

## **House of Representatives Inquiry into VET in Schools 2003**

*Invited submission by Erica Smith, Faculty of Education, Charles Sturt University*

The submission is based on the findings of research projects undertaken while at Charles Sturt University and University of South Australia, and my experience as the Executive Director of the Wholesale Retail and Personal Services (WRAPS) ITAB in South Australia from late 2000-early 2002. The views expressed are my own.

It is about a year since I studied the VET in schools literature in any detail and hence other submissions may be more up to date in some areas.

### **Range, structure, resourcing and delivery of VET in schools**

Rapid growth of VET in schools has been such that latest figures show that 40% of Year 11 and 12 students are now doing VET programs. Our research, and others', shows that it is generally the less academically-inclined students who study these programs. VET in schools is also more common in government schools than non-government schools.

The relatively high proportion of students studying VET means that it is now a mainstream option instead of a pioneering activity. This means that VET in schools is in the process of 'shifting gear' from a development phase when the enthusiasm of individuals carried it along, to becoming a normal part of the school curriculum. The recent announcement of the abolition of ECEF is perhaps a signal of this.

School based new apprenticeships (SBNAs) have also grown phenomenally, aided in some cases by special subsidies. My recent study of SBNAs (the research was carried out in late 2001) showed that most students' experiences of SBNAs was positive. The report highlighted a few areas of concern:

- SBNAs were concentrated in the same industries as ordinary part-time student jobs, although not to the same extent
- SBNAs seemed to be working low numbers of hours to fit in around school, and were under some pressure to use their school holidays to 'make up' training or work hours
- There were some quality problems with off the job training, and some evidence of poor linkage between off the job training and work
- A few students saw SBNAs as a 'training course' or a 'program' rather than a job.

In addition a concern of mine is the fate of SBNAs who come to dislike, or are treated badly, in their workplaces, especially where they need the senior school qualification attached to the SBNA. Group Training Organisations are valuable in assisting SBNAs with workplace difficulties and generally in managing SBNAs.

Most studies, including mine, show that there are a number of timetabling issues associated with VET in schools including SBNAs. Some schools may allocate special days, or afternoons, for students to do their placements or work, but others do not. It is easier in schools like many in Queensland where a greater proportion of students do VET or SBNAs. Where students are in the minority it is harder for them to have their timetable appropriately adjusted.

Some of the issues which are of concern to those running VET in schools programs include

- Funding (as programs are expensive to run, and/or services of RTOs are expensive to purchase);
- Perceived inferiority of VET in schools in status to more academic programs;
- Need for a co-ordination service to arrange work placements. Schools and employers alike find this a useful service;
- Competition for placements among RTOs, schools and other educational institutions; and
- Placements have many other challenges, which are summarised in the following book which I co-authored. (The review covers placements in all sectors of education.)

Smith, E. & Harris, R. (2001). *Work placements in vocational education and training courses: Evidence from the cross-sectoral literature*. Adelaide: NCVET.

On the positive side, VET in schools has the following advantages.

- It is seen as more rigorous than work experience and employers generally prefer it to work experience;
- Students learn more than from work experience and find more linkages to school than with work experience;
- Some evidence suggests that VET in schools can aid retention of students including (but not only) students at risk;
- Less-academic students find that VET in schools programs validate their practical skills;
- VET in schools programs give access to a wider range of industries than part-time work including SBNAs;
- VET in schools programs allow students who would find it difficult to access paid part-time work to experience workplaces and improve their chances of finding work when they leave school;
- VET in schools programs can encourage students to enter industries which are unpopular with school-leavers and hence have severe skills shortages; and
- A natural progression is fostered by GTOs and other organisations from work experience to VET in schools to apprenticeships in some industries including those with skills shortages.

### *Teacher skills and teacher training*

State education systems have been under pressure to skill teachers up to deliver VET in schools and the rapid rise in VET in schools programs has made this difficult. Often teachers need to be able to teach in other curriculum areas as well, so the problem is quite complex. Charles Sturt University has developed a special program with DET NSW to train new VET in schools teachers and I am sure other universities and States have similar arrangements. These new teachers often come from an industry background which appears to be important for the quality of delivery.

To teach VET in schools well, teachers need an industry background and experience, as well as teaching expertise. To comply with the AQTF, these requirements need to be formalised; for example teachers need the appropriate vocational qualifications and a Certificate IV in Assessment and Workplace Training. The latter qualification, however, unless delivered by a high-quality RTO, will not actually be of a great deal of use, as many current assessment and compliance issues are not part of the Certificate

IV. However, the new Cert IV in Training & Assessment (due in 2004) will be much better.

Teachers of VET in schools need to be specially innovative to be able to utilise pedagogical practices that both fit expectations of a senior school program and expectations of a competency-based VET program.

