



Submission to the Committee on Employment, Education and Training Inquiry into the Perceptions and Status of Vocational Education and Training

Introduction

The National Youth Commission Australia welcomes the Inquiry into the perceptions and status of vocational education and training and appreciates the opportunity to submit our ideas and recommendations. The Commission believes that vocational education and training is a vital part of Australia's education system that has been sorely neglected for a long time.

This submission draws on the evidence collected and the recommendations made by the National Youth Commission Australia from its Inquiry into Youth Employment and Transitions and the Youth Future Summits. This submission focuses on how the Australian Government, alongside the state and territory governments, can enhance the status of vocational education and training (VET).

The submission provides the Commission's views and recommendations on:

- Information available to young people about VET.
- Perceptions and status of VET.

About the National Youth Commission Australia

The National Youth Commission Australia is an independent and non-partisan body, drawing on the expertise and diverse lived experience of young people across the country, along with input from parents and teachers, employers, researchers, and community workers. The Commission creates an intergenerational community discussion about the challenges faced by young people and what should be kept, changed, or created to meet these challenges.

A Secretariat for the National Youth Commission Australia was established late in 2018, and independent Commissioners were appointed and briefed. A total of ten part-time Commissioners, including four Youth Commissioners, contributed to the Inquiry with their diverse and deep experience in youth affairs, education, employment, housing and homelessness, public services, and civic participation.¹

About the Inquiry into Youth Employment and Transitions

The National Youth Commission Australia launched the Inquiry into Youth Employment and Transitions in March 2019 to develop ideas on how young people could be better prepared and supported in their transition from school to work, now and in the future.

The Inquiry heard from over 3,500 individuals and organisations at public hearings, community consultations and two Summits with young people across Australia. Of the 3,500 people whom

¹ Information about the Commissioners can find at <https://nycinquiry.org.au/about/commissioners-and-secretariat/>.

Commissioners and workshop leaders met face to face with, more than 70 per cent were young people of school age or in early adulthood, both in and out of the workforce. The Commission also convened focus groups with young people to gather information on their experiences.

The Commission convened the Youth Futures Summits in August 2020 and June 2022, bringing together over 1,800 participants in two virtual events to discuss some of the biggest issues facing young people. Participants included young people, educators, employers, community service workers and policy-makers from around Australia. The Inquiry's interim findings report, [What Future?](#), and the proposed [Youth Futures Guarantee](#) were released during the 2020 Summit. Further reports have been released detailing parts of the Youth Futures Guarantee, including but not limited to:

- [Senior Secondary Education: Still a long way to go](#)
- [Apprenticeships and Traineeships: Delivering on potential](#)
- [‘You Can’t Be What You Can’t See’: Careers education in secondary schools](#)

Information available to young people about VET.

Many young people are unaware of the opportunities available through vocational education and training. The Commission was told:

In my discussions in recruiting people, I have certainly had discussions with young people, and you know, I think a lot of it is they aren't aware of the opportunities that are available once you get into a trade.

Michael Iaccarino, North Link, Preston VIC, 13 March 2019

This lack of knowledge of VET pathways may be due to their complexity and the poor understanding of them in the general community. The Smith Family told the Commission:

Additionally, many young people and their parents have a limited or inaccurate understanding of VET. Students often do not understand the education and employment pathways on offer via VET, and how to access them. Their post-school choices are influenced by family, carers, friends, teachers, or referral agencies – each of whom may have misconceptions about the value of VET pathways. This is another systemic issue in the sector that must be addressed for VET to be a post-school pathway on equal footing with university.

The Smith Family Submission, 30 July 2019

Better information about VET pathways might improve young people's knowledge of the system. However, in the Commission's view, young people need more than just good information about VET in Schools, post-school VET programs and pathways if they are to make informed decisions about their post-school education and training. Young people need excellent careers education in schools and, for those who do not make a smooth transition to post-school education, training or employment, they need good information, advice, and support about their post-school study and employment options.

