



Western Australian Council of State School Organisations

Submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Training

Inquiry into Vocational Education in schools

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Background

The Western Australian Council of State School Organisations Inc. (WACSSO) was founded in 1921 as the representative voice of parents, citizens and students associated with government schools in Western Australia. WACSSO is a non-party political and non-sectarian body with a current membership of 634 P&C Associations directly affiliated with WACSSO. WACSSO is therefore well placed to offer comments, feedback and suggestions for future developments relating to education and training in government schools in WA.

WACSSO influences the direction of education for the benefit of all students. Underpinning the workings of WACSSO are values and beliefs about children and young people and the importance of education. The following statements indicate the philosophical basis for this WACSSO submission about vocational education and training in schools.

WACSSO is committed to a public education system available to all young people irrespective of their age, socio-economic status, culture, gender, level of ability or where they live.

The philosophy underlying WACSSO policy centres around the principles of equality, excellence, and participatory democracy and recognises that all human beings depend on each other and so the future well-being of individuals is dependent on the future well-being of all.

Equality is dependent on such premises as: recognition that all children have a capacity to learn; learning is the construction of meaning from experience; school practices must acknowledge and build on the culture and experiences children bring to school; and children have a right to develop their skills, knowledge and aptitudes in challenging but personally successful and fulfilling ways.

The principle of excellence implies that the public school system must provide for all students the highest quality education, which will enable them to learn how to learn throughout their lives and to apply that knowledge for the benefit both of themselves and of others.

Public education must be geared to develop among all students, a sense of justice as well as respect and concern for others.

The principles of participatory democracy hold that the provision of an education system must address the needs of all. This is most likely to be achieved when those involved in the system, students, parents, and teachers, are enabled and empowered to be partners, through representation in all decision-making processes of the system

Accordingly, all persons attending government schools have the right to an unrestricted and effective education of the highest quality to allow them to develop their full potential as individuals. As empowered citizens, these students can take every advantage of social, political, and economic opportunity; obtain fulfillment of their reasonable aspirations within the range of their abilities; contribute their skills and knowledge for the betterment of Australia; and be able to participate harmoniously in all aspects of society.

WACSSO believes that these tenets form an essential statement of principles for guidance in its practical activities toward achieving an excellent, empowering, public education system for all.

WACSSO Policy

The Inquiry has invited submissions that address *“The place of vocational education in schools, its growth and development, and its effectiveness in preparing students for post-school options...”* with specific topics for particular reference. An overview and comments on the current level of provision in Western Australia provides an appropriate focus and starting point for this WACSSO submission to the Inquiry. In addition to contributing WACSSO perspective and general comments on the broad topic, WACSSO will address the specific issues as per the Terms of Reference for the Standing Committee.

Within the broad education and training ‘industry’ and the specific territory of schooling, the increasing popularity of vocational education and training (VET) and enterprise and vocational education (EVE) in schools has represented and required in turn, shifts in attitudes, practices, partnerships and purpose. WACSSO has been observing, participating and analysing changes and trends at the local level through the everyday involvements and interests of P&Cs. There are many complex issues and challenges to be identified and addressed in order to ensure the ongoing and future success of VET and EVE endeavours in schools.

The changes that have taken place in education over the last decade at least, has been remarkable. The divides between schools, TAFE, Colleges of Advanced Education, and Universities have all but disappeared. The potential advantages of the new apparent egalitarian system, include greater articulation possibilities, less restriction to mobility in education, and achievable higher degrees for students. However, international and OECD comparisons reveal continued ‘haves’ and ‘have nots’ in education outcomes. Many students have been disaffected by their schooling experiences and the benefits of continued education have not overcome their resistance. The relative transformation of schools and the development of more appealing vocational education and training to these students offers a ‘window of opportunity’ for Australia to redress the problems of the past.

