



# **Review on Vocational and Applied Learning Pathways in Senior Secondary Schooling Submission**

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## The context

The context in which this response has been prepared is in the wake of the devastation caused by the Coronavirus (COVID-19). This crisis raises significant issues about the future of Australia, its economy and underpinning systems including education. Commentators of all persuasions offer similar views on the shortfalls in our capacity to respond to the crisis and suggest that our current direction needs to be reconsidered.

Greg Sheridan, *The Australian*, said “that a real possibility is that Australia comes out of this crisis intact and we end up with an Australian version of Euro sclerosis – an affluent nation crippled by debt, big welfare and transfer programs, wide government involvement in the economy, yet still low on our productive capacity”.

To illustrate this, he goes on to say that “it is surely scandalous that as the 13<sup>th</sup> largest economy in the world, and one of the richest societies, even now, 4 months into the Coronavirus crisis, we cannot manufacture ventilators”.

In considering solutions, Sheridan considers the necessity of diversifying our trade, services and supply line and reducing an over-dependency on China.

Further, Jim Chalmers, *The Guardian Australia*, said “the crisis brings to light what many Australians already knew first-hand: hollowing out the state hurts people. We are seeing the cold hard consequence of years of cuts and closures dressed up as savings and the outsourcing and off-shoring of services in the name of efficiency”.

Ken Henry, *Australian Financial Review*, said that “while globalisation has been a good thing, the nation does need to insure itself against risk. A nation does need to maintain the capacity to manufacture items critical to public health. I’m sure we’ll see a very different attitude taken by governments towards self-reliance”.

This type of commentary is pertinent to this Review as to how upper secondary education and the construction of pathways programs is structured.

Moreover, it would be expected that in rebuilding/restarting the economy and strengthening a stressed society, a key role will be played by upper secondary and tertiary education.

Australia is not well prepared. We have created a system of secondary education focused almost exclusively on funnelling students into higher education.

VET, a partner, with higher education, in our vague notion of what constitutes tertiary, has been bedevilled by impoverished ideology, a complexity arguably matched by no other education system in the world, four thousand training providers of uneven quality, a language of its own (training packages, competency-based RTO’s, etc.) funding inconsistencies, mayhem in regard to fees and charges, and a curriculum framework long discarded by counterpart countries, but which we have maintained and not changed in thirty years.<sup>1</sup>

The outcome of the decline in VET, and a policy focus on higher education, has been that over past decades Australia has hollowed out its workforce to such an extent that in an OECD survey it is the seventh worst performer in relation to intermediate skills held in the workforce. (*Attachment 1*)

In this regard, Australia sits alongside some of the world's worst performing OECD countries and least educated economies such as Portugal, Turkey and Mexico. However, when it comes to university graduates we rank seventh in the OECD. In other words, graduate numbers are out of proportion in regard to a balanced workforce.

High performing economies such as the US, Germany, Sweden and Finland all have a much more balanced skilled workforce with relatively small concentrations of low skilled jobs, strong intermediate capability as well as high graduate numbers. With the exception of the US, all these countries have fewer graduates than Australia.

Our skills imbalance compromises productivity. It renders us incapable of instilling confidence in the community that we can effectively respond and overcome challenges when global supply chains collapse and countries close borders.

It is not suggested that there will be a renaissance of jobs in the middle level, rather that we have run down our middle level workforce to dangerously low levels. The pandemic has highlighted this shortfall with many of the critical jobs such as enrolled nurses, aged care workers, childcare workers and technicians of all persuasions. Essentially these are middle level workers whose skills are developed through applied learning which is the domain of VET.

The OECD is due to release a new skills assessment of countries in 2020. We expect Australia's intermediate skills position will be improved. One might ask how is this possible given the decline of VET in participation funding and the concentration of secondary education on producing little else other than students with an ATAR.

It is because Australia has focused on importing skilled workers from overseas rather than developing a well-respected and resourced VET system, focussed on the skills development of its population.

To elaborate, in 2017 70% of Australia's migrants entered the country through skilled workforce visas and only one in nine of these migrants came to Australia with a university qualification. The balance of skilled workers was in skilled intermediate level occupations.<sup>ii</sup>

Continuing to import one hundred thousand skilled workers a year as a policy imperative, in the light of the crisis caused by the pandemic, is unlikely. If we are to increase the skilled intermediate workforce to rebalance to meet shortages, then vocational education and training needs to be reimagined, and the upper secondary education system reformed to provide a much stronger student focus/movement into vocational education.

