

Integrating VET into the senior school: research findings on linear and non-linear pathways as a policy paradox

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ABSTRACT

This paper outlines the incorporation of vocational education and training courses into a senior secondary certificate of education, the NSW Higher School Certificate. New VET courses were introduced in 2000 to broaden the offerings available in post-compulsory schooling and to better cater for the vocational needs of students not primarily focused on university study, without excluding the latter option. This paper reviews the progressive implementation of dual recognition of VET courses in the HSC, and growth in participation through quantitative and qualitative data using official statistics to review enrolments and matriculation outcomes for students in the new VET courses. The qualitative data was collected throughout a three year ARC Linkage project on vocational education and equity in senior schooling, across a matrix of eight government schools in NSW. The paper presents new analysis of the data arguing that these reforms to curriculum and reporting of the HSC has led to a more integrated approach, and a better understanding of linear and non-linear VET and career pathways. The opportunity to have the outcomes from VET courses count towards university entrance was an important policy objective, but it remains unclear whether students take full advantage of this option.

Introduction

This paper reports on the findings and recommendations of a three year Australian Research Council funded study into Vocational Education and Training (VET) and equity in the context of senior school reforms in New South Wales, Australia. The study was undertaken by staff from the University of Sydney assisted by personnel from the NSW Department of Education and Training (DET) and from the Board of Studies (BOS) NSW. A paper outlining the goals of the project was presented to AARE in 2000, and this is the first opportunity to report on the outcomes of the project, some new data analysis, and our reflections on what the project achieved.

Through the late 1990s, as a major review of the Higher School Certificate in NSW proceeded (McGaw 1996, 1997, Aquilina, 1997), secondary schooling in NSW was restructured through policy interventions as a result of a timely but difficult collaboration between industry, the unions and government. The objective of this collaboration was to improve educational and economic outcomes for young people in Australia, through broader recognition of competencies and qualifications. One specific objective was an increase in retention rates for senior secondary education with young people encouraged to “stay on” (or return) to complete senior school and/or further education and training.

Thus vocational education and training in schools (VETiS) was intended to be a key link in this chain of planned events. Our concern, in shaping a project to research this issue,

was that VET might remain on the margins of what is important to students, and their families in getting through the senior school in a way that improved career options and life chances. We also hypothesised that the growth of VET courses might even, through a policy paradox, have some negative consequences for equity in education.

Government education systems and curriculum authorities, not only in NSW, responded to these changing circumstances by developing more integrated approaches to providing employment-related courses in schools. They also sought cross-sector cooperation where, previously, there had been protectionism and distrust between levels, sectors and providers. These responses are important given recent research that shows that, for increased job chances, the most significant stage of education is upper secondary school. High school completers are a third less likely to be unemployed in their early 20s than non-completers (OECD 1998, p. 8; see also Teese 2000). Hence the focus of this project: exploring changes to the new HSC in NSW with a special emphasis on VET, and on how teachers, students and families managed change.

I think it's a traditional attitude with the HSC, the more able academic students do the physics and the maths and the chemistry and the less able do these other things. I think attitudes are changing. I found that (change in attitudes) when I was talking to Year 10 this week about subject choices, the possible combinations and where a VET course might fit in. A lot of the very, very academically able students, ones that want to be a doctor and could quite easily get there, are doing IT. She sees that as something that's going to help her along the way. Another very able student is going to do Business and Office Admin. for the same sorts of reasons. I had another student talk to me about Hospitality because he sees that he's going to do a business course and he wants to work perhaps in the Hospitality industry in a management situation and he's one of the very, very able students and so I think they're now seeing the possibilities.

I think we're starting to get where VET is supposed to be but it's always going to attract kids that perhaps aren't going to achieve at a high academic level but it's giving them a vocation, it's giving them a reason, an interest to stay at school, there's something we can achieve. It's lovely teaching a (new VET) course, the competency based part of the course where kids do not fail. They can re-do it and do it until they become competent. There's nothing about failure, it's excellent for students that perhaps don't achieve well in other areas so I see that as a real positive for these students so I think it can suit both levels. (Bess, Business Services Administration, Hilltop High School)

While community understanding about the relationship between education and work increased in the 1990s, as the nature of work changed and employment options disappeared or evolved, vocational education has a long history of being perceived to be a lower level of study and thus having lower status in education systems. Until the new HSC in NSW, VET courses in schools did not carry much weight for students seeking entry into higher education, and did not necessarily assist with entry or progress through further education.

