes does not occur in the same way, if at all’.

Consultees provided examples of schools that successfully showcase and celebrate student achievements in VET, such as an annual awards night at a school where awards are handed out for each vocational industry area rather than VET as a whole. This mirrors practices in ‘core’ school subjects in which there is an award for each subject area. However, despite some success in this area, feedback suggested these types of initiatives are limited. Schools need to be encouraged to appropriately convey to students the benefits and options involved with VET pathways.

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RELEVANCE

Students do not understand the relevance of VET and how it can contribute to achieving their desired career aspirations

Stakeholders commented that students often do not understand what VET for school students means and the range of options available. Stakeholders noted that, at this age, students may not know what occupation or industry they want to pursue and VET can play a critical role in supporting them to test their interests. This was emphasised in a submission which noted that ‘An important part of establishing vocational careers as an option is allowing young people to see what it looks like before they commit to it’.

Stakeholders suggested that there is a presumption that if a student does a VET qualification, this is the career pathway that they will pursue. Whilst this is understandably the intended structure of vocational pathways, stakeholders noted that this should not diminish an appreciation of the broad applicability of VET skills to all job roles and career pathways. Indeed, a student that undertakes an automotive skill set or unit grouping would still gain key employability and technical skills that would be relevant in many future occupations. Stakeholders want to see the broad relevance of VET for school students recognised and communicated to students, parents and schools.

In particular, stakeholders flagged that more work needs to be done to articulate the pathways between VET and university education. Post-secondary education is commonly seen as a dichotomy, with students pursuing VET or university. However, a student that is interested in pursuing engineering at university would gain valuable skills and experience from undertaking VET content at school. Similarly, employability skills, such as teamwork and communication, are common across VET courses and are relevant to all students. Stakeholders commented that the broad applicability of VET courses and the capacity for students to undertake VET content and use this to further their university studies should be highlighted.

Industry is increasingly finding VET for school students graduates do not possess relevant skills or experience to operate in industry

Stakeholders suggested that students undertaking VET in a school environment would benefit from an increased focus on transferable core employability skills, such as language, literacy, numeracy, teamwork and communication. Stakeholders commented that VET programs often focus heavily on technical skills and, whilst these are relevant to a vocation, transferable employability skills are often more important in preparing a student for the work environment. A focus on employability skills is particularly beneficial as these skills are transferable across industries and can be used by students in a range of occupations. Indeed, some stakeholders commented that there is a place for all year 9 and/or 10 students to undertake an employability skill set to prepare them for the workplace.

The above findings were supported in a submission which noted that it has: ‘...identified two key areas that need to be addressed to ensure students are work-ready. The first is ensuring the students pass basic literacy and numeracy levels. There is concern that students are not passing basic numeracy and literacy skills before getting to high school. If these important foundations have not been laid at primary school, when students reach high school, they will then turn to the VET system as a crutch to complete the latter years of schooling...The other area important to employers is employability skills. These are skills that are needed for participation in modern workplaces...Employers have identified that beyond basic numeracy
and literacy skills, they look for students to have the ability to successfully interact with others, including co-workers and clients/customers; and have a work ethic that allows them to get the work done.’

**Employers and schools have different interpretations of VET**

Stakeholders commented that schools often see VET for schools students through the prism of how it can help a student complete SACE. It is often used as a way to allow students to gain SACE credits, with no intention of pursuing a vocation. This interpretation of the VET system has limited benefit for industry. As summarised by one stakeholder in an open forum, there is no benefit for industry when students undertake VET for other reasons (e.g. SACE completion). Stakeholders suggested that it is important for schools to understand the value of VET for school students independent of SACE credits and the ATAR. This was reiterated in a submission which noted that the VET for school students system ‘is heavily focused on SACE completion rather than engaging industry to provide career pathways for students’.

Stakeholders also suggested that industry particularly Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) needs to be encouraged and supported to see the value of VET for school students programs. Employers should see VET and work placements as a pipeline of potential recruits and as an investment for their future. However, it was acknowledged that adopting this view is difficult.

**Industry engagement**

Stakeholders identified the lack of strong industry engagement and relationships as a barrier to high quality VET for school students. Schools often rely on training providers to act as the link to industry partners and find relevant work placements for their students. Stronger industry engagement and relationships allow both schools and training providers to demonstrate to industry the high quality delivery of VET for school students and allow industry to buy into the pathway.

Industry engagement in South Australia is particularly challenging given the large number of small and medium enterprises (SMEs). It is likely these businesses will have limited capacity and resources to provide work placement opportunities for students. The size of businesses is not, however, an insurmountable barrier to industry engagement and Industry Skills Councils (ISCs) were highlighted as a key link to SMEs and industry more generally.

Supporting industry to understand the value of school-based VET and encouraging them to engage in applicable programs is promoted in New South Wales through the ‘Regional Industry Education Partnerships’ program. The program is a Government initiative and includes the following aims:

- Build employer and school partnerships;
- Enable employers to engage with schools and students to share information on future workforce needs and expectations;
- Assist students to develop work-ready skills; and
- Align the skills developed at school with those needed in the workplace.

The Initiative is led by Regional Industry Education Partnership officers who work collaboratively with schools and employers and is comparable with the Queensland ‘Gateway to Industry’ Schools program that seeks to build partnerships between schools and industry.
2. Student voice - VET pathways online survey

*Year13* is an online connection point for young people which provides a wide range of options and links to information, including career and life advice.

