

Enhancing the status of VET: information sheet

In this information sheet, a set of strategies identified from the interview and survey data is used to suggest practical strategies that might be taken by: i) government and industry, ii) schools and schooling systems and iii) vocational education institutions.

These three sets of strategies are now presented in turn.

What practical steps might government and industry take

It seems school students generally and many of their parents and teachers have limited knowledge of contemporary vocational education and training (VET) and the occupations it serves as a post-school option. That knowledge is largely premised on their personal experience. This renders them unfamiliar with the requirements of VET-related occupations, the nature and the kinds of skills young people need and appropriate educational pathways, and how these contribute to meeting the nation's skill needs.

Schools and VET institutions, however, mostly do not have the knowledge or resources to present that sort of broader information. Moreover, if they were to promote these, there is a risk that this would be seen as institutional marketing not public education.

Therefore, it requires higher level leadership, from government and industry, to demonstrate, broadcast and champion the significance of such occupations and the demands of skilful work associated with them, as well as the central role of these industries for the development of Australia, as well as to take sector-level action to enhance the attractiveness of VET. Some of these may well be longer-term strategies.

Consequently, in addition to the public education strategies for VET suggested in other documents, specific strategies might include:

Enhancing the attractiveness of VET

TAFE has an image problem – buildings and facilities are generally seen as old in comparison to universities. Also, whilst efforts are made to present VET institutions as resembling workplaces, there is also a need for these environments to be convivial and attractive to young people. It seems that university campuses are perceived to offer a social and physical environment that is far more attractive to young people, than those in vocational education institutions. So, there is a need to:

- Secure the direct involvement of industry, enterprises and professional associations in promoting occupations that are prepared within VET.
- Portray modern facilities in any broad public presentation of VET as a social marketing tool.

Promoting VET-related occupations

- Industries with skills shortages, in particular, could co-present with VET providers at major career events and focus on being relevant to the needs of young people;
- Industries could be more pro-active in being represented at major school prize-giving events and sponsoring VET scholarships and internships;
- Have local events where parents can share their stories of occupations and career passages with others, and at the same time learn from others about diverse occupations and pathways;
- Identify ways in which those who are undecided about their postschool pathways can come to understand the requirements for VET; and
- Hold a major conference on the changing face of VET and related occupations and subsidise key teachers and career advisers to attend, to get them enthusiastic about VET.

What practical steps might schools and schooling systems take

Four main considerations for schools emerged from the research:

1. Level of parents' knowledge of VET and engagement with schools
2. Level of teachers' knowledge of VET
3. Level of students' knowledge of VET
4. Management attitudes to VET in schools and as a post-school pathway

Level of parents' knowledge of VET, the occupations it serves and engagement with schools

Parents are generally not held to be knowledgeable about VET, nor strongly engaged with schools in career choices. They may also not have considered VET as a post-school option for their child/children either through ignorance of its possibilities or as an increasing preference for university studies. This is an issue outside the control of schools, so the options at that level are limited. Possible strategies include:

- Promoting VET as a worthwhile and viable option from when students first enrol, on the assumption that parents/carers are likely to be most engaged at that point
- Continually promoting VET in every year of high school through newsletters, other school communications with parents, career nights, parent-teacher interviews, etc, i.e. on every occasion there is a meaningful interaction with parents
- Make sure parents are aware of any government media campaign promoting VET, e.g. the school could send them the link to digital material.

Level of teachers' knowledge of VET

Teachers are not always knowledgeable about VET or the occupations it serves, basing advice on their own (possibly limited) experiences. Yet, students see them as highly influential in career choices. Teachers often acknowledge no direct experience of VET and an incomplete knowledge of its offerings and enrolment procedures. So, VET institutions themselves can be more pro-active in their links with schools, but schools can also:

- Organise familiarisation tours of VET facilities for teachers, as part of teachers' professional development
- Equip career advisers and others in the school who take on this role with sufficient knowledge to advise students authentically and individually.

