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VCAL

GROWTH AND PERFORMANCE

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines a major curriculum innovation that was introduced into the upper secondary curriculum in the Australian state of Victoria in 2002 – the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL). Victoria is the only state in Australia which has developed a separate senior secondary certificate, a vocational certificate to sit alongside the general Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE). The VCAL claims to be a comprehensive attempt to anchor vocational learning within the secondary school environment in Australia.

The aim of this study is to investigate whether the VCAL has delivered on its promise to provide an educational opportunity for students for whom the VCE is not appropriate; an opportunity to experience success and move into appropriate pathways into further education and training and employment.

It is important to assess the educational impact a vocational program like the VCAL has had within the senior secondary curriculum. To see this in context, the research literature on vocational and applied learning in schools is examined through various approaches that are used in the delivery of vocational and applied learning to school-age students internationally and in Australia. The research focuses on two main models of differentiation – whether they are predominantly school-based or employment-based and the age at which differentiation into academic and vocational programs occurs. The research also examines the effectiveness of these programs and their impact on school retention, student engagement and their ability to create effective pathways into a range of destinations, including further education, training and employment.

The story of vocational education and training (VET) in the Australian state of Victoria is seen in an historical context as the researcher explores the history of curriculum change in Victoria over many decades, leading to the senior secondary offerings available today.

The thesis concludes that the VCAL has on the whole been successful in engaging the VCAL students who participated in this study. It has also provided strong pathways in apprenticeships. However, pathways into employment in particular, full-time employment are less than optimal. The VCAL also continues to face many challenges, particularly in terms of perceptions and ownership at a local level. The thesis argues for a new educational philosophy and a redefinition of upper secondary curriculum to place VCAL as a credible alternative to the VCE. It argues for a redesign of the VCAL program requiring all VCAL students to enrol in the VCAL as an apprentice or trainee. Finally, it argues for a whole school approach and commitment to the VCAL program with strong leadership support and active involvement in the VCAL program.

Declaration:

This is to certify that:

- this thesis comprises my original work towards the PhD and due acknowledgement is given where reference is made to the work of others
- this thesis is less than 100,000 words in length

Cornelia Debrincat

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Contents

ABSTRACT.....	3
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	6
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	7
LIST OF TABLES.....	8
LIST OF FIGURES.....	8
LIST OF ACRONYMS.....	9
CHAPTER 1.....	11
THE CONTEXT AND FOCUS OF THE RESEARCH.....	11
CHAPTER 2.....	21
THE PLACE OF VET IN EDUCATION SYSTEMS.....	21
CHAPTER 3.....	57
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY.....	57
CHAPTER 4.....	73
THE HISTORY OF VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS.....	73
CHAPTER 5.....	109
REACTIONS TO THE VCE AND THE BIRTH OF VET IN SCHOOLS.....	109
CHAPTER 6.....	145
THE BIRTH OF VCAL.....	145
CHAPTER 7.....	181
DOES THE VCAL PROVIDE EFFECTIVE POST-SCHOOL PATHWAYS? ...	181
CHAPTER 8.....	203
DOES THE VCAL LEAD TO EFFECTIVE LEARNER ENGAGEMENT?	203
CHAPTER 9.....	225
WHAT ARE THE BARRIERS AND ENABLERS TO EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE VCAL?	225
CHAPTER 10.....	251
CONCLUSION.....	251
REFERENCES.....	267
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	297
APPENDIX 1.....	305
STUDENT FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS.....	305
APPENDIX 2.....	309
TEACHER INTERVIEW QUESTIONS.....	309

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: The VCE-VET union – partnership contributions.....	132
Table 2: Curriculum options for meeting the VCAL strand requirements	160
Table 3: VCAL Pilot – Trial Sites	164
Table 4: VCAL enrolments as a proportion of the Total Year 11 and 12 enrolments	174
Table 5 : Destinations of Year 12 or equivalent completers, by gender, student cohort of 2010	184
Table 6 Destinations of Year 12 or equivalent completers, for VCE non-VET, VCE VET and VCAL completers – student cohort of 2010	186
Table 7: Destinations for VCAL completers by year 2006-2013 (%)	189
Table 8: Employment destinations for VCAL completers by gender: 2006-2013 (%)	190
Table 9: Destinations of VCAL completers and VCE completers in the VCE lowest GAT quartile – student cohort of 2010	193
Table 10: Destinations of all early school leavers, by gender – student cohort of 2010	197
Table 11: Reasons given by early leavers for leaving school, by gender: student cohort of 2010	199
Table 12: Destinations of early leavers and VCAL completers – student cohort of 2010.....	200

