

Victorian Parliament

Economic, Education, Jobs and Skills Committee

Review into careers advice activities in Victorian schools



Victorian TAFE Association Response
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Introduction

The Victorian TAFE Association is the peak body for Victoria's public providers of Vocational Education and Training (VET), including 12 TAFE Institutes, four dual sector Universities, and an Associate member, AMES.

The Victorian TAFE Association welcomes this opportunity to respond to the Victorian Parliament's Economic, Education, Jobs and Skills Committee review into careers advice activities in Victorian schools.

The Victorian TAFE Association would like to present a response crafted around seven themes, including:

- Secondary education in TAFE
- Career services and lifelong learning
- The breadth of the TAFE Network
- Recognising student diversity
- Stakeholder engagement
- Facilitating a strong careers adviser workforce
- Career advice and sustainability

Secondary education in TAFE

The Victorian TAFE Association would like to alert the committee's attention to the role played by Victoria's public TAFE network in the provision of secondary education. The Victorian TAFE Association has commissioned research that shows that Victoria's TAFE institutes provide secondary education to almost 6,000 students, with increasing numbers of early school leavers completing their senior school certificates in Victoria's 12 TAFEs and four dual sector universities year on year.¹

The senior secondary settings in Victoria's 12 TAFEs and four dual sector Universities consistently attract young people who have struggled in school, have experienced disrupted learning for a variety of reasons and are from low socio-economic status. Such students typically face challenging learning backgrounds, which leads them to gravitate towards communities and professions that accept them.

Despite TAFE playing such a significant role in secondary education, anomalies in funding for programs to facilitate and/or support school attendance are denied to TAFE secondary students, placing them at an unfair disadvantage compared to those studying in more traditional settings. Examples include:

- Transport and travelling allowances: TAFE institutes do not meet eligibility requirements for such programs, meaning TAFE secondary students are denied access to resources that make attending school easier.
- Scholarship programs: TAFE secondary students are ineligible to apply for programs to address financial barriers (an example being the Lynne Kosky Memorial VCAL Scholarship).

¹ Jonas, Pam, Schultz, Nita and van Son, Jo (2017), *Disadvantaged young people: senior secondary completion in Victorian TAFEs and dual sector Universities*, Victorian TAFE Association.

TAFE secondary students are often an afterthought in the design, implementation and disbursement of supports and resources for student, including careers advice services. The Victorian TAFE Association therefore recommends that this review give consideration to career advice services for students in TAFE settings and to the broader question of supports and resources available to TAFE secondary students.

Career services and lifelong learning

The transformation of the Australian economy in the last 30 years is such that the nation's competitive advantage is based increasingly on a highly knowledgeable, educated and highly skilled workforce. The continuance of Australia's prosperity depends heavily on the ability of its workforce to continually adapt and develop its skills and on the smooth adoption of newly required abilities. In short, to the facilitation of lifelong learning and to the provision of careers advice services for an increasing number of non-school age Victorians pursuing new and evolving careers.

However, the terms of reference to this review make overwhelming reference to secondary students. This demonstrates an outdated view of the typical users of careers services, rooted in the notion of a young person moving from secondary schooling into formal education and training and embarking on a career. Further, the implication is still that of a career for life.

But the transformation referred to above means that the stereotypical young person is but one of many careers advice services users. While young people will continue to require access to careers advice services, increasingly, lifelong learning means that more and more adults will (and should) be participating in some form of education and training, so that they too will be in need of careers advice services. This new reality is clearly visible in the VET sector, where 63 per cent of its students are 25 and older, while those who are 45 and older represent about a quarter of the VET student cohort.² And this increasing number of (mostly older) lifelong learners will require access to career advice services that are cognisant of their circumstances and is relevant to their needs.

The Victorian TAFE Association therefore recommends that the review broaden its gaze to consider career services and users in their totality and to consider how best to cater to the careers advice needs of lifelong learners.

