



everyone's family

Review into Vocational and Applied Learning Pathways in Senior Secondary Schooling

Victorian Department of Education and Training

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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 in Australia. Our vision is a better future for young Australians in need. Our mission is to create opportunities for them by providing long-term support for their participation in education. This mission is founded on the belief that every child deserves a chance to thrive and create a better future for themselves.

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 2018-19, The Smith Family supported over 200,000 children, young people, parents, carers and community professionals across Australia. This included 42,000 in communities throughout Victoria such as the Latrobe Valley, Gippsland, Geelong, Shepparton, Broadmeadows and Dandenong. This included over 11,000 financially disadvantaged children and young people on our largest program, the *Learning for Life* educational scholarship.

Learning for Life has three integrated components:

- A modest biannual payment made to families to help them cover core education related expenses such as books, uniforms and excursions.
- A Program Coordinator (a staff member with The Smith Family) who works with the family and their school to support the young person's long-term participation in education.
- A range of short programs that help ensure the young person is engaged in education. Programs include literacy and numeracy, learning clubs, mentoring and career activities, as well as digital and financial literacy initiatives for parents.

Our programs aimed at helping young people build their career aspirations and post-school pathways, are outlined in this submission.

1. Introduction

The Smith Family welcomes the Victorian Government's Review of Vocational and Applied Learning Pathways in Senior Secondary Schooling (the Review) and appreciates the chance to contribute. In this submission, The Smith Family is particularly focused on the experience of disadvantaged students accessing vocational education and training (VET) at secondary school and planning their post-school futures.

Many young Victorians are struggling in the post-school transition, with youth unemployment remaining stubbornly high in areas like Bendigo, Shepparton and outer metropolitan Melbourne.¹ Many young Victorians are also experiencing under-employment. The Consultation Paper identifies the structural challenges limiting the effectiveness of vocational learning in Victorian schools, including the following:

- the lack of clarity regarding the purpose of vocational learning,
- the complexity in the current vocational learning structure and the lack of rigour in relation to assessment and curriculum content,
- the problems within the relationship between VET, VCAL and the VCE,
- difficulty in delivering these programs in regional and rural communities,
- unclear definition and measurement of successful student outcomes, and
- lingering perception issues regarding the benefits of VET qualifications to future careers.

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 vocational learning, but are uncertain how to navigate a complex system to determine the pathway best suited to them.

The Smith Family strongly supports high-quality vocational learning in Victorian schools, providing 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 purpose and role of vocational learning needs to be strengthened;
- vocational learning qualifications should strike a balance in meeting the needs of individual students and matching the demands of industry;
- more effective career education can help address misconceptions about the value or potential of VET pathways;
- pathways across the tertiary sector should be improved to allow students greater access to both vocational learning and university study;
- disadvantaged students require additional assistance to navigate vocational learning pathways; and

¹ Brotherhood of St Laurence, 'Smashing the avocado debate: Australia's Youth Unemployment Hotspots', March 2019.

- the Department of Education and Training should ensure that its measurement of educational outcomes achieved via vocational learning are more holistic.

We elaborate on these points below.

2. Strengthening the public purpose of vocational learning in schools

This Review is an ideal opportunity to examine the public purpose of vocational learning, to determine how it can best improve the education and employment outcomes for young people as they consider their post-school options. It is also a chance to strengthen the role vocational learning can play in helping disadvantaged students stay engaged at secondary school and ideally achieve a Year 12 certification, and open up career or study opportunities afterwards.

When delivered well, vocational learning 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, vocational learning does not offer adequate pathways into secure, quality, sustainable employment once students finish their courses and leave secondary school.² 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 in Victoria in 2018, of the approximately 50,000 students undertaking VET in Schools (VETiS) 96 per cent of them undertook certificate II and III qualifications.³ However, these lower level courses are the most problematic for providing successful pathways to employment because the learnings tend to be too 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 vocational learning at school does not assist students with entry into further training or study.⁵ At best, these lower level courses offer young people a ‘taster’ experience but they are not an end in themselves.

The Review should consider the core value of VET and the benefit to students undertaking vocational learning. The Smith Family believes that vocational learning should be dedicated to exposing young people to, and preparing them for, the demands of the 21st century workforce. Each course offered in vocational learning 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

² Brown, Justin, '[Integrating vocational education and training for secondary school students](#)', Australian Council for Educational Research, April 2019, p 11; Australian Government, [Through Growth to Achievement: Report of the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools](#), April 2018, p 49.

