

Submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Training's Inquiry into Vocational Education in Schools

From: Ian Cornford, Faculty of Education, Building 10,
University of Technology, Sydney, PO Box 123, Broadway NSW 2007
Email: Ian.Cornford@uts.edu.au
Phone (work): 02 9514 3857

Summary

The objectives of VET in schools programs remain unclear generally. With regard specifically to NSW also there are concerns about: (1) the quality of the teaching of and of the skills taught in vocational areas; (2) the opportunity to learn appropriate work attitudes when a great deal of the learning/teaching occurs in the school setting and is taught by teachers with little industrial experience; and (3) the specific need for more general learning-to-learn strategies to be taught in secondary schools along with VET subjects. There needs to be much greater use made of the expertise of teachers in the TAFE systems and greater government funding and support for TAFE in NSW. The relationship between schools and TAFE in NSW seems to have fallen into a policy vacuum and there is a need for changes in policy thinking on VET in Schools more generally. Quite specifically there is a need to change the attitudes of young Australians and their parents to get them to recognise the importance of VET and TAFE in preparation for careers and the world of work.

Introduction: Historical background

The re-emergence of vocational education subjects in schools was a *de facto* recognition in many states that an academic curriculum focused upon preparation for university entrance was unsuitable for many secondary school students. The movement to vocationalisation of the curriculum occurred also at a time when unemployment for relatively unskilled youths was very high and there were political pressures to ensure that students left school with reasonable prospects of employment. While unemployment of youth, and specifically unskilled youth, remains a problem it is time for a re-examination of the teaching of vocational education in schools and of the aims for the teaching of vocational subjects in this sector.

Aims for VET in Schools subjects/courses

The Senate Employment, Workplace Relations, Small Business and Education References Committee's Report (2000), *Aspiring to Excellence*, clearly established that there was a lack of clarity of aims and objectives for these programs. Broadly speaking, the objectives for VET in Schools seem to fall into three categories: personal development, specific skills and work socialisation. There are clearly benefits in terms of personal development, such as increased confidence from gaining work skills, applying them and gaining acceptance in the eyes of friends and significant others. There is also the aspect of particular skills being learned that will prove to be of benefit in the longer term over the individual's working or personal life. The discipline of learning a body of

knowledge that is required to produce specific outcomes for a team, group or organisation is likely to produce longer term benefits. The more obvious types of skills that may be learned are things like computing skills with considerable potential for generalisation. However, given the rapid changes in knowledge and workplace management practices, etc., and the need to change occupations probably four or five times during a working life time, possibly the most important skills may be skills which assist future learning, that is learning-to-learn skills with these skills not really part of policy focus at present. The issue of these skills will be returned to later (see Attachment, Cornford, 2002).

Other purposes that VET in Schools type programs serve are to socialise school age students to the expectations of adult work, having respect for a boss or authority figure in the workplace, etc. In this case the VET in Schools subjects/courses act as a transition between schooling and full, adult work life (and/or further study). Many of these aims are not in conflict, in fact are perfectly congruent but such has been the development of the more recent VET in Schools programs there has been insufficient conceptual analysis underlying them. In NSW the VET in Schools and related Joint Schools-TAFE programs have been grafted onto existing structures. This has led to ineffective organisational structures and deployment of resources. If the VET in Schools programs are seen as making a substantial contribution to the less academic students, and I believe that overall the research evidence points in this direction, then it is time to reconsider how the programs and subjects could be better taught, resourced and teachers better prepared.

Availability of resources and different systems

Initially in NSW, with the push to vocationalise the secondary curriculum, it appears to have been recognised that TAFE teachers possessed significant resources in work experience and specialist skills. This led to joint schools and TAFE initiatives. However the movement of children between schools and TAFE, essentially still two separate systems in NSW although both under the DET banner, led to problems in terms of timetabling that was disruptive to school functioning and also in the costing of resources. In some cases there was anecdotal evidence of conflict over payment between schools and TAFE colleges in the two sectors. In NSW the practical effect has been increased attempts to retrain and use school teachers to teach VET subjects to overcome the timetabling and other problems while satisfying the demand from students.

