The National VET Equity Advisory Taskforce

FINAL REPORT

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National VET Equity Advisory Taskforce Report

The purview of the National VET Equity Advisory Taskforce (NVEAT) encompasses a range of clients and issues across the full spectrum of the VET sector. This includes over 4,000 registered public and private training institutions nationally, with over 1.5 million students, undertaking courses ranging from Certificate I to Advanced Diplomas. Students may be full-time or part-time, in cities, country towns and remote locations, learning in classrooms, in the workplace and by correspondence / online.

In this environment the key tasks set for NVEAT were:

- to consider the common issues and barriers for all learners with the aim of improving the inclusiveness and responsiveness of the training system overall; and
- to consider the issues and barriers specific or unique to particular client groups.

NVEAT has undertaken a number of activities to gain a better understanding of the range of issues affecting all learners and particular disadvantaged groups of students in VET. This included:

- conducting a range of consultations with potential, current and recently graduated VET students;
- reviewing recent research;
- establishing an on-line forum where students can provide on-going feedback on their VET experiences; and
- investigating a national client service charter for VET Registered Training Organisations (RTOs).

Consultations

The consultations provide a valuable sample of views from a broad cross section of VET students. Participants were selected from private and public RTOs, in inner and outer city locations and in regional and rural areas, studying full-time, part-time and by distance learning or online. They included students from various backgrounds, such as people with a disability, Indigenous Australians and others from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, women, mature aged students and single parents.

Their stories provided NVEAT with a greater understanding of the needs, barriers, expectations, and attitudes of students, particularly in regard to their motivation to study, access to support and information, quality of teachers and resources and the relevance of course content to their employment goals.

The consultations included:

- a series of seven focus groups "The Student Experience in the VET System" conducted by Campbell Research and Consulting in New South Wales, Queensland and Victoria;
- a Roundtable with 50 students facilitated by the Sydney Institute of TAFE;
- a series of twelve focus groups "Equity in VET – An Exploration of the Student Experience" conducted by Market Solutions Pty Ltd in Western Australia, South Australia and the Northern Territory; and
- in-depth interviews with 60 students "Overcoming Barriers – Key Factors of Success in VET" conducted by TNS Social Research.

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A summary of the findings is provided at Appendix 1 and key points are noted in the 'Insights' section of this report.

Literature Review

A scan of research, using the Technical and Vocational Education and Training Research Database, identified a number of key research documents that formed the main sources of information for the review. Much of the research reviewed was conducted and published by the National Centre for Vocational Education and Research (NCVER) using funding provided by state, territory and Australian governments.

The review focused on research with a particular emphasis on systemic issues and barriers in relation to access, participation and outcomes. Overall, the various studies supported the qualitative findings of the consultations but also highlighted issues in promulgating good practice initiatives and pilot projects, and provided an insight into the views of parents and career advisors, who are a major influencing factor on study options considered by students.

Key points of the review are noted in the 'Insights' section of this report and an overview is provided at Appendix 2.

Online Forum

An online forum called 'Talk It Up' was recently established to provide an on-going opportunity for students to discuss relevant issues on their training experience. At the time of preparing this paper introductory activities for participants were being undertaken.

Client Charter

The development of a nationally consistent VET client service charter inclusive of, and responsive to, all equity groups engaged in the VET sector was considered. However, NVEAT determined that the new Australian Quality Training Framework 2007 (AQTF) addresses most of the areas of concern. The AQTF has three key components:

- The Essential Standards for Registration of training organisations;
- Standards for State and Territory Registering Bodies; and
- Excellence Criteria.

Together these standards assure Australia's VET system provides nationally consistent, high-quality training and assessment services for clients. Additionally, as most RTO's already operate under their own individual client service charters, a requirement to work within a national client service charter was considered onerous duplication.

The application of the AQTF is overseen by the National Quality Council (NQC). NVEAT recommends that the Advisory Alliance continues to work with the NQC to provide input and advice on the AQTF.

Insights

An overview of the consultations (Appendix 1) and literature review (Appendix 2) has been provided. However, the following key points are of particular interest.

- There is almost an infinite variety of potential consequences for people from disadvantaged backgrounds, particularly those with a disability, participating in VET. The impact of cumulative disadvantage means that a client group approach (one size fits all) is unlikely to adequately address equity issues.

