

# School achievement and completion

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A good higher education system must sit on a strong school system, otherwise it is going to be wobbly.<sup>103</sup>

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Successful study at university rests on a foundation of knowledge and skills developed over several years of prior education. Consequently, school achievement and completion are relevant to higher education participation. Geographical and socioeconomic differences in academic achievement, and in the proportion of students completing year 12, are fundamental causes of geographical differences in higher education participation rates. With this in mind, the Committee has considered levels of academic achievement and school completion rates throughout Victoria. The Committee also examined the different options for completing year 12 available to Victorian students, focusing on their different implications for participation in higher education.

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## Achievement at school

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Participation in higher education is dependent on achievement at school, both during the compulsory years and in the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE). Professor Richard James, Director, Centre for the Study of Higher Education, The University of Melbourne, argued that achievement at school is far more crucial to participation in higher education than is commonly acknowledged:

... many people think the differential access to higher education is to do with the perceived cost or the actual cost of going on to university. In fact it is far more closely related to levels of school achievement as far as we can tell from the data. Cost is an issue, of course, for some people, but cost comes in as a consideration once people have got to the point of transition—once they have got close to the point of considering university as an option. But many of the under-represented groups that I am talking about have already left school by year 10 or year 11. University has not been on the horizon for a long time.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Professor R. Teese, Director, Centre for Post-compulsory Education and Lifelong Learning, The University of Melbourne, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 25 February 2008, 17.

<sup>104</sup> Professor R. James, Director, Centre for the Study of Higher Education, The University of Melbourne, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 3 March 2008, 11.

Achievement at school, in the early and middle years of schooling and in year 12, is therefore a precondition to higher education participation for most students.

### **Achievement during compulsory schooling**

Achievement during the early and middle years of schooling has important implications for higher education participation, because of its associations with school completion, senior secondary study choices, academic achievement in the VCE, and the development of higher education aspirations.

Research in Australia and internationally has consistently found that low achievement during compulsory schooling is strongly associated with early school leaving.<sup>105</sup> A 2008 study based on Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) data found that low achievement in the four domains of reading literacy, mathematical literacy, scientific literacy and problem solving was associated with an increased likelihood of non-completion of school.<sup>106</sup> According to the study, more than a third of students in the lowest achievement quartile were non-completers, compared with fewer than five per cent in the highest achievement quartile.<sup>107</sup> This study accords with findings from earlier LSAY research which found that student achievement in literacy and numeracy was 'probably the strongest correlate' of year 12 participation.<sup>108</sup>

The relationship between low achievement and non-completion is also apparent from young people's explanations as to why they did not complete school. The 2008 On Track survey of early school leavers revealed that four out of ten early leavers cited not coping with schoolwork or falling behind at school as a reason for their decision to leave.<sup>109</sup> The contributions of inquiry participants echoed the findings from previous research on early school leaving and achievement at school. Young people who had left school before completing year 12 referred to difficulty with school work,<sup>110</sup> a lack of one-on-one assistance,<sup>111</sup> unsuitable subjects offered,<sup>112</sup> lack of relevance of school learning,<sup>113</sup> and incompatible teaching and learning styles<sup>114</sup> as factors in their decision making. Professor James argued that if school achievement levels are lifted, school completion improves, giving younger people greater options to participate in higher education.<sup>115</sup>

Achievement at earlier stages of schooling also has implications for study choices in the final years of school, which in turn affects participation in higher education. Research has consistently found that lower achievement is associated with a greater likelihood of participation in Vocational Education and Training (VET) activities, including VET in Schools

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<sup>105</sup> Department of Innovation, Industry and Regional Development (Victoria), Written Submission, May 2008, 12.

<sup>106</sup> David D. Curtis and Julie McMillan, *School Non-completers: Profiles and Initial Destinations*, Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth Research Report 54 (Camberwell: ACER, 2008), 8.

<sup>107</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>108</sup> Gary Marks and others, *Patterns of participation in year 12 and higher education in Australia: Trends and issues*, Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth Research Report 17 (Camberwell: Australian Council for Educational Research, 2000), 11.

<sup>109</sup> Sheldon Rothman and others, *The On Track Survey 2008: The Destinations of School Leavers in Victoria: Statewide Report* (Melbourne: Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2009), 95.

<sup>110</sup> Ms S. Clark, Student, Southern Grampians Adult Education, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Hamilton, 28 April 2008, 27.

<sup>111</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>112</sup> Mr J. Jonson, VCAL Student and Young Leader Program Participant, Morrison House, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Lilydale, 17 July 2008, 11.

<sup>113</sup> Mr N. Ainger, Student, Southern Grampians Adult Education, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Hamilton, 28 April 2008, 26.

<sup>114</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>115</sup> Professor R. James, Director, Centre for the Study of Higher Education, The University of Melbourne, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 3 March 2008, 11.

in years 11 and 12.<sup>116</sup> Earlier achievement is also related to subject choices within the academic senior secondary curriculum. Recent LSAY research has found that those who had been among the highest achievers in year 9 were more likely to study physical sciences and advanced mathematics subjects in year 12. They were also more likely to undertake traditional humanities subjects.<sup>117</sup> In turn, students undertaking these subjects are more likely to go on to participate in higher education.<sup>118</sup> Students in the lower achievement quartiles were more likely to take up subjects in business, economics, technology, arts and home sciences.<sup>119</sup>

For those who reach year 12, low achievement in the compulsory years of schooling predicts low achievement in senior secondary school, and is therefore a precursor to a lower likelihood of participation in higher education. The skills gained in the early and middle years of schooling lay the foundation for achievement in year 12. Ms Marg O'Shea, Careers Coordinator at Copperfield College in Melbourne's outer west, set out this argument:

In relation to the variation in rates of participation in higher education, in my experience part of that is due to a skills issue — literacy particularly and academic skills. There are a significant number of students who when they get to their senior years of schooling do not have the skill levels to achieve the ENTER scores to get into university.<sup>120</sup>

Research supports this assertion. Analysis of LSAY data has found that achievement in literacy and numeracy in year 9 is a key determinant of Tertiary Entrance Rank (TER).<sup>121</sup> A 2001 LSAY study found that students in the highest achievement quartile in year 9 also achieved the highest median TER, while the lowest year 9 achievers attained the lowest median TER.<sup>122</sup> Related to this, a subsequent LSAY study found that students who applied for university in year 12 but did not receive an offer generally had lower achievement in literacy and numeracy in year 9.<sup>123</sup>

Finally, the Committee heard that achievement during compulsory schooling is related to the development of aspirations for university study. Professor Richard Teese, Director, Centre for Post-compulsory Education and Lifelong Learning, The University of Melbourne, told the Committee that until achievement is raised, university aspirations will continue to be low in non-metropolitan and low socioeconomic status areas.<sup>124</sup> On Track and LSAY have shown that students with higher levels of achievement are more likely to have higher aspirations for further study.<sup>125</sup> This relationship between achievement and aspirations is not

<sup>116</sup> A number of these studies are reviewed in Sue Fullarton, *VET in Schools: Participation and Pathways*, Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth Research Report 21 (Camberwell: Australian Council for Educational Research, 2001), 9–10.

<sup>117</sup> Sue Fullarton and others, *Patterns of Participation in Year 12*, Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth Research Report 33 (Camberwell: Australian Council for Educational Research, 2003), 34.

<sup>118</sup> Sue Thomson, *Pathways from School to Further Education or Work: Examining the Consequences of Year 12 Course Choices*, Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth Research Report 42 (Camberwell: Australian Council for Educational Research, 2005), 30–32.

<sup>119</sup> Sue Fullarton and others, *Patterns of Participation in Year 12*, Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth Research Report 33 (Camberwell: Australian Council for Educational Research, 2003), 34.

<sup>120</sup> Ms M. O'Shea, Careers Coordinator, Copperfield College, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Sunshine, 12 August 2008, 3.

<sup>121</sup> Gary Marks, Julie McMillan and Kylie Hillman, *Tertiary Entrance Performance: The Role of Student Background and School Factors*, Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth Research Report 22 (Camberwell: Australian Council for Educational Research, 2001), 13.

<sup>122</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>123</sup> Gary N. Marks, *Unmet Demand? Characteristics and Activities of University Applicants Not Offered a Place*, Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth Research Report 46 (Camberwell: Australian Council for Educational Research, 2005), 6.

<sup>124</sup> Professor R. Teese, Director, Centre for Post-compulsory Education and Lifelong Learning, The University of Melbourne, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 25 February 2008, 17.

<sup>125</sup> Sheldon Rothman and others, *The On Track Survey 2008: The Destinations of School Leavers in Victoria: Statewide Report* (Melbourne: Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2009), 13; Sheldon Rothman and Julie McMillan, *Influences on Achievement in Literacy and Numeracy*, Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth Research Report 36 (Camberwell: Australian Council for Educational Research, 2003), 9.

straightforward, however, and it appears that each can influence the other.<sup>126</sup> The way in which aspirations influence higher education participation is discussed in Chapter 4.

## Achievement in the Victorian Certificate of Education

Throughout the inquiry, the Committee heard from senior secondary students who aspired to university study, and who were acutely aware of the need to achieve a high ENTER to gain entry to their preferred course.<sup>127</sup> Schools may help students to align their efforts at school with ENTER requirements in a chosen course, as described by one student from Melbourne's west:

I just had a mid-year exam. I got my mid-year score, which was pretty good. There are teachers here who help us predict our ENTER. I got my ENTER, and I have got to work a bit harder to reach my goal.<sup>128</sup>

This and many other personal accounts demonstrated students' strong awareness of the importance of the ENTER in gaining access to higher education courses.

Research supports students' perceptions, showing that ENTER is strongly related to higher education offers and enrolments. LSAY research shows that as TERs decline, so too does the likelihood of receiving a university offer.<sup>129</sup> A study of 2001 school leavers found that the mean TER of students who applied to university and did not receive an offer was 54, compared to a mean of 70 for the sample as a whole, and a mean of 80 for those who enrolled at university in either 2002 or 2003.<sup>130</sup> The Committee's analysis of VTAC data showed the same relationship between a student's ENTER and their success in securing a university offer.<sup>131</sup>

On Track data provides another way of assessing the relationship between achievement during the VCE and university entrance, revealing a 'very strong' relationship between performance in the General Achievement Test (GAT)<sup>132</sup> and university entry.<sup>133</sup> Of those students who completed the VCE in 2007 and who were placed in the top quartile of GAT achievement, three-quarters (75.7%) were enrolled in university in early 2008. In contrast, only 16.9 per cent in the lowest GAT achievement quartile had enrolled in a university course.<sup>134</sup>

As well as directly affecting access to university, achievement in senior secondary school and perceptions of academic ability are related to the future intention to participate in higher education. As TERs decline, the likelihood of applying to university declines,<sup>135</sup> indicating lower aspirations for university study and/or doubts about the likelihood of securing an offer or being successful in higher education studies. Higher TERs are also associated with a

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<sup>126</sup> Sheldon Rothman and Julie McMillan, *Influences on Achievement in Literacy and Numeracy*, Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth Research Report 36 (Camberwell: Australian Council for Educational Research, 2003), 9.

<sup>127</sup> For example, Mr A. Meyers, Year 11 Student, Sunshine College, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Sunshine, 12 August 2008, 11; Ms S. Elliott, Year 11 Student, Ouyen Secondary College, Written Submission, April 2008, 12; Mr T. Szmidel, Vice-Chairman, Colac Otway Youth Council, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Colac, 29 April 2008, 22; Ms C. Manley, Year 12 Student, Ouyen Secondary College, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Ouyen, 3 June 2008, 14.

<sup>128</sup> Mr D. Nguyen, Year 12 Student, Sunshine College, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Sunshine, 12 August 2008, 12.

<sup>129</sup> Gary N. Marks, *Unmet Demand? Characteristics and Activities of University Applicants Not Offered a Place*, Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth Research Report 46 (Camberwell: Australian Council for Educational Research, 2005), 9.