### **The effectiveness of pathways into vocational and applied learning in Victoria**

A major difficulty in responding to the Review is that there is no publicly available data on the outcomes of VCAL, pre-apprenticeships, or school-based apprenticeships. As a consequence, whilst opinions will be

bountiful evidence-based submissions are challenged. This suggests that it is highly unlikely that our pathways are effective.

Australian education seems to be declining in terms of student performance. The latest OECD program for international student assessment indicates that Australia's fifteen year olds were more than a year below those in 2003 in maths, about a year lower in reading than those in 2000 and worse in science than those in 2006. An assumption could be drawn that our secondary education system as a whole is underperforming.

In 2010 Australia raised the school leaving age to seventeen. This decision was consistent with worldwide trends. What was unique about the Australian experiment was that we compelled young people to stay at school, but did not bother about curriculum reform despite an increasing number of low achievers and disenchanted students being forced into compulsory education. It was a missed opportunity in relation to reforming and broadening the purpose and curricular of upper secondary education.

In the absence of data, and in an effort to try and analyse the effectiveness of current pathways, three indicators have been considered.

- Analysis of student destination surveys published by state governments in Queensland, Victoria and New South Wales. Each state outcomes vary but the trends are similar.
- Sample statements about the purposes and trends in VCAL (Google search).
- Comments about pathways and pre apprenticeships from industry groups and NCVET.

### **Student destinations**

Using state-wide destination surveys, the impact of increasing the school leaving age has been that more students now complete year 12 than ever before and around 50% of them go on to undertake a Bachelor degree (55% in Victoria). These students most likely come from higher SES backgrounds, are non-aboriginal and metropolitan based. (Averages based on an analysis of destination surveys from Queensland, Victoria and New South Wales.) (*Attachment 2*)

For non-university entrants, including VCAL students, their outcomes are marginal, whether completers or non-completers. Their primary destination is into temporary, part-time and poor quality employment in terms of job security, earnings, work environment and future opportunities. Their primary employment is predominantly into food/hospitality, sales, labouring, community and personal services.

VET for non-completers and for completers is a declining proposition. A tentative conclusion is that if there is a decline in completers going into VET and preferencing low skilled jobs, then the pathways programs are ineffective in attracting capable students.

What is as disturbing is that of those who do choose VET many are going backwards educationally. Their choices are ad hoc and reflect poorly on pathways programs. A significant proportion of completers go into Certificates I to III (including apprenticeships) and large numbers of non-completers go into Certificate IV. This is nonsensical. Certificates I to III do not require year 12 for entry, whereas Certificate

IV generally does. Non-completers entering Certificate IV raises some quality issues about selection processes.

NCVER statistical classification places Certificate I lower than year 10, and Certificate II lower than year 11. Lim and Karmel argue that even a Certificate III is not equivalent to year 12 completion, but interestingly argue that if governments need a comparison for rhetorical purposes, a vocational alternative to year 12 should be at the Certificate III level.<sup>iii</sup> This is consistent with OECD and other equivalent studies.

The OECD, the EU and New Zealand regard Certificates I to III as upper secondary. (*Attachment 3*) It is difficult to understand, given the weight of evidence, why setting educational targets in terms of year 12 or Certificate II is perpetuated.

The destination studies provide evidence that a student who completes year 12 and does not go to university has sub optimal outcomes, and in some cases goes backwards in terms of their educational advancement. It suggests that pathways programs and vocational programs have been poorly constructed and arguably confuse students.

Secondary education is meant to promote equity and excellence and ensure that all young Australians are successful learners: confident, creative and active informed citizens as well as being literate, numerate and digitally competent (Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians).

There is no strategy in place to support the rhetoric. Ill-informed policy invisibility has left thousands of young people in compulsory education programs which have serious defects in terms of their progression, skills acquisition, clear outcomes and with career options and opportunities. Existing arrangements are entrenching inequality.