The other major impediment to effective use of staff in different institutions, and specifically TAFE teachers in schools, appears to be partially an industrial relations and partially an inappropriate policy issue. In NSW state schools a minimum teaching skills requirement quite rightly has been a three-year qualification for some years. In the TAFE system there would be many good teachers who presumably would not be welcome in schools because they do not have three-year trained status. In effect, because of federal government policies, the minimum TAFE teaching requirement is a Certificate IV in Assessment and Workplace Training, which can be obtained through recognition of prior learning (RPL) processes in as little as 2-3 days. Even within the TAFE sector more serious researchers and policy analysts regard this Certificate IV qualification as totally inadequate. Australian society requires more in the way of qualifications for coaches of sport, that for most of the population only involves leisure activity, than for trainers providing people with the skills to earn their living. The Certificate IV has been revised

but it still will be nothing more than a ‘first aid/bandaid’ preparation for effective teaching.

Additional problems have emerged for the TAFE system in NSW which also have implications for VET in schools teaching. It is strong language, but I believe that the NSW TAFE system is in crisis as too are other TAFE systems in Australia, and for similar reasons. These are essentially that there is an aging permanent TAFE teaching force, with the percentage of full-time teachers having been substantially reduced all in the cause of economic rationalism. The result is an overworked permanent TAFE teaching workforce which is forced to shoulder the burdens of increased student counselling and administrative work to hold the fragmenting system together. Part-time and casual teachers are of course not paid to undertake these activities. In addition, government policies have increasingly made both school teaching and TAFE teaching less attractive career options. These include other major pressures stemming from federal and state government to ensure competitiveness between TAFE Institutes and the failures at various levels to ensure policy which recognises the importance and uniqueness of the TAFE and university systems and the worth of their teachers in financial terms.

However, if it is judged that VET in schools is of value, then it is argued that the TAFE teachers have much more substantial knowledge of the world work and trade knowledge than school teachers, and that this expertise of the TAFE teachers needs to be utilised more widely and effectively. It is much easier and more cost effective to prepare TAFE teachers, with their industrial experience and occupational skills background, with some developmental psychology and methods subjects to help them teacher younger adolescents. The alternative is to supply school teachers with substantial industrial experience and specialist occupational skills and knowledge which require many years to develop. Also historically lacking from vocational teacher training courses are subjects on teaching younger adolescents and the child protection training now a legal requirement for teaching children in NSW. Like the adolescent psychology and related elements, this last requirement this could be achieved for TAFE teachers relatively easily, although certainly involving the expenditure of funding on in-service education.

Problems with ‘the same old wine in new bottles’ policy approach

The re-emergence of VET in Schools, essentially an attempt at vocationalising the secondary high school curriculum, really was a knee-jerk reaction to a particular set of social problems and the attempt to find political solutions to these problems. In effect it is largely an attempt to put in place policies that had worked in the past with very minor variations. There was not proper analysis of the way in which the new wave of technological, economic and social revolutions of the late 1980s introduced new elements, nor could there have been given the circumstances.

The VET sector has traditionally been seen as the dumping ground for those who are not academically inclined. What almost everyone has now become aware of is the fact that the demand for much lowly skilled work has vanished and the labour market demands are for more highly skilled people and, in effect, people who can operate in more cognitively demanding ways (see Attachment, Cornford, 1998). In many trades areas, however, with the applications of computer and other IT technologies, the ability demands have risen, ie

there is a need for greater general ability to perform in the more demanding trades and professional areas. It is really no longer appropriate to consider the TAFE sector or VET as simply the dumping ground for those who cannot succeed in more academically challenging areas.

The trades and professional areas need to be seen as different but no less worthy or challenging than occupational areas traditionally accessed via university study. It is now widely recognised that teams comprising experts from a variety of backgrounds and perspectives are needed to solve business (and social) problems. People with a TAFE background provide an important practical counterbalance to those who are more theoretically oriented. Current estimates are that for every TAFE graduate who goes on to university somewhere between 5-8 people who have been to university return to TAFE to gain practical application skills.

Many VET occupations are more demanding than they were even a decade ago and the foundational skills need to be correctly taught by those who are highly proficient in the area. Unless the foundational skills are correct and secure there is a lack of credibility for those graduating from the VET in schools area, and there needs to be remedial later teaching to remove and re-establish correct knowledge and skills for those who seek to continue working in that occupational area. The replacing of incorrect skills and knowledge with more effective learning can present a major teaching/learning challenge in the skill performance area.