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: VCAL enrolments 2002-2010	171
Figure 2: VCAL Enrolments by gender 2002-2010	172
Figure 3: VCAL Enrolments (average country v metro) 2002-2010.....	173
Figure 4: VCAL enrolments as a proportion of total Year 11 and 12 enrolments (average country v metro).....	174
Figure 5: Apparent Retention Year 10-12 in metropolitan and regional (country) Victoria	176
Figure 6: Apparent Retention Rates in Victoria by gender – Years 10-12.....	177
Figure 7: Achievement profile (in GAT terms) of VCAL-VCE students	192

LIST OF ACRONYMS

AQTF	- Australian Quality Training Framework (formerly Australian Quality Training Framework)
ATAR	- Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (formerly TER – Tertiary Entrance Rank)
BEP	- Brevet d’Etudes Professionnelles
CAE	- College of Advanced Education
CAP	- Certificat d’Aptitude Professionnelle
Cedefop	- European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training
CFA	- Country Fire Authority
DEECD	- Department of Education and Early Childhood Development
IB	- International Baccalaureate
EAL	- English as an Additional Language
ESL	- English as a Second Language
EPUY	- Employment Programs for Unemployed Youth
FE	- Further Education
GAT	- General Achievement Test
HSC	- Higher School Certificate
LLENs	- Local Learning and Employment Networks
MIPS	- Managed Individual Pathways
NILFET	- Not in the labour force, education and training
OECD	- The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OTFE	- Office of Training and Further Education
PIRLS	- Progress in International Reading Literacy Study
RIPVET	- Research Institute for Professional Vocational Education and Training
SBA	- School-based Apprenticeship
STC	- Schools’ Year 12 and Tertiary Entrance Certificate
TAFE	- Technical and Further Education
T12	- Technical Year 12 Certificate
TOP	- Tertiary Orientation Programs
VCAA	- Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority
VCAB	- Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Board
VCAL	- Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning
VCE	- Victorian Certificate of Education
VET	- Vocational Education and Training
VOP	- Vocational Orientation Programs
WISE	- Victorian Institute of Secondary Education
VQA	- Victorian Qualifications Authority
VSTA	- Victorian Secondary Teachers Association

CHAPTER 1

THE CONTEXT AND FOCUS OF THE RESEARCH

The massification of secondary schooling worldwide has seen rapid growth in the proportions of the youth age cohort entering upper secondary education. Most countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) consider that completing secondary education is now ‘the minimum level of educational attainment for successful participation of young people in further study and work’ (Lamb & Markussen 2011, p. 1).

In Australia, approximately 80 per cent of students complete secondary schooling (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2014a) and data from the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) in the state of Victoria (DEECD 2013) show that of these, approximately 53 per cent pursue university studies. Of the remaining 47 per cent, half are not in education and training and only six per cent are in full-time employment. Yet, despite the fact that approximately only five in ten school completers enter university directly from school (and this is only four in ten if we consider the full cohort commencing secondary school), senior secondary school certificates are still mainly concerned with the functions of university preparation and university selection (Teese & Polesel 2003).

It is also notable that approximately one-fifth of the cohort leaves school without a senior school qualification. If we consider the 20 per cent who do not complete school, recent data from the state of Victoria (DEECD 2013) reveal that about 40 per cent are not in education, training or full-time employment. Moreover, the rate of youth unemployment in Australia is 12.5 per cent (ABS 2014b). This situation typifies situations faced by many countries in the OECD, with large numbers of students still not completing school, very poor outcomes for most who drop out and uncertain transitions for up to one-quarter of those who complete. It is in the light of these data that this thesis examines the provision of senior secondary education in the Australian state of Victoria and considers the introduction of the Victorian Certificate

of Applied Learning (VCAL) in 2002. This new vocationally oriented certificate was introduced specifically to deal with the need to increase participation and achievement and improve transitions from school (Department of Education, Employment and Training 2000b).