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- There is a fundamental difference in the way most Indigenous Australians and the broader Australian community operate in terms of expectations and drivers to achieve successful outcomes from VET. Indigenous culture has a collective approach, placing more emphasis on relationships, group identity, and a sense of belonging compared to mainstream Australian culture, which is individualistic and encourages students to be self-reliant, competitive, and pursue personal goals. This fundamental difference has implications for the types of strategies that will need to be implemented to increase participation and improve outcomes for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous learners.

- Australians generally, do not understand the role of VET in providing a wide range of pathways to further education and training and there is an underlying intrinsic notion that VET is somewhat inferior to a university education. This is particularly significant given the strong correlation between parental advice and career decisions.

- Students who are studying after a lapse in education often have high discomfort levels in terms of course choice, academic expectations and assimilation into the student community. Greater support to assist prospective students with course choice and orientation would encourage students to make realistic choices about their course.

- While courses are generally chosen on the basis of improving employment opportunities, the role of VET in raising self esteem and providing general employability skills is highly regarded by learners and is often linked with whether they consider a course successful.

- The overarching concern with online and distance study is that success and the value obtained, hinges greatly on an individual's self-discipline and motivation without the routine and obligation of attending classes. These challenges are compounded by reduced access to computers and fast internet connections in rural and remote areas and the sense of learning and studying in isolation. Additionally, these students are often unable to easily access an RTO for the practical components of their courses and must travel significant distances, disrupting care and work commitments.

- Finance is a major concern for most students particularly as the cumulative impact of primary and secondary disadvantage often results in increased financial burden.

- TAFEs in particular were criticised for poor enrolment and administration processes, for not maintaining up to date text books, course materials and equipment, for requiring students to find their own work experience placements, and in some cases for having lower academic standards.

- Generally, students are very positive about the quality of their teachers. However, a teacher regarded as disinterested, or worse, discouraging can prove a considerable impediment for students already facing considerable barriers to study.

- Students noted a significant disparity between teachers, particularly those with recent industry experience and those with limited or out-of-date knowledge. They prefer teachers who are able to tailor instruction to meet the individual needs of students. Teachers need ongoing professional development to ensure they are up to date with industry trends and to ensure they understand and can support their students' differing learning needs.

- Students expect teachers to motivate and engage them to study if they lose personal motivation. Specific approaches to foster mentoring relationships should be considered. This could include formal mentoring programs, increasing awareness of the importance of mentoring relationships for VET staff through professional development and inclusion of a mentoring relationship in staff duty statements.

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- Overall graduates report their training as relevant to their job, although not all students end up in a course 'matched' occupation. The match between course studied and employment obtained is high for the technicians and trades group of occupations, but relatively low for most other courses.

- Upon course completion, students from disadvantaged backgrounds often found the transition to employment quite difficult, feeling at a loss to identify employment opportunities relating to their qualifications.

- TAFE institutes in capital cities have higher proportions of the most socio-economically disadvantaged students, with the most disadvantaged groups of students having highest enrolments in certificate I and II courses.

- In remote areas, prospective students consider convenient locations and flexible study as more important triggers to participate in VET than do students in major cities. This may result in students not undertaking their preferred courses.

- There is a need to develop ways to sustain the benefits of good practice so that the end of short term funding does not spell the end of the benefits and support for the client, nor the end of the learning and goodwill that was achieved.

Recommendations

On the basis of the work undertaken, NVEAT makes the following recommendations:

1. Improve community awareness and knowledge of VET as a pathway to employment and further education and training. Promote inspiring stories from successful past VET students and provide better information and training for career advisors.

2. Develop nationally consistent career guidance and development services at VET institutions to support students through transition from pre-training through to completion and employment. In addition, promote support services available to assist students with transition and increase orientation programs/drop in centres available to assist potential students to develop realistic expectations in relation to their future studies.

3. Continue to work with the NQC providing input and advice on the AQTF. For example to increase the level of professional development undertaken by trainers/teachers so they are equipped to meet the needs of individual students and understand the importance of mentoring relationships.

4. Improve links between the VET and higher education sectors (such as improved processes for credit transfer from VET to higher education) to maximise VET as a potential pathway to enable equity groups to achieve higher qualifications.

5. Increase ability for students to pay their course fees in instalments or delay payment until greater earning capacity has been attained. Ensure students are aware of all associated course costs in general course information.

6. Review the social security eligibility criteria for full time students to better align with full-time study requirements in VET. Under the current requirements, students often take on additional courses to meet eligibility criteria. This has a two-fold financial effect: additional upfront course fees and reduced employment opportunity.

