

To: Secretariat, Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training, Commonwealth Government
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RE: Submission to Inquiry into Perceptions and Status of Vocational Education and Training

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This submission aims to inform the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training's inquiry into and reporting on the Perceptions and Status of Vocational Education and Training (VET), and Commonwealth supported information on VET available to students, and how they impact:

- education and training choices of students, particularly those who lack the necessary foundation skills, or experience other disadvantages; and
- employer views and practices in relation to engagement with VET.

The Inquiry focuses on the Commonwealth Skills and Training portfolio and includes consideration of:

- 1- information available to students about VET qualifications and related career pathways along a student's journey through secondary schools, vocational education (VET), higher education (HE), and work transitions, with a focus on how this combines with other sources of advice, including informal advice, to influence student choices, and how Commonwealth funded information for students about VET may be improved;
- 2- perceptions and status of the VET sector and how this may be impacting student enrolment choices, employer engagement, and recruitment and retention of the VET educator workforce, and how perceptions and status of the VET sector can be improved. International best practices in relation to VET perception and qualifications status should be examined;
- 3- successful partnerships between VET providers and employers that have demonstrably created career pathways and secure employment opportunities for students, considering the best practice elements of these successful partnerships, and how more partnering may be encouraged among VET providers and employers; and
- 4- Commonwealth programs which could influence the above, and intersections with state and territory, industry, and philanthropic efforts, including any structural barriers to improvement.

The following submission comprises an overview, executive summary followed by the detailed submission.

Overview

The low standing of vocational education and training (VET) has significant implications for supply of the kinds of skills that Australians, their workplaces and communities need, and how governments and industry come to support and engagement with this important educational sector. Hence, there is a need to engender more positive societal sentiment that enhances the uptake and status of VET and engagement in the occupations it serves. Whilst not wanting to force young people to make choices about post-school pathways in which they may lack interest, there is a need for structural engagement at the

national, state/territory and regional/local levels. These engagements could engage and provide experiences for young people, their parents/caregivers, and teachers so that the decision-making about those pathways is more fully informed and carefully guided.

Based upon research in Australia and overseas, there are clear actions to be taken by the Commonwealth to address the issue of the low standing of VET and the occupations it serves. These include guiding and supporting actions at the local level by partnerships comprising schools, vocational education institutions, local businesses. Engagement by the community is the most likely basis for making VET and the occupations it serves more societally esteemed, essential to the community and personally beneficial. However, support for those local actions needs to be augmented by national action to champion the worth of VET and the occupations it serves to realise a more positive national societal sentiment about VET, collaborating with states and territories to encourage these local partnerships. National action of this kind may make VET institutions more socially attractive to young people and their programs inclusive of options other than those that are occupationally specific. The latter is important for those young people who are undecided at the end of schooling about what occupations they want to engage in, and as alternative pathways for the high percentage of young people who change their occupational preferences either during or at the end of the initial occupational preparation.

Action at the local level is imperative. It offers the discretion to understand, meet and respond to localised needs. Local-level action is a key premise for informing and engaging young people, responding to localised needs, and addressing the kinds of skill shortages that are a product of lower levels of participation in VET and the occupations it serves. Engagement between employers and VET institutions, partnerships between schools and those institutions, initiatives such as “Grow your own” that seek to address key skill shortages in areas such as health and reaching into Indigenous communities, can only be realised at the local level.

Similarly, the provision of information VET programs and occupations to young people and their parents/caregivers and teachers whilst helpful is incomplete without guidance and support in the circumstances where young people come to engage with this material and make choices about educational pathways and preferred occupations.

No single agency or level of government can achieve these outcomes alone. Rather, it requires the Commonwealth to collaborate with states/territories in programs aimed to achieve these outcomes. Often, these state-based programs are designed for and responsive to approaches in those states/territories. Yet, even these initiatives, in turn, will also need to effectively engage at the local level to achieve these desired outcomes.

Coordination at different levels from national through to local matters because key national challenges are emerging that are associated with greater self-sufficiency, decentralisation of the production of goods and services, and generating further communities’ capacities to be innovative, and optimise their resources and capacities in ways that cannot be properly appraised, enacted, and evaluated at a national level.

This submission progresses with an Executive Summary that includes preces of recommendations, and then responses against the four focuses of the Inquiry. The submission is informed and evidenced through recent practical inquiries and review of global literature about these issues.

Executive Summary

The low standing of vocational education and training (VET) is viewed as a problem globally, and countries across the world with both developed and developing economies are seeking to redress this concern.

From an analysis of efforts overseas and recently completed and current empirical work conducted in Australia the following recommendations are proposed as key bases to redress this issue here. They comprise actions to be taken at: 1) the national, 2) state/territory and 3) regional/local levels.

National level

At a national level, government needs to champion the importance of VET and the occupations it serves to promote both the education system and those occupations as nationally important, socially worthwhile, and personally beneficial. This championing is required to promote a far more informed national perspective and positive societal sentiment about VET and the occupations it serves (see Table 2, page 10).

Also, the Commonwealth government could work with and through state/territory governments to promote initiatives associated with informing and engaging young people, their parents/caregivers, school teachers and guidance officers to redress the problem of low standing (see page 6, Figure 1 page 7).

National VET agencies might consider introducing qualifications that are not wholly occupational specific to address the needs of young people who have not decided upon the preferred occupation by the end of compulsory schooling (e.g., Diploma of Engineering/Creative industries/Social care/Information sciences, etc.) (see Table 2 page 9).

Moreover, and working through both state agencies and at a regional/local level, there is a need to promote partnerships amongst schools, vocational education institutions, local businesses, and community organisations to provide experiences that inform, engage, and effectively prepare young people and working age adults to participate in VET and contribute to the occupation it serves (see page 5 and pages 14-16).