Traditionally, post-compulsory education has forced students to choose between vocational studies or those of an academic ‘stream’. VET programs have the potential to close that gap by enabling students to tailor their study programs to achieve their own desired learning outcomes that do not necessarily restrict them to university. The VET programs promise an end to much of the strict regimentation and labelling of students as ‘clever’ or ‘dumb’. This is not automatically achieved but will require creativity and determination of all stakeholders. The development of new curriculum and ‘pedagogy’ is critical. One indicator of the success of this strategy will be the number of WA students who take VET courses at TEE level. The status and flexibility of VET studies must attract students of all ability levels and teachers must be able to teach all students regardless of where they’ve come from and where they’re going to.

WACSSO has been concerned that a system of autonomous Technical and Further Education (TAFE) colleges has limited opportunities for many students rather than enhanced their education and training experience. The system evolved historically with financial and philosophical encouragement by subsequent governments however, it has become increasingly clear that improvements are necessary to meet the emerging and indicated future needs of the population as a whole.

The TAFE system has been marked by inconsistent flexibility and responsiveness required to meet the training requirements of WA students. WACSSO policy concerning the more problematic aspects of the current TAFE system reflects the current public debate that has to some extent ‘inspired’ the HOR inquiry.

WACSSO Policy on TAFE Colleges is as follows:

1. *The insular system of autonomous colleges can not effectively coordinate joint programmes between different colleges or between colleges and schools. This must be changed in order to maximise the benefit of the physical resources and expertise for the good of the public education system as a whole.*
2. *In rural areas, where resources are sometimes sparsely distributed, it is vital that all sections of the public education system work together so that quality, choice of curriculum and access to resources can be expanded.*
3. *Local governance and advisory bodies at TAFE colleges must contain representatives of the student, parent and staff population, as well as industry and professional representation.*
4. *WACSSO believes that the functions of TAFE colleges need reviewing with a view to a comprehensive restructure of the system that will:*
 - (a) *increase standards;*
 - (b) *remove duplication;*
 - © *facilitate greater cooperation within the public education system;*
 - (d) *remove current impediments that inhibit joint activities and cross sectoral relationships;*
 - (e) *ensure improved public provision of vocational education;*
 - (f) *improve service delivery; and*
 - (g) *increase access to public facilities for all students across Western Australia.*

Against this background (above) of concern for improvements in the delivery of traditional TAFE institutions and programs, WACSSO has supported the introduction and development of VET in schools. WACSSO has been pleased to support government efforts to improve schooling experiences for students and achieve improved outcomes of education and training. Government recognition of alarming school retention statistics and programs introduced to enhance the relevance of school education for all students have been welcomed. But acknowledging problems facing the most disadvantaged students is not an end in itself, and WACSSO has been actively engaged in dialogue with all stakeholders and participating as partners with government to plan for new approaches that address obvious inequities and limitations.

The range of VET programs now being taught in government schools is wide, and applauded by those involved. In WA, even further fields of study have been proposed in addition to the following industry areas currently listed by the Department of Education WA:

- Arts, Entertainment, Sport and Recreation
- Automotive
- Building and Construction
- Business and Clerical
- Communication
- Community Services, health and Education
- Computing
- Engineering and Mining
- Finance, Banking and Insurance
- Food Processing
- General Education and Training
- Primary Industries
- Process manufacturing
- Sales and Personal Services
- Sciences, Technical and Other
- Textiles, Clothing, Footwear, Furnishings
- Tourism and Hospitality

- Transport and Storage
- Utilities.

These VET in schools programs represents enormous expansion in a relatively short period of time, and demonstrates the popularity and increasing demand for these courses. The message is clear from students and the community both, that very different models of education and training should be developed to meet current student demands and industry requirements.

WACSSO policy has given expression to many concerns about the system of TAFE colleges, those same colleges which traditionally offered many if not all, of the courses or components of courses currently taught in schools under the banner of 'VET'. These same concerns do not disappear, but in some ways, become magnified and more complex, when a duality or multiplicity of delivery arrangements and models are introduced at relatively rapid pace. It is timely to pause and reflect upon gains made and issues raised.