The “New” Higher School Certificate in NSW

In 1996, the NSW government published a Green Paper, *Their Future* (McGaw 1996), which set out a number of options for the reform of senior secondary schooling in the state. *Shaping Their Future* (McGaw 1997) followed, with recommendations for change. The subsequent White Paper, *Securing Their Future* (NSW Minister for Education 1997) set out the nature and timetable of reform. In 2000, the last cohort of students completed the "old" Higher School Certificate. When our study began, the first cohort under the new arrangements completed Year 11 in 2000 and sat for the "new" HSC in 2001.

One of the aims of these reforms was to make the senior secondary curriculum in NSW more educationally and socially inclusive. This was to be achieved by reducing the distinctions between programs of study that tended to separate socially privileged students from others, mainly through matriculation status (Lynch and Lodge, 2002). To narrow social gaps in educational outcomes has been a general goal of policy in the state, as articulated in the "Charter for Equity in Education and Training" (NSW Government 1996).

These reforms intersected with another agenda of change in Australian education: the restructuring of vocational education and training curriculum and the establishment of a national qualifications framework, alongside alternative entry to higher education. Together with very large changes that have occurred in the TAFE sector, there has been a growth of school-delivered VET courses and of the numbers of school students enrolled in TAFE-delivered courses. In 1998, for instance, NSW schools had about 22 000 enrolments in the former group and 24 000 in the latter. The numbers grew rapidly between 2000 and 2002, with sustained high levels through to 2005. As schools have provided more vocational education, they (like TAFE) have had to grapple with the problem of certification and accreditation, specifically with whether, and how, to fit their courses into the developing national standards framework.

This interconnected set of changes posed a significant equity problem. Vocational courses have, historically, been a vital educational pathway for working-class students, who were generally discouraged from participating in the academic curriculum. Though the old apprenticeship system and technical high schools no longer exist, vocational courses in schools and TAFE have continued to perform this function. But the logic of the HSC reforms was to reduce the differences between courses that tend to "stream" students. This could only happen if vocational courses were brought within the matriculation framework (i.e., making them count for the Universities Admission Index (UAI)).

There is a change now, in the culture that I can see with universities, in particular, now offering courses that are not just interested in the (student's) UAI. They are also interested in students being able to present a portfolio of experiences or portfolio of commitment and that in many ways gives rise to a greater opportunity of getting into those particular courses at university. I'm thinking of Hospitality and Hotel Management course at the Central Coast Campus where there's almost an expectation that they should have undertaken Hospitality at school to access

that university course. I think students have got to now think about not just doing traditional academic courses, but career planning, which is really linking their academic courses with Vocational Education Training or workplace training courses. And that, in its own way, will be a requirement, or prerequisite, for many university courses as well. (Bobby, Lewistown High)

These changes are an example of a problem-solution framework. In solving one area of concern, the solution could be the source for other problems to arise. First, students from more privileged backgrounds might "take over" vocational courses for their new matriculation benefits, thus making them less available to those students who have historically depended on them. Second, the curriculum of these courses might change from an industry-based focus to an academic focus, under the institutional pressures of credentialing, making them less accessible to students who enjoyed and performed well in subjects with a more practical focus. Either development could undermine the equity intentions of the reform.

Thus the broad aim of our research was to explore the educational and social patterns around vocational education in the new HSC, to gain a detailed understanding of what is happening in schools as the reform is implemented, and to feed back information to teachers and education authorities to help prevent these equity problems escalating.

The VEES Project

The Vocational Education and Equity in the Senior School (VEESS) Project was the first study into changes to curriculum and credentials in the new HSC, with specific reference to VET through the Industry Curriculum Framework (ICF) courses. As noted above, our aim was to inform policy development as it unfolded in response to implementation of "Securing their Future", as well as further our understanding of how reforms this large and comprehensive are expressed at the school level. The research was designed, therefore, to address these different dimensions as far as possible within the limitation of a three year study. The following section outlines how the research proceeded.

Research Design

The research involved fieldwork in eight public secondary schools across the state of NSW. This number of schools was chosen in order to, simultaneously: (a) represent the social and geographical diversity of the public school system; (b) gain enough understanding of each individual school and its community to understand VET issues in concrete detail; and, (c) remain within credible limits of time and likely funding.

