

SUBMISSION
TO
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
INQUIRY INTO

VOCATIONAL EDUCATION IN SCHOOLS

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NOTES	<p>The President and members of the AFSEA Management Committee wish to express thanks to the House of Representatives Committee for accepting this submission.</p> <p>It is an additional wish that AFSEA be considered as a source of further detailed information during the course of this inquiry, should an opportunity for “face to face” representation or other dialogue be possible.</p>

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Inquiry into
Vocational Education in Schools

Conducted by the

House of Representatives
Standing Committee on Education and Training

FROM

Australian Federation of Special Education
Administrators

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1.0 Introduction

VET programs assume great significance at the point of transition from school to post school options for all students. Effective transition programs are based on sound research data that has demonstrated that considerable time is involved in the development of such programs. For students with special needs, transition programs must be commenced well in advance of the time of leaving school. This will, in many cases, fall across most if not all of the years of secondary education.

Looking ahead at transition programs in the USA, Halpern (1999), identified six areas for focus among that country’s educators: (a) helping students to assume responsibility for their own education (b) identifying and developing improved tools and programs for delivering transition-related instruction, (c) enhancing teacher skills for implementing transition programs and providing them with opportunities to use these skills, (d) involving parents more effectively in the education of their children, (e) facilitating the replication of and utilisation of proven programs and (f) doing whatever we need to do to enhance the integration of secondary special education and transition programs within the overall structure of general education reform.

AFSEA would endorse these areas as applicable for the Australian context but would go further and advocate for a more directed co-ordination of VET programs at both the secondary and tertiary levels as an integrated mechanism for achieving a number of these transition goals.

AFSEA would like to offer for consideration, the following general points with respect to the contemporary and future educational environment, particularly pertaining to the purpose, delivery and outcomes of Vocational Education. There is an emphasis upon the implications for students with atypical educational needs including those with significant disability, however, many of the arguments apply equally to all students.

- a. It is non-negotiable, indeed a legal requirement, that all students have equitable access to all programs within the framework of the full range of basic human rights and responsibilities.
- b. There is a commonality of experience across Australian states with respect to the participation of students with special educational needs in this area. That experience has raised concerns at certain lost opportunities for the complex target student cohort of interest to AFSEA.
- c. Vocational Education has evolved, for the twenty-first century, to a much broader and complex concept than in previous times. All education is, in part, a preparation for a vocation, as it is preparation for the full range of post school options. These include, productive citizenship, individual growth to independence, self actualisation and social participation in and contribution to the economic wealth of the community. This participation is the legitimate expectation of all students with special needs.
- d. This evolution has floundered, to a certain extent, for the lack of a clear vision and potential of the relationship between academic excellence in basic, universal, education and vocational preparation. It has been, and unfortunately remains still, a dichotomous, competitive debate, such that there is competition for acceptance, prestige and resources that is counterproductive. With appropriate leadership and vision greater synergy can be attained and the complementary nature of the academic and the vocational can be exploited.
- e. Students with special needs and their advocates and educators have recognised that there is particular advantage in the more directed, practical pedagogy associated with the “traditional” content of VET programs **even though this participation may not necessarily lead directly to a formal qualification and/or career path in the usual sense.**
- f. It is further contended that the cohort of concern to AFSEA is undergoing significant qualitative change with respect to learning characteristics and needs and that, for adequate VET outcomes to be realised for the percentage of students able to use programs as a basis for formal vocational preparation, a better match of learning environments and learning facilitators is critical.
- g. New learning environments are not reflected in changing and adapted VET programs and processes for **all** students to the extent necessary to meet both individual and societal needs.
- h. There is growing incapacity of VET providers to meet the twin demands of specific expertise in “special needs” and the rising standards for the new industrial and commercial workforce. The demand for increasing industry experience and qualifications is often limiting instead of enhancing learning experiences for students with special needs.
- i. There is continuing value with respect to “ambit outcomes” for a cohort of students who may only participate without achieving all formal credentialed outcomes.
- j. Denial of this opportunity is discriminatory and therefore not acceptable, however, AFSEA contends that such participation is possible with the concerted and collective capacity of the education community generally.

2.0 Sufficient and Necessary Conditions **for** **the Future Success of VET in Schools**

The conditions listed hereunder are considered essential to be created and enacted simultaneously. Previous good intentions have often failed to deliver outcomes for lack of this ecological approach. Leadership from an agreed direction, such as from the Commonwealth Government will likewise be essential.

Condition 1.

An Australia wide commitment to the shared vision of full inclusion of students with special needs (including disabilities) into VET programs. (*Note: This referral to “inclusion” is not essentially a consideration of student placement in a particular settings; it is a philosophical understanding together with a commitment to deliver needs based learning environments for all students without exception*)

Condition 2.

A Commonwealth Government led support for establishment and development of **multiple models of flexibility** incorporating the following dimensions:

- Time for course undertaking and completion
- Purposes of VET
- Student Learning Support
- Valid and Purposeful Credentialling
- Creation, maintenance and evolution of learning settings

(Note: The concept that “one size fits all” for any educational purpose involving the total range of students is illogical and impractical. VET in this context can serve multiple purposes that will have profound benefits for the individual student as well as for the broader community.

