everyone's family

Expert Review of Australia's Vocational Education and Training Sector

Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet

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Overview of The Smith Family

The Smith Family is a national charity founded in 1922 to improve the lives of disadvantaged children and young people in Australia. Our vision is a better future for young Australians in need. Our mission is to create opportunities for young Australians in need by providing long-term support for their participation in education. This mission is founded on the belief that every child and young person deserves a chance.

Our mission guides every element of our work, including program development and delivery, research, advocacy and fundraising. The Smith Family delivers programs in each state and territory in Australia, in over 90 communities, including many regional and rural communities.

In 2017-18, The Smith Family supported more than 170,000 disadvantaged children, young people, parents, carers and community professionals through its education-focussed programs. Over 140,000 children and young people participated in programs run by The Smith Family. We are supporting 43,000 financially disadvantaged children and young people on our largest program, the *Learning for Life* educational scholarships.

We have a unique longitudinal dataset of young people participating on *Learning for Life.* It includes demographic, administrative and outcomes data. We are tracking the school attendance, school completion and post-school engagement in work and/or study of all young people on the program. We are also analysing this data in a systematic way in order to contribute to building the Australian educational evidence base.

In 2017-18, The Smith Family's total income was approximately $110 million. Around 70 per cent of this funding comes from private donations from individual supporters, corporate partners, universities, trusts and foundations, and bequests. There are over 230 partnerships helping to sustain our programs. Only a quarter of The Smith Family's income is sourced from different levels of government.

As part of our leadership and collaborative work in the sector, The Smith Family is a member of a number of organisations and represented on a number of advisory groups and boards. This includes our Chief Executive Officer, Dr Lisa O'Brien, being a member of the recent Commonwealth *Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools*.

1. Introduction

The Smith Family welcomes the Expert Review of Australia's Vocational Education and Training sector (the Review) and appreciates the chance to provide this submission. In this submission, The Smith Family is focused on the experience of young people, especially disadvantaged students, accessing VET at secondary school and afterwards.

The VET sector is beset by major structural challenges limiting its effectiveness. The primary educational mission of the sector is unclear. The quality of VET services varies markedly from one location to the next, thereby inhibiting individual learning and development. The links to industries and employers is often tenuous, and the sector is difficult to navigate for individuals. These challenges frequently mean too many young people leave courses without adequate education or employment outcomes. For disadvantaged students with a heavier reliance on VET pathways, the structural challenges can prevent people from starting their preferred career, and realising a better future for themselves. As a result, the public's confidence in the sector is low.

The Smith Family strongly supports a revitalised VET sector providing high-quality, effective training that allows young people to build successful careers and decent lives. As such, the main points in our submission are as follows:

Pathways across the tertiary education system must be improved

The policy and regulatory schism existing between VET and higher education continues to hinder Australia's education system from being as effective, resilient and competitive as it could be. One major area for improvement is building better, intersecting pathways between VET and university study to encourage young people to move between the two sectors as is necessary for their education and training. There are useful examples of this integrated approach in overseas jurisdictions.

The role of VET in Schools needs to be clarified and better understood

VET in Schools (VETiS) has the potential to assist socially disadvantaged students by motivating them to stay in school, despite what is sometimes a mismatch between school structures and pedagogies on the one hand, and student preferences on the other. The research tells us that although VETiS has been successful in raising retention rates, these programs do not offer adequate pathways into secure, quality, sustainable employment once students finish their courses and leave secondary school. This is a lost opportunity that must be rectified in any reform of the VET sector.

Australia needs quality education leading to qualifications that employers trust

The VET system must not only train young people for specific occupations, but also prepare them for a long-term vocational career, and a lifetime of navigating a fluid labour market. To do this, the VET curricula needs to be reframed and updated to more accurately reflect 21st century workforce needs. The types of competencies taught across the various training packages must include relevant technical vocational skills to be applied in individual employment positions, as well as non-cognitive skillsets that help students become well-rounded and capable workers in general.