#### *Other issues*

*Purpose of VET in schools.* I still feel that the purposes of VET in schools is not clearly articulated. Is it to develop skills? To ease the transition to work? To occupy the less academic while keeping them at school? To enable school-leavers to proceed to higher-level quals more quickly? Does this ambiguity need resolution or not?

*Transition to work.* The body of research I have done around transition to work shows that most students are ill-prepared for working life. I am not sure whether VET in schools has a role to play in rectifying this ‘problem’ or whether VET in schools should be seen as primarily a skills-based activity. Furthermore I am not sure that it is a ‘problem’ that should be owned by schools, or whether it is even a problem, as my recent NREC project on employability skills in novice workers showed that employers had good strategies for developing employability skills in raw recruits. (However some school-leavers need extra assistance for equity reasons). Perhaps some attention needs to be paid (and I am sure this is happening) to the role of careers teachers vis a vis VET in schools teachers

*Comparison among VET in schools, work experience and part-time work.* One of my studies found that, for school students, part-time work was viewed as the best learning environment, with work placements second and then work experience. However work experience had its own special value (career sampling etc); and part-time work could be problematic (although was usually not).

*VET in schools quals and subsequent employment prospects.* Anecdotally I have heard that having Cert II qualifications may make school-leavers less employable. This would apply only if they were looking for work in companies that liked to recruit employees as trainees, in order to access employment and/or user choice subsidies or for other reasons. I do not know if this has ever been empirically tested.

*The demise of State ITABs.* From my experience, State ITABs often worked closely with VET in schools teachers, providing information, advice, dissemination of new Training Packages, and staff development programs. I have no idea what will replace this form of support for VET in schools teachers and work placement co-ordinators.

#### **Differences between school-based programs and other VET courses**

There is a belief held by some that VET in schools programs are not as good as VET programs delivered in other contexts (eg TAFE, private RTOs, workplaces). To my knowledge (and I have not checked the literature lately) this belief has never been empirically tested, and this is an urgent need. I feel that some employers and employer groups may have their own reasons for arguing this point.

The question of ‘does industry accept a VET in schools qual?’ was sometimes raised when I was working in an ITAB, but I never managed to figure out what was meant by ‘accept’. Does it mean that employers, if choosing between two applicants with a Cert II in IT, would prefer the person who had done a traineeship to the person who had studied it in school? My feeling is that other factors would always affect a selection decision. I am not sure what else ‘acceptability’ means, unless it means that ITAB Boards might have a preference for employment-based programs (this was the case, for example, in retail when I worked with WRAPS).

#### *Comparison with other RTOs*

My feeling from having worked with VET in schools regions in SA, and from my research, is that there is no reason to believe that school-based VET is necessarily inferior to other VET. In any case many school VET students attend RTOs for their off-the-job training, so schools are only brokers rather than deliverers.

#### *Comparisons with employment-based programs*

There are well-documented shortcomings of on-the-job traineeships and it would be hard to weigh up the comparative advantages of a dubious on-the-job traineeship and a VET in schools program which did not have much work placement content. They are different but I would not like to say which was better.

#### *SBNAs*

My research found that SBNAs provide the best of both worlds, ie employment experience and off-the-job training. However both on-the-job SBNAs and SBNAs where the off-the-job training was delivered by schools scored poorly when compared with SBNAs’ views of TAFE or other RTOs (TAFE scored the highest).

#### *Adaptation of Training Packages to form school quals*

Training Packages have made it easier to provide national comparability of VET in schools programs. The two States with which I am familiar (and I am sure, other States and Territories) have ‘topped up’ Training Package quals with other, more academic, content, to create some sort of parity between a VET in schools qual and other senior secondary qualifications. This is quite legitimate but reinforces the point made earlier that teachers need to have skills in two quite different forms of pedagogical and assessment practices.

### **Accessibility and effectiveness of vocational education for indigenous students**

I do not have much expertise in this area but a few points may be helpful although have probably been made much better by others:

- VET programs need to start before Year 11 to be of much use for many indigenous students;
- VET in schools is a good way for indigenous students to access workplaces as they generally seem to need more help than others in this activity, often lacking family members who can help, or having a tendency otherwise to access only workplaces where family members or friends work; and
- In one of my projects we found that indigenous students were keener than others to have their part-time jobs ‘count’ for school purposes, and hence may be prime candidates for SBNAs.