The 'interface' between education and training systems is currently the subject of a WA Ministerial Inquiry. The traditional divides between TAFE and schools will be considered in the context of the current exponential growth of VET in schools. The issues and challenges for VET in schools must be dealt with earlier rather than later by all stakeholders involved including but not limited to TAFE colleges, schools, and others involved in program delivery such as private providers. Also involved should be the teaching professionals and administrators, students, parents/carers, business and community.

Just as WACSSO has articulated policy concerning the delivery of traditional TAFE programs, so too, WACSSO has worked for improvements in the delivery and development of school based curriculum and schooling outcomes. WACSSO is not assuming that problems associated with the current TAFE system automatically surface or transmute in the school context. Rather, the gains and achievements of both models should be shaped as a synergy for the benefit of students in the new climate of enthusiasm and open-mindedness. The overwhelmingly positive feedback from VET students in WA schools augurs well for the future.

WACSSO Policy in regards Vocational Education and Training (VET) is based on three premises. Firstly, post-compulsory curriculum must be based on sound principles of teaching and learning that encourage and allow for the development of qualities which assist all young people to adapt to a variety of post-school situations. Curriculum must explicitly assist students develop skills and knowledge valued not only by employers but by others beyond the precincts of the school. Specific vocational subjects must be set in an appropriate career and general education framework.

WACSSO Policy reads as follows:

Curriculum design in VET must be based on the following principles.

1. *Particular attention must be given to:*

- (a) *individual and specific needs of all students in post-compulsory years;*
- (b) *the needs of:*
 - (i) *rurally isolated students;*
 - (ii) *indigenous students;*
 - (iii) *NESB students;*
 - (iv) *students experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage; and*
 - (v) *students experiencing abuse and/or family crisis.*

- (c) *the cost of delivery of VET;*
 - (d) *the extent to which the redirection of funds or the cost of VET courses will restrict equitable access.*
2. *A set of consultative procedures must be established within vocational education to balance the interests of the ‘industry led’ initiatives beside the experience and expertise of other groups with a professional and human interest in the education of the young.*
 3. *Vocational education must move beyond narrowly specific job preparation and must include broad competencies. Teaching in these subjects must include supported critical reflection on both the subject material and the job experiences.*
 4. *VET courses need to be accredited. Students must be aware of:*
 - (a) *the capacity of the course to articulate within the context of the Australian qualifications framework;*
 - (b) *both the advantages and limitations of VET courses on their subject patterns and any future curriculum pathways.*
 5. *Any move to involve schools in labour market brokerage agencies which require schools to invest funds or which in other ways may lead to increased pressure on students to leave school early is antithesis to the purposes of schooling and rejected by this organisation.*
 6. *Workplace experience for students in vocational education must be the subject of rigorous monitoring, assessing and reporting to ensure that the curriculum is being delivered in a way that adds to the student’s knowledge and skills.*
 7. *VET must not be used to shift costs from private industry to the public schooling system.*
 8. *The increasing emphasis on the supposed right of employers to choose private providers of vocational education and training must not be at the expense of the quality, choice or availability of a wide variety of vocational education and training courses. “User choice” must not operate at the expense of a commitment to equity.*

The WA Government has committed to a doubling of VET places in government schools in response to its 2001 Review. Schools have not been compelled to take up these opportunities and initiatives, however that situation may need to be re-examined in the light of government strategy. Appreciating the unique features and circumstances of each school and the conditions effecting the introduction and development of VET in each school is an important first stage to determine how to best support the introduction of these initiatives and new fields of study.

The Department of Education Report “Review of Enterprise and Vocational Education and Training in Schools 2001” analysed results from the first VET in Schools beginning in 1997 as a marginal activity in 36 schools to the implementation in 2001 of the national new Framework for Vocational Education. The Report confirmed for the government that Vet programs had been successful in adding relevance to the education program for many students.

Further, the Report predicted that further development would provide a significant strategy to improve student retention rates, particularly since the post-compulsory curriculum has been expanded to include student support for career education and enterprise education through years K to 12. The government is currently moving to implement the agreed recommendations from the “*Our Youth, Our Future: Post-Compulsory Education Review*” completed in March 2002.

