Young adults and post-school training opportunities in the Frankston-Mornington Peninsula region of Victoria, Australia

by

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Abstract

Youth unemployment in Australia has been described as a source of ‘capability deprivation’ (Henry, 2014). Since the late 1980s, a recurring set of policies and programs have been implemented in Australia to tackle youth unemployment by lifting rates of participation in school-based and post-school vocational education and training (VET). More recently, the introduction of policy reforms to marketise the Victorian training system has transformed the composition of VET providers in the training system and, by extension, the types and quality of courses being offered. The impact of these reforms has been documented in the media and through government reviews (e.g. Mackenzie & Coulson, 2015; Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu, 2015; Mitchell, 2012). However, very little is understood about the impact of these reforms on VET ‘opportunities’ for small populations of young learners at the local level. Even less is understood from the perspective of the learners themselves. To address this gap, my research contributes a critical examination of post-school training opportunities available to young adults in the small local area of the Frankston-Mornington Peninsula region in Victoria, Australia. This particular region has a youth unemployment rate that is five percentage points higher than the greater Melbourne and Victorian state averages (ABS, 2015a). Drawing on the conceptual framework of the capabilities approach (CA) pioneered by economist Amartya Sen (1980/1984/1985/1987/1992/1993) and extended by philosopher Martha Nussbaum (1992/1995/2000/2002/2003), my study conducts a sequential explanatory mixed-method design (Creswell et al., 2003) set within critical realist (CR) ontology (Bhaskar, 1979/1975). I bring together the philosophical approach of CR and the
conceptual framework of the CA to better understand how the problem is constructed. By applying these alternative lenses, I propose approaches to understanding the problem in a more meaningful way. The capabilities approach is structured around three core concepts: capabilities (what people are able to be or to do); functionings (what people, having capabilities, are doing); and agency (the ability to choose the functionings). My research builds on this framework to identify the extent of alignment between available opportunities (as espoused in policy) and accessible opportunities (as stated by young people). Through an assessment of administrative, survey and primary qualitative data, my research produces new insights into the misalignment between (1) loosely-defined policy rhetoric advocating ‘choice’ and ‘opportunity’ in training ‘markets’ and (2) the real training opportunities accessible to young adults in a disadvantaged location. It is envisaged that the findings will have application for policy makers and practitioners in similarly disadvantaged contexts, particularly where there are limited post-school opportunities available to young people. For researchers, there are lessons arising for applying the capabilities approach to the context of young people and VET in disadvantaged locations.
For Kate, Cordelia & Adeline
Acknowledgments

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## Acronyms

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<th>Full Form</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABS</td>
<td>Australian Bureau of Statistics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACE</td>
<td>Adult and Community Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACER</td>
<td>Australian Council for Educational Research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACFE</td>
<td>Adult and Community Further Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACPET</td>
<td>Australian Council for Private Education and Training</td>
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<tr>
<td>AQF</td>
<td>Australian Qualifications Framework</td>
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<tr>
<td>AQTF</td>
<td>Australian Quality Training Framework</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASCED</td>
<td>Australian Standard Classification of Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AVETMISS</td>
<td>Australian Vocational Education and Training Management Information Statistical Standard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BSL</td>
<td>Brotherhood of St Laurence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CAA</td>
<td>Central Activity Area</td>
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<tr>
<td>CA</td>
<td>Capabilities approach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CBD</td>
<td>Central Business District</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COAG</td>
<td>Council of Australian Governments</td>
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<tr>
<td>DEECD</td>
<td>Department of Education and Early Childhood Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DET</td>
<td>Department of Education &amp; Training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DSF</td>
<td>Dusseldorp [Skills] Forum</td>
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<tr>
<td>FMP</td>
<td>Frankston-Mornington Peninsula</td>
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<tr>
<td>FMPLLEN</td>
<td>Frankston-Mornington Peninsula Local Learning Employment Network</td>
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<tr>
<td>GDP</td>
<td>Gross Domestic Product</td>
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<tr>
<td>Abbreviation</td>
<td>Full Form</td>
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<tr>
<td>HESG</td>
<td>Higher Education and Skills Group</td>
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<tr>
<td>IEO</td>
<td>Index of Education and Occupation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IRSD</td>
<td>Index of Relative Socio-economic Disadvantage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LGA</td>
<td>Local Government Area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LSAY</td>
<td>Longitudinal Survey of Australian Youth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEET</td>
<td>Not in Employment, Education or Training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NCVER</td>
<td>National Centre for Vocational Education Research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NILFET</td>
<td>Not in Labour Force, Education or Training</td>
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<tr>
<td>RTO</td>
<td>Registered Training Organisation</td>
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<tr>
<td>SA</td>
<td>Statistical Area</td>
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<tr>
<td>SEIFA</td>
<td>Socio-economic Index for Areas</td>
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<tr>
<td>SES</td>
<td>Socio-economic Status</td>
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<tr>
<td>SMR</td>
<td>Southern Metropolitan Region</td>
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<tr>
<td>SoS</td>
<td>Student Outcomes Survey</td>
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<tr>
<td>SYC</td>
<td>Southern Youth Commitment</td>
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<tr>
<td>TAFE</td>
<td>Technical and Further Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>VCE</td>
<td>Victorian Certificate of Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>VCAL</td>
<td>Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning</td>
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<tr>
<td>VET</td>
<td>Vocational education and training</td>
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<tr>
<td>VETiS</td>
<td>Vocational Education and Training in Schools</td>
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<tr>
<td>VTG</td>
<td>Victorian Training Guarantee</td>
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<tr>
<td>YACVic</td>
<td>Youth Affairs Council of Victoria</td>
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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

‘Differing measures lead to differing opinions on the overall adequacy of young people’s VET opportunities’

(Saunders, 2001, p.17)

***

1.1. Introduction

This research critically examines the post-school training opportunities available to young adults in the Frankston-Mornington Peninsula (FMP) region of Victoria. Victoria is Australia’s most densely populated state and its second-most populous state. Most of its population is concentrated in the area surrounding Port Phillip Bay, which includes the metropolitan area of its capital and largest city, Melbourne. Geographically, the total size of the FMP region is 852 km2 or about 10 per cent of the Greater Melbourne geographic area. The entire FMP region is comprised of two Local Government Areas – Frankston City (the north) and Mornington Peninsula Shire (the south). For government planning, resourcing and administrative purposes, the FMP region is located in the Southern Metropolitan Region (the SMR region) of the state of Victoria. The central business district of Frankston City is a hub for the region. It is located 40km south-east of the city of Melbourne, near the northernmost point of the Mornington Peninsula (see Figure 1.1). Mornington Peninsula Shire is a boot-shaped promontory separating Port Phillip and Western Port Bays, and extends a further 55kms from Frankston to Portsea. The traditional land owners have been the Mayone-Bulluk clan from the Bunurong tribe of the Kulin nation for an estimated 31,000 to 40,000 years.
(Butler & Associates, 2013). The region claims the first British settlement of Victoria, along with the first non-Indigenous birth, death, marriage and application of skilled labour by British settlers (Blairgowrie History, 2002). Today, the region comprises residential areas in the north, tourist and resort towns in the south as well as the industrial and port areas of Hastings. The population of 295,000 is spread in roughly equal shares between Frankston City and Mornington Peninsula Shire (Profile.id, 2016). Widely considered to be one of Melbourne's major holiday destinations and retirement areas, the population is estimated to increase by 80,000 people during the holiday seasons (FMPLLEN, 2015a). Socio-economically, the FMP region is home to some of the most affluent and the most disadvantaged suburbs in Australia. Its diverse socio-economic and geographic characteristics have led to it being classified as ‘metropolitan’, ‘urban’, ‘regional’ and ‘rural’ – or some combination of each. Although part of the Greater Melbourne area, a uniquely insular identity sets it apart. Local councillors contend that ‘our community is clear, we are not suburbia and don’t want to be’ (Frankston Standard, 2014). The region has been portrayed in mainstream media and political discourse as ‘Frankghanistan’ (Casey, 2016), ‘the home of beer and bogans’ (Tomazin, 2014) where young people are ‘roaming the streets’ (Dorrington, 2014a) creating a ‘youth unemployment crisis’ (Dorrington, 2014b). The local federal Member of Parliament for Dunkley (Frankston) has publicly stated that ‘it is no secret that youth unemployment is a challenge in Mornington Peninsula and positive action needs to be a key priority for our region’ (Billson, 2015). The youth unemployment rate is currently five percentage points higher than the Melbourne and state averages and rising. Coupled with its education and
training profile, these narratives make the region a suitable ‘laboratory’ to undertake my research. Having set the scene, this introductory chapter will provide an outline of my research in terms of: the research problem; the conceptual framework; what we know from the literature; the research questions and hypothesis; the scope and limitations; and its intended contribution to the field.
Figure 1.1: Geographic location of the Frankston-Mornington Peninsula region
1.2. Problem statement

The youth unemployment rate in Mornington Peninsula Shire has increased from nine per cent in 2006 to 20 per cent in April 2015 (ABS, 2015a). High rates of youth unemployment such as these have been described in Australia as the severest form of ‘capability deprivation’ (Henry, 2014). Since the late 1980s, a recurring policy response in Australia has been to implement policies designed to increase young people’s participation in further education and training. Since 2008-09, VET policy reforms have set about marketising the training system in the Australian state of Victoria. The market design is underpinned by an entitlement to publicly-subsidised training subject to certain eligibility criteria. The early impact of these reforms, known as the Victorian Training Guarantee (VTG), has been transformative. Much has been made of the statistical
increase in overall participation; the significant shift in the composition of training providers towards the private sector; the economic rationalisation of many course offerings; and the outbreak of low-quality training and/or training of limited ‘public value’ (Whitechurch, 2016; Nicolson, 2015; Leahy, 2015; Toner, 2014; Hetherington & Rust, 2013; Mitchell, 2012; Pardy, 2012; Toner, 2010; Cooney, 2008). The issues have been compounded by the introduction, and subsequent rorting by some training organisations, of a Commonwealth-funded loan scheme for Diploma-level courses (VET FEE-HELP). While these events have been documented through policy and media channels, little independent research has been conducted into the impact of the policy reforms on the post-school training opportunities available and accessible to young adults (18-24 year olds) at the local level. Even less is understood from the perspective of the learners themselves. My research aims to address some of these gaps in the knowledge base.

1.3. Conceptual framework

To help understand the problem, the conceptual foundation for my research is provided by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum’s Capabilities Approach (CA). The CA is detailed as part of the literature review in Section 2.2. In summary, the CA emerged in the 1980s as a critical response to the increased prevalence of narrow economic and utilitarian measures of poverty and human development (e.g. GDP per capita, average household income, absolute poverty measures). As a theoretical framework, the CA offers a normative evaluative space to consider different forms of freedom (Sen’s focus)
and a partial theory of justice (Nussbaum’s focus). Such a space allows for a critical examination of the alignment between the process aspect of freedom (e.g. as espoused in VET policy); and the opportunity aspect of freedom (e.g. real opportunities available to young adults). The CA is structured around three core concepts: capabilities (what people are able to be or to do); functionings (what people, having capabilities, are doing); and agency (the ability to choose the functionings). The distinction between functionings and capabilities is between ‘achievements on the one hand, and freedoms or valuable options from which one can choose on the other’ (Robeyns, 2005, p.95). In contrast to functionings, capabilities are the ‘substantive freedoms’ that allow an individual to ‘lead the kind of life he or she has reason to value’ – they are the ‘valuable functionings’ taking into account their individual characteristics and position within social arrangements (Sen, 1999, p.87). By prioritising the individual as the unit of primary moral concern (ethical individualism), the CA directs us to consider ‘comprehensive outcomes’ (how the functionings came about), ‘adaptive preferences’ (how preferences and choices adapt, perhaps subconsciously, to local structures), as well as individuals’ ‘freedom to choose’, as well as reject, from a range of good alternatives. The conceptual framework is set within an ontological lens of critical realism (Bhaskar, 1979/1975) that compels the research to look beneath surface level representations to critically examine the underlying causal mechanisms that create inequalities in social arrangements.
1.4. What is known from the literature

The conceptual framework of the capabilities approach; its application in earlier studies; and its intersection with critical realist ontology are detailed in Section 2.2. An emerging literature has applied the capabilities approach to the theorising of education, training and employment (Bonvin and Galster, 2010; Lumby and Morrison, 2009; McCowan, 2011; Robeyns, 2005; Saito, 2003; Walker, 2012; Walker et al., 2009; Walker & Unterhalter, 2007/2005). In Australia, the CA has appeared in social and economic policy since the early 2000s (Wheelahan et al., 2012; Wheelahan & Moodie, 2011; Singh et al., 2009; Henry, 2007; Headey, 2006; Simons, 2000). It has been cited in publications in the related sectors of community services, disability and welfare (Bowman et al., 2015; Bonvin & Galster, 2010). It has been influential in the development of social indicator frameworks within government and academia (Australian Social Inclusion Board, 2012; Boese & Scutella, 2006; Department of Treasury, 2004; Scutella & Smyth, 2005; Leahy & Doughney, 2006). Although these examples suggest there is potential for application in a range of settings, to date the number of applications in the specific context of VET and marginalised youth is quite limited (for example, Powell, 2014/2012 on South Africa; López Fagués, 2014 on Spain; Baros and Manafi, 2009 in Greece).

The literature on young adults and VET (detailed in Section 2.3) covers three dimensions of the research problem: lenses (ways of seeing), measures (ways of understanding) and narratives (ways of framing reality). At a system level, a number of studies have critiqued what is seen as narrow and reductive conceptualisations of ‘opportunity’ and ‘choice’ as applied in VET and youth policy in Australia and
internationally (Atkins & Flint, 2015; Bowman et al., 2015; Golding et al., 2012; Atkins 2010/2009; Cuervo & Wyn, 2011; Andres & Wyn, 2010; Anderson, 2005). At a local level, there is a small but important body of research that has examined VET opportunities for highly marginalised groups in the Frankston-Mornington Peninsula region (Bowman and Souery, 2010; Myconos, 2014/2013/2012/2011/2010; Barrett, 2012a/2012b; Bond, 2015/2011). This research has also observed a narrow framing of the ways in which young people are conceptualised in terms of their education, training and employment (Bond, 2011; Myconos, 2014). This narrow framing has implications for how young people may be viewed and for the policy narrative that arises as a result. In summary, the literature appears to suggest that there is scope for the capabilities approach to challenge some of the fundamental assumptions that underpin these policy narratives by offering an alternative lens on the problem.

1.5. Research questions and hypotheses

The aim of my research is to critically examine the post-school VET opportunities of young adults in the Frankston-Mornington Peninsula region of Victoria, Australia. To achieve this overall objective, there are three research questions to be addressed:

1. How useful are quantitative data for critically examining what post-school VET opportunities are available and accessible to young adults in the FMP region?
2. To what extent can qualitative data gathered from young adults in the FMP region offer a broader understanding of the problem?
3. What potential does the CA offer to better understand the nature of the problem?
The underpinning hypotheses to be tested are three-fold. The first is that post-school VET opportunities available to young adults on the Mornington Peninsula are subject to multi-factorial structural (systems) and agential (individual learner) constraints. These factors may manifest as unobservable causal relationships which are not found in surface-level representations of reality. It is further hypothesised that there is some degree of misalignment between: (1) newly-introduced market-based policy narratives concerning young people’s opportunity and choice in VET; and (2) the real opportunities and material resources available to them in the local area. Lastly, the research will test the hypothesis that the CA offers some degree of potential to help broaden and enrich understandings of the VET opportunities available to young adults on the Mornington Peninsula.

1.6. Nature of the study

Drawing on the conceptual framework of the CA pioneered by economist Amartya Sen (1980/1984/1985/1987/1992/1993) and extended by philosopher Martha Nussbaum (1992/1995/2000/2002/2003), the study conducts a sequential explanatory mixed-method design (Creswell et al., 2003) set within critical realist ontology (Bhaskar, 1979/1975). The quantitative strand comprises a comprehensive account of publicly available statistical information on the post-school activities of the target population as it relates to their education, training and/or employment. The qualitative strand comprises data gathered from focus groups with VET learners in the FMP region. Ontologically, there is a commitment to critically examining underlying causal mechanisms (structures
and agency) creating inequalities in VET access and participation. Methodologically, there is a commitment to assembling a diverse array of data sources, data types and analytical procedures to understand the research problem from multiple perspectives. The CA and critical realist lens are brought together in ways that are both ethically individualistic, mutually reinforcing, and contextualised to the research problem.

1.7. Definitions

The technical definitions relating to VET systems have been drawn from multiple sources, including the NCVER ‘Glossary of VET’ (Naidu et al., 2013). A number of terms from the glossary are defined throughout the literature review. A list of acronyms for the various frameworks, areas of government and relevant datasets precede Chapter 1. Additionally, much of the definitional and conceptual foundation for my research can be sourced from the conceptual framework of the CA as outlined in Section 2.2. Nevertheless, given the highly jargonistic nature of the Australian VET sector, it is necessary to define some key terms that feature throughout my research. At a fundamental level, precisely what constitutes a ‘VET program’ or ‘VET activity’ is a matter of ongoing contention. The parameters of the VET\(^1\) sector in Australia are defined through the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) levels as encompassing Certificate I-IV, Diploma, Advanced Diploma and short-course VET programs. VET is defined in the VET Glossary as:

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\(^1\) Alternative terms used internationally include technical and vocational education and training (TVET), vocational and technical education and training (VTET), technical and vocational education (TVE), vocational and technical education (VTE), further education and training (FET), and career and technical education (CTE).
Post-compulsory education and training, excluding degree and higher level programs delivered by further education institutions, which provides people with occupational or work-related knowledge and skills (ASQA, 2016)

‘Disadvantaged learners’ in VET have been previously defined as ‘current and potential learners in VET who experience disadvantage as a result of VET systems and processes which do not adequately take account of their particular life circumstances’ (NVEAC, 2011, p.3). In terms of the target population, my research focuses not on young adults as a homogenous group. Instead, the focus is on young adults who are living and studying in a specific disadvantaged location. In Australia, a measure of relative disadvantage is provided by the ABS Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA\textsuperscript{2}). SEIFA is commonly used in the reporting of education and training statistics to monitor areas of low ‘socio-economic status’ (SES). Providers of training in Australia are known as ‘Registered Training Organisations’ (RTOs). Public VET institutions are referred to as Technical and Further Education providers (TAFE). RTOs provide nationally recognised training and qualifications. RTOs are eligible for government funding as part of their ongoing compliance with the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF) overseen by the national VET regulator (ASQA). RTOs can include TAFE colleges and institutes, adult and community education providers (known as ‘Learn Locals’ in Victoria), community organisations, schools, higher education institutions, commercial and enterprise training providers, industry bodies and private providers. There is an important definitional distinction (albeit an imprecise one) to be made between RTOs that operate

\textsuperscript{2} The SEIFA method creates a summary measure of a group of variables related to socio-economic advantage and disadvantage (e.g. household income, education, employment, occupation, housing).
in the training market as ‘not-for-profit’ providers and those that operate ‘for-profit’ as commercially-driven providers. At a more technical level, my intention is to understand ‘how’ and ‘how well’ VET opportunities for young adults are measured. It is not to conduct an evaluative exercise per se. Similarly, ‘reporting’ should not be confused with the work of RTOs ‘reporting’ information back to statistical agencies and governments (e.g. for regulation or funding purposes). To be clear, my research conceives of ‘reporting’ as the output from public accountability mechanisms such as statistical reports on training activity, annual reports and budget papers. It also concerns reporting of consumer information in the form of public databases, registers of training providers and information portals.

1.8. Assumptions

Key assumptions apply to both the quantitative and qualitative strands of my research. There are also assumptions which transcend both strands. In the quantitative strand, there is an assumption that archival data have been collected according to statistical standards, thus meeting their own data quality and integrity requirements. There is an assumption that the student characteristics reported in these quantitative data (e.g. demographic information, labour force status etc) are an accurate representation of the student population. Anomalies are noted where they occur. In the qualitative strand, there is an assumption that the perspectives of the participants, as communicated to the researcher, are a fair representation of their views. However, it is important to note that a number of factors influence how participants tell their stories (e.g. power relationships,
presence of other young people, histories). These assumptions are taken into consideration when analysing and interpreting the results. Details on how these assumptions were managed are addressed in Chapter 4.

1.9. Scope and delimitations

Starting with the VET student population in Victoria, my research then introduces delimitations of ‘age’ (18-24 year olds) and ‘geographic location’ (FMP region). These are fundamental to the scope. The rationale for this is two-fold: (1) to focus on those young people, specifically young adults, who are no longer at school and (2) to focus on those young adults who have commenced their transition to adulthood and independence within a defined region. The ‘target population’ (as it is referred to throughout my research) is young adults (18-24 year olds) who (1) were enrolled in VET and (2) who reside and/or (3) were training at campuses in the FMP region in 2015. In terms of quantifying this target population, NCVER data show that 7,887 18-24 year olds were residing in the FMP region and enrolled in VET in 2015. This figure has ranged from a minimum of 6,840 in 2008 to a maximum of 10,277 in 2012. The target population comprises around five per cent of the total VET student population in Victoria (see Table 1.1). An important exclusion from my research are 15-17 year olds enrolled in VET at school (and/or via an external training organisation). Although a group of policy interest, the intention of my research is to focus directly on ‘young adults’ in ‘post-school’ training. The target population falls just outside the legislated age requirements for compulsory attendance in education and training.
The timeframe of interest varies depending on the availability of data but is generally limited to the period from 2006-2015. By starting in 2006, it is possible for my research to compare the results of the 2006 and 2011 national Census collections. It also allows my research to track the introduction of marketised training in the Victorian VET system in 2009 and consider shifts at a national level towards marketised training from 2012-2013. By concluding the study in 2015-2016, the research has full coverage of: (1) the initial ‘Victorian Training Guarantee’ policy package by the Labor Government (2009-2010), (2) the ‘Refocusing’ reforms by the Liberal Coalition Government (2011-2013) and (3) the first two years of the Labor Government (2014-2016). My research seeks to be inclusive of learners participating at all training levels (defined by AQF level) and industry area (defined by ASCED) to provide a broad cross-section of VET. Importantly, my research does not consider itself to be an evaluation of any particular policy intervention at a particular point in time. Instead, the focus is on understanding and critiquing the conceptual and measurement frameworks that underpin our understanding of the problem and, subsequently, how the problem becomes narrativised in mainstream discourses. In taking this approach, my research aim is to critically examine longer-term
and strategic policy settings that transcend the day-to-day processes and project-based work undertaken in areas of public policy.

1.10. Limitations

The significance of the results must be viewed in light of the limitations of the research. There are five key limitations that must be considered: (1) the small size of the target population negates the inclusion of sample-based surveys of training outcomes and youth transitions due to prohibitively high sample error; (2) the small size of the target population negates the calculation of reliable training completion rates; (3) the list of variables included within scope of the research is limited somewhat by what is manageable (e.g. level of study; field of education; age; gender; location); (4) the compatibility of the quantitative (secondary data) and qualitative strands (primary data) is somewhat limited by virtue of their different sources; and (5) the exclusion of certain voices, including non-participants (those who never enrolled), VET non-completers (those who started but did not complete); VET graduates (those who completed); and learners who were enrolled in other RTOs (learners not enrolled at the provider participating in my research).

1.11. Purpose and significance

The intended contribution of my research is to critically examine the post-school VET opportunities available to young adults on the Mornington Peninsula through the alternative lens of the capabilities approach. Tensions between the underlying social
structures in the FMP region and the agency of young adults’ to negotiate these structures through a VET pathway are compelling and deserving of investigation. My research occurs at a time of significant reform in the Victorian and national training systems. Despite their far-reaching and disruptive impact on training policy and practice, the evidence base on how well the reforms are working is weak (e.g. Whitechurch, 2016; Mitchell, 2012). At a local level, these reforms have not yet been subject to a steady program of impartial and empirical research. The timing of my research offers the potential to make a significant contribution to our understanding of their impact on young adults’ VET opportunities in an area of deep and persistent disadvantage. It is envisaged that the findings will have wider application in similarly structured socio-economic and geographic locations, and for training systems more generally. It is also hoped that the research can make a contribution to the CA literature and its intersection with the disciplinary areas of VET and youth transitions.

1.12. Summary

This introductory chapter has identified the problem, outlined the conceptual framework that will be used to address it and established a clear set of research questions to answer. I fully acknowledge the noted limitations and assumptions and have sought to give each due consideration in the presentation and discussion of my findings. Having introduced the research ‘laboratory’ of the FMP region and the general parameters of my research, the next chapter will present the findings of the literature review.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

‘Participants move through the VET system, engaging in its various processes, pursuing the learning that is its objective, and finally emerging at some end point of exit, if not completion, at which the so-called outcomes or outputs of the processes in which they have been engaged will be measured’

(Blom & Meyers, 2003, p.43)

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2.1. Introduction

The purpose of this literature review is four-fold: (1) to detail the conceptual features of the capabilities approach (CA); (2) to review examples of where and how the ontology of critical realism has been mutually reinforced by the conceptual framework of the CA; (3) to review the Australian and international literature on young people and VET; and (4) to review the literature on young people and VET in the FMP region. The literature search strategy is outlined in the methodology (Section 4.4.1).

2.2. Conceptual framework – The capabilities approach

This section reviews the CA literature across four streams: (1) its origins, purpose and defining features; (2) its limitations; (3) examples of its application in Australia and internationally; and (4) its intersection with the ontological lens of my research, critical realism.
2.2.1. Overview of the capabilities approach

**Origins.** A Nobel Laureate for contributions to welfare economics, Amartya
Sen’s interest in alternative poverty measures began in the late 1950s. At the University
of Cambridge, he and fellow student Mahbub ul Haq began discussing an alternative to
the GDP per capita benchmark. Haq argued for the usefulness of a simple, easy number,
but Sen saw that as too coarse. ‘What you need,’ Haq told him, ‘is something as vulgar as
gDP except concentrated on something meaningful like human life’ (Morrell, 2011). In
his Tanner Lecture of 1979 titled ‘Equality of What?’ Sen asked what metric egalitarians
should use to establish the extent to which their ideal is reflected in a given society (Sen,
1979). Building on the conceptual framework of the basic needs perspective (Hicks &
Streeter, 1979), Sen sought about ‘shifting attention from goods to what goods do to
human beings’ and adding the notion of freedom to notions of equality (Sen, 1980,
p.218). He subsequently conceived of the CA in the 1980s as a critique of two prior
theoretical frameworks: welfare economics (and the utilitarianism underlying it) and
Rawls’ Theory of Justice (Rawls, 1971). Sen’s key criticism of traditional welfare
economics concerns the assumptions it makes about preferences, choice and rational
behaviours of humans (Sen, 1999/1992). Conventional welfare economics holds that
more wealth gives people more choice, which they will then use to pursue their
preferences and utilities. Sen argued that a welfare approach fails to recognise that
humans may be limited in terms of how they think about their options and what utility
they will expect to receive from certain acts. He argued that the ability to act on what one
values, or ‘what a person can do in line with his or her conception of the good’
contributes directly and necessarily to wellbeing and freedom (Sen, 1985, p.206). In applying this alternate lens, the CA may offer potential to examine the underlying determinants of the relationship between people and commodities. These include variations in social conditions, such as the access to, and provision of, publicly-funded services such as education and training (Sen, 1999, pp.70-71).

**Sen and Nussbaum.** Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum are recognised as the key theorists and writers on the CA. Although Sen developed the conceptual architecture in the 1980s, and subsequently collaborated with Nussbaum, there are now significant differences in their respective contributions. Nussbaum approaches the capabilities approach from a perspective of moral, legal, political philosophy with the specific aim to argue for political principles that a government should guarantee all its citizens through its constitution (Roebyns, 2003, p.23). Nussbaum has criticized Sen for not grounding his approach in a Marxian or Aristotelian idea of true human functioning. In part, these divergences reflect their backgrounds and disciplinary frameworks as an economist (Sen) and a philosopher (Nussbaum). Nussbaum’s work has focused on producing a philosophically coherent normative (partial) theory of justice; whereas Sen is concerned with producing an ‘open’ framework for evaluating freedoms and the quality of lives people can lead. Sen’s work is closer to economic reasoning, quantitative empirical applications and measurement. Nussbaum, by contrast, is concerned with political processes, power, narratives, aspirations, motivations and desires (Roebyns, 2003, p.24). Sen’s notion of capabilities is primarily that of a real or effective opportunity, while Nussbaum’s is with people’s skills and personality traits as aspects of capabilities. It has
been argued that Nussbaum’s approach has more potential to understand actions, meanings and motivations (Gasper and van Staveren, 2003). Nussbaum’s partial theory of justice is based on dignity, a list of ten fundamental capabilities, and a minimum threshold (Nussbaum, 2000). The threshold specifies the minimum requirements of justice. In doing so, Nussbaum argued that everyone must be entitled to each specified capability at least to this degree. Nussbaum’s account has explained that our preferences and choices are shaped and informed or deformed by society and public policy. She has argued that unequal social and political circumstances lead to unequal chances and unequal capacities to choose (Nussbaum, 2000). These external (material as well as cultural) circumstances ‘affect the inner lives of people: what they hope for, what they love, what they fear, as well as what they are able to do’ (Nussbaum, 2000, p. 31). In terms of young people’s capabilities, Nussbaum (2000) has argued for their capability to critically reflect and plan in an autonomous way, even if as adults they choose a non-autonomous life. On education, Nussbaum (2010, p. 94) argued for the importance of critical thought:

* A catalogue of facts, without the ability to assess them, or to understand how a narrative is assembled from evidence, is almost as bad as ignorance, since the pupil will not be able to distinguish ignorant stereotypes purveyed by politicians and cultural leaders from the truth, or bogus claims from valid ones.

These are notable differences between Sen and Nussbaum but, as Roebyns (2003) explained, ‘if one considers the wide spectrum of normative social frameworks Sen’s and Nussbaum’s approaches are very closely related, and are allies in their opposition to and
critique of theories such as utilitarianism’ (p.23). Section 4.2 outlines my approach to applying the CA to the research problem.

**Key concepts.** Martha Nussbaum has explained that the core idea of the CA is that of a human being as a ‘dignified free being who shapes his or her own life, rather than being passively shaped or pushed around by the world in the manner of a flock or herd animal’ (Nussbaum, 2002, p. 130). It concerns notions of human worth or dignity. The CA consists of three core conceptual elements: *capabilities* (what people are able to be or to do); *functionings* (what people, having capabilities, are doing); and *agency* (the ability to choose functionings). Sen defines *functionings* as what a person ‘manages to do or to be’ (Sen, 1985, p.10). Examples of functionings can range from fundamental states of being (e.g. being healthy, having a good job, and being safe), to more complex states (e.g. being happy, having self-respect, and being calm). The problem with measurement of functionings is that they could be expanded by force, by coercion or domination (Alkire, 2005b). They may also represent a state that does not reflect their actual state of being (e.g. fasting by choice while otherwise well-nourished). In contrast, *capabilities* are the ‘substantive freedoms’ that allow an individual to ‘lead the kind of life he or she has reason to value’. Freedom is conceptualised as an effective freedom or a real possibility, not a hypothetical or idealised scenario. Such freedoms are defined as ‘the real opportunity that we have to accomplish what we value’ (Sen, 1992, p.31). These are defined as ‘valuable functionings’ that take into account individual characteristics and position within social arrangements (Sen, 1999/1992). This important distinction between capabilities and functionings is between ‘achievements on the one hand, and freedoms or
valuable options from which one can choose on the other’ (Robeyns, 2005, p.95). Functionings are the *subjects* of capabilities. In order to preserve respect for individuals' freedom to direct their own lives, the CA argued that governments should be concerned with what people can do, not with what they *do* do (Richardson, 2000). The CA theorises that a person's actual combination of functionings, what they are and do, is part of their overall capability set. These are the functionings they were able to do. This capability set is concerned with ‘freedom of choice’ and ‘freedom to achieve’, in and of itself, as being of direct importance to a person's quality of life (Sen, 1992). While the combination of a person's *functionings* represents their actual achievements, their *capability set* represents their opportunity freedom — their freedom to choose between alternative functioning combinations (Sen, 2001). Opportunity freedom is defined as ‘the extent to which a set of options offers a decision maker real opportunities to achieve’ (Foster, 2011). It has been noted that economic models of choice tend to focus on outcomes, which leaves unexamined the ways in which choices are constrained and compromised by structural conditions (Foster, 2011). As an alternate lens, the CA connects individual experience and social arrangements by focusing on equality in their capability to convert resources into functionings. The CA theorises that human development not only depends on real opportunities and freedoms, but also the ability to *envision* and *pursue* goals that people value (agency) (Alkire, 2010; Sen, 2002). By *agency*, the CA means ‘someone who acts and brings about change, and whose achievements are to be judged in terms of her own values and objectives, whether or not we assess them in terms of some external criteria as well’ (Sen, 1999, p. 19). The CA notion of agency focuses on the ability to personally
choose the functionings one values, a choice that may not always correlate with personal well-being (e.g. fasting). This may not align with social and cultural norms in which they live (e.g. a woman driving a car where religion forbids it) or may not be considered possible in the local environment (e.g. driving a car on unsafe roads). Through this lens, wellbeing results from the interaction between resources and agency: it is through agency that actors are able to employ material resources to achieve the life that they desire. Substantive freedom is produced by agency effectively mobilising resources (Victor et al., 2013).

In terms of measurement, it is argued that agency is crucial to an assessment of individuals’ capabilities. A focus on agency allows for an examination of whether or not economic, social, and/or political barriers impede a person’s ability to pursue substantive freedoms (Alkire, 2010). Sen argued that choice’ or the act of ‘choosing’ can also be considered an important functioning:

One reason why freedom may be important is that ‘choosing’ may itself be an important functioning...insofar as choosing is itself valuable, the existence and extent of choice have significance beyond that of providing only the means of choosing the particular alternative that happens to be chosen (Sen, 1988, p.290).

The CA makes an important distinction between economistic notions of ‘choice’ and the ‘freedom to choose’ what is eventually chosen. For example, Sen (1992, p.52) distinguished between ‘doing x’ and ‘choosing to do x and doing it’. Sen (2002) has distinguished between the ‘opportunity aspect’ (freedom to achieve valuable outcomes) and the ‘process aspect’ (the manner in which freedoms are achieved) (Sen, 2009). It has
been argued that social policy tends to focus on enhancing the ‘opportunity aspect’ but neglects the ability to choose or ‘enhancing the capability to choose’ (Leßmann, 2011 in Powell, 2012). The ‘capability to choose’ exists as what Nussbaum (2000) calls an ‘internal capability’ or learnt capability, which ‘develop[s] only with support from the surrounding environment’ (Nussbaum, 2000, p.84), requiring support and teaching from others for it to develop. Sen is critical of the perspective of happiness underlying utility (satisfaction) models in traditional welfare economics (Sen, 2009). He observed that in terms of ‘the mental metric of utility’ people tend to adapt their aspirations to the context of what is perceived as possible and realistic (Sen, 1990). This means that a person's deprivation may not show up in measures of wellbeing ‘even though he or she may be quite unable to be adequately nourished, decently clothed, minimally educated and so on’ (Sen, 1990, p.45).

On a conceptual level, the CA ‘is not and does not purport to be a theory of social change’ (Dean, 2009, p.9). Sen emphasised that the CA is only an open framework for the evaluation of individual advantage and social arrangements and not a full-fledged theory (Sen, 2009/1999/1993). As Robeyns (2003, p.64) has pointed out, it is not a fully specified theory ‘that gives us complete answers to all our normative questions’. It does not explain the causes of inequality, nor will it ‘generate one specific and universally-relevant set of domains for all evaluative exercises’ (Alkire, 2008a, p.91). Proponents of the CA have argued that it is not a theory that can provide an exhaustive explanation of poverty, inequality or well-being; instead it provides concepts and a framework that can help to conceptualise and evaluate these phenomena (Robeyns, 2005/2003). Alkire has
argued that the CA is ‘deliberately incomplete – it has to be operationalised differently in different contexts’ (Alkire, n.d.). Its construction as an open, normative framework has had advantages. The CA has been considered useful in framing a set of overarching, albeit non-prescriptive, evaluative criteria within a normative framework (Alkire, 2010; Roebyns, 2005). The normative proposition is that social arrangements should be primarily viewed according to the extent of freedom people have to promote or achieve functionings they value (Alkire, 2003). Within this normative framework, Alkire has argued that there are two different interpretations of what CA: (1) ‘narrow’ – to simply identify capability and functionings as the primary informational space and (2) ‘broad’ - where capabilities are the primary evaluative space with underpinning pluralist and democratic values and processes (Alkire, 2008a). Within these broader interpretations, Alkire argued that there are two forms of evaluation: (1) evaluative analyses and (2) prospective analyses (Alkire, 2008b). The objective of evaluative analysis is whether capabilities have expanded, rather than how and why such expansion occurred. These are comparisons of states of affairs - pre and post intervention. The objective of prospective analyses is not to compare two states of affairs but to identify which actions are most likely to generate expanded capabilities, or the better state of affairs (Alkire, 2008b).

The CA theorises that evaluations of poverty and its variants are associated with more than insufficient income or consumption – that, instead, the test is primarily about insufficient outcomes (Sen, 1999). Where traditional economic judgements of market efficiency and outcomes take account of the outcome (irrespective how it comes about), Sen’s interest is in ‘comprehensive outcomes’ to take account of the manner in which
such outcomes transpire and not merely the end result (Sen, 1999, p. 27). Such an approach is underpinned by commitment to ethical individualism. Robeyns (2005, pp.107-110) explained that the CA:

*postulates that individuals, and only individuals, are the ultimate units of concern ... This, of course, does not imply that we should not evaluate social structures and societal properties, but ethical individualism implies that these structures and institutions will be evaluated in virtue of the causal importance that they have for individuals’ well-being.*

To summarise some of the key conceptual contributions of the CA, it offers a normative evaluative framework to: (1) prioritise the individual as the unit of primary moral concern (ethical individualism); (2) broaden narrow conceptions of ‘outcomes’ to draw attention to ‘comprehensive outcomes’ (how the functionings came about) and opportunities; (3) broaden narrow conceptions of ‘opportunity’ to consider ‘adaptive preferences’ (how preferences and choices adapt, perhaps subconsciously, to local structures); and (4) broaden narrow notions of ‘choice’ to consider individuals’ ‘freedom to choose’, and reject, from a range of good alternatives.

**Limitations.** It must be acknowledged that there is a body of research that has outlined strong reservations regarding the usefulness and application of the CA (Holmwood, 2013; Walby, 2012; Dean, 2009; Richardson, 2000). Critics have argued that the CA has ignored three key issues: the realities of human interdependency; the hegemonic liberal conception of the public realm; and the extent to which capitalism’s global reach is predicated upon exploitative relations of power (Dean, 2009, p.1).
Nussbaum’s variant of the CA has also been criticised on the grounds that it has the potential to ignore asymmetrical power relationships (e.g. Jaggar, 2006; Richardson, 2000).

Sen has also acknowledged concerns regarding the empirical difficulties faced when operationalising the CA (Sen, 1985/1992/1999). He argued that the CA was ‘a general alternative view in a highly simple form—to indicate that, in order to concentrate on human life, you do not have to get into such complexity that people go back to using GDP unalloyed’ (Morrell, 2011). On the problematic process of balancing CA-oriented measures with pragmatic aggregation, Sen recognised that ‘the passion for aggregation makes good sense in many contexts, but it can be futile or pointless in others’ (Sen, 1987, p.44). At issue is that often when constructing a composite indicator to measure progress, we lose information on human heterogeneity and the plurality of dimensions - the defining features of the CA (Dang, 2014). On this issue, Sen (1992, p.117) argued that ‘general analyses of inequality must, in many cases, proceed in terms of groups—rather than specific individual—and would tend to confine attention to intergroup variations’.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of the existing evidence base. Despite growing international interest in the potential of the CA to contribute ideas, policies and practices in education, it is very much a ‘developing area of theory and practice’ (Unterhalter et al., 2007). The strengths and weaknesses of relevant applications are reviewed in the following section.

2.2.2. Applications of the capabilities approach
The capabilities approach is used in a wide range of fields, most prominently in development thinking, welfare economics, social policy and political philosophy (Roebyns, 2003, p.5). A leading theorist on the measurement of capabilities, Sabina Alkire, has argued that the CA will be ‘applied differently depending on the place and situation, the level of analysis, the information available, and the kind of decision involved. The methods will be plural’ (Alkire, 2008a, p.91). Internationally, the CA informed the development of the United Nations Human Development Index (HDI) in 1990 as well as a number of similarly structured and populated indicator frameworks at the national and international level. The developers of the Global Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI), led by Alkire, credit Sen’s work as their foundation. National governments have drawn on the CA to define responses to inform policy. Stiglitz et al. (2010) made the case that policy would benefit from the CA by focusing on increasing quality of life, understood through broad measures of objective and subjective wellbeing. In Australia, the CA has appeared in social and economic policy since the early 2000s (Wheelahan et al., 2012; Wheelahan & Moodie, 2011; Singh et al., 2009; Henry, 2007; Headey, 2006; Simons, 2000). It has provided a foundation for publications in the Australian community services and welfare sectors (Bowman et al., 2015; Bonvin & Galster, 2010) and has informed the development of social indicator frameworks within government and academia (Australian Social Inclusion Board, 2012; Boese & Scutella, 2006; Australian Government, 2010; Department of Treasury, 2004; Scutella & Smyth, 2005). Recently, former Treasury Secretary, Ken Henry applied the CA specifically to the issue of youth unemployment in Australia. He argued that:
unemployment is a powerful source of “capability deprivation”. In essence, what this means is that young people who are not in the education system and who are denied work are deprived of the freedom to lead a life they would choose. They are being denied the capability to participate fully in the activities of their community (Henry, 2014).

The Brotherhood of St Laurence (BSL), an Australian community sector organisation and registered training organisation, has published a number of research papers testing the potential of the CA to critique and improve public policy. For example, Bond (2010) argued that ‘an inclusive Australia is one where all Australians have the capabilities, opportunities, responsibilities and resources to learn, work, connect with others and have a say’. Wheelahan et al (2012) argued it is not possible to present a definitive model for VET in Australia, but ‘it does open the possibility for some common ground and thus dialogue in VET on the nature of skill and the policy frameworks that are needed to support its development’ (p.2). Similarly, Bowman et al (2015, p.ix) from the BSL explicitly recommended:

*Exploration of the capabilities approach to closely link the goal of achieving satisfactory employment with broader community and economic goals. Importantly, the capabilities approach can also be applied across the life course....Several attempts have been made to develop new approaches to youth transitions drawing on Sen's capabilities approach. However, they are often undeveloped and tend to confuse individual capabilities with Sen's broader use of the term.*
Internationally, there is an emerging literature, largely exploratory in nature, that has applied the CA to the theorising of education (Bonvin and Galster, 2010; Lumby and Morrison, 2009; McCowan, 2011; Robeyns, 2006a; Saito, 2003; Walker, 2005/2006a/2006b/2008/2010/2012; Walker et al., 2009; Walker & Unterhalter, 2007; Unterhalter, 2003/2005). It is argued that a particular strength of applying the CA in educational contexts is its ability to ‘open a space’ in which we can be critical of educational processes ‘within a normative framework with a sense of universality’ (Unterhalter et al., 2007, p.4). In an article on ‘Framing Social Justice in Education: What Does the 'Capabilities' Approach Offer?’, Walker (2003) argued for ‘…thick description, life narratives and ‘little stories’ if they are to convince’ (p.177). Similarly, Lambert et al. (2011, p.5) argued that indicators and statistics cannot be regarded as an objective description of the world. It was argued that they provide a partial image of it by selecting one specific informational basis to the detriment of others. Lambert et al further argued that even when indicators are based on objective and irrefutable information, they espouse value judgements, often passed over in silence or taken for granted, about the relevance of information worth retaining at the expense of other facts deemed inappropriate. Through the alternative lens of the CA, Lambert et al argued that:

> it is therefore necessary to ask ourselves about the normative and informational foundations of the employment rate in the light of Sen’s epistemological principles. Our intention, then, is to shed light on the normative postulates underlying this indicator, while putting them to the test of an alternative concept of activation [participation] brought
about by the capability approach.

Although recent years have witnessed increased application to schooling and higher education, the CA has only been applied to vocational education and training (Powell, 2014/2012 on South Africa; López Fogués, 2014 on Spain) and marginalised youth (Baros and Manafi, 2009 on Greece) in a limited way. However, a number of research projects have been funded, many in Europe, to explore the issue of capabilities measurement (e.g. Anand, 2009). Between 2010 and 2013, the European Union (EU) funded excellence PhD program trained 15 international early stage researchers in 10 countries in researching the transition pathways of socially vulnerable youth after compulsory schooling into working life using the CA (Egdell & McQuaid, 2016; Bussi, 2014; Balsera, 2014; Ilieva-Trichkova, 2014; Mauro, 2014; Hollywood et al., 2012b).

The remainder of this section selects three particular studies for more detailed consideration. Each has drawn on the CA to focus on issues of VET and post-school transitions, namely: (1) Powell (2014) on VET students in South Africa; (2) López Fogués (2014) on young VET students in Spain and (3) Singh et al. (2009) on school leavers in Queensland, Australia. A recent PhD on TVET and unemployed youth in South Africa (Powell, 2014) argued that the CA provides a space for conceptualising and evaluating VET which differs in orientation from dominant productivist approaches used in training systems. Powell argued that the objective is to restore the balance by ‘shifting the focus from economic development to human development’. In doing so, Powell argued that the CA offered potential to bring ‘the discourse of social justice, human rights, and poverty alleviation to the forefront of our discussion of skills development and
VET’ (Powell, 2014). Powell’s qualitative research is based on a sample of 20 college students who were either enrolled or had previously enrolled. She found that by placing the wellbeing of VET students at the centre, the ‘lens’ of her research changed from income generation and employability to a lens on capability expansion which includes but is not limited to employability. In a related paper, Powell (2012) argued that the standard measures applied to the evaluation of VET (e.g. institutional efficiency and effectiveness, graduate employment, employer and student intention and satisfaction etc) are:

informative and necessary for VET policy and practice. However, individually and collectively, they are unable to identify the capabilities that are of value to students and furthermore, the extent to which VET is expanding or contracting these capabilities. If the purpose of education is to improve the lives of students, then it is this that should be evaluated. This is not to undermine the importance of these standard evaluation measures. It is however to suggest that there may be capabilities – other than and in addition to the capability to work – which may be of value to students.

Finally, Powell (2014) argued that the CA, with its emphasis on the heterogeneity and well-being of individuals, ‘challenges researchers and policy makers to take seriously the implications of VET policy, practice and culture on the lived lives of VET students’ (p.23). In a related study, also on the South African TVET sector, Powell & McGrath (2014) argued that distinction between capabilities (freedoms) and functionings (doings) enables VET evaluations to identify differences in individuals’ abilities to convert the
characteristics of an ability (such as commodities, skills or for that matter qualifications) into functionings (such as a qualification or employment) (p.8). In this way, they argued, the CA ‘stresses the analytical distinction between means and ends’ (p.9). In a separate PhD study of ‘Freedoms and Oppressions in Vocational Education and Training’, López Fogués (2014) interviewed fifteen 19-24 year old students in ‘a highly academically rated college’ in Valencia, Spain. The study found that the CA helped to inform us that choices are not always ‘genuine’ or autonomous and cautioned against the homogenisation of individuals as part of a group or defined category. Finally, an Australian study by Singh et al. (2009) analysed data from the Queensland Next Step surveys of school leavers (2005-2008) to explore the CA in the context of post-school destinations of young adults. With a particular focus on teacher education, Singh et al. (2009) argued that there are two ways in which we might evaluate the post-school destination of young adults, either by adopting a ‘selection view’ or an ‘options view’ (Sen, 1992, p.34). The selection view, it was argued, is focused on the comparison of the ‘goodness of the bundles of choices’ a young adult is faced with which are socially valued goods, and other alternatives which are judged to be less than good (Sen, 1992, p.36). The selection view presents all young adults everywhere as being able to choose – all post-school destinations are equally realisable choices. Alternatively, the option view provides an interactive comparison between the post-school destinations or ‘commodities’ themselves and the ‘revealed preference’ of the young adults who choose a particular post-school destination (Sen, 1992, p.34). This enabled Singh et al. to critically examine, with greater nuance, the socio-economic, gendered and geographic structuring of school leavers’
preferences. These earlier applications in Australia and overseas suggest that the CA holds potential to provide an alternate lens with which to critically examine the post-school VET opportunities available to young adults in the FMP region.

2.2.3. The capabilities approach and critical realism

I bring together the philosophical approach of critical realism and the conceptual framework of the capabilities approach to better understand how the problem is constructed. Pioneered by Roy Bhaskar, critical realism brings together a general philosophy of science (transcendental realism) with a philosophy of social science (critical naturalism) to bridge the natural and social worlds (Bhaskar, 1975/1979). Critical realist ontology accepts both that: (1) there is a world existing independently of our thoughts; and (2) that we can only know what it is like from within discourse (Sayer, 2000, p.41). Even though critical realism accepts that there is one ‘real’ world it does not follow that we, as researchers, have immediate access to it or that we are able to observe its every aspect (Zachariadis et al., 2010). Bhaskar (1998, p.11) theorised that there are two dimensions of knowledge: the intransitive and transitive. Intransitive objects are not dependent on human activity (e.g. gravity, death). Conversely, transitive objectives are artificial objects fashioned into items of knowledge by science (e.g. facts, theories, paradigms, models, methods and techniques of study). Critical realists draw a distinction between: (1) ‘the real’ (the structures and powers of objects); (2) ‘the actual’ (what happens if and when those powers are activated) and; (3) ‘the empirical' (the domain of
experience) (Bhaskar, 1975). This stratified ontology is what differentiates critical realism from empirical realism. The latter sees the world as consisting of atomistic objects (or events) that can be easily observed without any hidden characteristics. The critical realist conceptualises of 'structure' as a set of internally related similar or diverse elements whose causal powers, when combined, are emergent from those of their constituent parts (Sayer, 2000, p.14). Objects (people, all other material animate and inanimate ‘things’, and social relations of all kinds active in time and space) are, or are part of, structures. The particular structures that constitute these ‘objects’ underpin their causal powers. Critical realist ontology posits that some structures are observable while others are not. Observability may make us ‘more confident about what we think exists, but existence itself is not dependent on it’ (Sayer, 2000, p.12). Critical realism acknowledges that social phenomena are intrinsically meaningful. Meaning is not only externally descriptive of social phenomena but constitutive of them. Meaning, however, ‘has to be understood, it cannot be measured or counted, and hence there is always an interpretative or hermeneutic element in social science’ (Sayer, 2000, p.17).

The literature where critical realism has intersected with the capabilities approach is small but growing. Robeyns (2003, p.64), for example, observed that ‘normative frameworks always depend on explanatory or ontological views of human nature and society, and Sen’s capabilities approach does not defend one particular world-view’. While it may not defend any particular world-view, Martins (2006) proposed that the CA exists as an exercise in ‘philosophical under-labouring’, a characteristic feature of critical realist ontology. The metaphor of ‘under-labouring’ was termed by John Locke (1690)
where he argued that ‘it is ambition enough to be employed as an under-labourer in clearing the ground a little, and removing some of the rubbish that lies in the way to knowledge’ (Locke, 1690 [1947], pp. xlii). Lawson argued that philosophical under-labouring has been a central part of critical realism in economics (Lawson, 1997/2003). Describing the mutually reinforcing elements of the critical realist ontology and the CA, Powell (2014) succinctly argued that while the capability approach is concerned with developing an ‘alternate vision’ of what disadvantage, poverty and human development means, critical realism is focused on the causal mechanisms, hidden and unseen, that create such social arrangements (p.109). Describing the relationship between critical realism and the CA, Martins (2006) drew some compelling parallels:

 Sen has been preoccupied with clarifying social categories at a less abstract level (categories such as ‘well-being’ and ‘advantage’), at the level of scientific ontology, while critical realism has addressed more general properties of the social realm such as structure, openness/closure, internal relations, emergence and many others, at the level of philosophical ontology. So both approaches are complementary and mutually enriching (p.682).

A critical realist ontology leads to consideration of underlying causal mechanisms that create inequalities in social arrangements. Sayer has argued that such ontology is highly suitable for development-related research and development practice designed to change what happens (Sayer, 2000, p.12). As a theory of human development, the CA compels us to recognise that what people can positively achieve is influenced by ‘economic opportunities, political liberties, social powers, and the enabling conditions of
good health, basic education, and the encouragement and cultivation of initiatives’ (Sen, 1999, p.5). That is ‘the options that a person has depend greatly on relations with others and on what the state and other institutions do’ (Drèze & Sen, 2002, p.6). In a wider sense, the CA draws attention to the critical role of social, political, legal and economic institutions in advancing capabilities over time (Alkire, 2008b). It has been argued that the critical realist ontology implies that powers may exist but not be exercised. Allowing a space of choice and agency, critical realism accept ‘that what has happened or been known to have happened does not exhaust what could happen or have happened’ (Sayer, 2000). Accepting that knowledge is fallible, it has been argued, does not mean that it should be taken as all equally false or true, or equally practically adequate (Sayer, 2000, p.69). Put simply, critical realism suggests that ‘every time we argue with someone, we presuppose the possibility of either party being wrong, i.e. falsely conscious’ (Sayer, 2000, p.48).

This section has described the fundamental conceptual framework of the CA. It has provided an overview of its limitations, applications and potential to be mutually reinforced by the ontology of critical realism. The next section provides a review of the research literature on young adults and VET in Australia.

2.3. Young people and VET in Australia: lenses, measures and narratives

The focus of this section now turns to the Australian VET sector – the setting for my research. The purpose of this section is to better understand notions of ‘opportunity’ in the Australian VET sector. Former Victorian Minister for Education and Training –
and Minister responsible for introducing the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning – argued that the successful provision of quality education and training for all is the critical requirement of all modern democracies. Kosky argued that it enabled people ‘to flourish personally and to maximise economic, social and cultural opportunity’ (Kosky, 2006, p.3). The next section will focus on VET ‘opportunities’ by focusing on three dimensions of the research problem: lenses (ways of seeing), measures (ways of understanding); and narratives (ways of framing reality).