Need for better careers education in schools

At its best, careers education in schools is a student-focussed and comprehensive program that seeks to identify a student's aspirations, interests and strengths and provides information and activities that allow the student to make informed decisions about pathways to their desired career. As one careers advisor put it to the Commission:

We look at what the student needs. We look at the pathways for every one of our students that talks about vocational pathways. We look at what they're interested to do. Do they

need to develop personal skills and customer skills and people skills? Do they need the vocational skills for working in a particular area?

Alison Weeks, All Saints Anglican School, Gold Coast QLD, 26 September 2019

Unfortunately, many young people told the Commission about how their experience of careers education fell well short of these standards. As an example, one young person told the Commission:

So, in total, over my schooling years, I had two careers sessions; one where I got given a copy of a resume and said 'that's how you do it'. And then the other was, 'What do you want to do at university?', to which I said, 'I have no idea'. And they didn't give me any options.

Jemille McKenzie, Bendigo VIC, 27 June 2019

In contrast, the Commission heard from careers advisors providing substantial careers programs. For example, a rural school the Commission was told about:

.. try where possible to enable students to see and hear first-hand information about opportunities that are available to them as a career. Careers program at my school offers students in year nine, ten and eleven many opportunities to explore their pathways through programs such as Personal Best, Beacon, VCAL, VET, work experience, structured workplace learning, community service, careers camp, excursions to the careers expo, guest speakers, year 12 Pd day, careers week and we have computer programs such as careers tools and career voyage.

Beth Crossman, Career Teachers Network, EchUCA VIC, 13 May 2019

Another careers advisor told the Commission:

Our career program starts in Year 10. So, I have all of our Year 10 students, once every fortnight throughout Year 10, we have a futures class. One whole term is dedicated to making good choices around university pathways, around vocational pathways, what do I do if I don't know what sort of pathway I should follow.

Alison Weeks, All Saints Anglican School, Gold Coast QLD, 26 September 2019

The Commission accepts that careers education in schools varies widely across the country in quality. That so many young people the Commission spoke to tended to express negative views of the careers education they received indicates substantial room for improvement. The Commission has made a series of recommendations to improve careers education in schools including:

- Implementing a comprehensive careers education program in all secondary schools.
- Starting careers education earlier.
- Strengthening school-industry links.
- Providing more funding for careers education.

Implementing the recommendations in the Commission's report, *'You Can't Be What You Can't See': Careers education in secondary schools*, will ensure a higher standard of careers education in schools that will raise awareness of VET pathways and improve young people's knowledge of their options.

Recommendation 1: That the Australian Government work with state and territory governments and non-government school systems to ensure that all schools provide students with a high-quality careers education program.

Need for better advice and information to young people after school

While many young people make a smooth transition to post-school study and work, some do not. The main concern is those young people who are not in employment, education or training. Once these young people leave school often before completing year 12, there are few options for them to get independent information and advice. Once out of school, the main source of information about education and training options are the universities and VET providers, hardly independent sources of information.

Young people on income support may get some assistance from employment services (Workforce Australia, Transition to Work, etc) but too often employment services focus on compliance requirements for income support and into churning young people into short-term, insecure work or pointless training programs. Employment services should assist young people to gain secure employment or support them into a university course or VET program. Employment services should be working with VET providers so that unemployed young people are supported into VET programs that lead to secure employment and as well as supported throughout the VET program.

The Commission believes that an independent source of information and support for young people who have not made a smooth transition from school to post-school education and training and work.

Recommendation 2: That the Australian Government ensure young people who are not in employment, education or training have access to high-quality, independent information and support.

Perceptions and status of the VET.

The Commission can identify two main reasons why VET pathways are perceived to be of a lower status than academic pathways:

1. Schools tend to focus on academic pathways because their success is measured by ATAR and university entrance.
2. Some VET pathways lead to lower paid and status occupations.
3. The perceived low quality of VET programs.