There is a major need for more effective career education

Misconceptions, including that a vocational qualification is less valuable compared to a university qualification, and that VET is predominately for learning a traditional trade, permeate the community generally. Students often do not understand the education and employment pathways on offer via VET, and how to access them. There is enormous variation in school practice in this area. Better career education, delivered early in the educational journey of young people and sustained over time, has the potential to assist all students, with a particular benefit flowing to disadvantaged students as they sometimes lack the informal networks which could inform them of the possibilities.

Disadvantaged students often require additional assistance to navigate the VET system

Disadvantaged students are an important equity cohort for the VET sector, as disadvantaged students rely heavily on such pathways to train for jobs, build career aspirations, connect with the workforce, and start the lifetime journey of employment. Ensuring their successful participation in VET both increases the nation's skill base and increases the number of employable, and possibly employed, people.

However, this cohort often requires additional assistance to ensure that their talent, sometimes masked due to situations of disadvantage and hardship, is recognised. It is incumbent on the VET system to provide this necessary, additional support.

We elaborate on these points below.

2. Improving pathways across the tertiary education system

Whilst the Review focuses exclusively on the functioning of the VET sector, realistically it is hard to separate the effectiveness of VET from the rest of the tertiary system. The Smith Family believes that a major way to strengthen VET is to improve the pathways across the tertiary system as a whole, so that a young person can move between VET and university study in a way that strengthens their career planning, practical and academic knowledge base and employment prospects.

Unfortunately, Australia retains a policy and regulatory schism between VET and higher education, exacerbating the fact that there are few pathways between VET and universities. For instance, there is a significant funding imbalance between the two sectors. VET remains exposed to the fiscal constraints of the states and territories, and the introduction of demand-driven funding in higher education exacerbated the gaps in public investment between the two sectors.[1] The lack of intersecting pathways hinders our education system from being as effective, resilient and competitive as it could be.

The Commonwealth can play a significant leadership role in reforming the structure of tertiary education to strengthen pathways between VET and university studies, in concert with the states and territories. In 2008, the Review of Australian Higher Education (the Bradley Review) argued that the Commonwealth should take primary responsibility for the broad tertiary education and training system in Australia, including regulation, funding, governance, and research into and analysis of the sector to support strategic decision-making.[2] The recommendation was adopted in part; it is now time to consider fully adopting and implementing this recommendation.

The Review should examine how other countries have improved the intersections between VET and university study, identifying examples of leading practice applicable in Australia. For instance, the reform journey of Switzerland offers applicable lessons. Over the past twenty-five years, Switzerland modernised its vocational education sector within its federal system, to determine a better way to engage young people in their education and post-school career planning.[3] The Swiss VET sector is now a fully integrated component of the education system. It provides a number of intersecting pathways allowing students to move between upper secondary school, vocational studies and a university of applied sciences.[4] Improved pathways has also meant forging very close links with Swiss industry in designing and delivering vocational education. Industry partners are actively involved in developing industry qualifications, assessments and training curriculum.[5] Corporations play a key role in providing meaningful, paid work placements as part of vocational

[1] Noon, Peter, *A New System for Financing Australian Tertiary Education*, Mitchell Institute, 2016, p 6-7

[2] Australian Government, Review of Australian Higher Education, Final Report, December 2008, p xx