To further complement the broader consultation process and provide young people an opportunity to anonymously contribute, *Year13* were engaged to conduct an online survey. The aim of this survey was to find out how young students view VET and how they choose their post-school education pathways.

The *Year13* survey targeted young South Australians between 15-21 years of age. Over 1,300 responses were collected through *Year13*’s social media and digital channels with the majority of respondents either in high school or having recently left, with 88% of respondents in their teenage years. It was interesting to note that while 58% of respondents were from major cities, there was a strong response from regional (34%) and rural (8%) youth. The full report is available at [www.education.sa.gov.au/VETpathways](http://www.education.sa.gov.au/VETpathways).
3. International best practice

Research and consultation undertaken to inform development of the VET for School Students policy included investigation of international best practice, with particular learnings taken from Germany, Switzerland, England and Canada. Each of these countries, to different degrees, have elements of what is known as a ‘dual VET system’. Dual VET systems have similarities with Australia’s apprenticeship system, integrating work-based and school-based learning to prepare students for a successful transition to the workplace.

The purpose of the dual system is to bring together the labour market and education systems to produce a workforce that meets the needs of the industry, while providing career pathways for young people. Students in countries with dual VET systems generally enjoy better transitions from school to work, supporting lower youth unemployment rates.7

**Germany**

The dual VET system is particularly well established in Germany and is the main pathway from school to employment, with 50% of young people entering the system each year.8 The Germany system is underpinned by high levels of engagement, commitment and shared investment from all parties including schools, employers and government.

VET is widely respected in German society and the system is well resourced through both public and private funding. A key strength of the German system is that pathways are well articulated with VET undertaken in secondary school providing clear avenues for students and meeting labour market demand.9

**Switzerland**

Switzerland also has a dual system in which work-based learning and VET are an integral part of the education system. VET is the most popular form of senior secondary education and training in Switzerland, with around two-thirds of young people coming out of compulsory education enrolling in a VET qualification.10

Swiss employers and industry associations are actively engaged with VET, with approximately 30% of companies hosting young apprentices who undertake duties of an entry level employee guided by qualified trainers. This high level of industry engagement and participation ensures the system is highly responsive to labour market needs.

Learning is highly personalised and guided by students’ interests and talents, and VET pathways are well-articulated, offering a wide range of progression opportunities with flexibility for students to change qualifications or move from VET to university education. VET is generally popular and well-regarded by young Swiss people and is fully integrated into the education system.

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7 [https://data.oecd.org/unemp/youth-unemployment-rate.htm](https://data.oecd.org/unemp/youth-unemployment-rate.htm)
**England**

VET is a long-standing feature of England’s education system and the country is moving towards a dual system similar to those in Germany in Switzerland. This transition includes development of new frameworks for learning and training that are informed by industry intelligence and engagement, new models of cross-curricula integration that break down traditional barriers between VET and university pathways, and a focus on aligning skills investment to industry need.

High levels of industry engagement commitment have strengthened the English VET system and mean employers are invested in the outcomes of training. This strong engagement is complemented by education policies and programs that support school students to gain industry exposure and work experience from an early age. There is a strong focus on employers providing support and pastoral care to apprentices, including beyond the contract of training.

A key strength of the English system is a strong base of research expertise and robust systems and data, supporting evidence-based decisions regarding policies, programs and investment.

**Canada**

In Canada, VET is offered at secondary education levels, either alongside academic courses in high school or in separate vocational schools. Students who undertake VET as part of their secondary education can graduate from high school with industry certification and can then enter the workforce, a post-secondary program to expand and enhance their skills, or an apprenticeship in their occupational or trade area. These programs have been very popular and the Ontario Ministry of Education credits them with raising the secondary school completion rate from 68% in 2004 to 86% in 2017.11

**Learnings for South Australia**

Development of the VET for School Students policy has drawn on the common features of the VET systems in these countries that contribute to their success, including:

- close collaboration between key stakeholders including employers, training providers, schools and government
- strong industry engagement and participation in the development, delivery and funding of vocational training
- continuous updating of training programs in response to technical advances and industry need
- strong alignment of education and training options with jobs in demand
- clear articulation of pathways that provide certainty and understanding for students and support informed choice.

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SUMMARY OF ENGAGEMENT

The breadth of feedback received throughout the Review of VET for School Students consultation process was very pleasing and the willingness of stakeholders to share their insight and offer positive options for improvement clearly demonstrates the value that VET pathways provide. This included:

- 1,946 online survey responses
  - 1319 student survey responses
  - 303 YourSAy survey responses
  - 324 career counselling survey responses
- 47 written submissions
- Over 110 people attended consultation forums in metropolitan and regional locations.

The South Australian Government is committed to supporting students’ access to vocational pathways from school to employment and would like to thank the many individuals and organisations who generously gave their time to contribute to this very important consultation process including organisational participation from the following:

- Apprentice Employment Network (SA) Group Training Organisations
- Association of Independent Schools South Australia (AISSA)
- Australian Education Union (AEU)
- Catholic Education South Australia (CESA)
- Commissioner for Children and Young People
- Department for Innovation and Skills
- Education Directors from the Department for Education
- Industry associations
- The Independent Tertiary Education Council Australia (ITECA)
- The Industry Training Providers Association (ITPA)
- National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER)
- Private and not for profit RTOs
- Regional Development Australia
- SACE Board of South Australia
- South Australian Secondary Principals Association (SASPA)
- TAFE SA
- The Office of the Training Advocate
- Training and Skills Commission (TASC)