<sup>130</sup> *ibid.*, 16.

<sup>131</sup> Education and Training Committee analysis of 2007–08 VTAC data, May 2009.

<sup>132</sup> The General Achievement Test is a general skills and knowledge test undertaken by VCE students.

<sup>133</sup> Sheldon Rothman and others, *The On Track Survey 2008: The Destinations of School Leavers in Victoria: Statewide Report* (Melbourne: Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2009), 14.

<sup>134</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>135</sup> Gary N. Marks, *Unmet Demand? Characteristics and Activities of University Applicants Not Offered a Place*, Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth Research Report 46 (Camberwell: Australian Council for Educational Research, 2005), 9.

greater likelihood of enrolling after receiving an offer,<sup>136</sup> perhaps suggesting that students with higher levels of academic achievement have stronger university aspirations than lower achieving applicants. In the 2008 On Track survey, approximately one in five school leavers (21.0%) who were not participating in further education or training said that they were unsure of their ability to cope with tertiary study, although this was not the most common reason for non-participation.<sup>137</sup> Among those not participating in further education or training, lower achievement in the GAT was also associated with less interest in further study and a stronger preference for employment.<sup>138</sup>

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### Year 12 completion

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Increasing the rate of school completion is currently a central objective of educational policy in Victoria and other Australian states and territories. The Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians, made by all Australian education ministers in 2008, identifies the rate of year 12 or equivalent completion as one of three key areas in which Australian school education requires 'significant improvement'.<sup>139</sup>

The Victorian Government, in its ten year policy statement *Growing Victoria Together: A Vision for Victoria to 2010 and Beyond*, set a target of 90 per cent attainment of year 12 or equivalent among young people by 2010, with a number of initiatives aimed at progress towards this target.<sup>140</sup> This focus is reaffirmed in the 2008 *Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development*. One of six major goals outlined in the blueprint is for an increase in the number of young people completing year 12 or equivalent.<sup>141</sup>

### Options for completion

Victorian students have four options for completing year 12 or its equivalent:

1. Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE)
2. International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma program
3. Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) at Intermediate level or higher
4. Vocational Education and Training (VET) qualification at Certificate II level or higher.

Senior secondary qualifications can be completed in a range of different settings. Schools are the main providers of the VCE and IB, although some TAFE institutes also offer VCE studies. Students can undertake the VCAL at school or at approximately 50 Adult and Community Education (ACE) sector providers.

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<sup>136</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>137</sup> Sheldon Rothman and others, *The On Track Survey 2008: The Destinations of School Leavers in Victoria; Statewide Report* (Melbourne: Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2009), 56.

<sup>138</sup> *ibid.*, 57–58.

<sup>139</sup> Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* (Melbourne: MCEETYA, 2008), 5.

<sup>140</sup> Department of Innovation, Industry and Regional Development (Victoria), *Written Submission*, May 2008, 19.

<sup>141</sup> Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (Victoria), *Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development* (Melbourne: DEECD, 2008), 2.

### *Victorian Certificate of Education*

The VCE is the main senior secondary qualification in Victoria. Students completing the VCE may select from more than 90 subjects within nine core curriculum areas: the Arts; English; Health and Physical Education; Languages other than English (LOTE); Mathematics; Science; Business Studies; Humanities; and Technology. Each VCE 'study' is broken up into four units numbered 1, 2, 3 and 4.<sup>142</sup> To complete the VCE, students must satisfactorily complete at least 16 units, including:

- At least three units from the English Group, comprising Foundation English, English, English Language, English as a Second Language and Literature. No more than two of these units may be at the Unit 1 and 2 level.
- At least three sequences of Units 3 and 4, from either VCE studies or VCE VET programs.<sup>143</sup>

Each unit of VCE study has between two and four outcomes that must be achieved in order to gain satisfactory completion. It is up to schools to decide whether or not a student has satisfactorily completed the units in their VCE program. Satisfactory completion is reported as an 'S', and not meeting the requirements for satisfactory completion is reported as an 'N'.<sup>144</sup> The Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority reports that in 2008, 96.6 per cent of students eligible to complete the VCE did so satisfactorily.<sup>145</sup>

In addition to gaining the 'S' or 'N' awarded by the school, students typically gain study scores for their VCE studies by undertaking a combination of school-based and external assessments.<sup>146</sup> A study score shows how a student performed in a VCE study or VCE VET program, relative to all other students doing that same study. It is calculated to a maximum of 50 using the scores achieved in each of three graded assessments for the study.<sup>147</sup>

Completion of VCE does not necessarily lead to an ENTER. To be awarded an ENTER, and therefore be eligible to apply for university, students must complete both Units 3 and 4 of one English study (from the group above) and a sequence of Units 3 and 4 in three other studies. They must also attain a study score for these.<sup>148</sup> Students may combine VCE studies and VET programs to apply for an ENTER, although the Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre places certain restrictions on some combinations.<sup>149</sup>

The VCE is the main pathway into higher education for senior secondary students in Victoria, and is accepted for entry to all Australian universities. While the VCE has an academic focus, students may also choose to undertake vocational qualifications as part of their VCE.

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<sup>142</sup> Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 'Where to now? Guide to the VCE, VCAL and Apprenticeships & Traineeships for 2010: Glossary,' VCAA, <http://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/vcaa/vce/publications/wheretow/vce/glossary.htm> (accessed 2 July 2009).

<sup>143</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>144</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>145</sup> Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, *Senior Secondary Certificate Statistical Information 2008* (Melbourne: VCAA, 2009).

<sup>146</sup> Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 'Where to now? Guide to the VCE, VCAL and Apprenticeships & Traineeships for 2010: What must I do to get my VCE?,' VCAA, <http://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/vce/publications/wheretow/howtograduate.htm> (accessed 2 July 2009).

<sup>147</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>148</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>149</sup> *ibid.*

### *International Baccalaureate Diploma*

The IB is an educational program administered by the International Baccalaureate Organisation, a non-profit educational institution based in Geneva. The IB offers programs at three levels: Primary Years, Middle Years and the two-year Diploma program for senior secondary students. All three levels are offered throughout Australia, mostly in non-government schools.<sup>150</sup>

The IB Diploma was accredited in 2006 by the then Victorian Qualifications Authority as a Victorian senior secondary certificate of education. It is offered by 10 schools in Melbourne and four in regional Victoria,<sup>151</sup> with 629 Victorian students undertaking the IB in 2008, representing a nine per cent increase from 2007.<sup>152</sup> The IB Diploma offers a broad curriculum, including the student's first language, a second language, mathematics, science, humanities and arts, as well as a Theory of Knowledge program which fosters cross-cultural understanding and reflects the IB's core educational principles.<sup>153</sup> In addition, IB Diploma students complete 150 hours of community service, sports activities and a creative pursuit. Unlike the VCE, the IB Diploma program does not include VET options.<sup>154</sup>

The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development describes the IB Diploma as being 'designed for students with university pathways in mind'.<sup>155</sup> Students who qualify for the IB Diploma receive a notional ENTER, calculated by the Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre and used to compare the results of applicants who have studied under different Australian educational systems. The IB Diploma ENTER is accepted by universities in Australia, and overseas universities also use IB exam results in their admission processes.<sup>156</sup>

### *Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning*

The VCAL is a senior secondary certificate with an applied learning focus, developed as an alternative to the VCE. The VCAL was developed in response to the Ministerial Review of Post Compulsory Education and Training Pathways in Victoria, conducted in 2000. A key finding of the review was that upper secondary qualifications need to cater to a wider range of students than in the past, providing for students with diverse educational experiences and skill levels.<sup>157</sup> As well as arguing for greater flexibility within the VCE, the review suggested the development of an alternative senior secondary learning program to cater for a small proportion of students.<sup>158</sup>

Students can enrol in the VCAL at either the Foundation, Intermediate or Senior level, although only Intermediate and Senior VCAL are considered to constitute year 12 or equivalent qualifications.<sup>159</sup> At each level, the VCAL combines classroom learning with

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<sup>150</sup> Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (Victoria), *Provision of the International Baccalaureate Diploma Program in Victorian Government Schools: Guidelines* (Melbourne: DEECD, 2008), 3.

<sup>151</sup> Victorian Government, 'Secondary Schools,' Live in Victoria, <http://www.liveinvictoria.vic.gov.au/living-in-victoria/education-and-childcare/secondary-schools> (accessed 2 July 2009).

<sup>152</sup> Miki Perkins, 'International Baccalaureate students set to go,' *The Age*, 5 January 2009.

<sup>153</sup> International Baccalaureate, 'Theory of Knowledge,' IB, <http://www.ibo.org/diploma/curriculum/core/knowledge/index.cfm> (accessed 2 July 2009).

<sup>154</sup> Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (Victoria), *Provision of the International Baccalaureate Diploma Program in Victorian Government Schools: Guidelines* (Melbourne: DEECD, 2008), 3.

<sup>155</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>156</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>157</sup> Peter Kirby, *Ministerial Review of Post Compulsory Education and Training Pathways in Victoria: Final Report* (Melbourne: Department of Education, Employment and Training, 2000), 78.

<sup>158</sup> *ibid.*, 81.

<sup>159</sup> Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (Victoria), 'Youth Guarantee – Frequently Asked Questions', <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/sensecyouth/delivery/youthguarantee-fs.htm> (accessed 19 June 2009).

options such as TAFE study, structured workplace learning and school-based apprenticeships. While the VCAL is flexible and tailored to meet individual students' interests and requirements, each student's learning program must include units from each of four curriculum strands: Literacy and Numeracy Skills; Industry Specific Skills; Work Related Skills; and Personal Development Skills. The VCAL aims to help students develop knowledge and vocational skills that prepare them for work and participation in the community. It also assists students to develop the knowledge and skills to make informed vocational choices and facilitates pathways to employment and/or further learning.<sup>160</sup>

### ***VET in Schools***

The VET in Schools Program was introduced in 1994 to expand opportunities and improve outcomes in post-compulsory schooling by enabling students to complete nationally recognised VET certificates while at school.<sup>161</sup> Through the program, students undertake vocationally oriented subjects as part of their VCE or VCAL studies. Studies that can be completed as part of the VET in Schools Program include: VET subjects undertaken as part of the VCE studies (which may contribute to the student's ENTER); other vocational education studies; and training undertaken as part of a School-Based Apprenticeship.<sup>162</sup> Schools have varied arrangements for the delivery of VET in Schools, but these typically involve partnerships with industry and training providers including TAFE institutes and Group Training Organisations.

### **Year 12 completion and higher education participation**

In terms of higher education, successful completion of school can be seen as the 'first hurdle' for young people: generally speaking, it is a prerequisite to having the option of participating in university study.<sup>163</sup> Consequently, young people who do not complete year 12 generally do not come to the point of considering whether to apply for or accept a place in higher education.

Various inquiry participants pointed to the association between year 12 completion rates and participation in higher education, arguing that the lower university participation rates among young people in particular areas can be attributed in part to lower school retention and completion rates in those areas.<sup>164</sup> Deakin University set out this argument in its submission:

... if rural, regional and isolated students remain in school until year 12 at a much lower rate than their metropolitan peers, the applicant pool of school leavers for these students will be relatively much smaller. School retention is therefore a major influence on the lower application rates for higher education in rural Victoria.<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, *VCAL Information Sheet: The VCAL: An Introduction* (Melbourne: VCAA, 2008).

<sup>161</sup> Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (Victoria), 'Vocational Education and Training in Schools,' DEECD, <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/sensecyouth/qualsprograms/vet.htm> (accessed 10 July 2009).

<sup>162</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>163</sup> University of Ballarat, Written Submission, March 2008, 17; Rural Education Forum Australia, Written Submission, April 2008, 3; Australian Education Union (Victorian Branch), Written Submission, May 2008, 2–3.

