

## Where to from here? Why Australia needs a broader tertiary framework

In 2010, Australia raised the school leaving age to 17<sup>i</sup>. This was consistent with worldwide trends. Compulsory education was good for students and in society's best interest<sup>ii</sup>.

What was unique about the Australian experiment was we compelled young people to stay at school but didn't bother about curriculum reform despite an increasing number of low achievers and disenchanted students being forced to remain in compulsory education.

The impact of increasing the school leaving age has been that more students now complete year 12 than ever before<sup>iii</sup> and around 50% of them go on to undertake a bachelor degree.<sup>iv</sup> These students are most likely to be from higher SES backgrounds, non-aboriginal and metropolitan based.<sup>v</sup> (Averages based on Destination Surveys – Queensland, Victoria, New South Wales.)

For non-university entrants their outcomes are marginal, whether completers or non-completers. Their primary destination is into temporary, part-time and poor quality employment. Poor quality in the terms of job security, earnings and work environment. Their primary employment is predominantly into food/hospitality, sales, labouring, community and personal services.<sup>vi</sup>

VET for non-completers and completers is a declining proposition and their choices appear to be ad hoc. A significant proportion of non-completers go into Certificate IV and above and a large proportion of completers go into Certificates I to III. This is nonsensical. Certificates I to III do not require year 12 for entry however Certificate IV and above normally require year 12 completion.

On a percentage basis non-completers are more likely to go into an apprenticeship than completers.<sup>vii</sup>

Year 12 completion is an effective mechanism to funnel 50% of students into universities provided they are not from disadvantaged backgrounds.<sup>viii</sup> For the remaining 50% the choices made and the outcomes are suboptimal.<sup>ix</sup>

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.<sup>x</sup>

Hollow words. There is no strategy in place to support the rhetoric. Policy invisibility has left thousands of young people in compulsory education programs that have had serious defects in terms of their progression and acquisition of skills. It has entrenched inequality.

Reforming an inequitable system is a monumental task. Today's policymakers face issues not dissimilar to 40 years ago: containing cost when participation is rising and ensuring that the tertiary system is accessible and relevant to the labour market. But nowadays there are other challenges.

We have an entrenched monopolistic arrangement for universities. We have damaged the reputation of VET to such an extent that it is only exceeded by the damage the banks have done to themselves. We only have vague notions about what constitutes tertiary, we are uncertain what types of research and what volume of research we want our universities to undertake and we have not made strong provision for adults at the tertiary level.

We are not certain as to what are the relevant skills in terms of industry and labour market needs. We have never articulated our expectations in terms of reasonable levels of literacy and numeracy to be achieved by students at the completion of year 12.

We have created a policy framework which separates tertiary education into silos and preferences one sector.

We pretend that we have pathways (never defined) for upper secondary students. State government destination studies (as obscure as they are) clearly indicate that there are no pathways other than to funnel around 50% of the students into universities.

Perhaps the greatest challenge to change for policymakers is the rise of the middle-class in Australia. With it comes aspirations and status. All parents want their children to do well and status is a university place.

An OECD study *Dream jobs? Teenagers Aspirations and the Future of Work* found that many teenagers are unaware and ignoring the new jobs that are emerging as a result of digitalisation. It reinforced the impact of disadvantage on aspiration and a disconnect between qualifications needed and aspiration.

However a broader range of career aspirations were prevalent among teenagers in countries with strong established VET systems such as in Switzerland and Germany.

Strong VET systems are underpinned by two streams at year 11 and 12: an academic and a professional stream. The professional stream (vocational education) is conducted in institutions that have wide-ranging vocational provision and have the necessary facilities and staff to meet industry requirements.

Importantly the professional pathway qualifies graduates for a job and/or further study at a professional university.

Australia has made a tentative step towards creating a fit for purpose 21<sup>st</sup> century tertiary sector. The Australian government's reforms in relation to university colleges can be a key mechanism to strengthen and enhance the reputation of VET and produce positive outcomes and pathways for students. Students who know how to do things and importantly understand the why underpinning the how. They can become powerful new and different 21<sup>st</sup> century tertiary institutions.

Policy indifference to secondary and tertiary education that limits student aspiration and reinforces disadvantage is inexcusable and in no one's interest.

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### References

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Pathways references to be added.

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<sup>i</sup> Consistent with the implementation of the Commonwealth Education and Care Services National Law, the *Education and Training Reform Amendment Act 2009* (Vic) amended the *Education and Training Reform Act 2006* (Vic), to increase the school leaving age to 17 years (s2.1.1). In New South Wales, the *Education Amendment Act 2009* (NSW) amended s21b of the *Education Act 1990* (NSW), to increase the school leaving age to 17 years. In the Northern Territory, the school leaving age is 17, as set out in s38 of the *Education Act 2015* (NT), the predecessor of which was mandated by the *Education Assessment (Youth Participation) Act 2009* (NT). In the ACT, s9 of the *Education Act 2004* (ACT) provides a school leaving age of 17 years. In Tasmania, the *Education Act 2016* (Tas) s11(1) provides that a child must continue in full time education or training until they reach 17 years. However, in South Australia, s75 of the *Education Act 1972* (SA), s(2a) provides a school leaving age of 16 years, where a child has achieved a qualification under an approved learning program. In Queensland, s9 of the *Education (General Provisions) Act 2006* (Qld) defines 'compulsory school age' as being where the child is less than 16 years. In Western Australia, since 1 January 2014, the *School Education Act 1999* (WA), as amended by the *Education and Care Services National Law Act 2012* (WA), provides in s6 the school leaving age is to be until the end of the year in which the child reaches 17 years and six months or the when the child reaches 18 years, whichever is first.