2.3.1. Lenses (ways of seeing)

The literature on critical realism has argued that ‘only by seeing the same data through the different theoretical lenses employed by different researchers can understanding of some of the features of the real world occur’ (Easton, 2010). The CA, and evaluative space for multidimensional measures it creates, has been described as an ‘alternative lens’ with which to view poverty and human development (Alkire & Foster, 2011). It has been found that by prioritising the well-being of VET students, the ‘lens’ of VET changes from income generation and with it employability, to a lens on capability expansion which includes but is not limited to employability (Powell, 2012). The term ‘lens’ is used in this section of my research to describe the dominant and alternative ‘ways of seeing’ ‘VET’ and young peoples’ interactions with it. VET systems, Deißinger (2009, p.1) argued, cannot be described as ‘constructions’ of a specific reality, mainly triggered by political motivations or economic interests. Instead, in order to understand how they function and how they are ‘capable’ to react to external demands, they have to be looked at as ‘historical entities’ and in historical context. Therefore, the literature is
reviewed in this historical context against three particular lenses to track their trajectory and influence on VET policy, practice and research. These lenses, which are not necessarily mutually exclusive, are: (1) a human capital lens (the dominant lens in Australian VET); (2) an access and equity lens (an alternative to the dominant lens); and (3) a youth transitions lens (to focus on issues relevant to the target population of my research).

I begin with human capital theory. Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* (Smith, 1776) described the four elements that constituted the capital stock of society, namely: tools and machinery, buildings used in business, improved land and,

*the acquired and useful abilities of all the inhabitants or members of the society. The acquisition of such talents, by the maintenance of the acquirer during his education, study of apprenticeship, always costs a real expense, which is a capital fixed and realised, as it were, in his person. Those talents, as they make a part of his fortune, so do they likewise that of the society to which he belongs.*

Human capital theory positions education and training not simply as a form of consumption or empowerment but rather as a productive investment (Becker, 1964). The modern articulation of human capital theory, propelled by neoliberal and economic rationalist policies (Hayek, 1944/1960; Friedman, 1962), has led to a convergence of education, training (skills), productivity and economic growth. This convergence, it has been argued, promotes a narrative that skills aligned to the demands of the economy are necessary to improving economy productivity and, by extension, the standard of living of the population (Knight & Mlotkowski, 2009, p.14). Economic restructuring policies of
the 1980s in Australia have been criticised for being ‘designed to primarily develop the kind of human capital that would support Australia’s economic growth and prosperity’ (Cuervo & Wyn, 2011 p.3). Since the 1980s, the VET sector in Australia has been restructured and re-positioned as a strategic instrument of the ‘human capital agenda’ (Banks, 2010) to: increase global competitiveness; combat unemployment; facilitate young people’s transition from education to work; and reduce poverty (King and Palmer, 2010; Anderson, 2005). Of these reforms, Wyn (2011) contended that ‘youth policy became synonymous with education and training policy, with an emphasis on the promotion of the nation’s human capital’. It is argued that this policy trajectory on which Australia was set had a profound impact on youth transitions to adulthood as an underlying objective was ‘to keep young people in education as long as possible’ (Cuervo & Wyn, 2011, p.3). The current Australian VET system, it is argued, is ‘…underpinned by widespread acceptance of the human capital model’ which:

*has become the dominant way of thinking about the links between education and training and the labour market. Under this model, education and training are seen as an investment in an individual’s productive capacity, and are motivated by an expectation of a return on that investment. That is, an individual invests the cost of tuition and his or her time on the basis that he or she will end up with a better job* (Knight & Mlotkowski, 2009, p.22).

The most recent national training reforms in Australia, Angus et al (2012, p.2) argued, centre on ‘the development of Australia’s human capital, particularly through education and skills development’. In the Australian state of Victoria (the setting for my
research), the Government’s Review of VET Fees and Funding (ESC, 2011b, p.7) argued that a contemporary economic rationale for government support of VET emerges from the ‘long-established concept of human capital development. Public investment in education and training is seen as an essential input into economic growth by ensuring that firms have access to skilled labour’ (p.7).

There have been criticisms of human capital theory as it has been applied to youth and VET policy settings in Australia. For example, Bowman et al (2015, p.15) argued that the human capital approach is overly narrow and instrumentalist in that it ‘conceives the problem of youth unemployment in terms of skills’. The argument is constructed from a premise that young people need skills and experience to equip them for the modern service-based economy. The policy responses encourage young people to attain formal post-school qualifications. Within this new neoliberal paradigm, Anderson (2009, pp. 44–45) argued that the institution of VET is ‘cast within the ethos of productivism and the ideological framework of neoliberalism’. He contended that this ‘reduces people and the environment to the status of human and natural resources for economic exploitation’. Finally, it is important to note that Sen’s ‘yardstick of assessment’ of human ‘capability’ is critical of human capital approaches. He has argued that:

\[
\text{the literature on human capital tends to concentrate on the agency of human beings in augmenting production possibilities. The perspective of human capability focuses, on the other hand, on the ability — the substantive freedom — of people to lead the lives they have reason to value and to enhance the real choices they have. The two perspectives}
\]
cannot but be related, since both are concerned with the role of human 
beings, and in particular with the actual abilities that they achieve and 
acquire. But the yardstick of assessment concentrates on different 
achievements (Sen, 2001, p.99)

Offering a counterpoint to the human capital lens is the access and equity lens 
(Angus et al., 2012; Golding et al., 2012; Brown and North, 2010; Nechvoglod & Beddie, 
2010; CEDEFOP, 2009; Volkoff et al., 2008; Considine et al., 2005; Bowman, 2004; 
Ferrier and Heagney, 2001; Golding & Volkoff, 1998). This lens prioritises the broader 
social and community purposes of VET. It acknowledges the essential role of VET in 
supporting individuals who have become marginalised by others sectors of education, 
training and employment. Researchers who view the world through this lens have 
contended that, by virtue of the profile of the VET student population, issues of access 
and equity are central to its purpose. Karmel (2010), for example, argued:

*The whole area of equity is essential to the whole notion of VET. It 
provides opportunities for a very broad slice of our society and 
provides another chance for many who have really been failed by the 
other education sectors*’ (Karmel, 2010 in Hargreaves, 2011, p.2).

A recent application of the equity lens includes the NCVER-funded research 
program ‘*Promoting social inclusion for disadvantaged groups through education and 
training*’ (2011-2013) undertaken by the Melbourne Institute at the University of 
Melbourne. The researchers used a multidimensional measure of social exclusion 
comprising: material resources (household income and expenditure); employment; 
education and skills (literacy and numeracy, educational attainment, work experience);
health and disability; social interactions; community (neighbourhood quality, civic participation, volunteerism); and personal safety. Their work established clear links between education and social exclusion, although low incomes and financial stress were still the larger causes of exclusion. A recurring feature of research conducted through this ‘equity’ lens is the identification and measurement of ‘equity groups’ in terms of their VET participation and outcomes (Rothman et al., 2013; Hargreaves, 2011; Clemans et al., 2003; Lamb et al., 1998). Such research has also focused on groups of young people who are ‘missing out’ on a ‘successful’ transition from school as a group of relevance to policy makers and the wider community (Lamb et al., 2015; Skujins & Lim, 2015; Stanwick et al., 2013; Considine et al., 2005). It has been argued that in order to ensure that the benefits associated with economic and social progress are more widely shared, ‘it is necessary to identify who is missing out and/or being left out, in which areas, and why’ (Saunders et al., 2007). ‘Disadvantaged learners’ in VET have been previously defined as ‘current and potential learners in VET who experience disadvantage as a result of VET systems and processes which do not adequately take account of their particular life circumstances’ (NVEAC, 2011, p.3). When discussing these notions of ‘structure’ and ‘agency’ in VET, Considine et al (2005) described two divergent philosophical approaches in education and training systems: (1) the structural barriers lens that emphasises the systems and structures that create barriers to entry into VET for minority and disadvantaged groups; and (2) the individual characteristics lens that focuses on measuring and understanding individual characteristics and experiences that have been associated with exclusion from VET. Considine et al (2005) argued that
the *individual characteristics* approach has reached its limit in furthering access and equity in VET. At the same time, the *structural barriers* approach remains too limited because of its failure to engage with individual realities. What is needed, they contended, is ‘a more holistic perspective which combines the best of each approach’ (p.17). Similarly, Cuervo & Wyn (2011, p.22) concurred with Considine where they argued that ‘most importantly, what seems to be missing is a balance between structural elements and individual’s agency’. The particular types of structural barriers and individual characteristics have been documented in research relating specifically to young people. For example, we know from OECD research that young people’s transition from school depends partly on the social, economic and labour market context, partly on young adult’s personal qualities, and partly on the quality of institutional arrangements in the education system and the labour market (OECD, 2000).

It has been argued that VET systems have to be understood ‘in relation to other societal institutions’ including the labour market, the economy, the system of industrial relations and of course the system of government (Raffe, 1998, p.391 in Deissinger, 2009). From this structural perspective, the OECD (2000) defined a set of key elements to support young people transition from study to employment: (1) a healthy economy; (2) well-organised pathways that connect initial education with work and further study; (3) widespread opportunities to combine workplace experience with education; (4) a tightly knit safety net for those at risk; (5) good information and guidance in terms of career options; and (6) effective institutions and processes. Similarly, Denny & Churchill (2016, p.19) argued that opportunities for youth in Australia are dependent on a number of
factors, predominantly: economic performance generating employment demand; ageing workforces; a shift of education and training policy; and provision towards encompassing employability skills as well as practical workplace experience and knowledge, including intergenerational knowledge transfer. Research by Hargreaves (2011) and others on the Australian VET system has identified three groupings of barriers: (i) structural (e.g. child care, transport and labour market conditions, such as availability of jobs and quality employment); (ii) individual (e.g. human capital, such as skills, education and work experience); (iii) personal (e.g. disabilities, health and mental health problems, substance abuse, children with health or behavioural issues, and housing instability).

A recurring criticism of equity approaches has been the tendency in policy and research to categorise learners based on their individual characteristics into broadly defined categories or equity groups. The traditional equity groups used in Australian VET from around the mid-1990s are shown in Table 2.1. Criticisms of these groupings suggest that such efforts may fail to account for issues of self-identification in one or more of these groups (e.g. at the point of enrolment); recognise diversity and heterogeneity within groups; nor the compounding effect of multiple layers of disadvantage (CEDEFOP, 2015a; Angus et al., 2012; Golding et al., 2012; Brown and North, 2010; Considine et al., 2005; Ferrier and Heagney, 2001; Golding & Volkoff, 1998). Considine et al (2005, p.5) argued that 'the notion of disadvantage which has informed VET policy-making needs to be reconceptualised. There are major shortcomings in viewing disadvantage in terms of abstract client groups’. In a national review of equity in VET, Golding et al (2012) urged policy-makers to be particularly cautious about routinely naming and treating individuals
and groups as ‘disadvantaged’ on the basis of one or more self-defined ‘indicators of disadvantage’. Such labelling, they argued, is fraught with ethical and pedagogical problems. It has also been argued that, given the diversity of the ‘group’, the 15 to 19-year-old ‘youth’ age group is ‘a clear example of how the client group approach falls short of advancing access and equity in VET’ (Considine et al., 2005, p.12).

Table 2.1: Classifications of ‘equity groups’ in the Australian VET sector

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learner group</th>
<th>Definitions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(a) Indigenous Australians</td>
<td>Persons who identified as Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander or both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) People with a disability</td>
<td>Persons who identified as having a disability, impairment or long-term condition.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(c) People from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, particularly new arrivals to Australia, refugees and emerging communities</td>
<td>Variables include:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• country of birth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• main language spoken at home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• proficiency in spoken English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• time since arrival in Australia.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(d) People from remote locations</td>
<td>Persons whose home address was in a Remote or Very Remote location, based on ARIA+, an index of remoteness derived from measures of road distance between populated localities and service centres.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(e) Women</td>
<td>Persons who identified as female.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(f) People from low socioeconomic status (SES) background</td>
<td>Persons in the lowest quintile of the Index of Relative Socio-economic Disadvantage (IRSD), which is one of the Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) developed by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Rothman et al., (2013)

The ‘youth transitions’ lens focuses on young peoples’ transition to adulthood. While an important dimension of the overall VET system, Cuervo & Wyn (2011) argued that it is common to approach the topic of youth transitions by taking an uncritical human capital policy perspective that places the emphasis on the transition from school to work. They contended that this is a ‘relevant approach within the constraints of economistic
policy parameters, [however] it is too narrow to provide a sound understanding of young people’s trajectories through life’ (p.4). The economic and psychological literature on happiness in the developed world, for example, has found non-linear relationships between differences in wealth and differences in personal wellbeing (Krueger, 2009, Kahneman, 2011; Layard, 2005). Through a critique of youth policy and programs, Bond (2010) found that concern for a young person’s wellbeing is:

> too narrowly framed and focuses heavily on employment, economic productivity, making a 'contribution to society'...this is not to suggest that productivity concerns are unwarranted, but that young people’s responsibility/right to participate economically (e.g. through full employment) must be complemented by recognition of their other social rights. In addition to economic participation, policy should be concerned with the achievement of human happiness and potential as an end in itself (p.4).

There is considerable debate over definitions of ‘youth transition’ and what measures should be used to constitute an ‘effective’ transition. Coles (2000), for example, described youth transitions as having three main dimensions: (1) the move from full-time education into the labour market (the school-to-work career); (2) the attainment of (relative) independence from family of origin (the family career); and (3) the move away from the parental home (the housing career). More recently, the term 'youth transitions' has come to refer to a range of issues affecting young people in the period between leaving school and moving into employment and independence (Bowman et al., 2015; Karmel and Liu, 2011). There is also a well-recognised need to move beyond a narrow
conception of transition to ‘consider more aspects of the journey than the standard ‘destinations’ of further education or training and employment’ (Figgis et al., 2004, p.1).

The literature suggests that these transitions consist of a series of non-linear and increasingly fraught transitions (UNESCO, 2014; te Riele, 2004; OECD, 2000). Terms such as ‘pathways’ (Raffe, 2003; Angwin et al., 1998; Finn, 1991); ‘zig-zag’ (Anderson, 2003); ‘mosaic’ (Spierings, 1999); ‘crazy paving’ (Harris et al., 2006); ‘stepping stones’ (Harris et al., 2006; Oliver, 2014); and ‘messy trajectories’ (Atkins et al., 2011) are each indicative of the non-linear and circuitous journeys of young people as they navigate their post-school transition. In their own review of the research literature, Karmel and Liu (2011) found ‘paths through the education maze are becoming increasingly complex (and longer) and are frequently not linear. They are also not assured’. Similarly, Anderson (2003, p.2) argued that ‘most individuals who pursue further study in VET are following zigzag, rather than linear, trajectories that are characterised by frequent interruptions and changes in direction’. As Raffe (2011, p. 315) points out: ‘… those who experience destandardised traditions tend to be the most disadvantaged young people with the least control over their own destinies, not the self-managing authors of ‘choice biographies’ (Furlong et al., 2003; du Bois-Reymond, 2009)’. Bowman et al (2015, p.vi) has argued that ‘this multiplicity of meanings, combined with the blurred age boundaries of youth, underlines the difficulties in defining responses and measuring outcomes’. The literature review not turns to the measures we use to understand the problem.
2.3.2. Measures (ways of understanding)

The term ‘measure’ is used here to describe the ways in which VET data are collected and crafted into performance measurement frameworks to create a statistical picture of what is happening in VET systems. If the lens is the ‘way of seeing the world’, these measures are the content used to understand what is happening. Since the late 1980s in Australia, training systems have sought to define and measure dimensions of VET ‘performance’ such as ‘effectiveness’ (e.g. industry relevance; skills alignment/shortages; quality; equity, risk, post-training outcomes) and ‘efficiency’ (e.g. unit costs) (see Productivity Commission, 2016; Australian Government, 2012; ANTA, 1997). The research literature explains that good measures and indicators in VET systems have common features. It is argued that they should be: fit for purpose; transparent and clear; produced as a part of a broad cross-section of indicators which cover multiple dimensions; impartial; relevant to their users; timely; technically feasible; cost-effective; and small in number – amongst a range of other criteria (Karmel, 2013a/2013b/2009; PhillipsKPA, 2006; Wyatt, 2004; Blom & Meyers, 2003; Lamb et al., 2003; Nuttall, 1994; Guthrie, 1991/1988). The means by which the Australian and Victorian training systems have come to understand how well they are performing has been through the development of performance measurement frameworks. These frameworks ‘provide a perception of what is actually going on, and how well things are working’ Guthrie (1988, p.15). Their composition in the Australian VET sector, PhillipsKPA (2006) argued, ‘incorporate a mix of input, output and outcome measures’ (p.9). These types of measures have been found to be broadly consistent across VET systems internationally.
(Blom & Meyers, 2003). In an international review of benchmarking in VET, Wyatt (2004) grouped VET indicators into four categories to constitute an input-outcome model:

1. **Input indicators**: the resources available to particular education systems;
2. **Workflow or process indicators**: the amount of work undertaken;
3. **Output indicators**: what the system produces;
4. **Outcomes indicators**: the results generated from the system (p.21)

The input-outcome model is typically concerned with measures and indicators of effectiveness and efficiency. These classifications of indicators, Karmel (2013b) argued, ‘typically are quite descriptive or make use of concepts such as efficiency, equity, quality and outcomes’ (p.9). Matters of equity and access are generally considered as a dimension of effectiveness in terms of participation and/or outcomes among ‘equity groups’ (see Productivity Commission, 2016; Australian Government, 2012; ANTA, 1997). The framework approach, however, has been repeatedly recognised as a necessary but insufficient means of understanding the opportunities arising from participation in VET. For example, the landmark Kirby *Review of Post Compulsory Education and Training Pathways for Young People in Victoria* (Kirby, 2000) stated that ‘higher levels of education participation alone are not sufficient’ (p.42). Also of importance, Kirby argued, ‘are the quality of outcomes and experience; linkages with employment; broader community responsibility and greater program and institutional flexibility’ (p.42). Amid the proliferation of key performance measures (KPMs) in Australian public policy in Australia during the late 1990s, the Victorian TAFE Association (VTA, 2000) was a
voice of dissent. It stated that ‘KPMs originated in the corporate context and that, as such, are inherently ill-suited to the public sector, particularly public education...In terms of the measures themselves, there is significant concern that they are overly economically focussed at the expense of educational and social objectives’ (pp. 4-5). The VTA continued:

*the Victorian KPMs [Key Performance Measures] could be criticised for their exclusion of the social (and related “intangible” economic) benefits of education and training. Arguably, such exclusion is indicative of a system that fails to promote the public good of education and/or relies on a suite of KPMs that are based more on what can be measured rather than what should be measured... ironicaly, the federal ANTA KPMs, while heavily influenced by neoliberal ideology, are also more heavily influenced by social-democratic ideology (p.5).*

The explanation for VET outcome measures having a predominantly economic focus, Dumbrell (2000, p.30) argued, is ‘probably due to their genesis in financial accountability measures between the Commonwealth Government and State/Territory Governments’. There is a risk, according to Angus et al (2012, p.15), that the large amount of statistical data ‘leads to a false sense that, since everyone has been counted, everything is OK, and the public VET dollar is being wisely spent and accounted for’. The limitations have been elaborated upon in the research literature. For example, some have argued that governments are ‘generally concerned with either system outcomes; that is, aggregates which relate to the whole system, or with broad categories or classes within the system’ and less so with the experiences of individuals at the local level (Dumbrell,
2000, p.7). Others have argued that performance has had ‘a stronger focus on system accountability and may not necessarily translate well to the RTO [training provider] level’ (Karmel et al., 2013 p.7). In the NCVER report, ‘A patchwork quilt: The development of national training statistics’, Knight & Cully (2007, pp.29-30) argued that:

> it would be naive to pretend that there are not flaws and limitations, most stemming from the choices made in the early stages of development... The system works best of all in monitoring and accounting for purchasing arrangements between state training authorities and providers, and between the Australian Government and state governments in respect of funding agreements....It is a manufactured compromise, one which tends to favour the interests of the producers of vocational education and training (that is, the providers and the state training authorities) over the consumers (that is, individual students and employers) and the general public interest.

The research literature focusing on recent reforms has noted the lack of learner and teacher engagement with the reform process. In a recent publication ‘Under the Pump: The Pressures on Young Australians’, John Spierings contended that ‘the contestable market, at least in Victorian vocational education, has been poorly devised and implemented. But more generally, in nearly all jurisdictions, policy has been hijacked and there has been a notable lack of listening to students, teachers, institutes and industry – the normal stakeholders that should have been extensively consulted’ (Spierings, 2015 p.76). Under the newly marketised training systems, Angus et al. (2012, p.13) found a widespread perception that ‘the learner voice is rarely sought or heard other than when
students make their feelings known ‘by their feet’: that is, when they stop coming to programs’. Similarly, Anderson (1999) stated that ‘arguably students comprise the most significant group to have been excluded from the VET reform process’ (p. 100). When it comes to collecting student input and devising measures, VET survey samples have a tendency to exclude certain groups – particularly those who are least satisfied with their experiences. The collection of outcomes data from ‘graduates’ and ‘subject completers’ means that ‘the voices of those who do not complete courses in VET are, in essence, unheard’ (Angus et al., 2012, p.17). It has been argued that ‘almost nothing is done to track and research non-completion in VET, compared to the voluminous literature in school and higher education contexts on early school and higher education leaving’ (Golding et al., 2012, p.68). In critiquing the ‘Learner Engagement’ questionnaire developed as part of the national standards for registered training organisations, Golding et al (2012, p.57) were:

*dubious about the extent to which a single questionnaire, which is comprised of 35 items, and which is to be completed somewhat impersonally by individual students within 15 minutes, can be claimed to provide sufficient opportunity for the adequate expression of learner voice.*

At a more general level, Knight & Cully (2007, p.27) contended that the student and employer surveys in Australia ‘might reasonably be argued, are more akin to market research than to social statistics...as with the administrative collections, their development has been very much driven by the requirement to report progress against key performance measures’. These and other related measures in these surveys, Toner (2010, p.9) argued,
are simple quantitative indicators of VET performance, and are ‘not a satisfactory metric for pricing inputs and outputs’. They are, Toner contended, ‘probably the best performance metrics that can be reasonably expected to be developed with constrained public sector finances’ (p.9). Reflecting on the introduction of ANTA’s KPMs, Dumbrell (2000) argued for a broadened understanding of ‘outcomes’, including the participation rates of young people in VET to reflect the community’s perspective on outcome measures. He argued that the VET sector ‘could only benefit through the development of broader and more inclusive measures of VET outcomes that acknowledge the importance of addressing community and personal needs’ (p.30). Information about training activity for regions and communities has been designated as a priority for the VET sector in Australia (Loveder & Guthrie, 2009). However, obtaining information on whole regions and communities ‘presents some difficulties as traditionally data collections have focussed more on the individual, and extending this out to a regional perspective will require a different approach’ (Loveder & Guthrie, 2009, p.288). To assist with understanding these broader dimensions, an emerging body of research has contributed insights into intangible dimensions and outcomes associated with education and training (e.g. aspirations, motives, choices, intentions; well-being; identity; self-confidence; and life satisfaction) (Gemici et al., 2014; Nguyen and Blomberg, 2014; Homel & Ryan, 2014). These various reports, each using the Longitudinal Survey of Australian Youth (LSAY) dataset, have underlined the need to understand and engage with young peoples’ aspirations early. This is a process which appears to be greatly dependent on parental influence and parents’ own experience (Beddie, 2015). Such factors help to explain the
persistence of intergenerational disadvantage, whereby parents with poor educational experience and no knowledge of post-school options are unable to guide their own children’s pathways (Redmond et al., 2014). The need to better understand these issues through better information has been acknowledged by the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP, 2015b, p.4) which recently made the observation that:

Collecting and analysing more information on young people’s individual motives, choices and trajectories will be a priority for the coming years. It will be essential to designing targeted and effective work related training policies to prevent and tackle early leaving from education and training and to mitigate the huge human and social cost this incurs.

While more detailed and broader measures are sought, the literature also urges care in their technical design, collation, analysis and presentation. Golding et al (2012, p.77), for example, argued there is a risk that information about VET students and their disadvantaged backgrounds ‘if not carefully and ethically collected and used…can feed ‘the vicious circle’ and lead to further social marginalisation’. For example, a growing body of research has confirmed that area level measures such as SEIFA greatly misclassify SES at the individual or family level (e.g. Power et al., 1985; Power & Robertson, 1987; Western, et al., 2000; Jones, n.d.; Coelli, 2010; Lim & Gemici, 2011). Karmel (2013, p.11) offered a useful summary of the data issues associated with current area-level measures of disadvantage in VET:
Participation in VET by region and socioeconomic status has been difficult to measure. Clearly, regional participation depends on the geographic classifications embedded in our statistical collections. In the absence of individual socioeconomic status data our measurement of socioeconomic status has been based on the SEIFA [local area] index derived from the census. The application of this index depends on the geographic data held at the individual level.

In the context of the Australian VET sector, Golding et al (2012) argued that aggregated national surveys tend mainly ‘to identify what numbers have changed and how greatly, but they are not particularly useful for separating out relationships and causality’. In Europe, CEDEFOP (2013) has cautioned that indicators ‘can oversimplify complex issues; to be properly understood they must be read in context’ (p.6). Sayer (2011, p.237) explained that the application of context-insensitive norms or policies are doomed to produce undesirable consequences. This in turn, can lead to lack of attention to the social conditions and social arrangements that are needed to realise capabilities (Wheelahan & Moodie, 2011, p.21). By necessity, each approach to performance measurement will draw on the same quantitative datasets and/or conduct qualitative data collections with similar stakeholders (e.g. students, practitioners, industry representatives, academics). In an international study on quality indicators in VET, Blom & Meyers (2003) noted that ‘quantitative measures will predominate in such areas as participation and employment rates’ (p.43). They argued that indicators such as these ‘seem to be universally adopted because they meet the demand for measures that can be used to demonstrate accountability’ (p.43).
It has been argued that for many of the constructs of interest in the VET sector only proxy measures are available (Wyatt, 2004). In a report for the Victorian Qualifications Authority, PhillipsKPA (2006) argued that what actually exists are essentially proxy measures of actual outcomes in that some of these potential outcomes are ‘inherently difficult to measure and require measures of student and employer perception or processes and outcomes rather than objective measures of outcomes themselves’ (p.17). Economic and financial indicators have been developed and refined over many years, whereas, Blom & Meyers (2003) argued that: 'indicators for values such as quality and performance [in VET], being less quantifiable, have been more slow to develop, and tend to show more variation and context-dependence’ (pp.15-16). These concerns appear to have led to the inclusion of a ‘context’ variable in some educational evaluation models in the spirit of Stufflebeams ‘context-input-output-outcome approach (Bateman et al 2012). Research warns of the issue of ‘masking’, either through data aggregation or other types of data manipulation, presentation and interpretation. The Annual National Report on VET (ANTA, 2003, pp.64-65) argued that:

*It is difficult to draw simplistic conclusions about the performance of equity groups in vocational education and training because of the myriad of factors which influence outcomes for equity group participants and the variety of indicators which can be considered under the three broad areas of participation, educational achievements and employment outcomes. Different indicators can sometimes show different trends....A comprehensive understanding of patterns of*
participation, outputs and outcomes achieved by each client group in vocational education and training can only be developed through a detailed analysis of the various factors that contribute to results.

VET students from the most socioeconomically disadvantaged areas do not necessarily reflect those of the wider system. A recent national snapshot suggests that VET students from lower socio-economic areas: (1) tend to be enrolled in comparatively fewer hours of training on average; (2) be more frequently enrolled in and completed lower-level qualifications (Certificate I/II), non-award courses or individual modules or units of competency; and (3) have lower load pass rates (Rothman et al., 2013, p.157). Furthermore, learners who are commonly under-represented in education and training are also less likely to self-refer to services, self-identify for administrative purposes or readily seek to engage in learning programs or courses (Brackertz, 2007).

In Australia, a recent report on ‘deep and persistent disadvantage’ by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (McLachlan et al., 2013, p.3) reported that:

Headline statistics on Australia’s most disadvantaged people frequently appear in the media, with the number of Australians living below the poverty line being often quoted. But little attention is given to explaining what lies behind these statistics, how much of the story they tell, and the judgments that sit behind them.

In the Australian VET sector, the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) argued that reporting on ‘equity groups’ has a tendency to focus ‘almost solely on their level of participation in VET, running the risk of masking critical equity issues associated with the training experience or its results’ (ANTA, 1999). Noting the ‘narrow sense of
participation’ the European ETF (2012) proposed that ‘TVET policy makers look beyond the notion of access as participation to focus also on transition from and within TVET tracks’ (ETF 2012, p.16). On the development of performance indicators in TAFE in Australia, Guthrie (1988, p.46) argued that numbers have ‘a beguiling face validity because we can see them and compare them, believing in their validity without really looking behind the facade to see whether the indicator(s) chosen have substance’. Guthrie also contended that performance measures ‘can mask a complexity which underlies their definition, derivation and interpretation’. To provide a practical example, the Ballarat Courier newspaper included the following observations by a Local Learning and Employment Network in an article titled: ‘Youth jobless rate falls but LLEN chief says statistics misleading’.

_The region’s unemployment rate dropped around 7 percentage points in one year, according to ABS statistics, while the Victorian youth unemployment rate increased by 1.5 per cent. Highlands Local Learning and Employment Network executive officer Jannine Bennett said although the figures were positive, it was misleading. She said there was a lot of part-time work, which made the youth underemployed rather than unemployed. “It’s quite confusing,” Ms Bennett said. “On the ground it doesn’t feel like we have a low youth unemployment rate”’ (Cairns, 2014).

These issues ‘masking and ‘misleading’ can also manifest at the system and institution level. Karmel (2013b), for example, noted that an aggregate level of analysis at the institute level ‘may hide significant internal variance between disciplinary areas or
campuses’ (p.12). Similarly, in an analysis of disadvantaged learners in Australian VET from 2006-2010, Hargreaves (2011) responds to the question of ‘how is success measured?’ by placing caveats around what is possible with current datasets:

> While the VET system can justifiably claim that a number of disadvantaged groups are well catered for, the available data mask a complex story. It is one thing to talk about participation and another to talk about outcomes and achievement (p.3)... One challenge to be addressed is the state of our data. Disadvantage is tricky to identify and measure....While improvements to data will not solve disadvantage, good data are needed to underpin understanding and sensible policy initiatives (p.11).

There are technical limitations that arise when attempting to disaggregate data at the local level, particularly in the use of sample-based surveys. The research literature has shown that ‘local [VET] knowledge is important and it is unlikely that official data collections can ever obviate the need for them’ (Karmel, 2011). At a national level, it has previously been observed that ‘we seem to have lots of high-level statistics but, in terms of responding to local community needs, is the level of generality of the statistical information we have sufficient to respond to local needs?’ (Bruniges, 2007, p.32-33). Golding et al (2012) agreed, stating that ‘...NCVER data, in terms of its analysis, tends to be of a summary nature, and feedback tends to be directed to industry. It is policy and provider focussed rather student or teacher focussed’. Similarly, Kearns (2007, p.11) argued that:
much VET policy has been developed according to national and state priorities. Rarely have we got down to the level of communities and considered the myriad of influences that affect outcomes in communities. By influences in the community I mean the culture, the history, the heritage, the industry base and so on. And if we are concerned with the role of research and with outcomes, then I think we have to ‘grapple’ with what happens in communities.

While efforts to improve system level data collections are important, Karmel (2009, p.11) reminds us that ‘policy may dictate that special attention is given to sub-groups, but the data may not be up to the task’. Similarly, Knight & Cully (2007, p.30) argued that:

while the [NCVER] datasets have some application for secondary analysis, this is constrained by the inability to trace learners across collections and over time (and also by other factors, such as the high item non-response—far higher than would be tolerated in an ABS collection—on some important fields). This considerably limits the utility of the data for answering applied policy research questions and results in most researchers favouring the use of ABS confidentialised unit record files, despite the bluntness of the survey instruments.

In the past, policy responses ‘have tended to focus on increasing participation rates for these [equity] groups without considering the nature of the participation’ (Dumbrell, 2000, p.32). There is recognition, however, that ‘improving participation rates does not necessarily lead to equitable labour market outcomes’ (Dumbrell, 2000, p.32). It
is argued that there is a heavy reliance in Australia on the ‘cold and hard’, aggregated statistical national data collected by institutions, states and territories, as well as nationally by NCVER (Golding et al., 2012, p.81). These conventions, it has been suggested, are based ‘on the simplistic assumption that more or any participation at any level in VET is good’ (Golding et al., 2012, p.81). Similarly, Burchardt et al. (2002) argued the critical point that ‘actual participation’ is often presented without due consideration of what opportunities were available in the first instance:

*Social exclusion is almost invariably framed in terms of the opportunity to participate, yet existing indicators measure actual participation or non-participation. We neither know whether the (non-) participation is regarded as problematic by the individual, or whether he or she has other options (p. 41).*

A state training authority explained to Golding et al (2012, p.64) that ‘skills reform agenda’ is moving Australia into an environment where the government, and the wider community, are going to be ‘interested in more transparency and, essentially, more consumer information for students’. As Karmel (2013a) pointed out, ‘consumers and governments are concerned with good performance not just different performance’, elaborating that that there are multiple motivations behind the ‘transparency agenda’:

*The first is the development of the training market with an emphasis on user choice. The second is accountability for very substantial government expenditure — governments want to know what they are getting for their ‘investment in human capital’, and the third is a desire to better understand the training market.... The big challenge lying*
This research will explore what VET patterns and trends might become apparent in data on young adults’ in post-school VET when viewing these data through the lens of the CA.

2.3.3. Narratives (ways of framing reality)

The term ‘narrative’ is used here to describe the ways in which issues and measures are interpreted and crafted to create stories about how the VET system is performing for those who can access it. If the lens is the ‘way of seeing the world’, and the measures are the means of understanding it, then the narrative is the story which arises from how the lens and measures are configured. More broadly, five elements have been said to constitute the VET sector’s ‘grand narrative’ in Australia - Reformism, Dualism, Disesteemism, Ascetism and Exceptionalism (Zoellner, 2011). In 2012, John Mitchell wrote that ‘despite attempts by the Victorian government to maintain a positive narrative, stories keep emerging in the Victorian Parliament and in the media of disreputable providers, inappropriate training and the misuse of public funds’ (Mitchell, 2012, p.16). At a local level, a narrative of insularity and ignominy appears to characterise the FMP region in the wider public discourse, particularly the area of Frankston City. The following excerpt from an interview with Christine Richards (former Frankston Mayor) and Ken Rowe (former Principal of Frankston High school) featured in The Age (Green, 2014) newspaper helps to set the scene for the following discussion of lenses, measures and narratives:
‘It’s discrimination. It’s almost as if the politicians have given up on Frankston... That’s what it feels like on the ground. Melbourne’s done such a good job of using us as a whipping boy, essentially.’ When Ken Rowe was principal at Frankston High, he would tell his graduating students not to disown their home town. ‘When you go to university and so on, don’t make any apologies that you went to Frankston High School,’ he would tell them, stressing the school was among the best. ‘Don’t make any apologies about being from Frankston.’ He knew they would sneak into lectures, and when asked where they were from, reply "South Mount Eliza." ‘It's a terrible indictment on the town, the city, isn't it? I'm proud of this place,’ says Rowe. ‘It's got enormous potential. And there's a real warmth of goodwill in the town. But it's just this superficial stuff that makes the perception.’

This section will focus on three intersecting narratives of relevance to the research problem, those of: youth participation; individualism and risk; and marketisation and choice.

**The narrative of youth participation.** The research literature points to a number of ways of explaining the relationship between young people and VET. Various authors have highlighted and challenged the construction of youth transitions as a conceptual field arising from a deficit approach (Bowman et al., 2015; Cuervo & Wyn, 2011). This deficit approach comes from a perspective that ‘youths’ are perceived to be in transition, having emerging identities, powerless and vulnerable, less responsible, dependent, ignorant, prone to risky behaviours and rebellious. Through this deficit-based lens, youth
are often viewed as a ‘problem’ that must be solved (Bond, 2010). In the domain of VET policy, it has been argued that ‘it is important to be clear about how learners are construed and constructed in alternative discourses about VET’ (Golding et al., 2012, p.10). In the UK, Jeffs and Smith (1999) argued that politicians in the United Kingdom talk about young people in three ways: as thugs, users and victims and ‘yet so many of the troublesome behaviours associated in this way with young people are not uniquely theirs’ (Jeffs & Smith, 1999, p.1 in Bond, 2010). In a paper titled ‘Opportunity and Aspiration, or the Great Deception? The Case of 14-19 Vocational Education’, Atkins (2010) argued that ‘the reality of vocational opportunities is…very different to the smoke and mirrors of the illusion marketed by government’. Atkins posited that the policy discourse around 14-19 year olds enrolled in further education training in the UK is one of negativity. She argued that its use of language such as ‘non-academic’, ‘disaffected’ and ‘disadvantaged’, places them firmly within a deficit model,

This model frames these young people as low achievers with low aspirations, routinely dismisses them as non-academic, yet claims to offer opportunities in the form of a vocational education which, according to the rhetoric, will lead to a lifelong nirvana of high-skill, high-paid work, personal satisfaction and opportunity (providing they continue to engage in lifelong learning) and this is something which many young people take on trust.

Australian research has similarly argued that ‘social policy often stereotypes young people as 'at risk' and vulnerable, or as a threat to social cohesion. These negative stereotypes can shift responsibility for broader social and economic problems onto the
individual’ (Bowman et al., 2015, p.16). Similar to the categorisation of equity groupings based on individual characteristics, earlier research has suggested that categorisation and labeling discourses around youth have serious implications for how we conceive of and address these issues. For example, Atkins (2009) has argued that consideration should be given in recognition of the ‘power of discourse’ and the way in which the use of particular descriptors, such as ‘disaffected, disengaged, disruptive’, result in the ‘othering of particular groups and the attribution of particular characteristics to individuals’ (Atkins, 2009, p.152). The use of ‘at risk’, in particular, in youth and education policies has been critiqued from a sociological perspective for the way in which it individualises social processes that marginalise and is dismissive of social arrangements (Cuervo & Wyn, 2011; Wyn, 2009). Bowman et al (2015, p.vi) agreed, arguing that in social policy and youth studies young people are:

often understood as 'at risk' or 'vulnerable', which can locate the responsibility with individuals alone...The term 'youth transitions' has become increasingly fraught as the age range of 'youth' is stretched. It has blurred and extended the phases of transition from education to work, seeing young people as a problem group who are 'at risk' while failing to adequately recognise the institutional and structural contexts.

Illuminating the connections to be made between the experiences of young people and their characterisation at the system level, Atkins (2009) stated policy makers should also recognise that if a young person withdraws from a VET course, or chooses to not progress through multiple layers of vocational qualifications:
it is not due to an inherent failing on their part (or that of their teachers) but to the challenges of complex lives, the demands on them to generate economic capital and the fact that transitions are not straightforward and predictable, but individual, varied and messy and powerfully mediated by class and earlier educational experiences and (non) achievements (pp.152-153).

Returning to the capabilities approach, Sen argued that individuals must be considered within the social structures in which they exist so as to not: ‘view individuals and their opportunities in isolated terms’. He argued that the options that a person has depend greatly on relations with others and on what the state and other institutions do. He was particularly concerned with those opportunities that are strongly influenced by social circumstances and public policy (Drèze & Sen, 2002, p.6). From an agency perspective, the OECD (2003, p.46) explained that young people ‘may be less confident in, skilled in, or used to negotiating access to complex learning systems’. They may, according to the OECD, ‘need more assistance in finding opportunities that can maximise their talents, and in overcoming barriers to accessing these opportunities’ (OECD, 2003, p.46). The research literature discusses the structural changes in labour markets in recent decades and the diminished opportunities which are available for groups of young people and school leavers. From a structural perspective, Bowman et al (2015, p.12) contended that in this post-1980s policy environment:

Employment opportunities for young people were to be expanded by reorienting education and training towards industry...opening a
competitive market for public and private training providers, and establishing thousands of new entry-level training places. The success or otherwise of youth policy was seen in terms of ‘young people learning or earning,’ and began to be measured accordingly.

In an insightful review of the ‘marketing and policy rhetoric’ in the UK Post Compulsory Education & Training sector, Atkins (2010) argued that ‘despite their overuse in government documents, terms such as ‘aspiration’ and ‘opportunity’ are not defined or problematised’. Atkins suggested that such policy documents promoting opportunity, aspirations and so on appear ‘benign, if not benevolent but a closer analysis clearly implicates political and educational structures in the production and reproduction of social class, and thus in the production and reproduction of power’. The overuse of terms such as ‘low-aspirations’, Atkins (2010) further explained, tends to position young people ‘within a deficit model, constrained by discourses of negativity, powerless to change a system which militates against them and lacking the agency for change, their chances of achieving those aspirations are almost non-existent’. From a capabilities approach, Alkire (2010, p.15) agreed that the CA provides ‘a focus on that freedom being ‘real’ – not just paper freedom but an actual possibility’. There is evidence to suggest that these structural changes have disproportionately affected young people. Dussledorp Skills Forum (2000) argued that ‘the impact of the revolution in the structure of our labour markets has fallen most unfairly on young people’. Dumbrell (2000) agreed that youth unemployment and underemployment in Australia appears ‘not to be related to a deficit of skills in the youth population, but rather to structural changes in the labour market which have disadvantaged young people’ (p.34).
A number of studies have shown that participation in government-funded VET by people from rural and remote areas of Australia is much higher overall than it is for people in metropolitan areas (Polvere & Lim, 2015; Rothman et al., 2013; Golding & Pattison, 2004; Walstab and Lamb, 2008). Reflecting on the ultimatum faced by many school leavers in non-metropolitan communities, Cuervo & Wyn (2011, p.42) argued that:

*a lack of educational and work options often presents young people with the need to abandon their rural communities. Thus, they face the choice of migrating from their communities or of staying and confronting a declining and precarious rural labour market structure; particularly in farming areas. In addition, poor or insufficient infrastructure, such as public transport often compromises the opportunities for young people to remain in their local areas.*

A lack of post-school educational and employment opportunities often compels young people to migrate to regional and outer metropolitan centres (McKenzie, 2009; Hillman and Rothman, 2007). For example, Hillman & Rothman (2007) found that of those who had been living in non-metropolitan areas in 1997 (when 16 years of age), 26 per cent were living in a metropolitan area in 2004, with 36 per cent having experienced at least one year in a major city during 1998–2004. Those who decide to stay in rural areas, Cuervo & Wyn (2011, p.4) argued, ‘face a declining and precarious labour market, mainly composed of casual and temporary work and low wages that hinder the possibility of making an independent livelihood’. A recurring finding from the literature is that location matters: ‘for many of these young people [in the regions and on the urban
fringe], career aspirations and choices are determined by an invisible radius of one hour’ (Webb et al., 2015).

The narrative of individualism and risk. Professor of Political Science at Yale University, Jacob Hacker, has described the restructuring of the American economy in recent decades as ‘the great risk shift’ (Hacker, 2008). Behind this shift towards individualised responsibility for one’s own welfare, Hacker argued, is the *Personal Responsibility Crusade*, who speak of a nirvana of economic empowerment, an ‘ownership society’ in which people are free to choose. In Australia, Cuervo & Wyn (2011, p.14) explained that such policy orientations have manifested in the lives of young people through ‘the introduction of free-market oriented policies with a subsequent weakening of welfare policies and an emphasis for all young Australians to complete 12 years of schooling’. Bowman et al (2015, p.17) has agreed that under these neoliberal and economic rationalist policy settings ‘the responsibility for managing risk falls onto the individual’. These neoliberal policy positions on individual responsibility (and self-managing the attendant risks) have manifested in the Australian VET sector through the incremental marketisation of training systems at a state and national level. Dumbrell (2004), for example, argued these developments are underpinned by:

* a belief that unemployment is attributable either to shortcomings in the skills and attitudes of individuals, or in the competitiveness of Australian industry. Individuals, or their employers, however, are increasingly being expected to make decisions about the nature of training that will best address these objectives. There appears to be, as
an aspect of this philosophy, a belief in the efficacy of market forces to
guide the direction of the VET sector and to ensure the best outcomes
for individuals (Dumbrell, 2004, p.16).

Professor John Smyth argued in 1998 that by quarantining the problem in this way so that it becomes an issue of ‘kids from poor backgrounds who can’t get jobs’, ‘the social pathology view of enterprise culture locates the problem with individuals, rather than focus on the social and economic structures of society that produce and maintain inequality’ (Smyth, 1998, p.3).

More recently, Bowman et al (2015, p.15) explained that: ‘the complex marketised systems of higher education and vocational education shift the responsibility (and associated risks) of decision making onto individuals. Without adequate career development supports, young people often make decisions too early, commence courses that they are not well matched to, or end up with qualifications that hold little weight with employers and provide limited opportunities to gain a job. This fuels non-completion, training churn and disillusionment for young people’. This discourse of individual responsibility, argued Cuervo & Wyn (2011), has been described as a process of ‘individualisation’ (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Such processes have had the effect, of ‘making young people view their own crises as individual failures or problems rather than the outcomes due to the erosion of structural processes’ (Cuervo, 2016, p.61). The implications of such an individualised deficit-based approach for young people, Bowman et al (2015, p.16-17) argued, is that it understands youth unemployment or lack of
educational credentials as the fault of individuals; and as a result the 'deep-seated structural inequalities are rendered invisible' (Colley & Hodkinson, 2001).

**The narrative of marketisation and choice.** Human development has been described through the lens of the capabilities approach as ‘a process of enlarging people's choices’ (Alkire, 2010, p.4). On the topic of youth opportunity in Australia, Spierings (2002) argued that ‘the major political project of our time has been about placing individual choice and autonomy at the centre of public policy’. Although VET participation has been shown to have a close relationship to socio-economic status and geographic location (Rothman et al., 2013; Lamb & Walstab, 2009), its relationship with the availability of course or provider choice is less well understood. Adopting a human capital lens on the recent VET reforms in Victoria, the concept of student choice in VET is approached by Leung et al (2013) from the position that:

> The decision to enrol in VET (or in a particular VET course) can be thought of as a human capital investment decision...where the prospective student weighs up the (present value of the) expected benefits of studying the course (e.g. higher expected future earnings, enjoyment of the course as a consumption good) and the expected costs of studying the course (e.g. course fees, expected earnings foregone during study, mental strain).

In response to the Victorian model, academic Phillip Toner has argued that it represents ‘a classic example of where the simplified textbook model of a market economy head butts up against a real world’ (Mitchell, 2012, p.40). Simplistic and reductive characterisations of VET pathways as rational choice-making transactions have
been challenged by decades of literature from the field of behavioural economics (Kahneman, 2011; Kahneman & Tversky, 1973; Thaler & Sunstein, 2008). In the 1970s, psychologists Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky set out to dismantle a feature of economic and human capital theory – the arch-rational decision maker known as *Homo Economicus*. Applied to education and training, the *Homo Economicus* student would decide whether or not to undertake a course of study on the basis of a comparison of the costs with the benefits of gaining the additional credential (Leung et al., 2013; Marginson, 2004). Such assumptions are discredited by behavioural economics theory on the basis that humans (as opposed to rational economic agents) are fallible, easily confused and act irrationally (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008; Kahneman, 2011). In VET systems, human rationality is made more problematic by the ‘loose fit’ between what course people choose, what vocational qualifications they complete and what VET graduates actually end up doing after they complete their training (Wheelahan et al., 2012). There are efforts underway by governments in Australia, the US and UK to introduce a field of behavioural choice architecture to public policy known as ‘nudging’ to modify choosers' behaviour (Thaler and Sunstein, 2008). The theorists behind ‘nudge’ have argued that unlike members of *Homo Economicus*, members of the species *homo sapiens* make predictable mistakes because of their use of heuristics, fallacies, and the way they are influenced by their social interactions (Thaler & Sunstein, 2003). Often people’s preferences are ill-formed, and their choices will inevitably be influenced by default rules, framing effects, and starting points. People, it is argued, ‘make inferior choices, choices that they would change if they had complete information’ (Thaler &
Sunstein, 2003, p.175). Behavioural Insights Units have been set up in the Australian states of New South Wales and Victoria since 2015, each drawing on the UK model. Building on the work of the UK Government’s Behavioural Insights Team, a recent report on ‘Behavioural Approaches to Understanding Student Choice’ (Diamond et al., 2012) argued that:

*The purpose of applying behavioural economics to student choice is to bring an improved understanding of how prospective students are influenced by different factors, how they respond to large amounts of information, and how they process decisions – and the answers to these questions may not always be as straightforward as might be assumed. Considering student choice in this way certainly does not negate the importance of providing easily comparable data on higher education institutions and courses, but it may have implications for how information is presented (p.17).*

The marketisation of VET systems found in current policy is, in many respects, built upon a series of assumptions about choice-making architecture among prospective students (Mitchell, 2012). Harris et al (2006), for example, have argued ‘policy that promotes unlimited choice has tremendous potential to be worthy, yet necessarily makes assumptions about: individuals having the necessary ‘wherewithal’ to benefit from a range of alternatives; the sufficiency of career services and arrangements; and the usefulness and timeliness of various career information sources’. In an Australian study on ‘Individual learners, choice and lifelong learning’, Anderson (2003, p.2) argued that underlying these VET policy narratives of ‘choice’ is: ‘an implicit assumption that
choice-making in VET is an unproblematic process in which individuals engage freely, actively and rationally’. Of what research exists, Anderson argued that it does not pay sufficient attention to ‘the effects of age and changing patterns of choice at different stages of a person’s life trajectory, or the extent to which individuals are behaving like rational consumers’ (ibid, p.2). The reality of choosing to undertake vocational training, Maxwell et al (2000) argued, requires ‘high-level personal decision-making skills, including skills in obtaining and systematising information on providers and courses as well as skills in considering the match to personal needs, interests, capabilities and aspirations’ (Maxwell et al., 2000, p.89). Through his own data collection, Anderson (2003) found that ‘individual choice in VET is a complex, contingent and dynamic process’ (ibid, p.2). He observed that ‘age becomes the most significant variable shaping individual choice after the initial post-school transition has been made’ (ibid, p.2). Finally, Anderson argued that individual choices and decisions to engage in further study in VET are ‘multi-factorial, highly contingent on other life circumstances, and although largely vocational and work-related in nature, tend to be based on diverse mixes of instrumental and non-instrumental goals’ (ibid, p.3).

In the UK, Atkins et al (2011) found young people in the further education system were more often compelled into VET by ‘chance not choice’ and that in most cases, students had made their decisions regarding particular vocational programs, ‘not on the basis of some imagined rationality where they each had all the known options available to them, but pragmatically, on the basis of what proved to be available in the contingent events of their everyday lives’. Atkins et al (2011) neatly summarised these concerns by
stating that ‘policy which is predicated on the belief that young people make rational choices and have linear trajectories has had the effect of making their social positioning more deterministic rather than opening possibilities and increasing life chances’. In a book titled, ‘Triumphs and Tears: Young People, Markets and the Transition from School to Work’, Hodkinson et al (1996) found that post-Thatcherite VET policies of 1990s Britain were:

naively individualistic, ignoring the complexities of decision-making, of interrelationships in the field and uncertainty of careership. Further, we suggest that that they take an industrial metaphor for people and society, which sees people as acting with consistency, predictability and controllability more sensibly associated with inanimate machines. There is an emphasis on efficiency, planning and controlling structures and procedures. These include a belief in ‘free markets’, which we argue depend on unrealistic assumptions about decision making and largely ignore the complex reality of culturally embedded social life.

The deterministic and rationalistic language used in VET policy is further challenged by the barriers and constraints on what choices are available. For example, Anderson (2003, p.6) argued that: ‘the scope for individuals to exercise choice is heavily constrained despite the rhetorical emphasis placed on choice in official VET policy’. He cited national training policy at the time that warned: ‘clients will often not be in a position to make adequately informed choices about every aspect of the training they require. This is likely to be the case for many individual students’ (ANTA, 1996, p.18). As Cuervo & Wyn (2011, p.22) argued ‘successful’ transitions into adulthood are in great
part dependent on young people’s ‘capacity to continuously construct one’s self as choice-maker, resourceful and a reflexive subject with a clear ability to plan their progress of becoming an adult’. These issues of self-efficacy and agency are evident in a recent study in the UK that found that college students (18-20 year age range) had ‘chosen’ their programs more by ‘serendipity and contingent events than by making apparently rational career choices and pursuing linear trajectories supported by coherent and consistent careers guidance’ (Atkins et al., 2011, p. 30). In Victoria, Leung et al (2013, p.20) stated that the impacts of recent training market reforms on student outcomes are ‘more uncertain and depend on whether students make the most of their greater freedom of course choice and whether greater contestability improves training quality. It is not clear that, given greater freedom of choice, students will choose courses with more positive labour market prospects’.

Returning to the capabilities approach, Alkire (2008a/2005a) cautioned that freedom is not about a maximisation of choices without regard to their quality and people’s values. It is about ‘comprehensive outcomes’. From the perspective of labour market participation, the CA suggests that, ‘the main objective of public action in the field of welfare should not be to put people back into work at all costs . . . but to enhance their real freedom of choice’ (Bonvin, 2009, p.56). In ‘Rational Fools: A Critique of the Behavioral Foundations of Economic Theory’ (Sen, 1977), Sen explained that ‘choice may reflect a compromise among a variety of considerations of which personal welfare may be just one’. Sen acknowledged that an individual’s real freedom of choice depends not only on resources but also on the ability to convert those resources (Sen, 1992, p.82).
The freedom to choose participation must also include the freedom to reject it (Watts & Bridges, 2006, p. 273). For example, as an adult and community education practitioner told Golding et al (2012, p.74), disadvantaged learners:

*often have very few services so they are really hesitant to make critical comments of the services they are given. From their perspective even a crutch service is better than no service at all. From their point of view they will often say, ‘This was terrific’, when what they actually mean is, ‘I would rather have that than not. I wouldn’t want to lose it. I don’t want to jeopardise my chances of other opportunities."

As a way forward, Atkins (2009) contended that consideration should be ‘given to what choice and opportunity might really mean to a young person struggling against oppressive and unequal societal structures, and to ways in which they might be helped to realize their potential for agency’. Atkins et al (2011) later argued that recent ‘14-19 policy’ in the UK, structured around models of instrumental or technical rationality ‘mistakenly assumes that all young people have the ability, support and understanding to make an informed rational and unconstrained career choice from an almost infinite range of possibilities’. Finally, Atkins & Flint (2015, p.41) found a general misalignment between further education policy and the lived experiences of young people in further education programs, stating that policy is:

*predicated on the assumption that individuals are able to make rational and informed choices on the basis of abstract, or even concrete, examples which are often outside their own lives – a model of ‘technical rationality’...Data from this study... reaffirms such dislocation and
suggests that policy strategy does not reflect sufficiently the lived experiences of young people in an increasingly globalised world.

This following section builds on these findings to explore what VET opportunities have been identified on research conducted in and/or on the geographic location of interest to this research – the Frankston-Mornington Peninsula region of Victoria, Australia.