<sup>164</sup> For example, Australian Education Union (Victorian Branch), Written Submission, May 2008, 3; Deakin University, Written Submission, March 2008, 5–6; Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals, Written Submission, March 2008, 3; The Hon J. Gillard, Australian Government Minister for Education, Written Submission, April 2008, 15–16; Mr M. Horn, Senior Manager, Research and Policy Centre, Brotherhood of St Laurence, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Lilydale, 17 July 2008, 53; Australian Council for Educational Research, Written Submission, March 2008, 2; South West Association of Post Primary Principals, Written Submission, April 2008, 5; Hobsons Bay City Council, Written Submission, March 2008, 3; University of Ballarat, Appendix to Written Submission, March 2008, 1.

<sup>165</sup> Deakin University, Written Submission, March 2008, 6.

This link between retention at school and transition to university has also been emphasised in the research literature on higher education participation.<sup>166</sup>

However, while school completion rates are clearly related to higher education participation rates, different year 12 or equivalent qualifications are associated with different post-school pathways. On Track data allows examination of the post-secondary destinations of 2007 school completers from four different study streams: VCE Non-VET; VCE VET; VCE VCAL; and VCAL only (refer Table 3.1).

Table 3.1: Destinations of year 12 or equivalent completers, by senior certificate/study strand (2008)

Destination	VCE Non-VET		VCE VET		VCE VCAL		VCAL Only		All	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
University	12,100	52.5	2,365	30.1	45	2.4	0	0.0	14,510	44.1
VET Cert. IV+	3,066	13.3	1,438	18.3	220	11.7	5	8.2	4,729	14.4
VET Entry level	715	3.1	320	4.1	181	9.6	7	11.5	1,223	3.7
Apprentice	700	3.0	640	8.1	550	29.1	20	32.8	1,910	5.8
Trainee	792	3.4	422	5.4	121	6.4	4	6.6	1,339	4.1
Employed	4,976	21.6	2,318	29.5	588	31.2	16	26.2	7,898	24.0
Looking for work	718	3.1	352	4.5	182	9.6	9	14.8	1,261	3.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>23,067</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>7,855</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>1,887</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>32,870</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Source: Sheldon Rothman and others, *The On Track Survey 2008: The Destinations of School Leavers in Victoria: Statewide Report* (Melbourne: Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2009), 19 (adapted).

Data from Table 3.1 informs the following discussion of the destinations of VCE students, dual-certificate students and VCAL students.

### *Destinations of VCE students*

On Track data shows, unsurprisingly, that VCE completers have the highest level of transition into higher education. In 2008, just over half (52.5%) of all 2007 VCE non-VET completers had gone on to university. In contrast, no VCAL completers and only 2.4 per cent of dual-certificate VCE VCAL students enrolled in a university course.

At the same time, different types of VCE studies are associated with a different likelihood of participating in higher education. Of all 2007 VCE completers, those who only undertook non-VET studies were substantially more likely to enrol in university than those who undertook VET studies as part of the VCE (52.5% compared to 30.1%, respectively). VCE students who completed VET studies were somewhat more likely to enrol in entry level and upper level VET courses, and also had higher participation in apprenticeships, traineeships and employment, compared with students completing only VCE non-VET studies. Other research has found that Victorian VET in Schools students are more likely than non-VET students to choose vocational post-school pathways.<sup>167</sup>

This pattern of lower transition to higher education among VCE students undertaking VET in Schools may support the contention that VET options can divert students away from more academic pathways that may lead to higher education. This view was set out by the

<sup>166</sup> Centre for the Study of Higher Education, University of Melbourne, *Participation and Equity: A review of the participation in higher education of people from low socioeconomic backgrounds and Indigenous people* (Canberra: Universities Australia, 2008), 26–28.

<sup>167</sup> Reviewed in John Polesel and others, *VET in Schools: A post-compulsory education perspective* (Adelaide: National Centre for Vocational Education Research, 2004), 18–19.

University of Ballarat, which argued that while participation in VET in Schools does not preclude entry into higher education, there is a tendency to stream students towards more vocational outcomes.<sup>168</sup>

On the other hand, the movement of VET in Schools students into more vocational post-school pathways may reflect the preferences and characteristics of students that choose to take up VET in Schools, rather than a process of 'streaming'. Australian research into the characteristics of VET in Schools students has found that while the program can, and does, appeal to university-bound students, it is primarily accessed by less academic students, with students in the two lowest achievement quintiles over-represented among VET in Schools students.<sup>169</sup>

Participants drew the Committee's attention to research that suggests that participation in VET in Schools may actually increase the likelihood of participation in higher education for some types of student.<sup>170</sup> One 2001 study compared the destinations of VET and non-VET students with a similar achievement profile. It found that academically weak students who participated in VET studies were more likely to progress to further study, including university, than those who did not.<sup>171</sup> However, this finding has not been supported by recent On Track data. Both the 2007 and 2008 On Track surveys show that VCE students in the lowest quartile of achievement were less likely to go on to university if they participated in VET in Schools. VCE students from the highest achievement quartile who participated in VET were also less likely to enrol in university than their high-achieving non-VET peers.<sup>172</sup>

### *Destinations of dual-certificate students*

A growing number of students are completing both the VCE and the VCAL. For dual-certificate students who completed their studies in 2007, Table 3.1 shows that the most common post-school destination was employment, accounting for 31.2 per cent of completers. The next most popular destinations were apprenticeships (29.1%) and upper level VET (11.7%). A small proportion (2.4%) of VCE VCAL students went on to university study, indicating that while most VCAL students choose a vocational destination, dual-certificate study can be a pathway to higher education.

### *Destinations of VCAL students*

On Track data in Table 3.1 shows that students who completed the VCAL in 2007 had higher rates of transition into the workforce (employed and looking for work) and employment-based training as apprentices and trainees when compared to other year 12 completers. They were more likely to take up entry level VET courses, but less likely to enrol in VET courses at Certificate IV level and above. Inquiry participants acknowledged that while a very small number of VCAL students pursue university study, the VCAL is generally seen by VCAL providers and students as a pathway into work or further VET study.<sup>173</sup> This

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<sup>168</sup> University of Ballarat, Written Submission, March 2008, 18.

<sup>169</sup> John Polesel and others, *VET in Schools: A post-compulsory education perspective* (Adelaide: National Centre for Vocational Education Research, 2004), 16.

<sup>170</sup> Sunraysia Institute of TAFE, Written Submission, March 2008, 5; Centre for Regional Development, Swinburne University of Technology, Written Submission, March 2008, 5.

<sup>171</sup> John Polesel, 'Vocational education and training in schools in Victoria: An appraisal six years down the track,' *Journal of Vocational Education and Training* 53, no. 2 (2001): 325-329.

<sup>172</sup> Richard Teese, Kira Clarke and John Polesel, *The On Track Survey 2007 Statewide Report: The Destinations of School Leavers in Victoria* (Melbourne: Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2007), 18.

<sup>173</sup> Centre for Regional Development, Swinburne University of Technology, Written Submission, March 2008, 5; South West Association of Post Primary Principals, Written Submission, April 2008, 6; University of Ballarat, Written Submission, March 2008, 18.

assumption underpins the design of the program and reflects the preferences of a majority of VCAL students.

According to On Track data, no 2007 VCAL completers were enrolled at university in early 2008, although the Committee notes that of the previous cohort of VCAL completers, 0.7 per cent made a transition to university study.<sup>174</sup> While movement from the VCAL to university study is minimal, it appears that a very small number of VCAL graduates enrol in a higher education course. This indicates that a small group of VCAL students has, or develops, the inclination to undertake university study. The Committee heard from one such student from Hamilton in Victoria's south-west. Ms Laura Scott was combining the VCAL with a Diploma of Business and Legal Practice through TAFE, and hoped to subsequently gain entry to Deakin University at Warrnambool to study as a mature age student.<sup>175</sup>

Some inquiry participants were of the view that increased movement from the VCAL into higher education could and should be encouraged.<sup>176</sup> However, evidence suggests that this may require a change in the way the VCAL is regarded by the university sector. One university representative argued that the VCAL is viewed within the higher education sector as 'less than' the VCE.<sup>177</sup> Dr John Henry, Board Member, Smart Geelong Region LLEN, similarly argued that universities 'need to connect to VCAL as a quality learning pathway'.<sup>178</sup> The Committee heard that Deakin University has taken steps in this direction, examining the feasibility of pathways from the VCAL into some degree programs, and has approved a new pathway into the Bachelor of Primary Education. While the university was not expecting large numbers of applicants through this route, it was working with schools in the Geelong region to promote the option.<sup>179</sup>

As the VCAL has been specifically created to cater for students with a preference for applied learning and vocational outcomes, the Committee believes that it should continue to focus on the needs of this group of students. At the same time, it is important that participation in the VCAL does not rule out future participation in higher education for the small proportion of students who have the aspiration for university study. The Committee encourages universities to continue to work with other education and training providers to enhance opportunities and pathways for students to move between sectors, where appropriate. The Committee also encourages VCAL providers to ensure that students are aware of opportunities for continued participation in education and training, including potential pathways into university study. These pathways are further discussed in Chapter 5.

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<sup>174</sup> Sheldon Rothman and others, *The On Track Survey 2008: The Destinations of School Leavers in Victoria; Statewide Report* (Melbourne: Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2009), 21–22; Richard Teese, Kira Clarke and John Polesel, *The On Track Survey 2007 Statewide Report: The Destinations of School Leavers in Victoria* (Melbourne: Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2007), 16.

<sup>175</sup> Ms L. Scott, Former Student, Southern Grampians Adult Education, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Hamilton, 28 April 2008, 26.

<sup>176</sup> Ms R. Heckenberg, Head and Lecturer, Centre for Australian Indigenous Studies, Monash University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Churchill, 19 May 2008, 23; Dr J. Henry, Board Member, Smart Geelong Region LLEN, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Colac, 29 April 2008, 19; Mr B. Baker, Convenor and Member, South West Regional Youth Affairs Network, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Hamilton, 28 April 2008, 10–11.

<sup>177</sup> Ms R. Heckenberg, Head and Lecturer, Centre for Australian Indigenous Studies, Monash University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Churchill, 19 May 2008, 23.

<sup>178</sup> Dr J. Henry, Board Member, Smart Geelong Region LLEN, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Colac, 29 April 2008, 19.

<sup>179</sup> Dr J. Henry, Board Member, Smart Geelong Region LLEN, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Colac, 29 April 2008, 19; Deakin University, Written Submission, March 2008, 7.

## Differences in school achievement and completion

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Overall, Victoria's education system supports strong student achievement, and comparatively high levels of year 12 or equivalent completion. Despite strong performance overall, however, the Committee found that there are substantial geographical and socioeconomic differences in school achievement and completion rates.

### Academic achievement levels

The Committee reviewed achievement data from a variety of sources to examine the academic performance of Victorian students relative to students in other jurisdictions. The Committee also considered geographical and socioeconomic differences in achievement within Victoria.

#### *Overall achievement levels for Victorian students*

Results from national and international testing show high average academic performance by Victorian students. The National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) commenced in 2008 with the purpose of providing comparable national literacy and numeracy data. Under the program, students in years 3, 5, 7 and 9 undertake standard national tests in Reading, Writing, Language Conventions (Spelling and Grammar) and Numeracy.<sup>180</sup> Results from the first round of testing indicate that along with the Australian Capital Territory and New South Wales, Victorian students were top performers.<sup>181</sup>

Coordinated by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is an international triennial test of the academic performance of 15-year-olds. PISA assesses competencies in three core domains, referred to as reading literacy, scientific literacy and mathematical literacy.<sup>182</sup> In the latest tests, the average performance of Victorian students across all three domains was similar to or above that of students in all Australian jurisdictions other than the Australian Capital Territory and Western Australia.<sup>183</sup> The achievement of Victorian students in PISA, while not topping that of students in other Australian jurisdictions, was well above OECD averages.

