



everyone's family

A Review of VET for School Students

South Australian Department of Education

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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 South Australia we are working in 10 communities.

In 2017-18, The Smith Family supported around 175,000 disadvantaged children, young people, parents, carers and community professionals through its education-focussed programs, including over 140,000 children and young people. We are supporting 48,000 financially disadvantaged children and young people nationally on our largest program, the *Learning for Life* educational scholarship. One in five students on the *Learning for Life* program is of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander background. In South Australia, our programs annually support around 15,500 children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

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 analysing this data in a systematic way in order to contribute to building the Australian educational evidence base.

1. Introduction

The Smith Family welcomes the South Australian Government's Review of Vocational Education and Training for School Students (the Review) and appreciates the chance to contribute. In this submission, The Smith Family is particularly focused on the experience of disadvantaged students accessing VET at secondary school and planning their post-school futures.

Many young South Australians are struggling in the post-school transition, with youth unemployment remaining stubbornly high. The Issues Paper identifies the structural challenges limiting the effectiveness of VET in Schools (VETiS): the lack of clarity regarding purpose; lingering perception issues regarding the benefits of VET qualifications to future careers; lack of consistency in funding and delivering VET in government schools; limited access to suitable courses for individual students; and fragmentation of information for students on VET choices. These challenges disproportionately impact students from disadvantaged backgrounds, such as those identifying as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, those experiencing financial disadvantage, or those with a health or disability issue or those living in regional or rural areas. Disadvantaged students often stand to benefit significantly from VET pathways but are uncertain how to navigate such a complex system.

The Smith Family strongly supports a robust VET sector in South Australia's schools, providing high-quality, effective training to students that allows them to connect meaningfully to the world of work, develop skillsets relevant to industry needs and plan for further training, study or work after school. We make the following recommendations to the Review:

- the role of VETiS needs to be clarified and better understood;
- VETiS must not only train young people for specific occupations, but also prepare them for long-term vocational careers, and a lifetime of navigating a fluid and dynamic labour market;
- there is a major need for more effective career education where students are better informed of the potential and relevancy of VET pathways;
- pathways across the tertiary sector should be improved to allow students greater access to both VET and university study; and
- disadvantaged students require additional assistance to navigate the VET system.

We elaborate on these points below.

2. Strengthening the public purpose of VET in Schools

This Review is an ideal opportunity to examine the public purpose of VETiS, to determine how it can best improve the education and employment outcomes for young people as they contemplate their post-school options. It is also a chance to strengthen the role VETiS can play in helping 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 better opportunities to engage with local businesses and other organisations, whilst ensuring important industries can find potential workforce talent for the future. Currently, VETiS does not offer adequate pathways into secure,

quality, sustainable employment once students finish their courses and leave secondary school.¹ 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. Across Australia, VETiS accounts for a higher number of certificate I and II qualifications than in those undertaking VET after school.² 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.³ However, these lower level courses are the most problematic for providing successful pathways to employment as the learnings tend to be 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 people for the workplace.⁴ The result is that VETiS does not assist them with entry into further training or study.⁵ At best, these lower level courses offer young people a 'taster' experience but they should not be seen as an end in themselves.

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 exposing young people to the 21st century labour market and preparing young people for the demands of the modern 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.⁶ The lower-level qualifications, 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.⁷ This helps ensure students are ready for further vocational education or training, or for further practical training via apprenticeships and traineeships.⁸

¹ Clarke, K., *Entry to vocations: building the foundations for successful transitions*, National Vocational Education and Training Research Program, 2014, p 6.

² Misko, J, Korbil, P & Blomberg, D, 2017, *VET in Schools students: characteristics and post-school employment and training experiences*, National Centre for Vocational Education Research, p 10.

³ National Centre for Vocational Education Research, *Australian vocational education and training statistics: young people in education and training 2017*, Table 4, p 12.

⁴ Clarke, K., *Entry to vocations: building the foundations for successful transitions*, National Vocational Education 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.

⁵ Clarke, K., *Entry to vocations: building the foundations for successful transitions*, National Vocational Education and Training Research Program, 2014, p 15.

⁶ 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.

⁷ Buchanan, J. et al, *Preparing for the best and worst of times: Future Frontiers Analytical Report*, already cited, p 42.

⁸ 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.

Given the variability in the delivery of VETiS across the state, The Smith Family recommends that the Review consider how 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. It should not be seen as a last resort for students struggling at school or at high risk of disengaging from their education altogether. 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 and decent careers beyond school.