In each school, interviews were conducted with students enrolled in Year 11 and 12 VET courses, their parents, their teachers in these courses, and other relevant school staff, in order to study how the VET agenda was working in the context of specific schools, families and communities. The project was designed to study the first two cohorts of VET students in the new HSC and, supported by a study of background issues, feed

information in "real time" to the BOS NSW and NSW DET to help with the development of curricula and other issues related to the implementation of new courses.

Participating schools

Selecting eight participating schools was a key task of the first phase of the project. The purpose was to choose schools that would reflect the diversity in the public school system. As well as VET participation levels and school location, differences in social class situation were central to the project design. In determining the latter, we adopted the NSW DET Socio-economic status (SES) indicators for disadvantaged schools, as poverty and other traditional working class identifiers are blended into this measure.

Data on schools were supplied by the Board of Studies NSW for year 2000 enrolments, and by the DET about region (metropolitan, regional, rural), SES status of the catchment, and Priority School Funds Project (formerly DSP) status of the schools. An index of VET orientation was constructed, using Year 11 enrolments, expressing total VET enrolments as a proportion of subject English enrolments in that year (as a proxy for total number of students).

All schools had experience of VETiS, or Joint Secondary School TAFE (JSST) courses, but varied in levels and rate of take-up. For the purposes of this selection, the number of new ICF courses offered was used as a measure of 'high', 'medium; or 'low' VET take-up in 2000. An initial selection of schools was made, according to the following matrix:

Table 1: School Selection Matrix

VET	SES	LOCATION
High VET	High SES	METROPOLITAN
High VET	Low SES	METROPOLITAN
High VET	Low SES	RURAL
High VET	Medium SES	REGIONAL
High VET	Medium SES	RURAL/REMOTE
Low VET	Low SES	METROPOLITAN
Low VET	Medium SES	METROPOLITAN
Low VET	Medium SES	REGIONAL

The project team then turned to individual schools and, in a lengthy process, discussed each school and its situation, to choose those most suitable for the project. This process revealed problems not apparent from the quantitative data. Issues considered included whether schools were already committed to research projects with DET or University, the exact regional context of a given school, and so on. Further information was collected about the specific pattern of VET courses offered by particular schools, so as to achieve a good spread across VET fields. In the end, a short list of about five suitable schools was compiled for each cell in the matrix, and the schools were ranked in order of preference by the steering committee.

The process of negotiation with schools was protracted and, at times, difficult. About half the schools initially approached were positive about participating in the project, and about half were not. The schools which promptly agreed to participate saw the project as potentially assisting them in the difficult period of introducing the new HSC, and generally had a specific interest in VET.

Other schools were less enthusiastic, seeing the year ahead (in 2000) as difficult enough without placing another burden on teachers' shoulders. In at least two cases of rejection, the school principal was enthusiastic, but the staff declined the principal's overtures on our behalf. In certain other cases, principals did not take or return phone calls, or were unwilling to meet with senior members of the project team to discuss the project. Schools with low VET enrolments (regardless of other factors) were the most likely to decline participation.

Fieldwork

The fieldwork in each of the eight schools followed a broadly similar pattern, though the timing and detail of each case was different. Members of the study team first visited the school and discussed the project with the school executive and VET teachers, collecting documents about the school and gaining familiarity with the setting. A program of interviews was then set up, with the assistance of the staff members who acted as the project's liaison in the school. In rural and regional schools, these were usually concentrated in time, during visits to the school by project personnel; in urban schools (and in one regional school) they were more spread out.

Whenever visits could be scheduled, project personnel attended relevant events at the study schools, such as a subject selection information evening for Year 10 students and parents, a Parents and Citizens Association meeting, an ethnic community parents' meeting, or a VET teachers' liaison meeting. VET facilities were visited. With the agreement of the teachers, many VET classes were attended, especially in "Framework" courses. Field notes were taken on all such events.

The main data collection involved individual focussed interviews with members of the three groups of participants: students, DET staff, and parents. The interviews were based on an agreed list of topics (see Appendix 1), but with freedom for the interviewer in terms of order, format and follow-up, in order to maximise rapport and improve chances of gaining fresh insights and understanding respondents' agendas. Interviews were audio-taped and subsequently transcribed in full.