### **Sample statements regarding VCAL**

*Attachment 4* indicates the confusion around VCAL. Whilst it is nothing more than a random Google search it demonstrates public confusion about its purpose. Moreover, the reference to VCAL nursing in the attachment is simply untrue. Students cannot enrol in the Diploma of Nursing in upper secondary education. Students can enrol in an allied health assistance course, but this is not a prerequisite for nursing and it does not guarantee a student being able to enrol in nursing. Misinformation to the extent shown in this example reflects badly on the pathways programs and could lead to a student having his/her career aspirations shattered.

*Attachment 5* is a report in the Bendigo Advertiser reflecting various groups' perceptions about the status and the outcomes from undertaking VCAL. They are negative at every level and in all aspects. Extraordinarily the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority rebutted the comments claiming that VCAL was a well-established pathway leading to fulfilling careers with no supporting evidence.

*Attachment 6* is an extract from the Sunday Age *Letters to the editor* and reflects similar concerns about VCAL.

## Comments by industry groups and the NCVER about pathways programs.

The CMFEU and AEU in a joint research paper entitled *A Perfect Storm*<sup>iv</sup> recommend that:

- school-based pre-apprenticeship and apprenticeship programs need to be reformed as their fragmented and discontinuous nature means many students receive insufficient worksite experience to support classroom-based learning. Programs in schools should be aimed at giving students a taste of the industry and encouraging further vocational training at TAFE. (Recommendation 3.4)
- the NCVER should collect specific data on pre-apprenticeships, and private training organisations should be required to undertake adequate destination surveys in order to ensure they are not recruiting large numbers of students where apprenticeships are not available on completion (Recommendation 3.3 summarised)

In the same paper, the report indicates that less than half of the students to undertake a pre-apprenticeship continue with further study.<sup>v</sup>

The NCVER, in a paper on pre-apprenticeships and the impact on completion if students have done a higher qualification (above Certificate II or above year 11), claims that they are unlikely to complete their apprenticeship.<sup>vi</sup>

In a very limited study the in 2011, the NCVER looked at the effects of pre-apprenticeships on getting an apprenticeship. The findings were that if a student was not at school, pre-apprenticeships had a positive effect. Whilst the effect on students at school was uncertain.<sup>vii</sup>

The problem for students who undertake a pre-apprenticeship, and who on completion do not get an apprenticeship, and many VCAL students are in this predicament, is that they gain no positive outcomes in terms of employment as a result of their pre-apprenticeship experience. Pre-apprenticeships are a very narrow pathway to undertake. They may be attractive to schools because they do not require work-based experience but there is no evidence that they produce optimum outcomes for students.

The consultation paper claims that Victoria has a well-established system of vocational and applied learning pathways. Our analysis suggests otherwise. For students who complete year 12 and do not go to university their destination is primarily into low skilled jobs. Further study in vocational education training is a declining proposition. We believe that much can be learnt from reforms that have been undertaken in other countries.

### VET in Schools programs

We do agree with the comments in the AQF review on VET in Schools (p. 53) that in many cases students are undertaking low-level qualifications that may not be recognised or valued by employers.<sup>viii</sup>

However, we believe that VET in Schools should be located in years 9 or 10, focusing more on developing broader skills and knowledge rather than completing a qualification and should be delivered in Victoria's technical schools.

### **International reforms and Policy directions**

Internationally, governments concerned with an overemphasis on university education and a hollowing out of their intermediate workforce have opted to reform their systems. Typically in reforming countries students at the upper secondary level are offered two options:

- an academic option for those who want to progress to a full-time undergraduate course at a research based university, or
- a technical/professional option for those wishing to gain the knowledge and skills required to progress to skilled employment, either directly after leaving school or after high level technical education, such as a diploma or a work inclusive degree. Completion of the upper secondary professional years is by external assessment. This is designed to overcome a lack of confidence by employers in the quality and standard of graduates. (See earlier)

Reforming countries also have non-research intensive universities that focus on providing entry to higher education for technical/professional stream students as well as adults returning to study. These universities offer applied qualifications from certificate to masters programs.

As a step towards reforming pathway programs for upper secondary students, we believe the technical option of two years duration should be developed with the following features:

- a curriculum underpinned by applied learning and adult learning concepts;
- a curriculum organised around clusters of similar occupations within the sector. For example, health and science, construction or design etc.;
- clusters would have specialisations so that students could see a direct pathway to employment at the end of year 12 if that is their preferred option.

