

Ref: M00469

04 May 2007

Committee Secretary

Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education Committee

Department of the Senate

P.O. Box 6100

Parliament House

Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Secretary



**SERVICE SKILLS**  
AUSTRALIA

**The Industry Skills Council for  
the Service Industries**

**Service Industries Skills Council**

**ABN 37 107 591 864**

**Level 10, 171 Clarence St**

**Sydney NSW 2000**

**GPO Box 4194**

**Sydney NSW 2001**

**Tel: +61 2 8243 1200**

**Fax: +61 2 8243 1299**

**[www.serviceskills.com.au](http://www.serviceskills.com.au)**

**RE: Inquiry into the Academic Standards of School Education**

Please find attached Service Skills Australia's response to the Senate Inquiry into the Academic Standards of School Education.

Service Skills Australia would like to thank the Committee for the opportunity to provide our views to this Inquiry and we look forward to the Report which will follow.

We would be happy to provide you with additional information should you make such a request, or to attend and present in person.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jeanette Allen". The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line above the first few letters.

Jeanette Allen

CEO



**SERVICE****SKILLS**  
A U S T R A L I A

RESPONSE TO  
Senate Inquiry into the Academic Standards  
Of School Education

27 April 2007

## Introduction

Service Skills Australia wishes to thank the Committee for the opportunity to comment on the extent to which School Education prepares young people for the workforce. Our comments are in relation to the delivery and assessment of Vocational Education and Training (VET). Our evidence for this submission comes from our extensive consultation with industry, peak employer bodies, training providers and trade unions carried out as part of the core roles and responsibilities of an Industry Skills Council.

Service Skills Australia is the national Industry Skills Council for the Australian service industries. Industry Skills Councils (ISCs) are funded by the Australian Government through the Department of Education, Science and Training. Their role under their funding agreement, is to develop, maintain and implement Training Packages in line with research and market intelligence on current and emerging skill needs, and VET system priorities.

Service Skills Australia represents the interests of almost 640,000 businesses across sectors including retail and wholesale, sport, fitness, community recreation, outdoor recreation, travel, tours, meetings and events, accommodation, restaurants and catering, caravans, hairdressing, beauty, floristry, community pharmacy and funeral services. Collectively, they contribute approximately 15% of Australia's GDP and employ in excess of 2.9 million people with an additional 1.5 million volunteers.

## Vocational Education and Training in Schools

Vocational Education and Training (VET) involves competency-based learning focusing on current and likely future jobs, duties and tasks within an occupation or industry. There are a number of pathways that students may choose, in order to achieve a VET qualification or competency, such as Australian Apprenticeships, Group Training, Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and VET in Schools.

The term VET in Schools is broadly used to describe the training provided to a student population which is still at school and which forms part of their normal course of study. It includes such things as School-based Australian Apprenticeships (SbAAs), where students enter into a training agreement with the school and an employer that provides that student with training on-the-job and off-the-job. VET in Schools also includes arrangements for students to undertake training off-campus with Registered Training Organisations (RTOs). Vocational courses conducted in classroom and taught by classroom teachers are also considered to be VET in Schools.

Many students undertaking post-compulsory education (Years 11 and 12) choose a course of study in a preferred vocational area, to prepare themselves for entry into the workforce. A 2005 report for NSW DET <sup>1</sup> suggests that as many as 35% of NSW HSC students are studying at least one VET in Schools subject. Service Skills Australia believes that there are vocational benefits in students studying these subjects, with increased exposure to career choices and further training options, potential for on-the-job training and experience and the development of the requisite technical skills that industry demand.

