

## Opinion Piece

### The VET roadmap?

A draft VET roadmap has been prepared by senior skills officials in response to COAG wanting a detailed plan to guide progress towards the goal of ensuring qualifications in VET meet the skill needs of the economy, drive productivity and growth and support social inclusion through foundation literacy, numeracy and digital educational opportunities.

According to the draft officials in all jurisdictions worked together to develop the roadmap and undertook consultations. The roadmap identifies seven destinations and each has three phases achievable in five years. They focus on credential simplification, improved teaching and assessment, reforms to the collapsing apprenticeship and traineeship system, better consumer information, stronger links between VET and higher education, improved workforce planning and better governance arrangements.

Some of the issues acknowledged are alarming. They are not new, but rarely identified in Australian government documents, even in draft form. In particular it acknowledges that assessment of qualifications has been repeatedly found to be inconsistent and raises concerns about whether the award of qualifications can be trusted.

Fraudulent assessment and the award of sham qualifications, along with the FEE-HELP scandal and the botched introduction of competitiveness has demoralised the sector and destroyed public confidence. For fraudulent assessment to still be a significant issue and acknowledged in a public official document is nothing short of disgraceful. Reform has moved at a glacial pace despite public opprobrium evidenced by collapsing enrolments.

The draft doesn't address some obvious weaknesses. The VET system is shrouded in a fog and a language that make it indecipherable to the average person. Training packages, competencies, four thousand undifferentiated providers, confused funding arrangements, episodic forays into new funding schemes, complex enrolment procedures and the differing needs of adults and young people are fundamental issues that need resolution.

The most serious shortcoming of the document is the absence of any discussion about linkages between upper secondary education and VET. Universities have a direct link to upper secondary education. The outcome for a year 12 completer is an ATAR: a university entrance score. VET has no links. VET for year 11 and 12 students is a declining proposition. For students who undertake years 11 and 12, whether completers or non-completers if they don't go to university their primary destination is into low paid temporary jobs.

Seventy percent of VET enrolments are in Certificates I to III. These are essentially secondary education programs. It is nonsensical for students who complete year 12 if they continue their education to go into Certificates I to III. They are wasting two years of their lives. They could have accessed VET at the end of year 10.

Internationally, governments concerned with the uneven outcomes for different social groups where secondary education is focused entirely on university entrance, such as in Australia, have reformed systems by focusing on creating two streams in upper secondary education:

- academic, for those whose aim is to progress to full-time undergraduate courses are research based university
- technical/professional, for those who wish to gain the knowledge and skills required to progress to skilled employment directly after leaving school or who want to pursue higher level applied professional qualifications.

For students who choose the technical option but wish to go on to study at a university binary systems are in place. Australia in the recent review into higher education institutional frameworks has expanded the university college descriptors which makes it now possible to develop applied professional universities (university college), to complement a reformed upper secondary education system.

Internationally the technical/professional option has the following features:

- curriculum underpinned by applied learning and adult education concepts
- curriculum organised around clusters of similar occupations within the sector. For example, health and science, construction
- specialisations within the cluster which can lead to a direct pathway to employment at the end of year 12
- an emphasis on literacy, numeracy and digital competence contextually designed and the successful completion integral to the award of the year 12 certificate.

If a key purpose of VET reform is to overcome disadvantage and strengthen occupational relevance its greatest challenge is in reforming lower level qualifications. Certificates I to III should provide relevant skills for entry level employment and/or educational advancement and develop underlining skills in literacy, numeracy and digital competence. These qualifications need to be directly linked to upper secondary education.

VET in its current form is an abstract arbitrary concept and isolated. It has no connection to secondary education or higher education. It should come as no surprise that VET participation is declining at an unprecedented rate.

Parity of esteem for VET raised in the draft is a misguided objective. Not all qualifications can be completely identical in prestige or content: that is true among academic qualifications, just as is true among vocational qualifications. Every country on earth has a status hierarchy for school and university level options. But there is no reason why vocational awards should not be seen to enjoy high esteem. This will not occur with the current VET architecture.

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9 March 2020