The breadth of the TAFE network

In his report released in October of this year, the Victorian Skills Commissioner noted "the challenge to attract capable apprentices to many industries". The Commissioner highlighted a number of reasons for this, including negative narratives on future employment and social pressures that push students away from Vocational Education and Training (VET) programs towards university study pathways.³

² *Australian vocational education and training statistics: total VET students and courses 2015 — data slicer*, National Centre for Vocational Education Research

³ Victorian Skills Commissioner (October 2017), *Rebalance and Relaunch Supporting Victoria's economy by enhancing apprenticeship and traineeship pathways as a mechanism for skilling the future workforce*,.

The Victorian TAFE Association considers that the cause of the problems identified by the Commissioner has, in part, been the result of a misapprehension of the nature of the VET sector and to the kinds of rewarding and fulfilling careers that are opened by VET learning.

Unfortunately, it is not uncommon to think of the VET and TAFE sectors as the 'apprenticeship' sector. While this is one of the sector's important training areas and one of which it is proud, to focus on it serves to minimise the breadth and plethora of career options that are opened by a VET qualification.

The TAFE network's breadth and diversity operates on a number of levels: from its expansive educational and training profile that operates across industry sectors and AQF profiles; to its location in communities and state-wide coverage; and its highly mixed, inclusive student cohort. Many TAFEs are registered as higher education providers while those that are not hold partnerships/agreements with universities and other higher education providers that create pathways and involve the delivery (at least in part) of higher education courses by TAFE institutes and other VET providers.

The Victorian TAFE Association considers that careers advice services can play a major role in countering these views and improving the perception of the VET sector as a pathway towards a rich and fulfilling career. Careers advisers should be trained to identify the rich outcomes available by pursuing VET qualifications and to its recognition as a path towards a rewarding and fulfilling career.

Recognising Student Diversity

For many individuals, the ability to forge a successful career is hampered by factors such as gender discrimination, location (that is, do they live in remote regions), social position, economic status, language barriers and cultural circumstances.

Given the foundational nature of education and training and the widely recognised role it plays in supporting the attainment of individual potential and to the underpinning of a successful career, it is imperative that career advice services are offered in such a way as to give access to such diverse cohorts.

Increasing access would be achieved in a threefold manner:

1. Services would be delivered in a manner that is easily understood and digested by the cohort in question.
2. Services would be made available irrespective of location, which is particularly important for students in remote locations, where transport and accessibility is often an issue.
3. Services would be provided in a way that is non-threatening and inviting. This would be particularly important for students who face cultural or gender barriers.

Each of these requires a host of different initiatives, from provision of information in different languages; to ensuring that advisers are culturally appropriate to the circumstance (e.g. of the appropriate gender or age); and training that enables advisers to speak in a manner that is engaging and inviting.

The Victorian TAFE network is highly familiar with students who come from diverse backgrounds. Its student cohort includes large numbers from non-traditional backgrounds, including those from non-English speaking backgrounds (representing about 18 per cent of its students compared with approximately 4 per cent for universities), low socio-economic status and mature age students.⁴ Further, each of Victoria's 12 TAFE institutes and four dual sector Universities houses a Skills and Jobs Centre that serves those looking to enter the workforce, start training or re-skill.

By virtue of these activities, the TAFE network is well placed to provide advice on the design and delivery of careers advice services for diverse student cohorts. The Victorian TAFE Association therefore suggests that the review recommends the design and delivery of careers advice services that cater to diverse student cohorts and to engaging the TAFE network in the development of careers advice programs that meet the needs of diverse student cohorts.

Stakeholder engagement

Successful careers advice services depend on careers advisers who provide users with the most accurate careers advice information. The provision of such information requires career advisers to be armed with the most up-to-date information on industry development, job availability and skill requirements. There is little point in advising towards a particular career path if said path is (or is soon to be) obsolete.

One way to ensure the relevance and accuracy of career advice is to fully engage industry and employers in the design and delivery of career advice services. The Victorian TAFE Association therefore recommends that this review give consideration to the role that industry currently plays in career advice services, and to the mechanisms used by careers advisers to engage with and benefit from the guidance of industry and employers. Consideration should be given to the use of existing bodies (such as the Office of the Victorian Skills Commissioner) to capture and facilitate industry and employer participation.