The fact that not all students, and not all schools, have participated and benefited from the expansion of VET and EVE implicates the education and training sectors and poses significant challenges. Some schools have been able to mount VET programs in towns and districts where no alternative education and

training facility exists. Those schools have been responsive to the needs of their students and have developed courses in concert with the local community including those locations without an obvious sponsoring business sector and local industry infrastructure. There are some schools that have met the local challenge by setting up a new business itself! Some schools have taken initiative with particular VET programs purely to retain their existing student body rather than face closure by 'losing' numbers at a critical juncture with staffing formulae. Some schools have been motivated by the competition for resources within the system, regardless of the existence of a similar course in the vicinity. Some schools report that 'their' students prefer child-centred high school learning to the adult learning environment of a traditional TAFE facility or another alternative. The comparative cost of similar courses is another factor in the decision.

Some critics of the current structural arrangements argue that amalgamation of education and training ministries and bureaucracies would minimise duplication and achieve greater communication, cooperation, efficiencies and partnerships.

The fact that rural and remote areas often lack business and industry infrastructures presents real difficulties when the relationship between local businesses and schools is critical to the success of the VET program. Some schools have overcome these barriers and serve as excellent 'lighthouse' models of good practice. Indeed, promotional materials from the Department of Education reveal a wonderful array of experimentation and creativity that deserves recognition and support. Schools that have tackled the dreadful plight of indigenous students with culturally sensitive and academically sound VET programs deserve the highest praise. Staff acting in real partnership with enlightened and engaged school communities have earned the respect and active commitment of local businesses and industry.

Preparing students for post-school options has consistently been expected of VET programs and to date students have reported strong results. However, many VET in schools programs have struggled with the tension between producing "job-ready" employees for the immediate market place and broadly educated individuals prepared as citizens for an ever-changing society. Meeting the QTF requirements in many cases presents hurdles for schools, for example for those schools that cannot guarantee articulation to a local TAFE college and local vacancies for their graduating students.

The benefits of introducing students to EVE studies earlier in the high school years have been obvious. Similarly, students benefit from clear and achievable articulation from VET courses to more advanced levels in further education and training. For example, students who complete Certificate I and II in a field of study at school should be able to move to Certificate IV and Diploma level easily. And those students who are capable of Certificate III entry level study in that field should not be restricted simply because they are high school students.

Parents and caregivers too, are often anxious about changing school and workplace environments, and seek to participate with confidence in these futuristic debates and be heard. Some schools have administration and professional staff who are isolated from parents/carers and representative P&Cs. Some Principals act as 'demi-Gods' making decisions about the use of resources for programs and delivery, denying the school community the opportunity to contribute and participate in reforms, developments and new endeavours. But, it is obvious from the most successful programs that the future development of VET in schools depends on the total school community involvement.

Like the professionals confronting these dilemmas everyday in classrooms, whatever form these take in the 'new order', parents and the school community generally are looking for information, leadership and vision. The traditional relationship between school and home must be transformed to one of partnership in all respects for everyone involved with the education and training of children and young people.

Answering basic questions such as “What is the purpose of education and training?” is not a simple matter, nor is the question of how to ensure equity and equality. No-one has exclusive rights. WACSSO urges the Federal Government to consider the issues of parental involvement in VET programs in schools as part of the Inquiry.

Terms of Reference

The Terms of Reference for the Inquiry have been examined by WACSSO and general comments are provided in this submission in response to the four listed topics. The comments could be considered as principles for further consideration rather than final solutions to the many evolving and complex issues.

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

The range of VET programs in government schools in WA has been expanding rapidly and is a measure at least of the bureaucracy, institution and individuals’ abilities to respond to social change. The new demands and imperatives have come from industry largely and supply from keen students looking for a more relevant and workplace oriented schooling experience.

Governments are keen to be seen to be acting constructively to social indicators that demonstrate Australia’s flagging success internationally against education and training competitors. Australian citizenry appears unprepared to meet the intellectual, research and development challenges ahead despite being relatively well resourced to educate and train its future workforce. Education is increasingly a political issue and a priority in elections.