By the conclusion of fieldwork in September 2002, 339 participants in the major target groups had been interviewed. Additionally three employers in the 'catchment' of one school were interviewed. The interviews, once transcribed, were analysed in two main ways, as family case studies and (combined with field observation) as school case studies. With the family case studies, interviews with parents and children were studied together, allowing cross-bearings on key issues, and also giving insight into differences of perspective. With some variations, the interview material was initially studied under the following headings, which embodied a focus on social class and community cultures:

- The student's enrolment, both VET and non-VET courses
- Family circumstances
- The family's general relationship with education
- Current family/school relations
- The pupil's educational strategy
- Educational choice, markets, and future expectations.

In 2004-2005, further data analysis was undertaken on the complete set of interview data. This analysis revealed social class and marketisation were the least prevalent themes or topics discussed by the participants. Thus a new set of topics most dominant in our interviewees' minds was then grouped under the following headings to fully explore:

- General views on the value (or not) of education
- Views on VET versus general/academic focus/choices
- Views on the NSW Higher School Certificate
- Choosing educational pathways
- VET at school or TAFE
- Teaching style/quality
- Professionalism/performativity
- Curriculum as a process of decision-making.

This new data illuminated a number of new findings and provided some qualifications to the early analysis. It is the new data that is the focus of what follows below.

VETiS and Policy Processes

Policy research has largely depended on linear implementation models, modified in more recent discussion by models that see policy as a cycle. We see policy rather differently - as an open-ended process of change or growth, occurring within a hierarchical context. There is no guaranteed direction of change. All policy ideas have the potential to improve or make worse the issues they are addressing.

Research evidence showing that policy decisions frequently do not result in the intended changes to practice can readily be found (Ball 1994, Ball, Maguire and Macrae 2000, and Crump, 2001). In the worst cases there appears to be a dichotomy between policy and practice, and teachers have to negotiate differences between what the organisation says (i.e. policy rhetoric), and what is actually done at various levels within it. Such a dichotomy requires practitioners to adjust to a work environment characterised by paradox and ambiguity, or to retreat into 'presentism' and just 'get on with' their teaching.

This means that there are often two schools in one: an official school as formally recorded in documents, and the unofficial school as it exists in daily practice. There is an interesting meeting ground in these sites between macro and micro politics that has rarely been exploited in researching education policy. As Ball (1994, p.10) argues, policy is part of the workings of the state but policy is also:

... text and action, words and deeds, it is what is enacted as well as what is intended. Policies are always complicated insofar as they relate to or map on to the 'wild profusion' of local practice.

While policy paradox and ambiguity are not unique to educational settings, the consequences in education may be particularly important. In educational settings we would expect that the most significant changes are intended to improve the educational outcomes for the majority of students, with the greatest benefits of change flowing to those for whom the system has traditionally worked least well (Natiello et al., 1990).

Macro policy, when it is effective, can result in micro changes (to school-level practices) that are consistent with the changes desired by decision makers, while also being tailored to the particular constituency of the local school, and the professional skills of the school's staff. Our task as researchers was not "to minimise or underestimate the effects of policy" (Ball, 1994, p.11).

But policy is not implemented all at once; it often has to be implemented in stages, reconsidered, and adjusted in a continuing cycle that is hard to structure and even harder to contain (Crump, 2001). It also contains a degree of what Ball calls 'ad hocery', though this can be a constructive element of contextualising the intended changes within the environment and according to the needs of the clients of each school.

It follows that the aims of implementation - in the case of our study, the aims of school-level management of VET in the 'New HSC' - should include the aim of enabling systems, schools and individuals to *continue the policy process*. For equity policy, this is possible only in an organisation where diverse interests are reasonably equitably handled - whether in a school, district or state office.

VETiS and Curriculum

Responding to these changes, the Board of Studies NSW developed eight industry curriculum frameworks. The frameworks were based on national training packages and define how units of competency drawn from these packages are arranged for the purpose of gaining unit credit for the HSC.

Wherever possible, VET courses in industry curriculum frameworks have been aligned to national VET qualifications and courses provide students with the opportunity to develop the workplace competencies, which the industry has determined are required by an entry-level employee. Typically this means that Certificate Level II and some Certificate Level III competencies can be obtained in a framework course.