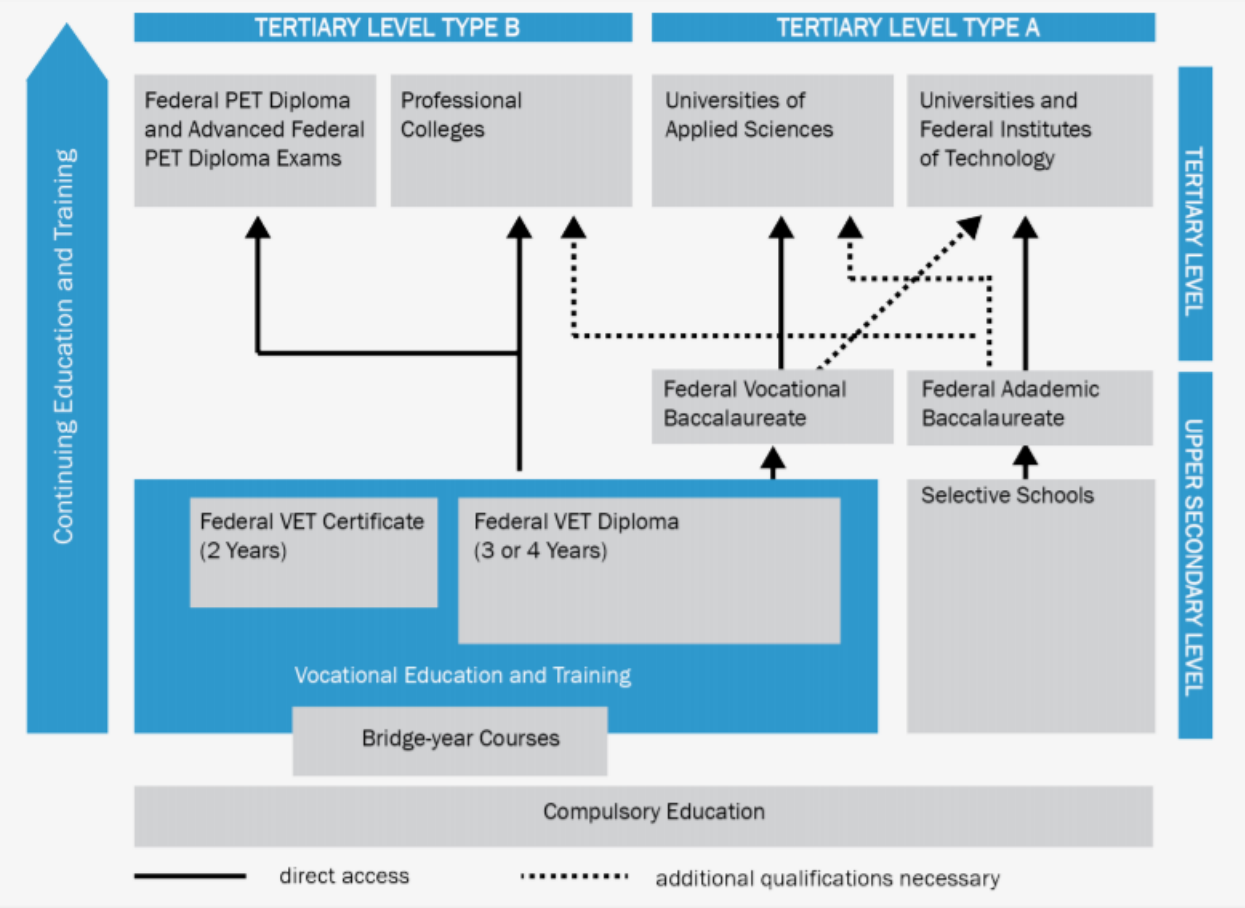
[3] Hoffman, N., & Schwartz, R., *Gold Standard: The Swiss Vocational Education and Training System*, National Centre on Education and the Economy, 2015, p 3.

[4] Hoffman, N., & Schwartz, R., *Gold Standard: The Swiss Vocational Education and Training System*, already cited, p 12, 19.

[5] Hoffman, N., & Schwartz, R., *Gold Standard: The Swiss Vocational Education and Training System*, already cited, p 1.

training for 70 per cent of school leavers in blue and white collar industries.[6] These traineeships ensure a supported transition to employment for young people and allow employers to participate in training their future workforce to develop the skills their organisations need. Unsurprisingly, the level of youth unemployment in Switzerland is very low. An outline of the Swiss education system is provided below.