³ National Centre for Vocational Education Research, '[VET in Schools 2018: data slicer](#)', September 2019.

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.

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

The Review should also ensure that VET is placed on an equal footing with mainstream academic learning in terms of learning rigour and value to post-school pathways. It should not be seen as a last resort for students struggling at school or at risk of disengaging from their education altogether. Another issue is the fact that vocational learning is currently provided in some schools and not others. 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. Success and achievement in VET should be recognised equally as a way to promote the value of different pathways. The Review should examine how to best provide vocational learning in all school communities and ensure it is properly embedded within the curriculum.

3. Ensuring qualifications balance the needs of individuals and industry

In the current system, vocational learning does not connect students with employers, nor is it connected to other programs like the School Based Apprenticeships and Traineeships (SBAT). Presently, vocational learning tends to focus on students' literacy and numeracy, which while important, is insufficient on its own. Given the importance of the VET sector to training the Victorian workforce, a major challenge for the Review is ensuring that vocational learning pathways deliver appropriate training and useful qualifications that meet the standards expected from industry and employers, as well as prepare students for a long-term vocational career, and a lifetime of navigating a fluid labour market.

What people learn in the lower-level vocational learning qualifications needs to be revised if the sector is to strengthen employment and education outcomes for graduates. 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. 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

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.

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.

multiple careers, not just one. They must become adept at navigating the fluid labour market in order to create their best future.

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.¹²

The Review should also examine the effectiveness of the Head Start apprenticeships and traineeships program. Whilst a promising initiative, there are challenges with its implementation and impact. For instance, more can be done in Head Start to ensure students are matched to the right vocational learning pathway that represents their interests, passions and aspirations, rather than simply to open and available courses. Further, even though Head Start allows more on the job training, there should be greater flexibility in how it is delivered in local settings, ensuring that students get the most out of the work experience and it is better tailored to their individual needs. The Review should look at the present implementation of this program and ensure it is fit for purpose to deliver tailored, impactful vocational learning to students across Victoria.

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

Improving vocational learning also requires addressing the misconceptions that vocational pathways are less valuable than academic ones, and that VET is predominately for learning a traditional trade.

The economic reality is that VET is pivotal to both ensuring Victoria 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 2022.¹³ However, students tend to have inaccurate impressions of vocational learning, including VET pathways after school. 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 vocational learning pathways.¹⁴

Addressing misconceptions requires better careers education and exposure in school, and in the tertiary sector, on possible vocational learning 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

¹² Buchanan, J. et al, *Preparing for the best and worst of times: Future Frontiers Analytical Report*, already cited, p 38.

¹³ Wyman, N., et al, *Perceptions are not reality: myths, realities & the critical role of vocational education & training in Australia*, Skilling Australia Foundation, 2017.

¹⁴ 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.

education or training in early adulthood.¹⁵ 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. Vocational learning can still be viewed as a second-rate option for low-performing students, rather than as a viable alternative pathway with significant career trajectories.¹⁶ Students are then not effectively supported in determining the best study, training or work pathway for them. Disadvantaged students, who may already begin the school journey with a very limited understanding of learning opportunities at school and career options afterwards, tend to be particularly impacted.

Discussions with students about possible post-school pathways, including VET, also need to happen earlier. 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.¹⁷ Once these limits are set, individuals will rarely consider broader alternatives.¹⁸ Disengagement from education is not a one-off event occurring in isolation at the end of a student's schooling. It is the result of a long-term process that can begin in childhood and continue throughout the course of a young person's schooling. Students not seeing the relevance of schooling to their life beyond school can be a key contributor to disengagement and early school leaving. A better vocational learning offering, linked to direct industry exposure, can help young people see the value of schooling and Year 12 completion.

By way of example, The Smith Family is currently implementing a suite of careers education and support 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 to sustain it over time as students progress through school.

¹⁵ 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.

¹⁶ 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.

¹⁷ NSW Education and Communities, *The Case for Career-Related Learning in Primary Schools: An invitation to primary school principals*, 2014, p 2.

