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

**Inquiry into Vocational Education
in Schools (VET)**

September 2002

Executive Summary of AHISA'S Submission

- AHISA is interested in the education of **all** Australian students. **VET can meet the needs of all abilities.**
- Today's students need a balance of academic and vocational content in their school programs. **Motivation towards learning is the key.**
- There are some basic skills, necessary for citizens in the 21st Century. These generic skills are best taught in school-based programs.
- Some external programs can offer a better industry perspective and include specific skills preparation. However buying TAFE packages comes at a high cost to independent schools
- **Adequate funding in both the public and private sectors is critical.** Students in independent schools should have access to the same resources as those in government schools.
- Successful school/work programs exhibit certain characteristics. They are enjoyed because they contain practical experiences, learning outside the classroom, working with adults
- The Cluster Method used for Structured Workplace Learning works extremely well.
- Steps need to be taken to institutionalise successful programs
- The changing nature of the national vision results in a real difficulty for those in schools to come to grips with the administration required.
- The inclusion of VET in the post compulsory programs of schools should not be mandated
- There are some good "niche market" schools that specialize in a particular aspect of VET
- Resourcing limits breadth of offerings. Some schools see it as all too difficult and would like to see the whole exercise of offering specific skills VET courses go over to TAFE institutions.
- It is important that **all** teachers are encouraged to develop an understanding of vocational education including the role of the VET Co-ordinator. Provisions for prior learning should be recognised and credit given in the certification of teachers of VET.
- Schools find it difficult to recruit teachers with both educational and work skills qualifications together with a values-based approach appropriate to a particular independent school.
- A conflict that causes problems is that although the qualifications are national, each State treats them differently
- The AQTF compliance requirements can become cumbersome. Many schools are opting out of VET subjects as a result.
- If the Government really wants to encourage and increase vocational learning in schools, then **it must support those schools that are willing to implement appropriate programs.**

AHISA'S Submission

The Association of Heads of Independent Schools of Australia (AHISA) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Inquiry into Vocational Education in Schools and commends the Minister for initiating this Inquiry.

The Association is a peak educational organization and presently its members are Heads of more than 300 Independent schools in Australia educating more than 250 000 students.

The members of this national Association have a strong interest in the quality of learning of **all** students in Australia and recognise that many of the skills accepted as important in vocational learning are skills that all students need to have for life in the 21st Century.

Preparation of this Submission

There are valuable and innovative vocational learning programs in many of our members' schools, especially where time energy and resources have been devoted specifically to this part of the curriculum. Our members as Principals of schools recognise that theirs is a crucial role, in that they need to create a positive climate in their schools that encourages vocational learning for all students.

Because of this interest in improving the **learning** opportunities in our schools, the Terms of Reference of this Inquiry were distributed via e-mail to our members with an invitation to respond to the AHISA Secretariat if they wished to provide input to this submission. Many members took advantage of this invitation and this submission has been prepared from the material provided. Certainly some of our members will lodge their own submissions which will contain details of specific school issues. This is especially necessary as the rules vary from State to State and though AHISA is a national body, it is difficult to frame a national approach.

Introduction

Today's students need a balance of academic and vocational content in their school programs. A primary goal of integrating academic and vocational education is to make the experience of applied vocational education more accessible to academic students and some academic courses more accessible to students concentrating on vocational education.

Strategies need to be developed that support connected learning (learning linked to the world beyond the classroom) and blend career development into the learning process. Connecting the experiences of the outside world with the learning in the classroom makes the acquired knowledge more useful and students see it as relevant. **Motivation towards learning is the key.**

Teachers play an important role in guiding the transfer of knowledge from school to workplace. By relating events that happen in the community to things that happen in the students' world, a real motivation for learning appears. By relating to practical situations, experiences from work and daily living provide important information, strategies and

insights to students. They then understand how some basic skills, necessary for success as a citizen in the 21st Century can be used to solve real world problems.

These basic skills are defined as the ability to

- Communicate ideas and information orally as well as in writing
- Use technology
- Work in groups
- Solve problems when the answers are not always self-evident
- Understand how systems work
- Collect, organise and analyse data.

Students must also learn

- The behaviours required at the work site
- That being on time matters
- That personal and social competence matters

These skills can be learnt at school, but some are best learnt in the workplace. Some students do this best in practical real-life situations.

To prepare students for the 21st Century is a huge challenge. All students would benefit from the skills learnt in vocational education, a fact recognised in “The New Framework”.