Figure 1: The Swiss Education System[7]



Examples such as this demonstrate the associated benefits of a well-structured tertiary education system where VET is a highly-valued component. For instance, it presents opportunities to re-examine the qualifications and trainings that should underpin vocational education and training, how they link to contemporary industry and workforce demands, as well as how they interact with higher education pathways.

[6] Baker, K., *14-19 Education: A new Baccalaureate*, Edge Foundation United Kingdom, 2017, p 26; Hoffman, N., & Schwartz, R., *Gold Standard: The Swiss Vocational Education and Training System*, already cited, p 1.

[7] Hoffman, N., & Schwartz, R., *Gold Standard: The Swiss Vocational Education and Training System*, already cited, p 7.

3. Improving the provision of VET in Schools

The provision of VET in Schools (VETiS) is crucial in helping young people, including disadvantaged students, stay engaged at secondary school, achieve a Year 12 certification, and open up career or study opportunities afterwards. When delivered well, VETiS offers young people economic and educational engagement with their community, which in turn encourages stronger social inclusion whilst ensuring important industries can find potential workforce talent.

In the past two decades, the number of VETiS students has trended steadily upwards. In 2017, approximately 237,700 school students aged 15 to 19 years old participated in VETiS courses.[8] About 90 per cent of Australian schools deliver or provide access to some form of vocational education.[9] Yet despite two decades of strong growth in VETiS enrolments, there remain systemic difficulties with the way VETiS is delivered across Australia's various school systems and how it connects with employers and industries.

This Review is an ideal opportunity to examine the role and purpose of VETiS, to determine how it best improves the education and employment outcomes for young people as they seriously contemplate their post-school options, and to make sure the social inclusion agenda of VETiS is strengthened.

Currently, VETiS does not offer adequate pathways into secure, quality, sustainable employment once students finish their courses and leave secondary school.[10] This is because the qualifications typically undertaken by school students do not provide sufficient training or skills to meet the needs and expectations of industry and employers. For instance, VETiS accounts for a higher number of Certificate I and II qualifications than in those undertaking post-school VET.[11] In 2017, 89.1 per cent of students were undertaking either a Certificate II or III qualification, with 55.7 per cent studying a Certificate II.[12] However, Certificate I to III courses are the most problematic for providing successful pathways to employment as the learnings tend to be very narrow. These qualifications tend not to teach sufficient technical or specific skillsets that make students employable in a vocation, nor do they teach substantial general competencies that help prepare

[8] National Centre for Vocational Education Research, *Young People in Education and Training 2017*, 2018, p 1.

[9] Nguyen, N., 'The Impact of VET in Schools on Young People's Intentions and Achievements' National Centre for Vocational Education Research, 1 September 2010.

[10] Clarke, K., *Entry to vocations: building the foundations for successful transitions*, National Vocational Educaiton and Training Research Program, 2014, p 6.

[11] Misko, J, Korbel, P & Blomberg, D, 2017, *VET in Schools students: characteristics and post-school employment and training experiences*, National Centre for Vocational Education Research, p 10.

[12] National Centre for Vocational Education Research, *Australian vocational education and training statistics: young people in education and training 2017*, Table 4, p 12.

people for the workplace.[13] The result has been that VETiS is not assisting them with entry into further training or study.[14]

The Review should consider the core value of the qualifications completed via VETiS and the benefit to students undertaking respective courses. The Smith Family believes that VETiS should be dedicated to preparing young people for the demands of the workforce. Each course offered in VETiS should have a clear, direct link to further study or training in the tertiary system or a link to entry-level employment via apprenticeships and the like.[15] The lower-level qualifications, Certificates I to III, should provide foundational learning in a vocation, such as the theoretical knowledge underpinning a particular industry, as well as specific, immediate skills required for particular occupations.[16] This helps ensure students are ready for further vocational education or training, or for further practical training via apprenticeships and traineeships.[17]