A 2009 Victorian Auditor-General's report assessed literacy and numeracy achievement trends in Victoria over the period 1998 to 2007.<sup>184</sup> The audit focused on data from the statewide VCE and Achievement Improvement Monitor (AIM) assessments, and returned mixed findings. Although noting improvements in some domains among some year levels, the Auditor-General concluded that there was no marked improvement in average literacy and numeracy achievement across age groups over the period examined.<sup>185</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, *National Assessment Program: Literacy and Numeracy: Achievement in Reading, Writing, Language Conventions and Numeracy* (Melbourne: MCEETYA, 2008), 2.

<sup>181</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>182</sup> Sue Thomson and Lisa De Bortoli, *Exploring Scientific Literacy: How Australia measures up. The PISA 2006 survey of students' scientific, reading and mathematical literacy skills* (Camberwell: Australian Council for Educational Research, 2008), 2–3.

<sup>183</sup> *ibid.*, 166, 202, 70.

<sup>184</sup> Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Literacy and Numeracy Achievement*, Victorian Auditor-General's Report (Melbourne: VAGO, 2009).

<sup>185</sup> *ibid.*, 2.

*Geographical and socioeconomic differences in achievement levels*

Many participants in the Committee's inquiry highlighted the influence of socioeconomic status on achievement at school, and therefore on higher education participation.<sup>186</sup> This relationship between socioeconomic status and achievement has been extensively documented by researchers and policymakers.<sup>187</sup> Reviewing previous research on the relationships between socioeconomic status and literacy and numeracy, Rothman and McMillan noted lower levels of average achievement from early childhood through to the final year of secondary school among students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds.<sup>188</sup>

Results from PISA and NAPLAN also show marked differences in achievement according to socioeconomic status. In 2006, Australian 15-year-olds from the highest socioeconomic status quartile attained average scores in PISA that were above those of the lowest quartile by 87 score points in scientific literacy, representing approximately two-and-a-half years of formal schooling.<sup>189</sup> In the domains of reading literacy and mathematical literacy, the scores of students from the lowest socioeconomic status quartile were below those from the highest socioeconomic status quartile by 84 score points and 78 score points, respectively.<sup>190</sup> Across each domain tested, low socioeconomic status students were under-represented at the highest achievement levels and over-represented among the lowest achievers.<sup>191</sup> Similarly, results from 2008 NAPLAN testing showed higher scores among students in years 3, 5, 7 and 9 where their parents had higher levels of educational attainment.<sup>192</sup>

Results from NAPLAN and PISA also show some differences in achievement levels between metropolitan, regional and remote areas, although geographical differences are less marked than socioeconomic differences. Across Australia in 2006, students from remote areas scored slightly lower in PISA scientific, mathematical and reading literacy tests than students in 'provincial' areas. In turn, provincial students achieved slightly lower average scores than metropolitan students.<sup>193</sup> Victoria's NAPLAN results show a different pattern. While students from regional areas tended to perform less well than their metropolitan counterparts, students from remote areas tended to do better than both

<sup>186</sup> For example, Mr M. Gallagher, Executive Director, Group of Eight, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Canberra, 17 June 2008, 3; Australian Education Union (Victorian Branch), Written Submission, May 2008, 5; Mr R. Juratowitch, Campus Principal, Kurnai College, Gippsland Education Precinct, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Churchill, 19 May 2008, 2; Professor R. James, Director, Centre for the Study of Higher Education, The University of Melbourne, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 3 March 2008, 10–11; Mr D. Conley, Youth Services Coordinator, Mornington Peninsula Shire Council, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Rosebud, 12 May 2008, 5; Professor R. Teese, Director, Centre for Post-compulsory Education and Lifelong Learning, The University of Melbourne, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 25 February 2008, 15; Mr D. McLean, Parent, Alexandra, Written Submission, April 2008, 3.

<sup>187</sup> A number of these studies are reviewed in Sheldon Rothman and Julie McMillan, *Influences on Achievement in Literacy and Numeracy*, Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth Research Report 36 (Camberwell: Australian Council for Educational Research, 2003), 5.

<sup>188</sup> Sheldon Rothman and Julie McMillan, *Influences on Achievement in Literacy and Numeracy*, Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth Research Report 36 (Camberwell: Australian Council for Educational Research, 2003), 5.

<sup>189</sup> Sue Thompson and Lisa De Bortoli, *Exploring Scientific Literacy: How Australia measures up. The PISA 2006 survey of students' scientific, reading and mathematical literacy skills* (Australian Council for Educational Research: Camberwell, 2008), 241.

<sup>190</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>191</sup> *ibid.*

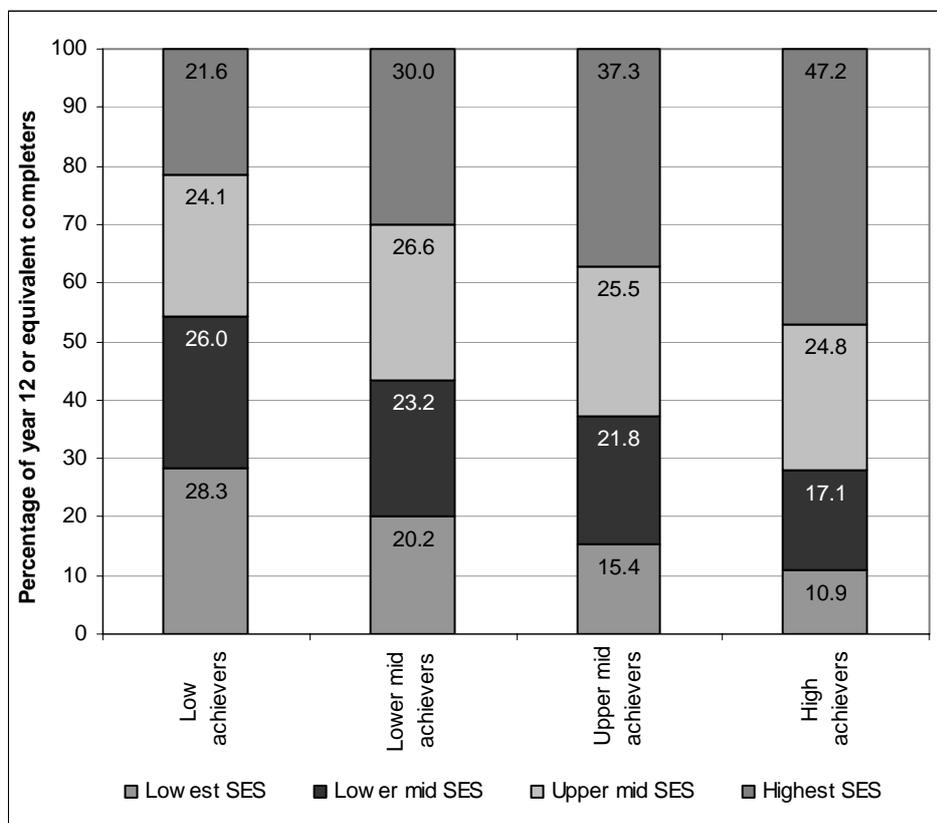
<sup>192</sup> Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, *National Assessment Program: Literacy and Numeracy: Achievement in Reading, Writing, Language Conventions and Numeracy* (Melbourne: MCEETYA, 2008), 53.

<sup>193</sup> Sue Thompson and Lisa De Bortoli, *Exploring Scientific Literacy: How Australia measures up. The PISA 2006 survey of students' scientific, reading and mathematical literacy skills* (Australian Council for Educational Research: Camberwell, 2008), vii.

metropolitan and regional students.<sup>194</sup> This result was unique to Victoria, where only a small number of students from remote areas participated in NAPLAN testing.

Socioeconomic and geographical differences in achievement carry through to senior secondary school. Data from the On Track survey show substantial differences in GAT achievement according to socioeconomic status (refer Figure 3.1). In 2007, students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds comprised just 10.9 per cent of students in the highest GAT achievement quartile, which was dominated by students from the highest socioeconomic status backgrounds (47.2%). At the same time, students from the lowest socioeconomic status quartile made up the largest proportion (28.3%) of students in the lowest achievement quartile. The On Track report concluded that given the strong relationships between socioeconomic status, GAT score and post-school destination, it is important that low socioeconomic status students be supported to reach higher levels of achievement.<sup>195</sup>

Figure 3.1: Socioeconomic status of year 12 or equivalent completers, by quartiles of GAT score (%) (2007)



Source: Sheldon Rothman and others, *The On Track Survey 2008: The Destinations of School Leavers in Victoria; Statewide Report* (Melbourne: Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2009), 26 (adapted).

<sup>194</sup> Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, *National Assessment Program: Literacy and Numeracy; Achievement in Reading, Writing, Language Conventions and Numeracy* (Melbourne: MCEETYA, 2008), 53, 105, 154-204.

<sup>195</sup> Sheldon Rothman and others, *The On Track Survey 2008: The Destinations of School Leavers in Victoria; Statewide Report* (Melbourne: Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2009), 27.

The Committee also found clear geographical differences in VCE achievement. Numerous participants highlighted the lower average ENTERs achieved by students from non-metropolitan and interface areas, compared with those in metropolitan areas. These views were supported by the Committee's analysis of VTAC data.<sup>196</sup> The implications of geographical differences in ENTER attainment are discussed in Chapter 5.

### Year 12 completion rates

As well as examining achievement levels, the Committee also considered the related issue of year 12 or equivalent completion rates in Victoria. The Committee examined geographical and socioeconomic differences in the types of year 12 or equivalent qualifications attained, in addition to its consideration of overall year 12 or equivalent completion rates.

#### *Overall year 12 or equivalent completion rates for Victorian students*

In comparison with most Australian jurisdictions, the rate of year 12 or equivalent completion in Victoria is high. One nationally agreed measure of completion, based on estimates from the ABS Survey of Education and Work, is the proportion of 20- to 24-year-olds to have completed year 12 or an equivalent qualification. On this measure, completion in Victoria improved from 81.8 per cent in 2000 to 86.1 per cent in 2007,<sup>197</sup> above the 2007 national average of 83.5 per cent.<sup>198</sup>

Another measure in use by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development is the year 12 or equivalent completion rate at age 19, calculated using the Department's administrative data and ABS population estimates. This measure also shows improvement, with the rate of year 12 or equivalent completion increasing 13 percentage points, from 71.0 per cent in 1999 to 84.0 per cent in 2006.<sup>199</sup>

At the same time as the rate of year 12 or equivalent completion in Victoria has risen, the balance between different types of year 12 completion has shifted. Significantly, completion of the VCE, the main pathway into higher education for school leavers, has decreased. According to the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA), the VCE completion rate for 19-year-olds declined from 67.0 per cent in 1998 to 62.9 per cent in 2008 (refer Table 3.2).

Together with this apparent decline in VCE completions, participation in the VCAL has grown steadily since its introduction, following a pilot with 546 students in 2002. Enrolments grew to 5,137 the following year,<sup>200</sup> reaching 15,641 in 2008.<sup>201</sup>

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<sup>196</sup> Education and Training Committee analysis of 2007–08 VTAC data, May 2009.

<sup>197</sup> Victorian Government, 'Growing Victoria Together Progress Report,' appendix to *Service Delivery*, Victorian State Budget Paper 2008–09 No. 3 (Melbourne: Department of Treasury and Finance, 2009), 394.

<sup>198</sup> Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (Victoria), *Summary Statistics for Victorian Schools*, Issue 1 (Melbourne: DEECD, 2008), 2.

<sup>199</sup> Supplementary information provided by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, July 2008.

<sup>200</sup> University of Ballarat, Appendix to Written Submission, March 2008, 2.

<sup>201</sup> Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, *Senior Secondary Certificate Statistical Information 2008* (Melbourne: VCAA, 2009).