In the context of the Australian federal system, individual states and territories are responsible for the delivery of education in their own jurisdiction, and each state has been responsible for the design and delivery of its own senior secondary school certificates. Traditionally, these certificates have performed the function of university preparation and have served as an assessment and sorting tool for the universities. Vocational education and training (VET) subjects have increasingly been added to the curriculum of these certificates over the last twenty years in an attempt to improve student engagement, to raise school completion rates and to improve transitions from school. While these initiatives have seen increasing proportions of the cohort enrolling in vocational subjects, it has been argued that they have neither significantly reduced the focus of the certificates on university entry (Teese & Polesel 2003), nor improved the transitions of school completers (Polesel 2008, Clarke & Polesel 2013). And despite this increase in the provision of VET for senior secondary school students, school completion rates in Australia have remained fairly static.

The issue of school dropouts has plagued many countries for several years. Lamb (2008, p. 1) and Lamb and Markussen (2011, p. 2) claim that while the rates of high school graduation and dropout vary considerably across the western nations, ‘one thing that does not vary much is the finding that not completing high school and failing to gain equivalent education and training qualifications is associated with poorer labour market outcomes’. Consistently, research has shown (see for example, Rumberger & Lamb 2003; Shavit & Müller 1998) that students who do not complete secondary schooling are more likely to become unemployed, stay unemployed for longer periods of time, generally have lower earnings and accumulate considerably less wealth over their lifetime. There is also a strong body of research (for example, Markussen 2011; Markussen & Sandberg 2011; Rumberger 2011) which supports the view that failure to complete upper secondary schooling is detrimental not only for the individual, but also for society as a whole.

According to Lamb (2008, p. 1) and Lamb and Markussen (2011 p. 2), a principal challenge in encouraging more young people to remain at school is ‘finding ways to deal with pupil diversity’. This remains a challenge in Australia’s university-oriented senior secondary curriculum. Lamb and Markussen (2011, p. 2) also claim that young people who leave school before completing their upper secondary qualification tend to come from ‘disadvantaged social and racial backgrounds’ and become disengaged from school. These students also have a history of academic failure and low academic achievement. This too remains a persistent feature of the Australian school landscape (Teese 2000). However, Lamb (2008, p. 1) argues that ‘encouraging more low achievers and other young people at risk of dropping out to remain at school and complete a qualification exerts great pressure on the flexibility of institutional arrangements and qualification structures’, in order to accommodate these diverse learning needs. Polesel, Nizinska and Kurantowicz (2011) maintain that schools that have traditionally focussed on university entry have had to broaden curriculum offerings in order to accommodate students wishing to undertake VET or enter the labour market.

VET appears to have had a somewhat conflicting role in these attempts to cater for diversity. On the one hand, there is evidence to suggest that the rates of school completion are higher for students who participate in school-based VET than for students who do not (Lamb & Vickers 2006). Other evidence (Barnett & Ryan 2005a) raises a concern with regard to the status of VET programs and the fact that students undertaking vocational programs are at risk of marginalisation. Furthermore, Currie and McCollow (2002) claim that school-based VET programs often appear not to be as highly regarded by employers as work-based training. However, Malley et al. (2001a, p. 48) note that employers believe that vocational subjects in the Australian senior secondary curriculum (given the formal appellation of VET in Schools subjects) help to provide a pool of students who are work-ready. They further argue that employers sometimes use work placement, which often forms part of a school-based VET program, as a ‘screening mechanism for recruitment’.

The Australian state of Victoria has gone somewhat further than the provision of some vocational options within the existing senior secondary certificate. In addition to the existing Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE), it has developed an

alternative senior secondary certificate, the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL), which is focussed on applied learning and vocational training rather than the transition into university. This thesis seeks to examine the effectiveness of this new initiative in the current context of the global financial crises and high rates of youth unemployment.

The VCAL is not the first attempt to provide greater curriculum choice for students in Victoria for whom the mainstream university preparatory programs were not working. Programs like the Technical Year 12 (T12) certificate offered in the 1980s were developed in part to cater for the emerging diversity of the student cohort at the time. However, a program of major curriculum reform in the early 1990s leading to the introduction of the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) saw programs such as the T12 abolished, with a loss of the curriculum diversity which they represented (Gunning 2005).