2.4. Young people and VET in the Frankston-Mornington Peninsula region

This section reviews the literature on young people’s experiences with VET and post-compulsory education and training in the FMP region. However, to contextualise the literature it is first necessary to review published indicators of well-being and disadvantage for the FMP region. The SEIFA Index of Relative Socio-economic Disadvantage (IRSD) and Index of Education and Occupation (IEO) are compiled by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). The IRSD is a general socio-economic index that summarises a range of information about the economic and social conditions of people and households within an area (e.g. no educational attainment, low-skilled employment, poor health conditions, access to transport). The ABS recommends using the IRSD/IEO when requiring: (1) an index of disadvantage and lack of disadvantage; and (2) a broad measure of disadvantage, rather than a specific measure (such as low income). Figures 2.1 and 2.2 show the breadth and clustering of local statistical areas across the index from the most disadvantaged (Frankston North, Rosebud-McCrae, Frankston) to least disadvantaged (Mount Eliza, Mount Martha, Flinders). The Centre of Full Employment and Equity (University of Newcastle) in conjunction with the Urban Research Program
(Griffith University) have developed the Employment Vulnerability Index (EVI) for suburbs across Australia. The EVI indicates those suburbs that have higher proportions of the types of jobs thought to be most at risk in the current economic climate. Each suburb in Australia has been graded as either: high risk, medium high risk, medium low risk or low risk. Frankston City has several suburbs in the high risk (Frankston North, Carrum Downs, Langwarrin) and medium high risk (Frankston, Frankston South, Seaford Skye-Sandhurst) categories. Mornington Peninsula has a number of suburbs in the medium high risk (Dromana, Hastings, Rosebud-McCrae, Mornington, Mount Martha, Somerville) category but currently no suburbs in the high risk category, although in the previous index (in 2009), there were four suburbs in this category (Baxter, Crib Point, Hastings and Somerville). Offering a less aggregated set of measures, Community Indicators Victoria has assembled a number of dimensions of community well-being for Local Government Areas. Table 2.2 compares Frankston City and Mornington Peninsula Shire with the rest of Victoria. These indicators cover a range of domains including: health, education, safety, civic engagement, employment, multiculturalism and the environment. Although insufficient to satisfy each of the requirements, these types of composite measures (indicators) go at least some way to applying Nussbaum’s (Nussbaum, 2000) list of ten core capabilities: life; bodily health; bodily integrity; sense, imagination and thought; emotions; practical reason; affiliation; other species; play; control over one’s environment (Nussbaum, 2000). The indicators in which Frankston has lower ratings than the rest of Victoria are: (1) ‘Participation in arts and culture in the previous month’; (2) ‘Felt safe or very safe – Night’; (3) ‘Participation in Citizen
Engagement in the previous 12 months’; (4) ‘School leavers fully engaged in work or non-school study’; (5) ‘It is a good thing for a society to be made up of people from different cultures’; (6) ‘Employment in highly skilled occupations’; and (8) ‘Tertiary or TAFE qualifications’. On the indicator of ‘Self-Reported Health’ a comparatively higher proportion of Frankstonians rate their health as ‘excellent or very good’ than the greater Victorian population. The indicators in which the Mornington Peninsula has lower ratings than the rest of Victoria are: (1) ‘It is a good thing for a society to be made up of people from different cultures’; (2) ‘School leavers fully engaged in work or non-school study’; (3) ‘The percentage of persons aged 15 years or older who are employed’; (4) ‘Rate of participation for children eligible for an assessment at 3.5 years’; (5) ‘Employment in highly skilled occupations’; and (6) ‘Broadband access’. Higher than state averages for the Mornington Peninsula are in the areas of: (1) ‘Feel safe or very safe – Night’ and (2) ‘Think that work and family life often interfere with each other’ compared to other parts of Victoria. Chapter 5 and 6 will explore some of these well-being measures in greater detail, namely: (1) Felt safe or very safe – Day/Night; (2) Tertiary or TAFE qualifications 2011; (3) Employment in highly skilled occupations; and (4) School leavers fully engaged in work or non-school study.
Figure 2.1: Statistical Area Level 2 (SA2) IRSD, 2011

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013, 2033.0.55.001 - Socio-economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA), Data Cube only, 2011

Figure 2.2: Statistical Area Level 2 (SA2) IEO, 2011

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013, 2033.0.55.001 - Socio-economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA), Data Cube only, 2011
Table 2.2: Selected indicators, Community Indicators Victoria, 2016

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>Frankston (F)</th>
<th>Mornington Peninsula (MP)</th>
<th>Victoria</th>
<th>MP - Percentage point difference to Victoria</th>
<th>Data source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-Reported Health - Excellent or very good</td>
<td>54.0</td>
<td>46.7</td>
<td>46.6</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>0.1 2011 Victorian Population Health Survey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household waste collected in kerbside collections was recycled in 2010-11</td>
<td>49.6</td>
<td>43.7</td>
<td>45.0</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>-1.3 Sustainability Victoria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Households spending &gt;30% of gross income on rent or mortgage payments</td>
<td>23.4</td>
<td>19.6</td>
<td>20.4</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>-0.8 2011 Australian Bureau of Statistics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Day-to-day travel had been limited or restricted in the previous 12 months</td>
<td>25.6</td>
<td>26.7</td>
<td>23.7</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>3.0 2011 VicHealth Indicators Survey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The percentage of persons aged 15 years or older who are employed.</td>
<td>62.7</td>
<td>57.0</td>
<td>61.3</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>-4.3 2011 Australian Bureau of Statistics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet access</td>
<td>80.6</td>
<td>78.3</td>
<td>79.6</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>-1.3 2011 Australian Bureau of Statistics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broadband access</td>
<td>73.4</td>
<td>70.8</td>
<td>72.4</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>-1.6 2011 Australian Bureau of Statistics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Could definitely get help from friends, family or neighbours when they needed it</td>
<td>92.1</td>
<td>94.2</td>
<td>91.7</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>2.5 2008 DPCD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Run out of food and could not afford to buy more in previous 12 months</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>-0.7</td>
<td>2.7 2011 Victorian Population Health Survey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felt safe or very safe - Day</td>
<td>96.3</td>
<td>98.9</td>
<td>97.0</td>
<td>-0.7</td>
<td>1.9 2011 VicHealth Indicators Survey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work and family life often interfere with each other</td>
<td>51.8</td>
<td>56.6</td>
<td>53.1</td>
<td>-1.3</td>
<td>3.5 2011 VicHealth Indicators Survey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subjective Wellbeing - Australian Unity Wellbeing Index</td>
<td>75.7</td>
<td>78.1</td>
<td>77.5</td>
<td>-1.8</td>
<td>0.6 2011 VicHealth Indicators Survey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling Part of the Community - Australian Unity Wellbeing Index</td>
<td>69.6</td>
<td>75.5</td>
<td>72.3</td>
<td>-2.7</td>
<td>3.2 2011 VicHealth Indicators Survey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rate of participation for children eligible for an assessment at 3.5 years</td>
<td>62.4</td>
<td>61.5</td>
<td>65.4</td>
<td>-3.0</td>
<td>-3.9 Maternal and Child Health Service 2013-14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household had engaged in a list of water conservation methods</td>
<td>37.9</td>
<td>43.4</td>
<td>41.3</td>
<td>-3.4</td>
<td>2.1 2011 VicHealth Indicators Survey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tertiary or TAFE qualifications 2011</td>
<td>52.5</td>
<td>56.1</td>
<td>56.3</td>
<td>-3.8</td>
<td>-0.2 2011 Australian Bureau of Statistics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tertiary or TAFE qualifications 2006</td>
<td>46.7</td>
<td>51.2</td>
<td>50.7</td>
<td>-4.0</td>
<td>0.5 2011 Australian Bureau of Statistics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment in highly skilled occupations</td>
<td>53.1</td>
<td>53.6</td>
<td>57.3</td>
<td>-4.2</td>
<td>-3.7 2011 Australian Bureau of Statistics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is a good thing for a society to be made up of people from different cultures</td>
<td>44.7</td>
<td>41.1</td>
<td>51.0</td>
<td>-6.3</td>
<td>-9.9 2011 Dept of Health &amp; Human Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School leavers fully engaged in work or non-school study</td>
<td>62.2</td>
<td>66.0</td>
<td>72.0</td>
<td>-9.8</td>
<td>-6.0 2011 Australian Bureau of Statistics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation in Citizen Engagement in the previous 12 months</td>
<td>40.3</td>
<td>50.5</td>
<td>50.5</td>
<td>-10.2</td>
<td>0.0 2011 VicHealth Indicators Survey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felt safe or very safe - Night</td>
<td>58.3</td>
<td>76.7</td>
<td>70.3</td>
<td>-12.0</td>
<td>6.4 2011 VicHealth Indicators Survey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation in arts and culture in the previous month</td>
<td>50.5</td>
<td>62.4</td>
<td>63.6</td>
<td>-13.1</td>
<td>-1.2 2011 VicHealth Indicators Survey</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Community Indicators Victoria, 2016.
The issue of transport has been well-documented, particularly for those living on the southern peninsula. A recent study titled ‘Stranded: Spatial disadvantage in Melbourne’, conducted projections of job opportunities for young adults (Mazzei & Spiller, 2015). It found that, based on the most recent population census in Australia, close to 250,000 young people will only be able to access 10 per cent or less of Melbourne’s jobs within a 30 minute drive in fifteen years. The projected misalignment between (a) the distribution of the 18-24 year old population and (b) their capability to access jobs is shown in Figure 2.3. The Frankston-Mornington Peninsula area is boxed. In undertaking these projections, Mazzei & Spiller (2015) focused on the employment opportunities of 18-24 year olds and found that:

*young people in the suburbs are in a particularly difficult situation in terms of access to opportunity. Around half of Melbourne’s youth population is forced to live in suburbs that are far from employment, education, training, health, recreation and other facilities, and all but entirely car dependent. This is regrettable in itself, but especially worrying given these young people represent the bulk of Australia’s future human capital stock. We appear to be building cities designed to undermine the nation’s productivity as well as its commitment to social justice (p.108).*
Research and evaluations in the FMP region. Frankston is home to the Frankston High Street centre of the Brotherhood of St Laurence (BSL). Based in Melbourne, the BSL is a community organisation that undertakes research, delivers
services and advocates on behalf of people experiencing disadvantage. The BSL has conducted a number of research projects and evaluation studies on topics such as: perceptions of training by students and trainees (Bowman and Souery, 2010); the BSL Community VCAL program (Myconos, 2014/2013/2012/2011/2010); the Peninsula Youth Connections program (Barrett, 2012a/2012b); and the Youth Collaboration program (Bond, 2015) among many others. Established in January 2010 as part of a national program, the Peninsula Youth Connections program involved the BSL working with young people at risk of disengaging from education or training. The program was self-evaluated through a three stage process: Stage 1 (Bond 2011); Stage 2 (Barrett 2012a); and Stage 3 (Barrett 2012b). Stage 1 found that:

*the narrow framing of engagement [in mainstream education and training], with limited opportunities for broader learning, building esteem and soft skills development, was noted [by interviewees], as was limited access to effective short-term reengagement and alternative programs. The lack of a learner-centred approach and the bias toward academic pathways in the current system were identified as critical barriers to the retention of students who did not fit into that model and felt they gained nothing from school (Bond 2011, p.vii)*

On the first issue, the Stage 1 report found that ‘a shortcoming of the education system, and indeed youth policy and programs in Australia generally, relates to the often narrow definition of student participation and engagement, and of learning’ (ibid, p.28). The evaluation recommended adjustments to how the final outcomes were measured and weighted by their funding sponsor (the Commonwealth Department). The rationale
behind the recommendation was that in the original weightings equal weight were accorded to quite different achievements. For example, ‘a young person re-engaged in education might only attend for one day before quitting, whereas a re-engagement lasting 13 weeks was also counted as one final outcome’ (ibid, p.48). The evaluation reaffirmed earlier findings that critical issues for young people in the region include ‘access to secure housing and to public transport (which affects the take-up of education and training)’ (ibid, p.5). Physical access to training was a further issue. Several interviewees told the BSL evaluations that some programs had been moved from the local TAFE in Frankston to the campuses at Dandenong (25km from Frankston) and Berwick (33km from Frankston). The evaluation noted that ‘while a trade training centre was planned for Frankston, this did not help young people in the present. Thus unlike those in urban locales where there were more course choices and competing TAFEs, young people had to travel long distances to access training. This effectively excluded some, and particularly those facing other barriers to their participation’. A community education provider commented that:

> Our kids can’t travel to Berwick [35km northeast of Frankston], that’s almost impossible—like it’s 6000 buses and it’s crazy, it’s not something that we would expect them to do. They’d have to be so dedicated and the problem is these are the kids that aren’t dedicated.

> These are the kids who can’t get up in the morning. These are the kids who’ve got other issues (ibid, p.35).

Conducted over the period of the Victorian market-based reforms (discussed in Chapter 3), the BSL evaluations found ‘dubious practices by registered training
organisations (RTOs) because of the sheer amount of funding available for young people’ (ibid, p.35). The evaluation cites examples of Certificate II courses being offered in two weeks and the extreme case of an RTO providing a three-certificate program in three months that would net $8,000 per student (ibid, p.35).

A further BSL study was conducted in the same time period titled ‘Transition for work’ (Bowman and Souery, 2010). It had two main aims: to analyse the characteristics of the students and trainees involved in BSL programs; and to examine the experience of vocational training from the trainees’ perspective, and gain insight into their motivations for doing training. Using a mixed method approach, the research found that where individuals had strong social networks and resources, training and formal credentials assisted them to secure employment. However, without support and mentoring, the research found that a certificate or qualification is not sufficient to enable them to get and keep a job. The research found that, with the experience of migrants, some students may be studying at a much lower level than their previous qualifications. Such research has argued that they ‘may be studying something that they have not actively chosen. They do it because they have little choice’ (Bowman & Souery, 2010, p.29). When deciding upon a data source for their research, Bowman and Souery (2010) explained that:

> on review of the available AQTF surveys [of learner engagement], it was decided to rely on BSL learner feedback forms, which had been developed by the RTO for the purpose of quality assurance. The completed forms provide insight into the experience of learners across a period of time and across a range of courses, along with rich
qualitative information, whereas the AQTF surveys were narrower in scope and material.

Other relevant BSL research includes an evaluation of a new Youth Collaborations Trial (Bond, 2015). It examined ways of integrating service delivery for 374 BSL students, including at the BSL Frankston site. The Community VCAL Program offered at the Frankston High Street centre, has been evaluated over an extended time period (Myconos, 2014/2013/2012/2011/2010). These evaluations have provided compelling and positive evaluations of the program on an annual basis, drawing on rich interview data with BSL clients. The evaluations make a useful distinction between the reporting of ‘formal outcomes’ (completions, graduates, attendance) and informal outcomes (behaviours, aspirations, confidence, security, stability, resilience, trust etc). School professionals told the Peninsula Youth Connections evaluation that ‘increasing the school leaving age to 17 in the absence of trade schools was ‘ridiculous’ and vocational pathways should be promoted as a legitimate choice rather than an option for the naughty kids’ (Bond 2011, p.34).

The Frankston area features prominently in the Victorian Inquiry into Geographical Differences in the Rate in which Victorian Students Participate in Higher Education (Parliament of Victoria, 2009). The Frankston Mornington Peninsula Local Learning & Employment Network (FMPLLEN) contributed a research-based submission to the Review (FMPLLEN, 2009a, p.1) that argued:

*Early school leaving remains an issue for FMPLLEN particularly when combined with the high labour market participation of youth including*
participation in part time and casual work. Professor Richard Teese’s research indicate labour market participation by FMPLLEN young people is the highest in the State and is supported by a local economy where retail and hospitality provide the key employment opportunities.

On the issue of parental expectations and aspirations, the Inquiry found that ‘some parents who are unemployed perceive that ‘any job is a good job’ and are supportive of their children leaving school early for part-time employment’ (Parliament of Victoria, 2009, p.73; FMPLLEN, 2009a). The Inquiry selected the FMP region for special mention by stating that the higher rate of deferment of university places in Frankston is of ‘particular concern’, as it also had the lowest university application (68.6%) and offer (59.3%) rates of any metropolitan local area. The Inquiry also noted 31.4 per cent of applicants in the Mornington Peninsula region who received a university offer deferred their place at university. A rate, the Inquiry noted, that ‘approaches that of non-metropolitan Victoria’ (p.31). The FMPLLEN submission to the Inquiry (FMPLLEN, 2009a) reiterated the importance of transport as a critical issue for young people, particularly those on the Mornington Peninsula’. The submission argued that transport routes are often ‘indirect and unreasonably long journeys result’ with evening rail travel seen as ‘unsafe and not as an option for young people travelling to and from city campuses’ (p.3). It further argued that the area is not serviced by those universities with lower ENTER scores so attendance at city campuses requires the student to relocate. Of those who do relocate or decide to commute to Melbourne, the FMPLLEN submission cautioned that:
Students in Frankston City who have access to the rail line have a far broader range of options, although travel costs are high and a journey to Melbourne will take approximately one hour. Access to Frankston from the Mornington Peninsula adds to the travel time and requires a combination of transport modes. Students from Rosebud need to travel in excess of 1.5 hours to reach Melbourne (FMPLLEN, 2009a, p.2)

In terms of VET options, the submission acknowledged that Chisholm Institute of TAFE, Frankston Campus offers a broad range of TAFE courses but some specialist courses are only available at the Dandenong campus. Rosebud Campus [on the southern peninsula] has a limited range of courses available and because it is ‘required to operate on a metropolitan TAFE model rather than a regional TAFE model, it does not have the flexibility to run courses with smaller groups of students’ (ibid, p.2). Similarly, the submission repeated a point that the FMPLLEN has made over a number of years:

*Under the Fairer Victoria strategy, Frankston and Mornington Peninsula were deemed to be part of Metropolitan Melbourne. This designation needs to be rethought in relation to transport costs for tertiary students from our area and in terms of their need to relocate for a range of tertiary education opportunities* (FMPLLEN, 2009a, p.5).

There are a number of examples of research studies and evaluations to have occurred in the FMP and its surrounds over the past decade that are of relevance. For example, Kellock (2007) undertook an innovative peer research model in Frankston to show how feedback from young people could lead to an improved understanding of their experiences in the transition from schooling to work, while informing the development of
transition programs and support services. In a separate study funded by the FMPLLEN on non-traditional and non-systemic educational programs in FMP Secondary Schools, Zyngier & Gale (2003) found a focus on retention more than participation. The success of these programs was measured by most teachers in terms of student retention and, to a lesser extent, the level of participation. Figgis et al (2004, p.14) made reference to vocational information program run in the early-mid 2000s at Karingal Park Secondary College in Frankston in partnership with the BSL. The program used ‘an action research project designed to evaluate the usefulness of bringing youth labour market specialists into the school three days a week to work directly with students who were thinking of dropping out’. The success of the program was attributed, in part, to its conceptualisation of the students. It ‘…did not endeavour to ‘fix up’ the kids or change them – but simply helped them clarify their plans and ambitions for the future and identify barriers and ways of overcoming them’. In doing so, Figgis et al (2004, p.14) contended that it ‘changed the conversation from ‘careers and occupations’ to what were the students’ ‘interests and skills’’. In a separate study, McIntyre et al (2004) included Chisholm Institute as a case study in a study on equity strategies of training providers. The findings reflected the diversity of its catchment area in the south eastern suburbs of Melbourne and southern peninsula. McIntyre et al concluded that ‘the socio-economic differences within the total catchment are very marked, while at the same time, participation rates in TAFE are quite varied. There is no simple relationship with the socio-economic disadvantage of a postcode area’. Finally, the recent report titled Dropping off the edge 2015 report (Vinson et al., 2015), showed that of the 667 postcodes in Victoria, 11 postcodes (1.6% in
total) account for more than 13.7 per cent of the most disadvantaged rank positions - one of these postcodes is Frankston North (3200). Of the 2012 reforms of the Victorian training system, Stanley & NEIR (2013, p.28) found that:

*the impact of funding cuts to Chisholm TAFE will be felt most by students already experiencing some social exclusion and disadvantage... The courses cut were taken by younger age students and those with no previous qualifications... the important role that Chisholm TAFE was providing as a means for skill development for those with fewer opportunities to gain this elsewhere, has now diminished.*

Having reviewed the available research literature on young people and VET in Victoria and in the FMP region, the next section will provide a summary and set of conclusions for the literature review chapter before moving into a review of policy and practice.

### 2.5. Summary

The purpose of this literature review has been four-fold: (1) to detail the conceptual features of the CA; (2) to show where and how the CA has been mutually reinforced by the ontology of critical realism; (3) to review the Australian and international literature on young adults and VET; and (4) to review the literature on young people and VET in the FMP region. To achieve these aims, Section 2.2 provided an overview the CA literature across four streams: (1) its origins, purpose and defining features; (2) its limitations; (3) examples of its application in Australia and internationally; and (4) its intersection with the ontological lens of my research, critical
realism. The findings suggest that the CA, set within a critical realist ontology, may offer potential to critically examine the opportunities available to young adults in the FMP region. There have been a number of applications of the CA, both in Australia and internationally, that my research can learn from and build upon. The review also identified an emerging body of research applying the CA with critical realist ontology to the field of ‘VET’ and ‘marginalised youth’. There are, however, limitations relating to the operationalisation and application of the CA that are discussed in Chapter 4. Section 2.3 reviewed the research literature on young people and VET across three dimensions: lenses (ways of seeing), measures (ways of understanding); and narratives (ways of framing reality). The findings suggest that the narrowing of the VET agenda towards human capital and neoliberal agenda, creates challenges as well opportunities for future VET research. Section 2.4 focused the discussion directly on young people’s experiences with VET and post-compulsory education and training in the FMP region. Although the research output is comparatively limited, there are commonalities found in the structural and agential barriers faced by young people who are living, studying and/or working in the FMP region. Having summarised the literature, the dissertation now moves into Chapter 3, a review of policy and practice.
Chapter 3: Policy and Practice Review

‘…in five and ten years’ time, when people look back at…this reform they'll see that changes we made, the investment we made was crucial to the wave of prosperity which will occur in five and ten years' time’

Former Premier of Victoria, John Brumby (in Lauder, 2008)

3.1. Introduction

This chapter on policy and practice contains four sections: (1) a brief history of VET in Australia; (2) an account of the current Australian VET system; (3) a brief overview of training policy reforms in the Australian state of Victoria; (4) a review of VET policies and programs that concern the target population in the FMP region.

3.2. A brief history of the Australian VET system

Early VET activity in Australia can be traced back to the first apprenticeships introduced in New South Wales in 1805 (Scofield, 1993) and the first Mechanics Institute in 1827 (Murray Smith, 1966). Australian historians generally identify the Ballarat School of Mines, which was established in 1871, as the first technical college to be established in Australia (Lundberg, 1994). The Mechanics Institute in Frankston was built in 1880 (Frankston Visitor Information Centre, 2015). By 1900, spurred by ‘the dominant national ideology of colonial liberalism’ (Ryan, 2011), technical colleges or mechanics institutes had been established in all of Australia’s major cities. In 1974, the Kangan Report (ACOTAFE, 1974) established a new image, status, charter and
philosophy for a ‘Technical and Further Education’ (TAFE) (Goozee, 2001). It has been argued that the ‘watershed’ Kangan Committee produced one of the most influential reports ever released in relation to vocational education in Australia (Keating 2011; Robinson, 2007, p.6). Signalling an affirmation of VET’s broader purposes, the Kangan Committee ‘adopted the educational and social purpose of technical and further education as the more appropriate [role] without overlooking TAFE’s vital manpower role’. (ACOTAFAE, 1974, p.xvii) The educational focus in Kangan has been repeatedly remarked upon in the research literature (Golding et al., 2012; Anderson, 2005; Goozee, 2001; Grant & Fisher, 1994). Of the 1980s, Ryan (2011, p.10) argued that ‘even insiders in the VET/TAFE policy community were caught unprepared as a significant change in values in the wider political stream overran the values of the Kangan era’. It was of this period that Ahearn (1993, p.14) observed: ‘a quite remarkable ideological eruption which saw a swing away from what could be loosely described as the Kangan student centred ‘culture of access’ to the industry and employer-centred culture of the new vocationalism’. VET Australia has been described as being built on ‘two cultures’ (Ryan 2011, p.21). One is looking towards industry practice and emphasising specific vocational objectives and successful employability. The other culture, it is argued, shares its values with the rest of the education system, serving its individual student clients and seeking to provide a flexible basis for career development (ibid, p.21). These two rival cultures, according to Golding et al (2012, p.62), continue to co-exist in contemporary VET, and particularly in TAFE. However, they suggest that the Kangan ideals have largely been ‘pushed to the side by the almost total dominance of neoliberal themes of
competition, market and managerialism, as well as somewhat simplistic, numerical notions of efficiency, accountability and choice’. When the Kangan socio-democratic principles underpinning VET in Australia were dismantled, Anderson (2005) has argued, they were replaced by policies based on ‘neoliberal economics and public choice theory’. Anderson contended that the key assumptions underpinning the reforms are that ‘competitive markets allocate resources more efficiently and effectively than centralised state planning, and that client choice ensures a better match between supply and demand’ (ibid, p.15). In making the case that ‘equity, and indeed the championing of social justice and learner voice… badly lost traction since the late 1990s’, Angus et al (2012, p.3) explained that:

A prolonged period of VET reforms from the late 1980s has arguably been influenced mainly by politicians, employers and industrialists, but hardly at all by educationalists. This period has given rise to the ‘two cultures’ of VET that Kangan had warned about: the Kangan culture of social and educational ideals, and the post-Kangan culture which sees VET largely as a tool of the economy.

This ongoing philosophical tug-o-war between the ‘training tribe’ and the ‘education tribe’ (Golding et al., 2012; Schofield, 1992) was observed by Blom & Meyers (2003) who wrote over a decade ago that:

the current VET system in Australia is mainly geared towards meeting the expectations of business and industry, and industry is often narrowly focussed on equipping learners to function in the current work environment, rather than concerning itself with preparing learners for
future work and the journey of lifelong learning. As a consequence, the
needs of learners and broader community concerns are given seemingly
less priority and have much less impact on VET policy in Australia than
they receive in the VET systems of many other countries (Blom &

The human capital theory, economic rationalist and neoliberal settings that
emerged have repositioned VET as individualised ‘goods’ (or services) delivered to
choice-making consumers of training products through guarantees of entitlements to
public funding (Toner, 2014; Golding et al., 2012; Anderson, 2005). Signalling the
distance travelled in VET policy since the Kangan ideals of the 1970s, the Federal
Minister for Skills stated that in 2015: ‘our government is committed to a high quality
VET system that ensures students are trained in skills for real jobs. That means placing
employers at the centre of the training system, and making the training system responsive
to industry needs’ (Birmingham, 2015). These words appear to echo those of former
Commonwealth Minister John Dawkins who said in 1990:

Following the 1987 Federal Election, I accepted my present portfolio
on the understanding that its originally proposed name be rearranged
so that the word ‘employment’ was placed first. I did this in order to
emphasise that policies in education and training must be subordinate
to the national economic imperative of achieving the optimal
employment of our people (Dawkins, 1990 in Goozee, 2001, p.79).

The literature suggests that just as the VET and youth policy environment has
changed so too has the broader socio-economic environment changed to impact
disproportionately on the lives of young people. The rising tide of economic uncertainty and fears for Australia’s competitive position in an increasingly globalised (and ‘knowledge-based’) world economy led to ‘the replacement of the social engineering policy ethos of the 1970s with the need for economic restructuring to make the Australian economy globally competitive in the next decade. This had profound implications for the lives of young people’ (Cuervo & Wyn, 2011, p.6). CEO of the Brotherhood of St Laurence, Tony Nicholson has publicly stated that: ‘support for young people is not keeping pace with changes to our economy in which unskilled and semi-skilled jobs have declined and employers expect to recruit fully trained and experienced workers’ (BSL, 2014).

In summary, the last two decades in Australian VET have been characterised by:
(1) a human capital agenda that views VET as a policy instrument to increase participation, skills attainment and economic productivity; (2) a neoliberal ideology that pursues markets, choice and efficiency; and (3) bi-partisan political support to steer VET towards the economic concerns of industry and employers. The resulting effect has impacted disproportionately on young people in Australia, particularly those with access to fewer material resources and real opportunities. In response to this narrowed focus, Dina Bowman of the Brotherhood of St Laurence explained that broad and balanced disciplinary frameworks are important:

because social and economic policy have been hijacked by narrow economic and psychological frameworks that focus on individual ‘choices’ and behaviours, there is an urgent need to embrace broader
frameworks that enable an understanding of the social and cultural constraints on choice and the processes that shape the persistence of disadvantage and poverty (Bowman, 2010, p.14).

3.3. The current Australian VET system

The VET sector is the largest education sector in Australia (Atkinson & Stanwick, 2016). Within the Australian federalist model of government (state and commonwealth), VET is overseen by interconnected government and independent bodies functioning within a National Training Framework (NTF). The NTF is made up of three major components: (1) the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF); (2) nationally endorsed training packages; and (3) the national VET Quality Framework. The AQF defines all nationally recognised qualifications in Australia. The qualifications that can be issued within the VET sector are: Certificate I; Certificate II; Certificate III; Certificate IV; Diploma and Advanced Diploma. Under the AQF, the achievement of a group of competencies leads to the attainment of a VET qualification. Units of competency are developed by industry to meet the identified skill needs of industry. Qualifications are defined by industry Training Packages. Quality delivery standards are set through the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF). The AQTF is the national set of agreed standards and conditions for training providers to maintain and regulate nationally consistent training and assessment. The national VET system is largely driven by industry through national reference groups and consultative bodies. Operating under the Australian federalist model of government, VET is a shared responsibility of state and
federal government. The states have primary responsibility for funding the delivery of training; while the Commonwealth is responsible for training incentives and payments made through Centrelink, apprenticeship and trainee support schemes. Training is delivered by Registered Training Organisations (RTOs). RTOs provide students with training that result in nationally-recognised qualifications and statements of attainment. Only RTOs can deliver accredited training and assessment and issue AQF qualifications.

In 2014, there were around 4,000 RTOs delivering training to around 1.4 million students in Australia (Australian Government, 2015a). The ‘market’ of RTOs is characterised by a handful of larger providers with upwards of around 10,000 students and a substantial number of medium-sized providers with around 1,000 students. However, there are nearly 2,000 providers (around 40 per cent of the total) with 100 or fewer students (Korbel and Misko, 2016). The training, assessment and wider operational practices of RTOs are regulated by the Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA) as part of the AQTF. Each state and territory has departments and agencies responsible for VET policy and funding within their own jurisdiction. States are responsible for the majority of policy settings and associated funding for the delivery of training through their own departments and agencies responsible for VET. In Victoria, the responsible area of government is the Higher Education and Skills Group (HESG) within the Department of Education and Training. The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) is the peak intergovernmental forum in Australia where policy reforms requiring cooperative action by all Australian governments are initiated, developed and monitored. Through COAG, state and Commonwealth governments (via their Premiers and the Prime Minister) enter into
National Agreements for Skills and Workforce Development to agree on the long-term objectives for VET. A separate National Partnership Agreement on Skills Reform, was introduced in April 2012 to advance, among other reforms, (1) the marketisation of the national training system; (2) the introduction of income-contingent loans for diploma-level training (VET FEE-HELP); (3) the creation of unique student identifiers; and (4) efforts to improve consumer information for prospective VET students. COAG (2012, p.12) stated that it will have reached its objectives for productivity and participation when the VET system ‘provides consumers with sufficient, high quality information so that they can make informed choices about any training they undertake’. The examples they offer include questions of ‘how much it will cost them’, ‘how long the training will take’, ‘the reputation and quality of the provider’, and ‘the potential employment advantages they can expect’ (ibid, p.12). However, experienced VET bureaucrat and academic, Robin Ryan (2011, p.22), has observed ‘a very long string of steps between policy authorisation at COAG or a ministerial council and eventual implementation at a training site and in the individual transaction between instructor and student’. Similarly, Harris et al (2006) pointed to ‘...a gap between the intent articulated in policy and what was actually happening to young people’. And yet, it is becoming apparent that such high-level decisions are having a real impact on these ‘individual transactions’, either directly or indirectly.

**The introduction of a training market.** The Australian VET sector has initiated a number of stalled attempts to introduce market mechanisms since the national training reforms of the 1990s (e.g. the User Choice apprenticeship program). The Deveson
Committee report (Deveson, 1992) is considered by many to be the first major policy pronouncement of marketised training systems in Australia (Anderson, 2005; Goozee, 2001). Surprisingly, a Deveson committee member, Robin Ryan has publicly stated that the sections on ‘markets’ in the Deveson report actually had ‘zero research content’ underpinning them (Ryan, 2011). More than fifteen years after the release of Deveson, Ryan (2008) wrote that during the national training reforms: ‘enthusiasm for market solutions ran ahead of development of the conceptual infrastructure that is essential for rational policy development and effective implementation. Not much has changed’. In a recent report on ‘Contracting out publicly funded vocational education: A transaction cost critique’, Toner (2014, p.3) agreed that despite the large body of previous research on the contracting out of government services, ‘there has to date been no economic evaluation of its rationale or effects in Australia in relation to public funding of VET’. In a similarly compelling criticism of what statistical measures were available for the purposes of understanding the performance of a training market during the national training reforms, Dumbrell argued:

*a major justification for the introduction of competition in VET (and specifically the more recent policy of user choice), was that it would enhance choice and diversity for clients—both students and employers. Hence, it would be reasonable to assume that measuring the degree to which choice and diversity have increased would be an important outcome measure. As yet there appears to be no measure undertaking this, nor is there a body of research on the issue. Perhaps the closest
The system comes to addressing this measure is reporting on the number of registered training providers (Dumbrell, 2000, p.22).

The VET sector is now undergoing its most significant level of change and restructuring since the national reforms of the early 1990s (Mitchell, 2012). These latest reforms, first introduced by the state of Victoria in 2008, have led to a recasting of policy settings to focus on the marketisation of publicly-subsidised VET. In August 2008 (the same month that Victoria released its first discussion paper on Skills Reform), then Minister for Education, Julia Gillard told the ACPET National Conference that:

Attempts by previous government to create a training market have not been fully successful because they neglected to design an adequate market structure. Instead they focused almost solely on subsidising private providers at the expense of universal service provision (Gillard, 2008).

Four years later, former Chief Executive of TAFE South Australia (SA), Jeff Gunnigham, told the Victorian TAFE Association Conference in July 2014 that ‘on paper the entitlement model is sound policy, but it’s been poorly implemented across Australia…TAFE in Australia has taken over 100 years to evolve into a world-class VET system, but the way things are going it will be brought to its knees in just a few short years’. He is quoted as saying that the ‘great set of headlines’ belied the reality. Describing the reforms as an ‘absolute shemozzle’, a ‘bungle’ and a ‘dog’s breakfast’. Gunningham said ‘the training market in SA is highly managed and a million miles from being truly open and competitive’. These views appear to be supported by political economist Phillip Toner (in Mitchell, 2012, p.42) who has argued:
It’s not actually a market, it’s a created market, it’s a false market, because it’s all to do with the use of public funds; they’ve created a market by basically allocating public funds. In a sense they’ve created this Frankenstein monster, this privatised VET training market, and as in the original Mary Shelley book, it is now turning on its creators, and they’re having to cobble together a series of patches to try to restrain the monster they’ve created.

Former advisor to Prime Minister Julia Gillard and researcher for the highly influential *Dussledorp Skills Forum* research program in the 1990s and 2000s, John Spierings (Spierings, 2015, p.76), recently wrote that:

> The experiment in the ‘marketisation’ of vocational education developed across a like-minded circle of consultants, advisers and public servants proceeding without an electoral mandate and without adequate public debate, scrutiny or transparency. There has been no accountability for the public dollars lost and little apology for the careers that have advanced despite highly flawed implementation and poor outcomes.

The Victorian training market reforms are detailed in Section 3.4.

**VET FEE-HELP.** Introduced in 2008, VET FEE-HELP is a government income-contingent loan (ICL) scheme. It defers the cost of higher-level VET programs for eligible Diploma and Advanced Diploma students so that it can be repaid once their income reaches a certain level. Students make a compulsory repayment through the taxation system if their income is $54,126 or above. The scheme has been the subject of
ongoing review and criticism since its introduction in 2008 (Nicolson, 2015). A recent
government Regulatory Impact Statement for VET FEE-HELP found that loans rose
Through an examination of RTO registration data, Korbel & Misko (2016) found that 19
of the top 20 VET FEE-HELP providers in 2014 (in terms of numbers of students and
amount of loans) were already in the market before the introduction of the scheme. While
enrolments at these providers may have grown as a result of their being approved as VET
FEE-HELP providers, ‘the evidence indicates that these were established providers rather
than new providers entering the market’ (ibid, p.8). The so-called ‘rorting’ of these public
subsidies – paid directly to training providers, regardless of training outcome - have been
widely-documented. At a national level, the VET regulator (ASQA) has stated that key
issues in the sector include: (1) ongoing issues with training programs delivered in very
short timeframes with insufficient training; (2) ongoing concerns about the poor quality
of assessment, and the skills of assessors, across the sector; (3) concerns regarding the
marketing by approved VET FEE-HELP providers; (4) issues with the marketing and
information provided to potential students, including the use of third parties such as
brokers and recruitment agents; and (5) concerns about the delivery of training in the
security, equestrian and child care training sectors (ASQA, 2015, pp.16-17). In a 2014
opinion piece titled, Victoria: canary down the VET coalmine (Workman, 2014), Gary
Workman (Executive Officer, Group Training Victoria) referred to an ASQA report
where it was found that 45 per cent of RTOs were marketing and advertising false
material. Workman observed that:
What the [ASQA] report did not mention was the common practice of unethical RTOs channeling young people into programs that are lucrative for the provider but, in practice, tend to damage the young person’s prospects of finding employment and use up their government-funded training entitlement. This problem is the result of a badly designed government program that tries to encourage training in industries affected by skills shortages by applying widely disparate funding to different qualifications. The program has created an incentive for RTOs to push their young clients towards qualifications in the most lucrative fields, regardless of how suited the individual is to the industry or whether the RTO has an employment opportunity for the young person upon completion of the course.

Prior to the full-scale implementation of the embattled VET-FEE HELP scheme, the Annual National Report on VET (DEEWR, 2012, p.16) reported that ‘The [VET FEE-HELP] Scheme does not specifically target disadvantaged groups. However, by allowing students to defer the cost of their tuition, the scheme does support the education and career aspirations of those least able to participate in further education’. There have been numerous examples published in the media documenting unscrupulous and unethical behaviour by RTOs targeting vulnerable groups, particularly young people and school leavers. For example, in July 2014, The Australian newspaper reported that Evocca College, was offering a Diploma of Web Design plus a ‘free computer’ for $22,000, when the same course is offered at RMIT for $4,490. VET expert Gavin Moodie told The Australian (Hare, 2014) newspaper at the time that:
Telling young people that their program is ‘free’ and comes with a ‘free laptop or iPad’ needed for their study until they are ‘earning over $53,345 a year’ (the HELP income threshold) seems to exploit their vulnerability, especially since $53,000 seems a wonderfully high income to young people used to casual wages.

In October 2015, a Senate inquiry was released under the title ‘Getting our money’s worth: the operation, regulation and funding of private vocational education and training (VET) providers in Australia’ (Australian Senate, 2015). In December 2015, a former call-centre worker for a VET sales agent told the Sydney Morning Herald: ‘You can hear it in how these clients talk…They are desperate for employment, for some sort of change in their life. They'll do anything. And then this call comes through and they'll take it without question’ (Bachelard, 2015). For these reasons, among others, Whitechurch (2016, p.1) recommended that ‘the Government ensure as their primary priority that the VET system is adequately designed and resourced to protect and support vulnerable students to complete a vocational qualification and attain employment’. In October 2016, the Federal Minister for Education announced a complete overhaul of the VET-FEE-HELP program, with a new program to be implemented from January 2017. The discussion will now provide a brief overview of the Victorian training reforms to position the research within a policy context at the state level.

3.4. A brief overview of the Victorian training reforms

The Victorian Government, through the Higher Education and Skills Group (HESG) in the Department of Education and Training (DET), is responsible for the
majority of VET policy settings, programs and funding of relevance to my research. The Victorian Government has described the role of HESG in these terms:

\[ HESG \text{ supports and facilitates access to vocational education and training opportunities so that Victorians can acquire higher skills that contribute to the success of Victorian business. In addition, HESG seeks to address barriers to training market responsiveness, access and innovation to fuel regional economic development, drives Victoria’s continued economic competitiveness and growth, and supports workers and businesses to adapt to changing business conditions. (DET, 2015c) } \]

Section 3.3 outlined the recent policy settings pursuing market-based training at a national level in Australia. While these reforms have been incrementally pursued (and reversed in the case of South Australia) from 2012 at a national level, they were first introduced in the state of Victoria years earlier. Early in 2008, the Victorian Government policy statement ‘Securing our future economic prosperity – Discussion paper on skills reform’ (Allan, 2008) set Victoria on the road to reforming its predominantly TAFE-based public training system into an open training market. Under the new policy settings, training providers, public and private, would compete for ‘contestable’ public funds. During a visit to the Chisholm Institute of TAFE campus at Frankston in November 2008, the former Labor Government Minister responsible for the initial reforms, Jacinta Allan, announced:

\[ This \text{ is the biggest higher education reform since John Dawkins led the Hawke Government’s modernisation of universities in the late 1980s...TAFE managers, their students and staff all deserve the chance } \]
to discuss the effects the reforms will have on their training options and institutions (Premier of Victoria, 2008).

The Victorian government initially published a policy paper ‘Securing jobs for your future’ in August 2008 (DIIRD, 2008). The resulting policy package, the Victorian Training Guarantee (VTG), was introduced from July 1 2009 to establish: (1) a market design for VET in Victoria; (2) an individual entitlement to government-subsidised training; and (3) contestable funding to be competed for among RTOs. The VTG initially implemented market-based funding arrangements to VET programs at Diploma level and above. It was progressively expanded to all VET programs from January 2011 (Yu & Oliver, 2015, p. 11). Under the VTG, students who met aged-based and training level progression-based3 eligibility criteria could enrol via their publicly-funded ‘entitlement’ in government-subsidised courses through TAFE institutes, dual sector universities, adult community and further education providers (Learn Locals) and private training providers.

Recent appraisals of provision in the Victorian post-secondary education includes: (i) 18 TAFE institutes, of which 4 are also dual-sector universities; (ii) 8 public universities, 1 specialised university and campuses of the multi-state Australian Catholic University; (iii) 138 government-contracted adult and community education providers; (iv) 404 government-contracted private registered training organisations (DEECD, 2013b). In essence, the VTG entitled Victorian students under the age of 20 years to a government-subsidised training place in any accredited course, with those from the age of 20 years in any accredited course at a level higher than that which they already held.

3 Government subsidies are available to gain a higher level qualification than already held
The impact of the reforms on student participation and funding levels was immediate. There was a 31 per cent increase in student enrolments over the period 2008 to 2012 (compared to 7.3 per cent for the rest of Australia). The growth was predominantly in private RTOs where the share of total enrolments increased from 14 per cent to 48 per cent over the same period (DEECD, 2014b). The number of private RTOs operating in Victoria increased from 201 in 2008 to over 500 in 2015 (BSL, 2015). The unplanned scale of this growth in participation led to an unexpected ‘budget blowout’ of an estimated $400m (NTEU, 2015). The composition and scale of the growth led to widespread concerns over the labour market relevance, quality and outcomes from training (Mitchell, 2012). Much of this additional take up of government subsidised training was in the Service Skills areas such as hospitality and tourism, retail, hairdressing and beauty therapy, sport, fitness and recreation (Guthrie, Smith, Burt, & Every, 2014, p. 5), skill areas which tend to be associated with lower paid and casualised work (Nicolson, 2015, p.53). Of particular concern was the rate of growth in foundation skills training (mostly Certificate I level training) where the share of total enrolments doubled in the space of a few years. In 2011, the Victorian Government had argued that ‘the introduction of the Victorian Training Guarantee and contestable funding arrangements has led to a significant number of providers entering the government funded VET market, improving access and choice for students and employers’ (DEECD, 2011b, p.49). However, in response to mounting problems with the scale and composition of what training was occurring, the Liberal government (elected in December 2010) implemented the ‘Refocusing Vocational Training in Victoria’ reforms in 2012 (DEECD,
This second wave of reform, once again, transformed the way in which VET activity was to be funded in Victoria. The ‘Refocusing’ package of reforms included: (1) a rolling series of ‘price signals’ (funding rules) for publicly-subsidised courses (RTO income) and learner eligibility criteria (student entitlement) to more closely align training activity to areas of ‘public value’ and skill shortage; (2) the establishment of a Market Monitoring Unit within the Department to monitor the effectiveness, efficiency and integrity of the market; and (3) a series of data collection and information tools. The ‘Refocusing’ policy paper explained that the 2012 reforms ‘will ensure that businesses and individuals continue to have opportunities to undertake training and choice over what and where they study’ (p.2). One of the key funding rule changes relevant to my research was that funding for some retail qualifications was reduced from $5 per student hour to $1.50 per hour, as part of the May 2012 budget. The Victorian Government has since instigated statewide reviews and inquiries to provide recommendations on reforming TAFE, VET funding and VET quality among other issues (Mackenzie & Coulson, 2015; Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu, 2015; DEECD, 2013c). It has been publicly reported that 2,419 qualifications were recalled in the Labor government's first 100 days in office in 2012c).

Departmental material stated that: “Under the new arrangements, weightings have been refined to apply at the course level according to an assessment of ‘public value’. Public value has been determined on the basis of the value of the course to the economy (in terms of jobs or productivity) and the extent to which government investment is required to stimulate delivery of, and participation in, this training to meet industry needs”. This included the removal of capped fees for government-subsidised courses; the equalization of subsidies paid to TAFE and private RTOs; and the removal of base funding to TAFE (DEECD 2012c).

For example, the Victorian Skills Gateway including a Funding Eligibility Indicator (online information portal launched 2012); an Industry blog (first post in July 2013, most recent post in June 2015); a Rate your training website (a 5-star rating system for employers of apprentices and trainees to rate performance of RTOs – reporting capability is unknown); and the Victorian Skills and Training Employer Surveys (skills needs and satisfaction); the RTO Performance Indicator project (student satisfaction ratings and overall experiences with VET)
2015, on top of 7,000 recalled qualifications in 2014. This equates to almost 10,000 qualifications in less than 18 months (Tomazin, 2015). It has been argued that funding rates have been the primary factor in creating this unevenness as they do not differentiate between modes of delivery (BSL, 2015, p.6). Therefore, ‘there is an incentive for providers to increase profits by only delivering courses that do not require expensive equipment, and can be delivered quickly or online’ (ibid, p.6). The Victorian system progressively came under scrutiny from opposing governments, other jurisdictions, providers, industry, and the public (Leung et al., 2014, p.5). The reforms have resulted in a number of reports (some commissioned by government, some not), opinion pieces and commentary which reflect views across the political and ideological spectrum. Notable examples include reports by the Business Council of Australia (2015); ACIL Allen Consulting [commissioned by ACPET] (2015); Yu & Oliver [commissioned by the AEU] (2015); ACE Victoria (n.d.); YACVic (2013); Mitchell (2012); Australian Education Union (2012); Melbourne City Mission (Cull, 2009). It is important to note the majority of these critiques have tended not to challenge the details of the reform agenda as much as their fundamental assumptions (Mitchell, 2012). The Northern Melbourne Institute of TAFE (NMIT) told a 2012 Fees and Funding review that the VTG reforms had been:

\[a \text{ thinly disguised initiative to increase statistical VET participation,}\]
\[\text{regardless of training quality and integrity, and regardless of the}\]
\[\text{training requirements of industry and the needs of individuals. NMIT}\]
\[\text{believed from the outset that this was an attempt to largely privatise the}\]
\[\text{VET system by stealth, based on unproven and spurious assumptions.}\]
Criticism of the VTG reforms was also heard from industry – one of the key stakeholders of the reform process. The Chief Executive of Ai Group in 2012 argued strongly that ‘people are burning their entitlement to training for a course that doesn’t give them a career path, and doesn’t give that person proper purpose or direction. [There have been] a lot of wasted training opportunities, as a result of this model’ (Mitchell, 2012, p.34). Victorian Employers’ Chamber of Commerce and Industry argued that the redirection of funding to areas of ‘public value’ in 2012 came ‘at the expense of funding support for many service sector occupations, including those in hospitality, administration, retail and tourism. These industries provide important entry career pathways for many young people. The lower level of training funding these occupations now receive has resulted in significant cost cutting among training providers and higher co-payments for employers and individuals’ (VECCI, 2015, p.2). A further assumption is that the market can operate, effectively or at all, in ‘thin’ markets. For example, the revised level of public subsidy paid by government to RTOs per hour of training under the ‘Refocusing’ reforms rendered many areas of training activity financially unviable to deliver training in high-cost low-volume settings. Of the ‘Refocusing’ reforms, Professor Tony Vinson, observed that ‘throughout Victoria the effects of the [funding] cuts go beyond the career ambitions and training pathways of individuals, important though those things are. They have major implications for the wellbeing of communities’ (Kniest, 2014). At a community level, the Association of Neighbourhood Houses Victoria told the Fees and Funding review:
the attempt to increase choice under the current regime may in fact undermine [the prospective student’s] goals. Students are seeking a qualification and will often seek the cheapest, quickest and easiest pathway and provider. They are not in a position to understand how their choice of provider and delivery method may impact on the adequacy of their learning or their employability (ANHLC, 2011).

As discussed in Section 2.3.3, the ‘narrative’ of youth participation and post-school education and training is becoming increasingly narrow in its perspective. There are examples of this ‘narrowing’ in the way in which the Victorian Government has reported on its training system since the introduction of the market-based reforms. In addressing the youth unemployment problem, for example, the Government has argued that ‘one of the biggest challenges we currently face is that when jobs are available for teenagers and young adults – particularly young disadvantaged people – they are often not ready for them’ (DEECD, 2012b, p.36). The first quarterly training market report produced by the Victorian Government included a commitment to: ‘ensuring there are enough opportunities for vocational education and alternative educational settings for young people who may not fit easily into Year 12 to university pathways’ (DEECD, 2012b, p.104). Offering an alternative lens applied from a community sector perspective, CEO of the Brotherhood of St Laurence, Tony Nicholson has publicly stated that ‘the experience of our programs and our research is that young people are eager to work, and need support and guidance to enter a labour market when it’s far harder to gain a foothold’ (Nicholson, 2014). In the FMP region, a local recruitment agent told the *Frankston Leader* that jobs had simply disappeared. ‘A lot of industries have closed
down and a lot of people have been made redundant,’ she said. The agent told the newspaper that ‘young people want to work, despite being stereotyped as lazy’ (Dorrington, 2014b). Also from a youth perspective, a particularly valuable contribution was published by the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria in a report titled ‘Vocational Education and Training (VET) and young Victorians: a way forward’ (YACVic, 2013). Its purpose was to ‘identify the impact of the VET [policy] changes on young people in Victoria, and to suggest future directions to deliver the best possible outcomes for young Victorians and their communities’ (p.4). Upon its release, the report prompted a letter from the Minister for Higher Education and Skills. The letter stated that the YACVic report ‘significantly understates what we now know about the full impact of the training entitlement’. The response goes on to say that the VTG has ‘dramatically increased access and participation across all age groups and regions in Victoria, particularly for young people and students from disadvantaged backgrounds’. To support their response, the Minister cited data showing increases in system-level inputs as evidence that the system was working (i.e. increases in participation levels; the number of RTOs operating in the market, including the number of courses they offer; and the level of public investment). There is little mention of post-training outcomes, completion rates and no data to indicate the quality of training.

As these reforms are relatively new, there are very few independently published and/or peer-reviewed research studies which provide a comprehensive account of the

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6 The peak body for young people in Victoria. Its members include community sector organisations, city councils, education providers and non-profit organisations who work with young people.
reforms from their inception. Joan McPhee, for example, undertook her doctoral thesis ‘Making a difference? Exploring the impact of privately owned Registered Training Organisations in the Victorian VET system’ (McPhee, 2008). That work, published one year prior to the introduction of the VTG reforms, concluded that:

the entry of privately owned RTOs into the Victorian VET market has changed its nature and scope. The VET system is different to the one in place 17 years ago when the only accredited providers were TAFE Colleges. It is now more diverse, more responsive, more flexible, more nationally consistent and more aware of the need to meet client needs than it was at the end of 1980s (p.2).

Concerningly, given the substantial public investment, Toner (2014) found that ‘despite the large body of previous research on the contracting out of government services, there has to date been no economic evaluation of its rationale or effects in Australia in relation to public funding of VET’. In two of the more favourable, and only, in-depth evaluations of the VTG, researchers addressed the VTG by conducting multivariate analysis of data on 15-24 year olds in training (Leung et al., 2014/2013). Commissioned by government, the evaluation findings were found to be ‘broadly consistent’ with those communicated in government reporting and offered a strikingly positive appraisal of the initial VTG reforms:

the message is positive...removing caps for publicly-funded places and giving students greater freedom of choice has increased responsiveness to labour market demands as measured by the proportion of enrolments that are in courses linked to skills-shortage occupations. It has also led
to increased completion rates. The message for other states is that there
are benefits to be had from introducing similar market-driven reforms
in the VET sector (p.7).

Working ‘within a human capital framework’, Leung et al., (2013) stated that
‘Victoria has led the way’ and that ‘the VTG does give the 15-19 year old age
group…greater choice among courses and providers’. The report does, however, note that
‘the positive impacts of the VTG have not spread equally across all groups of students,
with key equity group members not sharing in the enrolment growth to the same extent as
others’ (p.7). Leung et al (2014) found lower participation from equity groups to their
entitlements in the first phase of the Victorian Training Guarantee. They suggested the
following reasons for this: new providers had not developed the capacity to cater for
disadvantaged learners; the equity groups were slow to access information on the training
guarantee; and there was a lack of clarity about who was paying the cost of student
support services. The report also recommended the Student Outcomes Survey of VET
graduates, used in the construction of MySkills, be expanded and, ideally, contain
longitudinal information on post-training outcomes, possibly by linking the survey to
individual tax records or census information. Leung et al (2014) also used terms such as
‘poor student decisions’ and ‘provider misadventure’ to describe the decision-making of
students and the actions of RTOs:

‘Empirical evidence of the overall effects of market-based reforms in
Victoria is important to help put anecdotal reports of poor student
decisions and provider misadventure into perspective and to help guide
Other research has suggested a link between the introduction of the VTG and reduced crime rates in Victoria (Jha & Polidano, 2016). Polidano argued that ‘what has been missing [in discussion about the VTG reforms] is that these reforms did increase access to publicly funded training and that has had positive flow on effects’ (Cook, 2016).