Schools focus on ATAR as a measure of success

The Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) indicates a student's position relative to all the students in their year group. The ATAR was designed for universities to select students for their courses easily. Schools, parents, and the media consider ATAR and university entrance as measures of success for students. Consequently, schools overwhelmingly focus on achieving high ATARs to market their school. For example, the Commission was told:

Student ATARs are often primarily the only indicator used to reflect a schools' success, sending a subliminal message about the way academic excellence and university entrance is valued. Too often, schools have a culture that places academic learning above vocational learning and allocates finances and resources accordingly.

Vicki Bawden, Victorian Department of Education and Training, Preston VIC, 13 March 2019

So, if schools get measured... and I'll use my children's high school, they measure their achievements on the back of who go that highest ATAR. ...Not which kid is earning \$100,000 after four years because they're in a great trade or something along those lines.

Jason Sultana, Apprentice Employment Network, Parramatta NSW, 5 November 2019

In pursuit of high ATARs, schools stream students perceived as 'academic' into the ATAR, university pathway. Conversely, schools stream less academically gifted students into VET pathways. The streaming is despite how the students perceive their interests or aspirations. For example, the Commission was told:

Young people report experiencing significant pressure by teachers to do ATAR or VET so as not to impact on the school's overall ranking, regardless of whether or not it was the right pathway for them.

John Thomson, Anglicare WA, Perth WA, 13 August 2019

The Commission heard that the ATAR and other forms of academic assessment and testing focus schools on a narrow range of skills that the majority do not use. For example:

Our entire, even from younger years, our system of measurement for success is the academic; it's around those skills, working toward those skills that will do that will lead to you doing well at that set of final exams in the end. And so, I think as a nation, we actually have to ask ourselves, are we actually okay with that? Are we okay with the fact that school is just about getting to that end result and that only one in four kids are going to get there?

Tracey Jacobson, Indie School, Hobart TAS, 3 June 2019

The Commission believes that the focus on ATAR and university entrance as a measure of school success is misguided. More important measures of success should include independence, creativity, innovation, knowledge and foundation education skills. Students should be encouraged to pursue their interests and aspirations, not some perceived status associated with university education. Until VET pathways are valued similarly to academic pathways by schools, parents and the media, schools will continue to favour academic pathways.

However, some schools actively promote VET as a pathway equal to the academic pathway. For example:

We're fortunate at this school that we recognise success in all sorts of people, whether they're sportsmen or musicians or academic students. Equally we do that for VET.

Alison Weekes, All Saints Anglican School, Gold Coast QLD, 26 September 2019

Some schools have access to numerous VET options and large numbers of students participating:

VET in schools for us as a school is a really significant part of what we do. We have well upwards of 700 students on an annual basis who undertake some form of VET. We are a registered training organisation. We have thirteen I think certificates on our scope, but we also work with other RTOs, TAFEs, a couple of TAFEs to receive auspiced delivery for some of our students.

Dale Pearce, Bendigo Secondary College, Bendigo, 26 June 2019

Unfortunately, such schools tend to be the exception rather than the rule. Schools and education systems need to be held accountable for education outcomes, but the measures of success should not be the narrow focus on ATAR. New measures of success should include VET pathways. In this way, schools will place greater value on VET.

Recommendation 3: That the Australian Government work with school systems to ensure that schools value and promote VET pathways equally with academic pathways.

Valuing occupations requiring VET qualifications

It is commonly perceived that VET pathways are inferior to academic pathways and university education because occupations requiring VET qualifications are often considered to lead to lower paying jobs that are ‘dead-end’, manual, or servile. In contrast, university education is seen as leading to well-paid, secure employment in high status professions. These unfortunate perceptions do not reflect the reality that many VET qualifications lead to secure jobs with long-term prospects, some of which are well paid.

However, it remains the case that some VET qualifications lead to lower paid occupations than university qualifications. These tend to be in the services industries such as hospitality, retail, aged care, and childcare. Trades qualifications, often following a traditional apprenticeship pathway, can lead to higher paid occupations (electrician, plumber etc). There is a clear gender aspect to these occupations, with trades being male dominated and services being female dominated. Increasing the pay and perceived status of service occupations, particularly those in the essential health care and social assistance industries, would be one way of overcoming the perceived negative view of these VET pathways.