Subsequently, some ten years later, the VCAL was conceptualised as an effort to reintroduce greater curriculum diversity within the secondary school environment. According to Gunning (2005, p. 23), VCAL was intended to ‘show young people who had not responded well to an academic curriculum that they could achieve success through a different, more practical approach to learning’. It should be noted that the VCAL aimed to be more than a narrowly conceived program of vocational education and training. An information brochure (VCAA 2013a, p.2) states that the VCAL is designed to provide ‘practical, work-related experience, as well as literacy and numeracy skills and the opportunity to build personal skills that are important for life and work’.

It cannot be disputed that the VCAL has diversified the existing upper secondary curriculum in Victoria through the provision of a coherent and integrated program of school-based vocational education and training designed to encourage young people to remain in education and training and provide them with these necessary work and life skills. But diversifying senior secondary provision by means of an alternative vocationally oriented program can bring with it potential tensions. When curriculum diversification occurs, one can expect there to be issues around acceptance and relative prestige (Goodson 1993) and the purpose of vocational training within a high

school program, as well as the effectiveness and uptake of the program itself (Clarke & Polesel 2013).

These concerns are not uniquely Victorian, or indeed Australian. Evidence of curriculum change in other countries points to similar tensions. This suggests that there are more fundamental issues experienced, in particular around ‘second choice’ curriculum issues relating to a hierarchy of curriculum, to relegation and the feeling that students are getting ‘a lesser deal’ and poorer families are being let down as a result. There is a continuing dilemma here because curriculum reform is often seen as ‘letting down’ poorer students in two ways. While the academically oriented curriculum may be inappropriate for these students, leading to failure as a result, alternatives such as vocationally oriented options can potentially lower expectations and thus deliver inferior outcomes to these students (Dalton & Smith 2004).

Across the OECD, many countries have attempted to diversify secondary education through the introduction of vocational training. These attempts have had varying degrees of success, but they have certainly stimulated considerable tension and controversy. It is important to understand these tensions if the VCAL is to be considered from a critical and independent point of view. In this study, the VCAL is viewed as part of a wider international effort in curriculum reform to create in-school vocational alternatives to academic programs.

The literature on international vocational education systems for school-aged students is extensive and complex. Much of the literature is context-related, and detailed case-studies are required to fully appreciate the impact of context and history. It has not been possible within the scope of this thesis to present national case-studies, but brief accounts of two contrasting approaches provide important context. The subject of this study, the VCAL, is a school-based approach to vocational learning, not a work-placed or apprenticeship model like the German or Danish approaches. It is for this reason that the next chapter includes a discussion of the mainly school-based approach to VET in France and the predominantly employment-based approach in Germany.

The literature chapter considers the evidence regarding vocational and applied learning programs for school-aged students from a number of perspectives, including the ability of school-based vocational programs to provide students with good employment opportunities, their value in broader educational terms, their efficacy in providing opportunities for further study, and the question of whether these programs are most effective in a school-based environment or a workplace-based environment.

Following the literature review, the thesis turns to the scene in the Australian state of Victoria. In order to provide context, the researcher first traces the history of curriculum change in Victoria over the last century which has shaped the senior secondary curriculum offerings and which eventually led to the implementation of the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) in the 1990s, a certificate which promised to cater for all. This is followed by an investigation into the VCAL program, a major curriculum innovation, which provides the main focus for this thesis.

About this Thesis

This thesis is divided into ten chapters:

Chapter 1 provides the context for this research study and raises the issues of school dropouts and the difficulties of managing student diversity. This chapter also introduces the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) as an attempt in Victoria to provide broader curriculum choice for students for whom the mainstream university preparation programs were not working. The VCAL is also an attempt to provide better pathways into further education, training and employment for these students.

Chapter 2 examines the literature on various approaches that are used in the delivery of vocational and applied learning to school-age students internationally and in Australia. The focus is on two main dimensions of differentiation – whether vocational programs are predominantly school-based or employment-based and the age at which differentiation into academic and vocational programs occurs. This chapter also examines the effectiveness of these programs in promoting engagement, retention and school completion and in providing effective pathways from school.

Chapter 3 describes the research methodology used in this study. The researcher has taken a qualitative approach, focussing predominantly on data collected through a series of focus group interviews with students and interviews with teachers. Secondary data, including destination data produced by the Department of Education and Early Childhood and Development (DEECD) in Victoria have also informed this study.

