SUBMISSION TO THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES INQUIRY INTO VOCATIONAL EDUCATION IN SCHOOLS

AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL OF STATE SCHOOL ORGANISATIONS INC
(ACSSO)

Founded in 1947

ACSSO is the national organisation representing the interests of parents, citizens and students associated with government schools throughout Australia.   ACSSO is non-party political and non-sectarian.

ACSSO is committed to access, equality, equity of outcomes, excellence and participatory democracy.

Preamble

VET is an important and growing area of the school curriculum. It provides an enriched suite of pathways through schools and into the workforce and further education and training. There is a lingering perception by some stakeholders (incl students, parents and teachers) that VET is a second rate alternative. This is a misperception and needs to be addressed. The fact that 30% of Year 12 school leavers proceed to university and 70% choose other pathways, provides a strong argument for school curricula being designed to support the latter group, just as or even more comprehensively than the former.

Students need to have sufficient spare capacity in their curriculum packages to be able to study VET courses alongside traditional general education courses, without compromising their ability to meet a range of pre-requisites, both academic and vocational. Students should be allowed and indeed encouraged to keep their future career pathways open and flexible at this stage of their development.

The range, structure, resourcing and delivery of vocational education programs in schools, including teacher training and the impact of vocational education on other programs.

Range
  ➢ Gender bias in relation to the uptake of some VET courses is an issue.

Structure
  ➢ One of the difficulties for schools in relation to VET are the sometimes impenetrable layers of bureaucracy that must be negotiated, and the complexity provided by the multitude of players in the field. For teachers and schools, the offering of a VET program should be no more difficult than offering a traditional academic course.

Resourcing
  ➢ A fundamental issue for schools is the resourcing costs of VET. There can be no argument that VET programs are more expensive to operate than general educational programs. Whether VET courses are delivered from the school site or are out-sourced, many factors contribute to the increased cost – these include smaller class sizes, time for teachers to find and visit workplaces, cost of materials and equipment and so on. For schools to make a significant investment in VET, they may not only have to make decisions about which elements of the traditional curriculum that they relinquish, they also need to be provided with sufficient extra funds to deliver the new VET courses. These two factors provide significant challenges for schools and school systems.
  ➢ Teacher Industry Release in Queensland is a problem as there are insufficient funds to provide for replacement teachers – likely to be a problem in other states where this program still operates. The strength in VET lies in its immediate relevance to the workplace but it is also one of the main drawbacks to the system. Schools, particularly those who offer a wide variety of VET, find it very difficult to fund the release of teachers from classes of them to maintain and enhance their industry qualifications. This is certainly an area where the funding issue is seen in stark relief. The person delivering the VET subject or module will generally be a teacher but the funding that the school attracts is mainly targeted to the delivery of the subject/module and does not adequately fund the cost of maintaining both teaching and industry qualifications. Some schools opt out of offering VET as it too costly to deliver the TRS component associated with the delivery of VET. This therefore limits the range of choice that students can access and diminishes their educational opportunities.
  ➢ Another disincentive to the uptake of VET may well be the course fees associated with these programs. Hospitality programs in particular are often very expensive. Likewise the cost of transport to work or training sites may act as a barrier, for both teacher supervisors and for students.
  ➢ The creeping movement towards a "user pays" system of education becomes more apparent with VET courses. Admittedly, students are often at the post compulsory stage of their education, however the fundamental principle of

education as a public good remains very strong in the minds of parents, who are reluctant to see this concept diluted.

➤ At a different level, it must be recognised that costs to schools in offering VET programs are often significantly higher than those where the class sizes can be 25 or so, and there is no workplace assessment component.

➤ As with many educational programs, the diversity that is available in VET courses in the cities is not available in rural areas. To this end there may well have to be a greater reliance on Distance Education, co-operation with non-government schools for course delivery and careful linking of available community resources with school programs.

Delivery

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➤ The value of exposing students to the world of work, through work experience, structured work placement, School Based Apprenticeships or other programs is undeniable. ACSSO recognises however that when large numbers of students descend on work places, there will be pressures placed on employers. A small business for example cannot respond to multiple and often uncoordinated requests from schools for student placements. This whole process requires coordination.

Teacher Training

➤ Teacher training, teacher standards, availability of courses to upgrade or gain VET qualifications are issues that need to be addressed. A large proportion of VET in schools is carried by young teachers who have gained experience in the hospitality and retail industries, scraping together a living by waiting on tables and serving in shops. This does not represent a co-ordinated approach to solving the problems of specialist VET teacher supply.

➤ Although Workplace Assessor courses are now available for industry trainers and teachers, parents are concerned that there remain variable standards in assessment practices. Again the status of VET will be lifted when a robust system of assessment moderation practices can be put into place.

The differences between school-based and other vocational education programs and the resulting qualifications, and the pattern of industry acceptance of school-based programs.

➢ The status of VET courses is also related to the Accreditation and Certification processes in individual jurisdictions. These courses need the same stamp of approval that is provided to Tertiary preparation programs.

➢ Accreditation agencies need to have sufficient flexibility to recognise and accredit courses from external providers. A good case in point is the computer networking courses provided by academies sponsored by companies like Cisco Systems.

➢ Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is an important concept that should be relatively cheap for students, schools and accreditation agencies to access.

➢ Information about pathways to apprenticeships and traineeships is sometimes ad hoc and sporadic. Schools need to be well resourced with advisors who can distill information and make it available to students.

➢ There is some tension between the expectations and demands of industry on the one hand and educators on the other. To be fully accepted into the school curriculum, VET programs need to be seen as having educational integrity and value. Simple training programs are less likely to be accepted in schools, as they may lack intrinsic educational value, are likely to become quickly superceded as job requirements change and will suffer from the lack of status mentioned earlier. There are a wide range of VET programs that avoid these negativities. There is no implication here that industry has a preference for lower level training courses. ACSSO believes that a strong partnership between schools and industry is vital for the development of VET. Just as it is important for schools and teachers to understand business and industry, so is it important for business and industry to understand the education sector. Teacher release to industry programs are therefore seen as vitally important.

➢ ACSSO sees value in revisiting and revitalizing the Mayer Key Competencies as an important construct in school curricular. Whilst not vocationally specific, they provide a framework of skills that educators and industry people probably still find relevant. In fact ACSSO believes that the Mayer Competencies may still be useful as an integrating framework for general and vocational education.

Vocational education in new and emerging industries.

➢ One of the difficulties faced by individual schools and systems of schools is their ability to keep abreast of changes occurring in industry, especially in relation to the introduction of new technologies. Resourcing of VET should include dedicated funding for research into new and emerging industries to allow for forward planning in relation to the VET curriculum. Over the course of time, work practices, modes of operation, tools, and procedures will all be updated to encompass contemporary technology. Schools should not be insulated from these changes.

➢ Notwithstanding the above point, schools should not be asked to deliver training for specific jobs. It is better for schools to be aware of the broader changes in industry and concentrate on developing generic and transferable skills within the context of a changing and increasingly technological world.

The accessibility and effectiveness of vocational education for indigenous students.

➢ ACSSO does not wish to make any detailed statement in relation to this term of reference, except to say that it is an advocate for equitable provision for all Australian students. VET programs need to recognise the sometimes special and different needs of aboriginal students and their communities. This may well require modification in the delivery of VET programs to indigenous students in order to accommodate differences in culture, language and location. Provision of increased resource levels to support these modifications will invariably be required.