Industry bodies and professional associations have a role to champion their occupations broadly within the national community and represent them in informed and clear ways emphasising the qualities associated with that work and the kinds of contributions they make to communities and individuals (see pages 11-12).

In addition, bodies including the Australian Industry and Skills Committee (AISC) along with Industry Reference Committees (IRCs) could be invited to monitor and provide advice on improving the standing of VET and the occupations it serves and offer feedback on strategies advanced in this submission.

All nationally endorsed VET programs need to include identified articulation to higher levels of VET or university programs to avoid concerns about lack of articulation (see Table 2, page 10) to avoid VET courses being portrayed as 'dead end'.

State/territory-level

Deploying initiatives and funding leverage, the Commonwealth might collaborate at the state level through:

State/territory governments to both champion and provide initiatives to enhance the status of vocational education as a worthwhile post-school pathway and the occupations that it serves as viable, desirable and beneficial forms of employment (see Table 2 page 10).

Facilitating collaborations across state and territory departments (i.e., covering schools, vocational education, industry, employers, community engagement) whose collective contributions will be required to achieve these outcomes at the local level (see pages 14-16).

Promoting secondary school performance indicators negotiated by the Commonwealth that go beyond rewarding university entry and acknowledge number of graduates that engage in and complete VET programs and secure employment through them (see Table 2 page 10).

Registered Training Organisations programs and performance indicators as negotiated through the Commonwealth agreements might be extended to include the range and quality of experiences they provide to engage, inform, and adequately prepare young people for the occupations served by VET.

Supporting programs that initiate and sustain social partnerships amongst tertiary educational providers, schools, local businesses, and communities to engage, inform and initiate, and provide experiences for young people to consider both the occupations that VET serves and VET programs, processes and institutions (see pages 14-16).

Positioning VET institutions as being more socially attractive and engaging for young people (see Table 2 page 8).

Local and regional level

Deploying initiatives and funding leverage, and collaborating with state/territory agencies, the Commonwealth might collaborate at the local/regional level through:

- assisting development of collaborations amongst state and territory departments of schooling, tertiary education, employment, industry and communities to realise effective processes and outcomes at the local levels (see Table 1 page 5).
- locally selecting, enacting and appraising strategies that are most appropriate to the industry sectors, community and local institutions' (i.e., schools, VET providers, workplaces, communities) capabilities (see page 11, Box 2 page 15);
- building and sustaining local partnerships amongst the above agencies and institutions to engage and inform young people and their parents/caregivers, and provide direct experiences of occupations and exposure to VET institutions and their educational provisions (see pages 14-16);
- encouraging high school staff and administrators' engagement in processes akin to those provided for students and their parents/caregivers to promote a broader understanding of VET provisions and outcomes, such as visits to local VET institutions (see Table 2 pages 9-10);
- supporting VET institutions to be highly active in careers events and activities that promote VET within and to the local communities (see Table 1 page 5, Table 2 page 8); and
- establishing direct communications between teachers and administrators in schools and their counterparts in VET institutions (see Table 2 page 8).

Detailed Submission

Each of these four foci are addressed in turn in this submission that draws upon research and reviews undertaken by the four staff members of the School of Educational and Professional Studies and Griffith Institute for Educational Research at Griffith University, Queensland.

Information

Focus 1- information available to students about VET qualifications and related career pathways along a student's journey through secondary schools, vocational education (VET), higher education (HE), and work transitions, with a focus on how this combines with other sources of advice, including informal advice, to influence student choices, and how Commonwealth funded information for students about VET may be improved;

Providing information is insufficient by itself to inform and guide young people towards effective postschool transitions and to engaging in VET. What our evidence suggests is that beyond providing information there needs to be processes at the local level (i.e., in schools and communities) that assist young people translate information into informed decisions about the kinds of occupations to which they are suited, and they can be prepared for and enter. In all, our research suggests the processes of informing young people, their parents/carers and community about VET and engaging them in diverse post-school pathways involves diverse means of informing, advising and engaging them. Moreover, this process often extends to the participation of different community partners who can inform and provide relevant experiences. These partners include local enterprises, industry/workplaces, schools and training providers who are able to furnish young people with the kinds of knowledge and understandings to make informed choices and provisions of experiences.

Central here are twin goals of: i) identifying the alignment between young people's interests in particular occupations, and ii) their ability to be prepared for and enter those occupations. Consequently, the key purposes of assisting young people are not only providing information but also finding ways of realising those two goals. Our recent work on partnership programs indicates that their ability to both inform and provide experiences assists young people, and their parents and caregivers make more informed and appropriate decisions. The focus of these engagements is almost inevitably highly localised.

In Australia, information strategies are being deployed by both federal and state governments to inform students about occupations and VET to promote informed, realistic and impartial decision-making about postschool pathways (Billett, Choy & Hodge, 2020). However, these strategies should be augmented by processes that guide young people to identify alignments between the interests and capacities to engage in specific occupations.

Partnerships amongst schools, local enterprises and industry bodies offer a way forward here. For instance, a recent project to identify effective models and practices to inform and engage young Queenslanders in diverse post-school pathways (Billett, Choy, Gibbs, Mackay & Hay 2023) found that when concerted efforts have been made by schools, industry representatives and partners to build relationships across and amongst partners there is the strongest prospect of securing such intended outcomes. Some examples of strategies to both inform and engage young people included in Table 1 present the kinds of intended outcomes and means of achieving them.