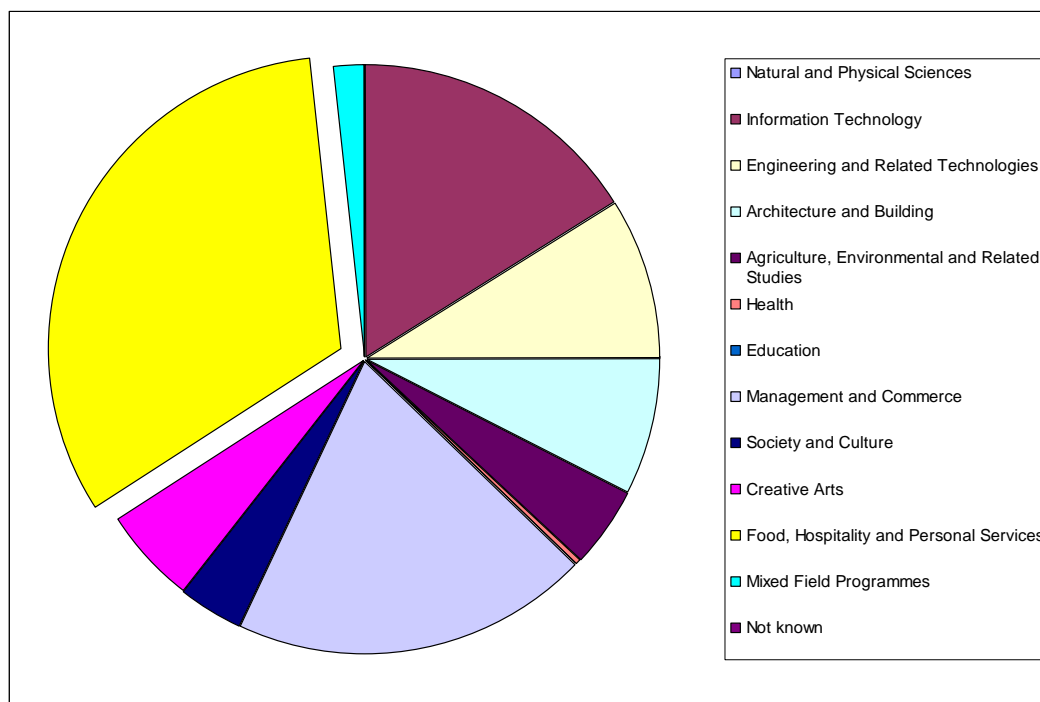
---

<sup>1</sup> *Destination and Satisfaction Survey of 2004 HSC VET Students in New South Wales* – Centre for Postcompulsory Education & Lifelong Learning, University of Melbourne for NSW Department of Education and Training – October 2005

Some doubt remains, however, about the motivation of some students in choosing VET in Schools subjects. There remains a perception among students, which the system may reinforce, that VET in Schools subjects are less challenging than traditional academic subjects. Therefore, there is the potential for some to choose VET subjects for ease rather than any genuine vocational interest. We believe that more informed careers guidance, that focuses on students' strengths and interests, and that gives equal value to Vocational Education and University entry, may go some way to correcting these perceptions.

Service Skills Australia believes that VET in Schools should deliver 'real' vocational outcomes for students and skilled workers for industry. The NSW DET report found that "VET in Schools programs contributed proportionally twice as many graduates to apprenticeships and traineeships than did non-VET programs, supporting the view that VET steers school completers away from unskilled, low-paid occupations and towards jobs (including apprenticeships and traineeships) with better career prospects."

Interestingly, the 2004 NSW Destination and Satisfaction survey reported a relatively poor percentage of students in Food, Hospitality and Personal Services fields of study entering the same field of study following completion of their Senior Secondary Certificate. Only 14.9% of that cohort continued studying in this area, which brings into question the motivation of students choosing these subjects, the effectiveness of schools in giving accurate careers guidance and in preparing them for further vocational training or employment in that vocational area. While these figures are for just one field of study, the graph <sup>2</sup> below, shows that in 2004, 32.6% of the NSW VET in Schools student population were enrolled in Food, Hospitality and Personal Services fields of study. This is by far, the greatest density of any discipline studied by NSW VET in Schools subjects.



2004 NSW HSC VET Fields of Study Enrolments

<sup>2</sup> VET in Schools, 2004 – National Centre for Vocational Education Research – July 2005.