<sup>ii</sup> The *Education and Care Services National Law* was implemented as part of the National Quality Framework (NQF) The purpose of the applied law system is to set a national standard for children's education and care

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across Australia. In effect it means the same law is applied in each state and territory, but with some varied provisions as applicable to the needs of each state or territory.

<sup>iii</sup> In 2018, the apparent retention rate to Year 12 in Australia for secondary schools was 85%, an increase from 75% in 2008 (ABS 2009, 2019, <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-welfare/secondary-education-school-retention-completion>, accessed 28 February 2020). However, see *Summary Statistics Victorian Schools*, 2019 <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/about/department/brochurejuly.pdf> (accessed 20 February 2020) The apparent retention rate for years 10-12 shows that it has reduced from 89.4 in 2015 to 87.4 in 2019, with the drop relating entirely to students in government schools. There was a slight increase in the retention rate of years 7-12, from 90.6 in 2015 to 90.8 in 2019, this again being directly related to government schools. The retention rate for girls at 94.4% is substantially higher than it is for boys at 88.5%.

<sup>iv</sup> See *Victoria On Track 2019: Destinations of Victorian School Leavers, Snapshot* – which shows that 55% of school leavers complete a Bachelor degree <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/about/research/OnTrack2018/snapshot-ontrack-2018.pdf> (accessed 28 February 2020); *NSW Secondary Students' Post-School Destinations and Expectations*, Social Research Centre – which shows that 50.9 of Year 12 completers complete a Bachelor degree <https://www.cese.nsw.gov.au//images/stories/PDF/Post-school-destinations-main-2018.pdf> (accessed 28 February 2020); and *Queensland 2019 Next Step Survey* which shows that 39.7 students complete a Bachelor degree <https://qed.qld.gov.au/det-publications/reports/earlyyears/Documents/ns-2019-statewide-summary.pdf> (accessed 28 February 2020).

<sup>v</sup> In NSW, females were more likely to be in a degree or traineeship and males more likely to be in an apprenticeship. Students with a higher parental SES were more likely to be in a Bachelor degree, whereas those with a lower parental SES were more likely to be in an apprenticeship. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students were more likely to be in a VET Cert 1-111 course or a traineeship. <https://www.cese.nsw.gov.au//images/stories/PDF/Post-school-destinations-main-2018.pdf> (p4) Whilst this level of detail is not provided in the *Queensland 2019 Next Step Survey*, it does show that 39.8 Indigenous respondents are in education or training, as opposed to the average of 58.6%. Further, only 51.4% of those students who are classified as from rural or remote areas and 46% of those from disadvantaged areas are in education or training. <https://qed.qld.gov.au/det-publications/reports/earlyyears/Documents/ns-2019-statewide-summary.pdf> (accessed 28 February 2020). The *Victorian On Track 2019: Destinations of Victorian School Leavers, Snapshot* fails to provide a similar breakdown. <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/about/research/OnTrack2018/snapshot-ontrack-2018.pdf>  
See also Victoria. *Student Completion Rates*. Auditor-General's Office 6.

<sup>vi</sup> *Victoria On Track 2019: Destinations of Victorian School Leavers, Snapshot* – which shows that in 2018, 29.9% of school completers worked as sales assistant and storepersons, with 29.7% working in food, hospitality and tourism. <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/about/research/OnTrack2018/snapshot-ontrack-2018.pdf> (accessed 28 February 2020) In NSW, 28.3% of completers worked as sales workers and 26.5% in community and personal service. <https://www.cese.nsw.gov.au//images/stories/PDF/Post-school-destinations-main-2018.pdf> In *Queensland 2019 Next Step Survey* shows that of the 64.8% of completers in paid employment, 35.2% work in accommodation and food services and 23.4% work in retail. <https://qed.qld.gov.au/det-publications/reports/earlyyears/Documents/ns-2019-statewide-summary.pdf> (accessed 28 February 2020).

<sup>vii</sup> In Victoria, the percentage on non completers entering apprenticeships was 31.8%. <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/research/pages/ontrack.aspx?Redirect=1> (accessed 3 March 2020).

<sup>viii</sup> See note 4.

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<sup>ix</sup> Australia. Bureau of Statistics (2015) 4235.0 Qualifications and Work, Australia, 2015 at 2-4.  
<https://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/mf/4235.0> accessed 1 March, 2020.

<sup>x</sup>[http://www.curriculum.edu.au/verve/\\_resources/National\\_Declaration\\_on\\_the\\_Educational\\_Goals\\_for\\_Young\\_Australians.pdf](http://www.curriculum.edu.au/verve/_resources/National_Declaration_on_the_Educational_Goals_for_Young_Australians.pdf) (accessed 4 March 2020)