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7. Consider longer term funding initiatives to promulgate proven examples of best practice and successful pilot projects that improve access, participation and learning outcomes for VET students.

8. Streamline and enhance enrolment, timetabling and other administrative processes through increased use of online services.

9. Increase course flexibility and consider re-structuring courses by clustering units into fewer days of the week to provide students with a greater capacity to 'earn and learn' and reduce the number of travel days required.

10. In regional areas where local employers are equipped with the materials and facilities required for the practical component of VET courses, consideration should be given to harnessing these facilities and knowledge so they can act as satellite training centres for students studying via distance and online.

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KEY FINDINGS FROM CONSULTATIONS

The following provides a summary of the findings from four separate consultation processes undertaken during 2007 and 2008 on behalf of the National VET Equity Advisory Taskforce. These were:

- a series of seven focus groups "The Student Experience in the VET System" conducted by Campbell Research and Consulting in NSW, Queensland and Victoria
- a Roundtable with 50 students facilitated by the Sydney Institute of TAFE
- a series of twelve focus groups "Equity in VET – An Exploration of the Student Experience" conducted by Market Solutions Pty, Ltd in Western Australia, South Australia and the Northern Territory and
- in-depth interviews with 60 students "Overcoming Barriers – Key Factors of Success in VET" conducted by TNS Social Research.

Participants included potential, current and recently graduated VET students:
- from private and public registered training organisations;
- in inner and outer city locations and in regional and rural areas;
- studying full-time, part-time and by distance learning or on-line;
- people with a disability;
- Indigenous Australians;
- people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds;
- women;
- aged 16-25, 25-45, and 45 yeas and over; and
- single parents.

For the majority of these students, their study experience exceeded their expectations and they provided positive feedback about their courses and teachers.

The role of VET in building self esteem and confidence was clearly important and considered part of the definition of a courses success. In some cases people undertook multiple courses specifically to improve their self esteem.

> *"When you have a mental illness no one really understands...I study to improve my confidence. Some days it is hard to go outside at all. If I didn't study I might just give up."*
>
> *"I want my kids to be proud of me when they grow up. I want to be proud of me too. If I can do this [study] then they can do anything."*

(Source - TNS in-depth interviews)

Motivation

Generally students undertake the VET courses they perceive will improve their quality of life through enhanced employment opportunities associated with obtaining a qualification. Those not seeking employment seek improved quality of life via engagement in the learning experience itself. This was particularly evident for Indigenous Australians who displayed pride in being involved in the education process and described themselves as positive role models who were active advocates of education within their communities. For Indigenous Australians

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VET has a role in community capacity building, developing cultural identity and building cultural role models for aspiring learners.

Some students choose VET as they want a hands-on practical course. For some younger students, or those without a formal qualification, the VET pathway was not necessarily a choice, but rather the only perceived option for further education. Older students with university degrees tend to see VET courses as a straightforward and reasonably unchallenging way of enhancing their employment or career prospects.

The method of training chosen by students often reflects their personal circumstances and the level of external support available to them. Younger students and school leavers generally study full-time, while part-time and distance learning tends to be favoured by mature aged students and those with additional responsibilities such as family/casual work commitments.

Factors of success

Along with increased self esteem, the development of workplace readiness and career advancement were key aspects of course success.

While community involvement and ownership of VET and the development of partnerships with the institution was found to be important for Indigenous Australians, these factors were not raised for other groups who placed greater emphasis on the individual and their personal characteristics in achieving success. This difference may be due to a difference in approach by Indigenous culture (ie a collective approach) which places greater emphasis on relationships, group identity, and sense of belonging than mainstream Australian culture which has a greater individualistic approach encouraging students to be self-reliant, competitive, and pursue personal goals.

While the support of the educational provider and quality of teaching were important factors for all students, non Indigenous students thought the characteristics of the individual were the most important factor for success. This was demonstrated in the stories told by participants of how they used their personal resources, most notably resilience and a positive outlook, to overcome provider shortfalls.

> *"I finished the course and I have a job now. It was hard with my partner unemployed...not having a home of our own...having no transport to TAFE...and a toddler. No one in my family has studied before or had a [white collar] job. I'm 19 with a baby. You have to make something of yourself...I know what everyone thinks..."*

> (Source - TNS in-depth interviews)

Whilst some participants, notably Indigenous Australians, people with chronic illness and the mentally ill (where disadvantage is highly pronounced) were conscious of their disadvantage and talked in open terms about breaking new ground, many others did not consciously locate themselves in a framework that included hardship and disadvantage, despite meeting this criteria.