“The New Framework”

The Framework is much broader than the past concept of VET in schools was, yet the terms of reference of this Inquiry seem to suggest that responses should relate to the post compulsory years of VET in schools.

AHISA as a peak Principals’ Association of Australia supports the concept of the New Framework. Indeed it is what is happening in many of our schools.

The Place of Vocational Education in Schools, its Growth and Development

VET has grown significantly in some of our schools, especially during the past five years. Independent schools that have developed successful school/work programs generally have

- Active support of the Principal, Governing Body and Senior Staff
- Community-based group support, especially of parents
- Regularly re-assessed progress towards clearly defined goals
- A developmental approach – the program will constantly change and evolve
- An incremental strategy – adding onto the original components to create new ones
- An expansion of school to work experiences – branching into new career fields, adding new employers to the school’s database of resources to support workplace learning
- A dedicated leader who puts significant thought into what skills the students should learn at the worksite and what academic skills they should have from school and then clearly articulates what students should achieve.

Students enjoy successful VET programs. They see the relevance of what they are learning and enjoy the practical aspect of the courses, they know what their goals are, and they know what they have to achieve, to be successful.

The practical structures that have helped deliver VET as part of the education offering are to be applauded. However the changing nature of the national vision and the constant changes of arrangements by bureaucrats results in a real difficulty for those in schools to come to grips with the administration required. The result is that instead of concentrating on what is delivered to our students, the whole focus is in danger of becoming paper-driven. The goalposts keep shifting – making it difficult to keep up with the latest rules.

As VET is a national goal on the education agenda, there have been some suggestions that the inclusion of VET in the programs of all schools might become mandated. This would fail to recognise the diversity in school populations and put at risk the character of some of our schools. It is a pity that there is the thought that all schools have to be the same. Parents deserve a choice when it comes to the school where their children are to be educated.

Growth, Development and Effectiveness of VET in preparing Students for Post-school Options.

This Association would like to see the attaining of **generic** skills needed for 21st Century living and working encouraged in school programs. From the point of view of sustainability, VET programs in schools will succeed if they are about generic skills. In our experience, industry and small business also wants to encourage the attaining of generic skills in schools. They often prefer to teach specific skills in the workplace.

Having said that, there is also a place for the learning of specific skills in many VET courses in the post-compulsory years and certainly VET qualifications, gained at school, are assisting some students into further education or positions in the workplace.

Since the introduction of Curriculum Framework courses in final year secondary school certification, many independent schools have seen a marked increase in the number of students taking VET subjects. Currently it is difficult to establish how effective these courses are in preparing students for post-school options. However it is clear that some students having taken these courses, have gone into vocational areas that they otherwise would not have considered. Many students who intend to study at university, see the benefits for part-time employment while studying at university.

Many of our schools provide training in hospitality, some are equipped with industry standard kitchens where students work in real-life catering situations. These courses are always popular with students because they can see the value of them for part-time work in their transition from school to post-school life. They also enjoy the communication with adults that such opportunities provide.

Offering a broad curriculum provides students with opportunities to experience whatever interests them. As students takes VET courses they begin to understand the relevance and practical application of “regular” subjects. They also enjoy learning outside the classroom, working with adults, seeing who is successful in happy in their work, and using them as role models.

Range, Structure, Resourcing and Delivery Issues

AHISA is interested in the education of **all** Australian students. Adequate and equal funding in both the public and private sectors is critical and it needs to be sufficient to provide long-term assistance. Much of the support at present is merely seed funding. Lack of financial support to mount VET programs is one of the chief inhibiting factors to the success of VET in schools. It is disappointing when schools face so many obstacles to their efforts to make these opportunities available to their students.

Students in independent schools would benefit greatly from having access to the same resources as those in the government schools.

Often State Governments discriminate against students from non-government schools by charging them greatly increased fees (in comparison with students from government schools) to attend the same VET courses, as their fellow students from government schools. Hence attending VET courses at TAFE or with private providers is outside the scope of some of our students.

Parents are penalised because their children attend non-government schools.

This is a shocking injustice.

Some external programs can offer a better industry perspective as well as trainers with a depth of experience in the industry. Specialist equipment is more readily available. However, as stated before, buying TAFE packages, a relatively easy way to include VET offerings for many schools, comes at a high cost to those in independent schools.

Many parents have commented on the positive effect VET programs have had on their children. However there are some parents who need to be persuaded of the value of vocational education. In many schools, parents' perception is that the achievement of academic success is the expected goal for their children, no matter what interests the student may have. The challenge is to have vocational learning valued by parents, employers, the wider community and at all levels of education.