Condition 3.

A concerted Commonwealth Government led drive for **economies of scale**, avoidance of unnecessary duplication of resources, both human and physical, and a better integration of learning environments for VET purposes.

(Note: In other countries, e.g. the United Kingdom, specialised vocational centres of excellence have been developed to meet the tertiary needs of this group of students.)

Condition 4.

A commitment from Government to co-sponsor with Industry and Business Communities, the development of “new” vocational opportunities for persons with special needs particularly in areas where traditional employment opportunities have changed under the impact of rapid social and technological change.

Condition 5.

A system of tracking, monitoring and evaluation of VET outcomes for the various sub sets of the target population in such a way that particular need of students with special needs is maintained as a

comprehensive profile, reflecting the reality of a very diverse set of needs. This data then becomes the evidence base for future improvements and directions.

Condition 6.

A commitment to adequate financial resourcing with appropriate accountability for outcomes at the student level and for the specific tracking of expenditure of these resources to ensure accountability for expenditure at the system/school/program level.

Condition 7.

A system of responsive learning support structures provided by professional expertise matched to student learning need and meeting or exceeding Disability Standards in Education.

*(Note: With respect to teacher/instructor capacity to deliver existing and “new” VET programs for the future, the combination of generic industry skills and experience together with specific specialised instructional competency does not generally occur. Local needs will dictate the combinations required and local schools (particularly secondary and special schools) in all states need to develop joint training and credentialing capacity. This capacity requires a **resource incentive** for coordination but **not** an additional structure. The TAFE sector and the industry links through Boards is in existence and is the proper vehicle for this extended task. There is a classic “Catch 22” situation that has evolved whereby without the demand for the dual qualifications there is no incentive to meet supply)*

3.0 Summary of Recommendations

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

It is recommended that

1. VET programs be available on a choice basis, for all students with special educational needs including disabilities, as an educational right of choice
2. Such programs be provided in the most appropriate local learning environment taking into account economies of scale, existing facilities and student need
3. Dual qualifications for teachers/instructors be provided at a school based level where suitable professional development to meet both industry
4. VET programs be viewed as serving multiple purposes for general educational outcomes as well as for specific work preparation
5. Flexibility of course and program delivery be fully resourced and recognised to be as flexible as necessary across the dimensions of time, purpose, place. Student support and credentialing

Second Term of Reference: The difference between school-based and other vocational education programs and the resulting qualifications, and the pattern of industry acceptance of school based programs

6. There be a “seamless-ness” between school based and other community/education/industry settings
7. Following #6 above, there be no artificial differences created between school based and other settings given that all settings are potentially suitable learning environments for vocational purposes provided they meet learning needs and produce appropriate outcomes.
8. Notwithstanding #6 and #7 above, the school setting for students with special educational needs may be the most appropriate initial basis for successful transition to post school options
9. Genuinely collaborative Industry or TAFE jurisdiction be recognised through sponsorship to operate with school based settings to achieve valid and reliable training and outcomes
10. Barriers to a more flexible recognition of prior industry experiences for teachers and instructors without involving “over zealous” and inappropriate standards be removed
11. School based VET programs particularly be subjected to rigorous evaluation and data recording requirements to ensure that evidence is generated to further the development of VET programs

Third Term of Reference: Vocational education in new and emerging industries

12. Research be encouraged, perhaps through competitive grants programs to seek urgently the implications for students with severe disabling conditions participating more in VET programs in new and emerging industries
13. Research be undertaken to identify barriers to the creation of appropriate “work skills” to match the capacities of this target group
14. Industry be given incentives to revisit concepts of work within the framework of the social capital available from this group and that new models of supported employment be determined for the most disadvantaged students

Fourth Term of Reference: The accessibility and effectiveness of vocational education for indigenous students

15. Students who are both indigenous and who, in addition, have special educational needs be recognised as having a unique set of circumstances that are addressed
16. All the recommendations for non –indigenous students be considered as applicable to indigenous students for the purposes of this submission

Concluding Comments

In the MCEETYA statement(2) entitled “Stepping Forward: Improving Pathways for Young People the “Vision” statement made an unequivocal commitment to support the journeys of that group of young people for whom the “journey” is “more difficult and challenging”.

The document spoke to the “emotional, cultural, physical and learning barriers” faced by this cohort and the “social, economic and locational factors” that impact negatively.

As a response to this, AFSEA is mindful of the imperative to ensure that students with special needs are “as caught up” as everyone else with the prevailing educational trends of the time. Educational reforms, in the literal sense of the word, are to be of benefit to all. Adaptations and improvements to VET programs now and in the future are to be applicable to students with special needs, particularly those with disabilities.

AFSEA wishes to record its appreciation for the support given by the Inquiry’s Secretariat and offers to provide further detailed responses if requested.

4.0 References

- (1) Halpern, A.S. (1999) Transition: Is it time for another rebottling? Paper presented at the 1999 Annual OSEP Project Directors’ Meeting, Washington D.C.

- (2) MCEETYA (2001) Stepping Forward –Improving Pathways for all Young People Ministerial Declaration, Melbourne.