Whilst most secondary schools offer or provide access to VET, there is great variability in how it is delivered. This includes variability in how it is incorporated into senior secondary certificates in different jurisdictions and how well it links to workplace learning.[18] The Smith Family recommends that the Review consider how the Commonwealth can work with the states and territories to better integrate VETiS into secondary schools. This includes determining how to better embed VET in the schools curriculum, placing it on equal footing with mainstream academic subjects. All secondary school students should have opportunities to access quality VET opportunities that help them create their best pathway after school into further training, study or work. It is crucial that VETiS properly equips young people to start building durable, decent, dignified careers beyond school.

4. Ensuring the sector provides quality education and training to all students

Given VET is so important to the training of the Australian workforce, a major challenge for the Review is ensuring that the sector delivers appropriate training and suitable qualifications that not only meet the standards expected from industry and employers, but also prepare young people for a long-term vocational career, and a lifetime of navigating a fluid labour market. What people learn

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[13] Clarke, K., *Entry to vocations: building the foundations for successful transitions*, National Vocational Educaiton and Training Research Program, 2014, p 6; Polesel, J., 'Democratising the curriculum or training the children of the poor: school-based vocational training in Australia', *Journal of Education Policy*, 23:6, p 628; Buchanan, J. et al, *Preparing for the best and worst of times: Future Frontiers Analytical Report*, NSW Department of Education & University of Sydney, 2018, p 35.

[14] Clarke, K., *Entry to vocations: building the foundations for successful transitions*, National Vocational Education and Training Research Program, 2014, p 15.

[15] Buchanan, J. et al, *Preparing for the best and worst of times: Future Frontiers Analytical Report*, already cited, p 38; Clarke, K., *Entry to vocations: building the foundations for successful transitions*, National Vocational Education and Training Research Program, 2014, p 6.

[16] Buchanan, J. et al, *Preparing for the best and worst of times: Future Frontiers Analytical Report*, already cited, p 42.

[17] Clarke, K., *Entry to vocations: building the foundations for successful transitions*, National Vocational Education and Training Research Program, 2014, p 8; Buchanan, J. et al, *Preparing for the best and worst of times: Future Frontiers Analytical Report*, already cited, p 36.

[18] Clarke, K., *Entry to vocations: building the foundations for successful transitions*, National Vocational Education and Training Research Program, 2014, p 3.

in VET needs to be revised if the sector is to strengthen employment and education outcomes for graduates, and to ensure Australia's workforce is adequately skilled for the present era.

The VET curricula needs to be reframed and updated to more accurately reflect 21st century workforce needs. The types of competencies taught across the various training packages must include relevant technical vocational skills to be applied in individual employment positons, as well as non-cognitive skillsets that help students become well-rounded and capable workers in general. It is still seldom recognised that over time, VET graduates often undertake work that has high cognitive and non-cognitive skill content.[19] Throughout a career, an apprentice or a trainee will need to draw on a variety of skills such as problem solving, project management and collaboration in addition to applying their technical expertise.[20] The VET sector should be able to teach these competencies. In fact, research demonstrates that general competencies like those outlined above are often best acquired in the context of mastering a specific discipline or trade.[21] The sector will better train Australia's future workforce if technical and non-cognitive skills are treated as relevant vocational competencies in a qualification. This applies equally to the lower-level qualifications most often taken as part of VETiS, as previously mentioned.