Level of students' knowledge of VET

In general, the students seem not very knowledgeable about VET post-school options. The research showed that students' lack of knowledge of VET options post-school is sometimes due to lack of guidance on where to look for it, and sometimes to their own apathy. Overcoming apathy and disinterest may only come with having to make decisions, even post school, but in the meantime schools can:

- Provide students with links to websites that show examples of VET training and related occupations
- Invite high-profile VET graduates or celebrities to talk to students about VET as an alternative to university
- Provide more personalised career information about VET training and jobs.

Administration's attitudes to VET in schools and as a post-school pathway

School administrations' support for VET in school courses and school policy on promoting VET pathways varied across schools. There was evidence that some schools hardly promoted VET as a post-school option, for such reasons as meeting parents' (higher) expectations, the perceived public image of the school for academic achievement, because student enrolment in VET courses disrupted a school's academic profile, or it was seen

as simply being too difficult. Other schools were more pro-active in encouraging students to undertake VET courses.

Among the strategies for enhancing the status of VET, schools can:

- Consistently celebrate school VET students' achievements alongside other student achievements
- Publicly acknowledge the contributions VET and VET teachers make to a school's curriculum
- Promote as policy that VET is regarded by the school as legitimate a choice as university entry.

What practical steps might VET institutions take

There are four themes that emerge from the research about what VET institutions might do:

1. market themselves as effectively as universities;
2. promote their strengths to overcome outmoded views of VET: contemporary courses and innovative teaching;
3. engage more effectively with potential students and their school advisers; and
4. provide more flexible course options and an attractive social environment.

1. VET institutions need to market themselves as effectively as universities

Schools consistently reported that TAFE and private RTOs were poorly represented at career events, whereas universities usually had more than one representative present plus attractive marketing materials.

Possible responses:

- ensure significant representation at all school career events;
- in addition to staff, use current students at these events – to provide a youthful face for VET and real-life student experiences; and
- utilise marketing methods to which young people will respond.

2. VET institutions need to promote their strengths in courses and teaching

School students generally had a limited or even no knowledge of what VET courses are like – mostly they saw them as 'practical', 'hands-on', which they compared to 'intellectual' university-level courses. School students who had experienced TAFE were often surprised that it wasn't just practical.

The suggestions below are in addition to the need to promote the benefits of a VET course, such as acquiring practical skills, being immediately employable on graduation, etc.

Possible responses:

- In marketing materials, video, Youtube etc, show the full range of VET courses and how these link with the demands of modern industry as well as prepare for changing jobs in the future
- When school students visit, expose them to examples of innovative teaching (not just talks) so they can get a feel for what being a VET student might be like
- Publicly champion the expertise of VET teachers in the way that universities do; the corollary is that VET institutions need to consistently show their staff that teaching is valued within the organisation.

3. VET institutions need to engage better with potential students and school advisers

Schools are the major source of VET students, yet school teachers and career advisers consistently compared their interactions with TAFE information providers unfavourably with those of universities, both in terms of access and in obtaining individual advice on behalf of students. Also, teachers themselves generally have no

personal experience of VET so may need personal guidance about course requirements and enrolment processes.

Possible responses:

- Be more pro-active with schools - talk to schools about how VET institutions can improve the interactions in person and online for teachers and career advisers seeking information about TAFE on behalf of students
- Provide other channels for introducing school students to VET, e.g. summer programs for high school students, 'trade taster' courses.
- Develop short videos for both teachers and students that present a lively picture of contemporary VET and the occupations it serves
- Visit schools to build on the interest in VET already shown by students enrolled in VET courses and be prepared for the need for individual advice; or facilitate visits to VET institutions by such students (grouped by interests) and also provide for individualised advice.

4. VET institutions to provide flexible course options and an attractive social environment

The research revealed a tendency for undecided students to opt for university study because they believed they could easily change into another course from their initial choice and because that was a more attractive environment to socialise with friends. Also, some teachers reported that pathways to university were not always clear on VET websites.

Possible responses:

- review and promote VET institutional pathways to illustrate the ease of making changes to course choices, wherever possible;
- talk to current VET institution students to help identify ways a campus might become a more attractive social environment; and
- ask teachers, parents and school students whether and how the 'VET to university' pathway can be made clearer on the institution's website.

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