Chapter 4 examines the history of vocational learning in Victorian secondary schools over many decades. It also examines the Technical Year 12 (T12) certificate, a vocational certificate which has particular relevance to this study of the VCAL. Limited research has been undertaken on this certificate, and given its significance, the researcher takes the opportunity to document the T12 story. The researcher also considers the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE), a major curriculum innovation which was introduced in Victoria in the early 1990s. Finally, the chapter explores the demise of technical education and the ongoing struggles to incorporate vocational education within the VCE.

Chapter 5 analyses the reactions to the VCE from a number of influential stakeholders, considering the impact of these reactions and the surrounding discourse on the shaping and implementation of the VCE. This is followed by an analysis of the introduction of vocational subjects (VET in Schools) into the VCE in 1994 and an examination of the difficulties integrating them into what remained a predominantly university-preparatory program. The chapter then concludes with an analysis of a major review of post-compulsory education and training which led to a new senior secondary certificate, the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL).

Chapter 6 introduces the reader to the birth of the VCAL following a review of post-compulsory education and training in Victoria (the Kirby Review). The chapter also considers a number of evaluations of this certificate, undertaken in the first years of its implementation. These evaluations provide a useful platform for the fieldwork undertaken by the researcher. The chapter also examines the growth of the VCAL over the first nine years of its implementation and the impact of the program in the broader context of school completion in Victoria.

Chapter 7 examines whether the VCAL is providing students with effective pathways into further education, training or employment. The main focus is on ‘the class of 2010’, the point at which the certificate was eight years of age, had 19175 enrolments and, having achieved a degree of maturity, may be said to have overcome any early implementation issues. The chapter presents an analysis of the destinations of the students who completed a VCAL certificate and compares them with the destinations of a cohort of VCE students with a similar academic profile. A secondary analysis of survey data collected during the DEECD *On Track* study also informs this chapter.

Chapter 8 explores the effectiveness of the VCAL program in engaging learners who are often reluctant to engage with education. This chapter draws on fieldwork undertaken by the researcher in selected schools to examine the program’s effectiveness through the eyes of these VCAL students and teachers. Student engagement is considered from a number of perspectives which are analysed primarily through a series of interviews with a number of VCAL teachers and focus groups with a number of VCAL students.

Chapter 9 identifies, through the fieldwork in selected schools, a number of barriers and enablers which have a significant impact on the effective implementation of the VCAL program in these schools. Some aspects which are considered to be barriers in some schools will be identified as enablers in other schools.

The concluding chapter (Chapter 10) brings the study to a close. It revisits the international literature within the context of the research questions and the key findings from this research. Finally the chapter considers a number of principles that might underpin an effective VCAL learning program and how these might be operationalised at two levels – the school setting and the systemic setting.

It is important to assess the educational impact a vocational program like the VCAL has within the traditional senior secondary curriculum framework designed to facilitate university entry. This is an important area of research that is unique to Victoria as the VCAL differs not only from the more conventional approaches of recognising vocational education within the mainstream senior secondary certificate

structure (as is the norm in most of Australia), but also the employment-based approach to vocational education that has been so popular in countries like Germany. This research is also significant as it has broader implications for school-based VET delivery and may therefore be of interest to a broader audience.

This chapter has provided the context and focus of the study. It raised the issues of school dropouts and the difficulties of managing student diversity as schools attempt to provide appropriate curriculum to encourage students to remain in education and training. The chapter also introduced the VCAL as an attempt in Victoria to provide broader curriculum choice and better pathways into further education, training and employment for students for whom the mainstream university preparation programs were not working.

The VCAL is a relatively new program in the local state context and unique in its approach in Australia. Little is known about its impact and about the students who enrol in this program. It is intended that this thesis will help address some of these shortcomings in the knowledge of this program. This thesis may potentially be able to contribute to a better understanding of how vocational programs like the VCAL can be used effectively to achieve good outcomes for students.

CHAPTER 2

THE PLACE OF VET IN EDUCATION SYSTEMS

This chapter examines the literature and research relevant to the topic of the thesis – vocational and applied learning in schools. It has four main components. The first considers the various approaches used in the delivery of vocational and applied learning to school-aged students internationally and in Australia, focussing on two main dimensions of differentiation – whether they are predominantly school-based or employment-based and the age at which differentiation into academic and vocational programs occurs.

The second section considers the research into the effectiveness of these programs internationally and in Australia. In particular, it focuses on the evidence for their impact on retention and school completion, their ability to engage young people in their learning, the evidence for their effectiveness in creating effective pathways from school into a range of destinations, including further education, training and the workforce, and finally the impact they have on students from different population sub-groups.