Where individuals do not have access to personal, social and cultural supports, institutional support factors become more important.

Cumulative Disadvantage

One commonality for all students is the impact of cumulative disadvantage. Multiple disadvantages faced by specific groups or individuals interact and compound their effects on the individual. This may produce poor social adjustment, reduced literacy and numeracy, reduced self esteem, impaired cognition, reduced workforce participation, reduced social support networks, geographic isolation, lower socio-economic status and increased costs.

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Individual students from the same disadvantage group have differing needs; for example, the different barriers faced by students with disabilities. Juxtapose the barriers faced by a deaf student - the mentally draining challenge of watching interpreters all day or being unable to find an alternative should a regular interpreter be unavailable - with the barriers faced by a student suffering a mental illness - coping with deadline anxieties, difficulties establishing relationships in group situations and the display of impulsive (possibly aggressive) behaviour towards other students and teachers.

These two scenarios highlight the problems of a client group approach which often fails to take account of individual diversity within a broad group and may to lead a 'one size fits all' approach where equity solutions fail to meet the needs of a substantial number of disadvantaged students.

People experiencing cumulative disadvantage require a structural response to improve their equity. This may include training of teachers to better support and understand the needs of individual learners, greater flexibility in course delivery and requirements, and the use of specialist support teams to provide financial, health, counselling and social support and improved transportation and access to childcare.

Finance

Financial constraints were frequently referred to as factors contributing to difficulty in undertaking or completing courses. Participants appeared willing to sacrifice considerably important aspects of their lives, such as socialising and work-life balance, in order to meet the financial burden imposed by studying. The main issues were:

- **Upfront course fees:** While course fees may appear to be reasonable (e.g. up to around $1,200 plus materials etc.), for many this represents a significant barrier.

- **Unexpected costs:** Students (particularly at TAFE) did not expect to have to additionally pay for tools, supplies or equipment necessary to undertake their course.

    "We had a list of books to buy....never used them!" (Melbourne)
    "I had to buy secateurs - we never used them till the second term..." (Melbourne)

    (Source – Campbell Research focus groups)

- **Social security rules:** To be eligible for Centrelink payments, students must be engaged in full time study (a set number of hours per week). In order to remain eligible, students often take additional courses to meet eligibility criteria. This has a two-fold financial effect: additional upfront course fees for these courses and employment opportunity costs.

- **Travel expenses:** For those students residing in regional and remote areas where public transport options are limited, often the most practical means of travel is by car. With courses stretching over a whole week travel costs are exacerbated by the number of trips required each week. With rising petrol prices, car travel is becoming a major barrier to continuing study for those in regional and remote locations.

There was also widespread awareness of what were perceived to be quite large fee discounts for students with health care cards. This had the potential to cause some resentment and was considered responsible for encouraging non-committed students into VET who often dropped out of courses and disrupted the class for other students.

Information and Orientation

The reputation of an institution in terms of the courses it offers, the quality of its teachers and their industry experience, the resources available and the pass rates of recent students, are factors some prospective students took into consideration in deciding where to study.

Most students found gathering and accessing information about various courses of interest fairly easy, though there were instances of conflicting advice. Common sources of information included career counsellors/services and teachers, information booklets and advice from friends and family.

Those who are considering a return to study after a lapse however, often have a high level of discomfort in terms of course choice, academic expectations, assimilation into the student community etc. This could be addressed by institutions promoting the assistance they can provide to students in their transition into study. In addition, the establishment of orientation programs/drop in centres would assist potential students to develop realistic expectations in relation to their future studies.

Students suggest a need for better training for career advisors on post school VET options and to improve the perceptions of VET in the community.

Providers

TAFEs were criticised for poor administration during the enrolment process. This was not the experience of students enrolling in private colleges. Problems included: difficulty in finding the way around campus due to lack of signage or instructions; long queues for enrolment; insufficient time to pay their fees; sudden changes in course starting dates and inadequate time to properly consider course offers.