There are, however, a number of highly critical research articles, policy critiques and commentary pieces on the Victorian training reforms (Whitechurch, 2016; Nicolson, 2015; Leahy, 2015; Toner, 2014; Hetherington & Rust, 2013; Mitchell, 2012; Pardy, 2012; Toner, 2010; Cooney, 2008). For example, Hethering and Rust (2013, p.12) offered a compelling policy critique from an economic perspective titled ‘Training Days: Models of Vocational Training Provision: Lessons from the Victorian experience’. The paper argued that basic economic theory explains part of the problem in that ‘this growth is something else – a bubble… a bubble has two features – high volumes and prices detached from true ‘value’… Because demand is effectively unlimited and price (the public subsidy) cannot fall in response to increased supply, suppliers have every incentive to stimulate demand as long as the price remains above their cost of provision. The result is the enormous growth in volume that we have seen since 2008’. There is evidence to suggest that this participation ‘bubble’ has impacted disproportionately upon young people, particularly those in non-metropolitan and regional locations (YACVic, 2013). At the same time, research has found that students in non-metropolitan, regional and rural parts of Victoria: were less likely to have attended open days; more commonly
reported that they had not used any information source; more commonly cited their parents as influential; were less likely to aspire to university than metropolitan students; were twice as likely to have difficulty finding information on course costs; and more commonly rated cost as an influence on their decision (DEECD, 2012d). During the ‘Refocusing’ reform process in 2012-13, the Victorian Minister for Higher Education and Skills stated that:

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\text{students in regional Victoria now have more choice in where they study due to increasing numbers of providers delivering government funded training... We are committed to boosting opportunities for regional Victorian students, both school leavers and adult learners to be able to remain at home while studying. This is why we are subsidising training delivered in regional Victoria at a higher rate than the same training delivered in metropolitan areas. (YACVic, 2016)}
\]

**Information on the training market.** Phillip Toner has argued that the student entitlement in VET is based on the myth that all VET students are ‘all-knowing consumers with perfect information processing capabilities’ (Mitchell, 2012, p.16). The main source of current and public information on the Victorian training market is a suite of reports of descriptive statistics produced by the Victorian Government at the system, regional and industry sector level. The reports relevant to my research problem are reviewed in Chapter 5. It should be noted that there are a number of areas within the Victorian government which undertake work on different aspects of VET data collection, information and public reporting. Much of this work appears to be unpublished and/or used for internal policy development. The Victorian Government administers its own
state level surveys of student outcomes and employer satisfaction, in addition to those administered nationally by NCVER. My interest, however, is on what information is available to users of the VET system that is accessible in the public domain. The main source of such information is currently through government websites such as the ‘Victorian Skills Gateway’ and ‘myskills’. In promoting the portal, the then Minister was quoted as saying that ‘Gone are the days of hours spent searching through the websites of individual training providers...This makes it easy. Select a career, click the mouse, and all training options available in Victoria for that job are laid out’ (ACPET, 2012). A key limitation of the Victorian Skills Gateway and the Commonwealth government myskills websites is the restrictiveness of how the information is presented. One must view the courses of each provider separately with no simple way of comparing costs; duration; outcomes and so on. The Victorian Government is seeking to close this gap through the RTO Performance Indicator project, by asking questions which include: ‘Did you think about training with any other training organisations when planning to do this course? If yes, how many other training organisations, including the one you trained with, did you consider for the course?’ Probing for more information, this question asks about the main reason for choosing to train with the specified RTO. However, what is missing from the long list of possible responses is the fundamental characteristic of the effective operation

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7 Possible responses include: I heard good things about it from friends, family, work colleagues or employers; It was easy to get to; The course or organisation had good industry networks and job placement opportunities; Another organisation (eg school, job network provider) suggested I train there; I was told by the training organisation that I would get a job if I trained with them; I liked the website or course brochures or what they said when I met with them; It was easy to apply for and to enrol into the course; There were no upfront fees or I could afford the fees, or the organisation had a flexible payment plan; I had
of a market – information on the product or service offered by an impartial and independent source, separate from the provider of the service. These limitations are made all-the-more problematic at the local level. The issue of data disaggregation is not limited to what can be held and reported to users of the training system. A TAFE Director for more than 30 years, and lead reviewer of the recent VET quality review, Bruce Mackenzie was quoted in *The Australian* newspaper as saying that:

> When we went to the bureaucracy which has been administering (Victorian vocational education) for seven years, there was a dearth of information. There was a stack of information on TAFE institutes, but very little on private providers — especially on their financial measures

(Ross, 2015).

In its response to the Mackenzie review, the Victorian Government conceded that the Victorian training system is characterised by ‘insufficient information and support for students and employers in making training choices’ (DET, 2015b, p.2). This is disappointing given that nine years earlier the *VET Inquiry in Victoria* (OTTE, 2006, p.27) advised government that ‘a missing piece of the picture is easily accessible, individualised advice for prospective enrollees’. Five years prior to the VET Inquiry, Saunders (2001) argued ‘with the deregulation of the training market, and diversification of training programs and pathways, it is reasonable that the information needs of regions and training providers should come closer to the fore’ (p.36). The Victorian Government is currently undertaking work to advance understanding in the area of the ‘student done previous training with them; The organisation or campus had good training facilities,; equipment, machinery or libraries to support the training I wanted or needed to do
journey’ and the types of information which are of use to RTOs as well as prospective and current enrollees.

The post-reform ‘narrative’ of participation. The narrative crafted by the Victorian government in the early years of the training reforms appeared to focus on participation, consumer choice, industry alignment (aligning training supply to industry demand) and levels of public investment. The particular emphasis on ‘participation’, ‘choice’ and ‘opportunity’ - increased, better, greater, more, improved - was ubiquitous in early reporting on the system. In the absence of empirical evidence linking counts of participation to notions of ‘choice’, ‘opportunity’ and ‘labour market demand’, policy documents tended to communicate the results of the VTG reforms through inference and speculation. For example, one report stated: ‘this high level of growth exceeds the total growth in enrolments…This is reflective of students choosing to engage in training that is responding to labour market needs’ (DEECD, 2012b, p.17). The same report stated that ‘the market based reforms provided more choice in the number of providers offering government funded training, expanding the capacity of the training system and delivering students improved access and greater choice’ (DEECD, 2012b, p.7). Similarly, a departmental report titled, ‘Victoria’s Training Market Early indicators of success’ stated that ‘growth in the number of training providers means greater choice and better access to training’ (Skills Victoria, 2011, p.1). The ‘Early Indicators’ report goes on:

*Our early results are promising: While only in its early stages, results to date give us confidence that Victoria’s training market approach is delivering the desired outcomes. In summary the data suggests that:*
Victorians are undertaking more training; More training is taking place in areas where skills needs are greatest; More training is at higher level qualifications; People with low level or no qualifications – including disadvantaged groups – are engaging in more training; Growth in the number of training providers means greater choice and better access to training. The growth in training to date has been significant (Skills Victoria, 2011, p.1).

The crafting of narratives necessitates that certain judgments be made about what should and shouldn’t be measured, monitored and reported upon. Published two months before the 2014 Victorian state election, a one-page document badged with the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development logo, titled ‘Victoria Training System Facts’ appeared on the Department’s website. It included headline statistics on the percentage increases (only increases) in funding and participation in the Victorian training system. The document led with phrases such as ‘More Victorians are participating in training’; and ‘More Victorians participate in training than any other state in Australia’. This participation-based narrative which characterized the VTG reforms also had implications for the characterisation of disadvantaged groups. Over time, statistical reporting has diverged from the conventional terminology of (1) ‘equity groups’ (as used in Australian and Victorian government reporting on VET since the early 1990s) to (2) ‘higher needs learners’ to (3) ‘higher needs learners and foundation skills’ to (4) ‘learner cohorts and foundation level training’ to (5) ‘More opportunities to train for the people who will benefit most’ before settling on (6) ‘learners facing barriers to participation’. Explicitly or implicitly, these incremental changes appear to shift the
nomenclature away from ‘groups’ to ‘cohorts’ to ‘learners’. Despite the many changes in how the group is labelled, the unit of analysis (e.g. members of equity groups) and measures (e.g. participation, completion and outcomes) have remained largely unchanged since performance reporting of this type began in Australia in the mid-1990s. At the time of writing, the Victorian Government is implementing the recommendations of the Mackenzie Review of VET funding, released in December 2015. Mackenzie summarised the issue of central importance to my research - the importance of not incentivising and advocating increases in volume and participation in their isolation, or to the detriment of quality and outcomes:

*In recent years, too much of the system has been driven by provider behaviour, rather than supporting students to make informed training decisions, or to protect them from opportunistic or unethical behaviour. There has been too much emphasis on increasing both the number of providers and the intensity of the competition between them, and not enough care taken in ensuring they are delivering quality training. There has been too much focus on increasing the volume of training, and not enough on whether the training leads to positive outcomes for the students such as employment and further education (Mackenzie & Coulson, 2015, p.4).*

In these early years of the VTG reforms, the narratives of statistical participation, inferred choice and inferred opportunity appear to have overwhelmed any discussion of training quality, outcomes, real opportunity and the freedom to choose. By December 2015, *The Australian* newspaper was reporting that ‘since it was fully introduced in 2011
Victoria’s open market has led to budget blowouts and widespread reports of rorts as private providers rapidly expanded on the back of access to government subsidies. TAFE’s market share of subsidies has nearly halved since 2010 from 50 per cent to just 27 per cent while the market share of private colleges has jumped from 20 per cent to 60 per cent’ (Trounson, 2015). CEO of Northern Melbourne Institute of Technology (NMIT) told the Campus Review in 2012 that ‘the skills reforms were introduced by the previous government and backed by spin and slogans. The current government inherited the mess and the same bureaucrats who constructed the mess’ (Mitchell, 2012, p.12). Asked if the Labor's contentious funding policy for VET was a mistake, current Minister for Higher Education and Skills, Steve Herbert replied: ‘I don't think so. Was it implemented poorly? Absolutely ... There is no doubt that we are spending large amounts on training qualifications where there are never going to be the jobs’ (Tomazin, 2015).

Having set the policy context at a national and state level, the discussion will now move into a review of VET providers and programs in the Frankston-Mornington Peninsula region – the laboratory in which this research takes place.

### 3.5. Post-school VET in the Frankston-Mornington Peninsula region

This section is presented in two parts. The first part reviews publicly available information on the impact of the Victorian training reforms in the FMP region as a whole. The second presents results of a mapping exercise to account for all providers delivering training to the target population in 2015.
Recapping the local issues. The following extracts are sourced from material produced by the FMPLLEN as part of the annual environmental scan of the FMP region.

Extract 1:

[The FMP region is] ‘different to adjoining Melbourne regions in terms of: the insular nature of our region; isolation, particularly on the southern peninsula; and limited transport access. All resulting in heightened importance of place-based initiatives for our young people. We have three of Victoria's most disadvantaged localities (per the SEIFA Index) with complex issues that require: place-based solutions; low transition to higher education; lack of full time employment locally; and lack of choice of providers and transience of providers’ (FMPLLEN, 2015b, p.2).

Extract 2:

‘on education, training and employment outcomes of young people in our regions are more consistent with findings in rural and regional Victoria than with findings in Metropolitan Melbourne. At the same time, the area is treated in the main as Metropolitan Melbourne by the Department of Education and Training. Other Departments classify the Mornington Peninsula as a Regional/rural area, others as an Interface area8 and others that it is a Metropolitan area. This inconsistency impacts on the community in a number of ways, particularly as the

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8 The Interface Council areas comprise ten contiguous local government areas (LGAs) that form metropolitan Melbourne's outer urban ring, and mark the interface of 'city' and 'country'. The interface regions have a dual identity that makes them part urban and part rural.
inconsistency appears to enable some Government departments to limit access to support, additional funding or favourable treatment in relation to meeting particular guidelines in their programs’ (FMPLLEN, 2005a, p.3).

**Extract 3:**

‘The Mornington Peninsula is semi-rural but classed as metropolitan. This has implications for students who apply for university places and are required to move out of home to attend university and are not provided with extra assistance (e.g. funding)’ (FMPLLEN, 2015a, p.52).

**Extract 4:**

‘Young people in the FMP Region are large users of VET compared to state averages, particularly young people at risk of disengaging. Evidence shows that these young people are often attached to engagement courses rather than courses focused on skill shortage areas’ (FMPLLEN, 2015a, p.44).

The FMPLLEN has repeatedly made the point in public fora that the FMP region is structurally disadvantaged by its geographic proximity to, and agglomeration within, the Greater Melbourne area. Although the FMP region is technically part of the southern metropolitan region of Melbourne, there are fundamentally different socio-economic and educational structures that influence the education and training post-school pathways taken by young people. The agglomeration of Frankston and the Mornington Peninsula
into the Greater Melbourne area can be traced back to the mid-1960s. Frankston City Council (n.d) observes that ‘in the post-war years the character of Frankston was dramatically transformed as Melbourne's suburban sprawl extended south along the Peninsula’.

At this time, the Melbourne metropolitan statistical area included the areas of Seaford, Frankston and Mount Eliza in the Frankston and Hastings shire (Victorian Places, 2015). In 1966, with the Shire of Frankston proclaimed a city and incorporated as the City of Frankston ‘all of the [southern] peninsula was included in the metropolitan statistical area, with the map showing a nearly continuous urban strip along Port Phillip Bay and urban areas at Hastings and Crib Point’ (Victorian Places, 2015). In 1976 the bayside urban strip had become thickened and continuous reflecting the upward trend in population growth. In 1991 the strip was mapped in the Melbourne Social Atlas (ABS) and extended to the southernmost end of the Peninsula. These changes have not, however, greatly expanded public transport options for young people wishing to access opportunities outside their local area. The Victorian Government has highlighted the importance of transport and local infrastructure when reporting on VET in the southern metropolitan region (DEECD, 2015a/2014a/2013a). For young adults, particularly for those living in the southern peninsula region, the lack of transport options can be a prohibitive barrier. The FMPLLEN (2012a, p.7) argued that:

*Young people in Interface Council areas such as Mornington Peninsula face the same barriers as young people in Regional Victoria. For example, Ballarat and Bendigo are better serviced with public transport and can have better access to Metropolitan Melbourne that towns like*
Mornington or Rosebud. Travel is a perceived barrier because it is not just about distance but also about cost, time and multiple modes of transport required.

Public transport in the FMP region is currently limited to a bus service that services urban areas on the western shorelines and a train service for the eastern areas of the peninsula. By road, Frankston is connected to the rest of the metropolitan area of Melbourne by the EastLink tollway (opened in 2008) and Nepean Highway (the original roadway built in 1850 has been progressively upgraded), and is connected to the rest of the Mornington Peninsula by the Moorooduc Highway, Nepean Highway and Peninsula Link (opened 2013). By train, the Frankston railway line (‘the Frankston Line’) terminates at Frankston train station. Out of the six State Government Central Activities Areas (CAA), Frankston has: (1) the lowest number of services per bus route per day; and (2) the lowest percentage of bus routes that meet the Department of Transport's Minimum Service Standards (one service per 60 minutes) in both the morning and afternoon peaks (Frankston City Council, 2010). A bus service runs along the entire length of the peninsula to Portsea, departing from Frankston railway station. There is also a shuttle bus service that operates between Rosebud and Chisholm Institute of TAFE in Rosebud.

**Overview of training reform impact.** The FMPLLEN Environmental Scan 2014 stated that ‘since 2012, the State Government has reduced funding to VET and targeted it to skill shortage areas, with a greater focus on user pays. Young people in the FMP region are large users of VET compared to state averages and are expected to have been affected by the cuts, particularly young people at risk of disengaging’ (FMPLLEN,
The FMPLLEN (2012, p.8) has previously argued that ‘changes to the eligibility criteria for young people seeking access to TAFE places under the Victorian Training Guarantee will severely limit the options for 15 year olds seeking to re-engage through entry into the VET system’. A June 2012 article in the Frankston Weekly titled ‘TAFE cuts: Frankston Council to lobby for funds’, quoted Councillor Christine Richards:

The training areas most heavily targeted by the cuts are well-recognised industry strengths for the Frankston and Mornington Peninsula region - including hospitality, tourism and retail...These cuts will seriously jeopardise our ability to attract new industry and the capability of our residents to be able to live, learn and work locally - a core planning platform of the state government (Pinner, 2012).

In a separate article titled ‘Blow for TAFE students (Morris, 2012c)’, the Australian Education Union (AEU) warned that with the introduction of VET FEE-HELP (refer to Section 3.3) ‘students from lower socio-economic backgrounds who are under 25 and enrolled in diplomas or advanced diplomas will lose their government-subsidised concessions’. To illustrate the impact, the Frankston Leader newspaper spoke to 18 year old Frankston student Dylan Collins, who was studying for an advanced diploma in computer systems. Dylan said that he didn’t know where he would be if his course didn’t exist. ‘I dropped out in year 11...Without TAFE, I wouldn’t have a future as a computer networker’. The Leader also spoke with Carrum Downs resident Rachel Arthur, 30, who was finishing her diploma of beauty therapy at Chisholm TAFE in Frankston. Rachel said that ‘This course means more skills and more job opportunities...Without this, I would be
stuck in retail’. A further news article titled ‘TAFE cuts affect 200 in Frankston’ quoted an anonymous Frankston Chisholm sessional teacher as saying that the State Government has ‘put up interesting barriers against learning…The shortfall of money needed to run a course might have to be put up by students and that’s a terrible way to run education’ (Morris, 2012b). Later in June, the Frankston Leader reported the experiences of young students at the Chisholm Frankston campus in an article titled, ‘Frankston TAFE students fear the future as cash dries up’. The article stated that:

Third-year plumbing apprentice Jayden Driver, 21, said his class didn’t have copper pipe for their jobs last week. ‘The teacher said it was because of the cuts,’ the Mt Eliza resident said. ‘We were told it would really hit hard next year.’ Jillian Howard, 33, said funding for her Certificate III in Aged Care course at the Frankston campus had already stopped. ‘I’m now paying about $4000 in full fees,’ the sole parent said. ‘With (government) funding it would have been $1800.’ Ms Howard said it had been a ‘big struggle to find the extra money’. ‘I support two children so it has been very hard. ‘I also have to pay childcare fees on top of this, but I have to finish. I want to get ahead in life.’ Another student, who did not wish to be named, feared for the future of her career in tourism. ‘I don’t think my parents can afford to pay any more’ (Morris, 2012a).

A news article published in the Peninsula Weekly (Robin, 2012) in December 2012 titled ‘Huge TAFE fees for peninsula, Frankston students’ further outlined the fee increases that occurred between 2012 and 2013 and their impact on local students. Under
the previous funding model, most Chisholm courses were supported by government subsidies and capped at an annual fee. This meant courses without 2013 resource allocation under the VTG (e.g. business administration and legal services, sport and fitness, food and meat processing, marketing, liberal arts, ceramics, areas of hospitality and events) faced increased fees or closure. A Chisholm Institute spokeswoman told the *Peninsula Weekly* that the TAFE had tried to keep fees as low as possible.

> In courses where there are high numbers of disadvantaged students, and for foundation courses such as VCE, we have kept fees low...Areas where the cost of courses has increased significantly are courses where the government's subsidy has been reduced. Our decision on what to charge for these courses was based on market value and competition with other tertiary providers. They may seem like big increases but we have to cover the costs of providing the course...I think everyone understands there have been cuts to the TAFE sector and we need to wear it.

The spokeswoman told the newspaper that some Chisholm courses — including certificate III and IV in hospitality, certificate I in kitchen operations and ceramics — would not be offered next year [2013]. Two years later, in December 2014, the newly-elected State Labor Member for Frankston remarked in his maiden speech to Parliament upon the role of TAFE, specifically Chisholm Institute, in supporting the pathways of young people on the Mornington Peninsula:

> Some welfare agencies in Frankston believe the youth unemployment percentage in the area is registering in the high teens. Most of these
kids are good kids and just need the opportunities that have been taken from them. The [2014-15] increase of funding for TAFEs and the correct funding for our education system are ways of providing our kids a positive and a constructive future. Under an Andrews Labor government Chisholm TAFE in Frankston will become the flag-ship of education in the south east. We can provide hope and direction to our young people, and it is our responsibility to do so (Frankston Community Coalition, 2016).

One year on, in November 2015, Liberal Opposition Member for Mornington David Morris, released a press release titled ‘TAFE enrolments drop in Southern Metropolitan Region under Labor’ citing the latest release of training statistics in Victoria:

‘Enrolments in government-subsidised training in the Southern Metropolitan region, which includes the Mornington Peninsula, have collapsed under [Labor Premier] Daniel Andrews,’ Mr. Morris said... ‘Under Labor TAFEs are receiving less funding for training, not more, and that means fewer local students are getting the training they need for the career they want.’ Shadow Minister for Training, Skills and Apprenticeships Steph Ryan said the Andrews Labor Government had been hiding the training data for months, before silently releasing it online. ‘These figures were hidden because they show Labor’s promises before the election to increase TAFE funding and grow enrolments were lies’. (Morris, 2015)
The capabilities approach theorises that ‘the people have to be seen… as being actively involved – given the opportunity – in shaping their own destiny, and not just as passive recipients’ (Sen, 1999). There is mounting evidence arising from the Victorian training reforms suggesting that even where a learner is enrolled in a course, they may be a passive participant in the process (or be entirely unaware). For example, the *Frankston Weekly* newspaper reported in 2012 that a number of students at the Chisholm Institute Frankston campus had been enrolled in the Certificate III in General Education for Adults (CGEA) (Pinner, 2012b). The CGEA requires 160 contact hours to satisfy the requirements of the course. A Frankston Certificate IV student told the newspaper that when she discovered the Certificate III on her enrolment slip she was confused: ‘I think they are receiving funding for something I didn't want, didn't need and certainly didn't sign up for…To have qualifications appearing on my permanent record that are below the standard in which I am enrolled is a misrepresentation of my skills’. The newspaper reported that ‘the student was told by her department manager she had been enrolled due to a government policy to determine various levels of language, literacy and numeracy. She was informed the enrolment was compulsory for students studying certificates I to III and was being trialed in certificate IV and diploma courses, without additional fees or work required by students, as it was incorporated into their curriculum’. This section has offered just a few examples of where the VTG reforms have impacted across the FMP region. In summary, these impacts have included: (1) cuts to government funding in training areas that are characteristic features of the FMP job market (e.g. hospitality, kitchen operations, tourism and retail); (2) cuts to the largest public provider that resulted
in course closures, job cuts and fee increases; (3) recognition by government that unemployed young people in the FMP region are ‘good kids and just need the opportunities that have been taken from them’ by recent VET reforms; (4) the shortening time horizon and increasingly politicized environment in which VET statistics are scrutinised; and (5) the ‘real world’ impacts of structural changes to VET funding models on providers and students.

**Number of RTOs and overall VET participation.** The Frankston-Mornington Peninsula region is described as a ‘thin’ training market (Deloitte Access Economics, 2012). A thin market in training systems is typically characterised by having low demand and high costs. In the Victorian VET context, thin markets may occur because of a number of factors including: low population density (regional and rural areas); small numbers of employers in the local economy; the workforce serviced by the training is relatively small and/or industry is dispersed (VTA, 2013). The Victorian Government’s ‘Vocational Training: Victoria’s Regions’ reports show that the number of RTOs delivering to Frankston residents increased from 2012 to 2014 (from 63 to 84). However, the participation rate for the Frankston Local Government Area (LGA) actually declined from 15 per cent to 12 per cent as the participation ‘bubble’ began to burst. The number of RTOs delivering training to residents of the Mornington Peninsula increased (from 41 to 72) while the participation rate also declined marginally from 12 per cent to 11 per cent. So, while the number of RTOs entering the market increased, the overall participation rate was steady or in decline.
Technical and Further Education (TAFE) and higher education. Named after the 19th century humanitarian Caroline Chisholm, Chisholm Institute (TAFE) is the largest VET provider in the FMP region. Founded at the turn of the 20th century, Chisholm Institute in Frankston was one of the first vocational and technical schools in Victoria. It was originally known as Frankston Technical College, before becoming the Frankston College of TAFE in 1974 (the same year the seminal Kangan Report was released). It merged with a number of other technical schools in the south-east of Melbourne to become the Chisholm Institute in 1998. It is currently located next to the Frankston Railway Station on Fletcher Road in the Frankston central business district (CBD). In addition to the Frankston campus, Chisholm Institute also has a smaller Peninsula Campus in Rosebud West as well as a campus in Cranbourne, which is located outside the FMP region. The Frankston campus caters to around 15,000 students annually. The Rosebud campus caters to around 1,200 students (Chisholm Institute, 2012). Around 3 million hours of training are delivered on the Frankston campus each year; compared to around 250,000 on the Peninsula campus (Chisholm Institute, 2015a).

In August 2012, Victorian Minister Peter Hall said the Chisholm Frankston site was ‘prime for renewal’, stating that ‘training conditions and technology have vastly changed since the 1960s and 1970s when the majority of buildings at the Frankston campus were constructed’ (Morris, 2012d). There are two major development and refurbishment works underway at the Frankston campus, including the Trade Training Centre (TTC), a new Advanced Manufacturing and Trades facility operating in partnership with a consortium of local schools; and a new Centre for Health and
Community Services. In October 2014 (the month before the Victorian state election), the Minister for Higher Education and Skills (under the former government) made the following funding announcement at Chisholm Institute in Frankston:

*This investment...will enable Chisholm Institute to better compete after the botched introduction of the open market by Labor in 2008...Unlike Labor, the Coalition Government is actively supporting TAFEs, with 23% more funding delivered to TAFEs than there was in 2010. Today's $21.9 million investment is also on top of the $200 million allocated to enable TAFEs to transform their operations and adjust to the market driven system introduced by Labor* (Australian Manufacturing Magazine, 2014).

Chisholm Institute generated an operating result of just over $30m in 2014 – one of only two TAFE institutes to post a surplus (Wodonga Institute posted $1.3m). Chisholm Institute has been recognised nationally for its work, having been awarded the title of Large Training Provider of the Year 2014 at the Australian Training Awards. Like all TAFE institutes in Victoria, it has been affected by the scale of the Victorian training reforms, requiring significant restructuring over the past 5-7 years. Funding cuts at the Frankston campus, estimated to be in the order of $25-30m, were widely reported in 2012. The Australian Education Union has publicly stated that between 2011 and 2013, 268 jobs were cut from the Frankston campus (Adoranti, 2014). Similar figures were published in Stanley & NEIR (2013). At the time of writing, Chisholm Institute is running a communications campaign that focuses on the notion of ‘risk’. For example, pamphlets include phrases such as:
Don’t Risk Your Education. Get a qualification that means something.

There are some education and training providers that don’t deliver quality training outcomes, and will leave you with a bill for thousands.

Make sure when selecting your education provider that they tick all the boxes.

A second TAFE, Holmesglen Institute of TAFE, also services the southeast corridor of Melbourne with campuses in Moorabbin (around 30km from Frankston) and Chadstone (around 40km from Frankston). Monash University operates a Peninsula campus in Frankston, catering to around 3,500 students in the areas of education, nursing and business. In March 2016, Monash University announced they would be closing their Berwick campus (35km northeast of Frankston in the outer southeast of Melbourne) citing low enrolments (ABC, 2016).

Non-Government Registered Training Organisations (RTOs). There are a number of privately-operated and community-sector training organisations that operate in the FMP region. These RTOs cover a broad range of ‘for-profit’ and ‘not-for-profit’ and/or community sector operating models. The results of a mapping of training providers (see Table 3.1), suggests that non-TAFE RTOs generally catering to learner populations at the higher end of the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) include: Pragmatic Training; Nepean Industry Edge Training and Evocca College. RTOs catering to learner populations across a comparatively broader range AQF levels, including the Community Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) include: SkillsPlus BRACE Education; the Brotherhood of St Laurence, Advance and Karingal Training. A highly respected provider on the southern Peninsula for over 30 years, ‘Advance’, is part
of a network of adult community and further education providers called ‘Learn Locals’\(^9\). These organisations deliver important re-engagement, pre-accredited training and accredited training services to marginalised cohorts, including young people and school leavers. There are also a number of RTOs based outside the Mornington Peninsula that enrol students from the FMP region or through local branch offices of larger state or national networks (e.g. Salvation Army; MEGT; FS Learning; ORS Training Solutions; WISE Employment; MAX Employment; Sarina Russo; Link Employment + Training/SkillInvest). Some of these RTOs are also Job Services Australia (JSA) and Disability Employment Service (DES) providers.

\(^9\) Learn Locals in the Frankston area include: (1) Langwarrin Community Centre; (2) Lyrebird Community Centre; (3) Belvedere Community Centre; (4) Mahogany Neighbourhood Centre (closed December 2014); (5) Karingal Neighbourhood House; (6) Orwil Street Community House. The Learn Local Mornington Peninsula network (LLMPN) includes: (1) Advance PTEP; (2) Mount Martha Community Learning Centre Inc; (3) Mornington Community Contact Inc; (4) Mount Eliza Village Neighbourhood Centre; (5) Peninsula Adult Education and Literacy; (6) Rye Beach Community Centre; (7) Sorrento Community Centre.
Table 3.1: Selection of providers offering nationally recognised VET courses in the FMP region

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RTO name</th>
<th>RTO type</th>
<th>VCAL</th>
<th>Certificate I</th>
<th>Certificate II</th>
<th>Certificate III</th>
<th>Certificate IV</th>
<th>Diploma/Advanced Diploma</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chisholm Institute</td>
<td>TAFE</td>
<td>VCAL</td>
<td>Multiple courses (8 listed on mytraining.gov.au)</td>
<td>Multiple courses (32 listed on mytraining.gov.au)</td>
<td>Multiple courses (72 listed on mytraining.gov.au)</td>
<td>Multiple courses (67 listed on mytraining.gov.au)</td>
<td>Multiple courses (72 listed on mytraining.gov.au)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pragmatic Training</td>
<td>Private RTO</td>
<td></td>
<td>Community Services</td>
<td>Early Childhood and Care</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Beauty therapy; Early Childhood and Care; IT, Interactive digital media, leadership and management, marketing, salon management, specialist make-up services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skills Plus Brace</td>
<td>Private RTO</td>
<td>VCAL; CVCAL</td>
<td>Business, EAL, CGEA</td>
<td>Community Services, CGEA, Sport and Recreation, Visual Arts</td>
<td>Business</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nepean Industry Edge</td>
<td>Private RTO</td>
<td></td>
<td>Business, Hospitality</td>
<td>Aged care, Childrens Services, Business, Home and Community Care, Hospitality</td>
<td>Aged Care, Disability, Celebrancy, Training and Assessment, Frontline Management, Volunteer Program Coordination</td>
<td></td>
<td>Childrens Services; Early Childhood and Care; Training Design and Development; Vocational Education and Training; Community Sector Management (Ad Dip); Disability (Ad Dip)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evocca College</td>
<td>Private RTO</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Business, Business Administration, Leadership and management, Youth Work, Community services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ORS Training Solutions</td>
<td>Private RTO</td>
<td></td>
<td>Business; Hospitality; Retail Services</td>
<td>Aged Care; Business Administration; Disability; Hospitality; Retail Operations</td>
<td>Business; Employment Services; Frontline Management; Leadership and Management Mental Health</td>
<td></td>
<td>Employment Services; Leadership and Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RTO name</td>
<td>RTO type</td>
<td>VCAL</td>
<td>Certificate I</td>
<td>Certificate II</td>
<td>Certificate III</td>
<td>Certificate IV</td>
<td>Diploma/Advanced Diploma</td>
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<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karingal Training</td>
<td>Community RTO</td>
<td>VCAL</td>
<td>Vocational Pathways; Creative Industries; Employment Pathways; CGEA; Hospitality; Adult Literacy and Numeracy; Transition Education; Work Education</td>
<td>Business; Community Services; Creative Industries; CGEA; Hospitality; Kitchen Operations; Retail Services; Skills for Work and Vocational Pathways</td>
<td>Aged Care; Community Services; Disability; CGEA; Home and Community Care; Individual Support</td>
<td>Aged Care Ageing Support; Alcohol and Other Drugs; Business; Career Development; Community Services; Disability; Employment Services; Home and Community Care; Leisure and Health; Mental Health; Training and Assessment</td>
<td>Community Services; Community Services Coordination; Disability; Leadership and Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brotherhood of St Laurence</td>
<td>Community RTO</td>
<td>CVCAL</td>
<td>Developing Independence; EAL; CGEA</td>
<td>CGEA; Hospitality; Retail Services; Skills for Work and Vocational Pathways</td>
<td>Aged Care; Business Administration; Cleaning Operations; Community Services Work; Home and Community Care; Retail Operations</td>
<td>Frontline Management; Retail Management</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Frankston, Hastings)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advance</td>
<td>Community RTO</td>
<td>CVCAL</td>
<td>CGEA, Work education</td>
<td>Business, Community Services, CGEA, Horticulture, Hospitality, Parks and Gardens</td>
<td>Aged Care, Health Services Assistance, Home &amp; Community Care, Horticulture, Landscape Construction, Parks and Gardens, Production Nursery</td>
<td>Training and Assessment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Rosebud, Hastings, Mornington)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mount Martha Community House</td>
<td>Community RTO</td>
<td>CGEA</td>
<td>CGEA</td>
<td>CGEA</td>
<td>Aged Care; CGEA; Early Childhood Education and Care; Home and Community Care</td>
<td>Training and Assessment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Langwarrin Community Centre Inc</td>
<td>Community RTO</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Geographic coverage of RTOs.** In terms of geographic location, Figures 3.1 shows a concentration of education, training and employment service providers within the central business district or ‘hub’ of Frankston. This means that some services are less accessible to young people living in the Mornington Peninsula area, particularly the southern peninsula region. The Victorian Government has reported that Mornington Peninsula Shire had ‘relatively high resident student numbers when compared with total enrolments delivered in the region’ (DEECD, 2014a). This indicates that students from the southern peninsula are travelling to study; whereas Frankston attracts students as an education ‘hub’ for local residents and those who travel longer distances to access services.
Figure 3.1: Selection of providers of education, training and employment services in Frankston (SA3) in 2013-14

N.B. Excludes Learn Local [Adult community education] providers
Regional partnerships and policy co-ordination. The Frankston-Mornington Peninsula Local Learning and Employment Network (FMPLLEN) was incorporated on 28 May 2001, with its inaugural Annual General Meeting held on 19 June 2001. Funded by government, the FMPLLEN is a not-for-profit organisation of hundreds of local individuals and organisations. It is one of 31 LLENs in Victoria focusing on initiatives to support engagement and re-engagement of 10-19 year olds in their local area. The office is currently based at the Hastings Hub, having previously been based in Mornington and Frankston. The mission of the FMPLLEN is to support ‘continued strong pathways from school to further education and work for local people. FMPLLEN will support the development of networks and partnerships designed to improve the participation, engagement, attainment and transition outcomes of young people’ (FMPLLEN, 2016a). Like other agencies working in the region, the FMPLLEN has suffered from recent funding cuts and efficiency drives. The FMPLLEN Annual Report for 2015 remarked upon the reduced funding available for 2015 and into the future:

the end result, for future years, or at least for 2015, is funding at about
one third of previous years and staffing at about half of previous years.
So even with our very best efforts, what we will be able to achieve will
be less than what we have achieved in recent years. Our priority will be
on business and school partnerships, and transitions, and we are re-
inventing ourselves to that narrower mission, to achieve the best
outcomes we can on that smaller base. This is our future challenge.

The FMPLLEN is very active in the region, producing a number of valuable resources for its members and the wider community. A recent addition is the FMP Youth
Pathways website. This provides information to young people and parents on the learning and employment options available in the local area. The FMPLLEN also partners with local organisations to deliver the ‘FMPJOBS’ website as a free service to connect people on the Peninsula with local job opportunities. Based on its many years of gathering local intelligence, the FMPLLEN has identified a set of key strengths that characterise the youth, community sector and VET sector in the region: (1) a strong Local Government engagement on youth issues; (2) highly-customised and contextualised learner-centred programs, such as the Community VCAL delivered by a core set of enduring providers committed to the region; and (3) strong, active associations, committees and networks – collaborative partnerships (e.g. the cross-sectoral VET associations) (FMPLLEN, 2015a, p.52).

In terms of local government areas, the greater ‘Mornington Peninsula’ region includes two councils: the City of Frankston and the Mornington Peninsula Shire. VET policy settings and programs are coordinated and monitored by the Victorian Government at a regional level. The Frankston-Mornington Peninsula sub-region is located within the Southern Metropolitan Region (SMR) of the Victorian Department of Education and Training. The SMR is the largest administrative region in Victoria (see Figure 3.2). The SMR office with oversight of the FMP region is based in Dandenong, which is around 25km from Frankston and 60km from Rosebud.
Other services, programs and initiatives. Recent major economic and infrastructure developments include the building on the TAFE Trade Training Centre at Chisholm Frankston campus (2014); the Peninsula Aquatic Recreation Centre (2014); and the establishment of the South East Water headquarters in Frankston (2015). There are four Centrelink customer service centres on the Mornington Peninsula (Mornington, Rosebud, Hastings and Frankston) delivering government payments and services to local residents. The number of students and apprentices, of any age, receiving Youth Allowance\(^\text{10}\) from Centrelink in the Dunkley (Frankston) and Flinders (Mornington

\(^{10}\) Available to people who are:
- 16 to 21 years of age and looking for full time work or undertaking approved activities;
- 18 to 24 years of age and studying full time;
- 16 or 17 years of age and have completed year 12 or equivalent, or undertaking full time secondary study and need to live away from home in order to study, or are considered independent for Youth Allowance, or
Peninsula) is around 1,700 (Department of Human Services, 2016). A further 1,400 are receiving *Youth Allowance* but not as students or apprentices. There are also a range of community-based youth, physical and mental health, respite and recovery service providers and programs. Although these are outside the scope of my research, it is important to note that each may refer young adults to training and employment services providers as part of an integrated service delivery model. In addition to these services, there are a number of programs and initiatives focusing on education, training and employment of young people operating in the FMP region. An example of a current program is the Commonwealth-funded *Training for Employment Scholarships* trial site.

The FMP region is one of 11 trial sites in Australia to be part of a pilot that provides funds for Mornington Peninsula businesses with fewer than 200 staff to apply for up to $7,500 when they hire an unemployed person aged 18-24 years who requires further training. The young person must be employed for 12 months and the scholarship covers 26 weeks of job specific training. There is also the Commonwealth Government *Transition to Work* program. This is a new service to support young people aged 15-21 to provide intensive, pre-employment support. It is particularly targeted at early school leavers, however the service also supports some young people who have experienced difficulty transitioning from education to employment. Providers of this program in the South Eastern Melbourne and Peninsula region are the Brotherhood of St Laurence, Mission Australia and Wesley Mission Victoria. The FMP region was also a pilot or

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* 16 to 24 years of age and undertaking a full time Australian Apprenticeship

demonstration site for the Victorian Government’s Youth Partnerships demonstration site (2013), the Youth Collaboration Trial program funded by the Ian Potter Foundation\textsuperscript{11} (2013-2014); the Commonwealth Government Local Connection to Work trial site (2012); and the Commonwealth Government Youth Connections program (2010). These types of place-based initiatives are considered essential to the FMP region given the persistent issues associated with limited transport, social insularity and level of entrenched inter-generational disadvantage, particularly along the southern peninsula. Transport, a key barrier to accessing post-school opportunities for young people, is a long-standing issue on the Mornington Peninsula. PenBus, a service initiated by the Mornington Peninsula Shire Council for students and trainees, had been running since 2012. Initially funded through the Commonwealth Government, PenBus transported 215 students and trainees on a daily basis from as far as Rosebud to Chisholm Institute in Frankston and Monash University, Clayton. A recent media release titled ‘Labor Government Saves Student Bus Service After Federal Cuts’ (Allan, 2016) announced a new 12 month trial for the PenBus connecting Rosebud, Safety Beach, Mt Martha, Mornington, Mt Eliza and Frankston Station during university semesters. Upon the announcement, Minister for Public Transport Jacinta Allan stated:

\textit{Local students and trainees have been pleading with Bruce Billson}

\textit{[Federal Member for Dunkley], Greg Hunt [Federal Member for}

\textsuperscript{11} The Youth Collaboration Trial (YCT) operated during 2013 and 2014 in Frankston, Craigieburn and the western suburbs of Melbourne as a model of service integration designed to ensure that young people aged 15–24 would be prepared for, and able to sustain, employment. Funded by the Ian Potter Foundation and involving a wide range of partners, YCT aimed to link employment, education and training services such as Youth Connections and Job Services Australia providers, using existing government funding.
Flinders] and Martin Dixon [State Member for Nepean] to continue the funding the previous Federal Labor Government provided for PenBus – sadly, those pleas fell on deaf ears. The Andrews Labor Government has stepped in to save local students, and provide an alternative to the PenBus service the Federal Government has withdrawn funding for.

Following the announcement that the PenBus would lose its funding, local student Anthony Hall, 16, told the Frankston Leader\(^{12}\) that he would be happy to pay for the bus. ‘It is not about the cost, it is about the convenience…Losing the PenBus would mean a lot of people lose out’ (Morton & Tatman, 2015).

3.6. Summary

This chapter comprised: (1) a brief history of VET in Australia; (2) an account of the current VET system; and (3) a brief overview of training policy reforms in the Australian state of Victoria. A final section reviewed VET policies, provision and programs of relevance to the target population of my research (18-24 year olds in the FMP region). The trajectory of VET in Australia would suggest a narrowing of purpose and focus since the mid-1980s, spurred by the convergence and application of neoliberal ideology and human capital frameworks within VET. The introduction of marketised and entitlement-based training systems have transformed how VET is funded and regulated, both in Victoria and throughout Australia. The implications of this have been felt at a system level in Victoria and at a local level in the FMP region. There has been

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widespread agreement that the reforms have impacted disproportionately on young people and the most marginalised sections of Victorian society. As in other parts of Victoria, the FMP region has experienced its own impact. The impacts have manifested in the form of cuts to government funding in training areas that are characteristic features of the FMP job market (e.g. hospitality, kitchen operations, tourism and retail). Considered a ‘thin’ education and training market (high-cost; low enrolment), there is one university and one predominant TAFE provider. An array of RTOs occupy the training market, catering to a different segments of the student population. In terms of geographic coverage, education and training providers are predominantly located in the Frankston ‘hub’; with fewer options accessible to young people living in the Mornington Peninsula area. This becomes increasingly so in the southern most parts of the peninsula region owing to transport and mobility issues. Having now reviewed the literature, policy and practice relevant to the target population, the next chapter will detail the research method used for addressing the research problem and questions.
Chapter 4: Research Method

‘Since Friedman, nothing so empowers economists as successful prediction, and experience suggests that little is more delightfully predictable than economists’ reactions to the term ‘capability’. It is a quizzical gaze and precisely two words: “measure it”.

(Alkire, 2005a, p.2)

***

4.1. Introduction

This chapter details the research design and rationale; the role of the researcher; the research methodology; threats to validity; and ethical procedures. The research methodology section details the tasks and approaches involved in each of the key stages of my research: (1) mapping and document analysis; (2) literature search; (3) participant selection; (4) instrumentation; (5) recruitment; (6) data collection; and (7) analysis and writing.

4.2. Research design and rationale

The aim of my research is to critically examine the post-school opportunities of young adults in the Frankston-Mornington Peninsula region of Victoria, Australia. The research questions I will address to meet this overarching aim are as follows:

1. How useful are quantitative data for critically examining what post-school VET opportunities are available and accessible to young adults in the FMP region?
2. What does qualitative data gathered from young adults in the FMP region offer?
3. What potential does the capabilities approach offer?
Drawing on the conceptual framework of the capabilities approach (CA) pioneered by economist Amartya Sen (1980/1984/1985/1987/1992/1993) and extended by philosopher Martha Nussbaum (1992/1995/2000/2002/2003), the study conducts a sequential explanatory mixed-method design (Creswell et al., 2003) set within critical realist (CR) ontology (Bhaskar, 1979/1975). I bring together the philosophical approach of CR and the conceptual framework of the CA to better understand how the problem is constructed. By applying these alternative lenses on the problem, I propose approaches to understanding the problem in a more meaningful way. To address the research questions, the quantitative strand (Chapter 5) comprises a comprehensive analysis of publicly available statistical information on the post-school activities of the target population (as it relates to their education, training and/or employment). The qualitative strand (Chapter 6) comprises data gathered from focus groups with VET learners and interviews with practitioners in the FMP region. The CA and critical realist lens are brought together in ways that are both ethically individualistic, mutually reinforcing, and contextualised to the research problem. The following sections outline the ontological approach; epistemological approach and methods in greater detail.

**Ontology and epistemology.** Ontology 'refers to theories of 'being' or 'what exists', while 'epistemology' refers to theories of how what exists can be known about (Sayer, 1992, p.155). My research is framed by the ontological lens of critical realism (described in Section 2.2.3). A tenet of critical realism (Bhaskar, 1979/1975) is that the world exists independently of what we think about it. This means there is a 'reality' that exists independently of what I, or any researcher, might think about it. Ontologically, my
research is committed to critically examining underlying causal mechanisms (structures and agency) creating inequalities in VET access and participation among the target population (18-24 year olds residing and training in the FMP region). I draw and build upon a number of recent studies that have applied critical realist ontology to explore the capabilities approach in different contexts, including in the areas of further education and VET (Powell & McGrath, 2014; Powell, 2014/2012, López-Fogués, 2014/2012a/2012b).

As detailed in Section 2.2.3, the CA applies an alternate vision on the problem of inequality while critical realism is focused on the mechanisms creating inequalities. In doing so, the critical realist lens reinforces the conceptual framework of the CA. Chapter 2 also noted the divergent approaches of the key CA theorists, Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum. While recognising the divergent views of Sen and Nussbaum, my research draws on their mutually-agreed starting points of: (1) their common CA conceptual framework (functionings, capabilities and agency) and (2) their criticism of narrow measures of human development. Where my research diverges from Sen, and towards Nussbaum, is in the areas of specified partial theories of justice (with minimal thresholds) and lived ‘human’ functionings. These concepts are considered most directly through notions of access to, and participation in, quality training as one minimum measure of justice that must be available and accessible to the target population.

**Methods.** Early in the research process, I set out to understand what data could be used to understand the research problem. It soon became apparent that the limitations of the quantitative data rendered them necessary but insufficient to address my research questions. A mixed-method design would be needed to provide the broadest possible
understanding. Bryman (2006) has offered a number of rationales for mixed-method designs, including the ability to account for structures through quantitative analyses and process through qualitative analyses. Similarly, critical realist ontology focuses on *explanation* rather than prediction, where methods involve ‘the postulation of a possible [structure or] mechanism, the attempt to collect evidence for or against its existence and the elimination of possible alternatives’ (Outhwaite, 1987, p.58). Sayer argued that ‘compared to positivism and inter-pretivism, critical realism endorses or is compatible with a relatively wide range of research methods, but it implies that the particular choices should depend on the nature of the object of study and what one wants to learn about it’ (Sayer, 2000, p.19). Similarly, Sen argued that methodology should be guided by ‘what serves the goals of the inquiry’ (Sen, 2004, p. 595). A number of CA theorists have drawn attention to the use of interdisciplinary research and mixed methods to capture the range of capabilities in a field such as education (Tikly, 2013; Robeyns, 2006a; Walker, 2006). In the Australian VET sector, Robinson (2007, p.10) argued that undertaking a range of research projects in an area, rather than a single project, has ‘a far more significant impact, especially when that work is coming from different angles and offering differing perspectives, in terms of conclusions. The more varied the research and its viewpoints, the more effective it is in terms of adding to the knowledge base and promoting debate’. Having decided upon a mixed-method design, the next step was to decide upon which one. Identifying six designs overall, Creswell et al (2003) provided a distinction between *sequential* designs (explanatory, exploratory or transformative) and *concurrent designs* (triangulation, nested or transformative). As the research continued to
gather momentum, I realised the overall purpose of my design is to use a qualitative strand to *explain* my quantitative results (Creswell et al., 2003). In a sequential explanatory design there are two distinct phases: a quantitative strand followed by a qualitative strand (Creswell et al., 2003). In this design, a researcher first collects and analyses the quantitative (numeric) data. The qualitative (text) data are collected and analysed second in the sequence and help explain, or elaborate on, the quantitative results obtained in the first phase. The qualitative data and their analysis refine and explain those statistical results by exploring participants’ views in more depth (Creswell, 2003; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). This design can also be used when the researcher wants to form groups based on quantitative results and follow up with the groups through subsequent qualitative research or to use quantitative results about participant characteristics to guide purposive sampling for a qualitative phase (Creswell et al., 2011; Creswell et al., 2003). This design is most useful when: ‘the researcher wants to assess trends and relationships with quantitative data but also be able to explain the mechanism or reasons behind the resultant trends’ (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2011, p.82).

The rationale for adopting this approach is that the perspectives of young people (and the people who work with them) have potential to challenge and expand the types of analysis more commonly applied in VET-based research. The VET sector often draws on mixed methods for policy and program evaluations. However, as noted above, the voice of the VET learner is often missing (Angus et al., 2012; Golding et al., 2012; Anderson, 2005). At a system level, public accountability mechanisms and system monitoring have tended to rely more on quantitative data and descriptive statistics. Just prior to the initial
national training reforms in Australia in the early 1990s, Guthrie (1988, p.16) argued in a report on *Performance indicators in TAFE* that quantitative indicators ‘enable comparisons’ and qualitative data ‘aid interpretations’ in the VET sector.

> performance indicators would have little or no meaning if only quantitative measures were allowed. Clearly a balance has to be struck between the relative convenience of quantitative or counting measures and the qualitative measures which have the potential to enrich, and help explain, these quantitative measures.

Elsewhere in the field of VET research, Considine et al (2005, p.32) identified limitations in the use of quantitative data in isolation. Instead, they argued that mixed methods ‘unearted important social processes’ that are not readily accessed through quantitative data. They argued that:

> statistical modelling did indeed highlight some key patterns in VET participation and suggested how these might be related to access and equity issues. The real insights, however, were only possible because of detailed qualitative research in the field. This type of research unearthed important social processes which were not accessible through statistical modelling. It also provided us with our key conceptual insight about how cumulative disadvantage operates on the ground.

Once a sequential explanatory mixed-method design was confirmed, I set about determining the most appropriate and effective approach to qualitative data collection. Focus groups were found to be preferable to interviews or surveys. The reason for this is
that the tools and methods underpinning the data collection process relied upon group activities, scenarios and exchanges of ideas between participants. It was confirmed through preliminary discussions with practitioners and managers within RTOs that focus groups were an appropriate method of data collection. In summary, the research design is directed by critical realist ontology and mutually reinforced by the conceptual framework of the CA. It applies a sequential explanatory mixed-method design to address the research problem. The quantitative strand comprises an analysis of a range of archival datasets. The qualitative strand comprises the conduct of focus groups with enrolled VET students in the FMP region.

4.3. Role of the researcher

I position myself within the study as a critical realist. Within the context of the subject matter, this means that I am concerned with the underlying causal mechanisms that create inequalities in: (1) human development (as understood through the alternate lens of the capabilities approach); and (2) vocational education and training systems. In terms of my own background, after leaving school, I completed a Bachelor of Business (Marketing) at the University of Technology Sydney, followed by a Masters of Education at Monash University. I have worked as a researcher in the Australian education system for almost fifteen years. Over the past decade, my research interests have become focused on young people’s access to, and participation in, post-compulsory education and training. The research I have conducted for the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) over the past seven years has further deepened my interest in the role
of education and training policy in broadening socio-economic opportunities for young people. The quantitative strand of my research draws on my professional experience in discerning appropriate data sources; relevant data fields; underlying meaning and caveats in these data. It was important, however, to not allow my experience to bias or prejudge the selection of data sources or the results. The qualitative strand required direct interactions with the target population of my research. In terms of my role in gathering data for the qualitative strand of the research, I had no prior personal or professional connection to any of the participants. Nor had I conducted any work with any of the participating organisations or individuals prior to commencing this research. The intention was to reduce any significant power differential between myself and the participants. It was recognised, however, that some differential is inevitable. As outlined in the documentation provided to the participants (see Appendices C and D), the research was introduced as a ‘chat’ rather than a ‘PhD research project’. My role as facilitator of the focus group sessions was to present a topic and then largely facilitate the discussion as an observer to guide but not direct the discussion. Having positioned myself within the research design, the following section describes my planned and actual methodology.

4.4. Methodology

This section outlines the methodology for each stage of the research. In summary these were: (1) mapping and document analysis; (2) literature search; (3) participant selection; (4) instrumentation; (5) recruitment; (6) data collection; and (7) analysis and writing. The first stages of the methodology involved a review of the literature (Chapter
2) and mapping of current policy and practice (Chapter 3). The substantive data collection and analytical phases deployed a descriptive framework with quantitative methods to analyse archival data. This involved the analysis and presentation of results relating to the post-school pathways of young adults (18-24 year olds) in the FMP region (Chapter 5). The methodology aimed to critically examine the strengths, weaknesses and themes within the available quantitative data for further explanation by learners in the qualitative strand. The final stage was to conduct a thematic analysis of these qualitative data.

4.4.1. Literature Search Strategy

The research databases searched for the literature review included VOCEDplus (administered by NCVER); Australian Education Index (AEI); ERC (Education Research Complete); ERIC (Education Resource Information Center); and the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP) publications website. The initial keywords for the search started as being comparatively broad in their scope (e.g. vocational education and training; youth transitions; post-compulsory education; school-to-work transitions; pathways; disadvantage; barriers; school leavers; access; equity). The keyword searchers were then narrowed to include topics pertaining to VET measures (e.g. socio-economic status; training measures; training statistics; performance measurement). The keywords were subsequently extended to include topics outside of VET to focus on (1) the capabilities approach in general (e.g. framework, key theorists, limitations); (2) the intersection of the CA with critical realism (e.g. areas of complementarity); and (3) the application of CA in the areas of education, training and
employment, in Australia and internationally. An international journal of particular note was the *Social Work and Society International Online Journal* as it hosts a number of research articles applying the CA to the fields of youth and VET. An endnote library was constructed and articles categorised into a number of themes including: ontological and conceptual framework (critical realism and capabilities approach); VET systems and structures; VET measures; VET in local contexts; and VET and young people. In the Australian context, my research draws heavily on scholarly academic research undertaken, and or funded by, NCVER. The search sought to prioritise peer-reviewed literature. However, by necessity a broad interpretation of ‘literature’ has been used to include grey literature\(^\text{13}\); applied research; practitioner inquiry and research-based policy statements and/or policy submissions.