School-based Programs

The popularity of school-based VET courses at some schools has led to a variety of courses being offered with some creative timetabling approaches. Often courses are run outside of traditional school hours allowing more students to access them. One example is in the hospitality area where coursework often occurs at night. Sometimes work placements occur in vacation times. In many cases, one day of the week is spent at work, the other four days at school.

Our members have found that in the main, generic skills, necessary for life in the 21st Century, are best taught in school-based programs. Information and Communications Technology (ICT) is an excellent example. It is a pity that schools are usually only allowed certification to Level 2. Many of our students (especially in laptop schools) have much better ICT skills than this level when they reach their final year at school.

Resourcing limits breadth of offerings at schools – the cost of equipment and materials and number of staff required for these essentially practical programs, makes offering a course for a few students, expensive. Organisational constraints are also a difficulty; co-ordinating timetables can be a nightmare, especially with a segmented curriculum.

Some schools have become “niche market” schools, schools that specialize in a particular aspect of vocational education. (One example is The Hamilton and Alexandra

College in Victoria which is highly regarded as being Victoria's "Horse School".) Resourcing of this sort of school can be very costly. The success of this sort of school can often be traced to the drive of senior people in the school and the development of close links with the local community and local employers. True partnerships develop where the school employs sessional lecturers from this group of people, who in turn provide work placements for students. Staffing is critical because a person who is a driving force may move on and the program may falter.

Steps need to be taken to institutionalise successful programs; documentation is important as is appropriate flexible support structures. There needs to be an increased sharing of knowledge and of practice and a communication network set up to enable educational leaders in this field to share their expertise of what works.

Community partnerships are wonderful – but very time-consuming and often come with problems. There is always the problem of finding enough appropriate placements for workplace learning that is part of many school-based programs and they require much time to supervise adequately. And when placements can be found, independent schools in some states have difficulty with the availability of insurance. While government schools are covered by Treasury, independent schools are not. An example is the difficulty Catholic schools in NSW are having, finding a new insurer for work placements.

Some schools are heavily involved in VET, seeing it as a valuable way of allowing all students to develop their potential. Other schools see it as all too difficult and would like to see the whole exercise of offering specific skills VET courses go over to TAFE institutions.

An Example of Best Practice - Structured Workplace Learning

Structured Workplace Learning is supported by small business as a relevant way of teaching generic workplace skills.

The Cluster or Co-operative Method, as used in some states especially by some Catholic and Independent Schools, works extremely well.

For a method of delivery of a VET program to be economically sustainable, Principals need to understand and support the program and it needs to be cost neutral, at least in the first year or two.

The success of a Cluster or Co-operative centres on

- The support of the Principals of the schools concerned leading the way in instigating the changes in the school programme to allow for VET students
- An excellent co-ordinator, employed by the Cluster, who has great communicating and negotiating skills
- A committed VET person/teacher in each of the schools
- An excellent data-base of "employers" to which many of the parents of the schools in the Cluster belong and
- The adhering to the attitudes and values espoused by the schools, by the students.

The Pre-service and Professional Development of Teachers

It is important that **all** teachers are encouraged to develop an understanding of vocational education and to acquire skills to help their students to attain generic workplace skills for they are indeed skills required of active citizens of the 21st Century. Pre-service teacher training and professional development of staff in schools should include a study of these issues.

Teachers need to commence their professional life with a knowledge of how to differentiate curriculum and assessment to meet the educational needs of **all** students. There should be much more pre-service training done in schools with quality teachers, than in lectures in teacher training institutions. Working with students in practical situations must be part of their pre-service training. Both Commonwealth and State Governments should push for a change in teacher training.

Sometimes schools find it difficult to recruit teachers with both educational and work skills qualifications together with a values-based approach appropriate to a particular independent school.

The professional development of teachers in VET seems to be a significant problem. Scholarships or study grants could be made available to release teachers working specifically in the VET area so that they could visit schools exhibiting good practice, participate in courses at tertiary institutions, attend conferences and the like. This would be of especial benefit to those teaching in remote areas.

Provisions for prior learning should be recognised and credit given in the certification of teachers of VET.

It is also important for VET teachers to be able to update their industry skills. However it should be done on a real needs basis. Sometimes this updating is overstated and can be a waste of time especially for already over-worked teachers. According to anecdotal evidence, “teachers’ work experience” in some States is often as much a waste of time as some “students’ work experience” is. Employers are often embarrassed by the expertise of teachers coming into their business houses supposedly to learn industry skills that they already have! Most employers do not want to be involved with the professional development of teachers although many are pleased to provide work-shadowing opportunities.