## *Inquiry into Geographical Differences in Participation in Higher Education in Victoria*

Table 3.2: VCE completion rate for 19-year-olds (1998 to 2008)

Year	19-year-olds who have successfully completed VCE (No.)	Target population of 19-year-olds in Victoria (No.)	VCE completion rate (%)
1998	41,768	62,299	67.0
1999	42,110	61,956	68.0
2000	43,039	64,106	67.1
2001	44,010	66,066	66.6
2002	44,796	67,050	66.8
2003	46,404	67,836	68.4
2004	47,733	69,640	68.5
2005	47,039	70,324	66.9
2006	46,958	71,103	66.0
2007	46,543	72,771	64.0
2008	46,845	74,424	62.9

Source: Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, *Senior Secondary Certificate Statistical Information 2008* (Melbourne: VCAA, 2009), 4.

The Committee heard that the VCAL comprises a substantial proportion of the total senior secondary cohort at some government schools. Mr Rob Juratowitch, Principal of the Gippsland Education Precinct campus of Kurnai College, told the Committee that approximately one-third of the College's senior cohort undertake the VCAL, while the remaining two-thirds enrol in the VCE. Mr Juratowitch told the Committee that the College had 'real internal debates about what is the right amount of VCAL', noting that while the College 'could almost become a VCAL school ... we want to keep our academic focus as well'.<sup>202</sup> Another small rural school said in a submission that strong VCAL enrolments at the school were 'perhaps higher than we would like', arguing that this was related to 'low student aspiration'.<sup>203</sup>

It may be that an increase in VCAL participation helps to explain the declining VCE completion rate. Ms Toni Burgoyne, Principal, Portland Secondary College, told the Committee that some students enrol in the VCAL despite being 'equally able to get a high score at VCE', attracted by strong school-based apprenticeship opportunities in the region.<sup>204</sup> Similarly, the most recent On Track report highlights a decline in VET in Schools participation among VCE students, concurrent with increasing VCAL participation. The report suggests that the VCAL may be attracting some students who in the past would have undertaken the VCE while participating in VET in Schools.<sup>205</sup>

The Committee is pleased to see the high levels of participation in VCAL and VET in Schools. A central objective of these programs is to engage and retain students who may not otherwise complete year 12 or equivalent.<sup>206</sup> There was widespread agreement among inquiry participants that the growth in courses offered in the vocational curriculum has

<sup>202</sup> Mr R. Juratowitch, Campus Principal, Kurnai College, Gippsland Education Precinct, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Churchill, 19 May 2008, 6.

<sup>203</sup> Lakes Entrance Secondary College, Written Submission, May 2008, 1.

<sup>204</sup> Ms T. Burgoyne, Principal, Portland Secondary College, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Hamilton, 28 April 2008, 22.

<sup>205</sup> Sheldon Rothman and others, *The On Track Survey 2008: The Destinations of School Leavers in Victoria: Statewide Report* (Melbourne: Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2009), 17.

<sup>206</sup> Mr G. McLean, General Manager, Youth Transitions Division, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (Victoria), Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 23 July 2008, 4.

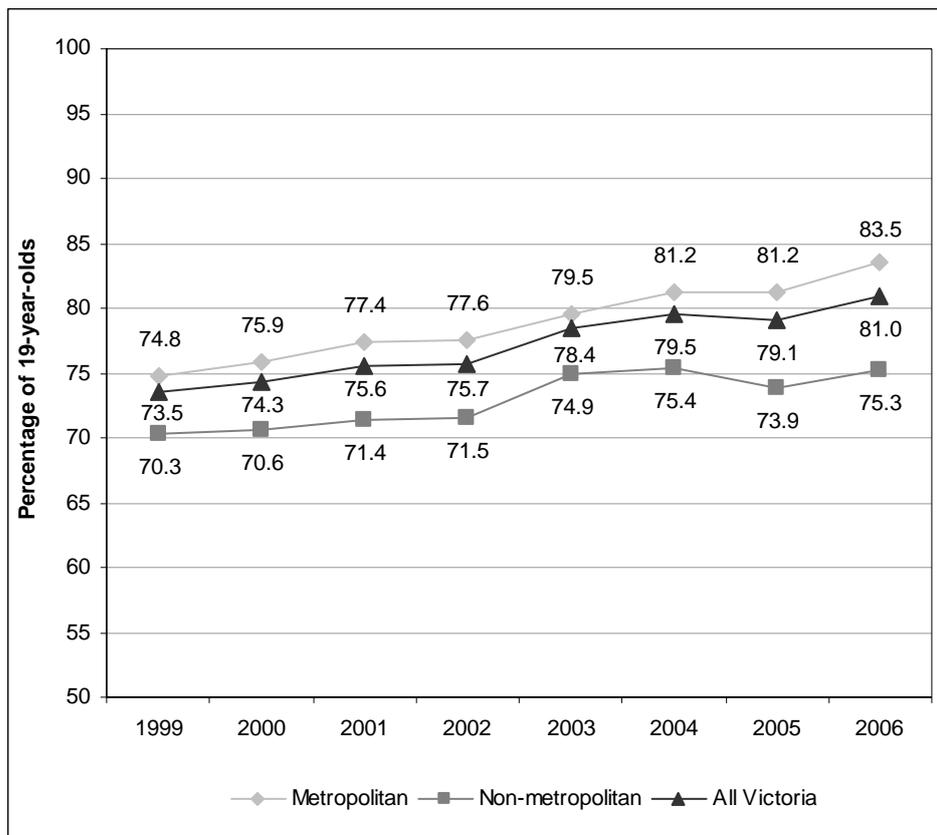
contributed to improvements in year 12 or equivalent completion rates.<sup>207</sup> The Committee acknowledges that the VCAL may be a more suitable senior secondary qualification for some senior secondary students who might previously have undertaken the VCE.

*Geographical and socioeconomic differences in year 12 or equivalent completion*

Throughout the inquiry, many participants commented on the lower rates of year 12 completion among young people in non-metropolitan Victoria, in interface areas, and in some metropolitan areas.<sup>208</sup>

Figure 3.2 shows year 12 or equivalent completion rates for 19-year-olds in Victoria, differentiated for metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas.

Figure 3.2: Victorian 19-year-olds with year 12 or equivalent, by home location (%) (1999 to 2006)



Source: Supplementary information provided by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (Victoria), July 2008 (adapted).

<sup>207</sup> For example, Chisholm Institute of TAFE, Written Submission, March 2008, 4; Association of Independent Schools of Victoria, Written Submission, March 2008, 8; Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals, Written Submission, March 2008, 3; Frankston Learning City Stakeholder Network, Written Submission, March 2008, 2; Orbest Secondary College, Written Submission, May 2008, 1; South West LLEN, Written Submission, April 2008, 2; Victorian Council of Social Service, Written Submission, April 2008, 4; Dr J. Henry, Board Member, Smart Geelong Region LLEN, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Colac, 29 April 2008, 19; South West Association of Post Primary Principals, Written Submission, April 2008, 6; Ms J. Golden, Executive Director, Education Programs, Gordon Institute of TAFE, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Colac, 29 April 2008, 71–72.

<sup>208</sup> For example, Professor R. Teese, Director, Centre for Post-compulsory Education and Lifelong Learning, The University of Melbourne, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 25 February 2008, 14, 21; Dr J. Oriel, Head, Student Equity Unit, Deakin University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Colac, 29 April 2008, 54; Ms M. Pendergast, Principal, Warrnambool College, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Colac, 29 April 2008, 34; Department of Innovation, Industry and Regional Development (Victoria), Written Submission, May 2008, 14–15; Professor S. Walker, Vice-Chancellor, Deakin University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 30 March 2009, 33; Ms R. Moore, Student, RMIT University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 23 March 2009, 2–3.

Figure 3.2 shows that completion of year 12 or equivalent increased over the seven years to 2006 in both metropolitan and non-metropolitan Victoria. However, in metropolitan areas this increase was greater, and built on a completion rate that was already substantially higher. In these areas, the completion rate grew 8.7 percentage points to reach a high of 83.5 per cent in 2006. In contrast, the non-metropolitan completion rate rose only 5 percentage points to 75.3 per cent of 19-year-olds in 2006.

The apparent retention rate is another measure that contributes to the picture of school completion. Year 10 to 12 apparent retention rates express year 12 enrolments as a proportion of the year 10 enrolment two years prior.<sup>209</sup> They are ‘apparent’ because they do not take into account a number of factors including repetition of a year, early school leaving prior to year 10, movement between school sectors or to other types of education and training provider, or movement within and between states. Nevertheless, apparent retention rates are an approximate measure of students’ progression through the years of schooling.

Table 3.3 shows year 10 to 12 apparent retention rates for government schools across nine Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) regions over the decade to 2008.

Table 3.3: Year 10 to 12 apparent retention rate at Victorian government schools, by DEECD region (%) (1999 to 2008)

Region	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
Western Metropolitan	81.9	80.7	81.6	83.2	83.9	83.8	82.1	81.4	81.2	81.1
Northern Metropolitan	81.5	82.7	83.6	86.0	85.7	88.7	86.7	87.7	88.1	88.0
Eastern Metropolitan	85.8	90.1	91.4	91.7	93.1	92.9	94.1	90.4	88.5	85.3
Southern Metropolitan	77.5	76.8	81.3	80.2	81.4	79.7	80.8	80.2	82.8	79.5
Barwon South Western	75.9	75.4	77.9	78.9	76.4	78.5	75.9	74.5	72.8	72.2
Grampians	75.1	71.8	73.4	73.9	73.4	71.8	74.3	73.7	72.9	71.6
Loddon Mallee	77.3	76.4	77.1	81.9	82.0	80.5	79.4	77.1	74.9	78.0
Hume	70.5	67.3	71.0	74.0	74.8	73.8	71.4	69.4	73.7	67.6
Gippsland	71.7	67.9	72.5	70.9	70.3	72.6	75.8	69.8	72.3	69.9
All metro regions	81.7	82.8	84.9	85.5	86.3	86.4	86.2	85.1	85.3	83.3
All non-metro regions	74.3	72.1	74.7	76.4	75.9	76.0	75.6	73.1	73.4	72.2
All government schools	79.2	79.0	81.3	82.3	82.7	82.9	82.7	81.1	81.3	79.7

Source: Compiled from Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (Victoria), *Summary Statistics for Victorian Schools: March 2009* (Melbourne: DEECD, 2009), 1; Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (Victoria), *Summary Statistics for Victorian Schools: February 2007* (Melbourne: DEECD, 2007), 25

Table 3.3 makes clear that there is a substantial and ongoing gap between apparent retention rates in metropolitan and non-metropolitan government schools. In the most recent year (2008) the apparent retention rate in non-metropolitan regions (72.2%) was approximately 11 percentage points lower than that in metropolitan regions (83.3%). Victoria’s overall apparent retention rate fluctuated in the period shown, rising to a peak of 82.9 per cent in 2004, and then declining to 79.7 per cent in 2008. The disparity between metropolitan and non-metropolitan regions increased slightly over the period.

<sup>209</sup> Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, *Summary Statistics Victorian Schools February 2007* (Melbourne: DEECD, 2008), 33.

Table 3.3 also shows differences in apparent retention rates within both the non-metropolitan and metropolitan groupings. Among metropolitan regions, 2008 apparent retention rates were highest in the Northern (88.0%) and Eastern (85.3%) regions, and lower in the Western (81.1%) and Southern (79.5%) regions. Among the non-metropolitan regions, apparent retention rates were lowest in Hume (67.6%) and Gippsland (69.9%) and highest in the Loddon Mallee region (78.0%). It might be expected that more detailed analysis of apparent retention rates would reveal further variations within both metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas.