The third section seeks to classify the VCAL within the framework of analyses used in section one and to consider what evidence, if any, exists in relation to its outcomes using the factors identified in section two.

In the final section, these analyses are used to formulate the four main research questions which form the basis of this thesis.

Dimensions of delivery of vocational and applied learning

This section considers the various approaches which may be adopted to deliver vocational and applied learning programs for school-aged students. In particular, it focuses on two main dimensions of differentiation – whether they are predominantly school-based or employment-based. These dimensions are also analysed in the context of two conceptual frameworks. The first relates to the contextual political

framework, as discussed in Murray and Polesel (2013) who drew on Hall and Soskice's (2001) varieties of capitalism approach. The second framework draws on Iannelli and Raffe's (2007) concept of 'vocational effect' and how it is governed by an 'employment logic' or by an 'education logic'. These studies on varieties of capitalism and system logic also inform the conceptual framework developed by Wheelahan (2015) to examine Australian VET. The German and French education systems are presented as two contrasting models of VET delivery; the German system being predominantly employment based while the French system is predominantly school based.

Murray and Polesel (2013, p. 233) examine the role of systems, that is the state system, the education and training system and the type of welfare state. They identify whether a given system is neocorporatist (coordinated economy) or neoliberal (liberal economy) and their impacts on education and training and employment outcomes. They argue that in linking education and employment outcomes, it is important to examine 'the role and type of the welfare state, including the role and type of capitalism within that state, and the relationship of the welfare state to transition systems'. They also claim that the varieties of capitalism approach which was articulated by Hall and Soskice (2001, cited in Murray & Polesel 2013, p. 234), suggests that an organisation's approach to training is significantly influenced 'by the national institution structures within which they work'. This indicates that there are distinctive differences in the way that skills formation is 'structured and delivered' and that these differences are strongly related to 'the forms of capitalism' that exist in different systems. In the case of liberal market economies, for example, Australia and Britain, they are more likely to export jobs offshore in an attempt to capitalise on the availability of low-paid and unskilled workers. This presents a 'needs-driven capitalism' (Murray & Polesel 2013, p. 234) with minimal relationship with the state structures and the education system. In this instance, there is little relationship between the industry partners, the State and trade unions because there is little dependence on them to provide appropriately trained workers. On the other hand, coordinated market economies, such as those in Germany and Denmark are committed to a strong apprenticeship system and are less likely to export jobs offshore given that they have a competitive advantage because they provide high-level training within their own systems.

Murray and Polesel (2013) also argue that despite ongoing debate about the varieties of capitalism, there is an increasing emphasis on the important role of employers in the welfare state due to their need for specific skills. This suggests that there is a link between education and skills on the one hand and on the other hand, the State's welfare provision and model of capitalism.

The second dimension focuses on a study undertaken by Iannelli and Raffe (2007) which examined the impact of undertaking vocational upper-secondary education and students' transitions from school. In this study, Iannelli and Raffe (2007, p. 49) describe the 'vocational effect' as being 'the effect on the success of an individual's education-work transitions of taking vocational programmes in upper-secondary education'. In their study, Iannelli and Raffe (2007, p. 50) also focus on the linkages between education and the labour market and argue that 'the stronger the linkages between upper-secondary education and the labour market, the more positive is the "vocational effect" on the labour-market outcomes of school leavers'. They further argue that in countries with strong linkages between education and the labour market, employers have a major role in the design, development, delivery and assessment of vocational programs. Young people also have closer contact with employers and easier access to recruitment networks.

In examining these linkages between education and the labour market, and also drawing on Maurice, Sellier & Silvestre (1986) notion of societal logic and the research on transition systems, Iannelli and Raffe (2007, p. 50) construct two ideal types – 'employment logic and education logic'. They argue that in systems with strong linkages, the *employment logic* dominates. In this instance, vocational upper-secondary education has strong links with the labour market and employers have a greater awareness and confidence in vocational qualifications and are more likely to recruit vocational graduates. These systems are sharply differentiated from academic upper-secondary education whose primary purpose is to prepare students for university studies.