### **Implementing a redesigned upper secondary education system. The technical/professional stream**

A redesigned, i.e. the technical /professional option, would mean that Certificates I to III would be incorporated into a broadly based framework, such as the nascent T levels in the UK. (UK T levels are based around best practice in Scandinavian and Nordic countries.) We have previously commented and provided evidence that Certificates I to III internationally are regarded as upper secondary not tertiary education.<sup>ix</sup>

This would mean that training packages, but not competencies would be superseded. The curriculum would have, as a key component of the completion, externally assessed occupational knowledge and skills

as well as an underpinning assessment of literacy, numeracy and digital competence. Such a course of study is consistent with the goals set out in the Melbourne Declaration (see earlier).

Incorporating Certificates I to III into a more practical technical/professional option as part of upper secondary education would mean the jurisdictional and financial responsibility would rest with state governments. As such, the option would not attract fees.

This would mean that a strong case could be made for the Commonwealth to take responsibility for Certificate IV and above. This move would overcome much of the confusion that exists about state/Commonwealth funding and financial responsibilities.

Reforming pathways, as has been done overseas, requires a major overhaul of the curricular in VET and the creation of universities that focus on applied learning, and have strong links with industry. Any reform to pathways programs of upper secondary education must be supported by significant reform in the tertiary sector.

### **Raising the status of VET**

The OECD says that a strong VET system needs to be attractive to a diversity of students, including those with stronger academic performance as well as those who are less academically inclined. We agree with these comments. The OECD claims that evidence suggests that the declining popularity of VET may well be related to weak pathways to higher education and therefore VET is perceived as an option only for low performing students. The purpose of developing a technical/professional stream is to combine demanding VET and academic coursework linked directly to entry into work and/or undergraduate programs in university colleges.<sup>x</sup>

Most countries have developed hybrid outcomes for their technical stream. In Denmark, upper secondary VET graduates are offered direct access to the professional bachelor program offered by university colleges. For example, upper secondary VET graduates trained as special ambulance assistants or as social and health assistants with strong academic records, i.e. they have good grades in Danish, natural science and English, can enter a bachelor degree program in nursing at a university college or enter the workforce.<sup>xi</sup>

Other options for students is to allow them to seamlessly enter into a 12-month diploma qualification at the end of year 12 and, on completion of the diploma, take up employment and return to study full-time or part-time at a later stage in an applied program.

The degrees that students undertake, not only in Denmark but in other countries, are often called professional bachelor degrees and are issued in a dedicated tier of institutions akin to universities, but separate from them. They are variously called university colleges, universities of applied science or polytechnics.

The university college model is seen as a vital element to reforming both upper secondary education and vocational education in this country. This Institute has already written extensively on university colleges.<sup>xii</sup>



## Other issues

This review cannot be seen as distinct from the review into vocational education currently being undertaken by Jenny Macklin. Indeed, the Macklin Issues Paper raises this matter.<sup>xiii</sup> The suggestions made in this paper are that a technical/professional stream needs to be created in upper secondary education in order to overcome the massive void of intermediate skills that has left Australia vulnerable.

We do not believe that the technical/professional stream should be conducted in schools as they do not have the facilities, staffing, nor the diversity of courses that are available in our publicly owned TAFE institutions. Partnerships between schools and TAFE institutes could be explored. Victoria has developed a range of technical schools and we believe these resources should be used for VET in schools, and should not strive to provide a qualification.

We have shown that, despite available data, there are indicators that VET students in secondary schools are not getting optimal outcomes. The reforms that we are proposing in regard to the creation of a technical/professional stream in upper secondary education starts to bring Australian education into line with international practice.

We think that to attract a diverse student population into vocational education training it is necessary to not only reform curricular at the upper secondary and tertiary level, but also to provide substantial financial support to those adults and young people who decide to undertake vocational education. We believe that there are models that could be adopted, including providing students with financial support for education expenses, travel, childcare, tutoring and subsistence.

For young people, the drift towards low skilled jobs is primarily to earn some money. A stipend for students undertaking upper secondary VET studies, (i.e. the technical/professional stream) will attract a wider diversity of students, especially if VET is not seen as limiting their educational or employment opportunities.