The low status and low income of many health care and social assistance jobs is a significant problem as the Australian population ages.

Recommendation 4: That the Australian Government consider ways to enhance the reputation of service occupations, particularly those in the health care and social assistance industries.

The perceived low quality of VET programs

Throughout the Inquiry the Commission regularly heard criticisms of Australia’s VET system. The general view was that the quality of VET was low and had been decreasing since the opening of the system to full competition in 2008. For example, the Commission was told:

Recent reforms have been a disaster. Quality has plummeted and people have been left with worthless qualifications. Employers don’t trust that the graduates can do the work.

Charlotte Newbold, Victorian Council of Social Service, Melbourne VIC, 6 March 2019.

The quality of VET has been concerning employers for some time. The Joyce Review of Vocational Education and Training reported falling satisfaction with the VET system among employers:

“Employer satisfaction with the Australian VET system has been declining in recent years. In 2017, a survey of employers with jobs requiring VET found that approximately 75 per cent were satisfied that vocational qualifications provide employees with the skills they need for the job. This compares with a peak of 85 per cent in 2011. Employer satisfaction is now at its lowest rate in 10 years.”²

The government funding of private VET providers radically transformed the VET system.³ Private providers competed fiercely for students, and there was a significant shift from public TAFEs to private for-profit providers. Unfortunately, poor regulation of the system and oversight of standards led to a fall in the quality of VET provision as profit became the main goal of many private VET providers. As better regulations have been introduced to improve quality, some private VET

² Joyce, S (2019) *Strengthening Skills: Expert Review of Australia’s Vocational Education and Training System*, Commonwealth of Australia, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, p.23.

³ Toner, P. (2018) *How Economics Explains Failure of the Publicly Funded Privately Delivered Training Market*, LH Martin Institute, University of Melbourne, p.2.

providers have collapsed⁴ leaving their students out of pocket and damaging the reputation of whole VET sector.⁵

The low level of government funding for VET has been an issue for many years. The Productivity Commission reported that funding of VET fell between 2008 and 2017, and this has implications for quality.⁶ Underinvestment in public TAFE has been called ‘a chronic problem’⁷ and has reduced the capacity of TAFE to keep up with technological development and maintain teachers’ skills and knowledge.

While the Australian Government has committed to improve TAFE funding through fee-free places and resources to improve technology, VET still lags university education in government support. Gross underfunding has led to poor assessment standards, short training durations, a lowering of teachers’ skills and qualifications, and inadequate teacher resources.⁸ A lack of government investment, unstable policy, and poorly regulated providers have seen VET deemed the poor cousin of higher education, undervalued by society, and plagued by controversy and negative public opinion.

Recommendation 5: That the Australian Government work with the state and territory governments to significantly increase funding to the public TAFE system to enhance the quality of teaching and learning.

Conclusion

The main way to improve the perceptions of VET programs in Australia is by properly funding and supporting the public TAFE system. Ensuring a high-quality learning experience for TAFE students will go a long way to overcoming the attitudes some employers have towards some VET programs. Ensuring a strong public system will enhance the quality of private VET providers or they will go out of business.

A strong TAFE system could better work with schools to promote effective VET in Schools programs. Effective VET in Schools programs will improve the perception of VET among students, their parents and teachers. Effective careers education in every secondary school will ensure students make decisions about their post-school pathways, including VET pathways.

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⁴ For example, see <https://www.news.com.au/finance/work/careers/students-left-26000-out-of-pocket-after-careers-australia-goes-into-administration/news-story/0ede1d1015cd2d733dd1a709ae50b48c>

⁵ Committee for Economic Development of Australia (2016) *VET: Securing Skills for Growth*, CEDA, Melbourne.

⁶ Productivity Commission (2019) *Report on Government Services*, Australian Government, p.5.17.

⁷ Toner, P. (2018) *op cit*, p 7

⁸ *ibid*, p 3