Table 1 Intended outcomes and activities *to inform and engage young people about post-school pathways*

Intended outcomes	Engagement processes and activities
Informing	Orientation day Information evenings Career expos Informed talks and events (e.g., industry talks) Online resources about career guide and pathways Making connections to related subjects in teaching Teacher-parent interviews Communicating student progress to parents Teacher professional development Teacher and parent visits to VET institutes and facilities Promoting to education stakeholders via email and social platforms Marketing to alternative education pathways Showcase of success (i.e., role model sharing lived experiences)
Engaging	Immersion days (e.g., health inspiration day) School excursions Visits to work sites (e.g., walkthroughs)

	<p>Work placements (e.g., industry tasters, mentoring/coaching)</p> <p>Industry paid work (e.g., seasonal harvest), and other part-time employment</p> <p>Purpose-built programs (e.g., work placement program for Year 10, transition-to-work program for Year 12)</p> <p>Live work site experience (e.g., Building Futures Project – house repair project)</p> <p>Piloting programs in partnership with industries (e.g., Cotton Australia (cotton industry), the Merino industry (sheep wool), Micron Group (horticulture supply chain), and the beef industry)</p> <p>VET in schools</p> <p>School-based traineeships or apprenticeships</p> <p>Post-school apprenticeships and cadetships</p>
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What can be seen from activities that inform and engage young people is that these cannot be conducted by schools or any other single institution alone, but must be realised through partnerships, and most likely, at the local level. That is, beyond informing young people, engagement amongst young people, schools, their parents/carers, local enterprises and industry sectors is required. Hence, federal agencies need to consider how best they can inform students and their parents/caregivers broadly and nationally about occupations and post-school pathways, including VET, but also support the implementation of such strategies at the local level.

Perceptions, impact and strategies

Focus 2- perceptions and status of the VET sector and how this may be impacting student enrolment choices, employer engagement, and recruitment and retention of the VET educator workforce, and how perceptions and status of the VET sector can be improved. International best practices in relation to VET perception and qualifications status should be examined

Perceptions and status of VET sector and their impact

The relatively low status of vocational education and training (VET) and the occupations it serves, is a significant impediment for realising VET's economic and employment goals. This status influences young people and parents' decision-making about post-school pathways, and government, community and employer support. That is, these perceptions also shape decision-making about whether it is a desirable, let alone, preferred option for young people to participate in VET either during compulsory schooling or as a post-school educational pathway. The societal standing of VET also shapes how teachers, parents and other familiars advise young people about post-school pathways and the willingness of employers to engage with and support VET provisions (Billett, 2014).

The consequences of VET's low standing are profound. In an era of high aspiration, VET is often seen as an option only for those unable to secure university entry. This perception can lead to mismatches amongst the kinds of skills young people are learning and employment opportunities, and with what employers seek in employees. This perception can also lead to potentially lengthy and sometimes unproductive tertiary education experiences. These consequences also influence how governments, industry, enterprises and communities view, support, fund and engage with VET programmes. This situation is complicated by the promotion of greater participation in higher education by governments since occupations with high societal esteem are often prepared for within universities (Billett, Choy & Hodge 2020).

Reviews of recent literature indicate there is an intertwining of institutional factors and the preferences of the people who have an influence upon the decision-making of young people about post-school pathways, including the relative standing of VET (Billett et al., 2022). Although societal factors play important roles in this decision-making, the views and practices of parents, teachers and other familiars are powerful influences in this decision-making and, therefore, efforts to redress this issue. There is insufficient evidence to suggest that strong social determinants operate. Instead, it is the interplay

between societal perceptions about what is worthwhile work, and personal preferences of young people that shape decision-making. It is these that are combining to shift preferences away from participation in VET and the occupations it serves.

A recent project focused on how to improve the status of VET so that it can be viewed a more worthwhile and viable post-school option by both young people and those who influence their decision-making about post-school pathways (here referred to SVEOS) (Billett et al., 2020). It was found that school students' decisions about post-school pathways are shaped by *familiars* (i.e., parents, teachers and peers) and *indirect suggestions* (e.g., electronic and broadcast media). These sources of influence differ in: i) how well informed they are about post-school pathways ii) their level of influence and iii) degree of engagement. Consequently, strategies to improve the standing of vocational education cannot just be directed to young people alone but should be extended to involve familiars and other sources of indirect influences.

The SVEOS study found that for school age students who had identified their future occupations, there were differences by schools and year level (e.g., as might be expected, more Year 11 than 10 identify a preferred occupation). School students who were undecided about their occupational pathway often reported being drawn to universities' breadth of options and learning pathway, and their social and institutional attractiveness. On the other hand, VET's specific occupational focus provided limited options for those who were undecided.

The familiars with whom young people engage are consistently reported as shaping their decisions about post-school pathways, and most of that decision-making occurs intentionally or unintentionally through those interactions. The key sources of this influence are parents or caregivers, high school teachers, peers, and members of the community with whom they interact (e.g., friends, extended family), and media, albeit also experienced and mediated by familiars as well. Yet, whilst studies in Australia and elsewhere consistently report how common and powerful these influences are, they also acknowledge that they can be partially or wholly uninformed, or emphasise what influential others would prefer, rather than what might be most appropriate for the young people themselves.

Arising from the findings from the first two phases of the SVEOS project (Choy et al., 2022, Hodge et al., 2022), four key sources of advice, guidance and support for young people's decision-making about postschool pathways were identified as sets of factors shaping *zones of influence* (Billett, Dymock, Choy, Hodge & Le, 2022; Billett, Hodge & Aakrog, 2022). These factors comprise the influences of government, schools and schooling system, VET institutions and those who employ (i.e., industry) as shown in Figure 1. What is inferred from these data and represented in this figure is that much of the actual decision-making is shaped by close or *proximal* influences. *Distal* influences are not as direct and explicit.