In countries where the *education logic* dominates, vocational upper-secondary education has weak links with employment and is 'less sharply differentiated' from

academic upper-secondary education (Iannelli & Raffe 2007, p. 51). Moreover, there are stronger links with tertiary education. Under this system, Iannelli and Raffe (2007, p. 51) claim that vocational education functions as part of the overall education system and its relationship with academic upper-secondary education is defined more by its lower status rather than its 'stronger orientation to employment'. Furthermore, Juul and Jorgensen (2011, p. 299) note that there are 'limits to state intervention in vocational education when this is not done in collaboration with the social partner'. Iannelli and Raffe (2007, p. 51) also note that employers tend to recruit applicants 'with the greatest potential rather than those with vocational skills'. They note that potential is determined by the level of study the student has undertaken and attained and vocational education tends to signal a low educational level of attainment. They also argue that this perception is 'self-reinforcing' because more capable students will choose academic study in order to avoid stigmatization. As a result, vocational students have poorer employment outcomes than their academic counterparts.

Iannelli and Raffe (2007) studied four education systems in North-Western Europe. Of the four countries studied, the Netherlands was identified as 'the closest to our ideal type of employment logic' and Scotland as the 'closest to our ideal type of education logic' (Iannelli & Raffe 2007, p. 51). The authors identified that vocational upper-secondary education in the Irish and Swedish systems tended to occupy 'an intermediate position between education and employment logic, but probably closer to the education logic' (Iannelli & Raffe 2007, p. 52). They also concluded that this 'vocational effect' varies across transition systems and that this variation was most likely linked to 'the strength of the labour-market linkages and to the distinction between employment and education logics'.

To further illustrate these dimensions of differentiation, two different and contrasting models of VET delivery within two European education systems are examined – first the French education system which relies heavily on a school-based approach to VET. Using Iannelli and Raffe's (2007) logic, the French system is closest to the ideal type of education logic and using Murray and Polesel's model (2013), it is closest to a liberal economy model. The second system, the German education system is essentially an employment-based approach, where VET has been predominantly structured around the apprenticeship system. Using Iannelli and Raffe's (2007)

model, the German education system is identified as closest to the employment logic and using Murray and Polesel's model (2013), it is closest to a coordinated market economy model. There is some overlap between the two systems because France also uses apprenticeships, albeit to a lesser extent, and Germany also runs full-time vocational programs in some schools.

The French Education System

The French education system is of particular interest because of its historical relationship with the state. It is described by Greinert (2004) as being a bureaucratic, state regulated and state financed model which is highly centralised (Blanchard & Sinthon 2011). This statist approach to education contrasts sharply with the 'strong social partnership' (Keating et al. 2002, p. 29) approach upon which vocational education and training is built in Germany.

The French education model presents a deliberate attempt to deliver vocational education and training predominantly through the school system. At one end of the spectrum, the general *baccalauréat* has always been considered to be a prestigious qualification for students who were focussed on higher education. At the other extreme end, the vocational *Certificat d'Aptitude Professionnelle (CAP)* and the *Brevet d'Etudes Professionnelles (BEP)* were considered to be the 'route of relegation and exclusion' (Gendron 2005a, p.33). The impact and challenges of social exclusion or 'working class failure' were identified in Whitty's (2010) study on education, social class and social exclusion. It would seem, however, that for students who were doomed to academic failure in general education, these vocational certificates would play an important part in providing them with an option to create their own future pathway; 'from failure to success, from weak self-esteem to self-confidence' (Gendron 2005a, p. 45).

For many years, the French vocational system has experienced much the same fate that has dogged other European jurisdictions with regard to the general perceptions of VET within the secondary school curriculum landscape. However, this negative perception of VET in France improved significantly with the introduction of the Bac Pro in 1985. The Bac Pro was established as a 'work-based route that could capture

the prestige of the baccalauréat' (Keating et al. 2002, p.35). This new diploma was intended to offer students who had failed in general education, a pathway for continuing their studies which was socially more acceptable. It was 'an instrument through which the two separated worlds of general and vocational education might be bridged' (Deissinger 2009, p. 9). The Bac Pro also provided the opportunity for young people who were doing well in the BEP to be able to progress to the next step (Powell, Coutrot, Graf, Bernhard & Kieffer 2009).