> *"I queued for five hours" – (Sydney)*
>
> *"It took me two hours to find the main admin office" (Brisbane)*
>
> *"No one knows what they are doing" (Sydney)*
>
> *"They just called and offered me a place… I said I'd need to think it over. They said "No.. you have to decide right now…) (Cranbourne)*
>
> (Source – Campbell Research focus groups)

Institutions could make greater use of online enrolment and timetabling services to save wasting valuable time in queues to overcome scheduling difficulties. This would bring about greater efficiencies and allow better student/trainer rapport as individuals could contact trainers for information prior to course commencement and throughout the course.

Often courses are stretched across the week, making it difficult for students to find suitable employment that fits with their studies. This is especially difficult for those who have family commitments that require them to be at home in the evenings and weekends.

> *"Too much time in between classes… there's a pretty boring class in the afternoon… we have to hang around for 3 hours…it's easy to skip it…. Most people do" (Melbourne)*
>
> (Source – Campbell Research focus groups)

There was a suggestion that class hours could be pooled so students can go to school one day and fulfil other commitments like work the other day. However, pooling classes may impact on some student's ability to cope with longer hours each day and increased amounts of homework per class day.

There was an expressed need for TAFEs to have up-to-date text books, course materials and equipment, with particular reference to the ability to access the latest technology. Students felt that institutions could provide better class materials by providing class notes and video recordings of classes online. This would reduce class costs and allow for more quality and informed contact between students and trainers. An extension of library opening hours would be helpful to distance disadvantaged students.

Online Learning

Online learning has been proposed as a viable alternative where access to classroom courses is a major prohibiting factor. Despite the benefits, those who had undertaken courses in this mode identified a range of limitations that were felt to compromise the quality of the leaning experience compared to face-to-face opportunities.

The overarching concern with online and distance study modes was that success and the value obtained hinged greatly on self-discipline and motivation without the routine and obligation of attending classes. Participants also spoke of a delay in gaining feedback and clarification of their understanding, leaving them feeling out of their depth and lacking confidence in their understanding of issues.

Online VET courses still require a practical component and this was often problematic for students. Frequently it resulted in having to undertake more travel than had been planned thereby unexpectedly increasing costs and causing difficulties for family care or work responsibilities. Additionally work experience placements were often difficult to arrange.

Support

There was continual emphasis on the importance of the provision of support and how this assists students to succeed. Students were usually aware of various support structures provided by their institution and generally felt confident about these services if required. However, some students felt that some institutions and teachers could be inflexible and not open to helping students who had child care, travel or work issues which could make punctual or regular attendance difficult.

> *"If you have a mental illness, you get no consideration. If I had the flu' I would get special consideration or people would get why I am not able to come to class. If you tell the teacher you were too depressed or anxious or whatever, they just tell you to get over it."*
>
> (Source - TNS in-depth interviews)

Students held expectations that teachers should motivate and engage them to study if they lose personal motivation. Specific approaches by providers to foster mentoring relationships should be considered. This could include formal mentoring programs, increasing awareness of the importance of mentoring relationships for VET staff through training and including mentoring roles in duty statements.

Language

Indigenous Australians identified language difficulties as a barrier, given that all lessons were taught in English which was not the primary language for most of these students, especially those in remote locations. This limits the ability for students to seek clarifications from their teachers and hence there is a strong reliance on other students for tutoring. In addition, written literacy levels for many of these students was well below that required by the courses they were studying. In some instances teachers were criticised for cultural indiscretions, and whilst students acknowledged that these were largely unintentional, it was found to be distasteful.

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There was evidence that some culturally and linguistically diverse students, because of language difficulties, lack the confidence to ask questions in class or to find out about the availability of resources.

Teachers

The vast majority of students spoke positively about their teachers for their positive contributions which were seen as important to student success.

Teachers were generally considered knowledgeable, although there were some instances where trainers lacked the latest industry experience. Despite the apparent abundance of quality teaching, a teacher regarded as disinterested, or worse, discouraging can prove a considerable impediment for students already facing considerable barriers to study. Students want to be taught by people who are passionate and committed to engaging with students.

> *"You can tell the ones that haven't worked (in the field) for a while. They tend to read straight from the text books whereas the other teachers (with work experience) just know it"*
>
> (Source - Market Solutions focus groups)

> *"I kept asking her and she kept telling me to read the page in the book... but I didn't understand..." (Albury)*
>
> (Source – Campbell Research focus groups)

Students who experience disadvantage often see the teacher as a critical person in their success. Some students had role models within their family; however, for students without family or peer group role models their educational mentors and teachers fill a need for support, guidance and personal affirmation. Mentors generally acted to inspire learners to see themselves as successful - providing them with the confidence to overcome barriers.