Further, the VET courses system is overly complex, and can be incredibly difficult for young people to navigate in trying to find the course best suited for them. Course components in VET are incredibly fragmented – as at 2014 there were 65 training packages, and around 1,600 separate qualifications.[22] The structure by which competency standards and qualifications are set is rigid, and some of the delineations between similar qualifications and vocational fields is now outdated. This is a problem considering VET graduates today will likely move between related and unrelated vocational fields over the course of their career. For example, in 2018, 31.5 per cent of VET graduates were employed in different occupations to their training course, but their training remained relevant to their current job.[23] The Review should consider how the qualifications structure could be streamlined, and made more navigable. For instance, qualifications could be reorganised according to industry clusters or vocational streams, recognising that common learning and areas and skillsets exist in similar areas, such as care services.[24]

Ensuring that the sector provides quality vocational training and education will require greater regulation and closer monitoring of service provision. The funding and delivery of VET services is a responsibility of state and territory governments, and currently there is variation in the way that courses are administered across different jurisdictions. However in the short-term, each jurisdiction could do more to ensure courses are effective and high-quality, regardless of whether they are delivered in a manner varying from other states or territories.

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[19] Buchanan, J. et al, *Preparing for the best and worst of times: Future Frontiers Analytical Report*, already cited, p 36.

[20] Jones, Anne, 'Vocational education for the twenty-first century', August 2018, University of Melbourne, p 4.

[21] Buchanan, J. et al, *Preparing for the best and worst of times: Future Frontiers Analytical Report*, already cited, p 4.

[22] Commonwealth Department of Industry, *Review of Training Packages and Accredited Courses: A discussion paper*, October 2014, p 9.

[23] National Centre for Vocational Education Research, *Australian vocational education and training statistics: VET student outcomes 2018*, 2018, Table 13, p 29.

[24] Buchanan, J. et al, *Preparing for the best and worst of times: Future Frontiers Analytical Report*, already cited, p 38.

5. Addressing misconceptions about VET through better career advice

Part of revitalising VET is addressing misconceptions that a vocational qualification is less valuable compared to university qualifications, and that VET is predominately for learning a traditional trade. These misconceptions permeate the community generally. Students often do not understand the education and employment pathways on offer via VET, and how to access them. Their post-school choices are influenced by family, carers, friends, teachers, or even referral agencies – each of whom may labour under misconceptions about the value of VET pathways.[25]

Current student employment outcomes suggest that VET graduates have higher employment rates than undergraduates, as well as earning wages comparable to, if not exceeding, their university educated peers.[26] According to Graduate Student Outcomes Survey, in 2017 the proportion of bachelor degree graduates in full-time employment was 71.8 per cent, down from 83.6 per cent in 2007.[27] It can take several years for university graduates to achieve full time work.[28] Comparatively, 74.7 per cent of VET graduates aged 20 to 24 years old were employed after training in 2018.[29] Of those who undertook training as part of an apprenticeship or traineeship, 79.8 per cent were employed after training, with 91.2 per cent of graduates in a trade occupation course employed after training.[30]

Similarly, VET is more relevant than ever when it comes to ensuring Australia has an appropriately skilled workforce improving the global competitiveness of local industries. The sector currently provides training courses for nine out of ten occupations predicted to have the greatest growth of new jobs to 2022.[31] The idea that VET mostly accommodates those learning a traditional trade is a thing of the past. However, misconceptions persist on the opportunities available through VET.

Addressing these misconceptions requires better careers education and exposure in school, and in the tertiary sector, on possible VET pathways. There is strong evidence showing the value of ensuring students have access to high quality careers advice while they are forming their post-school plans.[32] Yet the current approaches to career advice within schools are highly inconsistent and often ad hoc. Potential career opportunities via VET remain poorly understood. Students are not ably supported in determining the best study, training or work pathway for them. This applies

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[25] Myconos, G., Dommers, E. & Clarke, K., *Viewed from the margins: navigating disadvantage and VET*, Brotherhood of St Laurence and University of Melbourne, August 2018, p 6.

[26] Wyman, N., et al, *Perceptions are not reality: myths, realities & the critical role of vocational education & training in Australia*, Skilling Australia Foundation, 2017.

[27] Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching, *2017 Graduate Outcomes Survey*, p iii; Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching, *2018 Graduate Outcomes Survey – Longitudinal*, October 2018, p iii.