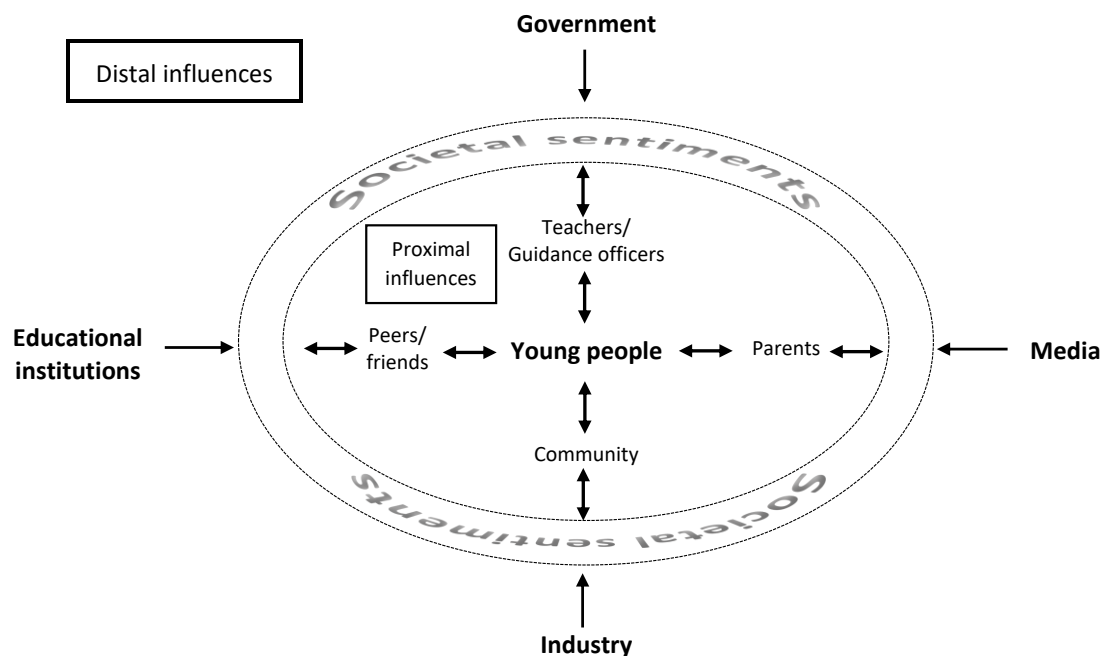


Figure 1. Shaping the local zones of influence

However, the sources and implications of these sources of influence need to be elaborated to identify practical strategies that can advance the task of providing informed and impartial advice.

Strategies and approaches to inform decision-making.

As the relatively low standing of VET is a product of a complex of societal and local factors, it can perhaps be best addressed by a range of local initiatives. In the SVEOS project, the researchers consulted with schools and policy and practitioner groups to identify strategies to promote the standing of VET. As a result of those consultations, a range of strategies were identified that might be enacted by VET institutions, schools, and government and business. These strategies are proposed as means by which actions can be taken to promote the image, attractiveness, and viability of VET as a worthwhile post-school pathway. These are listed in Table 2, which presents strategies that need to be undertaken by VET institutions, schools, government, and industry. In this table, in the left-hand column are the broad practical strategies, the central column the findings which support those strategies and listings of possible responses.

Table 2 *Practical strategies for enhancing the status of VET*

Practical steps	Research findings	Possible responses
For VET institutions		
Market themselves as effectively as universities;	Schools consistently reported that TAFE and private RTOs were poorly represented at career events, whereas universities usually had more than one representative present, plus attractive marketing materials in print, on the website and in public spaces (e.g., public transport etc).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ensure significant representation at all school career events; • use current students, in addition to staff, at these events – to provide a youthful face for VET and real-life student experiences; and • utilise marketing methods to which young people will respond.
Promote their strengths to overcome outmoded views of VET: contemporary courses and innovative teaching;	School students generally had limited or even no knowledge of what VET courses are like – mostly they saw them as ‘practical’, ‘hands-on’, which they compared to ‘intellectual’ university-level courses. School students who had experienced TAFE were often surprised that it was not just practical.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In marketing materials, video, Youtube etc., show the full range of VET courses and how these are linked to the demands of modern industry as well as prepare for changing jobs in the future; pathways into new and emerging occupations (i.e., movement sideways and upwards) • When school students visit, expose them to examples of innovative teaching (not just talks) so they can get a feel for what being a VET student might be like; and • Publicly champion the expertise of VET teachers in the way that universities do; the corollary is that VET institutions need to consistently show their staff that teaching is valued within the organisation.
Engage more effectively with potential students and school advisers; and	Schools are the major source of VET students, yet school teachers and career advisers consistently compared their interactions with TAFE information providers unfavourably with those of universities, both in terms of access and in obtaining individual advice on behalf of students. Also, teachers frequently reported having no personal experience of VET, so may themselves need guidance about course requirements and enrolment processes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be more pro-active with schools – talk to schools about how VET institutions can improve the interactions in person and online for teachers and career advisers seeking information about registered training organisations (RTOs) on behalf of students; • Have a dedicated phone number that allows easy communication between staff in the two kinds of institutions; • Provide other channels for introducing school students to VET, e.g., summer programs for high school students, ‘trade taster’ courses; • Develop short videos for both teachers and students that present a lively picture of contemporary VET and the occupations it serves; and • Visit schools to build on the interest in VET already shown by students enrolled in VET courses and be prepared for the need for individual advice; or facilitate visits to VET institutions by such students (grouped by interests) and provide individualised advice. • Actively recruit instead of waiting for students to come to the RTO. • Be more visible at education Expos.