The WA Labor Government as a new government, came to office with education high on its election commitments. More recently the Minister for Education, Mr Alan Carpenter, has encouraged public dialogue about education with his promotion of a higher school leaving age from 15 years to 16 or 17 or higher. WACSSO has welcomed the debate in the context of wider community consideration about education and training as a total package for reform. Keeping ‘kids’ at school is not a panacea for social ills, but an opportunity to provide highest quality education for our children.

The experience of VET programs to date in WA government schools has been mostly positive, at least according to those students whose feedback and opinions have been made known. The philosophical questions about the purpose of education and schooling remain despite the enthusiastic embrace of these new forms and content.

VET in WA Schools must be delivered in accordance with the requirements of the Curriculum Council Act 1997, the *VET Act 1996* and the national VET quality assurance policy: *Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF)*. The Minister for Employment and Training and the Minister for Education issued the *Joint Policy Statement: Future Directions for VET in Schools* in December 2002. New quality assurance processes and transition arrangements for the delivery of VET in Schools in accordance with the joint statement were developed by the Curriculum Council, Training Accreditation Council and the Department of Training. These inter-sectoral and inter-departmental activities indicate a level of cooperation and mutual concern for efficiencies, taking into account continuing issues such as the potential for duplication and wastage of resources.

Heads of these bodies have reassured stakeholders: “*The policies, procedures and quality assurance arrangements that have been developed (Curriculum Council Quality Assurance Manual for VET in Schools), will ensure that the achievement of VET in Schools in Western Australia meets state and*

national VET standards, is nationally recognised and contributes towards secondary graduation. Collaboration between the Curriculum Council, the Training Accreditation Council and the Department of Training will continue in 2002 to support schools and partnership arrangements to build industry and community confidence in the quality of VET outcomes for young people in Western Australia.”

Administrative barriers frequently preclude students of school-leaving age from furthering their studies. WACSSO notes significant ongoing collaborative efforts to streamline processes, strengthen agreements and protocols, increase professional development opportunities for teachers, and develop appropriate materials. The fact that there were so many bureaucratic structures and processes involved in the first place, has made these efforts essential. The departments involved have boldly stated that the human and physical resource requirements sufficient to meet industry standards have been determined. But external critics have questioned the timeliness and clarity of the overarching structural arrangements necessary to facilitate school participation and entry into the ‘sexy’ field of VET and EVE.

There is currently intense competition for funds and resources between schools, sectors, courses of study, geographical locations, and student categories of ‘educational need’. The government is under increasing political pressure to deal with the vexed matter of public monies going to private schools. There is an urgent need for substantial research into the total real costs of education on families. WACSSO recommends that increased support for VET programs be especially directed at meeting the needs of students currently unable to access existing courses.

Participation in post-compulsory education programs, wherever and however delivered, presents a nightmare of financial obligation for many low-income families, regardless of enticements to reduce compulsory fees, charges and voluntary contributions. If schools feel the strain of meeting the needs of larger and more demanding school populations, the financial and social issues facing families should also be taken into account.

The cost of sending your child/children to board in metropolitan centres for education and training is often prohibitive. There is also a need to address the barrier of low literacy and numeracy especially among indigenous students. If you cannot read the recipe, then having a high-tech kitchen available in a hospitality VET course is meaningless, or worse. There is an obvious interrelationship between early learning and later participation in courses at post-compulsory level, thus the implication is for preventive and early intervention programs.

The impact of vocational education on other school programs has not been adequately assessed to date. Anecdotal evidence is ambivalent. Schools have had to find or raise the funds to ‘turn over’ classrooms and facilities, make adjustments to school structures, entice appropriate staff, and struggle with the challenge of retaining students in the school who otherwise would have left long ago - and coping with their often very different learning needs and behaviours.