3. Ensuring qualifications match the workforce needs of individuals and industry

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

What people learn in the lower-level qualifications offered via VETiS needs to be revised if the sector is to strengthen employment and education outcomes for graduates. The curricula needs to be reframed and updated to more accurately reflect 21st century workforce needs. The types of competencies taught must include both fundamental, technical skills applicable in employment positions, as well as non-cognitive skillsets that help students become well-rounded and capable workers generally. Over time, school students who go on to be VET graduates often undertake work that has high cognitive and non-cognitive skill content.⁹ 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.¹⁰ 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.¹¹ These complementary skillsets are particularly important given that workforce entrants today will have multiple careers, not just one. They must become adept at navigating the fluid labour market in order to create their best future.

One leading, practical example of delivering quality VETiS that meets industry needs is the schools-based apprenticeship work of St Patrick's Technical College in Adelaide's northern suburbs. St Patrick's provides scholarships for disadvantaged students in The Smith Family's flagship *Learning for Life* program to attend the College. The College helps students find apprenticeships through running a workplace practices program, pre-vocational training, and by leveraging their extensive industry networks to find students work experience. Students are also encouraged to seek out apprenticeships that align with their future career interests. Year 12 students at the College who are doing an apprenticeship can spend up to 40 weeks full-time in paid employment and training whilst ensuring they complete SACE requirements. Since its establishment in 2007, over 800

⁹ Buchanan, J. et al, *Preparing for the best and worst of times: Future Frontiers Analytical Report*, already cited, p 36.

¹⁰ Jones, Anne, 'Vocational education for the twenty-first century', August 2018, University of Melbourne, p 4.

¹¹ Buchanan, J. et al, *Preparing for the best and worst of times: Future Frontiers Analytical Report*, already cited, p 4.

students have commenced apprenticeships or traineeships, with 90 per cent of them completing their training.¹²

Further, the Review should consider how the qualifications structure could be streamlined, and made more navigable. Presently, choosing the most suitable courses can be incredibly difficult for young people and their parent/carers, teachers and career advisers due to the complexity of the system. 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.¹³

4. Addressing misconceptions about VET through better careers education and advice

Improving VETiS also requires addressing the misconceptions that a vocational qualification is less valuable compared to university qualifications, and that VET is predominately for learning a traditional trade. This is a challenge identified in the Issues Paper.

The economic reality is that VET is pivotal to both ensuring South Australia has an appropriately skilled workforce and to 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 nationally to 2022.¹⁴ However, students tend to have inaccurate impressions of VETiS and post-school VET. Their views are heavily influenced by family, carers, friends, teachers, or even referral agencies, each of whom may have different impressions, and misperceptions, about the value of VET pathways.¹⁵

Addressing misconceptions requires better careers education and exposure in school, and in the tertiary sector, on possible VET pathways. The latest evidence demonstrates that there is a strong relationship between student participation in career development activities, including direct exposure to the world of work, and positive attitudes to schooling and post-school involvement in work and study. Young people who can recall four or more structured career activities across their school life, are five times less likely to be unemployed or disengaged from education or training in early adulthood.¹⁶ Engagement with employers helps young people, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, find out about a wide range of jobs and understand how their learning at school connects to their future.

Yet the current approaches to career advice within schools are highly inconsistent and often ad hoc. VETiS can still be viewed as a second-rate option for low-performing students, rather than as a

¹² St Patrick's Technical College, '[School-based Apprenticeships continue to soar](#)', 8 May 2018.

¹³ Buchanan, J. et al, *[Preparing for the best and worst of times: Future Frontiers Analytical Report](#)*, already cited, p 38.

¹⁴ Wyman, N., et al, *[Perceptions are not reality: myths, realities & the critical role of vocational education & training in Australia](#)*, Skilling Australia Foundation, 2017.

¹⁵ 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.

¹⁶ Kashepakdel, 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, 2017.

viable alternative pathway with significant career trajectories.¹⁷ Students are then not effectively supported in determining the best study, training or work pathway for them. Disadvantaged students, who may already start school with a very limited understanding of learning opportunities at school and career options afterwards, tend to be particularly impacted.