Coupled with better careers guidance, students should have the opportunity to enrol in a VET in Schools subject that gives them exposure to a range of industries, this may better prepare students to select appropriate subjects (vocational and/or academic) and pathways in grades 11 and 12. Such a course could be made up of competencies that could have applicability in a number of vocational areas.

### **Service Skills Australia's VET in School Principles**

The effective implementation of VET in Schools is hampered by inconsistent approaches adopted by state/territory education systems, which discourage industry involvement and in some cases impact upon quality. There is wide variation in many components of VET in Schools, including requirements for structured workplace learning, credit towards university entrance, and ability to attain a Training Package (Australian Qualifications Framework) qualification.

As with other aspects of VET, there must be a greater emphasis on national consistency and accountability in this area.

Service Skills Australia has developed a set of principles for the delivery of VET in Schools, designed to facilitate arrangements that support industry acceptance of VET programs and outcomes. These are intended to instil confidence among employers that qualifications attained through a VET in Schools pathway reasonably equate to the same qualification attained through another VET pathway. These VET in Schools principles include:

1. VET in Schools programs must demonstrate comparable standards of outcomes and delivery with other VET pathways;
2. All VET in Schools programs should be based upon industry-agreed qualifications;
3. VET in Schools should be appropriately recognised and counted fully for the purposes of university entrance scores;
4. Career counselling should be examined to provide an enhanced industry focus;
5. Fair workload for students.

#### **1. VET in Schools programs must demonstrate comparable standards of outcome and delivery with other VET pathways**

There is some concern exhibited by employers within our industries that different VET pathways are not leading to equivalent outcomes. This is of particular importance in relation to VET in Schools. Under VET in Schools, students may be able to access training via either a school-based Apprenticeship (tied to paid employment), or an institutional program that is managed entirely by the school system (not involving paid employment).

Employers have expressed concern that students who have gained Training Package qualifications through an institutional or non-traineeship VET in Schools pathway do not actually hold comparable skills to those with the same qualification, gained through an alternative pathway such as an Apprenticeship. Anecdotal evidence suggests that some employers, and some non-school RTOs, are reluctant to recognise Training Package qualifications attained via a VET in Schools program. These organisations cite experience with individuals who hold those qualifications, but are unable to perform the necessary skills in the workplace; the individual may be certified as competent, but they do actually not hold the requisite skills.

This suggests that there are a number of quality issues in relation to VET in Schools which must be addressed to ensure a perception by industry that this is a valid pathway leading to quality outcomes. Industry's specific concerns relate to:

- i. the sufficiency of structured workplace learning, and
- ii. schools' compliance with AQTF requirements and their capacity to conduct programs in accordance with the requirements of the Training Package.

These concerns over inadequate quality mechanisms and outcomes can contribute to a situation in which industry may regard VET in Schools qualifications with some scepticism, and will favour employment of individuals with qualifications achieved through other pathways, or individuals with no formal qualifications, rather than having to retrain someone who has been poorly trained.

*i. Structured workplace learning*

One of the key issues cited by industry has been the lack of appropriate structured workplace learning and workplace application of skills in some VET in Schools programs. Industry is of the view that successful completion of Training Package qualifications requires integrated on and off-the-job learning. In particular, industry stakeholders are concerned that all assessments are fair, valid, reliable and current, and that the standards and integrity of the Training Package are maintained.

Again, there are numerous inconsistencies across the states and territories, and between traineeship and non-traineeship delivery, in relation to the requirements around workplace learning in VET in Schools. These variations relate to the number of hours allocated to workplace learning, as well as the formal arrangements for establishing and monitoring structured workplace learning. Industry is concerned with both the quantity and quality of structured workplace learning.

In addition to the actual number of hours of workplace learning, there are key requirements in terms of the nature of workplace learning that need to be met to ensure that students gain real learning opportunities in the workplace. The key issue is that structured workplace learning is not simply normal work. It must involve genuine training across the full range of workplace operations outlined within the Training Package qualification.

A number of states allow school students' part-time or casual work to be counted towards work placement requirements. While Service Skills Australia supports this principle, where this occurs, it is necessary to ensure that these students are able to access structured workplace learning within their work, and are not simply confined to a narrow range of routine tasks.