### 4.4.2. Mapping and document analysis

My research set about mapping the policy and practice environment relevant to the research problem. One of the first mapping tasks to be undertaken was to create a detailed listing of VET providers, courses and stakeholders active in the FMP region. This essentially involved exhaustive web searches, interrogation of media archives, library databases, government websites and so on. The annual *Environmental Scan* produced by the Frankston-Mornington Peninsula Local Learning and Employment Network (FMPLLEN) offered an excellent starting point. The *Scan* provides an overview of the region (geography, demography, industry, employment; health; socio-economic

\(^{13}\text{Materials and research produced by organisations outside of the traditional commercial or academic publishing and distribution channels.}\)
issues etc); an education and training profile; business and industry profile; parent and family profile; community group profile; a listing of government programs; a list of community partnerships; and a list of challenges and opportunities in the FMP region. As the research progressed, the *Environmental Scan* document became invaluable for its comprehensive mapping of education and training providers, programs and local associations. A second set of documents relevant to the research were the quarterly training market reports and annual regional profiles produced by the Victorian Government. The regional profile of interest was the ‘Southern Metropolitan Region’ (SMR) profile as it includes information on the Frankston-Mornington Peninsula region. A list of the reports produced to date is included in Table 4.1\textsuperscript{14}. Although originally published on a quarterly basis, the training market reports were produced on a half-yearly basis in 2013 and 2014. The results of this mapping have informed various sections of my research, particularly the review of policy and practice in Chapter 3.

\textsuperscript{14} A set of industry profiles have also been produced for 2011-2014
Table 4.1: Victorian Government training market reports

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Report type</th>
<th>Time period</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Training Market Reports</td>
<td>Q2 2015</td>
<td>Victorian Training Market Report 2015 Half Year</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Q4 2014</td>
<td>Victorian Training Market Report 2014</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Q2 2014</td>
<td>Victorian Training Market Report Half year 2014</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Q4 2013</td>
<td>Victorian Training Market Report 2013</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Q3 2013</td>
<td>Victorian Training Market Quarterly Report Q3 2013</td>
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<td>Q2 2013</td>
<td>Victorian Training Market Quarterly Report Q2 2013</td>
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<td>Q1 2013</td>
<td>Victorian Training Market Quarterly Report Q1 2013</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Q4 2012</td>
<td>Victorian Training Market Quarterly Report Full Year 2012</td>
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<td>Q3 2012</td>
<td>Victorian Training Market Quarterly Report Q3 2012</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Q4 2011</td>
<td>Victorian Training Market Quarterly Report Full Year 2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional Profiles</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>Vocational Training: Victoria’s Regions 2014</td>
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<td>Vocational Training: Victoria’s Regions 2013</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Vocational Training: Victoria’s Regional Report 2012</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>Victorian Training Market Profiles 2011 Southern Melbourne Region</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The early mapping of policy and practice led to a re-orientation of the methodology in some areas. Initially, the intention was to collect information via interviews with policy makers, practitioners and administrators through semi-structured interviews. Although informal conversations with many of these stakeholders were eventually conducted, formal research was not undertaken. This was because the mapping exercise uncovered a great deal of information that did not need to be restated through a formal interview process with policy officers. Therefore, the policy dimension – the policy ‘voice’ - was sourced from publicly-available policy documents. Informal conversations with practitioners and administrators also offered invaluable feedback on emerging findings. These conversations helped to contextualise abstract and conceptual
ideas within the ‘real-world’ of the FMP region. It should be noted that a number of attempts were made to contact personnel within the Victorian Government department responsible for VET (under the former Government) at various levels but with little success. The response I received was that the staff within the Department did not have the ‘resources or capacity to support your research project’. This is understandable given the comparatively small size of my project and the demands on policy staff at the time. These shifts in methodology enabled my research to focus the qualitative strand more directly on gathering data from students. The second re-orientation related to what constituted the ‘target population’. Although the original intention was to cast a wider net to include ‘youth’ or ‘young people (15-24 year olds), the parameters narrowed to include only ‘young adults’ (18-24 year olds). This enabled my research to focus more directly on individuals enrolled in non-compulsory\textsuperscript{15} education and training delivered outside the schools sector.

\textbf{4.4.3. Participant selection and sampling}

This section details the process of selecting the ‘target population’ in the quantitative and qualitative strands. To focus the scope, the logic of participant selection follows an ordered hierarchy of criteria: geographic location of training and student residence (Frankston-Mornington Peninsula region); age (18-24 years old); participation in VET (enrolled student); level of participation in VET (AQF level); and industry training area (ASCED field).

\textsuperscript{15} The minimum school leaving age in Victoria is 17.
Geographic area. For the purposes of this study, the geographic area of the ‘Frankston-Mornington Peninsula region’ refers to the Australian Bureau of Statistics geographic area Statistical Area 4: ‘Frankston Mornington Peninsula’ under the Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS). This geographic area comprises Frankston (Statistical Area 3) and Mornington Peninsula (Statistical Area 3). Frankston is then divided into seven Level 2 areas and Mornington Peninsula into nine Level 2 areas. Maps of these geographic regions are shown in Figure 4.1. As the ASGS is a new statistical standard set by the ABS, prior to the 2011 Census the Statistical Local Areas (SLA) and Local Government Areas (LGA) are used. Under this geographical classification, ‘Frankston City Council’ and ‘Mornington Peninsula Shire’ define the geographic scope. This can be confusing as there is a higher level Statistical Area 4 called ‘Mornington Peninsula’ that refers to the entire region (the geographic scope of this research) and a Statistical Area 2 called ‘Frankston’ that refers to the suburb (the CBD and its surrounds). I have attempted to clarify any ambiguity with clear labels and descriptions of these permeations where they arise in each chapter.
Figure 4.1: Mapping of Statistical Areas 2, 3 & 4

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (2011)

**Age.** The target population is classified as ‘young adults’ who are 18-24 years old at the time the research was conducted. The logic behind selecting this particular age
group is evidenced in a number of studies. For example, Figgis et al (2004, p.32) cautioned against forgetting about ‘older youth’, arguing that ‘the most glaring missing support is early intervention for individuals in the older age bracket of youth in transition (the 19 to 24 year-olds)’. The ‘18-24’ age parameters can be found in a number of policy targets; eligibility criteria and research methodologies concerning post-secondary education, training and transitions. For example, an objective of the recent Europe 2020 strategy is to reduce the percentage of the population aged 18-24 who have attained, at most, lower secondary level education (ISCED 0-2) and who are not involved in further education or training (CEDEFOP, 2013). Similarly, the European Union definition of ‘early school leavers’ is people aged 18-24 who have only lower secondary education or less and are no longer in education or training’. In Australia, COAG has also used ‘18-24’ as a benchmark for post-school education and training. Indicating a delineation between ‘younger students’ and ‘older students’, NCVER recently published a study titled ‘Studying beyond age 25: who does it and what do they gain?’ (Coelli et al., 2012). It has recently been argued that ‘by age 24 many young people have completed their post-school study and are seeking to establish themselves in the workforce. It is an important age at which to measure how well our education and training system has served them and set them up for their careers and their wellbeing more broadly’ (Lamb et al., 2015, p.70). A further compelling reason to focus on the 18-24 year old age group is the policy dimension which concerns minimum compulsory attendance. In Victoria, the Education and Training Reform Amendment (School Age) Bill 2009 increased the minimum school leaving age to 17, from 1 January 2010. Furthermore, the Victorian
Commissioner for Children and Young People has jurisdiction over children and young people up to the age of 18. The result, according to Wyn (2011) is that ‘the minimal level of support that this commission provides for young people who are among the most vulnerable and disadvantaged disappears after their 18th birthday’. The age group also appears as a measure of civic representation. The DEECD (2008) measures youth electoral participation electoral enrolment statistics among young people aged 18–24.

**Additional delimitations of scope.** In terms of funding source, the scope for this research excludes students enrolled at school, including those enrolled in community-based programs funded through the school-level Student Resource Package (SRP). The timeframe of interest varies depending on the availability of data. It is generally limited to the period from 2006-2015. By starting in 2006, it is possible for the research to compare the results of the 2006 and 2011 Census collections; as well as track the introduction of marketised training in the Victorian VET system. By concluding the study in 2015-2016, the research has full coverage of: (a) the initial ‘Victorian Training Guarantee’ policy package by the Labor Government (2009-2010) (b) the ‘Refocusing’ reforms by the Liberal Coalition Government (2011-2013) and (c) the first two years of the Labor Government (2014-2016).

**Sampling.** The study links the quantitative and qualitative strands by matching particular characteristics of the target population through the quantitative strand (e.g. age; residence location; participation in training; level of training; industry area and so on). This matching was undertaken to conduct a purposive sampling strategy for the qualitative strand. Also known as judgmental, selective or subjective sampling, the main
goal of purposive sampling is to focus on particular characteristics of a population that are of interest, which best answer the research questions. The sample being studied is not representative of the population. For researchers pursuing qualitative or mixed methods research designs, this is not considered to be a weakness. This study employs a homogeneous purposive sampling technique – within strict parameters - that aims to achieve a sample whose units (e.g., people, cases, etc.) share the same (or very similar) characteristics or traits (e.g. 18-24 year olds currently enrolled in a training course in the FMP region). A homogeneous sample is commonly selected when the research question that is being addressed is specific to the characteristics of the particular group of interest. Although the quantitative strand has coverage of all VET providers delivering training to 18-24 year old students in the region, the qualitative strand is more focused. It involved working directly with the largest provider in the region to select a sample of students across a range of AQF levels and industry areas. This was undertaken to provide a broad cross-section of learners. The host provider is one of the largest VET providers in Australia. Chapter 5 indicates that this single training provider delivered training to around one-half of the target population of my research between 2011 and 2013. As discussed in Chapter 3, its offerings are comparatively broad compared to many of its competitors in the FMP region. The researcher worked closely with practitioners and administrators to define the particular learner group of relevance to the study. A guiding principle in the recruitment of participants was to not put undue burden on the practitioners and administrators supporting the recruitment and release of participants.
Having discussed the participation selection and sampling process, the next section discusses the instrumentation used to collect data.

4.4.4. Instrumentation

The quantitative data consists of two administrative sources and one survey source. The two administrative sources are the NCVER *National VET Provider Collection* and the ABS *Census of Population and Housing*. The survey collection is the Victorian Government *On Track* survey of school leavers in the state of Victoria. Each of these collections has been widely used for the purposes of tracking young peoples’ transitions and pathways. All are publicly available in various forms at a sufficient level of disaggregation to be useful to this research.

**NCVER collections.** NCVER is responsible for three relevant administrative collections: the National VET Provider Collection (reported as ‘Students and Courses’); a quarterly collection of apprentices and trainees; and an annual collection which counts the numbers of students in of VET in Schools programs (NCVER, 2016a, p.6). The *National VET Provider Collection* has been administered since 1994. The collection has been praised as ‘...a little-used but potentially very powerful data source for research purposes’ (Leung et al., 2013, p.26). Released each July, the detailed administrative data collection is based on the AVETMISS statistical standard for VET Providers. Since the 1990s in Australia, the AVETMISS has provided the underpinning statistical standards and data element definitions for all major VET collections undertaken by NCVER. NCVER (2016a) has described AVETMISS as providing ‘the information base to underscore public accountability and measurement of the state and national VET systems,
including key performance measures’ (p.5). The collection requires providers who receive public funding to submit training data for a calendar year to their state training authorities, which then validate and compile the data into standardised files. These files are then submitted to NCVER by the end of March of the following year. NCVER has recently moved from annual to quarterly reporting of data via its VOCSTATS web portal. It has also commenced data collection on ‘total VET activity’ to capture all nationally recognised training regardless of funding source. This national collection of publicly-funded providers includes student information on: who they are (age, sex and other demographic information; Indigenous and disability information; and geographic location); where they study (type of provider; location of training deliver; and what they study (enrolments in units of competency or modules, as part of a qualification, course or skill set; how it was studied; how it was funded; the results obtained for unit/module (outcome). Data submissions are reviewed for quality and signed off by jurisdictions by the end of April. Statistics for the calendar year are released publicly at the beginning of May at a high level, with full figures available at the beginning of July (KPMG, 2014, p.24). Submission of AVETMISS compliant data to the National VET Provider Collection requires submission of 10 file types to a state or territory training authority, or nine file types if reporting direct to NCVER. These data files are linked, as shown in Figure 3.3, by a number of identifiers in AVETMISS (for example, the client file is linked to the enrolment file via the client identifier that uniquely distinguishes an individual within an RTO). The files are structured to act as a relational database (KPMG, 2014, pp.44-45). Each is organised in four files, none of which is linked to
another file: (i) Students; (ii) Course enrolments; (iii) Subject enrolments; (iv) Completed qualifications (Rothman et al., 2013, p.3). The students file contains enrolment data on individual students for each and records the highest level course in which a student enrolled in any one year. The course and subject enrolments files, which span the same period, however, contain information on all courses and subjects in which students enrolled (see Figure 4.2). If a student enrolled in two courses during the year, then information on both courses is included in the file. Similarly, the completions file contains information on all qualifications completed in the year. The reporting of completions has a lag of one year (Rothman et al., 2013, pp. 3-4). This collection is used to publish an annual publication _Student and Courses_ and to populate the data sets available through the NCVER’s online portal, _VOCSTATS_. From the _National VET Provider Collection_, the main fields used in the analysis are drawn from _client attributes_ (e.g. Year of enrolment; Age; Sex; Statistical area; Highest Year of School Completed (HSCP); Labour Force Status (LFSP); and _program attributes_ (e.g. Reporting Type (funding); Highest current qualification level; Major program field of education). The postcode field refers to the postcode of the student’s address when enrolled, not the postcode where the training took place.
ABS Census of Population and Housing. The Australian Census is administered every five years by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). It measures the number of people in Australia, their key characteristics and the dwellings in which they live. It provides information to detailed regional and local levels about education and training participation and the highest level of qualifications completed amongst the local
population and labour force. However, there are limitations in the quality of these data which are noted in Section 4.4.7. The main fields from the Census used in the analysis are: Main Statistical Area Structure (Main ASGS) (UR); Highest Year of School Completed (HSCP); Labour Force Status (LFSP); Age; Educational Institution: Attendee Status (TYSTAP); Sex; Non-School Qualification: Level of Education (QALLP); Non-School Qualification: Field of Study (QALFP); Industry of Employment (INDP); and Occupation (OCCP). The geographic area refers to the individual’s ‘place of usual residence’ and not their place of enumeration.

**Victorian Government On Track survey of school leavers.** The annual *On Track* survey of post-school destinations in Victoria targets two types of respondent six months after they exit school: (1) school leavers who completed Year 12 in the previous school year (‘Year 12 completers’) and (2) those who left school in the previous school year prior to attaining a Year 12 certificate (‘early leavers’). Conducted in May-June, the survey consistently receives a response rate of around 60-65 per cent for Year 12 completers and around 30 per cent for early leavers. Data are collected from all school sectors and providers across Victoria. Consent to participate in the survey is sought through a question on each school student’s Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA) enrolment form in the year prior. Separate questionnaires are used for Year 12 or equivalent completers and early school leavers. The *On Track* survey is a Computer Assisted Telephone Interview (CATI) of approximately 8 minutes duration. For *On Track*, early school leavers are defined as students who had registered their details with the VCAA by enrolling in a Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE),
Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) or International Baccalaureate (IB) program and who left school before completion. In general, early school leavers had been in Year 10, 11 or 12 when they left school. In the seven years to 2014, the average number of students residing in the FMP region who have responded to the survey is around 1,500 for the ‘Year 12 completers’ survey and around 250 for the ‘early leavers’ survey. Although On Track data are collected on a number of post-school ‘activities’ (i.e. education, training, employment etc), they are typically reported by ‘main activity’. This means that reporting tends to prioritise education and training over employment (i.e. a university student who is employed part-time is counted as being at university and not in employment). These post-school ‘activities’ or ‘destinations’ are not mutually exclusive. It is therefore necessary to cross-tabulate education, training and employment activities to discern a more complete picture. As shown in Figure 4.3, the ‘activities’ in which young people are participating in overlap. For example, many young people will combine post-school studies with part-time work. The number of potential ‘activities’ renders it necessary to aggregate for the purposes of conducting sensible analysis of patterns and trends.
Figure 4.3: Potential post-school ‘activities’ of young people in Australia

It is a requirement of the ABS, AVETMISS and Victorian Government Statistical Standards that an address and postcode of permanent home residence be recorded for each individual (student). During the NCVER validation process student addresses are converted into broader geographic regions. The relevant postcodes are shown in Figure 4.4. This involves coding addresses to Statistical Areas under the ABS Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS). For data recorded post-2011 Census, the Statistical Areas (SA3s) of ‘Frankston’ and ‘Mornington Peninsula’ are used. For data recorded prior to the 2011 Census, the corresponding Statistical Local Areas (SLAs) of ‘Frankston City’ and ‘Mornington Peninsula Shire’ are used. This enables a time-series to be built which overcome the changes to the ASGS between the 2006 and 2011 Censuses.
In terms of the **qualitative strand**, the focus group instruments (attached in Appendices A-C) were developed following on an extensive review of existing
administrative and survey-based data collections on VET and youth transitions in Australia and internationally. The purpose of reviewing earlier and existing instruments was to ensure that my research could confirm, challenge and extend the existing knowledge base. My instruments were further refined by adherence to the principles of the conceptual framework of the CA and the specific works of Alkire (2010/2008a/2005a); Roebyns (2005); Powell (2014) and López Fogués (2014). The instruments benefited greatly from the inclusion of scenario-based techniques to draw out perspectives of the young people (e.g. Tom is thinking of doing X, what advice would you give him?). These scenarios essentially involved describing a fictionalized young person facing a particular decision, problem or issue. The intention was that each individual in the focus group would not be compelled to speak directly to their own experience if they did not wish to do so. The focus group strategy also drew on de Bono’s lateral thinking technique Plus-Minus-Interesting (de Bono, 1985) technique to have the group explore and unearth deeper perspectives on particular topics. This meant that each group was asked to think of something positive, negative and interesting about a set of pre-defined topics in a set amount of time. Drawing from a large bank of questions, the structure and content was customised to each group of participants as each focus group progressed. Factors that influenced the level of customisation included: the level of training (e.g. VCAL, Certificate III, Diploma etc); the stage of their training (e.g. near start of near completion); and the ages of the participants.
4.4.5. Procedures for recruitment and participation

**Quantitative strand.** All quantitative data were accessed through public sources. NCVER data are available on the VOCSTATS online portal (vocstats.ncver.edu.au); ABS data are available through the CDATA online portal (abs.gov.au/CDataOnline); and Victorian Government On Track data are available through the Department of Education and Training website (education.vic.gov.au) and FMPLLEN environmental scans.

**Qualitative strand.** The location for the qualitative data collection was the Frankston and Mornington Peninsula campus of a large VET provider. The data were collected over a rolling three week period in October 2015. An initial meeting was held with managers to introduce the research study. This led to the Planning Unit arranging contact with teaching and administrative staff at the Frankston and Rosebud campus to bring the research to their attention. I then followed-up with each of these contacts to arrange a meeting at the respective campuses. These meetings with Head teachers and administrators provided an opportunity to both introduce the research study and to identify how it could be appropriately and effectively conducted. This typically involved looking at training schedules for the upcoming time period and blocking out suitable times. In addition to informal interviews with practitioners and administrators, meetings were held with several public servants, practitioners, community members, local networks and associations at the local and regional level. The purpose of these additional interviews was to collect further information on each RTO and to generate further context and background for my own analysis. The researcher also introduced the PhD topic at a meeting of the Peninsula Vocational Education & Training (a cluster of 23 secondary
schools) and the Peninsula Pathways Association (groups working with young people in education settings to find pathways and options for at risk and disengaged young people). The purpose for attending these meetings was to present an overview of the research design, seek feedback and to arrange follow-up interviews with association members.

### 4.4.6. Data collection

**Quantitative strand.** There are variations in scope of the three selected quantitative data collections. Table 4.2 shows how different counts of young people vary for the common reference year of 2011 (the most recent Census year). Each collection is valuable for different reasons. This analysis draws on the relative strengths of each while ensuring that they are used appropriately. More information on each collection is included in later sections.

**Table 4.2: Number of students residing in the FMP region: three data sources**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Collection</th>
<th>Scope</th>
<th>Unit of measurement</th>
<th>2011</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. ABS Census of Population and Housing</td>
<td>18-24 year olds</td>
<td>Resident population, Attending a ‘Technical or Further Educational Institution’</td>
<td>22,525</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. NCVER National VET Provider Collection</td>
<td>18-24 year old ‘students’</td>
<td>Publicly-funded VET, Non-publicly funded (but nationally recognised) VET</td>
<td>9,159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Total nationally recognised VET</td>
<td>12,850</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Victorian On Track Survey</td>
<td>School leavers</td>
<td>Year 12 completers, Early leavers</td>
<td>1,561</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1,811</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Qualitative strand. A total of 35 enrolled students participated in the focus group sessions on the Frankston and Peninsula campuses. Four groups were conducted on the Frankston campus and two groups were conducted on the Peninsula (Rosebud) campus. There were 13 females and 22 males across a total of six training groups (see Table 4.3). The sessions ranged in duration from 45 minutes to 1 hour. Each participant was provided with a Plain Language Statement and Consent Form to make clear the purpose of the study and their role in it. The Statement also confirmed that students who agreed to take part would receive a $30 gift voucher as recognition of their contribution. These gift cards were attached to the documentation (see Figure 4.5). A signed active consent form was returned to me during the focus group session. The use of scenario-based questions in the focus group sessions yielded a good response. Once the topic of conversation was set by the researcher, it was common for 2-3 participants to have an exchange among themselves. This provided a richness of data that would likely not have been possible in an interview setting. Each session was audio-recorded by dictaphone and transcribed after the focus group was undertaken. By way of comparison, recent doctoral researchers Powell (2014) and López Fogués (2014) recently completed fieldwork with 20 students and 15 students respectively, using a similar research design involving one VET provider.
Table 4.3: Composition of sample in qualitative strand, by course and gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Females</th>
<th>Males</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Frankston campus</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Certificate III in Plumbing</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Certificate II in Electrotechnology (Career Start)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Certificate III in Electrotechnology (Electrician)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Certificate IV in Engineering (Fabrication and Welding)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Peninsula (Rosebud) campus</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Diploma of Early Childhood Education and Care</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>13</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4.5: Plain Language Statements and Gift Cards
4.4.7. Data quality, analysis and reporting

**Quantitative strand.** Quantitative datasets were analysed using a core set of common variables across the three data sources, including: level of qualification; industry sector of qualification; gender; age; geographic location; and labour force status. Each quantitative data source is considered in turn. Firstly, the ABS *Census of Population and Housing* data was extracted from the CDATA online portal. The advantage of Census data is their capacity to understand the stratification of the total resident population at different levels of geographic disaggregation. On the other hand, their weakness is that they are not designed to capture the nuances of education and training data (i.e. there is imprecision around AQF levels and types of training provider). These data required informed judgments in order to code disaggregated data into meaningful and useful post-school pathway categories. The tiered hierarchy showing how each pathway category was coded is shown in Table 4.4. This coding is based on the approach taken in the Victorian *On Track* survey in Victoria. For example, an individual was coded as undertaking a post-school ‘VET pathway’ if they were enrolled in 2011 and/or had completed a post-school VET qualification. This includes all those VET students and graduates who were working, unemployed or not in the labour force in 2011. Data were extracted from the CDATA portal in csv format and analysed using pivot tables in Microsoft Excel. Univariate and bivariate descriptive analyses are used to understand the patterns and trends in post-school pathways of the target population. The accompanying notes prepared by the ABS for some data extractions state that ‘no reliance should be placed on small cells. Cells in this table have been randomly adjusted to avoid the release of
confidential data’. These annotations have been included as footnotes to the tables in this research.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Current status of 18-24 year old</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University pathway</td>
<td>At university in 2011 and/or have completed a post-school HE qualification and/or have completed a post-school VET qualification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VET pathway</td>
<td>At TAFE/VET provider in 2011 and/or have completed a post-school VET qualification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other education and training pathway</td>
<td>Other education and training pathway (Provider type not stated)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Of those not identified above</td>
<td>Not studying in 2011 and no post-school qualifications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed full-time</td>
<td>Employed full-time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed part-time or away from work</td>
<td>Employed part-time or away from work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEET (including unemployed)</td>
<td>NEET (including unemployed)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not stated</td>
<td>Not stated</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The NCVER *National VET Provider* is a census of the student population in a given year. Univariate and bivariate descriptive analyses are undertaken to critically examine patterns and trends among the target population. Data were extracted from the VOCSTATS portal in csv format and analysed using pivot tables in Microsoft Excel. VOCSTATS databases have a proprietary algorithm called perturbation applied to the data. The perturbation module automatically makes adjustments to smaller cell values, showing a slightly different value in those cells to prevent anyone from identifying an individual. NCVER (2016b) stated that:
Importantly, it is not simply randomly rounding the values; it is a complex calculation that is specifically designed not to reduce the usefulness of the data by disrupting overall trends, or introducing bias. Cell values are perturbed in a repeatable and consistent way, such that totals still add up correctly and remain within the perturbation limits themselves. The perturbated cells protect students’ privacy where small numbers are evident (NCVER, 2016b, p.3).

An important note on the National Provider Collection is that disaggregated data were temporarily released on VOCSTATS for the first time by ‘RTO name’ for around 12 months in 2014-2015. These data have been since been removed from VOCSTATS with no indication that they will reappear in the near future. Nevertheless, some limited data at RTO-level have been included in Chapter 5 to understand the stratification of participation at the local level. Finally, data are included from the Victorian Government’s On Track survey of school leavers. Table 4.5 shows that the response rate for school leavers who have completed Year 12 is 60.2 per cent in Frankston and 66.5 per cent in Mornington Peninsula. Importantly, the response rate is just 17.9 per cent and 24.5 per cent for ‘early leavers’ in Frankston and Mornington Peninsula respectively. Therefore caution should be used when interpreting any early school leaver data from the On Track surveys. An important feature of the On Track reporting mechanism is that it prioritises education and training over all other main activities and students are not counted twice. For example, young people who, in their first school year, are studying at university full-time and employed part-time are only counted in the university category. Noting these limitations, data from the On Track survey are predominantly analysed with
descriptive techniques to understand the post-school ‘main activities’ of school leavers over time.

Table 4.5: Participation in On Track surveys of school leavers in Victoria, 2015

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Frankston</th>
<th>Mornington Peninsula</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Males</td>
<td>Females</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 12 completers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School leavers in cohort</td>
<td>701</td>
<td>748</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consented to participate</td>
<td>545</td>
<td>613</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responded to survey</td>
<td>411</td>
<td>461</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Participation rate (per cent)</strong></td>
<td><strong>58.6</strong></td>
<td><strong>61.6</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early leavers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School leavers in cohort</td>
<td>328</td>
<td>258</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consented to participate</td>
<td>199</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responded to survey</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Participation rate (per cent)</strong></td>
<td><strong>17.4</strong></td>
<td><strong>18.6</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The ABS Census and NCVER National Provider collections are reported as populations of residents and VET students respectively. As noted earlier, my analyses extract a sub-group population based on age (18-24 years old) and home residence (Frankston-Mornington Peninsula Statistical Area). All analyses are readily replicable through publicly available information sources. The On Track data have required some minor adjustment - such as the conversion of respondent counts to proportions - but these data analyses are also readily replicable by accessing information from both the Victorian
Department website and environmental scans produced by the Frankston-Mornington Peninsula Local Learning and Employment Network.

As outlined in the research limitations in Chapter 1, my research has not attempted to capture primary information on training outcomes. Nor has it attempted to analyse training outcomes data relevant to the target population based on existing surveys conducted at a national level. There are many examples of earlier research that offer compelling arguments as to why the calculation of VET course completion rates is a complex and challenging task (e.g. Bednarz, 2012; Karmel, 2012/2011; Mark and Karmel, 2010; Karmel & Virk, 2007). The research literature also highlights the long-standing technical issues associated with reaching consensus on the most robust and replicable way to calculate VET completions rates and to what end. These cautions have been heeded in my research. I have not sought to calculate a ‘completion rate’ for the target population. As with completion rates, calculating reliable estimates of the outcomes from training is particularly challenging for this target population, given its small size. The current NCVER Student Outcomes Survey (SoS) is undertaken as a stratified, randomly selected sample, with survey responses weighted to population benchmarks. The target population for my research represents around 1.5 per cent of the national VET student population. The SoS alternates between a large year (some 90,000 graduates and 210,000 module completers — those who have left VET without completing a qualification) and a small year (20,000 graduates and 60,000 module completers). The response rates for the NCVER Student Outcomes Survey currently sit at around 45 per cent for graduates and 35 per cent for module completers (Karmel, 2013).
Rothman et al (2013) notes that data from the Student Outcomes Survey are also subject to sampling error and, therefore, estimates have ‘a degree of uncertainty attached to them’. As Saunders (2001, p.37) argued ‘existing sources of performance data such as the SoS, if taken down near to the institute level, may be pushing the boundaries of statistical reliability and usefulness’. At a national level, surveys of learner satisfaction and post-training destinations are capable of reporting with some degree of confidence at the national and jurisdiction level. However, sample error becomes untenable once one drills down into the regional (Southern Metropolitan) and, in this case, sub-regional level (Frankston-Mornington Peninsula).

The RTO Performance Indicator Project in Victoria has produced outcomes and satisfaction data at the RTO level which, according to its evaluation (CIRES, 2015), provides useful data on the 14 performance measures it seeks to populate with data. However, these data were not available to this research at the time of the quantitative analysis. The current AQTF reports on ‘quality indicators’ of learner engagement and employer satisfaction are released on RTO websites but unfortunately are not disaggregated by cohort or campus location. For example, the 2015 results for Chisholm Institutes Learner Engagement and Employer satisfaction are based on: ‘a survey of 1,572 students and 950 employers. This sample represents 16 per cent of this organisation’s training delivery in the 2015 calendar year’ (Chisholm Institute, 2015b). In responding to the quality indicator surveys, a local RTO based in Frankston has stated that ‘…the main reason our students come to us is due to their unemployment status, therefore it is not possible for us to administer the Employer Satisfaction Survey’ (Skills
Despite numerous efforts to collect outcomes data, there remain prohibitive constraints to analysing these sample data at the sub-population level. As mentioned throughout this research, a number of developments are occurring which may make such analyses more feasible in the future.

**Qualitative strand.** The qualitative strand comprised of six focus groups with 35 students enrolled on the Frankston and Peninsula campuses. Once the sessions had been transcribed, the analysis phase commenced. Data were imported into SPSS where thematic analyses were undertaken to code responses and exchanges between students into broad categories. This process involved ‘both ‘dis-assembling’ – breaking the data down into paragraphs, sections, lines – and ‘reassembling’ (Ezzy, 2002, p. 94). The process was then to rearrange these data through coding to produce new understandings of the similarities and differences in respondents perceptions of VET. Firstly, an open list of codes was created. These codes were then collapsed into patterns of consistent themes and messages. The new codes were then tested against data from the final two focus groups and remained unchanged. The process of moving inductively from coded units into categories and themes required some realignment with the core features of the capabilities approach (functionings; capabilities; and agency) as well to draw out the values; preferences and contextual factors impacting upon choice in this local context. The specific codes included: neighbourhood (safety); persistence; risk; attitudes; aspirations; options; choice; family; plans; costs and so on. Discrepant cases were considered and noted within the results where they helped to question normative assumptions. The resulting themes are presented for each training group in Chapter 6.
There are strict provisions made to de-identify the respondents. All names have been changed to aliases when reporting the results.

4.5. Threats to validity

The key limitations are outlined in Chapter 1. This section details a set of technical considerations. The main issues of validity concern the linkages between the quantitative and qualitative strands. It is important to acknowledge that the participants in the qualitative strand are broadly representative of the target population analysed in the quantitative strand. The selected methodology (sequential explanatory mixed method) deployed matched-sampling to select students for participation in focus groups to ameliorate the effects of any changes in the student population between the two datasets. It should be noted that four of the six focus groups with students were with apprentices and pre-apprentices. It is a requirement of entry to these courses that students secure a training agreement with an employer. The representation of apprentices in the qualitative strand is (1) a reflection of the composition of the student profile at the RTO that hosted the qualitative research and (2) what was feasible during the data collection period. It is also important to acknowledge that differences in the quantitative results also reflect differences of scope in the quantitative datasets. For example, based on the ABS *Census of Population and Housing*, the count of 18-24 year olds attending a ‘Technical or Further Educational Institution (including TAFE Colleges)’ is likely to be an underestimate of the total number of VET students in any given year. Earlier research has discussed the limitations of ABS measures for the VET sector (Knight & Cully, 2007,
The first limitation in the Census dataset is that of educational attainment, as measured by the ABS. This is based on qualifications that have been completed. It is perfectly normal in the VET sector for students to intend to complete only part of a full qualification (which may be valuable in and of itself). A second issue, which Knight & Cully (2007, p.26) argued is a criticism which ‘applies to all ABS collections and surveys’, is that of reliably identifying, through household surveys, the characteristics of VET providers and activity. The reason is that identification of VET providers by individuals is imprecise in that:

- a person being surveyed or responding to the census might not know whether their certificate or diploma is a qualification under the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) or an unrecognised certificate issued by an unregistered provider. The preponderance of jargon and acronyms in VET is also likely to be a source of confusion among respondents and therefore of errors in responding to questions.

In terms of geography, the ABS released a new Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS) in 2011. The ASGS was applied for the purposes of geographical reporting on VET activity in the NCVER National VET Provider Collection from 2011 onwards. The previous classification, the Australian Standard Geographical Classification (ASGC), is used for geographical reporting for the 2006 Census. The structure of data within the VOCSTATS and CDATA databases requires that data for Statistical Local Areas and Local Government Areas (Frankston City and Mornington Peninsula Shire) be used for the year 2010 and earlier; while the new ABS Statistical Areas is used for 2011 onwards. For 2010 (and earlier) training activity data for Statistical Local Areas (SLA) –
‘Frankston City’ and ‘Mornington Peninsula Shire’ of Melbourne are mapped to SEIFA 2006. For 2011–2014 training activity, Statistical Area 2 (SA2) areas are mapped to SEIFA 2011. There are 7 SA2s in the SA3 of ‘Frankston’ and 9 SA2s in the SA3 of ‘Mornington Peninsula’. These two SA3s comprise the greater SA4 of ‘Mornington Peninsula’. For the greater Frankston-Mornington Peninsula region these changes are largely inconsequential as the geographic borders remain the same in the new statistical standard.

My research draws on the ABS Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA), specifically the SEIFA Index of Relative Socio-Economic Disadvantage. The derivation of SEIFA (IRDS/IEO) quintiles in my research is based on mapping the smallest geographical areas available to SEIFA. The ABS released a new version of the Socio-economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA 2011) in March 2013 with changes to the underlying algorithm determining the allocation of postal areas to each SEIFA quintile. Based on the revised methodology, there is a large shift between the resident population and number of VET students in 2010 and 2011 by SEIFA quintiles. This shift is predominantly due to underlying residential population changes when mapping granular postal area information to the revised SEIFA indices. This represents a break in the time series. As SEIFA is a relative measure it is contextualised to the time in which it is constructed (e.g. new communities emerge, older communities disappear, previously low-income areas become ‘gentrified’ etc). The ABS (2015b) outlined its changes to the 2011 SEIFA variables thus:

*Although Census 2011 collected the same variables as Census 2006,*
some newly derived SEIFA variables have been considered (children in jobless families, unengaged youth), and a number of variables (related to household tenure, education and internet access) have had some definitional changes.

The implications for this analysis is that under SEIFA there has been a redistribution of VET students out of the higher SEIFA categories and into the lowest SEIFA category of most disadvantaged students (see Table 4.6). The Mornington Peninsula is not unique in this regard. The same shift of the resident population (and VET students within the population) down into the lowest SEIFA quintile is found in the state and national level reporting. The implications for my research is that the revised SEIFA 2011 now shows that 8 per cent of the target population is, in fact, residing in the most disadvantaged quintile where in SEIFA 2006 there were no students in this quintile. It is difficult to say without deeper investigation, whether the inclusion of an ‘unengaged youth’ in SEIFA 2011 has had a disproportionate impact on the Mornington Peninsula compared to other areas.
Table 4.6: Students in target population, by SEIFA IRSD quintile (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Quintile 1: Most disadvantaged</th>
<th>Quintile 2</th>
<th>Quintile 3</th>
<th>Quintile 4</th>
<th>Quintile 5: Least disadvantaged</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>30.1</td>
<td>13.8</td>
<td>36.7</td>
<td>19.4</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>29.5</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>37.1</td>
<td>19.4</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>29.4</td>
<td>13.9</td>
<td>37.8</td>
<td>19.0</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>29.0</td>
<td>13.4</td>
<td>38.3</td>
<td>19.3</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>29.1</td>
<td>13.4</td>
<td>38.9</td>
<td>18.7</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>32.3</td>
<td>22.1</td>
<td>26.4</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>32.6</td>
<td>21.4</td>
<td>26.9</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>33.7</td>
<td>21.1</td>
<td>27.1</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>32.0</td>
<td>21.4</td>
<td>28.7</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: SEIFA 2006 is applied for 2006-2010; SEIFA 2011 is applied for 2011-2014
Source: NCVER VOCSTATS database

All data files (including Census data) contain missing values for some variables which have the potential to introduce bias in the results. Without conducting rigorous analyses, it would be difficult to ascertain the level of bias in each estimate. As a general rule this research follows the practice adopted by the ABS, NCVER and Rothman et al (2013) in dealing with missing values, which is to exclude them from the calculations of rates or proportions. If the missing values are reasonably uniformly distributed, the calculations are unlikely to be affected by exclusion of missing values. Former Managing Director of NCVER Tom Karmel (2013a) made the following observations with regard to missing VET data:

One example is the use of imputation techniques to fill in missing data
(the ABS has used such techniques for many years). Another example is
the use of synthetic estimation to derive estimates of small area.
statistics based on a combination of fine grained census data with
survey data at a coarser geographic level.

In years when there is no population census, reporting of participation rates requires the imputation of intercensal estimates. Imputed data follow a linear trend between the 2006 and 2011 censuses and are cross-referenced against annual estimates of the entire resident population in the region. Finally, in terms of the Victorian On Track survey of school leavers, caution should be taken in the interpretation of data on the ‘early leavers’ group. The Victorian Government (DEECD, 2013b, p.5) stated that:

Findings based on the early school leavers’ data should be treated with caution due to the relatively low overall response rate among the sample and evidence of differential response rates among sub-groups of early school leavers. Nevertheless, the On Track sample of early school leavers is much larger than any other early school leaver data collection for Victoria and enables more detailed analyses than would otherwise be available.

The qualitative strand of my research is located entirely within the largest provider VET in the region and seeks broad input from a cross-section of enrolled VET students. It does not, however, include the voice of: (1) non-participants (those who never enrolled); (2) VET non-completers (those who started but did not complete); (3) VET students enrolled with providers other than the host provider (albeit the single largest enrolling RTO catering to the target population); or (4) VET graduates (those who completed). These limitations have been taken into account in the interpretation of data and the presentation of results.
4.6. Ethical procedures

Quantitative data have been extracted directly from Australian Government departments and agencies. These organisations must comply with obligations under the Privacy Act 1988 and handle personal information in accordance with the Australian Privacy Principles (APPs). ABS (abs.gov.au/privacy); NCVER (ncver.edu.au/privacy); and Victorian Government (vic.gov.au/privacy) privacy policies are publicly available on their respective websites. NCVER unit level enrolment activity and a client’s demographic information are linked together through a client identifier assigned by the RTO. The Victorian Government (DEECD, 2013b, p.3) has stated that ‘participants in the On Track survey are guaranteed confidentiality and it is not possible to identify individual school leavers in any reporting’. The recently introduced Unique Student identifier (USI) is legislated through the Student Identifiers Act 2014 and is supported by a lengthy privacy policy (usi.gov.au/documents/privacy-policy). All quantitative data used in this research were de-identified by the custodians of the data. For the qualitative strand, a ‘standard’ risk ethics approval was sought from the University of Melbourne Human Ethics Advisory Group (HEAG). Applications classified as ‘standard risk’ are submitted to the University of Melbourne applications classified as more than low risk require further review by the Human Ethics Sub-Committee (HESC). The approval reference code was 1441635.2. Concurrently, permission was granted from hosting VET provider to conduct the fieldwork (focus groups) with 30-40 of their learners on the Frankston and Rosebud campuses. All participants were provided with a Plain Language Statement (PLS) and Consent Form at the time of conducting the focus groups. These
were signed and returned to the researcher. I conducted all focus groups on my own. I ensured that all documentation provided to potential interviewees communicated the fact that participation was voluntary. To incentivise participation, I-Tunes gift vouchers valued at $30 were provided to participants. The type and value of the gift card was discussed with the training provider prior to commencing the fieldwork to ensure it was appropriate for the target group. The demands on the time of participating students while they are training should not be under-estimated. Many students travel considerable distances and commence their classes early in the morning. It was determined that a small recognition of their contribution to my research was both necessary and consistent with the principles guiding the overall research design. A view was taken that any ethical and methodological implications of providing payment to students, of which none were identified, did not outweigh the need to recognise the contribution of those students who participated.

There were no real or perceived conflicts of interest in conducting the fieldwork. The most important ethical issue in preparing and conducting the research was in the ethical treatment, and associated potential risks for participants, of the research content. Specifically, the research requires that participants discuss personal issues such as their backgrounds and prior experiences. These issues were considered in terms of how they could be implicitly or indirectly related to discussion of their involvement with the program, aspirations, goals and so on. The scenario-based strategies deployed in the focus group helped to overcome these issues. This approach offered a safe space for respondents to reflect on their own experiences while contributing to the conversation.
Similarly, the decision to introduce the project as a staged-process through the senior executive, then through the department heads and then into the teaching departments, meant that a number of processes had been followed to ensure a suitable group of students would participate. The decision to have only participants who have been assembled by the practitioners and administrators (rather than recruiting students independently) mitigated against potential risk or harm to the students. My research acknowledges as one of its limitations that some of the most disadvantaged students are not included. However, it is paramount that the well-being of students must take precedence. In terms of reporting, all participants have been de-identified with a pseudonym. Materials collected as part of the fieldwork will be maintained for a minimum period of five years. After this period, if they are no longer required for research purposes, documents will be shredded according to university guidelines by the Principal Researchers and other materials will be disposed of using confidential bins.

4.7. Summary

This chapter began by providing an overview of the research design and positioning myself as the researcher within that design. The methodology section detailed the logic of participant selection; instrumentation; procedures for recruitment, participation and data collection; and relevant data quality issues. In summary, this research has conducted a sequential explanatory mixed-method design, set within a critical realist ontology to critically examine the opportunities available to young adults in the FMP region of Victoria. The quantitative strand (Chapter 5) comprises a critical
examination of publicly available statistical information on the target population as it relates to their post-school education and training. The qualitative strand (Chapter 6) comprises an analysis of data gathered from focus groups with VET learners in the FMP region. It is argued that the selection of this particular research design and underpinning methods is sound and provides an appropriate means with which to address the research problem. The next chapter commences the presentation of results.
Chapter 5: How good are the data?

‘Statistical data are also like lamp posts. They shine light on a limited space but leave large areas in the dark.’

(CEDEFOP, 2013, p.1)

5.1. Introduction

This chapter critically examines data and information on the post-school VET opportunities available to young adults in the FMP region. The results are grouped into three areas: (1) the representation of the FMP region in government reporting on VET; (2) data on post-school opportunities; and (3) data on post-school VET opportunities. The analysis draws on publicly-available data from the ABS Census of Population and Housing; the NCVER National Provider Collection; the On Track survey of school leavers in Victoria; and reports on the Victorian training system.

5.2. The representation of the FMP region in government reporting on VET

This section presents the results of a document analysis of government reporting on VET. The analysis is guided by the question: How good are the data used to represent the FMP region in government reporting on VET? As outlined in Chapters 3 and 4, the Victorian government periodically releases information on the Victorian training system through three mechanisms: (1) reports on the overall training market (aggregated data for the total VET system); (2) regional profiles (data by geographic areas); and (3) industry profiles (data by industry sectors and occupations). The Southern Metropolitan Region
(SMR) regional profile, released annually, contains data and information on the Frankston-Mornington Peninsula region. As the SMR profiles must describe the largest metropolitan region in the state of Victoria, there are limitations to what these reports can specifically tell us about the FMP region. VET enrolment in the FMP region across all age groups comprises just 20 per cent of all VET students reported in the SMR profile (DEECD, 2014a). The Department has described the ‘regional profiles’, as distinct from the ‘industry profiles’, in these terms:

*The publication combines regional intelligence and economic analysis with training data to form a comprehensive picture of the relationship between regional skills needs, employment opportunities and skills training (DET, 2016a).*

As would be expected, the training information included in the SMR profiles on the Frankston City and Mornington Peninsula Shire, as for all Local Government Areas (LGA), is extremely limited. This may help to explain why an administrator at a small RTO in Frankston told me that their main information source is ‘local intelligence’. They expressed the view that headline statistics and regional profiling are of little use to the operations of their RTO. Another highly experienced practitioner who runs a RTO on the southern peninsula told me that when it comes to highly aggregated reporting at a system level ‘these measures don’t apply to us’. As shown in Table 5.1, data presented for the Frankston City and Mornington Peninsula Shire LGAs are: (1) aggregate counts of enrolments (as a measure of participation); and (2) numbers of RTOs (as a proxy measure of student choice) for each LGA. Highly aggregated outcomes data are presented for total SMR region. When characterising the LGAs, the SMR profiles describe Mornington
Peninsula Shire (as distinct from the wider FMP region) as ‘more rural and agricultural’ (DEECD, 2014a, p.92) and Frankston as a ‘regional capital’ (DEECD, 2012a, p.2). The 2015 regional profile had not been publicly released prior to submission of my thesis (October 2016).

Table 5.1: Data elements reported in DET SMR Regional Profiles, 2011-2014

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LGA</th>
<th>Unit/measure</th>
<th>Q4 2011</th>
<th>Q4 2012</th>
<th>Q4 2013</th>
<th>Q4 2014</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Frankston</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of RTOs</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>84</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enrolments</td>
<td>19,120</td>
<td>23,400</td>
<td>25,500</td>
<td>--</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resident students</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>12,900</td>
<td>10,860</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation rate*</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mornington Peninsula</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of RTOs</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>72</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enrolments</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>6,600</td>
<td>5,500</td>
<td>--</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resident students</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>11,600</td>
<td>9,891</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation rate*</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Southern Metropolitan Region</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improved employment status upon completion</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Achieved their main reason for training</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Had a positive perception of the teaching experience</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Would recommend their training provider</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“--” indicates data were not reported
* The number of working-age (15 to 64 years) vocational education and training students as a proportion of the population aged 15 to 64 years.

What is most striking about the regional profiles is the apparent imbalance between economic and social concerns. As noted earlier, there is a separate reporting mechanism for disseminating data by industry and occupations. For example, the above
description of the regional profiles qualifies ‘opportunities’ as ‘economic opportunities’. ‘Outcomes’ are qualified as ‘labour force outcomes’\textsuperscript{16}. The ‘key indicators’ used in the regional profiles are: (1) Gross Value Added growth; (2) Employment growth; (3) Population growth; (4) Unemployment rate; and (5) Labour force participation rate. The commentary provided in the regional profiles is overwhelmingly economic. It focuses on industry needs, skills requirements and economic profiling of the regions. The ‘social’ dimension of the profiles is limited to: (1) age distributions of the working population; and (2) participation data on ‘student engagement by learner cohorts’ (e.g. Indigenous, CALD, disability, female, unemployed, youth, mature age). Each year, the SMR profiles have repeated the claim that ‘there is a mismatch between the jobs available and the skills of the local residents. In addition there is an overall low resident skill base in Greater Dandenong, Cardinia, Frankston and the Mornington Peninsula’ (DEECD, 2012a p.2). The overarching narrative is one of local resident populations with: (1) low skills that are mismatched to industry requirements; (2) poor infrastructure; (3) poor transport; (4) high levels of both unemployment and underemployment; and (5) ‘relatively low aspiration among young people when compared with [other] metropolitan areas’. This is a narrative crafted from: (1) employer surveys; (2) economic and labour market commentary; and (3) unsophisticated comparisons of VET participation data with employment data. Measures are based around the ‘business environment’ (e.g. workforce, staffing, recruitment, skills needs, employer barriers to training their workers). There appears to be little or no

\textsuperscript{16} Defined as ‘outcomes that lead to successful employment; employment at successively higher skill levels; the opening of pathways to further education leading to employment and improved workplace productivity through skills utilisation.’ (DEECD 2014\textsuperscript{c}, p.133)
attention to reporting the underlying causes of patterns and trends in participation. For example, the SMR profile makes the following assertions about substantial increases in the number of unemployed students since the introduction of the VTG:

The [SMR] region’s participation rate has increased considerably, from being the second lowest rate in the State (7 per cent) in 2008 [to the second highest with 13% in 2013]… Unemployed students also represented a slightly higher proportion of the student base than average, 30 per cent compared with 28 per cent – the third highest in Victoria. In terms of absolute numbers, Southern Metropolitan has the largest cohort of unemployed students, after increasing in excess of four fold over the past five years, demonstrating the important role vocational training can play in re-engaging disadvantaged groups in the community (DEECD, 2014, p.97).

There are very few technical notes included in these reports to aid interpretation of survey results in terms of response rates, sample sizes, representativeness and significance. No data are cited to support claims that ‘aspirations’ among young people are lower in the SMR region than in other metropolitan areas. The 2014 SMR profile showed that 82 per cent of respondents ‘Achieved their main reason for training’. However, in the absence of technical notes to accompany the results, I have no sense of statistical significance, reliability or how this result varies across Victoria’s largest administrative region. Perhaps most importantly, these statistics on training outcomes conflate the diversity of VET activity into a single aggregate measure i.e. employment-based training (e.g. apprenticeships) with entry-level training (e.g. early childhood) with
engagement training (foundation skills) among others. In doing so, these aggregated reports potentially may mask, or at best underestimate, significant differences in the profile of respondents. This document analysis suggests that the level of detail produced on the FMP region through government reporting mechanisms is quite limited. The characterisation of Frankston as a ‘regional hub’ and Mornington Peninsula Shire as ‘rural’ appears to reinforce the narrative that the FMP region stands apart from the rest of metropolitan Melbourne. What is reported, and what is reported on the SMR region more generally, is predominantly economic in nature; overly focused on participation to the detriment of discussions of quality and outcomes; tends to mask important underlying social causes of shifts in VET participation; and is lacking in intellectual rigour and technical transparency. The next section will delve deeper into these issues with an analysis of the post-school opportunities available to young adults in the FMP region (the target population).

5.3. Data on post-school opportunities

This section begins by asking – ‘how good are the data to understand all post-school opportunities that are available and accessible to the target population?’ To address this question, this section critically examines the usefulness of a selection of datasets, including the ABS Census of Population and Housing and the Victorian Government’s On Track survey of school leavers. It covers three areas of analysis: (1) Post-school pathways of young people; (2) Local area disadvantage; and (3) Destinations of school leavers.
1. Post-school pathways of young people. Offering a five-yearly snapshot of the entire resident population, Census data show marked differences in the post-school pathways of young people in the FMP region compared to the rest of Greater Melbourne.

These data suggest that 33.8 per cent of 18-24 year olds in the FMP region were pursuing a VET pathway in 2011 (Table 5.2). This was comparable to rates in regional areas of Victoria (+1.1 percentage points). It was, however, 7.7 percentage points higher than the Victorian average which is indicative of the important role that VET plays in the FMP region. It also is indicative of its divergence from the metropolitan Melbourne area it is one part of. These Census data also suggest there are fewer opportunities for local participation in higher education at university. In the FMP region, 18-24 year olds are far less likely than their peers in Inner Melbourne to undertake a university pathway (-39.2 percentage points). Figure 5.2 shows the target population is far more likely than their peers in Inner Melbourne to undertake a VET pathway (+17.6 percentage points) or be working full-time (+10.2 percentage points). The Census offers insights into the prevalence of post-school pathways through VET and/or directly into work in the FMP region. Not only are these the most prevalent pathways in the FMP region, but these data show that VET and work-based pathways are commenced from an early age among FMP residents compared to the rest of Melbourne and Victoria. These data also offer insight into the prevalence of young people leaving school and entering the workforce with no-post school qualifications. Full-time workers who were not enrolled in education and training and had no-post school qualifications comprised 16.1 per cent of all 18-24 year olds in the FMP region, compared to 14.5 per cent in regional centres and 10.9 per cent
across Victoria. The same pattern, although not quite as striking, is also apparent for part-
time work and those who are away from work. The proportion of 18-24 year olds
classified as ‘Not in Employment, Education or Training’ (NEET) in the FMP region was
9 per cent; compared to 7.4 per cent in outer Melbourne and 10.6 per cent in Regional
Victoria. In summary, the ABS data appear to suggest that the post-school pathways of
young adults more closely resemble their regional peers; are more vocational and work-
based than the rest of metropolitan Melbourne; and are counter-balanced by
comparatively lower rates of participation in higher education.
### Table 5.2: Main pathways and broad geographic area (comparisons), 2011

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Frankston-Mornington Peninsula</th>
<th>Inner Melbourne</th>
<th>Outer Melbourne</th>
<th>Regional Victoria</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>15-17 year olds</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At school</td>
<td>77.1</td>
<td>86.2</td>
<td>80.5</td>
<td>78.0</td>
<td>80.6</td>
<td>165,737</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VET pathway</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>10,486</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University pathway</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>880</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other education and training pathway</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>1,872</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>No post-school qualification</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed full-time</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>2,602</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed part-time or away from work</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>1,821</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEET, including unemployed</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>5,017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not stated</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>17,212</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
<td><strong>205,627</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Count of 15-17 year olds</strong></td>
<td><strong>10,684</strong></td>
<td><strong>36,359</strong></td>
<td><strong>101,079</strong></td>
<td><strong>57,505</strong></td>
<td><strong>205,627</strong></td>
<td><strong>Count</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>18-24 year olds</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At school</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>24,029</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VET pathway</td>
<td>33.8</td>
<td>16.2</td>
<td>28.0</td>
<td>32.7</td>
<td>26.1</td>
<td>134,287</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University pathway</td>
<td>19.7</td>
<td>58.9</td>
<td>34.6</td>
<td>20.7</td>
<td>37.4</td>
<td>191,914</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other education and training pathway</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>6,811</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>No post-school qualification</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed full-time</td>
<td>16.1</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>11.6</td>
<td>14.5</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>56,066</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed part-time or away from work</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>30,999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEET, including unemployed</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>36,419</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not stated</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>32,782</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
<td><strong>513,307</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Count of 18-24 year olds</strong></td>
<td><strong>22,502</strong></td>
<td><strong>134,385</strong></td>
<td><strong>248,030</strong></td>
<td><strong>108,390</strong></td>
<td><strong>513,307</strong></td>
<td><strong>Count</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Count of 15-24 year olds</strong></td>
<td><strong>33,186</strong></td>
<td><strong>170,744</strong></td>
<td><strong>349,109</strong></td>
<td><strong>165,895</strong></td>
<td><strong>718,934</strong></td>
<td><strong>718,934</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Excludes 'No usual address' (1,510 15-24 year olds in 2011)

Figure 5.1: Post-school pathways of target population—Percentage point difference between FMP region and other regions in Victoria, 2011 (%)

Excludes those at school, in ‘other’ forms of education and training, and ‘not stated’.


