

Labor review of VET puts vital changes in “too hard” basket, instead suggesting yet more bureaucracy

By Bruce Mackenzie

By 2019 Australia’s productivity levels were below 1970 levels. Well before COVID-19 hit, wages were stagnating, underemployment was widespread as was job overqualification. Labour market deficiencies have long been masked through migration to overcome skills shortages. But it appears this solution will be off the table for the foreseeable future due to COVID-19.

Australia will have to rely even more on enterprise and initiative to drive investment and productivity.

The OECD has found repeatedly that Australia has skills deficiencies, especially at the intermediate and higher intermediate skill levels.

All indicate an educational and training policy that is out of kilter. The disaster that followed the introduction in around 2010 of a market-based ideology that encouraged private providers to compete for government funding is the most scandalous in Australian educational history. Meanwhile VET enrolments are in serious decline.

In 2020, two inquiries were conducted into Vocational Education and Training in Victoria and their reports were recently published. The first is the *Review into Vocational and Applied Learning Pathways in Senior Secondary Schooling* by John Firth. The second is the *Skills for Victoria’s Growing Economy Review* by Jenny Macklin.

Both reports importantly advocate for the development of core skills and relevant standards (core skills in literacy, numeracy and Macklin includes digital skills); both suggest that existing arrangements are not fit for purpose.

However, neither takes the next logical step, a restructure that would create substantial and meaningful change. The reasoning offered by the Macklin report is particularly egregious. Macklin effectively postulates that an integrated tertiary sector is not achievable because of the dysfunctional relationships between the States and the Commonwealth. What a defeatist attitude, especially when the future of so many young Australians is at stake.

The Macklin cornerstone recommendation is yet another bureaucratic body - a new independent body called FutureSkills Victoria. Layering a VET system with another bureaucracy, no matter how well-meaning, is hardly the structural reform that Macklin identifies in the report’s opening chapter.

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Thanks to the Firth report we have for the first time in 19 years the outcomes of VET's flagship upper secondary education program - the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL). The outcomes make for particularly depressing reading.

The Firth report suggests that the fundamental purpose of senior secondary education is to facilitate entry into post-school education and training or employment as well as success in personal and civic life.

However, in 2019, one in three VCAL graduates are destined for unemployment or part-time precarious employment. More disappointing is that non-completers seem to have a better chance of gaining an apprenticeship than completers (so much for year 12 completion). In addition, not one graduate entered into university and only 20 per cent of graduates entered VET at the tertiary level.

Clearly the program is failing. The way VCAL was described was particularly revealing for the lack of respect it is accorded. Students described VCAL as "easier for dummies", that the kids that do it are "dumb", while school principals described using VCAL to provide for students perceived to be discipline problems.

Unless Victoria can produce better outcomes both educationally and from an employment perspective for students who undertake an alternative to the Victorian Certificate of Education, student numbers in VET pathways will continue to decline. This, in turn, will lead to an increase in students in academic streams, more demand for university places and continued skill shortages as even greater student numbers reject VET including apprenticeships.

The first solution is to integrate VCAL into the academically based VCE. Internationally, many advanced countries have strong tertiary systems – and have rejected an integrated vocational system and have created a vocational track in upper secondary education. Germany, Austria, Denmark, Switzerland and recently the UK have established a very clear distinction between academic and vocational tertiary tracks. These tracks can lead to applied further education and or employment.

Apart from Macklin's refusal to consider an integrated tertiary system, its other major weakness is that it totally ignores secondary education. This failure to consider secondary education threatens the viability of VET. Participation is falling and young people choosing apprenticeships as a preferred option is in rapid decline. Employers stress the unsuitability of applicants not only for apprenticeships but for a variety of jobs.

Macklin's report suffers because it confines itself to an educational policy that is based around an existing framework that creates arbitrary demarcations between upper secondary VET and higher education. All these arbitrary demarcations do is to marginalise VET and applied learning.

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Adding another layer of bureaucracy to a system that has no connection to secondary education - even though most VET enrolments are at the secondary school level - and none to higher education is anathema to what the OECD considers strong VET sectors. Weak VET sectors have residual links to student progression to higher education.

Structural reform is difficult and may cause some discomfort and lead to a realignment of responsibilities. Challenging the status quo is a precondition of structural reform. Structural reform means a reformed curriculum, tighter assessment, the development and implementation of core skills into all courses within an integrated tertiary sector that is aligned with a realistic industry policy.

The difficulty for educational reform is that the silos that have been created in VET limit the potential for restructuring. The two reports reflect that reality.

While both reports consider OECD views and describe arrangements that highly successful countries have or are adopting, neither takes the logical next step of recommending Australia takes that path.

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