Students frequently raised concerns about the lack of access to teachers/trainers outside of class contact hours to answer questions and provide tutorial support.

Students generally felt that there was no recognition of higher levels of performance for individuals within the current competency assessment method. Students discussed the value of being able to demonstrate how well they performed when attempting to gain access to university, negotiating credit transfer or their ability to gain employment upon completion of a course as they are unable to show to an employer exactly how well they performed in their course.

Participants commonly mentioned the need for greater understanding from their teachers and administrators of the impact of disadvantage at an individual level.

> *"I'd expect that they would take into consideration my disability and the fact that sometimes I have to go to the doctor during school times."*
>
> (Source - Market Solutions focus groups)

Transition

Students expect VET institutions to foster relationships with employers and act as a 'go-between'. TAFE students were critical that they were required to find their own work experience placements.

In some instances students reported a gap between career advisor information and the employer and industry actual requirements. Upon course completion some students found the

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transition to employment quite difficult, often feeling at a loss to identify employment opportunities relating to their qualifications. Employers expect graduates to be work ready while students expect additional employer support.

> *"They gave me a tool at work that I'd never seen before. That was a surprise."*
>
> (Source - Market Solutions focus groups)

There is limited evidence to suggest that employers are familiar with colleges that deal with their industry and often favour a particular private college qualification over a TAFE qualification. Generally, community perception of private colleges is reported to be more positive despite an apparent lack of knowledge about what they offer.

> *"It's hard finding a job because of my disability and I expect it won't be any different when I finish. The TAFE should provide help with getting a job."*
>
> (Source - Market Solutions focus groups)

OVERVIEW OF LITERATURE REVIEW

A scan of research, using the technical and vocational education and training research database identified a number of key research documents that formed the main sources of information for the review. Much of the research reviewed was conducted and published by the National Centre for Vocational Education and Research (NCVER) using funding provided by the state, territory and Australian Governments.

The review focused on research with a particular emphasis on systemic issues and barriers in relation to access, participation and outcomes. Overall, these various studies supported the qualitative findings of the consultations. The following provides an overview of the findings.

Cumulative disadvantage

The notion of disadvantage which has informed VET policy-making needs to be reconceptualised. There are major shortcomings in viewing disadvantage in terms of abstract 'client groups'. Target groups for VET equity initiatives need to be specific groups of individuals who face multiple disadvantages.

Striking a balance between the pursuit of social and economic outcomes is essential for the success of community-based initiatives designed to address access and equity in VET. Indeed, for individuals who face multiple disadvantages, the pursuit of social outcomes should be recognised as an important stepping stone to the achievement of economic outcomes.

Future strategies (including performance targets and funding) should recognise diversity within equity groups as well as the effects of cumulative disadvantage.

Motivation

Students reported many personal benefits from their TAFE training; in particular, improving skills both generally and in relation to specific jobs. Students also reported their earlier TAFE experiences as being important to them, with nearly nine out of ten graduates and two-thirds of module completers rating their training as important to them two-and-a-half years later.

Not surprisingly, in remote areas, prospective students consider convenient locations and flexible study as more important triggers to participate in VET than do students in major cities.

Twice as many students from English speaking homes anticipated going to TAFE or other vocational education and training course than those students from non-English speaking homes. While significantly more students from non-English speaking homes hoped to go to university than students from English speaking homes.

Information

There is limited understanding of VET in the general community especially among those who have had little or no exposure. While parents often profess positive attitudes about the VET sector, there is an underlying notion that VET is somewhat inferior to a university education. Over 80% of parents in the study perceived that VET is good for people who aren't suited to academic careers. VET is perceived as providing a narrow set of skills that limits future career development; is mainly focussed on trades; and suitable for people who are not academically talented. This perception is particularly significant given the strong correlation between parental advice and career decisions.

Parents in remote areas strongly perceived that VET is an alternative if you are unable to find a job. Many students see VET as a pathway to university or further education.

One in three parents whose teenager was at a government school expected their teenager to commence or complete a TAFE or other VET course, compared to one in four parents whose teenager was at a Catholic school and one in five parents whose teenager was at a private school.