2. **Local area disadvantage.** ABS Census data can also provide useful insights into the stratification of all post-school pathways (education and non-educational) at the regional and sub-regional level. These results suggest that, at this local level, variations in the underlying inequalities creating different patterns in post-school pathways can become more visible. Figure 5.2 shows variation across different geographic areas of the region for those young people who are not participating in education, training or employment. It is important to note that the two local areas with the highest proportions of young people in these groups are Frankston North and Rosebud (shaded in dark green). These two suburbs are ranked as the most disadvantaged local areas in the entire
FMP region under the SEIFA measure of relative socio-economic disadvantage. These local level data are indicative of the breadth of inequalities across the FMP region but also the concentration of entrenched disadvantage facing young people who are growing up in particular pockets of the region.

Figure 5.2: Proportion of 18-24 year olds in FMP who are NEET, working part-time or unemployed (and not studying), 2011 (%)


For the Frankston City area (refer to left-hand side of Figure 5.4), Frankston North stands out as a suburb of significant and entrenched disadvantage. Among 18-24 year olds residing in Frankston North, Census data suggest that the proportion pursuing a VET pathway in 2011 is comparatively high compared to other parts of the FMP region at 36.1 per cent (Table 5.3). The share of Frankston North residents pursuing a university pathway is 10.9 per cent. This is 9 percentage points lower than the Frankston (SA3)
average of 19.9 per cent. As an indicator of the opportunities available, the proportion of Frankston North residents who are categorised as ‘NEET’ or unemployed is 20 per cent, compared to the Frankston (SA3) average of 11.1 per cent.

Table 5.3: Main pathways and detailed geographic areas (Frankston), 2011

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Carrum Downs</th>
<th>Frankston (SA2)</th>
<th>Frankston North</th>
<th>Frankston South</th>
<th>Langwarrin</th>
<th>Seaford (Vic.)</th>
<th>Shy - Sandhurst</th>
<th>Frankston (SA3)</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>15-17 year olds</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At school</td>
<td>75.0</td>
<td>71.6</td>
<td>67.4</td>
<td>88.8</td>
<td>81.4</td>
<td>75.2</td>
<td>80.7</td>
<td>77.5</td>
<td>3,982</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VET pathway</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>266</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University pathway</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.0</td>
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<td>0.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other education and training pathway</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed full-time</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>111</td>
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<tr>
<td>Employed part-time or away from work</td>
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<td>0.8</td>
<td>0.9</td>
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<td>0.6</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>1.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>NEET, including unemployed</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>217</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not stated</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>13.7</td>
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<td>11.3</td>
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<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Count of 15-17 year olds</td>
<td>835</td>
<td>707</td>
<td>684</td>
<td>766</td>
<td>1,158</td>
<td>540</td>
<td>446</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>5,136</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

|                  |              |                |                |                |            |                |                |                |        |
| **18-24 year olds** |              |                |                |                |            |                |                |                |        |
| At school        | 3.6          | 3.9            | 2.5            | 7.9            | 5.4        | 4.5            | 4.9            | 4.5            | 537    |
| VET pathway      | 33.8         | 32.7           | 36.1           | 29.9           | 37.9       | 32.0           | 36.0           | 34.2           | 4,039  |
| University pathway| 14.4         | 23.6           | **10.9**       | **32.8**       | 20.0       | 18.6           | 21.0           | 19.9           | 2,351  |
| Other education and training pathway | 1.1 | 0.9 | 0.7 | 1.2 | 1.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.8 | 93 |
| Employed full-time | 16.5         | 11.6           | 14.9           | 13.8           | 18.2       | 16.7           | 18.8           | 15.5           | 1,828  |
| Employed part-time or away from work | 9.2 | 7.8 | 7.8 | 7.1 | 7.1 | 8.6 | 8.4 | 7.9 | 936 |
| NEET, including unemployed | 13.0 | 12.2 | **20.0** | **3.7** | 7.1 | 12.1 | 6.5 | 11.1 | 1,310 |
| Not stated       | 8.3          | 7.4            | 7.1            | 3.7            | 3.3        | 7.5            | 4.4            | 6.0            | 712    |
| **Total**        | **100.0**    | **100.0**      | **100.0**      | **100.0**      | **100.0**  | **100.0**      | **100.0**      | **100.0**      |        |
| Count of 18-24 year olds | 1,842 | 2,201 | 1,876 | 1,502 | 2,218 | 1,277 | 890 | 11,806 |
| Count of 15-24 year olds | 2,677 | 2,908 | 2,560 | 2,268 | 3,376 | 1,817 | 1,336 | 16,942 |

Note: The column headings refer to Statistical Area 2 classifications in Frankston City (SA3)
Differences of more than 5 percentage points to the average are highlighted

While university participation was low overall compared to other parts of Melbourne, Census data reveal that the prevalence of higher education pathways varies considerably at the local level. These data suggest that higher levels of schooling and university participation are undertaken in greater numbers in the relatively higher socio-
economic areas of Mount Eliza (41.5%) and Flinders (31.3%). These areas also have correspondingly low levels of 18-24 year olds pursuing a VET pathway. The proportion of the target population in the industry port area of Hastings-Somers who pursue a pathway of full-time employment (with no post-school qualifications) is 24.3 per cent, compared to 16.8 per cent across Mornington Peninsula Shire (Table 5.4).

Table 5.4: Main pathways and detailed geographic areas (Mornington Peninsula), 2011

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>15-17 year olds</th>
<th>Dromana</th>
<th>Flinders</th>
<th>Hastings - Somers</th>
<th>Mornington</th>
<th>Mount Eliza</th>
<th>Mount Martha</th>
<th>Point Nepean</th>
<th>Rosebud - McCrae</th>
<th>Somerville</th>
<th>Mornington Peninsula (SA3)</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>At school</td>
<td>87.1</td>
<td>87.2</td>
<td>71.2</td>
<td>79.5</td>
<td>90.3</td>
<td>84.7</td>
<td>75.8</td>
<td>71.2</td>
<td>83.0</td>
<td>80.6</td>
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<td>VET pathway</td>
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<td>5.8</td>
<td>1.7</td>
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<td>4.4</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>4.9</td>
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<td>University pathway</td>
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<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>18</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other education and training pathway</td>
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<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
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<td>0.7</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.5</td>
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<td>0.0</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>131</td>
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<tr>
<td>Employed part-time or away from work</td>
<td>1.1</td>
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<td>2.9</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>74</td>
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<td>1.4</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>10.1</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>12.3</td>
<td>11.6</td>
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<td>7.6</td>
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<td>100.0</td>
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<td>100.0</td>
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<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>5,546</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Count of 15-17 year olds</td>
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<td>218</td>
<td>815</td>
<td>761</td>
<td>862</td>
<td>721</td>
<td>455</td>
<td>614</td>
<td>822</td>
<td>5,546</td>
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</tr>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>18-24 year olds</th>
<th>Dromana</th>
<th>Flinders</th>
<th>Hastings - Somers</th>
<th>Mornington</th>
<th>Mount Eliza</th>
<th>Mount Martha</th>
<th>Point Nepean</th>
<th>Rosebud - McCrae</th>
<th>Somerville</th>
<th>Mornington Peninsula (SA3)</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>At school</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>14.9</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>12.8</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>582</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VET pathway</td>
<td>30.1</td>
<td>20.5</td>
<td>36.1</td>
<td>34.9</td>
<td>20.5</td>
<td>30.8</td>
<td>31.1</td>
<td>33.1</td>
<td>36.6</td>
<td>32.1</td>
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<td>31.3</td>
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<td>19.9</td>
<td>41.5</td>
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<td>20.7</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>2,147</td>
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<td>0.5</td>
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<td>0.7</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>1.0</td>
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<td>10.0</td>
<td>14.7</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>13.5</td>
<td>16.0</td>
<td>16.8</td>
<td>1,803</td>
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<tr>
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<td>11.4</td>
<td>9.9</td>
<td>8.5</td>
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<td>12.2</td>
<td>11.5</td>
<td>10.1</td>
<td>1,079</td>
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<td>10.8</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>14.8</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>937</td>
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<td>4.1</td>
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<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>10,715</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Count of 18-24 year olds</td>
<td>501</td>
<td>342</td>
<td>2,284</td>
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<td>1,075</td>
<td>891</td>
<td>1,201</td>
<td>1,654</td>
<td>10,715</td>
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<tr>
<td>Count of 15-24 year olds</td>
<td>779</td>
<td>560</td>
<td>3,099</td>
<td>2,274</td>
<td>2,116</td>
<td>1,796</td>
<td>1,346</td>
<td>1,815</td>
<td>2,476</td>
<td>16,261</td>
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</table>

Note: The column headings refer to Statistical Area 2 classifications in Mornington Peninsula Shire (SA3)
Differences of more than 5 percentage points to the average are highlighted
3. Destinations of school leavers. Offering an annual snapshot of school leavers in Victoria, *On Track* data show that each year around 1,500 students from Frankston and 1,300 students from the Mornington Peninsula complete Year 12 or its vocational equivalent (‘Year 12 completers’). Similarly, each year around 580 students in Frankston and 350 students on the Mornington Peninsula exit the school system before completing Year 12 (‘early leavers’). The earlier finding from Census data that around 34 per cent of 18-24 year olds undertake a university pathway is broadly consistent with data from the *On Track* survey of Year 12 completers. The latter suggests that, on average, around 40 per cent of FMP ‘Year 12 completers’ pursued a university pathway between 2008 and 2015. *On Track* data indicate that the proportion of Year 12 completers in university studies has increased by almost 14 percentage points from 26.8 per cent in 2008 to 40.7 per cent in 2015. This is consistent with national trends in participation among students from low socio-economic backgrounds alongside policy and institutional efforts to widen access to higher education. The corresponding decline was in full-time employment which decreased by 14.8 percentage points from 21.7 per cent to 6.9 per cent (see Figure 5.3). The proportion of school completers employed in the part-time job market (and not studying) has fluctuated somewhat between 15-20 per cent over seven years to 2015. The proportion of Year 12 completers enrolled in VET certificates and diplomas, including apprenticeships and traineeships, has remained stable between 2008 and 2015. There was a dip in the share of traineeships that appears to coincide with the ‘Refocusing’ reforms’ in 2013. Prior to the sharp increase in university participation, the proportion of Year 12 completers moving into all levels of VET was higher than university.
The proportions of early school leavers who left school in Year 10 was 19 per cent in Frankston and 18.6 per cent in Mornington Peninsula. This is around 3 percentage points higher than the Victorian average (DEECD, 2015a). The post-school pathways of ‘early leavers’ in the FMP region vary considerably from those who have completed Year 12. For example, the higher education pathway is not taken by this group of school leavers. This creates a different pattern of post-school destinations. Noting the technical limitations of the small sample (outlined in Chapter 4), the most common destination for early leavers in the FMP region is an apprenticeship. The share of total early leavers in apprenticeships has remained steady between 2008 and 2015 at between 21-30 per cent (Table 5.5). There was a dip in the share of apprenticeships coinciding with the
‘Refocusing’ reforms’ in 2012-13 along with an increase in the share of non-apprenticeship and non-traineeship certificates. Given the small sample size, the findings derived from these data should be treated with caution. However, the overall trends appear to affirm those arising from ABS and NCVER data sources, particularly the growth in lower-level VET among early school leavers and higher education among Year 12 completers. The data used provide valuable insights into the broad post-school pathway opportunities available to young people at a regional and local level. However, the potential of these data are limited in terms of what they can say about the nuances of the VET sector. Therefore, having conducted a critical examination of data on all post-school opportunities available and accessible to 18-24 years residing in the FMP region, the analysis now focuses specifically on post-school VET opportunities.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source: Victorian Department of Education and Training (and Department of Education and Early Childhood Development), published data</th>
<th></th>
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</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Table 5.5: Main pathways of school leavers in the FMP region, 2008-2015</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Level of schooling completed</strong></td>
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<td>2009</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>Change 15 vs 08</td>
</tr>
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<td><strong>Main activity</strong></td>
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<td>1.9</td>
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<td>6.4</td>
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<td>Bachelor</td>
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<td>33.8</td>
<td>33.1</td>
<td>39.1</td>
<td>41.8</td>
<td>40.6</td>
<td>40.7</td>
<td>13.9</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed part-time</td>
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<td>21.7</td>
<td>19.5</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>17.4</td>
<td>16.6</td>
<td>17.0</td>
<td>18.1</td>
<td>2.4</td>
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<tr>
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<td>13.0</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>8.2</td>
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<td>-14.8</td>
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<td>4.9</td>
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<td>1.4</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>-0.2</td>
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<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
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<td>-0.1</td>
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<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Responding Year 12 completers</td>
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<td>1,603</td>
<td>1,561</td>
<td>1,674</td>
<td>1,580</td>
<td>1,549</td>
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<td>Early leavers</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education and training</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cert I-III</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>12.6</td>
<td>12.3</td>
<td>14.8</td>
<td>12.3</td>
<td>22.9</td>
<td>21.9</td>
<td>14.4</td>
<td>4.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cert IV+</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>11.0</td>
<td>8.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traineeship</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>-7.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apprenticeship</td>
<td>29.5</td>
<td>29.9</td>
<td>29.0</td>
<td>28.8</td>
<td>29.9</td>
<td>20.7</td>
<td>23.3</td>
<td>27.1</td>
<td>-2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>-0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labour force</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed part-time</td>
<td>15.1</td>
<td>12.2</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>14.2</td>
<td>11.2</td>
<td>14.9</td>
<td>15.5</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed full-time</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>16.2</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>14.2</td>
<td>11.7</td>
<td>12.1</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>-10.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Looking for work</td>
<td>12.9</td>
<td>17.3</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>18.4</td>
<td>14.2</td>
<td>13.8</td>
<td>10.7</td>
<td>18.8</td>
<td>5.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NILFET</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>-0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not complete Year 12</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responding early leavers</td>
<td>325</td>
<td>278</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>204</td>
<td>188</td>
<td>215</td>
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<td>13.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total early leavers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
5.4. Data on post-school VET opportunities

This section begins by asking – ‘how good are the data to understand post-school VET opportunities that are available and accessible to the target population?’ To address this question, this section critically examines the usefulness of a selection of datasets, including the ABS *Census of Population and Housing* and the NCVER *National VET Provider Collection*. It covers five areas of analysis: (1) VET participation rates; (2) Access by disadvantaged learner groups; (3) Participation by student and course type; (4) Patterns of participation at the sub-regional level; and (5) Number and composition of post-school VET providers.

1. VET participation rates. Offering an annual snapshot of the VET student population, the National VET Provider Collection shows that the target population has comprised between 9,000-10,000 publicly-funded students over the past few years. Of these VET students, around 4-5 per cent are still attending school. These data, therefore, can provide an important sense of scale to this analysis. To estimate a ‘participation rate’ for the target population, my analysis combines data on the: (1) VET student population (from the National VET Provider Collection); and (2) resident population (from the ABS Census). These estimates suggest that the VET participation rate for the target population in 2011 was around 42 per cent (see Figure 5.4). By comparing data across Censuses, it is also possible to estimate changes over the duration of the Victorian training reforms. These estimates suggest that the target population’s VET participation rate was around 30 per cent in 2006. This would indicate an 11.9 percentage point increase between 2006 and 2011. VET participation rates among the 18-24 year old target population were
considerably higher than the general population in the FMP region (14 per cent in 2011 and 10 per cent in 2006\(^\ref{17}\)). VET participation among the target population climbed as high as 45 per cent in 2012. However, by 2015, these estimates suggest that their participation rate had returned to the same level it had been prior to the introduction of the VTG reforms. The highest participation rate for single age groups was among 19 year olds (Figure 5.5). Not only is this the age at which VET participation is at its highest, it also increased by 16 percentage points between 2006 and 2011. Figure 5.5 also indicates that there is an age beyond the mid-20s at which FMP residents quickly become less likely to participate in VET. In 2014, NCVER conducted an inaugural collection of training data from all RTOs delivering training in Australia, regardless of whether it was subsidised through government funding (Total VET Activity). The results for the FMP region suggest that an additional 4000-6000 students not counted under the previous ‘government-subsidised’ collections are now to be considered as part of the total training effort. The inclusion of the ‘TVA’ dataset suggest that traditional estimates of VET participation based solely on publicly-funded training are likely to considerably underestimate the level of participation that occurs within local communities.

\(^{17}\) These findings are broadly consistent with what was reported in the DEECD SMR regional profiles which showed a participation rate in Frankston of between 12-15% and in Mornington Peninsula of between 11-12%. (DEECD, 2014a)
Figure 5.4: Participation rate and count of VET students aged 18-24 in the FMP region, 2006-2015

Note: The number of VET students within scope of the target population (the numerator) is presented as a share of population estimates for the target population (the denominator) for 2007-2010 and 2012-2014. Intercensal data are imputed on a linear trend between Censuses. Non-government subsidized data are estimates from the 2014-15 Total VET Activity Collection.

Source: ABS Census of Population and Housing, 2006; 2011 & NCVER VOCSTATS database

These data provide valuable insight into the impact of the Victorian training reforms on participation among the target population over time. Figure 5.5 shows the upward shifts in participation between 2009 and 2012 along with the early introduction of the VTG. With the introduction of the ‘Refocusing’ reforms in 2012-13, the rate of participation has declined to 2009-10 levels.
2. Access by disadvantaged learner groups. These analyses suggest that a robust administrative collection of the entire publicly-funded VET student population can offer valuable trend data on the composition of the target population. As a share of commencing students, the proportion of 18-24 year olds in VET who are unemployed in the FMP region has increased from 12 per cent to 25 per cent in 2015 (peaking at 30 per cent in 2013). It is unclear from these data how the increase in unemployed students was connected to the VTG reforms and the broader socio-economic environment in Victoria. Figure 5.6 shows that the shares of commencing students have remained relatively unchanged for a selection of important learner groups, including: (1) people with a disability; (2) people who left school in Year 9 or earlier; and (3) female learners.
In terms of gender, the initial VTG reforms appeared to have brought about a narrowing of the gender gap in the number of students enrolled. The subsequent ‘Refocusing’ reforms in 2012-13, however, appear to have widened the gender gap.

**Figure 5.6: Commencing students in target population, by learner group, FMP region, 2006-2015 (%)**

![Figure 5.6: Commencing students in target population, by learner group, FMP region, 2006-2015 (%)](chart.png)

*Source: NCVER VOCSTATS database*

### 3. Participation by student and course type.

The data presented in Section 5.3 indicated the important role of VET and work-based pathways in providing opportunities for young people in the FMP region. The number of apprenticeships has declined between 2006 and 2015 in the FMP region. This is consistent with trends indicative of softer demand for apprenticeships across Victoria and the rest of Australia in recent years. However, the downward trend has also occurred alongside significant growth in
RTOs delivering non-apprenticeship training courses to the target population in the FMP region. In 2006, the proportion of the target population enrolled in apprenticeships was 48 per cent (52 per cent were in non-apprenticeship training). Over time, the gap between these two forms of VET has widened significantly (Figure 5.7). By 2015, the proportion of students enrolled in non-apprenticeships had grown to 69 per cent. The proportion of apprentices among the target population declined by 11.6 percentage points between 2011 and 2013. This represented the second largest downward shift of any Statistical 4 area of Victoria over this time.

**Figure 5.7: Students in target population, by apprenticeship status, 2006-2015 (%)**

Source: NCVER VOCSTATS database

Growth in the number of students has occurred largely at the higher levels of the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF). Private RTOs have increased enrolments at the Certificate III and IV levels, while Certificate II has declined as a share of total
enrolment for the target population (Figure 5.8). The trends are indicative of increases in Certificate III (Non-apprenticeships\textsuperscript{18}); Certificate IV; and Diploma levels, particularly in the Community Services; Health sectors (Early Childhood and Aged Care) and Business sectors. Student demand for the Construction and Property Services and Community Services and Health areas appears to have continued to grow following the 2012-13 reforms. However, the proportion of students enrolled in Services and Business courses has declined dramatically since 2013 (Figure 5.9).

**Figure 5.8: Students in target population, by highest AQF level, 2006-2015 (%)**

![Graph showing enrolment trends](image)

*Note: Excludes Secondary education, Non-award courses, Other education, Other Source: NCVER VOCSTATS database*

\textsuperscript{18} In Australia most apprenticeships occur at Certificate III level
4. **Patterns of participation at the sub-regional level.** The overall VET participation rate across the FMP region (41.9 per cent) was broadly comparable with rates in the constituent areas Frankston (42.7%) and Mornington Peninsula (41%). Confirming the findings in the analysis of Census data, these NCVER data show considerable variation in VET participation across local areas within the wider FMP region. For example, the target population residing in the Frankston CBD and its surrounds had a high participation rate of 76.1 per cent overall. Conversely, the significantly disadvantaged area of Frankston North had a comparatively low participation rate of 12.8 per cent. This lower rate may be a function of the significant barriers to participation in this area (e.g. finances, housing, general instability). On the
Mornington Peninsula, there is more uniformity, with higher rates of VET participation in Rosebud (highly-disadvantaged, low transitions to higher education); and lower rates in Flinders (less disadvantaged, higher transitions to higher education). Figure 5.10 shows a clustering of SA2 (local) areas by VET participation rate and SEIFA level of disadvantage. All SEIFA Quintile 2 and 4 SA2 areas are in Frankston; all quintile 3 and 5 SA2 areas are on the Mornington Peninsula. The exception is quintile 1 (the most disadvantaged) which is occupied by Frankston North and Rosebud – McCrae on the southern peninsula.

Figure 5.10: VET participation rates among target population, by SA2 and SEIFA IRSD, 2011 (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Q1: Most disadvantaged</th>
<th>Q2</th>
<th>Q3</th>
<th>Q4</th>
<th>Q5: Least disadvantaged</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Frankston North (F)</td>
<td>12.8%</td>
<td>45.1%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosebud - McCrae (MP)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Seaford (F)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Carrum Downs (F)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frankston (F)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dromana (MP)</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Point Nepean (MP)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Mornington (MP)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Hastings - Somers (MP)</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skye - Sandhurst (F)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>40.2%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frankston South (F)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somerville (F)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Langwarrin (F)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flinders (MP)</td>
<td>32.8%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Mount Eliza (MP)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mount Martha (MP)</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: ABS SEIFA Indices; ABS Census of Population and Housing, 2011 & NCVER VOCSTATS database

The calculation of VET participation rates also enables comparisons to be made with other parts of Victoria. The FMP region’s participation rate (41.9%) is considerably
higher than the Victorian state average (33.9%), the neighbouring hub of Dandenong (30.7%) and Melbourne City (10.3%). In terms of the regions, it is positioned between Ballarat (32%), Geelong (46.5%) and Warrnambool (48.4%). This affirms the region, although part of the Melbourne metropolitan area, is characterized by post-school pathways and rates of VET participation that more closely resemble regional Victoria. Consistent with statewide trends, almost all local areas experienced double-digit declines between 2012 (the peak) and 2015 (the most current year) (Figure 5.11). The second greatest decline occurred in the most disadvantaged area in the region (Frankston North). This may suggest that the impact of the reforms are being felt disproportionately by the most disadvantaged segments. These data offer further evidence of the importance of VET pathways in providing opportunities for young adults in the FMP region.

**Figure 5.11: Percentage change in number of target population, by Statistical Area 2, change 2015 vs 2012 (%)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Q1: Most disadvantaged</th>
<th>Frankston North (F)</th>
<th>Rosebud - McCrae (MP)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-37%</td>
<td>-20%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-39%</td>
<td>-17%</td>
<td>-11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-23%</td>
<td>-16%</td>
<td>-13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-18%</td>
<td>-6%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q5: Least disadvantaged</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-33%</td>
<td>-34%</td>
<td>-21%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: NCVER VOCSTATS database
5. Composition of post-school VET providers. This analysis suggests that data on training provider type and funding source can generate insights into where training has occurred since the introduction of the VTG reforms. These data suggest that the composition of students by provider type has been entirely reconstituted since the VTG reforms were implemented in 2009. Figure 5.12 shows that the proportion of the target population studying with a TAFE has declined from 80 per cent in 2006 to 59 per cent in 2015. A corresponding increase has occurred in the proportion of students enrolled with private training organisations from 15 per cent to 37 per cent between 2006 and 2015. The Adult and Community Further Education (ACFE) or ‘Learn Local’ sector makes up only 5-8 per cent of students and this appears to have remained constant during the pre and post-reform period.

Figure 5.12: Students in target population, by reporting type, 2006-2015 (%)

Source: NCVER VOCSTATS database
As shown in Chapter 3, the number of RTOs has been repeatedly used as a proxy measure of student choice since the VTG reforms were introduced. Data from the SMR profiles show that the number of RTOs delivering training to all residents of Frankston City increased from 63 in 2011 to 84 in 2013. It increased from 41 to 72 for residents of the Mornington Peninsula Shire (DEECDa, 2014). This indicates that, since 2012, the number of RTOs delivering training to all VET student residents of the FMP region has increased even as the participation rate was falling. As indicated above, there is no further disaggregation disclosed in the SMR profiles as to who these providers are or the composition of their offerings. Data disaggregated to the level of ‘RTO name’ reveal a great deal more about the composition of the training market. It is at this level that I come to understand the significant size of Chisholm Institute (TAFE) as a provider of training to this part of the target population. Data disaggregated by RTO name suggest that Chisholm students comprise almost one half of all non-apprenticeship program enrolments among 15-24 year olds over the three years to 2013. These data show that, in addition to Chisholm Institute (Frankston, Rosebud, Dandenong, Berwick, Bass Coast and Cranbourne) and Holmesglen (Moorabbin) a number of other TAFEs deliver training to residents of the FMP region (e.g. Box Hill Institute; GOTAFE; Kangan Institute; and Melbourne Polytechnic). Occupying positions 3, 4, 5, 7 and 8 on the highest enrolling (non-apprenticeship) enrolments were a range of private RTOs: Pragmatic Training; BuildIt Learning; SkillsPlus; Smart Training and Job Placement; and the Australian Institute of Fitness. The fourth highest enrolling RTO over this time period was BuildIt Learning (TGA Id: 21357). This RTO was also the second highest enrolling RTO for
Certificate I (foundation skills) level training of the target population between 2011 and 2013 (Chisholm Institute was the highest enrolling RTO). ‘Buildit Learning’ (also known as ‘RTO Edge’, ‘Diverse Learning’ and ‘BAWM’) gained notoriety in April 2015 when the following announcement was made by the Victorian Government under the heading ‘Entitlement Restoration Advice’:

On 10 April 2015, BAWM Pty Ltd (BAWM) a registered training organisation (RTO) wrote to a number of students who had undertaken training in 2014 recalling their qualifications. The qualifications were recalled due to concerns regarding the quality of training and assessment that was delivered by BAWM... The Victorian Government will restore entitlements to training for students who have had their qualifications recalled (DET, 2016d).

The fifth highest enrolling RTO was recruiting students in the Frankston region until its registration was cancelled in 2015 by the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority. The RTO had previously distributed the advertising material shown in Figure 5.13 to recruit students. Using vibrant, primary colours, this particular example was targeting prospective students with a sales pitch using words and phrases such as: ‘free!’; ‘short’; ‘only $120’; ‘low price’; and ‘the cheapest in Melbourne!’.
There is very little publicly available data on (1) the quality of training and assessment; (2) training completion rates or (3) training outcomes at the level of the RTO. Insights may be gleaned from audit reports (if released by the regulator/RTO) or highly-aggregated data published by the RTO on training engagement and employer satisfaction as part of their registration requirements (e.g. the AQTF Quality Indicators). The new Victorian RTO surveys may take some steps forward to address this gap. At present, it is often not until an RTO is under investigation, reported to the media or has its registration cancelled that issues of low-quality provision and unethical practices become known to the general public. CEO of Northern Melbourne Institute of Technology (NMIT) told the Campus Review in 2012 that ‘a significant number of dishonest providers then managed to rort the system at the expense of gullible or compliant students, and were only exposed because of an increasingly vigilant and investigative media. For a period of time, investigative journalists were the default regulatory authority for the Victorian VET sector’ (Mitchell, 2012, p.13). Any assessment of the data must...
recognise these as key constraints to understanding what VET opportunities are available and accessible in a local setting. Having provided this account of the data, the next section will provide a summary of Chapter 5.

5.5. Summary of findings

This chapter began with a document analysis of government reporting on VET in the FMP region and wider southern metropolitan region of Victoria. The results suggest that many of the traditional narratives are repeated through an economic lens. The descriptions contained within these documents appear to reinforce notions of low-skilled residents with mismatched skills and young people with low aspirations. The reporting also appears to reinforce the classifications of Frankston as a ‘regional’ hub and Mornington Peninsula Shire as ‘more rural’ compared to the rest of Melbourne. This chapter then conducted primary analysis of secondary data to quantify the training opportunities available to the target population, generally and through VET. The analysis drew on publicly-available data from the ABS Census of Population and Housing; the NCVER National Provider Collection; and the On Track survey of school leavers in Victoria. The findings presented in this section suggest that quantitative data from administrative systems have a great deal to offer our understanding of VET access and participation. With these data, I can observe that post-school pathways have traditionally been more work and vocationally-oriented, particularly for young men following the apprenticeship stream. They appear to more closely resemble those of regional cities of Victoria than the rest of metropolitan Melbourne. These data also tell us that the target population’s pathways were changing through higher rates of participation in higher
education; increased participation in non-apprenticeship pathways; increased participation at higher AQF levels; and increased participation in VET with private RTOs. Time series of administrative data show that VET participation rose significantly with the introduction of the VTG but has since returned to 2009-10 levels. With the exception of Frankston South (a less disadvantaged area), all local areas experienced double-digit percentage declines in training participation between 2012 (the peak) and 2015 (the most recent data available). It appears from these data that the ‘services’ training area has been disproportionately affected by the 2012-13 cuts to government funding. Data held through administrative collections and surveys provide a useful indication of size and composition of the training market structures, and to some extent, the outputs of that training. These administrative and survey data appear to offer valuable insights into point-in-time and trend ‘functionings’ (beings and doings) of the target population. However, our view is somewhat obstructed by the focus on ‘current activities’ (or inactivity). Data are generally categorised in terms of current levels of participation in education, training and/or employment. We also know very little about the flows between and outcomes from the various sectors of education, training and employment (and unemployment) for this local area population. We also have little insight into the target populations’ collective and individual freedoms to choose and reject from a range of options. Finally, I know little about the nature and quality of VET activity. As a result, I gain little insight through these data on the human experience of navigating these complex structures nor of the underlying causal mechanisms which may explain these patterns and trends in participation. To address some of these limitations in
the quantitative data, the next chapter seeks to explain some of the themes identified in Chapter 5 by asking the question: What do the students say?
Chapter 6: What do students say?

‘Weakening TAFE threatens a really significant part of the whole Australian education edifice…it is the component primarily committed to extending opportunity to those less advantaged.’

(Kwong Le Dow in Beddie, O’Connor & Curtin, 2013, p.55)

***

This chapter presents an analysis of qualitative data collected from six focus groups with learners in the FMP region in 2015. Approached through the lens of the capabilities approach, the aims of the chapter are to: (1) delve into the underlying causal mechanisms impacting upon the findings in the quantitative analysis; (2) address gaps in our understanding arising from the limitations of quantitative analyses: and (3) generate new insights into the experiences of a sample of the target population in their own words. The chapter provides six illustrative examples across student types: (1) apprentice plumbers; (2) pre-apprenticeship electricians; (3) apprentice electricians; (4) apprentice welders; (5) early childhood education and care students; and (6) Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning students. The common and divergent themes from each section are summarised at the end of the chapter.

6.1. Apprentice Plumbers

Context. The students considered in this section were enrolled in a Certificate III apprenticeship course in plumbing. The course is delivered over three years on a part-time basis. It is directed at young people who have a goal of becoming a registered plumber. Entry is predicated on securing a Registered Training Agreement with an
employer. This focus group was conducted in Frankston with seven male apprentices in their second and third year of training. The government-subsidised course fees in 2015 were $5,778. Students also pay a materials fee of $465; a student services and amenities fee of $175; and an ancillary fee of $25.

**What the apprentice plumbers say.** The group was asked about **the neighbourhood** of Frankston and surrounding suburbs. Their general perception of the area focused on the issue of safety, although the campus itself was considered a safe place.

*Stuart:* *You don’t really feel safe [in the neighborhood].*

*Stevie:* *I actually genuinely worry when I walk around some of the streets to see if I’m going to get shanked in the back or not [but] I live in the nice part, Carrum Downs (laughter).*

All participants live locally (between 5-10km) and drive to campus. The Frankston campus is the closest TAFE campus for all respondents. Respondents stated that they must travel further distances (20km+) for the workplace-based component of their apprenticeship. This workplace component comprises the majority of their training hours. The issue of **accessibility** was not considered a key issue for they owned their own cars. Even so, having the TAFE campus centrally located within Frankston was seen as a positive. The group discussed what **opportunities were available for young people** in Frankston and what types of aspirations young people have growing up in the area. Their responses indicated a disassociation between themselves, as apprentices bound to an employer, and other young people living in the region.
Ben: I reckon that’s pretty true [that young people in Frankston have low aspirations]…I mean you see all the young people just hanging around the station...

Darren: No one has like bigger pictures, like they just want to do that for the rest of their life.

Robert: Or they just work in Coles [supermarket chain] for the rest of their life.

Stevie: Easiest job they can find.

These observations would suggest that the participants could envision a long-term plan for themselves that set them apart from their peers who lived in the same neighbourhood. Part of this plan, some agreed, necessitated training, working and the pursuit of greater autonomy in how they managed their lives. There was recognition that the apprenticeship qualification and licensing was the first step on a longer pathway to achieving these goals. They saw participation and completion of a trade qualification as being a short-term sacrifice to reap longer-term opportunities. Equally, there was some recognition of the future cost of not undertaking training. They then discussed themselves in comparison to a different peer group who had, for example, become employed at the local supermarket with no formal post-school qualifications:

Stuart: With no qualifications or anything they can just sort of apply for it [the job at Coles] and get it and then they don’t have to do anything.

Bob: There’s people out there who’d be working at Safeway and Maccas and all that and they’ll earn more than us but in 4 years or 5 years,
we’ll be earning double the pay which is worth it in the end just to
tough it out for a couple of years

**Stevie**  ... [you are] better off getting your ticket [Plumber’s licence] and
everything else like that than working in Safeway and at the end of
four years you’ve got nothing behind you. So just, yeah, get a ticket.

However, when speaking about the recent growth in the number of young people
enrolled in training, including in Frankston, the responses seem to return to the dominant
narrative of low aspirations and self-efficacy.

**Stuart:**  [More training is] giving them [young people in Frankston] the
opportunity to do something, if they want to but obviously...a lot of
youth in this town doesn’t.

**Bob:**  That’s exactly right, they’d rather just the easy way out.

When asked what advice they would give to a young person starting out on a
similar journey to their own, the group agreed that the key ingredients included self-
fulfillment and the right people (‘finding a good boss’, ‘you have to enjoy it somewhat’
and ‘good workers and working with good people’). Asked what advice they would give
to someone who was thinking of dropping out of their apprenticeship, the group agreed
that, having started, it is better to finish. It is, one participant argued, more beneficial to
finish the trade you are not enjoying, than to withdraw from your apprenticeship
altogether.

**Ben:**  Nah, don’t drop out, just get your ticket and just f*ck off and do
something else.

**Darren:**  If you’ve started it you may as well finish it.
Robert: Once you’ve got your ticket, you’ve always got it.

Billy: I’ve known people that have been 3rd year chippies [carpenters] and they’ve gone ‘oh I wanna change’ and become a plumber and I’m like why wouldn’t you just finish your apprenticeship as a chippie and then you’ve got a qualification that can go anywhere? Just finish it and do something else.

The reasons why people might drop-out reflected a number of intrinsic factors (‘too hard’; ‘they don’t have it in them’; ‘they don’t have the right stuff’; ‘they don’t have the ticker’; ‘they’re not mature enough’) and extrinsic workplace factors (‘could get injured’; ‘it’s an easy job to get injured at’). The group discussed perceptions of employers about qualifications and training providers. In their opinion, it didn’t particularly matter so long as the individual was able to perform their job on site.

Ben: I don’t think they look at where you’ve got it [the qualification] from. It’s more like you’ve got your qualification... So you’re good enough.

Darren: It’s not really a question they ask.

Robert: I remember when I got my white card [general construction induction card], they just put me in a room for four hours but they give you all the answers to everything anyway. It doesn’t make any difference. Any idiot’s going to pass it.

When asked about how much control they felt they had over the decision to enrol in the plumbing apprenticeship, there was unanimous agreement that all had complete control in their decision-making process. That said, nobody within the group
had looked in detail at a course guide to develop an understanding of what they would learn (‘Yeah, you’ve got like a general understanding’; ‘Yeah, you just know’). Instead, for this group, TAFE was the trusted option among employers and was preferred for its location and accessibility:

**Ben:** You’re not really interested in what the TAFE offers like it’s just –
you want to be a plumber so you have to come to TAFE...

**Darren:** Yeah, my employer chose [TAFE]. He was just like ‘you’re going here, here’s your first day’.

**Robert:** Just [TAFE], yeah because it’s local. No point going anywhere else.

Future plans appear to be moderated by what real opportunities were available and accessible in the local environment. Post-training job opportunities were perceived to be dependent upon the location (‘if I can get a job locally; ‘where the job is’ and ‘where you can get work…you take work where you can get it’). One participant was of the view that ‘…there’ll always be work [as a plumber]. If you can find it or be good enough to get it’. Another was guided by their perception of the size of the job market: ‘…there’s a lot of plumbers out there. So I don’t think it would be too hard to find it’. If travel is a necessary part of finding work, these participants see this as an inconvenient but necessary part of the job. Finally, the group was asked how they will judge whether the course has been successful six months after the finish. In this instance, they placed more importance on the intrinsic attributes of the individual student than differences in the training provision.

**Robert:** It’s more about where you’re working I guess... How much you pick
Ben: I don’t think it’s got to do with training it’s who you are as a person. If you want to learn, you’ll learn.

6.2. Pre-Apprenticeship Electricians

Context. The students considered in this section were enrolled in a Certificate II in Electrotechnology (Career Start) pre-apprenticeship course. The course is delivered over three months on a full-time basis as a pre-apprenticeship. It is directed at people wanting to move into an electrical apprenticeship by developing skills in domestic and commercial electrical work. A potential outcome is an electrical apprenticeship. This focus group was conducted in Frankston with seven pre-apprentices (six males: one female). The students were interviewed in their fourth week of a 12 week course. The government-subsidised course fees in 2015 were $1,216. Students also pay a materials fee of $400; a student services and amenities fee of $175; and an ancillary fee of $25.

What the pre-apprenticeship electricians say. The group discussed the positive and negative attributes of the neighbourhood of Frankston and surrounding suburbs. Positive attributes included the beach, foreshore and accessibility of services in the local area (‘everything is within walking distance’). The availability of public transport and a train line was also viewed positively. The negative attributes related more to social issues, such as the number of ‘junkies’ in the CBD area. This group of students perceived improvements in safety in the local area in recent years.

Dougie Oh, I feel more unsafe at night [than during the day]. Yeah, if
you’re like, hanging around near the train station at night but if the
[police] are out, you’re pretty much right. In my opinion I’ve seen
less than there used to be here when I came to this TAFE maybe
five years ago

Frank Yeah, that’s true like five years ago I watched someone get stabbed
in the bloody bus port where the train station is, yeah.

Brendan Yeah, it used to be a rowdy Friday night with the coppers and yeah
now you don’t see much of that which is great.

Paul Yeah, during the day is completely fine.

Each participant was able to describe familial connections to the trades which led
to an interest in them enrolling in a VET course. They remarked upon this interest
developing from an early age while watching their fathers, uncles and/or other family
members at work:

Dougie I just always had an interest in it to be honest. I’ve got two uncles
[who are electricians], my girlfriend’s got two uncles as well and
ever since I was a kid I just always used to try and help my uncle
with outlets or...he used to fix power tools. I just always interested
from them so...I’m finally pursuing it.

Frank My pop used to be an electrician and... just growing up he used to
do electronics with me and pulling it all apart and putting it back
together so...got a real interest for it. Then I got work experience
with an electrical contractor and yeah I just thought ‘this is great’
so I thought I’d take it up.
Jane A lot of my uncles and my dad, they’re all carpenters but that’s a very physically demanding trade so I did work experience with a lot of different trades and electrical was just the least physically demanding.

On the topic of young people in training, the group observed differences between their own pay levels and those of their peers in other jobs. The following discussion suggests that the process of making these comparisons can cause frustrations in the short-term.

Dougie Yeah, a lot of guys who are team members [at McDonalds] get made managers and can’t leave or they don’t want to leave because the money’s too high.

Frank My friend’s brother. He’s a manager. He actually rakes in quite a lot. He bought a brand new Beamer [BMW car] the other day.

Jane They get more than a pharmacist who has gone to uni. It’s ridiculous.

The group was asked to discuss the narrative that young people in Frankston have low-aspirations for post-school education and training. Their responses suggested that some felt rushed into making decisions about their education in the past. They did not always feel they were able to exercise freedom in the choice of course, particularly when they were younger.

Dougie I think there’s too much pressure on kids to do a course rather than what they actually want to do.

Frank Yeah, during school you’re sort of forced into one [a training
course] – just to pick one- rather than actually think about what you want to do.

Jane Yeah, I would agree. Like during school it was all very rushed.

Frank ...which could be why there’s a lot of people in this course that are 23+ years old because they were forced into a course they didn’t want to do.

Dougie Pretty much yeah.

The group was asked what options they had open to them in terms of training providers before enrolling in their current pre-apprenticeship course. The results indicate that location, accessibility, duration and cost were considered as part of their decision-making processes to enroll with a particular provider and/or course:

Dougie There was [a TAFE B course] when I looked but [TAFE A] was closer with the public transport so it was just easier for me.

Frank If I wanted to do a course I would travel and wake-up early in the morning but yeah I live in Rosebud [on the southern peninsula]. I’d go to TAFE there but they only really do agriculture and horticulture so...

Jane I looked at the fees because TAFE B was going to be more expensive. And I looked at the length of the course. This one [at TAFE A] is two weeks longer [10 weeks] than the TAFE B one but it was cheaper so...

Bob Well I actually came across from Dandenong because it’s closer—much closer.
Despite these considerations, cost was not considered a major factor in their decision-making as it is only a relatively short duration (12 weeks). The associated costs of textbooks and materials were not considered to be prohibitively high (‘We don’t pay for books in this course but when we start our apprenticeship we have to buy the textbooks. So it’s not a problem yet’). Although the direct cost of training did not appear to be a major factor in enrolling, the potential indirect costs associated with withdrawal did appear to resonate with these pre-apprentices. The participants were asked what advice they would give to a young person starting out on a similar journey to their own. Their responses emphasised the importance of having a clear set of goals and the importance of ‘making sure’ it’s what you want to.

Dougie  Just, I guess, make sure that you want to do the course. So that at the end of it you’re not feeling unsatisfied.

Frank  You’ll have wasted two grand. Because you don’t get that refunded if you feel like you don’t want to do the course.

Jane  Definitely make sure that you want to be an electrician just so you’re not out-of-pocket two grand or so or however much you’ve paid. Just really make sure.

Bob  Yeah, and just so you don’t waste a couple of weeks when you could be doing something that you’d actually want to do.

The group was asked what advice they would give to someone who was thinking of dropping out of their pre-apprenticeship. Their responses focused on the importance of completing the qualification. Similar to the plumbers, this group saw potential for future portability of their electrician's licence within the trades. This would indicate their
expectation that the qualification and their licence will convert into broader opportunities in the medium to longer term future.

**Dougie**  
Well, with a course like this I’d tell them to push it through to the end. Just so you have a qualification behind you because you’re not going to be able to start another course until after it’s done anyway.

**Frank**  
And you might come back in a couple of years and think oh actually I can use this qualification. It’s only 10 weeks it’s better to just see it through.

**Jane**  
If you’ve spent the money, then why waste it with a couple of weeks. As these guys said you might as well just stick it out.

**Bob**  
It’s good just to have that qualification because if you go into another trade and they see you’ve got electrical behind you as well, it just looks good.

The **post-training plans** of these pre-apprentices were diverse. Each appeared to focus on different opportunities arising from completing their apprenticeship. One student was looking to start their own business, another was considering the requirements of the A-Grade [electrician's licence] and what they would need to be able to do to pass. Another student was thinking of working overseas because ‘…an A Grade Electrician is pretty much your ticket to work anywhere’. Another noted that ‘…there’s a lot of job opportunities in mines …on oil rigs and stuff which means travelling but it’s for more money so it’s better in the long run’.
6.3. Apprentice Electricians

**Context.** The students considered in this section were enrolled in a Certificate III in Electrotechnology (Electrician). The course is delivered over four years on a part-time basis. It is directed at people wanting to start a career as a licensed electrical mechanic. Further education and training pathways include the ‘Certificate IV in Electrotechnology – Systems Electrician’ or an ‘Advanced Diploma of Electronics and Communications Engineering’. This focus group was conducted in Frankston with five male apprentices in their second year of training. The government-subsidised course fees in 2015 were $3,410. Students also pay a materials fee of $400; a student services and amenities fee of $175; and an ancillary fee of $25.

**What the apprentice electricians say.** The group discussed the positive and negative attributes of the **neighbourhood** of Frankston and surrounding suburbs. Positive attributes included the beach, the shops, and ‘the train station helps on the weekends’. The negative attributes related to concerns about safety, particularly in the area surrounding the train station. Similar to the plumbers, their responses suggested a disassociation between these apprentice electricians and other young people in the area.

*David*  
*We’ve got so many f*cking drop-kicks who live around here.*

*John*  
*All the 15 year olds that dropped out of school and are standing in front of TAFE.*

The group reflected on what it’s like **growing up and starting adulthood in the FMP region.** In terms of access to higher education, one participant observed that ‘…most of the people I went to school with have made the effort to travel or moved into
the city or catch a train or whatever’. They described the difference between life in Frankston and life closer to the Melbourne CBD.

David Most people in the city like they’re all like business-minded and that’s kind of not really drummed into us as much down here. I just feel like it’s a bit more relaxed down here. So you talk to the people who live up in the city and whatnot and they’re like ‘it’s all crazy’.

John The pressure’s not really around us as much so it’s not really in our face.

All participants lived around 5-15km from the campus and all choose to drive cars rather than take public transport. However, they must travel further distances (25km+) for the workplace-based component of their apprenticeship. As with the plumbers, this workplace component comprises the majority of their training hours. For the apprentice electricians, their choice of training provider was strongly influenced by its proximity to home and where their employer wanted them to study. This would suggest, at least to some degree, a narrowing of preferences occurred to adapt to what was closest to home.

David TAFE was just close.

John Yeah, it was closest.

Michael It was my boss’s choice, kind of.

Allan There’s nothing really close to here. So, like, I live 5 minutes away so it wouldn’t make sense to go anywhere else.

Asked about their journey into an electrical apprenticeship, one participant said that ‘It’s just what we kind of grew up into, really’. The group spoke positively about their pursuit of their electrician’s licence as a motivating goal. They agreed that
‘electrical’s the hardest to get’ which appeared to indicate a sense of pride in their pursuit of this particular trade qualification and licence. The group also spoke positively about the trade of electrical work and the job prospects they perceived to be available. On this topic, one apprentice stated that ‘there’s always going to be power around. You’re always going to be in work’. Once again, there was an acknowledgement of the wider skills, knowledge and opportunities arising beyond what would be learnt in this particular trade. For example, another remarked that ‘in electrical you sort of do a bit of everything like you’ll do a bit of building or something like that to get around things. [In] building you just wood and hammer. Electrical has different sides to it and using different tools’. One participant expressed the view that how well one does in their electrician’s licence testing is based on a mix of personal and training related factors. The result, they argued, is ‘a direct result of how much attention you’ve paid…[as well as] how well the course is set up’.

While participants believed that they learned more at work than at TAFE, they also believed that workplace problems are one of the most influential factors in non-completion. For example, one participant was with his second employer; another was with his third. While they did not look at more than one RTO before enrolling at this TAFE, all participants remarked on the difficulties of ‘shopping around’ for employers on Seek, Gumtree or through the TAFE. They felt there was pressure on them to stick with one once they found one. One participant said that ‘more often than not it’s the worksite, who they work with, what they do and whether they like it or not. [Trade] School is kind of irrelevant’. Speaking of the opportunities that are available locally,
one participant said: ‘There are always people [employers] you can go with, whether it’s a quality job or not [is something different]’ The group spoke about the types of employers – large and small – and the likelihood of them keeping apprentices on as full-time employers after they complete. One participant expressed a view that linked their decision-making with the incentives driving provider practices:

David Depends on which company you work for. If you work for a small company you’ve got a good chance of being kept on...but if you work for a large scale company then they’re intending on pushing as many apprentices through to get government bonuses and sh*t, trying to get more money...It all depends on the company. I’m not stereotyping but...

The group discussed the goals they hope to achieve after they have completed their apprenticeship. They were asked how their world might change as a result of gaining their qualification and electrician's licence. The responses indicated an interest in earnings and employment but also a sense of broadened choices and opportunities more generally.

John There'll be more job opportunities. Because [right now] we’re just an apprentice we can’t really do much. So we just have to kind of finish. You can choose what you want to do. Choose your field. See how far you can get and whatnot.
6.4. Apprentice Welders

**Context.** The students considered in this section were enrolled in a Certificate IV in Engineering (Fabrication and Welding). This course is delivered over one year on a part-time basis. It is directed at people wanting to become a certified welder. Further education and training pathways include the ‘Diploma of Engineering Technology’, a course which is accredited by Engineers Australia and can be a pathway into higher education. This focus group was conducted in Frankston with five male apprentices in their second and third year of training. The government-subsidised course fees in 2015 were $4,624. Students also pay a materials fee of $450; a student services and amenities fee of $175; and an ancillary fee of $25.

**What the apprentice welders say.** The group was asked about the positives of the **neighbourhood** of Frankston and the surrounding suburbs. Positive attributes included the beach, the foreshore, the pubs and the lifestyle (‘It’s the gateway to the Peninsula!’). Negative factors were perceived to be the crime rate, drugs and junkies. The group discussed what **opportunities are available for young people** in Frankston more generally and what types of aspirations young people had growing up in the area. The issue of disassociation appeared but was extended to include issues of intergenerational disadvantage and parental aspirations.

*David* Some people around that just don’t want to work.

*Tom* They just want to sit on their ass and get Centrelink and drink and do drugs and smoke.

*David* And I think that their parents would probably be the same. I think
you see a lot of generational....repetitiveness?

**Researcher** Reproduction?

**David** Yeah, it’s because it’s what they’re used to. It’s what they know.

**Tom** Parents don’t care so they don’t care. Like, they live on Centrelink so why can’t we?

The group then discussed the ways that some young people can leave school and be stuck churning through low-skilled, low-paid jobs which may require no training qualifications. Like the plumbers, the responses appear to focus on self-efficacy and ‘choices’ associated with different post-school pathways:

**David** If you’re working at Maccas at least you’ve got a job.

**Tom** Yeah, I was earning more at Maccas than I am now. On a big week when I was working at Maccas I used to bring in $700 a week – on a bad week.

**Michael** Everyone has their own career path really. If somebody wants to work at Maccas for the rest of their life that’s their choice. We want to be tradies so we got off our arses and did something.

Asked about how **their journey** led to a fabrication apprenticeship, one spoke about how a pre-apprenticeship in welding led to his current pathway. He said that the decision to do VET at school was not an active one. Nor did it provide a clear line-of-sight for him between the training and what he could do with the qualification at the end. It ‘…was just because the school made us do something… It was about five years after that pre-apprenticeship that I got the job’. Another apprentice’s journey offered some
insight into the way in which a short-term job opportunity can lead to a longer-term perception of being ‘stuck’ in a vocational pathway.

David I sort of fell into this. I wasn’t working and then one of my mates who does this [welding] sort of needed someone to work for a day and then a day turned into a week and a week turned into a year.

Tom And now you’re stuck here.

David And now I’m stuck.

The group discussed the importance of family and social networks in finding job opportunities on the Peninsula. One spoke about being offered his apprenticeship through his brother. Another stated that the job offer came about ‘…through a twisted line of his boss talking to his mate and his mate talking to his mate I eventually found a position that suited’. Reflecting on how they expect to gain employment after they finish, the group was in agreement that you need to know someone to be offered a more substantive position in the trade.

David It’s the only way to get into those sorts of things.

Tom It’s not what you know it’s who you know – nowadays anyway. If you want to get into the mines and all the big sh*t you’ve got to know someone. You might have all the qualifications under the sun and spent tens of thousands of dollars getting it.... You might know everything but they’d rather train you up to know it their way rather than the way you’ve learnt it.

Reflecting on reasons for withdrawal, the group discussed the importance, having started the apprenticeship, of not dropping out. As with students in the other focus
groups, the fabrication apprentices believed that the relationship with their boss was a highly influential factor in completing their apprenticeship. One stated that the overriding factor was ‘work relationships. The relationship with your boss especially when you’re training’. For those who do drop-out, the group discussed what local opportunities were available to them. This exchange between two participants indicated the difference between becoming a licensed tradesperson and an unskilled laborer.

David  What else are you going to do? Are you going to go and be a labourer?

Tom  That’s exactly what I did in my second year. Don’t do it. It’s the worst mistake I’ve ever done.

David  I suppose if you don’t like the trade then yeah – leave.

Tom  Well that was the thing, I liked the trade. I didn’t like my boss.

There were a number of more tangible factors (personal, family and financial) that appeared to be impacting upon the lives of these apprentices while they were completing their course.

Tom  I’m a really heavy sleeper so if it’s too late by the time the kids are settled and I can’t get to sleep I just stay up.

David  I think a lot of young guys get screwed over because their boss demands so much. I’ve just come out of 90 hour weeks. I’ve got two kids...You know, I do it for them [my family] so if they’re not going to have me around – what’s the point?

The issue of cost was discussed, particularly as it relates to the additional costs of supporting their own participation in training. This exchange between two apprentices
appeared to be indicative of how the benefit of a small government allowance can be offset by other factors.