Under current arrangements, students completing a school-based Australian Apprenticeship are covered by a training agreement. However, those completing non-traineeship VET in Schools programs are not covered by the same requirements. In some states, there is no requirement for the school to undertake monitoring of workplace learning and formal workplace assessment.

Service Skills Australia considers that all VET in Schools students must be covered by a signed training agreement which specifies the agreed training plan, provides for proper structured on and off job training and ensures equivalent educational outcomes and procedures for school students as for others undertaking the same certificate.

This agreement must also be resourced and monitored effectively. In practice, each student should have access to a designated person with appropriate expertise and adequate resources, who liaises between student/school/employer/RTO, co-ordinates on and off-the-job delivery and keeps all parties appropriately informed.

ii. *Compliance with AQTF requirements*

There is a clear need for regulation of all organisations delivering Training Package qualifications, to comply with the AQTF standards. Effective regulation and audit procedures are a key component in ensuring higher levels of industry confidence in the outcomes of training programs.

Industry strongly advocates that schools seeking to become RTOs undergo the same processes as any other organisation, and are subject to effective auditing and monitoring processes to ensure quality outcomes. This entails meeting infrastructure, equipment and human resource requirements, conducting programs in full accordance with Training Package requirements, and providing adequate support to students.

The implementation of the AQTF standards relating to the skills of teachers and assessors is of significant concern to industry. There is concern that some teachers delivering VET in Schools programs or assessing outcomes may hold little or no current, relevant industry experience. At present, few states provide specialised training for teachers involved in delivering VET in Schools. This is of particular concern when schools are delivering VET in Schools themselves; the risk is that the teacher is not adequately equipped to make the necessary linkages to the workplace, or to conduct effective industry-specific training and assessment.

Registration processes must be applied in a manner that adequately monitors compliance with the AQTF; in some situations, schools as RTOs are combined into clusters, and are therefore not audited and monitored individually. There is also some concern with the rigour of auditing practices applied to schools.

Where schools are not adequately equipped to meet AQTF requirements, delivery and assessment should be available through partnership arrangements with other Registered Training Organisations, with sufficient funding and resources made available to support this option.

2. All VET in Schools programs should be based upon industry-agreed qualifications

School-based VET programs, including school-based traineeships and apprenticeships, must be integrated into the broader industry-led vocational training system and not develop as a separate system.

As such, Training Package qualifications should form the core of all VET in Schools programs. The term 'VET in Schools' should only describe those programs which deliver competencies endorsed within the national training framework and provide credit towards a credential within the Australian Qualifications Framework. Other education about the world of work, which is not related to endorsed competency standards, should be regarded as part of general education and not as VET.

The specific Training Package qualifications available through a VET in Schools program should only be those which have been identified by industry as appropriate for this pathway. In relation to the service industries, these are specific entry-level programs that industry considers appropriate for delivery under a VET in Schools program. These qualifications are identified on the basis of industry structures and related skills needs, and their use ensures that the competency outcomes attained under VET in Schools programs are realistic, relevant and appropriate to the industry.

There have been numerous instances where various players within VET in Schools have sought to deliver qualifications and competencies that are not supported by industry for this pathway. The general argument proposed by educational authorities appears to be that the specified industry qualification is not of sufficient intellectual rigour to count toward a university entrance score, and that alternative qualifications should be offered, or additional content or examination processes

should be introduced. This points to a continued tension faced by students, between the achievement of industry-recognised VET qualifications and tertiary entrance.

Insofar as industry recognition is considered a significant outcome for students, the needs of industry must be addressed. It is essential that accountability is introduced into this area of the system, and that VET in Schools programs are defined and conducted in a manner which accurately reflects the needs and concerns of industry. State education systems therefore need to apply meaningful monitoring processes that take account of industry positions, and intervene into inappropriate arrangements where necessary.