Provide more flexible course options and an attractive social environment	The research revealed a tendency for undecided students to opt for university study because they believed they could easily change into another course from their initial choice and in a more attractive environment to study and socialise. Also, some teachers reported that pathways from VET programs to university were not always clear on VET websites.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review and promote VET institutional pathways to illustrate the ease of making changes to course choices, wherever possible; • Communicate with current VET institution students to help identify ways a campus might become a more attractive social environment; • Ask teachers, parents, and school students whether and how the ‘VET to university’ pathway can be made clearer on the institution’s website; and • Having course options within VET that are more broadly sector specific (e.g., engineering, applied science, communication, digital transformation) than tied to a specific occupation. • Market the social activities and spaces on campus and online.
For Schools		
Increase level of parents’ knowledge of VET and engagement with schools	Parents are generally not knowledgeable about VET, nor strongly engaged with schools in career choices. They may also not have considered VET as a post-school option or pathways for their child/children either through ignorance of its possibilities or an underlying preference for university studies. Although this issue sits outside the control of schools, there are some options that could be exercised.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote VET as a worthwhile and viable option and pathway from when students first enrol, on the assumption that parents/carers are likely to be most engaged at that point; • Continually promote VET in every year of high school through newsletters, other school communications with parents, career nights, parent-teacher interviews, etc., and on every other occasion there is a meaningful interaction with parents; and • Make sure parents are aware of government media campaign promoting VET, e.g., the school could send them the link to digital material.
Increase level of teachers’ knowledge of VET	Teachers are not always knowledgeable about VET or the occupations it serves. They often base the advice they provide to students, even inadvertently, on what they read in marketing materials or their own life experiences, which rarely includes vocational education. Yet, students see their teachers as highly influential in career choices. In fairness, teachers often acknowledge no direct experience of VET and an incomplete knowledge of its offerings and enrolment procedures.	<p>VET institutions themselves can be more proactive in their links with schools, but schools can also:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organise familiarisation tours of VET facilities for teachers, as part of teachers’ professional development; and • Equip career advisers and others in the school who take on this role with sufficient knowledge to advise students authentically and individually.
Increase level of students’ knowledge of VET	In general, the students seem not very knowledgeable about VET post-school options or pathways. The research showed that students’ lack of knowledge is sometimes due to lack of guidance on where to look for it, and sometimes to their lack of interest.	<p>Overcoming a lack of interest may only come with having to make decisions, even post school, yet in the meantime schools can:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide students with links to websites that show examples of VET training and related occupations; • Invite high-profile VET graduates or celebrities to talk to students about VET as an alternative to university; and

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide more personalised career information about VET training and jobs.
Management attitudes to VET in schools and as a post-school pathway	School administrations' support for VET in school courses and school policy on promoting VET pathways varied across schools. There was evidence that some schools hardly promoted VET as a worthwhile post-school option, for reasons such as concerns about meeting parents' expectations, the perceived public image of the school for academic achievement, because student enrolment in VET courses disrupted a school's academic profile or was simply being too difficult. Other schools were more pro-active in encouraging students to undertake VET courses, however.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consistently celebrate VET students' achievements alongside other student achievements; • Publicly acknowledge the contributions VET and VET teachers make to a school's curriculum; • Promote as policy that VET is regarded by the school as a legitimate choice as university entry; • Connect with the parents' and teachers' associations for networks to assist with new opportunities for students. • Form partnerships with local employers to accept students for work experience and employment.
<i>For Government and Industry</i>		
Enhancing the attractiveness of VET	RTOs have an image problem – buildings and facilities are generally seen as old in comparison to universities. Also, whilst efforts are made to present VET institutions as resembling workplaces, there is also a need for these environments to be convivial and attractive to young people. It seems that university campuses are perceived to offer a more attractive social and physical environment than those in vocational education institutions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Secure the direct involvement of industry, enterprises and professional associations in promoting occupations that are prepared for within VET; • Portray modern facilities in any broad public presentation of VET as a social marketing tool. • Extend higher education schemes (HECs) to all VET courses, not just those for high demand occupations. • Promote VET and occupations at primary schools. • Engage with professional bodies, licencing agencies to promote VET.
Promoting VET-related occupations	It requires leadership, from government and industry, to demonstrate, broadcast and champion the significance of the range and kinds of VET-serviced occupations, and the demands for and requirements of skilful work associated with them and the central role of these occupations in the ongoing development of Australia, and the benefits to individuals. As in other countries, there is likely to be a need for industry sector-level initiatives to enhance the attractiveness of VET and instil 'pride in trade'. Some of these may well be longer-term strategies.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Industries with skills shortages, in particular, could co-present with VET providers at major career events and focus on being relevant to the needs of young people; • Industries could be more pro-active in being represented at major school prize-giving events and sponsoring VET scholarships and internships; • Organise localised events where parents can share their stories of occupations and career passages with others, and at the same time learn from others about diverse occupations and pathways; • Identify ways in which those who are undecided about their postschool pathways can come to understand the requirements for VET; and • Promote in various ways the changing face of VET and related occupations and subsidise key teachers and career advisers to attend, to get them enthusiastic about VET.

These strategies emphasise the important role of government and industry, as well as those of educational institutions, in addressing the low standing of VET. Schools and VET institutions reportedly do not have the capacity or resources to inform, let alone advise students individually about the range and kinds of occupations and available post-school educational provisions. Hence, the expertise of industry representatives and local enterprises may be required to augment what schools are able to furnish. Moreover, if VET institutions were to promote these options, there is a risk that this would be seen as institutional marketing, not public education. Therefore, national, and local leadership from government and industry is required, to demonstrate, broadcast and champion the significance of occupations served by VET and the demands for, and requirements of skilful work associated with them.

In another project that sought to identify how best young and not so young Queenslanders can be attracted to, engage with, prepare for, and remain in healthcare work to both meet their needs and those of Queensland (Billett, Le, Millichap, Meyer & 2022), it is broadly recommended that:

- the healthcare sector secures and engages with VET provision nationally, at the state and local levels to ensure that its needs are addressed;
- the healthcare sector influences the content, form and provision of experiences comprising VET for healthcare workers now and in ways commensurate with the goals and its contributions;
- locally based and informed decision-making mechanisms are enacted to secure, prepare and retain sufficient numbers of healthcare workers of the kind required to address healthcare needs; and
- those mechanisms engage, inform and exercise the capacities of health care settings, schools, VET and community institutions;
- practical strategies trialled and adopted across healthcare systems and communities be consolidated to support recruiting, preparing and sustaining healthcare employees; and
- models of preparation, such as cadetships and traineeships, that provide and integrate experiences in educational and practice settings augmented by guidance and support be adopted widely.