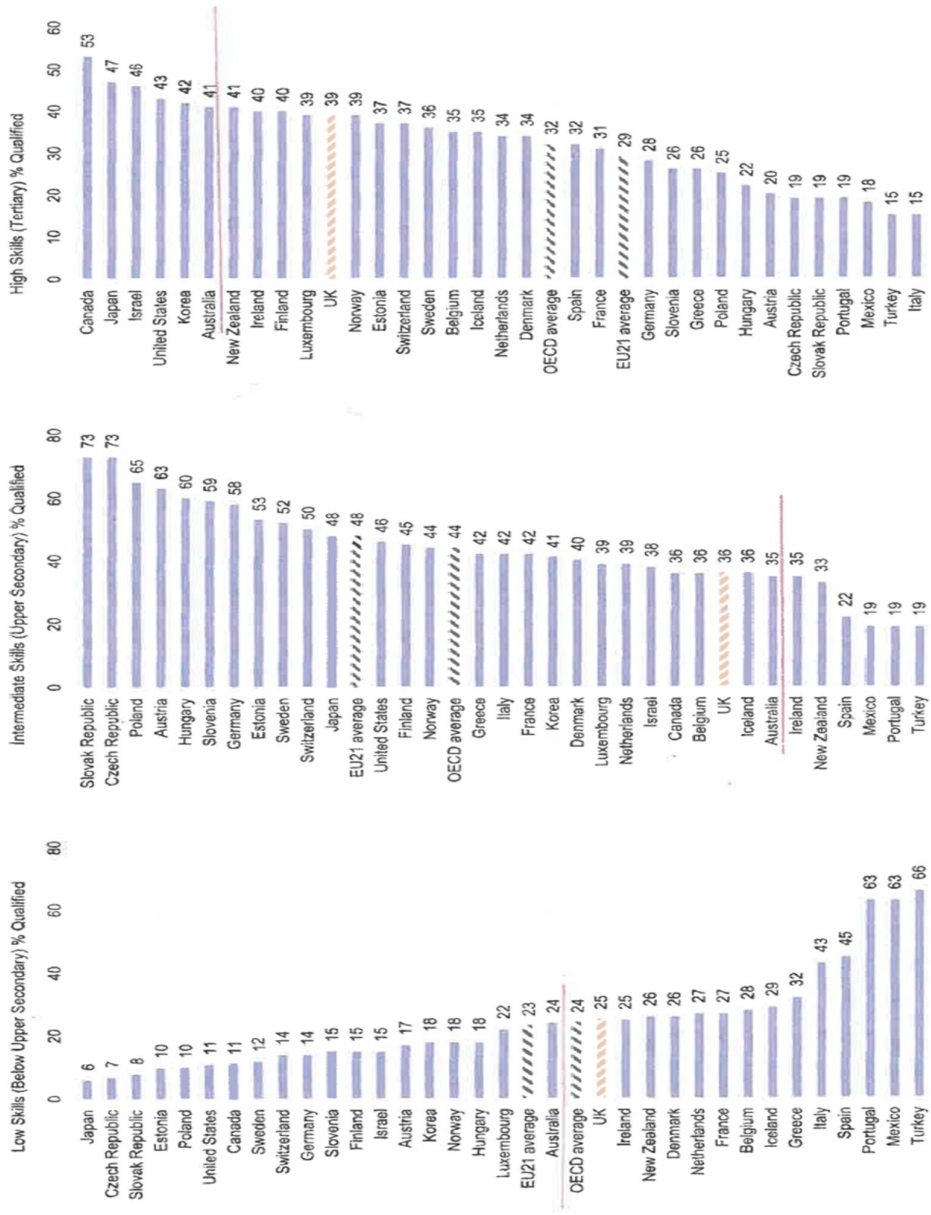
Costly? Yes. However, as the OECD in its 2019 country note for Australia illustrates, spending on general upper secondary programs in Australia is USD \$1,3543 well above the OECD average (\$9,397) and for upper secondary VET USD \$4,529 more than 100% below the OECD average (\$10,922)<sup>xiv</sup>.