Related to these geographical differences in retention and year 12 or equivalent completion, students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds are less likely to complete school. These differences were highlighted by a number of inquiry participants,<sup>210</sup> and are well documented in the literature on early school leaving.<sup>211</sup>

A number of studies also point to socioeconomic and geographical differences in the type of year 12 or equivalent qualifications attained. A range of studies, including the most recent On Track survey, have shown that participation in VET in Schools is generally higher in non-metropolitan areas.<sup>212</sup> At the same time, there are differences in VET in Schools participation within Melbourne. According to On Track, in 2007, participation in VET in Schools was highest in the Northern Metropolitan Region (33.5%) and lowest in the Eastern Metropolitan Region (22.1%).<sup>213</sup>

Several Australian studies have found that school students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds are more likely to enrol in VET programs.<sup>214</sup> Examining the VET in Schools participation of secondary students across nine Victorian regions, one study found that participation rates tend to drop off as the mean socioeconomic status of the region rises.<sup>215</sup> Analysis using a postcode measure of socioeconomic status showed that while 29.0 per cent of students living in areas with postcodes in the bottom socioeconomic status quartile were enrolled in VET programs, only 16.7 per cent of those living in areas with postcodes in the highest socioeconomic status quartile participated in VET in Schools.<sup>216</sup>

Related to this, most VET in Schools provision is in the government sector. According to data from the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA), there were 6,792 year 12 students in the government sector enrolled in VET in Schools in 2006, compared to

<sup>210</sup> For example, Professor R. James, Director, Centre for the Study of Higher Education, The University of Melbourne, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 3 March 2008, 10–11; Professor R. Larkins, Chair, Universities Australia, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 3 March 2008, 21; Australian Education Union (Victorian Branch), Written Submission, May 2008, 5; Mr M. Horn, Senior Manager, Research and Policy Centre, Brotherhood of St Laurence, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Lilydale, 17 July 2008, 53.

<sup>211</sup> See, for example, Sue Fullarton and others, *Patterns of Participation in Year 12*, Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth Research Report 33 (Camberwell: Australian Council for Educational Research, 2003), vii; David D. Curtis and Julie McMillan, *School Non-completers: Profiles and Initial Destinations*, Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth Research Report 54 (Camberwell: Australian Council for Educational Research, 2008), 2.

<sup>212</sup> Sue Fullarton, *VET in Schools: Participation and Pathways*, Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth Research Report 21 (Camberwell: Australian Council for Educational Research, 2001), 12; Stephen Lamb and Margaret Vickers, *Variations in VET Provision across Australian Schools and Their Effects on Student Outcomes*, Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth Research Report 48 (Camberwell: Australian Council for Educational Research, 2006), 18; Sheldon Rothman and others, *The On Track Survey 2008: The Destinations of School Leavers in Victoria: Statewide Report* (Melbourne: Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2009), 64–65.

<sup>213</sup> Sheldon Rothman and others, *The On Track Survey 2008: The Destinations of School Leavers in Victoria: Statewide Report* (Melbourne: Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2009), 65.

<sup>214</sup> These are reviewed in John Polesel and others, *VET in Schools: A post-compulsory education perspective* (Adelaide: National Centre for Vocational Education Research, 2004), 14.

<sup>215</sup> John Polesel, 'The Development of Vocational Programs in Secondary Schools in Victoria and the European Tradition,' *International Studies in Educational Inequality, Theory and Policy*, vol. 3, *Inequality: Educational Theory and Public Policy*, eds. Richard Teese, Stephen Lamb and Marie Duru-Bellat (Dordrecht: Springer, 2007), 161.

<sup>216</sup> *ibid.*

1,934 in Catholic schools and 967 in the independent school sector.<sup>217</sup> In 2007, 31.0 per cent of year 12 or equivalent completers in government schools had participated in VET in Schools, compared to 26.7 per cent in Catholic schools and 21.4 per cent in independent schools.<sup>218</sup>

Similarly, a 2007 study found that within Melbourne's government schools, VCAL provision was uneven.<sup>219</sup> In outer urban areas almost all government schools were offering the VCAL by 2006. In the high socioeconomic status inner eastern and southern suburbs, government schools were far less likely to offer the VCAL.<sup>220</sup> Cumulatively, then, research suggests that students in lower socioeconomic status and non-metropolitan areas are more likely to undertake vocationally oriented year 12 or equivalent qualifications.

The recent decline in the VCE completion rate is of some concern to the Committee, especially when considered in combination with the geographical and socioeconomic differences in the type of year 12 or equivalent qualifications that students undertake. The evidence suggests that the decline in VCE completion may be concentrated in particular geographical areas and socioeconomic groups, which may further limit opportunities to progress to higher education for groups with an already lower rate of transition to higher education. While these groups may benefit from the positive outcomes associated with other year 12 qualifications, the implications for their future ability to participate in higher education is of particular interest to this inquiry.

The Committee believes that future policy regarding post-school transitions should be informed by a more detailed understanding of year 12 or equivalent completion rates. This would enable geographic and socioeconomic trends to be analysed more thoroughly in order to identify any trends in year 12 completion that may be disproportionately limiting post-school opportunities for a particular student group. The Committee therefore recommends that the Victorian Government collect and publish year 12 or equivalent completion data that is disaggregated by qualification type (VCE, IB, VCAL or Certificate II and above), as well as by location and socioeconomic status.

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## Lifting school achievement and completion rates

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Increasing academic achievement and year 12 or equivalent completion rates are important but ambitious goals. Professor Richard James, Director, Centre for the Study of Higher Education, The University of Melbourne, emphasised the enormity of the task:

Getting better equity in higher education in Australia, and in that sense Victoria, is ultimately about improving school achievement levels for the groups that are under-represented, and that is a wretchedly difficult challenge for communities all around the world.<sup>221</sup>

The Committee considered the role of school improvement in underpinning improved achievement and completion, particularly in areas where achievement and completion are currently low. With an emphasis on the VCE, the Committee also considered specific interventions to support increased year 12 completion and academic achievement.

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<sup>217</sup> John Polesel and Richard Teese, *VET in Schools Pathways: The 2006 Year 12 Cohort* (Melbourne: Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2007), 4.

<sup>218</sup> Rothman and others, *The On Track Survey 2008: The Destinations of School Leavers in Victoria; Statewide Report* (Melbourne: Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2009), 66.

<sup>219</sup> Daniel Edwards, 'The vocational fate of government secondary schools,' *People and Place* 15, no. 2 (2007): 8-9.

<sup>220</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>221</sup> Professor R. James, Director, Centre for the Study of Higher Education, The University of Melbourne, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 3 March 2008, 11.

## School improvement strategies

Some inquiry participants argued that lifting the higher education participation rates of under-represented groups requires widespread school improvement in the government school sector. Professor Richard Teese, Director, Centre for Post-compulsory Education and Lifelong Learning, The University of Melbourne, argued that 'regeneration' of the government school system in non-metropolitan and low socioeconomic status areas is fundamental to raising achievement.<sup>222</sup> Professor Teese identified the 'conservation of teaching capital and teaching expertise' and the build-up of resources in 'larger, more comprehensive institutions' as essential strategies for strengthening government schools.<sup>223</sup> Similarly, the Department of Innovation, Industry and Regional Development noted that while larger schools tend to promote better outcomes, low socioeconomic status and rural students are more likely to attend schools that are constrained by their smaller size.<sup>224</sup>

The Australian Education Union (Victorian Branch) argued that government schools should be revitalised through sustained funding for equipment and facilities.<sup>225</sup> It further argued that additional funding is required to improve achievement and retention among low socioeconomic status students and rural students.<sup>226</sup> The union also expressed support for the further development of education precincts that integrate public education, from early childhood through to tertiary education.<sup>227</sup> The Committee also recognises the benefits of education precincts and has recommended that the Victorian Government, in partnership with local governments, universities and other stakeholders consider further opportunities for co-location of school and higher education facilities in areas where participation in higher education is currently low (refer Chapter 4).

### *Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development*

In 2008, the Victorian Government developed the Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development, a comprehensive five-year plan that outlines the Victorian Government's vision and goals for Victorian education and early childhood development.<sup>228</sup> A key priority set out in the Education Blueprint is to strengthen public confidence in the education system, with a strong and vibrant school sector at its core.<sup>229</sup> Another key priority is to improve outcomes for disadvantaged young Victorians.<sup>230</sup> Within this, goals are set out for high levels of achievement at age 15, and increases in the number of young people completing year 12 or equivalent.<sup>231</sup> Importantly, the Education Blueprint encompasses government and non-government schools.<sup>232</sup>

The Education Blueprint identifies government school improvement as a key strategy for achieving these goals. The School Accountability and Improvement Framework for government schools will be strengthened, while school performance will be assessed

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<sup>222</sup> Professor R. Teese, Director, Centre for Post-compulsory Education and Lifelong Learning, The University of Melbourne, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 25 February 2008, 17.

<sup>223</sup> *ibid.*, 16.

<sup>224</sup> Department of Innovation, Industry and Regional Development (Victoria), Written Submission, May 2008, 13.

<sup>225</sup> Australian Education Union (Victorian Branch), Written Submission, May 2008, 8–9.

<sup>226</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>227</sup> *ibid.*, 9.

<sup>228</sup> Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (Victoria), *Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development* (Melbourne: DEECD, 2008).

<sup>229</sup> *ibid.*, 11.

<sup>230</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>231</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>232</sup> *ibid.*, 12.

against a new set of measures.<sup>233</sup> Schools where students are not meeting expected standards will receive additional support, which could include mentoring from high-performing schools, additional professional development for staff, or external management of staffing and resources.<sup>234</sup> New standards for provision in government schools will focus on improving access to a high-quality and broad curriculum.<sup>235</sup>

The Victorian Schools Plan will support the implementation of the Education Blueprint through a commitment that will see all of Victoria's government schools rebuilt, renovated or extended by 2017. Funding of \$1.9 billion has been committed for 500 schools over the period 2007 to 2010.<sup>236</sup> The Committee supports the intent of the Education Blueprint, and the associated investment in school infrastructure.

### *Addressing workforce shortages*

The Committee heard that a specific systemic restraint that impacts on both achievement and completion of year 12 or equivalent is teaching workforce difficulties in many regional and other hard-to-staff areas. The Victorian Government's latest *Teacher Supply and Demand Report* shows that 12.4 per cent of teaching vacancies in government secondary schools were difficult to fill in 2007, with almost half (49.6%) of all government secondary schools reporting difficulties in filling vacancies that year.<sup>237</sup> The number of 'difficult to fill' vacancies was highest in Mathematics, followed by Technology and Science.<sup>238</sup> Until recently, LOTE also had some of the highest number of difficult to fill vacancies. However, a lack of qualified LOTE teachers has seen the number of schools offering LOTE decline, thereby reducing the number of difficult to fill LOTE vacancies.<sup>239</sup> The report also showed geographic differences in the number of 'difficult to fill' vacancies, with government schools in the state's far north and west, together with those in the growth corridors on Melbourne's urban fringe, consistently experiencing more difficulty in filling teaching vacancies.<sup>240</sup>

Problems attracting and retaining teachers were widely acknowledged throughout the inquiry.<sup>241</sup> In particular, the Committee heard that many schools are experiencing severe difficulties in attracting and retaining teachers in key VCE subject areas including the sciences, mathematics and LOTE.<sup>242</sup> Ms Mary Pendergast, Principal, Warrnambool College, told the Committee that teacher shortages in some subject areas were 'becoming an endemic problem'.<sup>243</sup> Research has found that teachers in rural schools are more likely to

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<sup>233</sup> *ibid.*, 26.

<sup>234</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>235</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>236</sup> Department of Innovation, Industry and Regional Development (Victoria), Written Submission, May 2008, 22.

<sup>237</sup> Teacher Supply and Demand Reference Group, *Teacher Supply and Demand Report 2007* (Melbourne: Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2007), v.

<sup>238</sup> *ibid.*, 16.