David  
*I get $34 a week because I’ve got two kids. That’s meant to pay for day care which costs per day - before [government] funding - $100 per kid. So $200 for the 1 day I’m at TAFE.*

Tom  
*How the f*ck do you get that I’ve got two kids and I don’t get sh*t!*

David  
*Trust me – if I had of have known it was for $34 before I went down that avenue of 100-something god-damn pages of [paperwork] and needless phone calls, I just wouldn’t have bothered.*

Tom  
*Not worth the 34 bucks.*

The group discussed their earlier ‘choices’ in relation to training. One said that at school ‘they were just like ‘do you want to do something?’ and I was like ‘welding sounds alright’’. Their reasons for selecting their course and provider were influenced by their employer as well as their proximity to the campus (‘It was my boss’s choice’, ‘Yeah, he just said you’ve got to go to trade school. Frankston’s closest so you’ll go there’). There were exchanges between the participants that were indicative of the passive role that some young adults play during the process of choosing and enrolling with a training provider. For example, one participant spoke about feeling powerless in how he was led through his Certificate IV in Warehousing.

Michael  
*Before I got into this through my Job Support Agency I did a Cert IV in Warehousing just because I wanted my forklift ticket but they wouldn’t just put me through and get my forklift ticket so they made me do this whole big course and at the end you get to choose if you*
want to do your forklift ticket. So I had to go through a whole Cert IV course just to get my bloody ticket.

Tom The government subsidise the Cert IV not the forklift ticket so that’s why training providers put you through the Cert IV.

There was some limited awareness of new training organisations entering the training markets in Frankston. For example, one participant referred to a private RTO who could ‘get you to sign up to do a hospitality course’. There was also an exchange which indicated what further study options one participant was aspiring to and his narrow understanding of what qualifications were included within the vocational stream of engineering.

Tom To go any higher you have to do a Diploma or something.

Michael [Incredulous tone] Well I don’t think there’s a Diploma of Engineering.

Tom There actually is, yeah a Bachelors and stuff. You go to university for it. Yeah degrees and Masters. That’s where you learn all your drafting and shit.

Michael Oh f*ck that, I’m quite happy with just Cert IV.

One respondent was asked whether his decision to start his own business was to gain more control over his work: ‘Yeah, control over your own life really. You can choose what to do – what you want to do. If you want to specialise in something’. Asked what their plans are after they complete training, the group spoke about their aspirations of setting up their own business and/or relocating overseas.

Tom My plan is to stay with my boss for maybe another year, save some
money and then go out on my own – just straight up. But who knows six months down the track I might want to travel and work all around the world.

David We’re probably gonna relocate overseas at some point.

Ben [Going] down the mines, make some big money.

Michael I actually know a guy – like one of my old man’s friends – who works on an offshore oil rig and he reckons he’s gonna get me out there like after I finish my apprenticeship so that’s real big money – that’ll let me save to open up my own business.

The question of how apprentices will measure the success of their training focused less on post-training employment outcomes and paid work and more on their ability and confidence to work on their own.

David If you can go out and do it on your own.

Tom If we can turn around and do whatever your next employee and employer tells us to do or whatever then we know that this training has done what it needed to do.

Michael If something goes wrong you know how to fix it.

Tom That’s it – fix your stuff-ups and other peoples.

Michael Not have to ask the dumb questions – you just know the answers.

6.5. Early Childhood Education and Care Students

Context. The students considered in this section were enrolled in a Diploma of Early Childhood Education and Care. The course is delivered over one year (full-time) or two years (part-time). It is directed at people who want to work with children in
education settings (childcare or kindergarten) or as a nanny. Further education and training pathways include the ‘Bachelor of Early Childhood Education’, facilitated through a partnership between the TAFE and Deakin University. This focus group was conducted in Rosebud with eight female students. The students were interviewed in the final weeks of their one year course. All students live between the neighboring suburbs of McRae and Blairgowrie. The government-subsidised course fees in 2015 were $8,440 if paid up-front. Alternatively, the VET FEE-HELP fees were $16,490 if deferred through an income-contingent government loan. Students also pay a materials fee of $130; a student services and amenities fee of $175; and an ancillary fee of $25.

**What the early childhood education and care students say.** When asked to describe the positives attributes of their local **neighbourhood**, the participants at the Rosebud campus spoke about ‘the beach’ and ‘the atmosphere’. Of the local population, it was said that ‘you kind of get all sorts of people down here’ and ‘there’s a lot of ferals I reckon’. Surprisingly, the negatives raised included the seasonal supply of tourists who are attracted to the southern peninsula during peak holiday periods.

*Jane*  
Yeah, we don’t get a summer. Ever.

*Sharon*  
You can’t leave the house, it’s so busy.

When speaking about their **post-school options** available to young people, the group offered insights into the composition of different providers on the southern peninsula. Their responses suggest that the local TAFE was their only option for their course.

*Jane*  
There’s other agencies but they’re all – I know there’s one [non-
TAFE RTO] down here.

Kate It’s pretty limited.

Jane It’s very limited.

Sharon I’d say hospitality and business are probably big down here – but not early childhood [that’s mainly at TAFE].

Fiona Plus you have to like especially with [Private RTO] you’ve got to be either on the Dole or...

Kate In need of help.

Jane That’s pretty much it down here but most of its all Frankston way. Frankston and Dandenong.

Researcher So, for you, was [TAFE A] your only choice?

Fiona Well it was my only choice.

There was general agreement that the TAFE brand was trusted by employers in the local community (‘It’s got a good name’). Their responses also indicated there was a degree of adaptive preference in their decision-making. For example, one participant commented that ‘I’ve spoken to a lot of people …who work in early childhood and they said that they like [TAFE A] students so it was kind of good really that this was our only option’. The issue of balancing the demands of a training on top of other family and personal responsibilities was also raised, particularly in terms of raising young children.

Jane One of the positives for me is that there’s a childcare right there which I can put my daughter in when I come here. So it’s just easy.

The limited time available to this group was a feature of the discussion. The group was particularly surprised at the time commitment required to keep up with the
requirements of the Diploma-level course. Over the year, this has had implications for other parts of their lives.

Kate  
*Not having time to do anything else like a lot of us – some of us - have young children and stuff and it just all gets thrown out the window because you’ve got to sit down and do your work. And it just makes it so hard to live a normal life.*

Sharon  
*You have to give up everything. I’ve had to give up work during the week. I can only work on the weekends because I don’t have time. I still don’t have time because there’s just so much. There’s just no time.*

Some participants were critical of what they perceived as inequalities in the cost of completing the diploma-level qualification. They spoke of people they knew who had recently completed the same course at a fraction of the cost because they completed prior to the introduction of the VET FEE-HELP income-contingent loan scheme (described in Chapter 3).

Researcher  
*So you’ve come in through VET FEE-HELP funding?*

All  
*Yeah.*

Researcher  
*Was that a big factor in why you enrolled?*

Fiona  
*It made it a lot easier.*

Jane  
*That was the only way that the government would subsidise us. Otherwise, it would have been unaffordable.*

Fiona  
*My girlfriend paid nothing to do her course. Or $100.*

Sharon  
*Well that’s what it should be because we have to pay for everything*
else anyway.

Kate [People at my work] did it two years ago and they didn’t have to pay anything for it and they had like not even half the workload that we had so...[they] only the resource fees – that’s it.

When asked what advice they would give to somebody thinking of withdrawing or dropping-out, the risk of accruing longer-term costs was raised again (‘What’s the point? You’ve got to still pay it back even if you drop out’). Another responded that the cost was ‘the reason I stayed! I just didn’t want to pay for it and not finish it’. The group listed a series of alternatives to withdrawing, such as ‘They [TAFE A] could drop them [the student] down to a Cert III’ or ‘do it online’ or ‘do it over a few years’. The Diploma course was viewed by the participants as a pathway to higher level qualifications. However, when asked whether they felt like they were in control of the decision to enrol in the Diploma, participants were less certain. One said that ‘You’d think you would be [in control]. But you’re not’. This led to discussion about aspirations to undertake training in the first place, and the subsequent eligibility criteria set by progression requirements (e.g. funding for qualifications at levels not already held).

Jane Yeah, it’s because you have to ‘upskill’ now

Fiona When they [the training provider/government] say the course costs $8,000 they [young people] go ‘ooh, OK I might just stick with a normal job where I get paid and not have to pay to do a Cert [Certificate]’.

Jane Yep, I was with Coles for years. I had the opportunity to do management but then I’m like I don’t want to do that path. I want to
get out of the supermarket. That’s why I’m here today.

The students undertook placements with employers along the southern peninsula from Red Hill (~15km from campus) to Mornington (~25km from campus) to Rosebud. Finding a placement in the early childhood and childcare area was perceived to be particularly challenging.

*Jane* You’ve just got to ring them, email them and then you’ll find that a lot of centres won’t take placement students because it’s just too much effort for them to take you on.

*Jane* I’m onto my third placement. It’s possible but you’ve just got to get out there... it depends on how much you want to travel as well because I originally started in Rosebud, went to Dromana [~10km from campus] and now I’m in Mornington. So it just depends on as long as you can get there and as long as they’ll take you.

The group were asked about their perceptions of what might be driving the growth in the number of young people in training in Victoria. Their reflections appear to be framed from a place of both curiosity and skepticism as to what was driving the increases in participation.

*Jane* I’d be curious as to why it would be happening. Like is it employment? Unemployment? Money?

*Fiona* Are they [the students] doing it just because they have to? They’ve been told that they have to?

*Jane* Some people just do it because they want to get the money benefit. Like they’re on Centrelink and then Centrelink tells them ‘you need
to do something’ sort of thing – so they say ‘enrol into a course if
you can’t find a job’.

Kate But also something to look at it is how many people actually finish
the course.

The group was asked how they will measure the success of their training six
months after they finish. The responses indicated a focus on increased incomes, job
opportunities and a sense of personal achievement.

Fiona If six months down the track you still don’t have a job and you’re
not doing anything I guess you’d kind of feel like ‘why did I waste
all that time for nothing?’

Jane When you get what you want out of it. When you get the job or you
get into that course and you actually earn some money - like you’ve
achieved something out of it. That’s when you might know.

6.6. Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) students

Context. The students considered in this section were enrolled in a Victorian
Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL). The course duration can vary but is generally
delivered over one year on a full-time basis (four days per week). VCAL spans a range of
levels (Foundation, Intermediate and Senior) and can focus on particular trades or
occupations or vocational interests. The entry requirements vary depending on the VCAL
level. For the majority of VCAL offerings, applicants must be under 20 years of age on 1
January in the year they commence the course. This focus group was conducted in
Rosebud with four female students. The participants were studying a VCAL Certificate II
Hospitality; a Certificate III in Health Services; and a Certificate III in Beauty. The students were interviewed in their final two weeks of training. Three of the students left school at the end of Year 10. The fourth, who left at the end of Year 8, has completed Years 9 to 11 at TAFE and plans to complete Year 12 at TAFE in 2016. The government-subsidised course fees in 2015 were $1,560. Students also pay a materials fee of $325; a student services and amenities fee of $175; and an ancillary fee of $25.

**What the VCAL students say.** The VCAL students began by reflecting upon what it’s like to live and study on the Peninsula. The discussion quickly turned to the characteristic features of the local area.

*Julie*  
It’s in a good location...like we’re still close enough to the city but not right in it.

*Ali*  
It’s definitely a holiday destination, like in summer it’s full-on people everywhere. In winter it quiets down a lot and just the locals kind of come out and run the place kind of. But it’s definitely a flip [between summer and winter].

*Trish*  
It’s quiet and everyone knows everyone.

When discussing the negatives of the *neighbourhood* of Rosebud and surrounding suburbs, the group raised the topics of young people, retired people and drugs.

*Ali*  
There’s a lot of troubled teens down our way.

*Rebecca*  
It kind of seems to be that everyone down here is really old waiting to die or just like raising some awful kids.

*Trish*  
Yeah, the Peninsula’s like really elderly – like there’s a lot of
elderly people down here. There’s also just a lot of disruptive youth.

**Julie**  Yeah, people trying to wreck the place and that.

**Rebecca**  It’s just getting worse and worse down here.

**Ali**  And there’s a lot of drugs.

**Julie**  Yeah a lot of drugs but I suppose that’s everywhere these days – you can’t really get away from it.

Asked about what **opportunities there are for young people** like the ‘disruptive youth’ they had mentioned, one respondent identified TAFE and VCAL as an important option. The first student spoke about young people, whom she perceived to be affected by intergenerational disadvantage, but ‘just don’t have the will to go after’ their passions:

**Ali**  I think a lot of kids like see it so easy – like a lot of their parents are on Centrelink and they say like ‘why do I have to go out and get a job and all that when I can just stay at home and get paid for nothing?’ Why do I have to try so hard and get on to selling drugs or something like that?...it’s each to their own really but mostly some people have like a passion in something they just don’t have the will to go after it. They just think it’s going to fall in their lap or something.

**Julie**  People that do suffer from drug addiction and things like that think this [TAFE] is a much better option for them to kind of reconnect and get back into the things that they wanted out of life....so it’s like a good path to find out what you want to be because I know there’s a lot of people still confused and that – they’re all young as well so
they’ve still got a lot to work out and it’s just a good environment for that.

This group spoke about the different environment at TAFE compared to school. The discussion revealed a difference in terms of what was expected of them at TAFE compared to school and how they had managed these expectations. The results suggest a belief in the importance of self-efficacy that is fostered within a supportive environment.

Julie  Yeah it’s really hard like growing up here [at TAFE]. You’re trying to work so much sh*t out. Just generally I think that coming out of TAFE you come away with a lot more like street-smarts… Because at school it’s just so sugar-coated and it’s just a more grown-up environment here. Not so much everyone telling you what to do 24/7 more just think for yourself and do your shit. They’re not forcing you into anything so much here. They want you to do well not make you do well. Well we all have to grow up sometime and TAFE just kind of pushes you.

Rebecca  It’s more up to you if you want to pass. But they do care. Yeah, it kind of does it just kind of gives you that big push to grow up.

Ali  Yeah, don’t treat it like school but always keep it in the back of your mind that it is school.

On the topic of choice, the discussion turned to the local offerings and accessibility of training on the Peninsula. Their responses appeared to reflect the narrow nature of what choices were available on the southern peninsula as well as the challenges of travelling in to Frankston to seek more opportunities.
Rebecca  It’s such a small area.

Julie  Um, yeah [TAFE A] is pretty much the only TAFE I know of. I’m not like saying there’s not others [training providers] but...yeah they’re not kind of advertised.

Julie  I think there’s 3 or 4 set VCAL classes here which kind of restricted...

Researcher  But it was always going to be TAFE A in Rosebud?

Trish  Yeah, oh, Frankston’s just like...just getting there on the train and the buses and that – the area as well. This isn’t the best campus but I’m sure it’s a lot better than Frankston.

Ali  I do my health services up there. It’s really hard to travel every like Wednesday. Courses are like normally 1-5pm – it’s so late and you have to catch the bus after it and stuff. So it’s kind of hard.

On the issue of costs, one student had received a scholarship from the TAFE. In her mind, this had made all the difference: ‘I’ve had a really hard year like with housing and just like financially I really wouldn’t have been able to afford it. I got a scholarship so I’m really, obviously, hugely, massively grateful for that’. Asked what advice they would give to someone thinking of dropping out of their VCAL, the students cautioned against anyone withdrawing before completion. They spoke about the resulting risk, wasted time and investment of non-completion.

Julie  I don’t recommend dropping out. Or if you do at least have that opportunity to always go back.

Rebecca  I just think like you’ve started something, it’s going to be a waste of
money and time already so just put your head down and get through it because you want to come out of it with something.

**Julie** You may as well finish it.

The group was concerned about the lack of local opportunities for entry-level graduates on the Peninsula. One said that ‘I want to move to the city. There’s more opportunities up there’. Similarly, the task of finding a job placement as part of the course had proven particular challenging.

**Trish** I’m still finding one!

**Julie** Yeah, I really, really struggled with this because I had to do 20 hours in a salon. Like salons don’t take you on unless you have experience. Like how can I get experience if I need the experience? I went to like 30 different places. Had the business cards, called them up regularly. And it’s just like I have a fear of failing now...

**Rebecca** Especially, if there’s only like 2 or 3 down here.

Similar to the Early Childhood group, the VCAL group framed the discussion of increased participation in training within broader concerns of welfare and unemployment. Asked what might have driven the growth in the FMP region in recent years, the group focused on the connection between training and welfare.

**Ali** Centrelink!

**Julie** Yeah, people use the Centrelink benefit as easy ways to get money. I think if they were a bit more strict on that they’d have a lot more kids coming to school.

**Trish** I’m on Centrelink and last year my attendance was really bad here
and I still have my payment. So you literally just have to enrol and
then give them the paperwork you don’t even have to come a day
after that. Like there’s no real pressure [to attend class].

Their plans for post-training pathways are a combination of further education and
training and employment. Their responses suggested a good level of insight into the
education and training pathways available into higher level qualifications through
arrangements with universities.

**Julie**
I’m planning on getting my degree [in Beauty].

**Rebecca**
I’m doing a health services course and... then I want to be an
enrolled nurse. So I want to do that and it goes for 18 months.
When I turn 21 I want to do my degree at university and then
hopefully become a midwife at some stage.

**Ali**
I’m coming back here to do Hospitality and Year 12 next year and
after that I want to be a bartender.

**Trish**
I don’t know what I want to do yet. My mind’s just spinning.
There’s so many things that I’m interested in but I don’t know what
to do first – like what’s going to get me somewhere. I’m still
thinking about it.

The group spoke about how they will **judge the success of their training** down
the track. Their responses suggested a broader focus than ‘getting a job’. Similar to other
groups, there was a strong focus on ‘what I learnt’ rather than ‘whether I’m in paid
work’.

**Trish**
Depends on how much knowledge you’ve taken out of it.
Julie: *How much you get out of it is kind of what you put into it. If you really learn and listen to everything that they say – like even if you don’t get a job – it’s just the experience and like all the skills that you have developed over the year.*

6.7. Summary of findings

Each training group of young adults perceived their local neighbourhoods to have a common set of positive and negative attributes. In Frankston, the beach, the foreshore, and the proximity of services to the city centre (including the TAFE) were seen as positive aspects of growing up in the local area in Frankston. In Rosebud, on the southern Peninsula, participants focused on the importance of tourism to their local area and the limited opportunities available for young people in their local communities. The issue of ‘safety’ was an ongoing concern, particularly at night and around Frankston train station. However, safety concerns were felt less during the day. The training campuses were considered a safe place. In terms of post-school VET, the proximity of the campus to the centre of Frankston city was an important factor as most people were able to drive or take public transport to the campus. The catchment area for Rosebud was more restricted around the direct local area. A theme from these data was the young adults’ aspirations to build a sense of autonomy and independence through work that they valued that is valued by others. Many participants were exposed to work in the trades from a young age. Most had undertaken some form of VET in schools – many through the TAFE – although there was no apparent link between their VET in schools program and what they were doing as
young adults at TAFE. Some felt that they were rushed into making a decision about VET in schools or a choice was made for them.

The groups spoke about the issues of intergenerational disadvantage and the pressures on young people to take the ‘easy way’. Their responses suggested a disassociation between themselves and the kids ‘hanging around the station’ or ‘working at McDonalds’. Participants could identify with the low aspirations narrative. However, they also pointed to the underlying family and social factors which can lead to low aspirations of older teenagers and young adults to take the ‘easy option’. Participants also recognised that parental influence can be an influential factor on young people. Access to social networks and social capital were an important factor in lining up employment after completing and/or in gaining an apprenticeship while studying. For young parents, the availability of on-campus services, such as childcare was essential. The location, cost and duration were each key factors in choosing a provider and course. Choice was extremely limited for most students, particularly for those enrolled on the southern peninsula. There appeared to be no standard approach to selection of training provider and course. Participants were able to critically question what was driving increases in participation in their local area. Students on the southern peninsula suggested that the receipt of Centrelink payments may have been a factor. Some were aware of RTOs other than their own but had a limited direct understanding of what others may offer. There was a focus on the risks borne by the individual of dropping out before completion of the qualification and the associated time and financial costs. Participants would advise young people starting out on a similar journey to their own to make sure they want to enroll.
They cautioned about the risks of withdrawing after you start because it will have time, costs and other consequences. The difficulty of navigating often complex administrative systems was also raised as a challenge. Finally, it was apparent that participants were linking their current training into future plans. Their plans were diverse and focused on where the qualification could take them in life (not just in their career) e.g. international, interstate, into other trades, higher level qualifications. Having presented the results of the quantitative analysis (Chapter 5) and qualitative analysis (Chapter 6), the final step is to integrate and discuss the two strands in Chapter 7.
Chapter 7: Discussion

‘An ‘entitlement’ does not imply that all courses should be available in all geographic locations. Where necessary, students may need to travel or re-locate within the state to take up a particular course’

National Partnership Agreement on Skills Reform (COAG, 2012, p.24)

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7.1. Introduction

This chapter will discuss the main findings of my research. It will do this by addressing each of the three research questions:

1. How useful are quantitative data for critically examining what post-school VET opportunities are available and accessible to young adults in the FMP region?
2. What does qualitative data gathered from young adults in the FMP region offer?
3. What potential does the capabilities approach offer?

7.2. Research Question 1

How useful are quantitative data for critically examining what post-school VET opportunities are available and accessible to young adults in the FMP region?

Overall, my research suggests that administrative data collected on the resident and student populations can be helpful for quantifying student participation at a detailed local level. Despite the differences in scope, the findings appear to be broadly consistent across the three different data sources and collections (i.e. the ABS Census; the NCVER VET Provider Collection; and the Victorian Government On Track survey of school
leavers). Similarly, each dataset suggests some degree of misalignment between young adults’ available opportunities (as espoused in policy rhetoric) and their accessible opportunities (as pursued by school leavers and young adults). Ultimately, however, these data were insufficient for understanding the post-school opportunities accessible to young adults in the FMP region in two respects. I do not gain any real insight into the array and quality of what post-school training opportunities are available for the target population to choose from. Nor do I gain insight into the economic and broader social context in which the training occurred or the outcomes derived from participation in training. A key reason for this is that national and state-based surveys of transitions and outcomes typically do not permit local area or detailed cohort analysis due to prohibitively high sample error. This places significant reliance on small-scale program evaluations and local intelligence to probe more deeply into the underlying causes of systemic issues.

Finding 1: Administrative data can be helpful for local area analysis but are ultimately insufficient for understanding the opportunities and choices of the target population; surveys are more problematic; consumer information is poor

Overall, my research appears to affirm that administrative and survey data sources provide a detailed account of how the ‘system’ is ‘performing’ for accountability, resourcing and reporting purposes (Leung et al., 2013; Knight & Mlotkowski, 2009; King and Palmer, 2010; Blom & Meyers, 2003; Knight & Cully, 2007; Dumbrell, 2000). Collected via management information systems to a national statistical standard (AVETMISS), these administrative data can tell us a great deal about the target population’s characteristics and their VET program. A key strength of the Census and the
VET administrative collections for conducting local area analyses is that they represent a population and not just a sample. These population-based administrative data are collected at the unit record level and can be aggregated up to the level of training provider, qualification, geographic area, system and so on. With nationally standardised data, I can gain insight into patterns and trends at different qualification levels and types of program (e.g. industry sector, AQF levels etc). I can observe differences between units of measurement such as counts of enrolments, students, hours and subjects and their relationships to each other. I can also disaggregate these data to track and compare rates of participation in terms of student demography, geography, labour market status, relative disadvantage, remoteness and major funding source. Over time, these data allow us to observe patterns and trends in the composition of the student population. My assessment of these data suggests that they were useful to the extent that they enable us to:

1. Quantify the number of 18-24 year old residents of the FMP region participating in VET (the target population);
2. Quantify the number of the target population in publicly-funded VET and estimate the number in privately-funded VET;
3. Quantify the post-school pathways of the target population at a detailed local level (ASGS Statistical Areas 2-4) in terms of their participation in education, training and employment;
4. Calculate VET participation rates for the target population and estimate changes in these rates at the local level;
5. Track changes in VET participation among the target population at a detailed local level over time;

6. Track changes in the composition of the target population over time (e.g. unemployed students); and

7. Track changes in the types of VET programs the target population are participating in over time.

There are, however, a number of specific limitations that have been raised by my analysis. Despite the many advantages of these administrative data, they appear to not extend our understanding outside the formal VET systems and structures. In many respects, these limitations appear to stem from VET statistics in Australia having their genesis in financial accountability measures between the Commonwealth Government and State/Territory Governments (Dumbrell, 2000, p.30). As a result, these data appear to offer few insights into the availability and accessibility of training opportunities in a local context. Nor do these data offer a rich understanding of the constraints on material resources that may influence inequalities in rates of participation. For example, I have little insight into the geographic spread of campuses; accessibility of transport; quality of training; affordability; income support and entitlements; living arrangements and so on. I also have little uniform understanding, at the least in the public domain, of RTO-level statistics, their fee structures and practices.

On the key issues of transport and access, an experienced RTO practitioner on the southern Peninsula described their target student cohort as ‘virtually trapped on the Peninsula’. These pre-existing issues are compounded by new research showing sub-
populations of young adults (18-24 year olds) who are becoming ‘stranded’ in terms of job opportunities in Victoria (Mazzei & Spiller, 2015). The geographic mapping of RTOs in Section 3.5 suggests a ‘clustering’ of services in the ‘hub’ of Frankston. However, the vast geographic expanse of the southern peninsula means that Frankston remains out of reach for many young people. As a result, my findings affirm those that have shown young people in the FMP region are heavily reliant on place-based programs that are located in accessible locations (FMPLLEN, 2015b). My findings also suggest that the structural misalignment between available and accessible opportunities appears to manifest when conflating: (1) the FMP region with the rest of metropolitan Melbourne (e.g. in resourcing, planning, statistics, reporting etc); and (2) geographic measures of distance (e.g. kms from campus) with social measures of distance (e.g. low self-confidence, social norms). Doing so, as argued in earlier research in the FMP region, is dismissive of barriers relating to highly-contextualised social norms, proximity to home/family, self-efficacy and values (Bond, 2011).

The results in Chapters 4 and 5 appear to confirm earlier statements that the quality of consumer information on the training market is poor (Mackenzie & Coulson, 2015; Mitchell, 2012). In the absence of RTO and local area data on outcomes, I am also unsure of what opportunities are available and accessible to graduates upon completion of their training. The administrative data become less useful, and more technically problematic, when seeking answers to questions about post-training ‘outputs’ (e.g. completion rates) and ‘outcomes’ (e.g. employment, further education and training, satisfaction). In terms of ‘outcomes’ from schooling, the On Track survey of school
leavers helps to understand the distribution of education, training and employment activities for those who left school in the last year. However, I do not gain insights into their attachment to these post-school activities, the availability of ‘decent’ work, the outcomes or their extended trajectories three-five years after they leave school. In terms of ‘outcomes’ from post-school education and training, annual and longitudinal surveys do not allow disaggregation by geographic areas or age groups due to prohibitively high sample error in existing surveys when examining small populations. For this same reason, there is little known about the flows between, and outcomes from, the various sectors of education, training and employment (and unemployment) for the target population.

My assessment of the data suggests that our view relies heavily on how data are collected, assembled and narrativised. The data analysed in Chapter 5 suggest that administrative collections and surveys can provide a useful snapshot of the size and composition of the training market structures and, to some extent, the outputs (completions) at a particular point-in-time. However, measures of outputs, outcomes and choice that are useful for local area and small cohort analysis appear to be lacking. In their absence, highly-aggregated, uncontextualised participation-based measures appear to dominate the narrative. Such descriptions include deficit-based notions of low-skilled residents with mismatched skills and young people with low aspirations. The regional profiles produced by the Victorian Government also report the number of RTOs catering to each local government area as a proxy for student choice. There is no indication of the type of provision or quality of these RTOs. Similarly, my analysis appears to be somewhat obstructed by the focus on simply-stated snapshots of ‘current activities’ (or
inactivity) as data are generally categorised in terms of current levels of participation in education, training and/or employment. I therefore appear to gain little insight into the target populations’ collective and individual freedoms over time. As a result, my assessment of the data suggests that conventional methods may diminish the complexity of the social arrangements that young people must navigate. In doing so, I remain ignorant of the underlying causal mechanisms that explain inequalities in surface-level representations and snapshots of ‘participation’.

**Finding 2: Archival Census data and surveys of school leavers suggest that VET and work characterise post-school pathways among the target population**

The data presented in Chapter 5 appear to offer a comprehensive quantitative account of the target population’s post-school pathways and participation in VET. All three datasets indicate that the post-school pathways accessed by the target population more closely resemble those taken by their peers in regional centres of Victoria (FMPLLEN, 2005a). When compared to their peers in the rest of metropolitan Melbourne, these data suggest that the target population is: (1) less likely to be enrolled in higher education; (2) more likely to be employed full-time (despite there being fewer options available); (3) more likely to be employed full-time at a younger age; and (4) more likely to be unemployed with no post-school qualification. My findings also appear to align with previous research which has shown comparatively high rates of participation in VET and the labour market in the FMP region from a comparatively early age (FMPLLEN, 2015a; Parliament of Victoria, 2009; FMPLLEN, 2009a). However, my findings also indicate that in the absence of a range of higher education options for local
residents, ‘VET’ and ‘work’ have a tendency to characterise post-school pathways in the FMP region for the target population. The findings suggest that highly gendered, trade-based apprenticeship pathways among school leavers and young adults have been characteristic features of VET in the FMP region over the past decade. The traditionally low rates of participation among the target population in higher education are congruent with earlier research that has shown VET participation is comparatively higher than in areas with good access to higher education (Polvere & Lim, 2015; Rothman et al., 2013; Golding & Pattison, 2004; Walstab and Lamb, 2008). However, recent data suggest that these long-standing patterns are changing. The analysis presented in Chapter 5 shows an increasing share of school leavers is participating in higher education each year, albeit from a low base.

**Finding 3: Administrative VET data suggest the composition of the target population and the providers who train them has been restructured since the VTG reforms were introduced**

The VET administrative data provide valuable insight into the impact of the Victorian training reforms on participation over time. Alongside the increased levels of participation in higher education, data from the National VET Provider Collection suggest there has been a re-composition in the target population enrolled in VET in recent years. Since the introduction of the ‘Victorian Training Guarantee’ reforms, these data suggest that within the target population participation has increased among: (1) the unemployed; (2) learners enrolled with private VET providers; and (3) learners enrolled in non-apprenticeship training. In many ways, these shifts appear to reflect shifts in VET
policy (e.g. Victorian Training Guarantee, VET FEE-HELP) and higher education policy (e.g. widening participation agenda, demand-based funding models). They also appear to reflect contemporaneous factors in the broader socio-economic environment (e.g. a national downturn in apprenticeships, rising youth unemployment, changing socio-economic profile of the FMP region).

The overall rate of VET participation among the target population increased considerably with the initial introduction of the VTG in 2009. With the introduction of the ‘Refocusing’ reforms in 2012-13, VET participation has since returned to 2009-10 levels. These trends in the data appear to align with Toner’s contention that the rise and fall of participation following the introduction of the VTG represented a ‘bubble’ (Mitchell, 2012). It appears that these shifts up and then down in participation can be tracked directly to changes in funding models as part of the 2012-13 reforms. These policies recalibrated the VET funding model to redirect training away from areas of personal interest (e.g. personal fitness, events management) and towards areas of economic concern, skills shortage and ‘public value’ by setting the price (government subsidy) and uncapping fees (as noted in Whitechurch, 2016; Nicolson, 2015; Leung et al., 2013; Mitchell, 2012). The effects appear to have been felt across all local areas in the FMP region. With the exception of Frankston South (a less disadvantaged area), these data suggest that all local areas experienced double-digit percentage declines in the count of VET students between 2012 (the peak) and 2015 (the most recent data available). It appears from these data that the ‘services’ training area has been disproportionately affected by the 2012-13 cuts to government funding (Mitchell, 2012; Guthrie et al., 2014;
In terms of economic opportunities, VET participation has traditionally supported a local economy in the FMP region where retail and hospitality offer the key employment opportunities for young people (FMPLLEN, 2009a). However, my research suggests that the shifts in public subsidies and training participation away from traditional services (tourism, hospitality, retail), since the 2012 ‘refocusing’ reforms, have not necessarily aligned training provision to accessible opportunities in the local economy for the target population.

My research appears to concur with observations by the FMPLLEN that their region has: (1) low transitions to higher education; (2) a lack of full-time employment locally; (3) lack of choice of providers; and (4) transience of providers (FMPLLEN, 2015b). The first two observations appear to have been affirmed by my research. However, the second two are more problematic to address with quantitative data and may tend to rely more on qualitative data and local intelligence. The findings presented in Chapter 5 suggest that pre-existing issues relating to limited choice of good-quality providers and transience of RTOs may have been exacerbated by the introduction of market competition and VET FEE-HELP. This appears to align with earlier findings of ‘dubious practices’ undertaken by training providers in the FMP region to recruit young people into VET courses (Bond, 2011; Barrett, 2012a/2012b).

7.3. Research Question 2

What does qualitative data gathered from young adults in the FMP region offer?
The results presented in Chapter 6 suggest that qualitative data gathered from current VET students at the local level are valuable for addressing the research problem. Many of these students viewed VET as a tool to build their own autonomy and independence through decent work that they value doing and that is valued by others. They spoke, either explicitly or implicitly, about their freedoms to choose, opportunities in their local area and aspirations to do more with their training after they complete. My findings suggest some of the target population interpret a sense of freedom and agency when navigating local structures (‘if you want to, you can’). However, the responses of some students also suggested, implicitly or explicitly, constraints on their choices and opportunities. For example, student descriptions of the local neighborhood appear to align with narratives in the public discourse (e.g. safety, transport, welfare). Consistent with earlier research, their post-school pathways into VET appear to take shape early and are strongly influenced by family role models. However, the actual decision-making strategies and behaviours appear to be complex and contingent on a range of factors. Some felt ‘rushed’ into making decisions about VET courses when they were younger. The risks and costs of withdrawal prior to completion were perceived to be real and non-trivial. My research suggests that, as elsewhere in Victoria, the entry of new RTOs into the local market has, in the short-term, increased choice in many training areas. It has also exposed young people to unscrupulous recruitment practices and sub-standard training in some qualifications. In doing so, it has increased the level of risk associated with accessing a VET course. The well-documented issue of ‘access’ to transport in the FMP region was affirmed by many students. It was found to be a fundamental capability
requirement for their participation in post-school VET, particularly for individuals residing on the southern peninsula. In expressing their post-training plans, it was apparent that these participants had broader aspirations than simply ‘getting a job’. The results suggest that some members of the target population have needed to adapt their expectations and preferences to align with their individual and local circumstances. My research suggests that some of the target population had to adapt their preferences to fit a range of influencing factors including a lack of material resources (e.g. campus was close to home, lower course fees, only RTO offering the course etc). The participants also appeared to acknowledge the limited post-school education and training options available to them. And yet, some may have adapted their preferences and become satisfied that the only option that they were compelled to choose was, in their perception, a good one.

**Finding 4: Student descriptions of the local neighborhood appear to align with narratives in the public discourse**

The participants tended to identify common sets of positive and negative attributes when describing their local neighborhood. In some ways, it was surprising to listen to their descriptions of their local neighborhood in their own words. Without prompting, they appeared to discuss attributes of the FMP region in ways that aligned to the conventional narratives, stereotypes and socio-economic indicators of disadvantage. For example, the students spoke about drugs, crime, the ‘welfare mindset’, the beach, the foreshore, young people, retirees, tourists and so on. In Frankston, the beach, the foreshore, and the proximity of services to the city centre (including the TAFE) were perceived to be positive aspects of growing up in and around the local area. In Rosebud,
on the southern peninsula, participants spoke about the lack of opportunities for young people, the impact of tourists on their local area during peak seasons, and the older age profile of the population. The issue of ‘safety’ was affirmed as an ongoing concern, particularly at night and around Frankston train station (Community Indicators Victoria, 2015). Consistent with earlier research, the views of the target population suggest students travelling to and from the southern peninsula at night have very real concerns about their safety (FMPLLEN, 2009a). Compounding these issues of safety and well-being is the finding that transport routes are often indirect and unreasonably long journeys result (FMPLLEN, 2009a). However, safety concerns were felt less during the day and the training campus was considered a safe place.

Finding 5: Pathways into VET appear to take shape early and are strongly influenced by family role models

My findings reinforce the important role of parents and other family members in forming aspirations to undertake VET (Gemici et al., 2014). Students with a pre-existing relationship with VET through a family member tended to see it as an accessible pathway from a young age. For apprentices, the seed to take a VET pathway was planted early by seeing fathers/uncles/other family members apply a trade (‘It’s just what we kind of grew up into, really’). The participants described how the occupations, opinions and expectations of their own parents and family members played a formative role in shaping what opportunities appeared to be available and accessible to them from a young age. For example, many of the apprentices were exposed to work in the traditional trades through a family member. The participants suggested that family connections were important not
just in terms of the decision to enrol but also as a ‘converting factor’ to generate real employment opportunities after they complete (‘It’s who you know’). Access to these social networks and social capital were recognised as important resources when lining up their course, apprenticeship and post-training employment opportunities. In discussing the influence of parents and family, participants appeared to identify with the ‘low aspirations’ narrative. Their responses suggested that they tend to disassociate themselves from the kids ‘hanging around the station’ and ‘all the 15 year olds that dropped out of school and are standing in front of TAFE’. However, they also pointed to the underlying and intergenerational factors (parents, family members) that can foster low aspirations among young people and lead them towards the ‘easy option’. Most had undertaken some form of VET in schools – many through the TAFE. However, there was no apparent link between their VET in schools program and what they were doing as young adults at TAFE.

**Finding 6: Decision-making strategies and behaviours are complex and can be more passive than active**

My research extends our understanding of these issues with the finding that some participants felt that they were rushed into making a decision about VET programs when they were younger. The also felt that choices had been made on their behalf (‘I think there’s too much pressure on kids to do a course rather than what they actually want to do’). The qualitative research also suggests that some of the target population can end up ‘stuck’ in a VET course after lengthy spells outside education, training and/or employment. Some apprentices spoke about their protracted and circuitous pathways
from school into work as labourers, partial qualifications and then full qualifications. My findings suggest that their decision to enrol did not necessarily follow a rational, linear or idealised pathway to employment, independence or some other measure of a ‘successful transition’. The findings presented in Chapters 5 and 6 also support earlier findings that non-linear and ‘messy trajectories’ (Atkins et al., 2011) are more often experienced by those who are most disadvantaged (Raffe, 2011; Anderson, 2003). It is not surprising then that some students, when reflecting on their school experiences with VET, felt rushed and lacking in control of that experience. One student commented that the rush could explain ‘…why there’s a lot of people in this course that are 23+ years old because they were forced into a course they didn’t want to do’.

Participants appear to indicate that training location, cost and duration were their key factors in choosing their course. There did not appear to be a standard approach to training provider (RTO) and course selection. Some chose their course first, then their RTO. Some chose their vocation (or trade), then their course, then the RTO. Others chose their vocation, then their RTO, then their course. The proximity of the campus to the centre of Frankston city was an important factor. The provision of on-campus and financial supports (e.g. childcare, scholarships) was an important, possibly threshold, factor that enabled some young people to participate in study. My findings suggest that without these services, post-school VET would not be possible for some members of the target population. Once the decision to enroll in a post-school VET course was made, the findings suggest that some of the target population had trouble navigating complex administrative structures. For some students, the ongoing rule changes to funding
eligibility and course options may have made navigating these structures that much more difficult. Some students also suggested that the time spent gaining access to income support while training may not have outweighed the value in receiving it.

My research affirms earlier findings that decision-making processes are also highly influenced by peers (Gemici et al., 2014). However, my research also suggests a tendency among young people to draw comparisons between their current state of affairs and those of their peers in their local community or those who had left the region. My findings appear congruent with earlier research that showed an ‘urban drift’ where young people leave regional and non-metropolitan areas to pursue opportunities in metropolitan cities in Victoria and across Australia (McKenzie, 2009; Hillman and Rothman, 2007). However, the views of the target population in my research appear to illuminate what was driving some of these comparisons in their local area. For example, some participants had observed the ‘urban drift’ of their peers closer to Melbourne after leaving school to find more opportunities (‘most of the people I went to school with have made the effort to travel or moved into the city or catch a train or whatever’). Some participants also appeared to see more opportunities outside of the peninsula for themselves (‘I want to move to the city. There’s more opportunities up there’). Participants also compared themselves to other young people in the local area who were not studying but making ‘more money’ in the short term (e.g. a manager at McDonalds compared to a 2nd year apprentice). There were also comparisons made to peers who have incurred less debt to complete a post-school qualification (e.g. colleagues who completed their Diploma for a minimal fee before the introduction of the VET FEE-HELP loan scheme). Each of these
comparisons suggests that participants had put thought into what current and future opportunities might arise from their current participation in VET (compared to other opportunities).

Finding 7: The risks and costs of withdrawal were considered to be real

The results of the qualitative strand suggest that young adults considered the risks associated with withdrawal from their studies to be significant and costly. Participants said they would advise young people starting out on a similar journey to their own to make sure they actually want to do the course. They said that they would caution other young people about the risks of withdrawing and to make that decision very carefully. Withdrawing, they agreed, would come at a cost in terms of time (e.g. opportunity cost), money (e.g. tuition fees, materials fees, transport, childcare etc) and other consequences (e.g. potentially lose eligibility for government funding). It was surprising to observe the perceived risk that participants felt in commencing a VET course. There was unanimous agreement that once you start a VET course, you are better off finishing than starting something else. The views of participants suggested that the completed qualification, regardless of the industry or trade it is aligned to, can take you somewhere else of value.

Finding 8: Post-training plans reflected broader aspirations than ‘getting a job’

The post-training plans and goals of participants mirrored earlier findings in that they varied and involved a range of instrumental and non-instrumental goals (Anderson, 2003). Their plans were diverse and focused on where the qualification could take them not just in their career but in life more broadly. The plans ranged in scope and direction from moving overseas, interstate, into other trades and/or into higher level qualifications
through pathways arrangements with universities. It was surprising, however, to observe that some of the apprentices expressed a clear line-of-sight between the VET course they were enrolled in and broader opportunities in the future. This clarity of vision, it seemed, was compelled by a desire to become more independent. They stated that ‘there is work around if you are willing to find it’ and ‘if you want to – you can’ and ‘I want to get out of the supermarket. That’s why I’m here today’. This is not to suggest that structural impediments were not also evident. For example, the issue of finding work placements as part of the training course was a recurring barrier, particularly for students on the southern peninsula. In such a limited local job market, the opportunities to gain workplace experience for a set number of hours (a requirement of the course) can be extremely challenging for young people. One student summarised the compounding challenges of accessing transport and finding work-placements in the FMP region as ‘…it just depends on as long as you can get there and as long as they’ll take you’.

7.4. Research Question 3

What potential does the capabilities approach offer?

As a normative framework, my research suggests that the capabilities approach may offer an alternative lens to challenge the increasingly reductive approaches taken to measuring and narrativising the ‘performance’ of VET systems. The capabilities approach compels us to disentangle the often conflated surface-level representation of individual and collective functionings (e.g. being enrolled in a VET course) with
capabilities (e.g. freedom to participate in any VET course/course they have reason to value) with agency (e.g. freedom to actively choose a VET course) in the narrative of the VET sector. These results appear to affirm the importance of understanding the underlying causal mechanisms and contexts that can cause inequalities in these surface-level representations of ‘participation’ in education and training. There is potential for the capabilities approach, in challenging these simplistic and economistic representations, to consider an individual’s freedoms to access and participate in VET and to choose the functionings they have reason to value.

**Finding 9: The CA may have potential to challenge traditional assumptions in the measurement and narrativisation of VET**

My findings appear to contribute to earlier work that has demonstrated the potential of applying critical realist ontology, mutually reinforced by the alternate lens of the capabilities approach, to critique conventional VET policy narratives and the representations of young people in VET (Powell & McGrath, 2014; Powell, 2014/2012; Wheelahan et al., 2012; López-Fogués, 2014/2012a/2012b). Chapters 2 and 3 suggest that a configuration of lenses, measures and narratives craft a surface-level representation of how well a VET system, or VET sub-system, is structured and working for those who access it (Mitchell, 2012; Guthrie, 1991/1988). At a system level, the research literature has characterised the trajectory of VET policy since the 1980s as increasingly narrow and not reflective of the broader educational, social and community purposes of VET as envisioned in the mid-1970s (Bowman et al., 2015; Cuervo & Wyn, 2011; Wyn, 2009). The post-1990s configuration of (1) lenses (e.g. human capital, neoliberalism, economic
rationalism, new managerialism, vocationalism); (2) measures (e.g. effectiveness and efficiency); and (3) narratives (e.g. ‘skills’, ‘choice’, ‘industry relevance’, ‘opportunities’) appear to have superseded these broader concerns (Bowman, et al., 2015; Wheelahan et al., 2012; Wheelahan & Moodie, 2011; Golding et al., 2012; Angus et al., 2012). The new managerialist approach to public sector provision appears to account for the ‘performance’ (inputs, processes, outputs and outcomes) of VET systems, to the detriment of understanding the opportunities and choices they offer (Knight & Mlotkowski, 2009; King and Palmer, 2010; Blom & Meyers, 2003).

At a local level, my research appears to contribute an alternative approach to these increasingly narrow delimitations for seeing, measuring and narrativising VET systems. Local evaluations and research conducted in the FMP region have previously observed narrow definitions of student participation, engagement and learning (Bond, 2011). Similarly, local research has emphasised the need to: (1) broaden measures; (2) distinguish between formal and informal outcomes; and (3) recognise the social and community-based outcomes of VET participation (Myconos, 2014/2013/2012; 2011/2010). The document analysis of Victorian Government reporting on the training market (Section 5.2) suggests that economic measures and commentary (e.g. skills alignment, employment outcomes) appear to overshadow the broader social and community dimensions of training (e.g. educational pathways into/from VET, aspirations, intentions, inclusion, affordability, well-being, income support).

**Finding 10: Headline statistics appear to mask underlying causal mechanisms that create distortions in surface-level representations of reality**
The capabilities approach compels us to be critical of headline statistics that provide only narrow, uncontextualised and non-distributive economic assessments of human flourishing (e.g. GDP per capita, average household income). The results in Chapter 5 suggest that quantitative data must be contextualised to needs within the local social arrangement to properly evaluate the impact of policies and programs on local residents. At a system level, earlier research has suggested that highly-aggregated and economically-focused VET statistics have a tendency to mask underlying contextual inequalities and experiences of sub-populations. My research suggests that the process of aggregating counts of participation into ‘equity groups’ is necessary for system monitoring but wholly insufficient for examining the compounding effects and underlying causes of inequalities in learner populations at the local level. In the specific case of young adults in the FMP region, my research suggests that such top-down aggregation of data may also mask compounding forms of disadvantage occurring at the local and individual levels. The SEIFA index of relative disadvantage (Chapter 3) indicates that the FMP region is home to suburbs that rank among the most advantaged (Mt Eliza and Flinders) and most disadvantaged (Rosebud, Frankston North) in Australia. This suggests that headline statistics for the FMP region may mask considerable underlying variations at the local level. The Southern Metropolitan Region (the government administrative region) is extremely diverse and the largest administrative region in Victoria. The FMP region comprises only around 20 per cent of total enrolment in the wider southern metropolitan region. Then aggregation of the FMP region into the SMR region, such as is done in the Victorian Government’s regional profiles on VET,
appears to render the FMP region all but invisible. At a more granular level, the results also appear to further reinforce the deficiencies of area-based (rather than individual-based) measures of relative disadvantage when applied to VET participation measures (e.g. SEIFA) (Coelli, 2010; Lim & Gemici, 2011). A final complicating factor is the classification of Frankston City as a ‘regional hub’ and Mornington Peninsula Shire as ‘more rural’ even though they are both included within metropolitan Melbourne for administrative, resourcing and statistical purposes. My findings suggest that young adults who are residents of the FMP region live close enough to the Melbourne CBD to be considered ‘metropolitan’ but not quite close enough to reap the opportunities this offers their peers in other parts of Melbourne. Finally, my research affirms earlier research that has found system-led quantitative representations of VET participation (and to some extent completions and outcomes) appear to provide little place for the learner voice to be captured in the VET sector (Angus et al., 2012; Golding et al., 2012; Misko & Priest, 2009; Anderson, 2005/1999). Instead, my research suggests that a deficit-based characterisation of young people tends to dominate the discourse around their engagement with education, training and employment in the FMP region.

**Finding 11: The capabilities approach may offer an alternative lens for measuring and narrativising VET**

The capabilities approach appears to have made a valuable contribution to my research. By compelling me to increase the focus on: (1) the real material resources an individual has; (2) his or her motivation and what he or she values; and (3) how to convert these resources into valued functionings, it has helped to challenge how the
problem is understood and approached. My findings appear to add further weight to the emerging literature that has applied critical realist ontology and the capabilities approach to VET systems in Australia and overseas (Powell & McGrath, 2014; Powell, 2014/2012; Wheelahan et al., 2012; López-Fogués, 2014/2012a/2012b). However, my research also appears to offer potential for understanding the underlying causes that constrain what post-school training opportunities are available to young people at a local level. It appears to show that surface-level representations of reality in VET through the narrow lens of participation are insufficient and potentially present a distorted picture. The data collected and analysed suggest that the capabilities approach – supported by a critical realist lens - can help to challenge the underpinning assumptions of this participation-based approach and the underlying causal mechanisms that lead to certain narratives and assumptions. It can do this, for example, by challenging inferences that a change in statistical participation necessarily relates to, or has arisen from, changes in opportunities, choice or the removal of structural and/or agential barriers to accessing and participating in VET. For example, by viewing participation through the lens of the capabilities approach one can view a rich and complex social and community context in which the training occurs. Such a lens may take consideration of the values, aspirations and preferences of learners. It gives weight to constraints on young people’s capability to convert pre-training and post-training states of affairs into something they have reason to value. The results suggest that the application of the CA to the context of young adults and post-school VET may hold potential in the following areas:
1. Disentangling ‘functionings’ (e.g. being enrolled in a VET course) from ‘capabilities’ (e.g. freedom to enrol in any VET course/freedom to enroll in a VET course they value) and ‘agency’ (e.g. freedom to choose a specific VET course);  

2. Seeking an understanding of comprehensive outcomes to understand how functionings came to be (the means by which people came to be enrolled in a VET course);  

3. Acknowledging the prevalence of adaptive preference formation in contexts where options are limited (e.g. ‘thin’ markets);  

4. Applying a lens that balances the need for quality compliance and regulation of RTOs with the pursuit of a minimum threshold of justice for individuals accessing VET;  

5. Prioritising the well-being of individuals as the primary unit of moral concern (ethical individualism); and  

6. Acknowledging the structural and agential constraints on individuals’ freedom to rationally choose and reject from a range of good alternatives.  

My findings suggest that when highly complex interfaces are reduced to crude statistical representations of VET participation, bound by weak empirical assumptions, a narrow perception of reality may be narrativised and reinforced. These data also suggest such practices may be ultimately dismissive of the underlying causal mechanisms causing deeper, entrenched inequalities that are not necessarily accessible in surface-level representations of reality. The qualitative data collected from students suggests that a
range of underlying factors may include: (1) the means by which the student became enrolled; (2) the active or passive role they played in the decision to become enrolled; (3) the extent to which they are enrolled to satisfy short-term pressures (e.g. to maintain welfare payments; to increase RTO income) or as a starting point to achieve longer-term aspirations (e.g. to travel overseas as a qualified tradesperson). Perhaps most importantly, the capabilities approach may offer potential to critically examine the means by which these young adults’ current ‘functionings’ came to be. For example, one of the welders who participated in my research spoke about wanting a forklift ticket for his current job. He said that he ‘had to go through a whole Cert IV course just to get my bloody ticket’. Although enrolled, the findings suggest that he, and others, were not always active participants in their enrolment or choice of enrolment. This comes to the notion of ‘freedom of choice’ and the extent to which the target population felt that they were in control of their decision to enrol in a course. One student was of the view that ‘You’d think you would be [in control]. But you’re not’. This lack of control, one student suggested, could ‘explain why there’s a lot of people in this course that are 23+ years old because they were forced into a course they didn’t want to do’.

In the absence of good data on training ‘quality’ and ‘choice’ at the level of the RTO, the results of Chapter 3 (review of policy and practice) suggest that proxy measures and inferred causal relationships have had a tendency to emerge and dominate the narrative (e.g. ‘the shifts in participation reflect improvements in course choice’). A utilitarian lens on the problem may craft a reality in which measures of student satisfaction with training can provide a proxy for the quality of training and assessment
delivered. The capabilities approach helps to challenge these sorts of assumptions. The challenge comes from an implicit understanding that utility (satisfaction) is not our primary concern as it may be the function of limited options and adaptive preferences (e.g. ‘…it was kind of good really that this was our only option’). It may also reflect a lack of knowledge as to whether a training program has or has not met national standards in delivery and assessing the course. It seems entirely plausible for graduates who have participated in ‘easy’, ‘fast’, ‘free’ (but also low quality) training to ultimately say they were broadly satisfied with their experience. Instead, the capabilities approach redirects our attention to be concerned with the types and quality of training opportunities available in the first place. It focuses attention on the accessibility and quality of options, as well as the freedom to choose and reject from a range of good alternatives. My findings suggest that a more capability-informed approach to understanding young adults’ engagement with VET would not measure success solely by their current levels of participation in VET, their satisfaction with it or their transition into work. Rather, it would seek to measure whether it has improved the young person’s capabilities, and might focus, for example, on sustainable and valued careers; the development of individuals’ freedom of choice in their local training and labour market; and the availability of decent work that is valued.

7.5. Summary of discussion

In response to research question one, my research suggests that administrative and survey data on post-school pathways and VET participation, while helpful in many respects, offer an incomplete understanding of the problem. VET administrative and
survey data sources provide a detailed account of how the ‘system’ is ‘performing’ for accountability and reporting purposes. Census and school-leaver data provide helpful insights into the stratification of all post-school pathways of young people. When combined with a mapping of local post-school education and training provision, I can see how post-school pathways in the FMP region are confined by, and adapt to, a narrow set of tertiary education and training and/or employment opportunities.

Archival Census data and surveys of school leavers suggest that VET and work characterise post-school pathways in the FMP region. At the same time, VET administrative data suggests that, since the introduction of the VTG, the learner groups to have increased are: (1) the unemployed; (2) female learners; (3) learners enrolled with private providers; and (4) learners enrolled in non-apprenticeship training. Census data can show us that when compared to their peers in the rest of Melbourne, these data suggest that the target population is: (1) less likely to be enrolled in higher education; (2) more likely to be employed full-time; and (3) more likely to be unemployed with no post-school qualification. At the same time, surveys of school leavers can show us that the rate of participation in higher education, although low, is growing. The analysis presented in Chapter 5 appears to demonstrate that each of the selected data sources can contribute, challenge or corroborate a new message to the narrative. They are, however, largely based on snapshots of participation and therefore risk masking the underlying causes that cause the stratification in participation across the region. The quantitative results indicate that a deeper understanding of local context is needed to understand the underlying causal
mechanisms influencing inequalities in rates of participation in post-school education and training.

