

Submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Training **Inquiry into Vocational Education in Schools**

from
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The Faculty of Education at UTS has a special interest in vocational learning. The Dean, Professor Andrew Gonczi, is well-known for his work on competency-based education and training; we have an unusually large number of staff working on vocational education areas, and we house a key university research centre on vocational learning (OVAL Research). I want here to make a brief submission noting some issues that relate specifically to my own experience and areas of interest (as Professor of Teacher Education, and as a researcher conducting some major research projects relevant to this inquiry). I and other members of the faculty would be happy to provide further information if this is useful.

The issues I wish the inquiry to note are:

1. The need to take account of the wider demands on schools and teacher education.
2. The problem of the historical separation of schools expertise and post-school vocational expertise.
3. Recruitment issues in teacher education.
4. The need for schools policy on vocational education to clearly distinguish two types of concern: (i) the broad vocationally-related foundations of learning that schools should be providing for all students; and (ii) the more immediate and certificated forms of vocational preparation.
5. Some research projects we are engaged in relevant to this area.

1. Vocational Education and the Wide-ranging Demands on Schools and Teacher Education

I have worked in teacher education for over twenty years, and in that time have seen numerous inquiries: on maths and science, on health education, on equal opportunity for girls, on the needs of boys, on literacy, on citizenship education, on driver education, on environmental education, and so on. Each time the committee of inquiry ends up saying (1) X is an area of priority for schools and for teacher education; and (2) they should be doing more of X. The issue of the changing nature of work, and whether schools are adequately preparing young people for this *is* important. However it is equally important that it be taken up in a way that is realistic, and that has proper

regard for the whole range of agendas that schooling and teacher preparation is required to serve.

In democratic countries, schools are generally expected to do two broad things:

- give young people a basic foundation for their future lives as citizens and workers
- do some sorting and selection that decides who can get into the most prestigious universities and courses.

Parents take this second issue very seriously. As long as UAI's and competitive university entrance remains, and as long as a lot of high-paid vocations are entered via university, it is not simply a matter of saying schools should give priority to short-term vocational preparation. It is realistic to expect that the issue of specific vocational programs will be given more emphasis in some schools than others.

2. Separation between education sectors

Traditionally teacher training concerned with vocational preparation and teacher training concerned with other areas of schooling has taken place in separate institutions. Even at UTS, which is a faculty originally formed by an amalgamation of a technical training institution and a teachers college, there is little integration of programs at the pre-service level. I think more flexible combinations could be encouraged in this area. However the answer is not simply to do away with any distinctions between schools, TAFE and so on. I think a schooling system which has a compulsory element and a wide-ranging brief in preparing citizens is in a fundamentally different situation from institutions that deal with those who are there voluntarily and as adults. But I do think we need more forums and cross-involvements of people with expertise in the different sectors.

3. Recruitment issues in teacher education

Students in schools would benefit greatly by the recruitment of a larger number of mature-age teachers (and by opportunities for greater flow both into and out of this profession). Older recruits to teaching not only have experiences in other workplaces, they are often particularly committed to teaching when they decide to enter that profession. However people cannot easily retrain as teachers if they are required to give up a working wage and train full-time. A greater range of entry options should be encouraged. A further issue is that employment structures do not necessarily make best use of teachers' work experiences.

4. Vocational Learning versus VET courses.

At a recent national forum on vocational education organized by ACE and the Enterprise Foundation, discussion was continually hampered by a blurring of whether we were trying to discuss issues for schools and teachers trying to organize partnership and work-based programs; or whether we were trying to discuss the broader issue of what schools need to do to give students employability foundations. The second is NOT the same as the first.

On the issue of broad foundations, it is clear that employers in a whole range of work require attributes such as literacy, numeracy, flexibility, reliability, ability to learn new tasks, etc – but many employers, while they like to let off steam about 'relevance', also vote with their feet in their employment practices by giving

preference to students who have done an ‘academic’ certificate over those who have done a specifically vocational one.

It is important that schooling systems keep up to date in terms of what foundation skills are needed by young people today – for example, literacy in a world of new media and new technology (and note the Queensland work on the ‘new basics’). One of the things schooling systems need to confront in relation to their broad education program for all students *is* how technology is transforming work and work skills (and social life more generally), and what type of foundation students need in this area. At present, a lot of work is being done in Australian school systems to expand students’ use of computers, but a lot of work still needs to be done on the issue of what we are trying to achieve in this work. That is, what is the foundation of knowledge and skills we are trying to build given new technology? This is an area two of my own current research projects are concerned with.

Another issue that has not yet been sufficiently taken account of in our current education structures and practices is the breakdown of the stereotype of a life path that moves from being a student to being a worker. A large number of young people engage in paid work while they are at school; a large number of ‘full-time’ university students do similarly; a large number of workers at all ages do not have full-time jobs, and/or are required to do new learning. Schools need to appreciate the vocational knowledge that students actually have, and work to build on this. This is not about giving them a certificate for something they would be doing anyway; but working out what form of educational input can add to the knowledge and experiences they bring.