<sup>239</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>240</sup> *ibid.*, 2.

<sup>241</sup> For example, Catholic College Wodonga, Written Submission, June 2008, 4; Mr B. Simons, Principal, The Hamilton and Alexandra College, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Hamilton, 28 April 2008, 22; Ms M. Pendergast, Principal, Warrnambool College, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Colac, 29 April 2008, 29, 32; Mrs J. Boyle, Principal, Mortlake P-12 College, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Colac, 29 April 2008, 32; Ms P. Nunan, Principal, Werrimull P-12 School, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Ouyen, 3 June 2008, 52; Ms H. Thiele, Principal, Murrayville Community College, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Ouyen, 3 June 2008, 50; Association of Independent Schools of Victoria, Written Submission, March 2008, 12; Australian Education Union (Victorian Branch), Written Submission, May 2008, 3; Rural Education Forum Australia, Written Submission, April 2008, 2; Victorian Farmers Federation, Written Submission, March 2008, 3; Australian Council for Educational Research, Written Submission, March 2008, 2.

<sup>242</sup> The Hon J. Gillard, Australian Government Minister for Education, Written Submission, April 2008, 14; Association of Independent Schools of Victoria, Written Submission, March 2008, 12; Rural Education Forum Australia, Written Submission, April 2008, 4.

<sup>243</sup> Ms M. Pendergast, Principal, Warrnambool College, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Colac, 29 April 2008, 32.

be teaching multiple subjects across different year levels, affecting learning outcomes.<sup>244</sup> According to two prominent research centres, smaller schools in rural areas experience these workforce difficulties and are often constrained in their ability to offer a wide range of curriculum and other programs for students.<sup>245</sup> These issues may contribute to lower student engagement and retention in non-metropolitan schools.

Participants in the Committee's inquiry therefore suggested measures to address workforce difficulties in rural and other hard-to-staff schools as a way of lifting higher education participation rates among under-represented groups. Broadly, participants argued that improved prestige, pay and working conditions should be used to increase the attractiveness of the teaching profession, including to high-achieving applicants and graduates.<sup>246</sup> Participants also argued for schemes, including generous scholarships, to attract a share of high quality teachers to rural schools and particular curriculum areas.<sup>247</sup> The Committee notes that to this end, the Victorian Government has in place a number of initiatives including the Teaching Scholarship Scheme, Career Change Program and Rural Retraining Program.<sup>248</sup>

Since quality teaching is the most important school factor determining learning outcomes from schooling, addressing persistent teacher shortages is clearly important. The Committee believes that the Victorian Government should monitor and review the effectiveness of its existing workforce schemes to ensure they adequately address the needs of schools in rural, regional, interface and low socioeconomic status areas. The Committee believes that addressing recruitment difficulties in hard-to-staff schools will contribute to improved achievement and completion rates, thereby laying the foundation for expanded post-school opportunities for students in disadvantaged areas.

### Lifting VCE achievement and completion rates

While system-wide improvement in the school sector is of fundamental importance, increased higher education participation will rest specifically on improved VCE outcomes among students from under-represented groups. Year 12 completion strategies must aim at increasing completions in all year 12 or equivalent qualifications, including the VCE. Furthermore, students from areas and groups that are under-represented in higher education should be specifically encouraged and supported to undertake the VCE.

#### *The need for a multifaceted approach to raising year 12 or equivalent completion*

Strategies for increasing year 12 or equivalent completion will be most successful if they address the multiple causes of early school leaving. The Committee heard that early school leaving is a complex phenomenon, having to do with the motivations of early school leavers, their individual backgrounds, and the contexts in which they live and study. The evidence

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<sup>244</sup> The Hon J. Gillard, Australian Government Minister for Education, Written Submission, April 2008, 14.

<sup>245</sup> Australian Council for Educational Research, Written Submission, March 2008, 2; Professor R. Teese, Director, Centre for Post-compulsory Education and Lifelong Learning, The University of Melbourne, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 25 February 2008, 17.

<sup>246</sup> Australian Education Union (Victorian Branch), Written Submission, May 2008, 9; vicCentral Highlands Area Consultative Committee, Written Submission, March 2008, 9; Association of Independent Schools of Victoria, Written Submission, March 2008, 12; Mr D. Paproth, Deputy Regional Director, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Churchill, 19 May 2008, 40.

<sup>247</sup> Australian Education Union (Victorian Branch), Written Submission, May 2008, 9; vicCentral Highlands Area Consultative Committee, Written Submission, March 2008, 9; Association of Independent Schools of Victoria, Written Submission, March 2008, 12.

<sup>248</sup> Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (Victoria), 'Teacher Supply and Demand Initiatives,' DEECD, <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/hrweb/careers/teach/demand.htm> (accessed 13 July 2009).

suggests that the motivations of early school leavers can generally be grouped into three categories: positive motivations to work; negative experiences of school; and personal welfare issues.<sup>249</sup> A number of studies have found that a positive attraction or 'pull' towards the workplace is a major influence on decisions, with early school leavers reporting a desire to earn money, or to work in a job or apprenticeship.<sup>250</sup> School related issues and concerns are another common factor in the decision to leave school. These factors include a lack of interest in school work, poor achievement, disengagement, and a general dislike of school or teachers.<sup>251</sup> Personal welfare issues such as ill-health or disability, caring responsibilities, pregnancy, involvement with the juvenile justice system, bullying, homelessness and family conflict can also influence the decision to leave school.<sup>252</sup>

The decision-making of early school leavers is related to their background characteristics and to the contexts in which they live and study. Youth labour market conditions, such as the availability of work, competitiveness of the workforce, and required skill sets, are one set of contextual factors that can influence early school leaving.<sup>253</sup> Year 12 completion rates are also influenced by school factors, such as school quality, teacher quality, curriculum, pedagogical effectiveness, school resources and school organisation.<sup>254</sup>

To date, the Victorian Government's approach to increasing school completion rates has placed heavy emphasis on broadening senior secondary curriculum to include greater vocational options. While broadening curriculum is one important strategy for increasing completion rates, the multiple factors influencing early school leaving highlight the need for multifaceted strategies to support completion. This point was emphasised in a recent report commissioned by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development to identify effective strategies for increasing school completion rates:

... what emerged as central to improving school engagement and completion for at risk students was a series of targeted interventions and programs underpinned by a supportive school culture or climate. The elements of school culture central to maximising student engagement and retention included a shared vision across the school community, high expectations of staff and students, flexibility and responsiveness to individual student needs, a commitment to success for all students, and a drive for continuous improvement.<sup>255</sup>

The report noted that schools are most effective in improving completion rates when they combine a range of strategies, develop a whole-of-staff commitment to engaging students, and constantly refine their approach to meet shifting needs.<sup>256</sup>

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<sup>249</sup> Stephen Lamb and others, *Staying on at school: Improving student retention in Australia*, (Brisbane: Department of Education and the Arts, 2004).

<sup>250</sup> For example, R. Teese, K. Clarke and J. Polesel, *The On Track Survey 2007 Statewide Report: The Destinations of School Leavers in Victoria* (Melbourne: Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2007), 68–69; David D. Curtis and Julie McMillan, *School Non-completers: Profiles and Initial Destinations*, Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth Research Report 54 (Camberwell: Australian Council for Educational Research, 2008), 1.

<sup>251</sup> R. Teese, K. Clarke and J. Polesel, *The On Track Survey 2007 Statewide Report: The Destinations of School Leavers in Victoria* (Melbourne: Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2007), 68; David D. Curtis and Julie McMillan, *School Non-completers: Profiles and Initial Destinations*, Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth Research Report 54 (Camberwell: Australian Council for Educational Research, 2008), 14–15; The Hon J. Gillard, Australian Government Minister for Education, Written Submission, April 2008, 14; Australian Council for Educational Research, Written Submission, March 2008, 2; University of Ballarat, Written Submission, March 2008, 8.

<sup>252</sup> For example, Hon. J. Gillard, Australian Government Minister for Education, Written Submission, April 2008, 14; Mr M. Horn, Senior Manager, Research and Policy Centre, Brotherhood of St Laurence, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Lilydale, 17 July 2008, 52; Representatives of Southern Grampians Adult Education, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Hamilton, 28 April 2008, 24–28.

<sup>253</sup> The Hon J. Gillard, Australian Government Minister for Education, Written Submission, April 2008, 13; South West Association of Post Primary Principals, Written Submission, April 2008, 2; Ms M. Pendergast, Principal, Warrnambool College, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Colac, 29 April 2008, 28.

<sup>254</sup> The Hon J. Gillard, Australian Government Minister for Education, Written Submission, April 2008, 13.

<sup>255</sup> Stephen Lamb and Suzanne Rice, *Effective Strategies to Increase School Completion Report*, Report to the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (Melbourne: DEECD, 2008), 3.

<sup>256</sup> *ibid.*, 4.

The report identified a variety of effective targeted interventions, including: mentoring and tutoring programs; early, intensive career planning; targeted skill development for low achievers; coordination of welfare needs; case management; social skills development support; family outreach; and targeted financial support.<sup>257</sup> To help schools implement such interventions, the report recommended that the Victorian Government provide integrated support to schools to help them address early school leaving, including assistance with training, staff development, planning and evaluation. Finally, it recommended strategic investment in proven strategies targeting the most disadvantaged students and schools.<sup>258</sup>

Similar interventions were suggested by participants throughout the inquiry. The Committee endorses the report's recommendations and calls upon the Victorian Government to continue to provide adequate funding and support for schools to implement broad, holistic interventions and strategies to improve completion rates.

### *Expanding VCE subject choice*

A key concern relating to VCE achievement at some non-metropolitan and small schools was the limited range of subjects typically offered.<sup>259</sup> Students noted that specialised subjects such as LOTE, English literature, physics, chemistry and advanced mathematics subjects are not always available in country schools.<sup>260</sup> In its submission, the Department of Innovation, Industry and Regional Development outlined the potential consequences of limited subject choice at the VCE level:

Limited subject choice in small regional schools does not enable students to select subjects of most interest/relevance to their abilities which reduces their ultimate ENTER score and their access to desired courses. This can also limit student course selection options and decisions.<sup>261</sup>

Mr Axil Lonergan, a student at Ouyen Secondary College in Victoria's Mallee region, described how limited subject choice had meant he had to undertake subjects that were not his preferred options, noting that while the work was interesting, it was 'far removed from the skills I need for my career goals'.<sup>262</sup>

On the other hand, the Committee was also told that non-metropolitan schools often make a particular effort to ensure that students are able to access suitable VCE subjects. Ms Cheryl Torpey, Careers Coordinator, Ouyen Secondary College, told the Committee that the school makes a big effort to source advanced mathematics and science teachers 'do or die'.<sup>263</sup> The school also embeds chemistry and physics 'tasters' into the year 9 and year 10 curriculum so as to improve students' ability to make subject choices in senior secondary school.<sup>264</sup> Mr Gary Allen, Chair, Country Education Project, argued that the perception of limited subject choice is 'often illusory', describing how non-metropolitan schools tend to develop the

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<sup>257</sup> *ibid.*, 3–4.

<sup>258</sup> *ibid.*, 50.

<sup>259</sup> For example, South West LLEN, Written Submission, April 2008, 5; Rural Education Forum Australia, Written Submission, April 2008, 2; Mr L. Parrott, Croydon, Written Submission, March 2008, 1; Continuing Education Centre (Albury-Wodonga), Written Submission, March 2008, 2; Australian Catholic University, Written Submission, March 2008, 2; Victorian Farmers Federation, Written Submission, March 2008, 2; Mr B. Baker, Convenor and Member, South West Regional Youth Affairs Network, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Hamilton, 28 April 2008, 10.

<sup>260</sup> Ms K. Leadbeater, Second Year Student, RMIT University, Written Submission, April 2008, 2; Mr J. Langdon, Ms C. Barker, Ms S. Wills, Mr S. Dan and Mr A. Lonergan, Year 11 Students, Ouyen Secondary College, various written submissions, April–May 2008.