If the government is successful in its desire to substantially redress early school leaving and increase the compulsory leaving age in WA, then it is questionable whether some of the existing campuses can cope. Already some schools are ‘bursting at the seams’ with their numbers and new facilities cannot be built fast enough in many locations. Old schools lack maintenance and pose health and safety risks. Many schools have multiple constructions and mini-schools within the larger campus. The chance of ‘losing’ a student in large institutions is as real as the messages from other social sciences about the dangers of institutional life. Some staff carry mobile phones to ensure basic communications across huge campuses, not just for crises and emergencies.

Many schools nevertheless desire to be larger in order to attract more dollars, and schools commonly seek flexibility and autonomy in how that budget is spent. This trend comes at the expense often, of smaller schools.

And yet the government is convinced that retaining and attracting more students to government schools is important, and VET offers much in this regard. WACSSO is concerned that the rush to find new and attractive solutions to these pressing problems could take away from the more fundamental work to change the basic system and eliminate obstructive and destructive practices and bureaucratic procedures.

Teachers too have felt the impact of the development of VET. Most VET teachers speak enthusiastically for the benefits to students across the whole school. Professional development (PD) for these VET staff should be accessible and appropriate; the PD should be timely and not purely classroom learning but provide opportunities for meaningful interaction with industry.

Support to schools should also include start-up capacity building and course development time and resources. If communication is to be achieved between all stakeholders, then this must be undertaken professionally with accountability for the process. The whole school community should be part of the planning, decision-making, and ongoing support and monitoring of the VET programs as indeed all school activities that impact upon the students. P&Cs are not simply in existence in schools as the unquestioning fundraising body to provide the resources for a new VET wing.

The whole school body and community should be enriched by the introduction and development of VET programs in the school.

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

WACSSO philosophy and policy stance to education, and vocational education, has been articulated previously. The temptation exists for the government education system in the current economic and political climate to base its programs and curriculum on industry demand, just as the university sector determination of entry requirements has influenced the direction and delivery of high level intellectual streaming in traditional schooling endeavour. However, WACSSO reiterates that the object of public education is to ensure that all children and young people develop the skills and understandings necessary to shape their own lives and to be able to contribute constructively to the social, political and economic future of Australia.

WACSSO strongly urges the government not to fall prey to shortsighted market forces; not to turn schools into institutions that create ‘factory fodder’; not to succumb to the pressures of global competition that promotes and protects the privileged but exploits the disadvantaged. The fact that industry acceptance of school-based programs has been positive in WA should not be the determining factor in development of VET in schools. The support and involvement of industry is appreciated and worthy but should not be the primary goal for these programs. Just as the absence or lack of participation for whatever reason, by local industry, should not discourage schools from venturing into the VET field for their students.

The differences between school-based and other vocational education programs has previously been discussed in this submission. Superficial and highly visible differences cover such aspects as buildings

and facilities. But there are further differences that significantly effect student outcomes. Different teaching qualifications, backgrounds, methods and styles are apparent in the classroom. At the more 'invisible' level further differences are of concern to WACSSO, for example staff screening procedures exist for new staff appointments in the Department of Education, but TAFE colleges have not traditionally required clearances for teaching of adult learners. This also means that TAFE staff in partnership arrangements and co-location situations, when attending schools to teach high school students bring with them their TAFE conditions and approaches.

Other vocational education programs include private providers on occasion but little information is available publicly about success or otherwise with these programs. Most students undertake units as part of their VET program that entail activities to be undertaken off campus. This includes structured workplace learning (SWL) units that provide valuable insight into the realities of daily workplace requirements and demands. This experience in the actual work situation is popular with students, even where the immediate activity is unenjoyable, because of the benefits for career education and guidance. Many students report that their SWL was the most rewarding aspect of their VET course which was itself the most relevant part of their school experience.

WACSSO reminds education authorities that the following considerations are important for these SWL units: ensuring that the working environment is physically safe and emotionally secure; that students are protected from all forms of exploitation, including economic exploitation; and that the educational setting fosters the 'rights of the child' that is, Duty of Care provisions are in place.