As in other countries, there is likely to be a need for industry sector-level initiatives to enhance the attractiveness of VET through promoting the occupations it serves. Deissinger (2022) (Germany) notes the importance of "shared practices" in the public sphere, including chambers of commerce, employers and trade unions, the mandatory dual attendance in both workplaces and vocational education institutions. Furthermore, the valuing of occupations served by VET as being "skilled occupations" legitimates of their worth as societally respected destinations realised through VET. Hence, he points to the shared carriage of the responsibility for, and actions associated with legitimating VET as a viable educational pathway. Combining the understanding of the purposes of VET with the elements needed for a successful skills system is a good starting point for policymakers to understand, to resource, and then meaningfully integrate policy into a wider system of education and workforce development, thus giving it genuine standing as James Relly (2022) (UK) proposes. Underpinning this approach to elevate the standing of the VET pathway is the understanding that quality of provision and teaching standards are also inextricably linked to esteem. Consequently, employers, education and training providers, and policy makers may consider how working together can best lead to the elevation of the standing of VET, through being clear about goals, procedures, and processes to achieve these outcomes.

Of course, this requires a long-term strategic approach where a skills-based economy stands alongside the so-called 'knowledge economy' considering the entire tertiary education landscape (including workplaces) where skills are developed, the relationship between productivity and the shifting dynamics between skills supply and demand, the changing nature of work, spatial dynamics, and local economic variance, and the re-professionalisation of the VET workforce.

Having a VET pathway that has high societal standing matters, because the young people taking that pathway matter. The implications, of course, are wider and include national prosperity, and the ability to be self-reliant, thereby protecting sovereignty. In this regard, Pantea (2022) (Romania) calls for a more consolidated understanding of the political economy of VET and issues of social justice. Here also, Rintala and Nokelainen (2022) (Finland) propose that instead of reforms and development projects, long-term development focused on improving quality is needed and achieved by the support of stable funding and institutions dedicated to its purposes and outcomes. Implementing measures to promote the standing of VET is not easy, as it requires finding a balance between different target groups and the varying aims of VET as a promoter of social inclusion and economic growth, and between higher education pathways and employment are all initiatives that can guide decision-making through distal means. Hiim (2022) (Norway) proposes that a key principle to increase the status and quality of VET is equal opportunities for vocational and academic students in and beyond schooling as founded in their interests and levels of their achievement. More generally, another key principle is a holistic organisation of VET where learning and work experience, knowledge, skills, theory and practice are integrated. However, all this needs to be embraced by educational policy and enacted locally in ways that provide an informed basis for decision-making about educational pathways.

International best practices

Policy goals and initiatives

The low standing of VET and the occupations it serves are global concerns, Yet, how this standing is manifested and may be addressed is often country specific. One key divide is whether VET is undertaken largely as a stream within schooling (i.e., compulsory education) or as a post-schooling option in dedicated tertiary education institutions. Even here, the concept of ‘schools’, their educational purposes, the age range of students and resources are quite distinct across nation states, as are the issues of redressing the relatively low standing of VET. This then leads to quite distinct policy goals and initiatives.

- In Norway (Hiim, 2020) and Denmark (Aarkrog, 2020), there have been efforts to improve retention in VET programmes that are a common form of post-school education. Hence, initiatives to improve the standing of VET are directed towards improving its quality.
- In Norway, these initiatives include specific VET teacher education programs, curriculum reforms to align more closely with what is taught and experienced in VET programs, for instance, to aligning VET provisions with the requirements of work in that country’s workplaces (Hiim, 2020).
- In Finland, there is a concern also about addressing the declining numbers of school-leavers progressing directly into VET. A large component of the VET student cohort are adults whose engagement in initial occupational preparation is often engaged with in early adulthood (Rintala & Nokelainen, 2020). It follows that a key focus of policy goals in Finland is often associated with the quality of the learning experience and how this can assist students and graduates develop the kinds of capacities that will be effective in workplaces (Rintala & Nokelainen, 2020).
- In Denmark, the response to this kind of problem is on elevating the standing of VET through making entry requirements more demanding and making the institutions and programs more attractive to young people (Aarkrog, 2020). However, the consequence appears to have been a less inclusive provision of education, and one that excludes socially marginalised students, including those from migrant backgrounds.
- In Spain, initial reforms of VET were directed towards addressing issues of low literacy of those participating in VET institutions (Martínez-Morales & Marhuenda-Fluixá, 2020). Hence, the need to integrate VET provisions with schooling in which the academic curriculum is being enacted. Later,

curriculum initiatives were implemented to make the content and focus less on 'academic' considerations and more on those associated with the requirements of work.

Curriculum initiatives and practices

Curriculum initiatives associated with enhancing the status of VET also are country specific and potentially localised depending upon the kinds of goals that are intended. Issues associated with improving pedagogic practices to make students' learning experiences are more focused on capacities that will promote their employability including strong conceptual understandings also featured in Norway, Denmark, Spain and Finland.