The rhetoric is always about parity, seamless pathways for students and the importance of a skilled workforce. This rhetoric abounds in policy formation, but not in resourcing nor in practice. Reform is essential if Australia, let alone Victoria, is to emerge from this crisis as a country that can sustain itself where required. A vital part of that reform has to be the reconstruction of upper secondary and tertiary education systems. Fiddling at the edges is unlikely to achieve sustainable goals and will continue the trend of an internationally inferior education system.

Bruce Mackenzie  
Mackenzie Research Institute  
April 2020

# Attachment 1

## Current international skills position



Source: OECD Education Database and Labour Force Survey, ONS. Distribution of the 25-64 year old population by highest level of education attained. Excludes Chile.

## Attachment 2

### Destination patterns, Year 12 completers

Destination	2018
Bachelor degree	54.9%
Certificate/Diploma	12.1%
Apprenticeship/Traineeship	8.1%
Certificates I-III	2.2%
Certificate IV or higher	9.9%
Employed	11.3%
Looking for work	3.2%
Not in labour force, education or training	0.4%

Source: *On Track 2018: Destinations of Victorian School Leavers*. Education and Training, Victoria State Government.

Note: To reflect diversity data applies to government schools only.

### Destination patterns, Year 12 non-completers

Destination	2018
Bachelor degree	0.9%
Certificate/Diploma	19.5%
Apprenticeship/Traineeship	32.1%
Certificates I-III	11.6%
Certificate IV or higher	8.0%
Employed	27.5%
Looking for work	15.0%
Not in labour force, education or training	4.8%

Source: *On Track 2018: Destinations of Victorian School Leavers*. Education and Training, Victoria State Government

Note: To reflect diversity data applies to government schools only.

## Attachment 3

Figure 2. Correspondence between AQF levels and EQF levels

**Examples of national qualification types**  
See Appendix 1 for more information on how the levels compare  
(linked to the EQF via NQFs referenced to the EQF)

AQF		EQF
10 Doctoral Degree	8	Third cycle degrees (Doctorate) Higher professional qualifications EE: occ. qual. 'chartered engineer'
9 Masters Degree	7	Second cycle degrees (Master) Higher professional qualifications CZ: 'Chemical engineer product 'manager'
8 Bachelor Honours Degree Graduate Certificate Graduate Diploma	6	First cycle degrees (Bachelor) IE: Honours Bachelor Degree  Higher professional qualifications DE: 'Master Craftsman (certified)'
7 Bachelor Degree		
6 Associate Degree Advanced Diploma	5	SCHE qualifications Higher professional qualifications
5 Diploma		
4 Certificate IV	4	Upper secondary general education certificates; VET qualifications
3 Certificate III	3	Secondary education certificates; VET qualifications
2 Certificate II	2	Lower-secondary education Basic VET qualifications
1 Certificate	1	Primary education certificates Basic VET qualifications

Source: *Comparative Analysis of the Australian Qualifications Framework and the European qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning: Joint Technical Report 2016*

## **Attachment 3 cont'd**

### **New Zealand and Australia equivalents. Contextual background for levels 3 and 4**

Levels 3 and 4 on the AQF and the NZQF contain flagship qualifications (trade qualifications in Australia and New Zealand and senior secondary school qualifications in New Zealand) which are important considerations in the referencing process.

In New Zealand, the highest school qualification sits at level 3 (NCEA Level3). The results from NCEA Level 3 are used for the purpose of university entrance.

On balance, applying the principle of bet fit and substantial difference, the similarities of the learning outcomes for NZQF level 3 and AQF level 3 are greater than the differences. AQF level 3 and NZQF level 3 are comparable.

Source: *Enhancing mobility. Referencing of the Australian and New Zealand Qualifications Frameworks, ASQA & NZQA*



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The Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) is a hands-on option for students in Years 11 and 12. VCAL can lead to apprenticeships, TAFE and training courses, or even get you a job. Feb 21, 2018

www.youthcentral.vic.gov.au > study-and-training > high-school > VCAL

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#### People also ask

What is the difference between VCE and VCAL?

What Veal senior?

The Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) is a **senior secondary certificate** of education **recognised** within the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF). VCAL is a pathway to Technical and Further Education (TAFE), university, apprenticeships/traineeships or employment.

www.vcaa.vic.edu.au, curriculum > veal > Pages > About VCAL

Pages - About VCAL - VCAA

Search for: What Veal senior?