The eight industry framework courses introduced for Year 11 in 2000 and Year 12 in 2001 were Hospitality, Information Technology, Business Services, Retail Operations, Construction, Tourism, Metal and Engineering, and Primary Industries. Enrolments in these courses for 2001 and 2002 are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Total Number of Students Completing Courses in Each VET Framework, 2001-2002

Framework	
	2001
	2002
	Year 11
	Year 12
	Year 11
	Year 12
Hospitality	9408
	6314
	9745
	7364
Information tech.	6100
	3351
	6902
	4559
Business services	3717
	2605
	3546

	2958
Retail	
	2546
	1571
	2875
	2043
Construction	
	2546
	1518
	2618
	1695
Tourism	
	941
	744
	886
	785
Metal & Eng.	
	1154
	667
	1176
	738
Primary Ind.	
	928

	575
	984
	672
TOTAL VET	
	27 340
	17 345
	28 732
	20 814

In 2002, the percentage of VET HSC units as a percentage of the total number of units was 13 per cent; up from the 3 per cent in 1995. While the Board continued the option of schools being able to propose VET courses for endorsement outside of the frameworks, only 10 per cent of VET units were taken in this manner. Thus the reform appears to have met the requirement for better articulated and more career focussed offering in VET.

Improvements to VET offerings in the framework structure include:

- a change in focus, reflecting the requirements of the National Training Framework, from modules of VET curriculum to units of competency;
- applicability to all providers so that HSC students undertake the same courses whether the courses are delivered by a school, by a TAFE college or by another Registered Training Organisation on behalf of a school;
- update of content to reflect changes in industry standards, particularly in relation to the use of technology in the workplace;
- the addition of different strands to enable the selection of a particular pathway that may lead to a specific occupational outcome;
- work placement requirements to reflect more accurately the length of the working week; and
- the inclusion of optional HSC examinations which allow students who wish to have results from the 240 indicative hour courses included in the calculation of the University Admission Index to do so.

One of the issues relating to acceptance of VET courses relates to how well students perform in them relative to other courses. Due to the choice of options, relatively few students take a common set of subjects. If there is a tendency for students to do better in their VET subjects than in the more academic courses, this is a desirable outcome from

the point of view of a pathway-to-employment in a specific industry. But do students see this as a viable pathway to follow, or are pathways becoming less linear as work changes and employment becomes a part-time occupation?

Influences of Student Pathway Choices

First we need to understand the influences on students' choices to stay on at school and which subject to select. Parents are one of the most prominent influences, though in two-parent families the advice can differ. One student told us:

My dad told me 'Do what you want to do, as long as you do well. Do what you want, as long as you have fun at it'. My mum was a bit more..."can you get a job out of it?". (Warren, Year 12, Electronic Technology at TAFE, Hilltop High School)

Whereas a parent confessed:

I said to her "I'm 43 years of age (and) I don't know what I want to do". How the heck is she going to know at 17? (Sean; Parent of Annette, Year 11 IT; Cosgrove Plains High School)

Another student explained:

I was going to choose really easy subjects, so I could come back to school to do easy work and like not have much homework, but then I found out I could choose these [new VET ICF] subjects that were easy and also I WANTED [his emphasis] to do them. (Edwin, Year 11, Retail and Primary Industries, Hilltop High School)

In many cases parental advice will be less influential than that from teacher or friends. On the other hand, Louise told us:

I was just mainly doing it [a VET/ICF course] because I wanted to. I wasn't concerned about my friends or whatever (Year 11, Business Services, Mayford High School)

Teachers tend to see parents as influential and devote a lot of energy to informing the home about what Year 11 and 12 offers, especially in VET, though this can be a losing battle. Pam commented:

I believe parents still indicate to our kids that they want them to do the academic courses; whether they're suited or not. (Hospitality teacher, Cosgrove Plains High School)

On the other hand, another teacher told us:

But now I realise that students do it for a variety of reasons not just to make a career out of it although its funny, a couple that I thought weren't going into it for a career have turned around and had success with it (Tony, Construction teacher) Cosgrove Plains High)

And teachers have noticed the outcomes of new influences from policy objectives for the new HSC in NSW:

I mean, you initially tend to think that the kids who do the Voc Ed courses are the lesser academic kids, but that's not the reality. The reality is that they're right across the spectrum. (Guy, Timetabler, Hilltop High School)

Leaving/Staying at School

Secondly, we need to understand why students stay on at school and how they see this helping them in life and for work. One teacher told us:

I think a lot of the 30 or so number of kids that come back – not all of them – a lot of them are very non-academic kids, that have made a decision to come back to school because they really haven't thought about it. In other words, the easiest option is to keep going with what you're doing. Haven't thought about it. They perceive that it'll be much the same as like they did before and get a shock to find it isn't. You know, there's a much greater expectation in terms of workload and the difficulty of the workload and so on. (Guy, Timetabler, Hilltop High School)

A student at Hilltop High School saw it this way:

I don't know if I'll make it to the HSC level. If I find a job or something that I want to do, I might just leave. But if there's nothing around I'll just keep doing school. (Bobby, Yr 11, Primary Industry and Retail)

Another student, in rural NSW, observed:

At the moment I am definitely staying at school, I may as well! But if they offered me a job it would depend on how appropriate it was and if I liked it. (Noel, Year 11, Metals, Kangaroo High School).

And this student was just coping with the 'here and now', without letting extraneous matters or issues get in the way:

I just want to get the HSC over and done with before I contemplate much on whatever else is going because I've got enough on my mind at the moment as it is. (Alan, Year 12, Retail, Campbell Heights High)

These feelings of ambivalence, and to a certain extent fear, about the potentially life-damaging consequence of choosing one pathway over another, was explained by a student at a very different school, the other side of town geographically and socially:

Even now I think maybe I should leave, but I really want to get my HSC. To be a chef, [so] I probably wouldn't actually even need my HSC, because I could do it

at TAFE. But, like, in case I change my mind, or decide I want to do something different, then I've got like my HSC to fall back on, and go to university even, or whatever. (Irene, Year 11, Hospitality, Valhalla High School)

Parents felt this ambivalence too:

Becky is enjoying her TAFE course, [but] where it will lead her, I don't know. We would encourage her to take a university channel rather than a TAFE channel when she leaves school and I guess we're talking prestige aren't we. (Brian, father of Becky, Year 11 Photography at TAFE, Hilltop High School)

For a number of student interviews, 'staying on' was a pathway to social activities:

I came back to school for the lifestyle. (Neil, Year 11, Metals, Kangaroo High School)

One of the dominant discourses was one of confusion and ignorance about where the pathway goes:

I don't really know what happens after your HSC. Like, I'm going to be ... "okay. I've done that. Now what do I do?" because I've been at school a long time [laughs]. So I don't really know what to expect. That's why I didn't leave in Year 10. I would have probably left in Year 10 if I knew what to do. They didn't have the Hospitality or the Construction course when I was in Year 10. And then they've got them in Year 11 and 12 so I'm like "oh well, okay". (Giles, Year 11, Hospitality and Construction, Kangaroo High School)

For some parents, the logistics of their child leaving school for something like a trade apprenticeship is too difficult to manage, so the pathway chosen was a practical reality rather than perhaps the preferred route:

You've got 16 year olds starting trades. You've got to get up at 4 o'clock in the morning and drive them places. Whereas if they go to school for another year and a half – if they stay at school it's a lot easier. They just get on the bus, you know. And you can afford it [if they stay at school]. And that's because we all work. Parents all work and all that sort of thing. And, you know, for mum to have to do it is just not that easy. (Cindy, mother of Bill, Year 11 Retail, Hilltop High School)

For other parents and children, the choices were more about opening up options:

Oh I think that's [new VET courses] good. Because, like, James wouldn't be here if it wasn't for that. Because that's the only thing that's keeping him in here. His TAFE, his Music, because he knows he's getting certificates and when he leaves, even if he doesn't do any good here, he can use them. You know, they'll stand up for him. (Thelma, mother of James, Year 11 Construction, Chelmsford High School)

And teachers recognised this aspect too:

The introduction of VET courses has made it possible for us to find more appropriate courses for some students to do because the VET courses are often better choices. But I don't think it has changed who's coming back at all. They either want to come back because they want to come back, or they don't. (Helen, Head Teacher Welfare, Hilltop High School)

Now the only thing we've got to watch is that they don't think that because they're in Year 11 and 12 – or their parents don't think that oh, therefore, the next step is university. We can give them a taste in High School, of the VET courses, but there has to be – you know, extended training institutions like TAFE, where they can move on to. (Roger, executive staff, Hilltop High School)

Reflecting on the recent expansion of VET in NSW secondary schools, whose story is partly told here, we think there are definite advantages to having vocational education options present in senior schools and easily accessible through a range of options and sites. The policy paradox is whether this ultimately will open up more choices for more students, or will wider constraints such as cultural capital and market forces steer students into choices that they would rather not make?