<sup>261</sup> Department of Innovation, Industry and Regional Development (Victoria), Written Submission, May 2008, 14.

<sup>262</sup> Mr A. Lonergan, Year 11 Student, Ouyen Secondary College, Written Submission, May 2008, 1.

<sup>263</sup> Ms C. Torpey, Careers Coordinator, Ouyen Secondary College, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Ouyen, 3 June 2008, 9.

<sup>264</sup> *ibid.*

timetable and curriculum based on the preferences of the student cohort.<sup>265</sup> Despite schools best efforts, however, it is clear that smaller schools are not able to offer as comprehensive a range of VCE subjects as larger schools.

Consequently, many small schools offer students the opportunity to study VCE subjects by distance education. However, the Committee heard distance education is often perceived as a difficult and unappealing mode of study for secondary students.<sup>266</sup> Ms Hilary Thiele, Principal, Murrayville Community College, described some of these difficulties:

It tends not to work that well at the top level of the school. Whenever we offer a distance ed subject we have kids really struggling—I suppose ostensibly it is with the workload and getting things in on time, but really I think it is more about the relationship they have with their teacher.<sup>267</sup>

A number of students who had experienced VCE study by distance education were also critical of the experience, describing it as 'extremely stressful' and 'achievable but with definite disadvantages'.<sup>268</sup>

Schools may also encounter technological difficulties when offering distance education, both in terms of equipment and staff expertise.<sup>269</sup> Participants suggested that there is room for further development in the full utilisation of information and communications technology (ICT) in rural schools, particularly as access to high-speed internet improves.<sup>270</sup> A representative of the Country Education Project emphasised the importance of 'bringing our people along' by providing opportunities for teachers to develop skills in ICT use.<sup>271</sup> In its previous inquiry into effective strategies for teacher professional learning, the Committee recommended that the use of ICT should be one of the priorities for teacher professional development promoted and facilitated by the Victorian Government and individual schools.<sup>272</sup>

The Committee notes that in the Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development, the Victorian Government states that all students should be able to access programs covering each strand of the Victorian Essential Learning Standards, specialist and extracurricular programs, and a range of academic and vocational options in the post-compulsory years.<sup>273</sup> Significantly, new standards for provision in government schools will give guidance on how expanded access may be achieved in rural areas.<sup>274</sup> Strategies may include partnerships between schools or with other providers, and better use of ICT.<sup>275</sup>

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<sup>265</sup> Mr G. Allen, Chair, Country Education Project, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 25 February 2008, 31.

<sup>266</sup> Ms J. Edwards, Manager, Equity and Disability Support Services, Swinburne University of Technology, Written Submission, March 2008, 3; Ms P. Nunan, Principal, Werrimull P-12 School, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Ouyen, 3 June 2008, 52; Mr R. Juratowitch, Principal, Gippsland Education Precinct Campus, Kurnai College, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Churchill, 19 May 2008, 4; Murrabit Group School Parents and Friends Club, Written Submission, February 2008, 1.

<sup>267</sup> Mrs H. Thiele, Principal, Murrayville Community College, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Ouyen, 3 June 2008, 53.

<sup>268</sup> Ms K. Leadbeater, Second Year Student, RMIT University, Written Submission, April 2008, 2; Ms R. Moore, Student, RMIT University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 23 March 2009, 4; Mr A. Lonergan, Year 11 Student, Ouyen Secondary College, Written Submission, May 2008, 1.

<sup>269</sup> Mrs H. Thiele, Principal, Murrayville Community College, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Ouyen, 3 June 2008, 50; Ms C. Torpey, Careers Coordinator, Ouyen Secondary College, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Ouyen, 3 June 2008, 10.

<sup>270</sup> For example, Mr P. Brown, Executive Officer, Country Education Project, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 25 February 2008, 32; Mr B. Simons, Principal, The Hamilton and Alexandra College, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Hamilton, 28 April 2008, 20.

<sup>271</sup> Mr G. Allen, Chair, Country Education Project, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 25 February 2008, 31.

<sup>272</sup> Education and Training Committee, Parliament of Victoria, *Report on the inquiry into effective strategies for teacher professional learning* (Melbourne: Parliament of Victoria, 2009), 88.

<sup>273</sup> Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (Victoria), *Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development* (Melbourne: DEECD, 2008), 26.

<sup>274</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>275</sup> *ibid.*

The Committee supports the expansion of programs in non-metropolitan schools, and believes that access to a range of VCE subjects should be a component of efforts to expand the opportunities available to students. Wherever possible, the emphasis should be on face-to-face teaching and learning. Where distance education is used, the Committee sees a need to ensure that these options are high quality, appealing to students, and supported by relevant professional learning for teachers.

### *VCE extension and revision opportunities and the academic atmosphere*

A number of participants highlighted a lack of opportunities for some non-metropolitan students to attend study lectures and to participate in cultural and enrichment activities that stimulate and motivate students. Ms Jan Edwards, Manager, Equity and Disability Services, Swinburne University of Technology, described the experiences of students from non-metropolitan backgrounds:

Many students mentioned their disadvantage in not being able to access or having limited access to the VCE Support Programs offered to students, due to their only being held in city locations. Among the problems students reported in attempting to access these programs are the costs of travel to the city, and the time taken away from the remainder of their studies, e.g. missing other classes in order to attend.<sup>276</sup>

This issue also attracted substantial comment from past and current secondary students. Ms Megan Freckleton, School Captain, St Brigid's College, Horsham, said in a submission that she suspected her ENTER would suffer partly due to 'limited access to educational resources outside of school', including study days and courses.<sup>277</sup> Other students also highlighted the inability to attend exam preparation workshops and lectures as a disadvantage impacting on the achievement of non-metropolitan students.<sup>278</sup>

Some participants also expressed concern that the growth in vocational curriculum may have a negative impact on the academic atmosphere at some schools, potentially reducing academic achievement. Mr Shane Kelly, Acting Principal, Swan Hill College, argued that the 'pendulum swing' to VET at the college had affected those students who were interested in professional occupations and tertiary study, citing dramatically lowered tertiary application rates as evidence of changed student aspirations.<sup>279</sup> Similarly, Orbost Secondary College noted that increased participation in the VCAL meant 'a dilution of the ethos of academic excellence and lack of peer stimulus and competition in a school cohort that can reduce individual Study Scores and thus ENTERs'.<sup>280</sup> The Committee notes that while only non-metropolitan participants commented on this topic, similar issues may arise in some metropolitan and interface schools with strong vocational provision.

Some former students from non-metropolitan areas highlighted the absence of a competitive academic atmosphere in some rural schools.<sup>281</sup> Ms Rachael Moore, now a student at RMIT University, commented about her experiences at school:

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<sup>276</sup> Ms J. Edwards, Manager, Equity and Disability Support Services, Swinburne University of Technology, Written Submission, March 2008, 3.

<sup>277</sup> Ms M. Freckleton, School Captain, St Brigid's College, Written Submission, March 2008, 1.

<sup>278</sup> Year 12 Students, Orbost Secondary College, Written Submission, May 2008, 1; Mr C. Willames, Student, Drouin, Written Submission, April 2008, 1; Ms M. Collins, First Year Student, Bachelor of Arts/Science, Monash University, Written Submission, April 2008, 1; Ms K. Leadbeater, Second Year Student, RMIT University, Written Submission, April 2008, 2.

<sup>279</sup> Mr S. Kelly, Acting Principal, Swan Hill College, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Robinvale, 2 June 2008, 16.

<sup>280</sup> Orbost Secondary College, Written Submission, May 2008, 1.

<sup>281</sup> Ms M. Collins, First Year Student, Bachelor of Arts/Science, Monash University, Written Submission, April 2008, 1; Ms R. Moore, Student, RMIT University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 23 March 2009, 4–5.

... from prior experience I know that it is very hard to study in a class where half the people there do not actually want to be there and are just basically mucking around and making it difficult for both teachers and the students who really wish to be there.<sup>282</sup>

Ms Moore also noted that in such an environment, teachers tend to be occupied monitoring the more disruptive students, limiting the amount of support they can offer to more ambitious students.<sup>283</sup>

The Committee believes that it is essential to provide increased support for students if they are to excel in their VCE studies. One inquiry participant suggested some ways in which VCE students might be supported, including through the local provision of study lectures, or online access to recorded lectures and lecture notes.<sup>284</sup> The Committee also sees potential for the expansion of accelerated learning programs in schools, or for greater access to university run tertiary extension studies. Alternatively, scholarships might be provided to enable students to participate in extension and revision activities held outside of their local communities. The Committee believes that work should be done to identify avenues to support students in non-metropolitan and other areas to boost their achievement in the VCE, and to promote an academic atmosphere that supports high achievement. There is also a role for universities to contribute to achievement as part of school outreach activities, as discussed in Chapter 4.

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## Conclusion and recommendations

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In discussion of the barriers that impede participation in higher education, academic achievement at school and completion of year 12 are sometimes overlooked. However, differences in school achievement and completion are among the most fundamental causes of geographical differences in higher education participation rates.

The Committee's review of research and data on school achievement and completion in Victoria showed that despite strong overall performance, students in low socioeconomic status and in non-metropolitan areas have lower levels of achievement and are less likely to complete year 12. This suggests that success in addressing the under-representation of some groups in higher education will depend in large part on success in increasing school completion and raising academic achievement among these groups. The Committee therefore believes that the Victorian Government should continue to focus on lifting year 12 or equivalent completion rates, particularly in low socioeconomic and non-metropolitan areas, through system-wide school improvement strategies and integrated supports that enable schools to tackle the full range of factors that contribute to early school leaving.

In addition, there are geographical and socioeconomic differences in the type of year 12 qualifications attained. The Committee believes that recent trends in year 12 completion rates should be further investigated. As the VCE is the main pathway into university for school leavers, this work should analyse the causes and implications of any changes in VCE completion rates, compared with other qualifications. Importantly, the Committee believes that in its efforts to lift overall school completion rates, the Victorian Government should have particular regard to ensuring that students from non-metropolitan and low socioeconomic status areas are encouraged and supported to undertake the VCE. Expanded VCE subject choices would allow students to undertake subjects that are of most

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<sup>282</sup> Ms R. Moore, Student, RMIT University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 23 March 2009, 5.

<sup>283</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>284</sup> Mr C. Williams, Student, Drouin, Written Submission, April 2008, 1.

interest to them and in which they are most likely to excel. Increased academic support is also essential, including opportunities to participate in a range of extension and revision activities.

## Recommendations

- 3.1 That the Victorian Government continue to focus on lifting year 12 or equivalent completion rates by:
  - implementing system-wide school improvement strategies, with particular attention to schools in low socioeconomic and non-metropolitan areas; and
  - providing schools with integrated support that enables them to tackle the full range of factors that contribute to early school leaving.
- 3.2 That the Victorian Government expand the collection and publication of annual data on year 12 completion rates to include analyses of data for different qualifications (VCE, VCAL and VET certificate) between different geographical areas and socioeconomic groups.
- 3.3 That the Victorian Government analyse and report on recent trends in VCE completion rates, including:
  - VCE completion rates for Victoria as a whole and for different geographical areas and socioeconomic groups;
  - causes and implications of any changes in VCE completion rates; and
  - strategies to increase VCE completion rates, particularly in low socioeconomic and non-metropolitan areas.
- 3.4 That the Victorian Government support increased completion and higher achievement in the VCE, particularly among under-represented groups, by:
  - assisting smaller schools to expand VCE subject choices;
  - developing a scholarship program for VCE students to participate in revision and extension activities;
  - expanding accelerated learning programs;
  - supporting schools to offer access to university-run tertiary extension studies that can contribute to ENTERs; and
  - providing online written and interactive extension and revision materials.