### 3. VET in Schools should be appropriately recognised and counted fully for the purposes of university entrance scores

Service Skills Australia recommends that VET in Schools programs should complement key competency delivery, expand opportunities for senior secondary students and, as far as practicable, keep open the option of participation in higher education. Participation in VET in Schools programs should therefore not disadvantage students for the purposes of university entry.

Without this, we effectively create separate ‘vocational’ and ‘academic’ streams, based upon which subjects contribute toward tertiary entrance. Students are effectively pushed into one stream or the other, with VET in Schools positioned as the option for those who are unlikely to achieve a university entrance. This diminishes the status of both VET in Schools and VET in general, and negates its potential for making a positive contribution to the development of all young people.

The low status of VET is of major concern to industry, which supports VET as a means of enhancing its skills base and competitiveness. It also restricts the range of options available to students. The system would be better served by arrangements which situate VET in Schools as complementary to traditional school subjects, and of comparable standing.

### 4. Careers counselling should be examined to provide an enhanced industry focus

Industry stakeholders have expressed concern that the school system in general, through its provision of careers information, exhibits a strong bias toward preparing students for university entrance, rather than for vocational streams that it sees as ‘second best’. We acknowledge that efforts have been made in overcoming this bias in recent years but still see room for significant improvement, particularly in addressing the perception that the service industries are largely unskilled.

Many career opportunities are available within these industries, but it appears that students are not being encouraged to consider these careers. This is due in part to a lack of informed, unbiased advice about career opportunities, that takes into account the realities of the Australian economy, employment patterns and the skills and experience employers are seeking. Instead, the current situation sees students and their parents focus on university courses as the only way to get a ‘good’ job. This overlooks the fact that employers increasingly seek employees with a broad set of skills and experience, not just formal university qualifications. It also does not take adequate account of the need for employees to continually acquire and upgrade new skills throughout their working lives.

This is an ongoing cultural issue for the Australian education system, and Australian society in general. It does not serve the interests of young people to be streamed into university simply because it is seen as the ‘thing to do’ – relevant vocational competencies are highly valued by employers, and this also needs to be communicated to students.

Service Skills Australia considers that it is important that programs be developed to enhance schools’ ability to provide careers advice which is more vocationally oriented. Strategies could include



programs to recruit teachers and careers advisors with vocational experience, and professional development programs that highlight trends in employment and the role of real vocational programs.

#### 5. Fair workload for students

Service Skills Australia is concerned to ensure that VET in Schools programs are not placing unacceptable demands on students in terms of workload, and that these students do not have a heavier workload than others. VET in Schools programs should therefore be timetabled so that these students do not miss other classes, and are not precluded from enrolling in other subjects.

In practice, it appears that states and territories differ in their approach to this issue; some provide more flexible arrangements, while others retain 'traditional' timetabling models that disadvantage students undertaking VET in Schools.

Where VET classes are taken on campus or off-campus with an RTO, schools should take all reasonable steps to build these into the timetable. We don't believe it is satisfactory to expect students, other than those engaged in on-the-job training as part of SbAA training agreements, to undertake VET training in their own time or to their exclusion from other non-vocational subject choices.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

VET in Schools programs have the capacity to provide beneficial outcomes for industry, employers and schools. However, the current models are not entirely successful in maintaining the quality outcomes that industry and students require. The current inconsistencies between state systems, and lack of adequate regulation, monitoring and support in some areas of VET in Schools, lead to variable quality outcomes, which undermine industry acceptance of VET in Schools.

The key priorities in terms of improving outcomes include:

- taking real action to ensure accountability; all VET in Schools programs must be conducted in full accordance with industry requirements, as specified in endorsed Training Packages and the AQTF; and
- ensuring quality structured workplace learning occurs that is relevant and appropriate to the vocational occupation that the student is studying.
- establishing mechanisms to ensure that students undertaking VET in Schools programs are not disadvantaged through unrealistic workload or the perpetuation of 'streaming' arrangements that limit their options.
- establishing VET in Schools programs designed for students who are uncertain about their career goals, that would expose them to a range of vocational areas while giving them skills that can be used within a number of industries.