

## Submission

by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER)

To

Parliament of Victoria Economic, Education, Jobs and Skills Committee

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### Inquiry into career advice activities in Victorian schools

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#### RESPONSE TO TERMS OF REFERENCE

The National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) is an independent body responsible for collecting, managing, analysing, evaluating and communicating research and statistics about vocational education and training (VET) in Australia. NCVER is pleased to provide the following submission to the Parliament of Victoria Economic, Education, Jobs and Skills Committee Inquiry into Career Advice Activities in Victorian Schools.

#### Background

Young people represent Australia's future workforce and productivity so it is of great policy interest that young people make successful transitions from school to further education and the labour market (Knight, 2017). However, currently almost one-third of young people are unemployed or underemployed (Brotherhood of St Laurence, 2017).

Vocational education and training provides an important pathway into work. The latest NCVER Student Outcomes Survey (SOS) reports that 66.4% of VET graduates aged 18 to 19 years and 75.8% of 20-24 year old VET graduates were employed after training and 81.2% for apprentices and trainees (NCVER, 2017). Similarly, the release of the 2016 Census of Population and Housing by the Australian Bureau of Statistics showed that some of the largest industries by employment are those which rely on the VET sector for skilled workers (ABS, 2017). These include the largest industry, the Health Care and Social Assistance industry, which now accounts for 12.6% of Australia's working population in 2016, and the Retail Trade industry, Australia's second largest industry (ABS, 2017). Also released around the same time as the Census data, the *2017 Soft Skills in Demand Report* showed that jobs in construction were greatest in-demand by employers (Smith, 2017). The report was based on analysis of 168 000 job advertisements across 54 industries; the

analysis also reveals the top 10 fields. The Construction industry, like those mentioned above, relies on the VET sector for skilled workers.

In Victoria, the Commonwealth Bank's CommSec *State of the States* analysis of state and territory economic factors showed that construction and retail jobs were thriving in Victoria (Commonwealth Bank of Australia, 2017).

These data show that Australia's VET sector provides not only a viable pathway to work but also to jobs in large and growing industries.

However, VET is viewed across the world as a less attractive educational pathway compared with either general or higher education – a phenomenon which is remarkably universal and entrenched (Winch, 2013). This appears to be true in Australia too, as the recently NCVER published research by Gore et al (2017) indicates. Their data, based on the views of 6000 students from Year 3 to Year 12 in New South Wales government schools (but applicable to other jurisdictions) canvassed over a four-year period, suggests enduring views of TAFE/VET (terms used interchangeable in the study) as inferior to university study. Many students, parents/carers and teachers perceived TAFE as only for the less academically capable students. Some students, in particular, expressed concern that a VET qualification would not provide a competitive edge (Gore et al, 2017).

However, their study also indicates that VET and VET-related occupations appeal to certain kinds of students, but there is more interest in VET-related occupations than in VET, with some misalignment between the two. Further, students' interests in VET-related occupations are primarily motivated by enjoyment, interest, perceived benefits, altruism, personal suitability and prior related experience. The VET sector is perceived as a place of practical learning, offering great opportunities, especially for those who are less academically inclined (Gore et al, 2017).

These data and the above findings provide the backdrop and context which frame this submission. It aims to provide insights into career advice activities as they relate to VET and draws on recent NCVER research.

This submission responds to the first, third and fourth terms of reference of this Inquiry.

### ***Terms of Reference 1: Examining the relationship between career advice activities and workforce participation of young Victorians***

In surveying 6000 school students Gore et al (2017) provide a clearer picture of the conversations school students, their parents/carers and teachers have about vocational education and training. In terms of the relationship between career advice activities and workforce participation, they report that career activities, including work experience, intensify in the later years of high school (Gore et al, 2017). However, by this point in students' schooling, many students have already formed strong (and sometimes negative) views of the VET sector and have minimised their career aspirations in ways that limit them to deliberations about university pathways (Gore et al, 2017). This signals the potential importance of information about VET being available in junior secondary and even earlier, in primary years of schooling (Gore et al, 2017).

Further, while a student is forming their VET (or further education) aspiration, the role of gender stereotyping often shapes their beliefs about a suitable career path. Data from the

Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) demonstrates that this gender divide is most prominent in the area of apprenticeships.

As shown in table 1 (from Osborne, 2018 forthcoming), when students' VET-related post-school plans are compared, the greatest difference between responses of male and female participants is the proportion intending to undertake an apprenticeship, with 21.7% of male students intending to do an apprenticeship compared with 5.8% of female students with the same intention.

**Table 1 Percentage of planned post-school pathways at 15 years of age, by gender**

	Females	Males
Go to university	49.4	39.5
Undertake VET study	17.7	29.7
Get an apprenticeship	5.8	21.7
Get a traineeship	1.9	2.0
Go to a TAFE/VET college	10.0	6.0
Do some other study/training	3.3	3.0
Look for work/get a job	6.7	6.7
Gap year/Time off/Travel	7.1	3.5
Other	0.7	1.6
Don't know	8.8	8.2
Missing	6.3	7.9

Source: LSAY Y06 cohort

Waiting until a student is ready to enter the workforce is not the best time or an effective way to encourage young women in particular to take up apprenticeships; this must happen in an age appropriate way throughout school (Dommers et al, 2017).

Schools play a significant role in preparing students for VET. However, Gore et al's study shows that many students are unclear about VET, conveyed out-dated rather than contemporary portrayals of the sector, and are unclear about the pathway to VET-related occupations, despite career activities in schools which included VET-focused activities. This confusion about vocational training indicates many students lack clear, accurate and contemporary information about the sector. An increase in the level of student interest in VET is likely to require changing perceptions of TAFE as a lower-status destination, one designed for students who are unsuited to university study (Gore et al, 2017).