[28] Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching, *2018 Graduate Outcomes Survey – Longitudinal*, October 2018, p iii.

[29] National Centre for Vocational Education Research, *VET Student Outcomes 2018*, 2018, Table 7, p 23.

[30] National Centre for Vocational Education Research, *VET Student Outcomes 2018*, *2018*, p 11.

[31] Wyman, N., et al, *Perceptions are not reality: myths, realities & the critical role of vocational education & training in Australia*, Skilling Australia Foundation, 2017.

[32] Kashefpakdel, E., Mann, A., and Schleicher M., *The impact of career development activities on student attitudes towards school utility: an analysis of data from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)*, UK Education and Employers Research.

equally to VETiS, which can at times be viewed as a second-rate option for low-performing students, rather than as a viable alternative pathway.[33] Disadvantaged students, who may already start school with a very limited understanding of learning opportunities at school and career options afterwards, are especially affected.

The discussions with students about possible post-school pathways, including VET, need to also happen earlier than is typically the case presently. Basic career education should be available at primary school. Research suggests that young people start to rule out career options at an early age because of the unconscious influences of parents, friends and the stereotyping of occupations.[34] Once these limits are set, individuals will rarely consider broader alternatives.[35] Research also shows that disengagement from education, training and employment is not a one-off event occurring in isolation at the end of a student's schooling. Instead, it is the result of a long-term process that can begin in childhood and continue throughout the course of a child's schooling.

It is important to not only offer career learning early, but sustain it over time as students progress through school. Evidence shows that there is strong relationship between student participation in career development activities, including elements of direct exposure to the contemporary working world, and positive attitudes towards schooling. Crucially, studies show that if young people can recall four or more structured career activities across their school life, they are five times less likely to be unemployed or disengaged from education or training.[36]

We need to move towards an integrated model of careers education incorporating individual support, parental and guardian involvement and partnerships with community organisations to support the diverse needs and aspirations of young people as they contemplate, and get ready, for the post-school future.[37] The reality is that better careers education means intervening early in the school system and sustaining it over time. This is where the VET pathways discussions must commence, not just as secondary school students are nearing the end of their school education.

The Smith Family recommends that the Commonwealth play an active leadership role in ensuring better integrated career-focused activities, industry-focussed learning and post-school planning within the education system, including from the primary years. It means ensuring that career-focused learning is offered early, sustained over time, and is complemented with quality careers advice tailored to students' aspirations.

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[33] Dempsey, M., *Impacts of the changing nature of the Vocational Education and Training (VET) system on educators within the VET system in Australia*, Edith Cowan University, p 21; Buchanan, J. et al, *Preparing for the best and worst of times: Future Frontiers Analytical Report*, already cited, p 42.

[34] NSW Education and Communities, *The Case for Career-Related Learning in Primary Schools: An invitation to primary school principals*, 2014, p 2.

[35] NSW Education and Communities, *The Case for Career-Related Learning in Primary Schools: An invitation to primary school principals*, 2014, p 2.

[36] Kashefpakdel, E., Mann, A., and Schleicher M., *The impact of career development activities on student attitudes towards school utility: an analysis of data from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)*, UK Education and Employers Research.

[37] Youth Action, *Career Guidance: The missing link in school to work transitions*, Youth Action Policy Paper, July 2017, p 9.

6. Boosting support for disadvantaged students in VET

The sector needs to strengthen its capacity to support disadvantaged students to engage with vocational and education training and complete their qualifications. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds often have additional learning needs that can be very serious, and often require extra assistance to remain engaged in their education. Students experiencing disadvantage and hardship may be from low-income households where neither parent or carer works, from families experiencing problems with inter-generational disadvantage. They may identify as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander or have culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, experience serious health or disability issues, or be from regional or remote communities. Many of these students experience multiple and compounding disadvantage in their lifetime.