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

We need to move towards an integrated model of careers education incorporating individual support, parental and carer 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.¹⁹ The reality is that better careers education means intervening early in the school system and sustaining it over time. This is where the vocational learning pathways discussions must commence, not just when senior students are nearing the end of their secondary education.

5. Improving pathways across the tertiary education system

Whilst the Review focuses on vocational (and applied) learning in Victorian schools, it is difficult to compartmentalise the effectiveness of VET from the functioning of the broader tertiary system. For example, students may complete VET qualifications and then seek admission to universities for further academic education. In 2017, over 25,500 students applied for university admission across Australia after completing VET studies.²⁰ The Smith Family believes that a vital way to strengthen vocational learning in Victoria 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.

One example of leading practice can be found at Victoria University, which for over ten years has delivered a VETiS program in partnership with 150 secondary schools in Melbourne.²¹ 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. The Review could consider other, similar arrangements in order to further improve pathways across the tertiary system.

6. Boosting support for disadvantaged students

Students from disadvantaged backgrounds often have additional learning needs that 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 lives and this can have a major impact on their schooling and capacity to plan their future.

¹⁹ Youth Action, *Career Guidance: The missing link in school to work transitions*, Youth Action Policy Paper, July 2017, p 9.

²⁰ Productivity Commission, *The Demand Driven University System: A Mixed Report Card*, June 2019, p 75.

²¹ Victoria University Polytechnic, '*VET In Schools*', 2019.

Disadvantaged students are an important and large equity cohort within vocational learning. 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.²² This is also the case with young people who leave school early, many of whom come from disadvantaged backgrounds.²³ There are several factors that contribute to this pattern.

As mentioned previously, the sector generally is complex, fragmented and difficult to navigate for disadvantaged students. They can feel daunted by trying to select a suitable training provider or course, especially if the most suitable course is not provided in their local area. 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.²⁴ Overall, this makes the experience for disadvantaged students in vocational learning challenging and problematic but there are practical ways to offer better assistance. For instance, research suggests that providing help with course choices may help increase course completion rates for disadvantaged students.²⁵

Similarly, the cost to engage in vocational learning 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.²⁶ For instance, the cost of tools, materials and clothing in particular is a significant barrier despite the fact that many vocational learning courses are included as options within school. The difficulty of finding (and paying for) suitable transport is another sizeable barrier for this cohort. The Review should ensure that in improving the support for disadvantaged students in vocational learning, that these and other practical challenges are addressed. The cost of program participation presents a daily hurdle for disadvantaged families and students that unless tackled, will continue to hinder engagement and completion rates in vocational learning.

The Smith Family recommends that the Review prioritise greater, sustained support for disadvantaged students to access vocational learning opportunities, including boosting their ability to find appropriate financial assistance to engage fully in courses, and complete qualifications.

7. Measuring education outcomes more holistically

The Smith Family recommends that the Review ensure that student performance and success are measured holistically across senior secondary schooling, including for those undertaking vocational

²² McVicar, D & Tabasso, D., *The impact of disadvantage on VET completion and employment gaps*, National Centre for Vocational Education Research, 2016, p 8.

²³ Myconos, G., Dommers, E. & Clarke, K., '[Helping Early School Leavers](#)', University of Melbourne.

²⁴ 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.

²⁵ McVicar, D & Tabasso, D., *The impact of disadvantage on VET completion and employment gaps*, National Centre for Vocational Education Research, 2016, p 9.

²⁶ Osbornem, K., '[VET's role in mitigating disadvantage](#)', 24 April 2018.

learning pathways. Currently, the Department of Education and Training measures Year 12 completion rates, VET course completions, Certificate III or above course completion and proportion of graduates with improved employment status after training.²⁷ These are certainly important indicators to measure. However, some students undertaking vocational learning may leave school early because they have secured employment and continue their learning via on-the-job training. It is important that performance indicators include these and other real-life outcomes that students achieve in the senior secondary schooling years, to demonstrate the overall effectiveness of the sector.

8. Conclusion

The Review is a chance to improve Victoria's vocational learning approach 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 vocational learning 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 undertaking vocational learning develop a set of technical and general capabilities to thrive in the workforce. It can ensure that the sector best serves the disadvantaged students reliant on vocational learning 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.

²⁷ Victorian Department of Education and Training, *2018-2019 Annual Report*, p 15.