***Terms of Reference 3: Examining the challenges advisers face helping young Victorians transition from education to the workforce***

Over the last 20 years the VET sector has been incrementally and increasingly opened up to competition (Korbel & Misko, 2016) with training offered in publicly subsidised training providers (TAFE) and private training providers. This fundamental shift has added to the VET sector's complexity. Many reviews of the VET sector have identified this; the Victorian review of VET quality argued that the structure of the VET 'market', with its large number of providers and diverse range of qualifications, can be overwhelming (review by Deloitte Touche Tomatsu quoted in Brown, 2017).

Schools play a significant role in preparing students for VET, but as mentioned above, Gore et al (2017) found many students are unclear about VET-related occupations and the educational pathway to these occupations. This misalignment of educational and occupational aspirations and confusion about VET indicates that many students lack clear and accurate information about the VET sector (Gore et al, 2017). This suggests that schools (including career advisers in schools) and/or VET providers have more to do in ensuring that students and their parents/carers have a greater awareness of what pathways are available and where they might lead (Gore et al, 2017).

An increase in the level of student interest in VET is likely to require changing perceptions of TAFE/VET as a lower-status destination, one designed for students who are unsuited to university study. As such, NCVER notes that the Australian Government has recently launched its VET Information Strategy, which includes the campaign *Real skills for real careers*. The Strategy aims to address misconceptions around VET and promote the opportunities that an individual can gain by completing a VET qualification (Department of Education and Training website, 2017).

#### ***Terms of Reference 4: Considering strategies to improve the effectiveness of career advice activities for school leavers***

With almost one-third of young people unemployed or underemployed, it is important for early school leavers (defined as a person who leaves secondary schooling prior to completing Year 12) to gain skills that improve their employment opportunities (Dommers et al, 2017). The VET sector plays a critical role in skilling these young people but getting them into VET can be difficult. The Dommers et al study provides valuable insights into approaches that would maximise successful entry into and engagement with vocational training for disadvantaged young people. The study focussed on selected economically disadvantaged areas in Queensland, Victoria and Tasmania.

Prior to enrolment in VET, information that is clear and easily accessible is vital. Training providers and support services need to work together to demystify the VET sector for young early school leavers to enable them to gain greater awareness of what it is and what it can offer them. Connecting with families, schools and other community groups will help to raise awareness among young people about VET options. Students interviewed in the Dommers et al study continually underscored the importance of being dealt with in a welcoming and friendly manner, and being able to connect with staff who have their interests in mind.

At enrolment, the complexity of the process, as well as VET funding and subsidy structures, can be overwhelming for young early school leavers. Engaging young people in the process through the provision of well-communicated information on course choices and financial support, and making the enrolment process as simple as possible are critical changes needed at this stage (Dommers et al, 2017).

For young people in general, a significant challenge exists as to how the VET sector can raise the profile and reputation of vocational careers and pathways in Australia. This includes applying new thinking as to how to effectively reach and inform the key 'influencers' for young people — parents/carers, career professionals and classroom teachers (Couldrey and Loveder, 2017).

Career development, which is the process of managing life, learning, and work over the life span, is important in improving the attractiveness of VET (and particularly apprenticeships)

according to Carney (in Couldrey and Loveder, 2017). Unbiased career advice of a high quality can reduce some of the stereotypes and prejudices relating to VET held by young people and their parents/carers. In this, career guidance staff and professionals in schools have an important role to play.

Carney reports that with no formal or legislated requirement for Australian schools to provide high-quality career development services, the delivery across the country is presently ad-hoc and patchy at best. This lack of a national approach is resulting in young people making poor and ill-informed decisions in relation to, for example, undertaking an apprenticeship.

A recommendation from a *Future of Australian Apprenticeships* (Couldrey and Loveder, 2017) is that consideration should be given to a national approach to career development in schools supplemented with systems of accountability and incentives to be applied to schools to lift performance in career advice. Current provision is, as mentioned above, ad-hoc and fragmented, and largely falling to individual school principals to find and allocate a budget.

Strategies for addressing perceptions will likely require additional investment in both TAFE outreach to schools and teacher development. Most teachers' education experience is limited to university, the site of the vast majority of teacher education. Without first-hand knowledge of TAFE, it is likely to be critical that teachers have greater ease of access to good-quality information about VET pathways. (Gore et al, 2017).

Career advisers, many of whom have extensive first-hand knowledge of VET (TAFE and private VET providers), have a vital role in changing perceptions of the VET sector (Gore et al, 2017). Furthermore, if teachers and career advisers are to share up-to-date and accurate information with their students and convey positive perceptions of VET, it is critical that they understand the changing face of the VET sector and the career possibilities it provides (Gore et al, 2017). Changing perceptions of, and increasing interest in, VET is likely to require concerted and coordinated efforts that use inclusive, non-stigmatising, non-deficit language while highlighting the full range of opportunities and pathways available to students (Gore et al, 2017). Teachers will need active support from and engagement with government and VET providers if they are to fully inform students about the opportunities that the VET sector has to offer (Gore et al, 2017).

Policies that enhance opportunities for VET as a pathway to higher education and which increase opportunities for achieving degrees through VET study may be important in developing students' interest and participation in the VET sector. (Gore et al, 2017)

NCVER has recently worked with Education Services Australia, who host the myfuture website ([www.myfuture.edu.au](http://www.myfuture.edu.au)), to inject greater information about VET into this online career information site, which mostly designed for young people.

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