Disadvantaged students are an important and large equity cohort for the sector. For instance in 2017, about 37 per cent of all VET students, more than 1.56 million people, were from the two most disadvantaged Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) quintiles.[38] Yet disadvantaged students tend to have lower course completion rates than their non-disadvantaged peers, with those students experiencing multiple disadvantages, and those identifying as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, faring particularly poorly.[39] This is also the case with the one in five young people aged 15 to 19 years who leave school early. Many early school leavers come from disadvantaged backgrounds. Almost two-thirds of early school leavers enter VET, however, currently 40 per cent drop out of their course before completion.[40]

The sector is not currently adept at supporting disadvantaged students to enrol, engage and complete in VET courses.[41] As mentioned previously, the sector is complex, fragmented and difficult to navigate. For those students intending to pursue VET, they can feel daunted by trying to select a suitable training provider, and enrolling in a course. This can be particularly stressful for disadvantaged students without any additional support from school counsellors or families that solely rely on marketing information from individual training providers. Once participating in VET courses, the capacity of different training providers to assist with the extra learning needs of disadvantaged students is highly variable.[42] The Smith Family has witnessed these difficulties via students in our Tertiary Scholarship Scheme who have interacted with the VET sector. Overall, this makes the learning experience for disadvantaged students in VET challenging and problematic.

[38] National Centre for Vocational Education Research, *Australian vocational education and training statistics: Total VET students and courses 2017*, Table 6, p 14.

[39] McVicar, D & Tabasso, D., *The impact of disadvantage on VET completion and employment gaps*, National Centre for Vocational Education Research, 2016, p 8.

[40] Myconos, G., Dommers, E. & Clarke, K., 'Helping Early School Leavers', University of Melbourne.

[41] Myconos, G., Dommers, E. & Clarke, K., *Viewed from the margins: navigating disadvantage and VET*, Brotherhood of St Laurence and University of Melbourne, August 2018, p 6.

[42] Myconos, G., Dommers, E. & Clarke, K., *Viewed from the margins: navigating disadvantage and VET*, Brotherhood of St Laurence and University of Melbourne, August 2018, p 7.

The Smith Family recommends that the Review prioritise greater support for disadvantaged students to access VET opportunities and complete qualifications. Research suggests that providing help with course choices may help increase course completion rates for disadvantaged students.[43] An important policy objective should be to improve the rate of qualification completion by disadvantaged students.

7. Conclusion

The provision of VET is a significant contributor to Australia's prosperity and to ensuring that capable, well-rounded individuals enter the workforce and successfully navigate an uncertain landscape of persistent change and disruption. Australia will not be able to truly revitalise the sector, and ensure it delivers maximum impact and benefit to employers and employees alike, until it treats VET as a crucial education component and not a second tier system. This will also help gradually restore public confidence and support in the system. The Review is a chance for systemic reform to be methodically developed and pursued, in conjunction with the states and territories. Getting the reform process right will undoubtedly strengthen Australia's prospects of maintaining a robust, resilient economy that delivers jobs and a decent quality of life for all Australians. Missing this reform window risks Australia moving in the other direction.

The Review offers a starting point for systemic reform to the delivery of VET. It can help revalue and revitalise the sector. It can develop an agenda that helps steer Australia closer towards a tertiary education sector that enables people to choose the learning pathway that is right for them, free from misconceptions. It can better connect VET pathways to the contemporary needs and expectations of industries and employers and draw them more effectively into the system. It can upgrade the quality of courses to ensure all students develop a set of vocational and general capabilities to thrive in the workforce. It can ensure that the sector best serves the tens of thousands of disadvantaged students reliant on VET pathways for a life without hardship or deprivation, and does more to help them complete qualifications, and create better lives for themselves in the long-term.

[43] McVicar, D & Tabasso, D, *The impact of disadvantage on VET completion and employment gaps*, National Centre for Vocational Education Research, 2016, p 9.