VET Co-ordination is an entire field of study in itself. There is much work to be done in this area. The position of a VET Co-ordinator is extremely complex, a position of vast responsibility and increased workload in today’s schools. There is a lack of recognition of this complex role by other staff in schools and even by some principals.

The Impact of VET on other Programs

Our members are pleased to offer the option of VET studies in the post-compulsory years but emphasise that it is a **choice** of programs that they want maintained. To add VET as a compulsory component would overcrowd what is already a very busy curriculum and could lead to a dilution of the academic curriculum. Most of our schools currently have a curriculum with enough choice to allow for the development of the generic and some specific skills required in the world of work, lifelong learning and also being well prepared for tertiary study. More flexible timetabling would facilitate a wider choice of programs but limited funding does not always allow that to happen.

The promotion of these courses to students and competition between courses can often lead to problems between staff. There is often an unwillingness on the part of the school community to understand that VET courses require different attitudes to timetabling and

the amount of teacher time required for the administration aspects. Without effective handling of these aspects, the courses can fail. Often other teachers do not understand the role of the VET Co-ordinator.

Resulting Qualifications and the Pattern of Industry Acceptance.

A conflict that causes problems is that although the qualifications are national, each State treats them differently. This leads to different standards being acceptable in different States.

Added to this is the fact that some people in industry really think that VET should be left to TAFE and not be done in school. However some schools are reporting an increasingly positive response from parents, students, workplace and employers.

Certificate Level 2 is an industry qualification that fits into the AQTF and is nationally recognised. However industry expectations that the maximum level that a school can achieve in any VET program is Level 2 has many challengers.

The AQTF compliance requirements can be cumbersome. A compliance audit can result in a huge number of staff hours preparing minutiae of details and policies to satisfy the audit. This level of bureaucracy results in schools being much more accountable for a handful of students doing hospitality and trade maths for example, than for the great majority of students entering tertiary study. The whole process has been taken over by over-zealous public servants addicted to paperwork and regulations. Many schools are opting out of VET subjects as a result of this stress.

Effective parent-school, community-school partnerships

Many schools consider it advantageous to use as many opportunities as possible to have parents connect with the school, to take a real interest in, and learn about their children's education. The vocational learning experiences provide an ideal opportunity for teachers, parents and the community to work together in partnership, with a genuine sharing of resources and decision-making. The general community can provide opportunities for our students in the world of work. They can also provide the additional adult links that school children need as they learn of their world.

Conclusion

VET offers a breadth and alternative pathway of applied learning that students find relevant in today's world, Students often comment that their VET time is a rich and rewarding part of their life at school, impacting positively on other parts of their school program. When faced with a balanced program of academic and VET studies, they can cope with one because of the stimulation of the other. In fact VET has been shown to impact positively on Pastoral Care programs in our schools.

If Australian students are to make the most of their vocational learning opportunities while at school, they deserve the unqualified support of the Australian government. If the Government really wants to encourage and increase vocational learning in schools, then it must support those schools that are willing to implement appropriate programs. Principals and teachers cannot do it alone.

This inquiry is a step in the right direction, because there is a need to recognise teachers of VET who are struggling with the administrative overload pressed on them by all the bureaucratic paperwork in what has become a paper-driven approach rather than an

outcomes-based approach. There is a feeling that no-one understands or cares about the people who work with these students in the classroom/workplace.

As one Tasmanian teacher said – “In the long term the sustainability of VET will be reflected in the quality of classroom delivery, and the development and resourcing of literature, materials and mentors, both in the classroom and the workplace, who can provide the necessary insight to a second generation of VET teachers.”

If Vocational Learning is to succeed, and we would like it to succeed because we believe that it satisfies many students’ needs, there must be much more support given to Principals and the teachers in their schools.

Authorised and submitted by

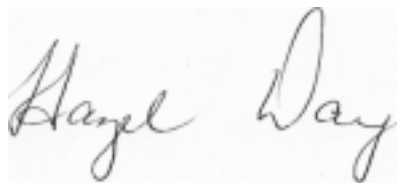
Chair of the Association of Heads of Independent Schools of Australia

Ms Noelene Horton

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Prepared by the Executive Officer

Hazel Day

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Hazel Day". The signature is written in a cursive style and is set against a light grey rectangular background.

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