

Submission to the House of Representatives inquiry into Vocational Education and Training for School Students

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Preamble

On Wednesday 2 July in Wagga Wagga, I had the opportunity to observe part of the Inquiry panel's hearings with local VET for Schools personnel. I was there in support of the Coordinator of VET in Schools programs provided by the Wagga Wagga campus of the Riverina Institute for local schools. She (Judy Gissing) is one of 12 Coordinators I supervise across the Riverina region and she was able to comprehensively discuss operational matters concerning VET programs for school students.

Following her presentation I listened to the input from Wagga Wagga regional secondary school principals and District Office personnel. I have the opportunity to meet with them regularly and engage in collaborative activity to further the scope and quality of VET provision to school students. There were, however, some matters raised in this latter session, or not touched upon, that I would like to discuss with a view to aiding the panel's deliberations.

1. The place of VET in Schools in stimulating a new perception of senior secondary education

Experience drawn from around the Riverina region has shown that there is much to be gained in stimulating a community wide debate by introducing VET courses into the senior secondary curriculum. However, the benefit to be gained appears contingent upon such factors as:

- The involvement of parents and community members at an early stage in a debate about the purposes of the senior years as preparation for transition rather than as a continuation of the style of learning found in the compulsory years of schooling
- The facilitation (or mandating) of collaboration between schools and the VET sector
- The expansion of debate about the nature of and interrelationships among the 3 aspects of VET in schools (namely: accredited vocational courses, preparation for careers, enterprise education).

Open debate about such issues does not usually occur and decisions on what VET courses should be offered and why is usually a matter of in-school consideration. This can lead to the spread of ill informed perspectives that do not do justice to the value and applicability of alternatives to the traditional academic senior curriculum. Support for a broader involvement can be readily found; refer for example to Principle 5 in the Policy Directions document of the MCEETYA New Framework for VET in Schools, namely:

'Vocational Education is a shared responsibility in the community and fosters collaboration between education, business, government and community interests.' (P. 11)

Where communities do become more involved the opportunities for students to experience options both in the content and style of senior school tend to be well received. An excellent example of this is the Link Day Program operating in Griffith, NSW. (for any information please contact Trevor Brand at the Griffith District Office of the NSW Department of Education and Training on 0269 618100)

2. What do employers want?

One interesting issue that was alluded to by witnesses appearing before the panel concerned the balance between nationally recognised competency based training and the development of employability skills. Employers often point out that their preference is for the latter and that school students who go on to become employees can gain workplace competencies in other ways. Indeed, as we enter this new millenium we are being challenged to consider the implications of a move towards a 'knowledge based economy' that may put less emphasis in the skills we have worked so hard to map since the late 1980s under the national training agenda. A relevant reference here can be made to the 1990 BVET review of literature on the Knowledge Based Economy:

'Official thinking by OECD as well as governments of industrialised nations posits knowledge as the main driver of growth, wealth creation and employmentwith learning, skills enhancement, innovation and enterprise as the cornerstones of the new economy' (P. 4)

The question must be asked as to whether employers believe an employability focus around generic needs (as described in the ACCI report of 2002) should be the major target for all potential employees, or is it simply that they believe that school students will not adequately get a sound grasp of national training package competencies via school based VET programs?

If the latter is the case, does this reflect a need to strengthen ties between the secondary and VET sectors such that the credibility of VET provision to schools is enhanced. In some states where there have been Departmental amalgamations there has been the belief that this would result in 'seamless cross-sectoral transitions' and the maximisation of the quality and efficiency of VET delivery to school students. The NSW experience would be that such enhancements take time and succeed best where the consumer becomes sufficiently informed and empowered to demand what the rhetoric promised.

3. The excessive influence of tertiary considerations on the promotion and choice of VET options

An issue of concern is the emphasis that is often placed on those courses that have a capacity to be recognised for tertiary admission scores (in NSW as the UAI rank). This added value can be important for some students however there can sometimes be a neglect of the value of VET outcomes where the course is not recognised against tertiary entry. Both parents and school teachers sometimes become overly focussed on the score rather than on a students preferred career outcomes and the many ways of reaching that outcome. Furthermore, it is clear that there are those in schools, even among careers advisers, who have only a rudimentary understanding of articulation and credit transfer. The result of this as observed in this region, is that the widest range of available VET courses is not always promoted to students.

4. Quality issues

From the matters raised above it can be seen that the industry, community and VET sector representatives have a legitimate interest in the quality of VET delivery to school students. Industry is naturally conscious of what kind of employees it seeks and how generic and specific skills fit in. Parents and students want to be sure that course outcomes are valid, recognisable and transferable. For VET providers such as the Riverina Institute, it is in their interests to support and assist the delivery of VET for school students in a way that is comparable to and complementary to their own delivery profile. This is good for perceptions of VET generally and supports ongoing efforts to multiply and promote lifelong learning pathways across all sectors.

5. Student continuity data

An area of concern that was not specifically addressed in the panel session was the need for analysis of student participation data at the local and national level. Whilst data on overall participation and discipline enrolments are readily available (e.g. the AESOC paper 5.1, 16 June 2003 entitled 'National Data on Participation in VET in Schools Programs for the 2002 School Year'), there are gaps in data analysis that are inhibiting the design and implementation of VET courses for schools. These gaps relate to:

- The extent to which students drop VET courses at the end of year 11
- Which VET courses perform best in terms of retention and why
- To what extent are course offerings adequate to meet the interests of girls and boys
- The extent to which students take post school courses in the same discipline areas as their VET in school enrolments
- The extent to which students prefer to do VET courses at their own school rather than at a neighbouring school or VET provider

These are issues that need analysis and currently both local and statewide tools and protocols to collect such data are non existent or inadequate.