Can you do year 10 VCAL?

When was Veal introduced?

Can you go to uni if you do VCAL?

Students who choose VCAL are most likely to go on to training at TAFE institutes, start an apprenticeship or get a job after completing school, rather than applying for university, although a move into the VCE is not out of the question for students who change their mind.

www.goodschools.com.au | start-here | at-school-and-beyond | veal

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Search for: Can you go to uni if you do VCAL?

Can you change from VCE to VCAL?

Can you do nursing through VCAL?

VCAL Nursing is only available to VCAL Senior (Year 12) student. This course allows Year 12 students to begin their Diploma of Nursing, which can be completed the following year.... This nationally **recognised** qualification provides a pathway to an exciting **nursing** career.

www.chisholm.edu.au > courses > veal-nursing-senior

VCAL - Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (Senior) | Chisholm.

Search for: Can you do nursing through VCAL?

## Attachment 5

MARCH 11 2017 - 11:54AM

# VCAL students: they see us as the 'dumb ones'

- **Timna Jacks**  
Local News

Kaylee Stoffels believes that she and her VCAL classmates were viewed as the "dumb ones" at her old school.

"I would say the school didn't value VCAL like it did the VCE," she says. "They see us as people taking the easier road."

The 17-year-old says she loved studying the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning - the vocational alternative to the VCE - last year, and praises her "passionate" teachers.



Kaylee Stoffels. Picture: PENNY STEPHENS

A VCAL graduate at another school, Denzel, had a similar experience last year. He and his VCAL peers felt invisible.

"The kids who do the program think they're not as good as everyone else."

A two-tiered system has engulfed schools offering both the VCE and VCAL, with many students in the latter program believing they have been shunted in a system obsessed with the ATAR.

While some schools offer VCAL with pride, others are treating the program like a "second rate certificate", depriving it of resources and high-quality teachers, says Bronwyn Harcourt, principal at Croydon Community School.

<https://www.bendigoadvertiser.com.au/story/4523277/vcal-students-they-see-us-as-the-dumb-ones/>

VCE graduates are twice as likely to pursue study or full-time work compared to VCAL graduates, government data shows.

## **VCAL, the 'easier road'**

The proportion of VCAL and VCE graduates who are looking for work and not in education or training.

The picture is more alarming for girls. Recent data shows just 8 per cent of female VCAL graduates secured apprenticeships, compared with nearly 40 per cent of boys.

State government funding for VCAL was cut in 2011, putting a strain on schools still offering the program, says Professor John Polesel, director of Melbourne University's Centre for Vocational and Educational Policy.

It meant schools were forced to stump up the cost of the resource-heavy program.

"Anything in the vocational sector will require facilities and resources ... yet we still work in a model where we think we can fund it in the same way as we fund the teaching of English and maths," Professor Polesel said.

Vocational education has been linked with lower crime rates in Victoria, and is an important option for disadvantaged students.

But Mr Polesel says the program needs to better support girls, and offer students easier access to university.

Insiders also warn that VCAL work placements are either unsuitable, or not properly pursued, with one source claiming that students who should be at work placement are at home "twiddling their thumbs".

A recent Hume Whittlesea Local Learning and Employment Network program found 80 per cent of 170 local VCAL students were deemed not job ready by 40 employers in late 2015.

Executive officer Nicky Leitch says students' mock resumes submitted as part of the program were riddled with errors, while they struggled in job interviews.

"Most of the employers walked away with quite severe concerns ... we have a lot of young people who are a long way from being employment-ready."

There has also been a push away from VCAL by some mainstream schools eager to rebrand as elite institutions, placing enormous pressure on schools left to pick up the slack.

Ms Leitch says two independent schools in her region cut the program this 2017.

Mildura Senior College's acting principal Belinda Hudak said the school "highly values" both the VCE and VCAL.

She acknowledges there is "a misconception from some students that it [VCAL] doesn't have the same rigour and challenges" as the VCE.

The VCAL is a high-quality and rigorous program, that "really prepares students for entering the workplace", she says.