On the issue of specific VET programs and certification:

- in my experience, this is one of the few aspects of the schooling program that is actually working better in country and regional areas than in urban ones, because teachers and local industry do know each other better, are realistic, and do work out programs that suit their specific needs;
- in relation to offering vocational accreditation to school students, there is currently a problem in getting industries with sufficient commitment to offer real work placements (giving certification for cheap labour is not the answer, but nor can we ignore the pressures on many businesses and industries);
- for VET teachers, there is a problem of career paths (they are less likely to be appointed to principal positions; and a number of attempts to give teachers industry experience have found that teachers who do that often stay in the industry rather than return to schools, given the better pay and conditions there);
- for schools, there is a problem of cost and budget. To make work placements work effectively requires considerable liaison and individual attention;
- for boys in particular, the issue of whether the programs are best offered in schools or would be better based elsewhere deserves attention. Often by year 10, boys who are not aiming to attend university resent being in a compulsory institution where they are not treated as a ‘man’. A change of scene may be desirable at this point.

4. Research related to this inquiry:

(i)

A colleague, Geof Hawke, has drawn my attention to a report he carried out with people from ACER, which is very relevant to this inquiry:

The Quest for a Working Blueprint: vocational education and training in Australian secondary schools

(Jeff Malley, Jack Keating, Lyn Robinson and Geof Hawke).

available at <http://www.ncver.edu.au/research/proj/nr7039> 1.pdf

and <http://www.ncver.edu.au/research/proj/nr7039> 2.pdf.

(ii)

The UTS key university research strength in organizational and vocational learning, OVAL Research is engaged in a number of projects, particularly related to issues of 'working knowledge' and 'productive learning'. See <http://www.oval.uts.edu.au> or further information from OVAL Director, Associate Professor Nicky Solomon (nicky.solomon@uts.edu.au, ph 9514 3922).

(iii)

Current research projects I am conducting include:

(1) *Changing Work, Changing Workers, Changing Selves: a study of pedagogies in the new vocationalism.*

ARC funded 3 year Discovery Project 2002-4

Principal Researchers: Prof Mark Tennant, Prof Lyn Yates, Assoc Prof Nicky Solomon, Assoc Prof Clive Chappell (all UTS)

This study is qualitative and comparative investigation of what is actually happening in terms of vocational teaching strategies today. It has a particular focus on pedagogical strategies being used in different sectors to develop 'the new worker' and differences, inclusions, exclusions in this process. The study takes two industries, with different histories (hospitality, and IT) and for each takes cases across different educational sites: schools, TAFE, University, work-based.

There has been a lot of talk about needs of the new worker (eg regarding flexibility, life-long learning, ability to work in teams etc), and also about changing boundaries and sites of education. In this project, we are investigating similarities and differences in how vocational education is being conducted for different industries and sites, with particular attention to what types of workers are being developed, what coherence or lack of coherence exists between these practices and the rhetoric of new worker skills and competencies; what types of people are being well-served and less well-served by the approaches (eg in terms of gender, educational background, ethnicity etc). The project aims to develop more detailed, comparative information on current practices in different industries and sectors of education in Australia, and to develop new insights about pedagogic practices that aim to serve these areas.

Further details from the Project Officer: Dr Carolyn Williams (Carolyn.Williams@uts.edu.au, ph 02 9514 3859).

(2) *Effective Learning with new technologies in schools (the E-effects Project)*

ARC SPIRT 3 year project in collaboration with NSW DET. 2001-2003

Principal Researchers: Dr Debra Hayes, Prof Lyn Yates, Prof Shirley Alexander (all UTS)

The aspect of this project that is relevant to the inquiry is that we have an interest in what types of new knowledge schools are developing with new technology. For example, what does ‘authentic learning’ look like in this context? When students work with computers, what ideas do they develop about what knowledge is important, what skills matter?

Further details on <http://www.effectsproject.uts.edu.au> or from the Project Officer, Joanne Dwyer (joanne.dwyer@uts.edu.au, ph 02 9514 5613).

(3) *The 12 to 18 Project: a longitudinal, qualitative study of Victorian girls and boys from the ages of 12 [1993-2001]*

ARC funded project with additional support from La Trobe, Deakin and UTS.

Principal researchers: Prof Lyn Yates (UTS), Dr Julie McLeod (Deakin University)

This 7 Up style study followed girls and boys at four different schools, interviewing them twice a year about ‘self, school and future’. One aim of the study was to follow the different ways in which students thought about their future through the early, middle and later years of secondary school, and the effects of both family and school experiences in the choices they made and the values and aptitudes they developed. Some findings relevant to this inquiry include

- Across all schools, specific careers advice and work experience seemed to have little effect on students in the study, though dual accreditation courses were of importance to the students who took these.
- Overall school orientation did have a significant effect on the type of orientation to work students were showing at 18; at two comparable high schools, students from one were much more vocationally oriented and ‘on track’ at 18 than students from the other.
- One school in particular, had a very well-regarded program of matching students with work and accreditation opportunities in the local community. However, at age 18 a number of these boys were out of work because the types of traditional male work they aspired to was not available (ie industries and employers they had begun apprenticeships with had found themselves unable to maintain these). That is, this raises the issues that programs that look vocationally relevant may not be vocationally effective.

Further information and publications list is available from Prof. Lyn Yates (lyn.yates@uts.edu.au, ph 02 9514 5230).