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, including from a gender perspective.¹⁸ Once these limits are set, individuals will rarely consider broader alternatives.¹⁹ 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. Young people not seeing the relevance of schooling to their life beyond school can be a key contributor to disengagement and early school leaving. A higher quality VETiS offering, linked to direct industry exposure can help young people see the value of schooling

By way of example, The Smith Family is currently implementing a suite of careers education and support in order to assist disadvantaged children and young people as they progress through primary school and the critical middle and later years of high school. As part of this suite, we provide a range of experiences that help students understand career pathways and training and study options. Activities include experiential careers days and university and VET experience days, run in partnership with corporate, VET and university partners. Employability workshops and employer networking activities are also included. These activities build students' confidence, knowledge and expand their networks with other students and supportive adults. They are key to helping disadvantaged young people realise they are capable of undertaking tertiary study and securing employment

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.

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

¹⁷ 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.

¹⁸ NSW Education and Communities, *The Case for Career-Related Learning in Primary Schools: An invitation to primary school principals*, 2014, p 2.

¹⁹ NSW Education and Communities, *The Case for Career-Related Learning in Primary Schools: An invitation to primary school principals*, 2014, p 2.

the post-school future.²⁰ 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.

5. Improving pathways across the tertiary education system

Whilst the Review focuses on the functioning of the VET sector and the value of VET to future career prospects, realistically it is difficult to compartmentalise the effectiveness of VET separately to that of the broader tertiary system. In 2017, over 25,000 students applied for university admission across Australia after completing VET studies.²¹ The Smith Family believes that a vital way to strengthen VET in South Australia is to facilitate the further development of enhanced, intersecting pathways between the sector and local universities. This would enable young people to more readily move between different tertiary study options in a way that further strengthens their career planning; practical and academic knowledge base; and employment prospects. Given the frequently non-linear educational journeys for many students from low SES backgrounds, such an approach would encompass students' movement from VET to university study, and vice versa.

For instance over the past ten years, Victoria University has delivered a VETiS program in partnership with 150 secondary schools in Melbourne.²² The program allows secondary students to gain practical skills in specific industries such as construction, early childhood care, tourism business and allied health while undertaking the Victorian Certificate of Education or the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning. The program offers students the chance to connect with industry-experienced practitioners, develop skills to make them employable, and create a post-school education, study or training. South Australia could consider similar arrangements in order to further improve pathways across the tertiary system.

6. Boosting support for disadvantaged students

The sector needs to strengthen its capacity to support disadvantaged students to engage with VET at school. 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 VET sector. 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

²⁰ Youth Action, *Career Guidance: The missing link in school to work transitions*, Youth Action Policy Paper, July 2017, p 9.

²¹ Productivity Commission, *The Demand Driven University System: A Mixed Report Card*, June 2019, p 75.

²² Victoria University Polytechnic, 'VET In Schools', 2019.

and Torres Strait Islander, faring particularly poorly.²³ This is also the case with young people who leave school early, many of whom come from disadvantaged backgrounds.²⁴ There are several factors that contribute to this pattern.

As mentioned previously, the sector is complex, fragmented and difficult to navigate for disadvantaged students. They can feel daunted by trying to select a suitable training provider or course. This can be particularly stressful for disadvantaged students without any additional support from school counsellors or families who solely rely on marketing information from individual training providers. Once participating in courses, the capacity of different training providers to assist with the extra learning needs of disadvantaged students is highly variable.²⁵ Overall, this makes the learning experience for disadvantaged students in VET challenging and problematic. Research suggests that providing help with course choices may help increase course completion rates for disadvantaged students.²⁶

Similarly, the cost to engage in VET courses is a significant challenge for disadvantaged students and is often a major reason why they cannot fully engage or commit to opportunities, or do not complete courses.²⁷ For instance, the cost of tools and materials in particular is a significant barrier despite the fact that many VETiS courses are included as options within school. The difficulty of paying for suitable transport is another sizeable barrier for this cohort.

The Smith Family recommends that the Review prioritise greater support for disadvantaged students to access VET opportunities, find appropriate financial assistance to engage fully in courses, and complete qualifications.

7. Conclusion

The Review is a chance to improve South Australia's VETiS Sector and in doing so, strengthen the state's prospects of creating a robust, resilient economy delivering jobs and a decent quality of life for its young people. The Review can better connect VETiS 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 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.

²³ McVicar, D & Tabasso, D., *The impact of disadvantage on VET completion and employment gaps*, National Centre for Vocational Education Research, 2016, p 8.

²⁴ Myconos, G., Dommers, E. & Clarke, K., *'Helping Early School Leavers'*, University of Melbourne.

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 7.

²⁶ McVicar, D & Tabasso, D., *The impact of disadvantage on VET completion and employment gaps*, National Centre for Vocational Education Research, 2016, p 9.

²⁷ Osbornem, K., *'VET's role in mitigating disadvantage'*, 24 April 2018.