Conclusions

The NSW approach has been to include VET courses in the mainstream curriculum framework of the HSC, able to be taught at school or a College of TAFE, and to design the new ICF courses in such a way that they can be included in the university selection process (specifically the UAI - and most ICF course students have taken this option). This approach gives more opportunities to potentially disengaged students to find a pattern of courses that is comfortable and relevant for them, and still opens pathways to further education.

In doing this, the school system has faced some difficult questions: it had to reconcile two sets of demands - from the students and families, and from the Australian Qualifications Framework - in developing new courses; it faced staff training issues, problems about facilities, and questions about articulation with TAFE; it had to do all this in a short time-frame, in a context of wider change in the HSC, and in an era when public education is under challenge from within and without.

Given this demanding context, on the basis of our observations and discussions with teachers, students and parents, we consider NSW public schools have engaged meaningfully with a complex but useful reform. Whether students are able to take full advantage of these options depends on a number of factors, not all under the control of the school. However, improving the life chances of marginalised as well as mainstream students remains a worthy policy direction to pursue, even if imperfectly. On that basis the research made a number of recommendations (See Appendix 1).

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APPENDIX 1

VEESS PROJECT PROPOSALS

1. The Industry Curriculum Framework courses have proved relevant to students' needs and interests, and are valued by parents and the community. The Board and the Department should continue to develop and support such courses.
2. Vocational education courses at upper-secondary level perform multiple functions, educationally. They are not just technical training in a set of skills. Their continuing development - and any expansion that is undertaken - should maintain a strong concern with general education goals and with making senior secondary schooling more socially inclusive.
3. Support and training for teachers responsible for new ICF courses was an area of difficulty in the implementation. In further development of such courses, the Board and Department should give particular attention in the early stages to professional development activities and materials for teachers.
4. Work placement was an area where there was wide variation in practices between schools and between courses, and where problems of "saturation" emerged in some localities. Action by the Department to strengthen the District-level work placement agencies would simplify the task for schools (and individual teachers), and overcome some problems of duplication and competition.
5. AQF requirements for evidence of competency-based outcomes place a significant load on schools in terms of administration, storage, and teacher workload; this is a common source of dissatisfaction with ICF courses. These requirements should be re-negotiated and reduced.
6. Many parents, especially from social groups historically under-represented in higher education, have very limited knowledge of the educational pathways and mechanisms around the end of secondary schooling (e.g.: widespread misunderstandings about the UAI; confusion between school-based VET and TAFE). Further work by the Board of Studies NSW and Department of Education and Training NSW to develop "plain English" and community-language informative materials (electronic as well as print) will be valuable.
7. Contacts between secondary schools and families around educational decision-making are very uneven. (This is of course a deeply entrenched problem, not confined to VET.) Schools should be encouraged to treat this question as a major issue relevant to student welfare and educational outcomes, and should give VET some prominence in their strategies for communicating with students' families and the local community.
8. The role of employers in the work placement programs was also very uneven - and was the occasion of significant criticism by some parents and teachers. It is important to maintain an even quality in VET courses, to provide more explicit

- information for the employers about the programs they are helping with, and the outcomes expected for the students.
9. Gender differences in course enrolments continue to be strongly marked in vocational education, and it is clear that there are difficulties for students in making "non-traditional" choices, and sustaining them when made. The Board should specifically monitor gender divisions in this area, and work to design all vocational education courses so they are easy for both girls and boys to access.
 10. Schools vary in the way they implement central policy, and often have a lot to learn from each other. This can be supported from the centre by collecting and circulating (in publications and in-service conferences) schools' experiences of implementation, and successful locally-developed methods (e.g. timetabling, work placement techniques) of implementation.
 11. The expansion of VET in schools needs to be supported in initial teacher education as well as through in-service work. All teacher education programs in NSW should be periodically briefed on VET developments and research (e.g. reports like this one), and should be encouraged to make familiarity with VET a universal component in secondary teacher preparation.
 12. Staffing of VETiS courses requires constant monitoring as it is an area of high demand and shifting enrolments. Qualification levels, staff turn-over and absence, and school resource levels for VETiS are some pertinent factors that need to be reviewed annually if schools are to sustain effective delivery of VET in the senior school.