- In Norway, initiatives attempting to make the curriculum more theoretically premised were intended to make it more educationally attractive to young people (Hiim, 2020). Moreover, the structuring of an initial broadly focused set of experiences to address a range of industry sectors, rather than specific occupations was an attempt to redress the problem of focussing the intended outcomes too narrowly on just one occupational field. Attempts to legitimise VET as a quality form of provision were made through the introduction of a more extended period of teaching preparation, with an emphasis on improving teaching quality. Here, there is a specific attempt to address the imbalance of esteem between VET and higher education by providing students with educational experiences designed and enacted by occupational experts who are also highly qualified teachers.
- In Denmark, initiatives include providing youth-orientated educational environments, transitions from VET to HE, improving the quality of training and provision of workplace experiences (Aarkrog, 2020).
- In Spain, a series of reforms were enacted to initially dignify and give greater educational rigour to VET and to make it more relevant to the world of work (Martínez-Morales & Marhuenda-Fluixá, 2020). Hence, initial reforms were aimed to provide more general education that later was overturned by considerations about modernising the VET provision to make it more occupationally relevant, with the guidance of industry stakeholders.
- In Finland, there was an emphasis on learning environment design, focussing on alignment between school and work (Rintala & Nokelainen, 2020). This aimed at addressing issues associated with improving pedagogic practices to make the learning experiences better and to address specific educational concern such as the development of conceptual knowledge.

In these ways, both our research and that highlighted above indicates that concerted action needs to occur to implement effective strategies through vocational education institutions, schools and in workplaces, albeit supported through industry engagement and the support and championing of government. It is noteworthy that in some countries (i.e., Germany) where skilled work is held in high esteem, parents are more likely to not only encourage their children to participate in vocational education but also support them through the preparation for an occupation. So, there are practical strategies associated with informing and engaging young people, and their parents/care givers, familiars and peers. Regardless of whether these are to be enacted in countries with advanced industrial economies such as Australia, those with developing economies are premised on local initiatives and engagements, usually featuring partnerships directed towards assisting with informing young people and providing them with opportunities to experience VET provisions and, potentially, occupations that they might find meets their needs and interests. So, these partnerships are worthy of consideration in terms of action by Commonwealth agencies.

Partnerships

Focus 3- successful partnerships between VET providers and employers that have demonstrably created career pathways and secure employment opportunities for students, considering the best practice elements of these successful partnerships, and how more partnering may be encouraged among VET providers and employers;

In a project that aimed to identify what constitutes effective models and practices for Queensland schools to diversify students' post-school pathways, some of the existing delivery models associated with VET in Queensland offer insights into what successful partnerships might look like and how these might be more broadly applied within local communities (Billett, Choy, Gibbs, Mackay & Hay 2023). For instance, the Gateway to Industry School Programs (GISPs) (e.g., Agribusiness, Tourism and Hospitality Minerals and Energy, Health) offer a range of distinct approaches to building partnerships at the local level that are responsive to needs by encouraging and engaging young people in VET and then supporting their initial occupational preparation. An example from the Agribusiness GISP illustrates a successful model:

Box 1 *Vignette of Agribusiness GISP case study*

Assisting young people make successful transitions from school into further education and/or employment in agribusiness-related industries is the primary purpose of this partnership. It sought to achieve this through engagement with its partners through various channels. These included organising activities and events such as excursions for schools or the AgTech and immersion programs (e.g., work placements).

This GISP has utilised more than 30 mentors state-wide across the life of the project who have backgrounds in agricultural science, extension work, biosecurity, industry development and vocational education. These mentors were responsible for linking up contacts, making connections and working with local agricultural businesses. They also assisted with sourcing advice for schools wanting to reinvigorate or establish new agriculture programs.

To build capacity, the partnership provided coaching for teachers on agricultural content in their subjects based on the national curriculum (i.e., "teach that content through an agricultural context") and career aspect in relation to agriculture. It engaged and provided students and teachers with industry connections (e.g., industry guest speaker talks, Q&A panels on a regular basis) and hosted teacher professional development sessions (e.g., informed presentations, farm visits). Through school partners, it engaged parents and community in National Agriculture Day, through newsletters, social media platforms (e.g., Facebook), teacher-parent interviews and school grounds to celebrate agriculture.

The program involved industry partners in raising young people's awareness of the existing industries in their region. Through industry partners, it has also implemented some piloting projects to inform and engage young people in different career pathways in agricultural industries, for example, Cotton Australia (i.e., cotton industry) the Merino industry (i.e., sheep wool), Micron Group (i.e., horticulture supply chain), and the beef industry. The program engaged with industry to identify level of skills required and provided young people with hands-on experience. It also contributed to providing advice on educational models to engage tertiary education and schools.

Outcomes for young people because of partnering with the industry included Year 11 school-based apprentices (after having completed a Certificate II) who were employed in the industry and Year 12 students (undertaking a Certificate III) who were engaged in onsite training. Further engagement of young people in work experience (with paid employment) included a seasonal harvest work program in aquaculture, horticulture and cane. This is likely an effective form of industry experience/career tasters to contextualise the knowledge they are learning.

Similarly, the Metro South Health Program (Logan, Redlands and Beaudesert) that is a partnership amongst schools, RTOs (legal employers) and local hospitals offers a helpful example.

Box 2 *Vignette of Metro South Health Program case study*

The Metro South Health Partnership Program is a school-based traineeship program in nursing and midwifery. It was developed in response to a shortage of healthcare staff to meet the demands of an aging population, the increase in chronic disease, and growing number of workers retiring from the health sector. To be responsive to the future demand for health jobs in the Logan region and local unemployment rates, Logan Bayside Health Network targeted school-based trainees to build workforce sustainability in the local region. This partnership program seeks to provide students in Years 11 and 12 with knowledge of career pathways in the healthcare sector. This program commenced in 2016 in the Logan area and has now extended to include student trainees in Redlands and Beaudesert. There was a particular aim to inform about and engage young people in health-related post-school pathways within a community that is often disadvantaged.

Beyond informing young people of the program, the effort to engage them in the process that was seen as the highlight of the partnership work. This was realised through a rigorous recruitment process. That is, scenarios were set out during interview processes to provide young people with insights into healthcare work thus identifying and understanding their interest and needs. Essentially, the recruitment process was three-staged including i) 3-minute video for shortlisting, ii) group interview to assess group fit, and iii) one-on-one interview.