- **Vocational education in new and emerging industries**

Western Australia is a State anticipating and planning for substantial population growth over the next few years. The growth rate in an already strongly multicultural and isolated population will predictably fuel demand for such infrastructure as housing, transport, employment, public services, environmental resources especially water, flexible labour supply - and schools. The natural resources in WA are providing much of the new wealth and the government's challenge is to harness opportunities presented by international and global interest in investment in the State.

The education system meanwhile is attempting to develop new and improved ways of meeting student needs. But if the system continues to refer to its 'core business' as teaching and learning, the vision of a wholistic education experience for students will be restricted. Social and emotional wellbeing of students is critical to individual development and self-actualisation. Support staff such as chaplains, psychologists, speech therapists, and all too scarce social workers are discretionary in the school's staffing profile. Yet schools cannot achieve their goals without engaging the whole student, and the whole community in its activities.

New and emerging industries will not respond constructively to traditional school routines and methods which have been found wanting. Schools will have to convince new and bold industries that partnerships and sponsorship relationships will bear fruit for all involved. Schools cannot simply sit and wait for new and emerging industries to recognise the potential benefits of VET programs. WA is poised to expand in a wide range of industrial enterprises, probably incorporating cutting-edge technologies, all of which will draw on the graduates of schools, colleges and universities. Credentialism is a possible consequence of much of the expansion in education and training and this must be taken into account.

History has shown how the demise of many early Australian industries especially in the manufacturing and agricultural sectors, has already resulted in the loss of many unskilled jobs. Workforce planning for futures unpredicted at this stage, is an important role for all governments. Schools must be proactive in this regard so that students are not entering the workforce with VET skills already superfluous because that particular industry has moved on while the course was underway.

Of particular concern are those students who are currently unable to access VET programs, let alone be well placed to compete for jobs whether in new or existing industries, and further education places. Indigenous students are most at risk, in fact represent the greatest test of educators and communities that profess to care. The Curriculum Framework is meaningless if you can't keep the 'kids' at school, healthy, happy and loved.

- **The accessibility and effectiveness of vocational education for indigenous students**

WACSSO has previously expressed its deep concern for the wellbeing of indigenous students. The challenge of reconciliation faces all Australians and schools in particular must contribute actively and with dedication to the challenge. Schools are critical social institutions to help or hinder, indigenous children and young people in their personal development and academic life. Successful and positive role models are invaluable in aboriginal communities, and schools would be wise to involve if not actually employ, indigenous educators and support staff. Diversity in the education staffing profile must place indigenous employment as primary strategy to improve indigenous students' outcomes. Homework centres and mentor schemes are also useful approaches.

VET programs specifically targetting indigenous students have much to offer, and excellent examples are documented. But these programs are few and far between. And these programs have particular difficulties gaining community support and involvement, including from industry. When aboriginal students have successfully passed through a full and personally rewarding school, VET, TAFE and maybe even tertiary pathway to face rejection in the workplace and unemployment then the next generation of students is discouraged from the process altogether.

Integration of these programs within the whole schooling experience is important. But many schools remain insensitive to the cultural differences and issues with their indigenous students continuing to suffer racism as a result. These students will not attend school at all if the education system is not capable of understanding their situations and meeting their needs.

The recent WA Gordon Inquiry has much to say about the systemic failure to ensure aboriginal children and young people - students - are protected and nurtured. The Report brought to the fore of media and public attention shameful conditions including high suicide rates among aboriginal students, deafness, inter-agency paralysis and incompetence in the face of abuse, domestic violence, poverty and a long list of other social indicators of desperate need.

The WA community including public agencies, are currently waiting on government action in the face of the Gordon findings and the complementary independent Harries Report commissioned to examine Mandatory Reporting. These issues are not considered 'core business' for the Education Department. But WACSSO recommends that the education system throws itself seriously into participating to meet these challenges, as one part of a whole interrelated government machinery that can and should be, meeting the needs of indigenous students. Starting at the earliest days of schooling right through to the VET programs that lead into successful higher education if these indigenous students so desire....