Good Practice

There are many examples of good practice initiatives that rise 'above and beyond' to meet client needs and that open the way to meaningful employment for clients. These are training programs that are built around a solid understanding of the needs of people from disadvantaged backgrounds including Indigenous people and people with a disability, that bring together community and relevant government agencies, that adapt and evolve as necessary and that involve people who are deeply committed to achieving outcomes for these client groups.

Despite the success of examples of good practice they are often not sustained, nor are examples of good practice often replicated across the sector. Funding is usually only available on a short-term basis. When one project is over, practitioners spend significant amounts of time hunting for alternate funding to continue the initiative or begin a new one.

There is a need to develop ways of sustaining the benefits of good practice so that the end of funding does not spell the end of the benefits and support for the clients, nor the end of the learning and goodwill that was achieved.

Resources

Although good-quality learning resources are available via websites and pamphlets, their existence is not enough to ensure that they will actually be used. Longer-term funding models would allow resource developers to build in pre-production consultation, trialling and marketing of the resources, as well as post-production tracking of their use and usefulness.

Promotion of resources as accessible for all learners, in addition to those with 'special needs', will encourage greater usefulness within the entire VET sector and provide a better return for the considerable public and professional investment.

There are a number of trade courses where it makes sense to design the course around a particular occupational setting. These courses would appear to fit very naturally into the world of training packages developed by Industry Skills Councils. However, the majority of courses do not fit into this pattern, and the majority of graduates do not end up in the occupation which is the 'intended' occupation for the course. Most of VET is generic in this sense. This does not imply that the industry focus of VET is wrong, but it does imply that course designers need to be very wary of the range of contexts in which graduates are likely to use the skills they have acquired. It also implies that planners need to be wary of trying to match training to particular occupations. This view is supported by the finding that the distribution of employment after completion of vocational training bears closer correspondence to the overall workforce distribution of employment than it does to the intended areas of training.

Online Learning

It requires vision, leadership and some fundamental changes to policies and practices to successfully implement online learning. Networks and partnerships need to be fostered not only across sectors of education and between providers but also between a far wider range of organisations and community groups. Relationships between providers and employers on the one hand, and with key local and regional community groups on the other, need to be developed and maintained.

Another recurrent theme is the need for professional development in a wide range of areas to help teachers make better use of online learning and delivery, particularly in areas of assessment, evaluation and online facilitation, and the management of self-paced groups.

Additionally, the relative speed and stability of internet access is an issue particularly in regional Australia and must be considered in course delivery.

Quality

The concept of quality provokes different responses from VET stakeholders. Some focus on managing quality systems and quality indicators, while others focus on creating cultures to stimulate continuous improvement. Ideally, both perspectives are needed.

VET practitioners need to extend their existing skills to meet the challenges of the new VET environment, which includes a range of learning styles, new assessment practices, diversity of clients (from industry to individual students) with a diversity of requirements (such as customised service), and enhanced technologies. This will include coaching, mentoring, industry release and work shadowing as well as participating in networks, communities of practice and professional conversations.

Partnerships and networks support the achievement of high-quality teaching, learning and assessment by encouraging the exchange of information, ideas, techniques and approaches between VET practitioners, their clients and industry representatives.

Finance

Students from low socio economic areas are more likely to study certificate I and II level course than certificate II and above. This may indicate the cultural emphasis upon gaining entry to the work force as soon as practical.

Socio-economic status as a barrier to participation in VET may be best understood as a force acting to compound disadvantage rather than a stand alone barrier. For example, the challenges facing a student with an intellectual disability may result in increased costs (such as transport and carer costs) and this makes socioeconomic status more important.

TAFE institutes in capital cities have a higher proportion of the most socio-economically disadvantaged students with the most disadvantaged groups of students having highest enrolments in certificate I and II courses.

Transitions

In regard to increased income, students who already have low-level qualifications (certificate II or below) benefit most from undertaking and particularly by completing qualifications at certificate III, IV or higher. Those who already have higher-level qualifications (certificate IV or higher) are less likely to gain a direct wage benefit from undertaking or completing a further VET qualification.

While not all students are employed immediately after their training their employment outcomes do improve over time. Around two-thirds of students (participating in this study) who were unemployed in 2002 were employed by September 2004.

Graduates overall mostly report their training as relevant to their job, despite not always ending up in the 'matched' occupation. The match between what people study in VET and the jobs they then get is high for the technicians and trades group of occupations, but relatively low for most other courses. Clearly there are examples of wastage in the sector, where graduates do

not end up in jobs where the training is relevant. This should be of concern to planners and to potential students.

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