TAFE and school teachers are also operating with very different philosophies of learning. Because of industrial experience and knowledge of employer demands, TAFE teachers tend to set much higher expectations for behaviour. School teachers tend to view students as children who will naturally make mistakes: TAFE teachers view students more as potential employees with potential to learn like adults and set higher expectations regarding mature behaviour (see Attachment Cornford, 2000). For this reason TAFE teachers have much more street credibility with students and employers.

Learning-to-learn skills

There is a somewhat savage irony in the fact that the VET area, that has tended often to attract the least academically inclined, has also been one of the areas of the society subjected to the most fundamental technological change. As a result of the rapidity and extent of technological change there has been a consequent need for learning to adapt to the continuing technical changes. Change management is all about learning new things to replace the old. I have argued on a number of occasions (see Attachment Cornford, 2002) for the need to teach effective learning-to-learn skills along with the subject content that is taught in order to provide VET students with the skills to enable them to engage in effective lifelong learning. Such a radically new approach to teaching should not just be restricted to VET in schools students. All students in schools need to be taught these skills, but it is probable that VET students are most in need of such explicit teaching of learning-to-learn skills, which incidentally are quite different from the older study skills approach. The skills that I see as being most important, apart from cognitive learning skills, are metacognitive skills. Metacognitive skills involve planning, monitoring and

evaluation, with such skills quite central to general problem solving and also effective trade/professional performance in the adult world of work.

A need for change in community attitudes and the attitudes of policy makers

Many of the fashionable thoughts on IT, markets and economics that have driven policy making for the past fourteen years have proven to be less substantial than was once believed. So too in education policy there may be a need for substantially revised thinking. There are a number of issues that I feel have been too long neglected in current policy making.

It was important to recognise that not all high school students who stay on at school beyond the minimum leaving age are destined for university although unfortunately university education has been oversold by policy makers to many young people not suited to this form of education. Most adolescents are strongly motivated towards becoming adult and economically independent. They are thus generally strongly attracted to subjects that will, in their eyes, allow them to move in these directions. It is undeniable that the practicality of VET in Schools has a wide appeal to many adolescents and their parents as well as potential employers. However, during this period a very substantial, good general education must be provided for those many students who will not go onto university or unfortunately, in many cases, even other substantial, occupationally-related studies. Richard Sweet, now with the OECD in Paris, has argued this for many years and highlighted models from some countries which do this much better than Australia (see Cornford, 1998). It is apparent that the current non-VET subjects in schools are not providing this good general education base since so many school students seem to avoid further education. It is also doubtful whether the VET in schools subjects are providing the kind of initial, quality vocational training required since still approximately 20-25% of high school students are still not completing senior schooling.

The additional years at school provide the opportunity for further maturation, effective socialisation and the stimulation of learning skills that will later be important in adult life. In terms of current thinking there is potential for further development of learning-to-learn skills for effective lifelong learning. Generally speaking, Australia has lagged well behind most European countries in recognising the importance of lifelong learning and developing specific policies to ensure that lifelong learning is actively encouraged. The key, as I have argued in a number of papers and articles, is to ensure that learning-to-learn strategies are taught in addition to subject content at high school level and earlier (see Cornford, 2002).

There would appear a need for educational policies that maintain the balance between the schools, TAFE and universities. Each sector appears to have its own particular strengths and makes its own unique contribution. The importance of the TAFE sector is reflected in the fact that for every TAFE student who goes onto university there are somewhere between 5-8 university students who enrol at TAFE to gain specific skills beyond the theory. This is one reason why there is growing realisation of the need for closer links between the university and TAFE sectors and the need to develop specific policies to encourage this cross-institution study so that later in life TAFE students may proceed to university study or vice-versa.

Also important are attempts by governments to change community attitudes to the value of TAFE, and VET more generally. The university education option was massively over-sold to the general population in the late 80s-early 90s. The result is that VET and TAFE are seen as inferior long-term career options and many students who are really unsuited to university study, because of immaturity, lack of definite career goals, lack of real motivation for learning, etc., have opted to go to university first. The value of VET to the Australian society, and of TAFE specifically, needs to be re-established. Adequately financing this sector so vital for national productivity would be a good starting point.

References

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Note: Copies of the first three articles/papers by the author of this submission are being sent separately by post but are intended to form an attachment to this submission as they substantially flesh-out the arguments presented here.