Victoria's TAFEs are renowned for their robust and well-developed industry engagement strategies and the delivery of education and training that is strongly informed by employer and industry partners. This expertise would be invaluable to the development of industry engaged career advice services. The Victorian TAFE Association would be happy to facilitate the TAFE network's involvement in the development of career advice services that enable greater industry and employer participation.

Career advice is not and cannot be given in isolation but is one of many voices a student hears through their decision making process. Among the highly influential voices that are heard are those of family, teachers and peers. When the information provided is biased, inaccurate or based on outmoded notions, it can prove deleterious to the best interest of the student.

Countering these influential and ill-informed voices can prove highly problematic and is particularly difficult when the career advice user is a young student who lacks the confidence or maturity to navigate career options or challenge the assertion of older peers. The

⁴ *Selected Higher Education Statistics – 2014 Student Data*, Commonwealth Department of Education and Training.

usefulness of career advice services is therefore affected immensely by the power of peers: the provision of accurate industry-informed advice can be reduced to naught in the face of an authoritative and uninformed peer.

To counter these effects, the Victorian TAFE Association recommends the development of 'peer' education and engagement strategies to increase awareness and provide an accurate understanding of career options. The Victorian TAFE Association also recommends that career advisers be provided with training that enables them to more effectively engage with peers and address and challenge the biases and misapprehensions they may present to a student. Greater analysis should be undertaken of the impact of peers to careers choices.

Facilitating a strong careers adviser workforce

The pressure of budgeting often results in the reduction of career advice provision. Perhaps reflecting this budget reality, the role of careers adviser is often undertaken as an 'add-on' by teaching staff who hold a teaching qualification only and are not expert in providing career advice.

This lack of expertise affects the career adviser's ability to provide accurate advice and properly filter myriad (sometimes conflicting) information. It increases the likelihood that career advisers are deficient in 'real' vocational and industry knowledge. The add-on nature means that the link from career adviser to industry and employer is very inconsistent, with many career advisers having little time to pursue, build and maintain important industry and employer networks. The value of genuine workplace experience is poorly appreciated or understood, manifesting in the forfeiting of useful work experience programs and structured work placements.⁵

As a consequence, many students do not have access to adequate careers advice services. As an indicator of the magnitude of the problem, information provided by a Victorian TAFE Association member revealed that approximately 70 per cent of students in the region in which it operates did not have access to appropriate career information within their school environment. Further, there is no consistency in the approach of advice available to students.

Poor career advice can have large impacts on the student. As career/employment opportunities become increasingly complex, the likelihood of advice that is not well informed (where it is available at all) can lead to students undertaking courses that are not well-suited, resulting in significant unnecessary expense (including debt associated with the cost of studying and living away from home).

Therefore, while industry and peer engagement in the provision of career advice services is pivotal, the disbursement of relevant and current advice in the most engaging and effective way possible requires a properly funded and highly trained career adviser workforce.

The Victorian TAFE Association recommends that funding be provided to ensure those in need are given access to expert career advice. Career advice must no longer be viewed as a 'frivolous' activity that can be provided as an add-on to an existing role but instead be

⁵ One example of how this manifests is the School Based Apprenticeships initiative, which the Victorian TAFE Association's members suggest is poorly understood by many careers advisers, meaning few students take advantage of this valuable option.

appreciated and prized for the important role it plays in the education and training of Victorians and for its important contribution to Victorian prosperity.

Career advice and education sustainability

Throughout the discussion above, it was noted the influential role that career advice can play in the career choices made by Victorians. Implied in this is the large role career advisers play in the education and training choices pursued by Victorians to realise their career goals.

Careers advice can therefore have very real impacts upon the sustainability of the education sector and on education and training provision. The result is advice that can limit or amplify the effectiveness of a sector's strategies to grow student load and to the longer term sustainability of the education sector and training provision. This is particularly relevant if the advice provided is based on flawed or inaccurate information, the likelihood of which is heightened when, as noted above, the career adviser role is an 'add-on'.

The Victorian TAFE Association considers that an analysis of the impact of career advice on educational sustainability is worthy of greater consideration. The Victorian TAFE Association is happy to participate and contribute to any such analysis.

Key Contact

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