In response to research question two, my findings suggest that there is a richness of information about the target population – sourced from the participants themselves – that cannot be feasibly captured from system-level collections. For example, collecting qualitative data on the participants’ perspectives on their own perceptions of safety, the local community, and local opportunities for other young people helps to provide important context to the participation data. These data start to explain some of the underlying drivers and their potential to impact upon issues of choice, access, participation, completion and outcomes. For example, the qualitative data collection revealed that many participants were exposed to work in the traditional trades from a young age (e.g. plumbing, carpentry). Most had undertaken some form of VET in schools, many through the TAFE they were currently attending. However, there was no apparent link between their VET in schools program and what they were doing as young adults at TAFE. Some felt that they were rushed into making a decision about VET in schools or a choice was made for them. The location, cost and duration were each key factors in choosing a provider and course. For young parents, the availability of on-campus services, such as childcare was essential. Choice was extremely limited for most students, particularly for those enrolled on the southern peninsula. The participants appeared to be acutely aware of the risks borne by the individual of dropping out before completing their qualification as well as the attendant time and financial costs.
In response to research question three, my research appears to support earlier research that suggests the capabilities approach offers some potential to the areas of VET and youth transitions. As an alternate lens on an increasingly narrowly conceived problem, the CA appears to help to challenge some of the normative, economistic assumptions around what opportunities are ‘available’ in an increasingly market-driven VET systems (Powell, 2014; López-Fogués, 2014; Wheelahan et al., 2012). However, the lens of the CA also offers potential for disentangling ‘functionings’ (e.g. being enrolled in a VET course) from ‘capabilities’ (e.g. freedom to enrol in any VET course/freedom to enroll in a VET course they value) and ‘agency’ (e.g. freedom to choose a specific VET course). It puts an emphasis on understanding how functionings came to be (the means by which people came to be enrolled in a VET course). By placing the individual as the primary unit of moral concern (ethical individualism), it gives consideration to the prevalence of adaptive preference and how capabilities become narrowed in contexts where options are limited. The lens of the capabilities approach theorises that individuals tend to adapt their aspirations to the context of what is perceived as possible and realistic. My research suggests that, in the face of limited post-school education, training and employment options, the target population in the FMP region has comparatively limited post-school opportunities in terms of full-time employment and higher education. They may have limited material resources to access post-school opportunities and convert their training course into something they value. With the introduction of an increased level of uncertainty associated with (1) who they train with, (2) what courses are offered within a travelable distance; (3) and how much of the cost they are expected to bear, young adults
may be exposed to an additional layer of risk than was previously the case. This additional layer appears to be added to what is already a precarious transition from school into adulthood, independence and working life. These factors appear to have implications for how responses to the problem are conceived and measured into the future.
Chapter 8: Conclusions

‘[The VET market reform process is] affecting the most vulnerable young people in the community; it’s cutting off opportunities which are aimed at the most vulnerable’.

Professor of Economics, John Quiggin (Mitchell, 2012, p.44)

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This concluding chapter will begin by recapping the original aims (what I set out to do) and a description of the enacted research design (what I did). The chapter then outlines the methodological approach, its rationale and how it was undertaken (how I did it and why). In light of the discussion of results in Chapter 7, I then outline the significance of my findings and their contribution to knowledge. The chapter concludes with a discussion of my research in terms of its implications and limitations.

8.1. What I set out to do

My research started with the problem of youth unemployment in Australia. This has been described by former Treasury Secretary Ken Henry as a source of ‘capability deprivation’ (Henry, 2014). The youth unemployment rate on the Mornington Peninsula of Melbourne, Victoria increased from nine per cent in 2006 to 20 per cent in April 2015. This is five percentage points higher than the greater Melbourne and Victorian state averages (ABS, 2015a). Consistent with human capital theory, a recurring set of policies and programs have been introduced in Australia to widen post-school opportunities by lifting rates of participation in vocational education and training (VET). More recently, the introduction of neoliberal policies marketising the Victorian training system has
transformed the composition of VET providers in the training system and, by extension, the types and quality of courses being offered. While the impact of these market-based reforms has been documented in the media and government reviews (Mackenzie & Coulson, 2015), very little is understood about the impact of these reforms on small populations at the local level. Even less is understood from the perspective of the learners themselves. This research set out to make a contribution to better understand these problems.

To address the problem, I set out to undertake research into the stratification of post-school pathways of young people and notions of post-school ‘opportunities’. This led to considerations of underlying causal mechanisms that influence inequalities in what opportunities are available and accessible to young people after they leave school. My research sought to contribute a broader critical examination of post-school training opportunities available to young adults in the Frankston-Mornington Peninsula region. An underlying hypothesis of my research was that some degree of misalignment exists between what is ‘available’ and what is ‘accessible’ for particular sub-populations of young people at the local level. As the research aims became more focused, I set out to critically examine the post-school VET opportunities that are both available and accessible to young adults in a particular disadvantaged setting. To test my ‘misalignment’ hypotheses, it was logical to set up my research ‘laboratory’ in a geographic setting where both youth participation in VET and youth unemployment rates are comparatively high. A preliminary mapping exercise of the Victorian VET system revealed high levels of VET participation and youth unemployment in the Frankston-
Mornington Peninsula (FMP) region of southern metropolitan Melbourne (an administrative region of the Victorian Government). As I looked deeper into the FMP region, I became aware of deficit-based narratives in the wider public discourse surrounding young people (e.g. ‘youth unemployment crisis’, ‘young people roaming the streets’, ‘low aspirations’). I set out to understand some of the underlying causal mechanisms driving some of these surface-level narratives and to document their points of intersection with the VET system.

With the geographic setting in place, my interest turned to VET policy settings and measures of ‘performance’. This meant taking a step back from the FMP region to consider the higher-level disciplinary and ideological frameworks influencing the trajectory of VET policy reforms in Australia. The impact of recent reforms had been widely-documented in the media and through government reviews at a system level (e.g. Mackenzie & Coulson, 2015; Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu, 2015; Mitchell, 2012). However, little independent research had been conducted into their impact on the post-school training opportunities available to young adults at a local level. Even less was understood from the perspective of the learners themselves. It was hypothesised that through a critical examination of the underlying causes of inequality, and the methods used to measure to understand ‘disadvantage’ in VET, my research could better understand the degree of alignment between: (1) paper-based opportunities (as espoused and measured in VET policy) and (2) real, accessible opportunities (as stated and valued by young people undertaking VET). The tension between these two lenses set the
foundation with which to critically examine the underlying causes of inequalities in the post-school opportunities available to young adults in the FMP region.

8.2. What I did

With the research problems identified, I set about constructing an appropriate conceptual and methodological framework to address them. My research was built around, and mutually reinforced by, three elements: (1) critical realist ontology (Bhaskar, 1979/1975); (2) the conceptual framework of the capabilities approach (Sen, 1980/1984/1985/1987/1992/1993; Nussbaum, 1988/1992/1995/2000/2002/2003); and (3) a sequential explanatory mixed-method design (Creswell et al., 2003) This configuration of ontology, conceptual framework and research methods set about creating a line-of-sight between the research problems and the methods used to address them. Each element was brought together in ways that were ethically individualistic, mutually reinforcing, and contextualised to the research problem. The first element, critical realism, was selected to provide an ontological lens that challenged surface-level representations of reality and the fallibility of our capacity to represent reality. As stated earlier, the purpose of my research was to better understand the extent of misalignment between available and accessible VET opportunities. This necessitated a lens that did not accept the ‘face value’. It was predicated on an understanding that our understanding of reality is fallible. A tenet of critical realism (Bhaskar, 1979/1975) is that the world exists independently of what humans think about it. This means there is a 'reality' that exists independently of what I, or any researcher, might think about it. As a critical realist, I was able to critically examine the underlying causal mechanisms (structures and agency) creating inequalities
in surface-level statistical representations of access to, and participation in, post-school VET for young adults in the FMP region. The second element, the capabilities approach, introduced a normative evaluative space in which to challenge economistic and utilitarian assumptions around the purposes and narrativisation of VET. A fundamental rationale for drawing on the capabilities approach was its interest in critiquing narrow and non-distributive measures of human development.

By selecting the capabilities approach, I sought to apply an alternative lens to an increasingly narrow, instrumentalist and reductive lens of VET in public policy. A preliminary investigation of the literature revealed that the trajectory of VET policy since the 1980s was also narrowing its scope to exclude the broader educational, social and community-based purposes of VET. Critics of this industry-driven approach have argued that measures of VET ‘performance’ had become overly economistic and instrumental.

The criticisms have suggested such approaches, such as the categorisation of ‘equity groups’, were potentially masking deep and persistent inequalities in the levels of access, participation and outcomes. By applying the conceptual framework of the CA, it was hypothesised that my research could offer an alternative lens on VET that is more reflective of its broader purposes. In knitting together the ontology of critical realism with the conceptual framework of the capabilities approach, my research sought to provide a fresh perspective to challenge some of the conventional wisdom, assumptions and narratives concerning young adults and VET in disadvantaged locations. The capabilities approach helps to challenge the orthodoxy of VET by applying an alternate vision on the problem of inequality in access to, and participation in, VET. Complementing the CA,
critical realist ontology is concerned with the causal mechanisms that may create and reinforce such inequalities. My research also builds on earlier studies, some of which are PhDs, that have drawn on critical realist ontology to explore the capabilities approach in different contexts, including in the areas of further education, VET and marginalised youth (Powell & McGrath, 2014; Powell, 2014/2012; López-Fogués, 2014/2012a/2012b).

The third and final element was the deployment of a research design to collect and analyse data. It became clear early on that a mixed methods approach was needed to understand differences between ‘available’ and ‘accessible’ opportunities. Therefore, I set out to understand what data could be used to understand the research problem. Through a preliminary investigation of the quantitative data sources, it soon became apparent that their limitations rendered them necessary but insufficient to address my research questions. This led to the selection of a sequential explanatory mixed-method design. Such a design necessitated the construction of two strands of intersecting research: (1) a quantitative strand comprising an account of publicly available statistical information on the post-school activities of the target population as it relates to their education, training and/or employment; and (2) a qualitative strand comprising data gathered from focus groups with VET learners in the FMP region. Methodologically, I set about assembling and conducting a diverse array of data sources, data types and analytical procedures to address three research questions:

1. How useful are quantitative data for critically examining what post-school VET opportunities are available and accessible to young adults in the FMP region?
2. What does qualitative data gathered from young adults in the FMP region offer?
3. What potential does the capabilities approach offer?

In addressing the questions, my research aimed to address three hypotheses: (1) that post-school VET opportunities are contextualised to the local environment and may manifest as unobservable causal relationships which may not be found in surface-level representations of reality; (2) that some degree of misalignment exists between available and accessible opportunities among the target population; and (3) that the CA offers some degree of potential to help broaden understandings of the VET opportunities available to young adults in the FMP region. The next challenge for my research was to develop a sound and appropriate methodology.

8.3. How I did it and why

To address my research questions and hypotheses, the methodology involved six substantive research tasks. In summary, these were: (1) a literature review of Australian and international literature (presented in Chapter 2); (2) a mapping of VET policy settings, providers and programs relevant to the FMP region (presented in Chapter 3); (3) the assembly and analysis of archival quantitative data from public data sources; (4) the preparation of the qualitative strand (design of data collection tools, recruitment of the VET provider, scheduling of focus groups etc); (5) the collection of qualitative data; and (6) the analysis of qualitative data.

The literature review (Chapter 2). As detailed in the literature search strategy (Section 4.4.1), the literature review comprised of two components: (1) a review of the literature on the capabilities approach (key concepts, applications and limitations); and
(2) a review of the literature on young people and VET in Australia and internationally (lenses, measures and narratives). These two complementary strands assisted my research by identifying gaps where my research could make a contribution. The review also assisted with the process of consolidating the ontological and conceptual framework for my research (critical realism and the capabilities approach). An endnote library was constructed and journal articles were categorised into a number of themes. In the Australian context, my research drew heavily on scholarly academic research undertaken, and or funded by, NCVER. The search sought to prioritise peer-reviewed literature. However, by necessity a broad interpretation of ‘literature’ was applied to include grey literature\textsuperscript{19}, applied research; practitioner inquiry and research-based policy statements and/or policy submissions.

**The review of policy and practice (Chapter 3).** The second stage involved assembling, reviewing and critically analysing relevant documentation on policy and practice. This required my research to take a step back from the FMP region to understand the trajectory of VET and youth policy settings in Victoria and in Australia in recent decades. In doing so, I sought to contextualise my research in a broader understanding of historical context and current socio-economic arrangements that had potential to impact upon the target population and my findings. One of the mapping tasks to be undertaken was to create a detailed listing of VET providers, courses and stakeholders that were active in the FMP region. This essentially involved exhaustive

\textsuperscript{19} Materials and research produced by organisations outside of the traditional commercial or academic publishing and distribution channels.
web searches, interrogation of media archives, library databases and government websites. The annual *Environmental Scan* produced by the Frankston-Mornington Peninsula Local Learning and Employment Network (FMPLLEN) and the Southern Metropolitan Regional Profiles provided the foundation for understanding the local setting. Informal conversations with practitioners and administrators also offered invaluable feedback on emerging findings. These conversations helped to contextualise abstract and conceptual ideas within the ‘real-world’ of the FMP region. Although the original intention was to cast a wider net to include ‘youth’ or ‘young people’ (15-24 year olds), the parameters narrowed to include only ‘young adults’ (18-24 year olds). This enabled my research to focus more directly on individuals enrolled in non-compulsory education and training delivered outside the schools sector.

**Identifying a ‘target population’**. To focus the scope, the logic of participant selection followed an ordered hierarchy of criteria: geographic location of training and student residence (Frankston-Mornington Peninsula region); age (18-24 years old); participation in VET (enrolled student); level of participation in VET (AQF level); and industry training area (ASCED field). For the purposes of this study, the geographic area of the ‘Frankston-Mornington Peninsula region’ refers to the Australian Bureau of Statistics geographic area Statistical Area 4: ‘Frankston Mornington Peninsula’ under the Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS).

**The assessment of the data (Chapter 5)**. The next task was to deploy a descriptive framework with quantitative methods to analyse secondary quantitative data.

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20 The minimum school leaving age in Victoria is 17.
This involved the analysis and presentation of results relating to the post-school pathways of young adults (18-24 year olds) in the FMP region (presented in Chapter 5). These analyses draw predominately on the ABS *Census of Population and Housing*; the NCVER *National VET Provider* collection, and the Victorian Government’s *On Track* surveys of school leavers. My objective was to conduct an assessment of their capacity to address my research questions. The underpinning hypothesis was that limitations and assumptions within the datasets may influence how surface-level representations of reality are narrativised and understood at the local level. The results of the analysis, presented in Chapter 5, were grouped into three sections: (1) the representation of the FMP region in government reporting on VET (based on a document analysis of government reports); (2) data on post-school opportunities (based on analysis of Census and *On Track* data); and (3) data on post-school VET opportunities (based on analysis of data from the NCVER VET National Provider Collection). My assessment of the limitations of the available quantitative data, as presented in Chapter, aimed to draw out themes for further explanation by enrolled learners in the qualitative strand.

**What the students say (Chapter 6).** To assist with the sampling of students from the target population, I constructed a stratified matched sample frame from NCVER statistics. This involved using matched samples based on demographics, industry area and training qualification level. With the sample frame built, the schedule of questions finalised and the focus groups scheduled, the next stage was to collect data with groups of learners at the Frankston and Mornington Peninsula campuses of a large training provider. The qualitative strand comprised six focus groups with 35 students enrolled on
the Frankston and Peninsula campuses. Four groups were conducted on the Frankston campus and two groups were conducted on the Peninsula (Rosebud) campus. There were 13 females and 22 males across a total of six training groups. The sessions ranged in duration from 45 minutes to 1 hour. Each participant was provided with a Plain Language Statement and Consent Form to make clear the purpose of the study and their role in it. Once the sessions had been transcribed, the qualitative analysis phase commenced. Data were imported into SPSS where thematic analyses were undertaken to code responses and exchanges between students into broad categories. The results were then reported thematically for each training group.

8.4. Contribution to knowledge and significance

My research has occurred at a time of unprecedented change in the Victorian training system. These changes have sought to reorient the Victorian training system towards market-based principles of: individual entitlements, industry relevance, competition, choice and flexibility. Despite their far-reaching and disruptive impact on training policy and practice, the evidence base on how well the reforms are working is weak (e.g. Whitechurch, 2016; Mitchell, 2012). At a local level, these reforms have not yet been subject to a steady program of impartial and empirical research. The timing of my research offers the potential to make a significant contribution to our understanding of their impact on young adults’ VET opportunities in an area of deep and persistent disadvantage. Research of this kind is required to better understand how such reorientations are impacting upon the lives of people living at the local level.
My research contributes to knowledge by investigating the misalignment between formal VET opportunities (as espoused in government policy) and real opportunities (as experienced by young people) in the specific location of the Frankston-Mornington Peninsula region. A fundamental rationale for undertaking this research in one geographic area was that it could focus on local contexts but have potential for wider application. It was hypothesised that if the application of the capabilities approach could be shown to have potential in one local area, for one ‘target population’ of students, then there may be potential for application to the wider training system and other training systems in Australia and overseas. My research suggests that:

1. Administrative and survey data on post-school pathways and VET participation offer a necessary but insufficient understanding of the opportunities that are available and accessible to individuals and collective groups at the local level;

2. There appears to be some degree of misalignment between the types of ‘available’ opportunities espoused in policy rhetoric and the opportunities that are accessible;

3. Qualitative data gathered from enrolled students offers insights into understanding the constraints on their opportunities that are not identifiable through the quantitative data; and

4. The capabilities approach offers some potential to provide an alternative lens with which to challenge some of the normative, economistic assumptions in increasingly market-driven VET systems.
The findings suggest that there are a number of levels at which issues facing an already diverse VET student population are masked within higher level measurement conventions and public reporting mechanisms by government. What makes the FMP region a compelling case is the compounding effect of the structure of social arrangements that are inconvenient for the purposes of simplistic measurement and reporting. This is reflected in the breadth of disadvantage and advantage at the sub-regional level (e.g. from Mount Eliza to Frankston North) and between the Mornington Peninsula region and other parts of the Southern metropolitan region or Victoria. This gradation and breadth of disadvantage, and how it is reflected in official measurement and reporting, can be subtle and insidious when it comes to how young peoples’ experiences with education, training and employment at the local level are understood. The capabilities approach, with its focus on ethical individualism and heterogeneity of the human experience, compels us to consider how the various issues may mask issues at the local area level. Finally, it is hoped that the research can make a contribution to the emerging literature which is applying the capabilities approach to the theorising of young people in education, training and employment.

8.5. Implications for policy, practice and research

This section discusses the implications of the results for policy, practice and research.

8.5.1. Implications for policy and practice
It is envisaged that the findings will have application for policy makers and practitioners working in similarly disadvantaged contexts, particularly where there are limited post-school opportunities available to young people. For policy makers, the findings suggest that there can be marked areas of incongruity between what is valued (and measured) at a system level and what is valued (and accessible) by young people, and the practitioners who work with them, at the local level. This finding has implications for how VET opportunities are conceptualised, measured and narrativised within VET systems, both at the system and the local level. The findings presented in Chapters 4 and 5 suggest a degree of misalignment between the policy rhetoric advocated in the early implementation of the VTG and the outcomes that occurred in the years that followed. The implication for policy is that statistical increases in participation do not necessarily reflect greater and improved opportunity and choice in the training market for all cohorts. Participation data are necessary but insufficient for critically examining the underlying causal factors that may cause inequalities in rates of access and participation. Secondly, the results appear to challenge a fundamental assumption of the market reformist agenda in VET that conceives of young people as consumers, making rational choices based on sound information in a training market. My findings suggest that policy attempts to cast the target population, and the wider student population, as rational ‘consumers’ requires further investigation. As detailed in Chapter 2, the rational agent - *Homo Economicus* - is assumed to take account of available information, probabilities of events, and potential costs (e.g. tuition fees) and benefits (e.g. post-training employment rates, earnings) in determining preferences, and to act consistently in choosing the self-determined best
choice of action. In reality, my research suggests a messier and more complex picture of how young adults engage with VET. For example, at least since 2012, the financial viability of courses has been a significant driver in determining what training opportunities are available to the target population in their local area. Any assumption that young people, such as the target population of my research, are making rational ‘choices’ informed by labour market demand needs to be challenged or, at least, contextualised in light of these swiftly introduced funding interventions. When government subsidies for training are significantly reduced in training areas that characterise the local youth labour market, it is unclear how the needs of industry or the choices of students are being met. This decline in training opportunities in the services sector challenges the ‘industry responsive’ and ‘increased choice’ rationale for market-based training reform. My findings have implications for how these types of reforms can impact upon local communities in ‘thin’ markets where training and employment opportunities are already limited. If young people are deprived of access to training opportunities that characterise the job profile of the local economy then this has significant implications for them as local residents seeking local opportunities.

The recent ‘Mackenzie Review’ of VET funding in Victoria recommended to government the introduction of ‘thin market’ funding (Mackenzie & Coulson, 2015). The Government’s response to the ‘Mackenzie Review’ used the example of Warrnambool, a regional centre populated by around 29,000 people and located 265km south-west of Melbourne.

*The coastal city of Warrnambool attracts over 700,000 visitors per*
year. The tourism and hospitality industries are major contributors to the region’s economy and its population relies strongly on these industries for jobs and economic growth. However, local training in tourism and hospitality has significantly declined in recent years as, under the current system, regional training businesses are unable to get enough students in the door and deliver these courses at the same funding rates paid to the big metropolitan training institutes (DET, 2015b, p.8).

My findings extend these types of observations to suggest that there are fundamental assumptions in the VET policy settings that require deeper critical analysis. For example, the most recent VET reforms to marketise the training system in Victoria appear to have been led, at least in the initial years, by the assumption that A [more funding, more training providers, and more courses] will lead to, and is a reflection of, B [more choice]. However, when unacceptably large numbers of students do not ‘choose’ to train in C [skill shortage or specialised areas] and/or unacceptably large numbers of students do not ‘choose’ to train with D [RTOs who are meeting the national training standards] the government is forced to intervene to maintain the integrity of the system and reign in the budget. To do this, government has acted to ‘facilitate’ the market [adjust the funding rules, produce market information] and tighten RTO standards [registration and compliance requirements] to maximise ‘public value’ for the investment made. However, my research suggests that the empirical relationships between A, B, C, D have been inferred. Their relationship was empirically unknown in the context of Australian training systems at the point of introducing the initial reforms. What is known is subject
to infinite externalities, intangibles, contemporaneous factors and unknown economic, social and political conditions – all of which are in a constant state of change. My findings suggest that the ‘experiment’ that tested this unknown relationship has had real implications at the local level for individuals accessing the VET system, especially during the early experimental period of reform.

My findings also suggest that some small VET populations do not ‘fit the mould’ of system-led public policy accountability and reporting mechanisms in VET. With their economic and accounting origins, the input, process, output, outcome model may have been useful for establishing resourcing and accountability agreements between the states and federal governments. However, my findings suggest that this model offers little insight into what opportunities are available to individuals nor their capability and agency to access them. There currently remain an array of technical, privacy and cost limitations to: (1) calculating completion rates to a disaggregated level (outputs); (2) collecting post-training survey data on satisfaction and destinations to a disaggregated level (outcomes); and (3) releasing information on training courses and providers to prospective users of the training system (consumer information). While noting these limitations, it can be reasonably assumed that such information will become more in-demand in the future as greater premiums are placed on informing users of the training system and choice-making behaviours. As the VET ‘market’ develops in sophistication, my research suggests that a more nuanced approach may be required by policy makers to understand the complex interplay of factors such as price, cost, choice, opportunity, quality and so on. The introduction of market-based funding, and the subsequent outbreak of unethical practices
by a small number of RTOs and their brokers, has galvanised policymakers to focus on the application process (how students are recruited); the reasons why individuals choose RTOs or not; learner engagement; peer recommendations; and satisfaction at the RTO level, among other consumeristic factors.

The results of Chapter 5 direct attention to the limitations of the available data for understanding the VET opportunities that are available and accessible to the target population. The participation-based narrative, while sometimes supplemented with data on outcomes, appears to offer little insight into factors creating inequalities in levels of access and participation. It also offers little understanding of the availability of good quality choices (courses/RTOs) from which young adults are able to select and reject. At a policy level, there are clearly a number of efforts underway to improve the richness of data available on VET in Australia. For example, in the last two years Australian governments have introduced: (1) unique student identifiers (to track student flows in VET); (2) surveys of total VET activity (to track non-government VET); (3) large jurisdiction-level surveys of students and employers (to enable more granular analysis of training outcomes); (4) ongoing technical work to refine methodologies for calculating training completion rates; (5) consumer information websites (to compare data on the training market); and (6) data linkage projects (to break down inter-governmental silos).

Each of these developments appears to demonstrate a commitment by government to improving and enriching our understanding of issues beyond basic counts of participation. The pursuit of collecting and disseminating data on VET appears promising. However, the results of my research imply that it is important to approach
these data requirements from a sufficiently broad perspective so as not to be even further bound by narrow and instrumentalist conceptualisations of VET.

My findings appear to confirm the widely-stated argument that the Australian VET system has not been well-established to listen to all voices of students who access the system – particularly those who: (1) do not complete; (2) are most disadvantaged; and (3) are in most need of government-subsidised services. The capacity of young people to afford tuition fees and the associated costs of participation in education and training are rarely heard within the VET policy discourse of ‘choice’ – particularly as it relates to young people in disadvantaged areas. Despite the policy rhetoric of ‘training guarantees’, ‘youth guarantees’ and ‘unlimited places’, affordability is likely to become a key policy issue in the future with the uncapping of student fees; the opening up of income-contingent loans; and increasing fiscal pressures on VET budgets. For the target population participating in my research, the issues of cost and investment were affirmed as issues of importance to them, as was the attendant risk of carrying these costs. This is particularly true for the out-of-pocket expenses that young people must incur over and above what they expect they will incur at the start of the course.

At a technical level, there are a number of implications for policy and practice including: (1) the continued refinement of enrolment procedures to reduce missing values in questions relating to student characteristics; (2) the development of robust and replicable methodologies to measure outputs and outcomes at different levels of the system; (3) inter-agency data linkages to broaden understandings of individual well-being outside the confines of VET systems and structures (e.g. schools, VET, health, housing,
financial assistance etc); (4) improved measures of student choice that extend beyond imprecise counts of RTOs operating in a given geographic area; (5) development of feedback mechanisms to give greater credence to the learner voice and community participation in the VET reform process; and (6) improved consumer information to better inform individuals accessing the system of what it is they are signing up for.

My research has reaffirmed how little information on the training market is accessible and customised to users (consumers) of the training system, and how long it has taken to produce what limited information is currently available (Mackenzie & Coulson, 2015; Karmel, 2013a/2013b/2009; Mitchell, 2012; Angus et al., 2012; Golding et al., 2012). The current RTO performance indicator project in Victoria appears to be making an extremely valuable contribution to the area of consumer information. However, it was introduced some seven or eight years after the introduction of the initial Victorian training reforms and after many millions of dollars was wasted on recalled qualifications and low-quality training. In its response to the Mackenzie Review of VET Funding in Victoria, the Victorian Government acknowledged that since the introduction of the market-based reforms there has been ‘insufficient information and support for students and employers in making training choices’ (DET, 2015b, p.2). As a result, the government has said they ‘will develop a powerful tool to communicate provider performance in a way that is meaningful and useful for students’ (DET, 2015a, p.8). A full decade earlier, the 2006 VET Inquiry in Victoria advised government that ‘a missing piece of the picture is easily accessible, individualised advice for prospective enrolees’ (OTTE, 2006, p.27).
The finding that post-school pathways more closely resemble regional pathways than metropolitan pathways has important implications for policy. Firstly, this means that the lack of access (and attendant cost and transport issues), particularly for those residing on the southern peninsula, is not necessarily offset by financial support and incentives to encourage participation by individuals in post-school education and training. Already residing in an area not well-serviced by higher education providers, school leavers aspiring to pursue higher education studies do not appear to receive regional entitlements to study at metropolitan-based universities. Secondly, from the RTO perspective, training providers in the FMP region (a metropolitan location) do not receive the Victorian Government five per cent subsidy loadings available to providers in regional locations. Thirdly, inconsistent classifications of FMP region as ‘metro’, ‘regional’, ‘rural’ and so on appear to create structural inconsistencies for providers and students. A 5km journey for a 19 year old to attend a VET course in south-eastern Metropolitan Melbourne does not equate to a journey of the same length in Frankston or on the southern peninsula. Yet, all are considered to be located with the Melbourne metropolitan area. The level of resourcing, policies and programs deployed, if not sufficiently representative of contexts, social norms, transport, and affordability for individuals who reside in the area, have the potential to reproduce social inequality and reinforce barriers to access and participation. In summary, the results imply that the VET sector could benefit from a fresh set of policy questions. For example, a traditional approach may compel us to ask: ‘How effectively and efficiently is the training system meeting the training needs of the target population
on the Mornington Peninsula?’ However, a capabilities approach may compel us to ask ‘How accessible are training opportunities to all individuals?’

So, with an increasingly stringent set of eligibility criteria placed upon the individual in order for them to access public funding, what has the government provided in return? Nussbaum’s partial theory of justice may offer potential to future policy work for its capacity to reorient emphases towards the pursuit of justice for individuals by their governments. This is timely as support continues to mount in Australia for consumer protections for VET students, alongside the introduction of VET complaint hotlines and the establishment of a national ‘VET ombudsman’ (Mitchell, 2012). Nussbaum’s capabilities approach, as distinct from Amartya Sen’s variation, prioritises fundamental human freedoms that should be available and accessible to all individuals. In doing so, Nussbaum redirects our attention towards the pursuit of justice by considering minimum thresholds of justice for individual students. This seeks to ensure that their welfare is prioritised as the primary unit of moral concern. This may offer some balance to the current regulation-led and risk-based approaches that appear to prioritise the ‘weeding out’ of poor RTOs sometime after they have committed the practices that caused their registration to be suspended or cancelled. The application of the capabilities approach in this way may open up new lines of enquiry that rarely gain traction in the participation-led narrative in the VET sector. For example, while a statistical increase in VET participation is readily narrativised as a reflection of ‘increased opportunities’ and ‘increased choice’ could it also reflect the deprivation of other opportunities? Could it reflect a deprivation of access to higher education or a limited supply of part-time work
to support post-compulsory studies? Could it reflect the lack of income support provided to FMP residents for university studies by virtue of their ‘metropolitan’ status? Could the dramatic increase in unemployed VET students also reflect RTO recruitment strategies to target the young and unemployed? Could a statistical increase in RTOs reflect a surface-level increase in the supply of choices on paper but also a reduction in the overall quality of choice in the lives of local residents? The lens of the capabilities approach, supported by a mixed method design, also appears to unearth a deep level of insight from the learners themselves. The results in Chapter 6 suggested that a suite of ‘life pressures’ associated with undertaking a VET course, in amongst the other pressures they felt, were bubbling under the surface of our discussions around VET. The comment by one young mother that it was ‘hard to live a normal life’ while studying offered one insight into the challenge of maintaining a manageable balance between study, work and family life. It is these lines of enquiry that demonstrate the value of an alternative lens but also the importance of qualitative and mixed method research to look behind surface-level representations of current ‘functionings’ (‘being enrolled’).

8.5.2. Implications for research

For researchers, there are lessons arising for ways in which the capabilities approach can help to inform conceptualisations and measures of training in disadvantaged locations. My research suggests that the ways in which governments in Australia have been representing the problem and shaping the argument around VET policy since 2008 requires critical analysis (Nicolson, 2015). The results of my research imply both challenges and opportunities for research in the VET sector. The results imply
the importance of researchers being able to demonstrate the value of alternate models such as the capabilities approach within the mainstream policy discourse. The challenge is in demonstrating their value without being dismissed as ‘costly’ and ‘impractical’ in an increasingly narrow and fiscally conservative policy environment. A key advantage of the capabilities approach over other conceptual frameworks is that is its openness can compel VET researchers and policymakers to debate and refine the approaches used to understand VET systems.

A particular area of future research could be in understanding the nature of learner choice in training markets. The weak empirical measures of ‘choice’ in public reporting on the VET system (e.g. shifts in participation to non-TAFE RTOs, increases in number of RTOs etc) suggest that there is more work to be done to make a compelling case that these statistical shifts in participation are related to active, rational decision-making behaviours. Correlation doesn’t necessarily imply causation. Nor does an increase in the number of RTOs imply increases in the overall level of good choices, nor increases in freedom to choose and reject from a range of good alternatives. For many years, technical work has sought to measure intangible, social, and community benefits and outcomes from VET in ways that are meaningful to policy and practice. The challenge for researchers is to not allow narrow and surface-level representations of data and policy-led decisions to outpace (or contradict) the evidence base. While research at a conceptual and system level is important, my research reaffirms the importance of local intelligence, networks, associations and communities of practice. These channels produce and coordinate research output of vital importance. The work of the Brotherhood of St
Laurence, Dussledorp Skills Forum and Youth Affairs Council of Victoria, as described earlier, are examples of how community-based action research and participatory evaluation models have striven to be inclusive of the learner voice and of ‘how young people are faring’. These lenses combine quantitative trend data at a system level with ‘thick’ understandings of learners’ histories, experiences and capabilities arising from their participation in programs at the local level. While traditional data-collection techniques remain important, they have drawn attention to the potentially significant role of more participative approaches to collecting relevant data, such as those used by non-governmental organisations, where the process of data collection, deliberation and reflection can be just as valuable as the data itself. This approach can offer an understanding not just of whether capabilities have expanded but of how, so that policymakers can make best use of increasingly scarce resources to support the expansion of ‘good’ and ‘real’ opportunities. Suggesting a possible strand of VET research, my findings suggest there is scope for VET research to apply Alkire’s (2008b) two distinct forms of CA evaluation: (1) evaluative analyses and (2) prospective analyses. Through an evaluative analysis, we might seek to observe whether capabilities to access, participate and complete a good quality VET course have expanded, rather than how and why such expansion occurred. These are comparisons of states of affairs at the pre and post intervention points. By contrast, through prospective analyses VET research could identify which actions are most likely to generate expanded capabilities, or the better state of affairs. This includes what VET policy settings and underpinning measures can
help us to understand, what helped to increase access, participation and completion of a VET course – as well as the material resources required to achieve each of these.

8.6. Limitations

The significance of the results must be viewed in light of the limitations of the research. There are five key limitations that must be considered: (1) the small size of the target population negates the inclusion of sample-based surveys of training outcomes and youth transitions due to prohibitively high sample error; (2) the small size of the target population negates the calculation of reliable training completion rates; (3) the list of variables included within scope of the research is limited somewhat by what is manageable (e.g. level of study; field of education; age; gender; location); (4) the compatibility of the quantitative (secondary data) and qualitative strands (primary data) is somewhat limited by virtue of their different sources; and (5) the exclusion of certain voices, including non-participants (those who never enrolled), VET non-completers (those who started but did not complete); VET graduates (those who completed); and learners who were enrolled in other RTOs (learners not enrolled at the VET provider that participated in my research). The main issues of validity concern the linkages between the quantitative and qualitative strands. The selected methodology (sequential explanatory mixed method) deployed matched-sampling to select students for participation in focus groups to ameliorate the effects of any changes in the student population between the two datasets. The qualitative strand of my research is located entirely within the largest provider VET in the region and seeks broad input from a cross-
section of enrolled VET students. However, it should be noted that four of the six focus groups with students were with apprentices and pre-apprentices. The qualitative research does not include the voice of: (1) non-participants (those who never enrolled); (2) VET non-completers (those who started but did not complete); (3) VET students enrolled with providers other than the host provider (albeit the single largest enrolling RTO catering to the target population); or (4) VET graduates (those who completed).

8.7. Final remarks

My research has shown that when examining the real, accessible VET opportunities available to young adults living in disadvantaged communities, such as the FMP region, the participation-based narrative can be particularly deficient. It can be founded on assumptions around improvements in choice, quality and outcomes that may not represent the lived experiences of those accessing the system. What are needed are deeper and more sustained measures of how well VET is performing for those who access it. VET systems tend to rely upon area-level rather than individual measures of socio-economic status. They tend to rely upon satisfaction ratings of those who complete rather than those who do not. We tend to rely upon a snapshot of training participation rather than the journey from pre-participation to post-training outcomes. In reporting VET data, the VET sector tends to prioritise the economic over the social and educational. My research has found that the complex nature of how young adults make use of, fare within, and benefit from VET systems is often simplified to reductive counts of ‘participation’ for measurement, funding and reporting purposes. For a number of
reasons, VET participation is rarely considered within the context of learners’ capabilities to participate. There is a tendency of public accountability mechanisms, although espousing the importance of completions and outcomes, to revert to a participation-based narrative. This narrative, however, has a time limit. It can present a good news story in the short term (e.g. a surge in enrolments) but ultimately fails in the medium-to-longer term as issues of quality, completion and outcomes become apparent.

As the positioning of the purpose of VET has narrowed towards more purely economic, instrumentalist, industry-led and paid-work objectives, the ways in which we understand how well VET systems are working have been measured and narrativised accordingly. Despite more than two decades of policy rhetoric on the importance of measuring outcomes in VET (and other publicly-funded services), the ongoing technical and cost constraints of collecting broader dimensions of VET data – particularly in terms of capturing completions and post-training outcomes - leave the narrative tethered to reductive interpretations of VET based on participation. Where it is technically feasible to do so, completion rates, post-training outcomes and satisfaction ratings, are incorporated at an aggregated level but have limited application at the regional and local level. Through this lens of the human capital agenda, ‘high’ participation is deemed to be ‘good’ with no benchmark of what a ‘good’ increase is or why ‘more’ is ‘better’. The flaw in the ‘participation-based’ approach is that a narrative crafted around the premise that any form of participation is ‘good’ overlooks what the CA describes as the ‘comprehensive outcomes’ of development. My findings suggest that a human capital or accountancy-based lens on measuring system ‘performance’ greatly diminishes our
capacity to critically examine the underlying drivers and causes of inequalities experienced by individuals at the local level. A comprehensive approach reminds us to pay attention to how these stated functionings (e.g. participation levels and post-training employment) came about; whether and how substantive freedoms have broadened as a result; and whether and how utility has been borne of rational choice-making or through adaptive preferences that have ‘settled’ and ‘narrowed’ to suit local offerings.

My assessment of the available quantitative data is that they provide necessary but insufficient answers to the research questions. We remain uninformed about the underlying causal mechanisms causing inequalities in rates of access and participation. The quantitative data goes some way to help us understand what the CA describes as ‘functionings’ (e.g. participation in education and training). However, they offer little insight into the role of ‘capabilities’ and ‘agency’ from the available administrative and survey collections in the Australian VET sector. The results presented in Chapter 6 suggest that qualitative data gathered from current VET enrollees at the local level can help to illuminate areas of investigation left unanswered and uncontextualised by quantitative datasets. My findings suggest that some of the target population interpret a sense of freedom and agency in navigating local structures (‘if you want to, you can’). However, there is somewhat contradictory evidence that suggests the target population adapt their preferences to fit a range of influencing factors including a lack of material resources (e.g. campus was close to home, lower course fees etc). The target population appears to acknowledge the limited post-school education and training options available
to them. And yet, some may be satisfied that the only option that they were compelled to choose was a good one.

Overall, my findings suggest that the application of the CA to the context of young adults and post-school VET may hold potential in its capacity to: (1) disentangle functionings’ from ‘capabilities’ and ‘agency’; (2) apply a counterweight to the pursuit of quality compliance and regulation of RTOs with the pursuit of a minimum threshold of justice for individuals accessing VET; (3) acknowledge the prevalence of adaptive preference formation in contexts where options are limited; (4) seek an understanding of comprehensive outcomes to understand how functionings came to be (the means by which people came to be enrolled in a VET course); (5) prioritise the well-being of individuals as the primary unit of moral concern (ethical individualism); and (6) acknowledge the structural and agential constraints of individuals’ freedom to rationally choose and reject from a range of good alternatives. These results appear to affirm the importance of understanding the underlying causal mechanisms that can cause inequalities in surface-level representations of ‘participation’ in education and training. For a target population of young adults that is ‘stranded’, ‘trapped’ and ‘stuck’, increases in funding and participation are of little value unless they lead to broadened capabilities and freedoms to live a life which they have reason to value. This research has produced new conceptualisations of disadvantaged young adults enrolled in post-school VET to reflect not just their ‘functionings’ (participation and post-training destinations) and ‘utility’ (their satisfaction with the training) but their ‘capabilities’ and ‘agency’ to exercise freedom of choice when accessing training in their local environment. This
raises questions as to whether other conceptual frameworks may prove to have potential for challenging the increasingly narrow purposes, measurement and narrativisation of VET as it continues down the path of marketisation.

The application of the capabilities approach to the field of VET appears to offer an alternative lens on an increasingly narrow policy landscape. Such an approach promotes the importance of developing the student’s autonomy and ability to make choices. It is underpinned by a moral imperative to relate to the values and experiences of the individual and their local community, determined through a process of public dialogue and consensus-building at different levels. The capabilities and freedoms accessible to individuals are reconceptualised to become the ethical basis of entitlements to education and training. They include, through access to material resources, the realisation of a set of opportunities that equates to more than credentialism and the attainment of qualifications. My findings would suggest that, in the case of the target population, the loosely-defined policy rhetoric of ‘choice’ and ‘opportunity’ which has enveloped the policy discourse has not translated into more good-quality choices and broader opportunities in the longer-term for the target population. Instead, my research suggests that the new social arrangement between young people and VET systems has exposed young people to increased levels of risk in their already precarious transition from school to adulthood. We know from the literature that these transitions have become increasingly protracted and uncertain in recent decades. My research suggests that the ‘Victorian Training Guarantee’ reforms are a continuation of policy settings designed to shift the risk and cost of post-school education and training onto individuals under the
guise of ‘improved choice’ and ‘more opportunity’. So, given the transfer of risk and cost, what has government offered young people in return? What do young people receive in return for their increasing personal investment? How have VET providers, public and private, demonstrated the value of their services? The findings compel us to reflect upon whether the participation-incentivised training system, under-resourced regulators and profit-seeking business models of some RTOs can ever operate to serve the best interests of young people in disadvantaged areas such as the FMP region. Also, can there ever be, as industry groups have asked, a ‘sympathy of interest’ between what the student wants and what industry needs? (Mitchell, 2012)

Young people experiencing disadvantage are vulnerable, particularly those who adapt their preferences (or are most responsive) to fast, free and incentivised offerings. If they are presented with a fast, and cheap opportunity to complete ‘free’ training with government support, we need not be surprised that they should take up the opportunity on face value. Such choices are all the more understandable when the young person is told that there is ‘government funding available’ and that the supplier is a ‘registered training organisation’ delivering ‘nationally recognised qualifications’. The narrative, at least in its first five years, appears to have given little consideration to the radically changed social arrangement between government and young people when it comes to their post-school VET options. Instead, it has focused on increases in funding, participation and choice. It has focused more on ‘learners facing barriers to participation’ than the structural inequalities that individuals are confronted with when actively accessing, or being recruited into, a marketised VET system. It has focused more on driving up
statistical participation and prioritising training of ‘public value’ than on the accessibility, composition and quality of training. It has focused more upon RTO regulation, quality assurance and compliance than on thresholds of minimum justice to ensure individuals have access to basic capabilities (e.g. the capability to actively choose and access good quality training).

Of the Australian VET sector, Ryan (2011, p.6) has observed that ‘not all innovation in public policy succeeds, or follows its intended trajectory, in VET or elsewhere; but in VET there has been a tendency to let the policy flow drain quietly into the sands rather than to learn from a systematic appraisal of experience’. My research has been conducted on a small learner population in a small geographic area. Nevertheless, it is hoped that this application will not ‘drain quietly into the sands’ but that it will have application to other learner populations across Australia where similar reforms have been introduced. The conservative newspaper, The Australian, recently published an editorial piece in its Higher Education section on the VET market reforms in Australia,

*Something has to be done. There is not a single person who could say this crazed experiment in free markets and contestability has resulted in a better vocational system. In fact, it’s trashed a once truly world class training system. TAFEs and dual sectors have been gutted and the streets are cluttered with Rolls Royce driving charlatans who’ve rorted and ripped off students and governments alike. That’s what we like to see from our governments and policy makers. A good old-fashioned epic stuff up that has cost billions (and rising)* (The Australian, 2015).
It is hoped that the current research has made some small contribution to illuminating the impact of the ‘experiment’ for one cohort of learners, in part, from their own perspective. The ideas presented in this PhD have led to a NCVER National VET Research and Evaluation Program grant to conduct further research on the topic of choice in the Victorian training system. It is hoped that this forthcoming research will build on the ideas generated here to further strengthen and demonstrate the possibilities of the capabilities approach in the field of the VET sector in Australia and internationally.
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Appendix A: Data collection tools

**Method:** Focus groups

**Duration:** 30 minutes

**Target population:** Young adults (18-24 years old) enrolled in post-school VET in the Frankston-Mornington Peninsula region of Victoria.

**Notes:** Participants will be provided with a copy of the questions and Plain Language Statement in advance. The interviews will be audio-recorded unless agreed otherwise. Actual or generic position titles will be used in report, subject to agreement with the participant.

The results will draw on the following but not all questions and scenarios will be used in each session. The structure and content will be customised to the group of participants at the commencement of each session.

The information requested of participants is in three parts:

**Section A: Training information** - collection of qualitative information (e.g. reasons for training, reasons for withdrawing from training etc) and scenarios based on young peoples’ experiences training and working locally in the Frankston-Mornington Peninsula region;

**Section B: General information about training and the region** - collection of qualitative information about the Frankston-Mornington Peninsula region and ‘training system performance’ as well as general impressions about training.
Each section is structured to address different aspects of the research questions and different dimensions of the main conceptual framework (Sen’s Capabilities Approach).

**SECTION A: TRAINING INFORMATION**

Section A will open a discussion about opportunities (also options and alternatives) in the local Frankston and Mornington Peninsula region for young adults.

**Section A1: Before enrolment**

1. What were your reasons for enrolling? It is in one of these lists? Where? Does the wording match your reason(s) completely? Why/why not?

2. What were you looking for in a training course?

3. Why did you enrol in a training course over other options available to you?

4. How did you set yourself goals for what you wanted out of the training?

5. What sort of goal was this training when you started – a long term one or a short-term one?

6. Where does the course fit in you achieving what you want to achieve?

7. How important was/is the location of the course?

8. Did you consider other training providers before enrolling here? How many others? Why did you go with this course?

9. Was this course your first preference? Why?

10. If not first preference, which was and why didn’t you enrol in it? If so, did you feel you preferences have to adapt to what was available locally?

11. What was more important – location or training course? Why?

12. Did someone refer this course to you or did you find it yourself?
13. What types of information did you use? (e.g. course brochures, open days, websites etc) How useful was it? How influential were they in making your decision?

**Activity A1.4:** Jane lives in Frankston North and wants to be a cook or work in a restaurant.

1. How much control do you think she has over where she does her training? Why?

Control over all – 5 Over most – 4 Over some – 3 Over very few decisions – 2 No control at all – 1

2. What advice would you give her before enrolling?

3. What opportunities would she find locally?

What are some the problems she might face in finding a course to do locally?

**Section A2: During training**

1. How did it feel when you started this course?

2. What do you like about this course so far? How does it differ from your expectations before starting?

3. Are there things you know now that you wish you knew before you started?

4. What helps you get through the training?

5. What creates problems?

6. How important is the cost of training to whether someone can enrol or finish their course? (e.g. tuition costs, materials fees, ancillary fees; tools, things you need for
training on the job; transport costs (e.g. bus, train, car); associated costs (e.g. childcare, time away from work); other out-of-pocket costs.

**Activity A2.1:** A list of costs associated with training is cut into strips of paper and the group talks about ordering these cost items in order of importance in (a) their decision to enrol in training and (b) their ability to complete the training – why are some more important than others? – what cases do the participants put forward for ordering the list the way that they do?

**Activity A2.2:** Johnny lives in Frankston North and is studying for a Certificate in situation X and he’s thinking of dropping out of the course.

1. What advice would you give him before doing that?
2. What opportunities does he have open to him instead of withdrawing?
3. What opportunities likely happen if he did?
4. What helps get through the course? What creates problems?

**Section A3: After training**

1. How will it feel when you finish? What will it mean to you to finish?
2. What are your goals once you finish?
3. What would be the best outcome for you when you finish training?
4. How will you judge whether the training has been successful or not? (6 months on, 5 years on)
5. Will you have access to a bigger pool of jobs having done the training?
6. How likely is it you will enrol in another course in the future?
7. When do you think is the best time of year to look for local jobs? Why?
8. Is there a difference between being satisfied with course and recommending the course? Could you be satisfied and not recommend it?

9. How useful are questions that begin with ‘my training and/or instructors help me to…’?

**Activity A3.1:** Johnny lives in Frankston North and is studying for a Certificate in situation X and he’s looking for a job.

1. How much control do you think he has over his job search?

Control over all – 5 Over most – 4 Over some – 3 Over very few decisions – 2 No control at all – 1

2. What advice would you give him?

3. What opportunities would he find?

4. What are some the problems he might face?

**SECTION B: GENERAL INFORMATION ABOUT TRAINING AND THE REGION**

**Section B1: The Frankston-Mornington Peninsula Region**

Think about a positive, a minus and something interesting about:

Your neighbourhood

The local job market in Frankston and Mornington Peninsula

The number of hours available for jobs in the area you are training for

The local training opportunities in Frankston and Mornington Peninsula
Do you feel that people can generally change things in your neighbourhood if they want to?


If you could change one thing about your local neighbourhood, what would it be?

Section B2: General perceptions and value of training

1. Why is it important for young adults to develop skills and knowledge?

2. Why is training important?

3. Why is training worth the time and investment?

4. Does training guarantee anything?

5. Are there particular things that young adults in the FMP region have to deal with that maybe you wouldn’t in Melbourne of others parts of Victoria/Australia?
Appendix B: Plain Language Statement

INVITATION TO PARTICIPANTS OF VET PROGRAMS
FOR INVOLVEMENT IN FOCUS GROUPS

INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH STUDY

Dr. Mary Leahy (Supervisor)  Professor John Polesel
Education Policy and Leadership  Education Policy and Leadership
Melbourne Graduate School of  Melbourne Graduate School of
Education  Education
Ph: 03 9345 3908  Ph: 03 9344 8293

Mr. Justin Brown (PhD Research student)
Ph: 0413 207 370

Project: “Post-school transitions of disadvantaged young people in the Frankston-Mornington Peninsula region of Victoria”

Introduction

I am writing to invite your involvement in my research project. The aim of the research is to better understand how training organisations in the Frankston-Mornington Peninsula region help to improve opportunities of young people after they leave school. This project has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee at the University of Melbourne.

What will I be asked to do?

If you agree to take part, you would be asked to contribute in the following ways:

- Sign a consent form
- Participate in an audio-recorded focus group for up to 1 hour in duration with 4-6 other people who are about the same age.

How will my confidentiality be protected?

In the final report, you will be referred to by a pseudonym. We will remove any references to personal information that might allow someone to guess your identity. However, given the specific nature of the work you should note that the number of people we seek to interview may be very small and it may be possible for someone to identify you. Materials will be maintained for a minimum period of five years. After this period, if they are no longer required for research purposes, documents will be shredded and other materials will be disposed of using confidential bins.

How will I receive feedback?

Once the project is finished, a summary of the findings will be available to you on application. It is also possible that the results will be presented at academic conferences.

Do I have to take part?

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Should you wish to withdraw at any stage, or to withdraw any unprocessed data you have supplied, you are free to do so without prejudice.

Where can I get further information?

Please contact the researchers if you have any questions or if you would like more information about the project. The contact telephone number is 0413 207 370.

If you have any concerns about the conduct of the project which you do not wish to discuss with the research team, please contact the Manager, Human Research Ethics, Office for Research Ethics and Integrity, The University of Melbourne, on ph: 9344 2073, or fax: 9347 6739.

How do I agree to participate?

If you would like to participate, please show that you have read and understood this information by signing the consent form and returning it to the person who introduced you to the project.

Justin Brown (PhD student)
Appendix C: Consent Form

CONSENT FORM

Research Project: “Post-school transitions of disadvantaged young people in the Frankston-Mornington Peninsula region of Victoria”

Name of participant:

Name of investigator(s): Dr Mary Leahy (Supervisor) and Professor John Poliel (Co-Supervisor)

Mr Justin Brown (PhD student)

1. I consent to participate in this project, the details of which have been explained to me, and I have been provided with a written plain language statement to keep.

2. I understand that after signing and returning this consent form, it will be retained by the researcher.

3. I understand that my participation will involve an interview or focus group and I agree that the researcher may use the results as described in the plain language statement.

4. I acknowledge that:
   a) the possible effects of participating in the interview or focus group have been explained to my satisfaction;
   b) I have been informed that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time without explanation or prejudice and to withdraw any unprocessed data I have provided;
   c) the project is for the purpose of research;
   d) I have been informed that the confidentiality of the information I provide will be safeguarded subject to any legal requirements;
   e) I have been informed that with my consent, the interview or focus group will be audio-taped and I understand that audio-tapes will be stored at the University of Melbourne and will be destroyed after five years;
   f) my name will be referred to by a generic title or pseudonym in any publications arising from the research;
   g) I have been informed that a copy of the research findings will be forwarded to me, should I agree to this.

I consent to the interview being audio-taped [ ] yes [ ] no
I wish to receive a copy of the summary project report on research findings [ ] yes [ ] no

Participant signature: __________________________ Date: __________________________

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HREC: 1441635.1; Date: 5/03/16; Version: 1.0
Appendix D: Jack Keating Scholarship Fund

The Jack Keating Fund was established to support policy influencing research in the field of education where the research is likely to impact on greater equality of opportunity and educational outcomes, and the advancement of social justice. Since 2012, the University of Melbourne, in conjunction with the Jack Keating Advisory Committee, conducted a public appeal in memory of the late Professor Jack Keating to commemorate his contribution to education policy and research. The appeal obtained donations to establish The Jack Keating Fund to support policy influencing research in the field of education where the research is likely to impact on greater equality of opportunity and educational outcomes, and the advancement of social justice. Professor Keating was a specialist in post compulsory education and training, most noted for his contribution to education policy and debates. His work combined formal roles in advising departments of education around Australia and organisations such as the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority and the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority. Professor Keating also contributed to research and scholarship on the international stage, including work for the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, International Labour Organisation, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and UNESCO. Professor Keating died on 21 July, 2012.
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