The next staged engagement of young people occurred at the training organisation (i.e., the RTO/legal employer). Support, understanding and guidance from the RTO was highly praised. This was an important stage when student trainees were prepared with conceptual knowledge before progressing to their placement at the hospital.

Following the RTO interaction was the engagement of young people at the industry host (i.e., the hospital) where they were supported and guided during work placement to assist informed decision-making. The trainees were exposed to various workplace practices to engage them in developing certain occupational understanding and skills. These practices included job rotation (i.e., standard practice in health professions) and mentoring (i.e., support by a senior worker). The workplace support was also extended to accommodate students' needs during the process (i.e., flexibility) and provide emotional/wellbeing support.

In regard to informing young people and engaging them health-related post-school pathways, this partnership has extended its reach quite widely to seek advice and secure support from its partners to achieve the shared goal and intended outcomes for young people.

Beyond the case studies represented by these vignettes with their specific partnership models are some broader insights about how learning associated with identifying occupations and preparing for young people might progress. For instance, for advancing young people's effective occupational preparation it is important to align engagement in educational and workplace experiences in ways commensurate with the students' readiness to engage and make choices about that preparation. For instance, in the Logan program, some quite young students were confronted with death and dying patients early in their program. So, there is a need to align their abilities and prepare them to effectively engage in these experiences and learn from them productive ways to achieve the goals of effective occupational practice. But, beyond teaching and providing experiences to develop occupational skills, there is the young persons' readiness to progress through both the educational program and experiences in work settings. All these requirements need to be understood and administered locally to align with localised needs and availability of educational experiences, including support and guidance.

Immersion in work experience can be an appropriate model, if it is not overwhelming for the young persons. It may be important to augment those immersive experiences with others that ensure an adequate orientation to the occupation through the inclusion of 'educational interludes' (i.e., classroom-type preparation) to ensure that the young person's development is not wholly constrained by the

experiences they are encountering in a single work setting. Moreover, there is a need to safeguard that the experiences in the workplace – the practice curriculum – are indeed aligned with the overall development of the occupational capacities required and accommodate the learners' readiness to participate. That is, the candidates are first made ready to engage with these kinds of experiences and then guided in their engagement in occupational activities, and then post-practices interventions such as the sharing and comparing of experiences, guided discussions of how these experiences are aligned with developing the skills required.

Models of paid initial occupational preparation (i.e., cadetships, apprenticeships, traineeships) are often those that are exemplary in providing the structure, experiences, and time for the development of occupational capacities and position the novice as workers, rather than as students. That is, they can be positioned to be given responsibilities and the expectation to fulfil expectations associated with novice workers. Being paid to learn and having a living salary (i.e., through cadetships) is particularly important for young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people because their parents may not be able to adequately support them financially through their occupational preparation.

So, the integration of partnerships within an overall educational plan seems important and essential to achieve the kind of outcomes required to make the occupations served by vocational education more attractive and for VET to become seen more broadly as a worthwhile option. Again, given the geographical, cultural, and situational factors (i.e., availability of workplaces, school resources, industry sector activity), ultimately, whatever strategies are adopted need to be sensitive to enactment at the local level.

Commonwealth programs

Focus 4- Commonwealth programs which could influence the above, and intersections with state and territory, industry, and philanthropic efforts, including any structural barriers to improvement.

In response to this focus, rather than indicate which programs could influence what has been proposed above, the response here is to be consistent with what has arisen from the findings of our practical inquiries into the standing of VET and the occupations it serves and the roles that social partnerships can play in informing postschool pathways.

There are key national roles to be made by the Commonwealth in terms of championing and promoting VET and the occupation it serves in a concerted effort to situate within a far more positive societal sentiment. That championing is essential to marshal the interests, concerns and capacities of individuals, agencies, and institutions at the national, state/territory and local levels.

The example from elsewhere (e.g., Germany, Austria and parts of Switzerland) is that when the standing of vocational education is higher, this facilitates a higher level of engagement and interaction amongst industry, education and unions albeit within, largely, localised arrangements. Ideal here would be to achieve acceptance of the *Beruf Konzept* - the valuing of skilled work which underpins workplace commitment to effective training, parents supporting their children through apprenticeship and rich and mature alliances between educational institutions and workplaces, albeit facilitated by bipartite chambers of commerce.

Whilst replicating this concept is unlikely in Australia, there are key premises which the Commonwealth can seek to exercise in terms of engagements and partnerships. Central here however is realising a far more positive societal sentiment about vocational education and the occupation it serves.

This, however, cannot be just a Commonwealth initiative alone and requires engagement by industry groups and professional associations who need to play their part in making the occupations for which they have carriage to be viewed as being worthwhile and important at the national, local and personal levels. So, a partnership between government and professional and industry bodies to engage in such championing is a first kind of partnership that the Commonwealth could exercise.

In foreshadowing the ideas of partnerships between the Commonwealth and State and Territory governments, and by extension to local governments, it is acknowledged that to achieve many of the outcomes posed here that such partnerships will be essential.

The key point here is that whilst the Commonwealth has key policy levers (i.e., tied funding), it is faced with limitations of enacting policies within states and territories and also within them, across different departments (e.g., Industry, schools, vocational education, employment) that need to collaborate to achieve those goals.

So, in programmatic terms, central to achieving the important goals of changing the societal sentiment about vocational education and the occupations it serves is how Commonwealth agencies can engage with and collaborate constructively with the state and territory counterparts. Together, they face the challenge of identifying how to engage with and in local communities to support partnership work, schools embracing VET, and facilitating both schools and tertiary education institutions having an outward focus and can reach out and engage with the community. Measure here such as imposition of performance indicators) and targeted forms of support for partnerships may comprise means of achieving these outcomes.

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