An education department spokesman says VCAL was "a well-established pathway" leading to fulfilling careers, while the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority has a "robust quality assurance process" to ensure VCAL providers meet the standards.

<https://www.bendigoadvertiser.com.au/story/4523277/vcal-students-they-see-us-as-the-dumb-ones/>



# THE AGE

COMMENT NATIONAL LETTERS

## It's as if these students aren't even on the radar

August 11, 2019 - 12.00am



To submit a letter to *The Age*, email [letters@theage.com.au](mailto:letters@theage.com.au). Please include your home address and telephone number.

Each year you publish the VCE success stories soon after the release of VCE results. High-performing VCE students are celebrated and details of their tertiary destinations are noted as they start on the next stage of their journey to achieve their career ambitions. You have also frequently published "Where are they now?" stories that explore, several years down the track, the lives of VCE students you have previously profiled.

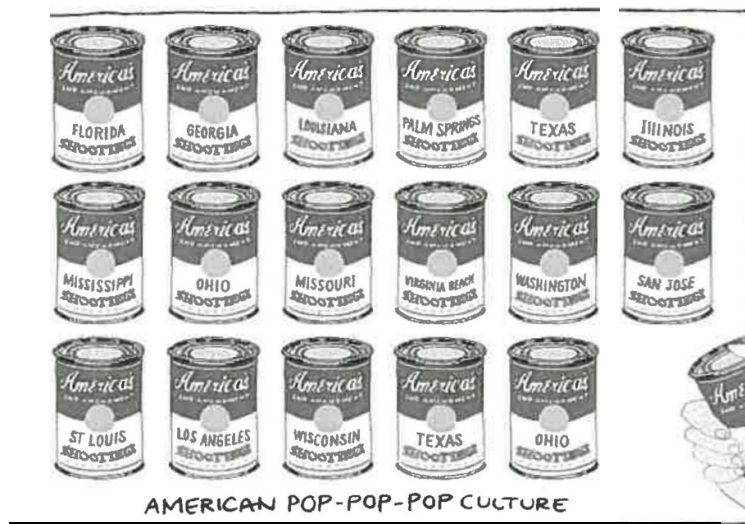


Illustration: Matt Golding

If the VCAL is meant to be the equal of the VCE ("VCAL is not VCE's poor cousin", *The Sunday Age*, 4/8), why is scant attention paid to students who have completed this qualification? I would not even know when VCAL results are released because, unlike their more prominent cousin, precious little media attention is paid to it. It is like VCAL students don't exist.

How relevant is the statement in George Orwell's *Animal Farm* to the status of VCAL and its students: "All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others"?

**Colene Bonello, Eltham North**

**Data is too hard to come by**

Although information about the VCE is published each year through the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, for the "VCE's poor cousin" we cannot find the evidence we need to make necessary improvements to VCAL. Why is that?

We do know some facts. For example, of the 24,000 young people enrolled in VCAL in 2018, more than 11,000 did not complete the certificate. However, we need to know much more. Who is actually attempting the certificate and for what reasons? How many find success? Why did they not complete? It is difficult to find out which schools are succeeding in their delivery of VCAL. If the data about VCE was this sketchy there would be an uproar.

If we really are serious about improving the certificate itself and improving the educational outcomes of these important young people, then we should certainly be demanding to know the facts. Otherwise VCAL really will remain the VCE's poor cousin.

**Peter White, Mount Eliza**

**Northcote High VCAL students say ...**

VCAL is not all finger painting and origami. VCAL is so much more than that. While VCE prepares students for university, VCAL prepares us for life. We know how to do taxes, write a cover letter, prepare a resume, and apply for meaningful work. We are prepared for work, but is the government prepared to work for us?

In our experience, VCAL has improved our confidence and self-esteem. This is because our school, despite limited funding, values the VCAL program by placing it at the heart of the school community, unlike other schools that relegate VCAL to the curriculum periphery. We are still at school because of VCAL, and will continue lifelong learning through VCAL.

**VCAL students, Northcote High School**

**Application of knowledge is the key**

Whether your studies have been completed by doing VCE or VCAL, in the long run it is the application of the knowledge gained that will make Australia into the "clever country" that it can be, and it should be this application that is foremost in the minds of all educators.

**Glenise Michaelson, Montmorency**

**THE FORUM**

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## References

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