The creation of the Bac Pro, however, has created many challenges. This is because a vocational educational ladder has effectively been established, creating a hierarchy, much like the general system, with each step being 'clearly marked as being inferior or superior to another one' (Powell, Coutrot, Graf, Bernhard & Kieffer 2009, p. 10). The Bac Pro has therefore pushed the CAP further down the vocational hierarchical ladder. As a result, large numbers of students are even more vulnerable and exposed to low paid, unskilled and unstable jobs. This therefore further damages their working life expectations and is likely to reproduce 'repetitive unemployment' (Powell, Coutrot, Graf, Bernhard & Kieffer 2009, p. 11).

There are conflicting viewpoints as to whether vocational training in France has been a 'friend or foe' to students from low socio-economic backgrounds (Teese 2011, p. 343). Teese argues that while vocational training in France has been used as a vehicle to expand educational participation within the school system, it has not prevented vulnerable students from scholastic failure. A clear divide between academic and vocational education has been created within an ordered hierarchy, effectively creating social streams. Instead of improving the quality of the educational programs in teaching and learning terms, academic and vocational education programs continue to operate as separate streams, 'but pushed up the senior years, delaying choice rather than changing the range and nature of the choices or indeed merging them in more pedagogically inclusive programmes' (Teese 2011, p. 347).

Yet, it would appear that the Bac Pro has had significant positive outcomes for these students who are enrolled and successfully complete this program. According to Gendron (2005a), before the advent of the Bac Pro, vocational education was perceived as a program for students who were doing poorly in general education. The

vocational baccalauréat has offered students a pathway into further studies or simply an opportunity to catch up in ways that were ‘socially more prestigious’ (Gendron 2005a, p. 39), enabling them to earn a qualification that is equivalent to the general and technological baccalauréat.

Despite the popularity of the Bac Pro in providing school-age students with an opportunity to extend their period of training and also providing a broader training program, the French vocational system continues to face many challenges. Some of these challenges are concerned with the prestige or lack thereof associated with a vocational qualification; whether a school-based vocational system will help secure jobs for students enrolled in these programs; whether the overall educational levels for these students are adequate and finally whether these programs provide adequate pathways planning for these students.

The German Vocational System

The focus now turns to the German Vocational System which provides a contrasting perspective in that it combines paid work with school-based studies. The success of the German vocational system is largely attributed to the main element of Germany’s initial training system, the Dual System, often referred to as the heart of the German vocational system (Greinert 1994) and the ‘king’s way’ into skilled employment (Deissinger 2009, p. 6). The dual system has been much admired by many VET policy makers in other countries and has been seen to be a major contributor to the high level of industry skills formation and post-war economic prosperity in Germany (Smith & Keating 1997). Many have praised workplace-based vocational programs, like the dual system in Germany, as the ‘best the world has seen’ (Greinert 2004, p. 9), in particular for the level of industry investment in training and the social partnership approach (Keating et al. 2002). According to Sweet (2002, p. 220) Germany’s dual system of apprenticeship has ‘much to teach other countries because of its success in keeping youth unemployment rates low’. However, over the years, the educational and economic landscape in Germany has changed and some argue that the Dual System appears to have lost the competitive edge (Powell, Coutrot, Graf, Bernhard & Kieffer 2009).

The German Dual System presents an interesting contrast in that a large proportion of vocational training occurs in the workplace. The strength of the dual system lies with the ability to provide access to skilled, well-paid jobs. According to Teese (2011, p. 348), ‘Apprenticeship is not seen as compensation for failure at school, but as a source of security in a labour market that penalizes the unqualified’. Teese (2011) notes that the dual system has also protected the young people, up to a point, from changes in the economy and the likelihood of unemployment. Furthermore, it has protected them from potential scholastic failure that has dogged countries like France where school programs have become ‘massified’.

The OECD (2012, p. 1) notes that apprenticeships have been particularly effective in ‘fostering skills acquisition and promoting smooth transitions from schools to formal sector employment’. Misko (2006) also notes that while the concept of a contract-based apprenticeship arrangement has been a key strategy for developing work-based skills in countries like Australia, Germany and England, it has been more commonly adopted in Germany where two out of three students who pursue further education will move into the German dual apprenticeship system.

A major strength of the dual system is the high degree of engagement between employers and other social partners (Hoeckel & Schwartz 2010; Misko 2006; OECD 2011), and thanks to this involvement, the dual system’s long term acceptance within the employment section is assured (Pahl 2002). Similar arrangements exist within the Danish dual system where social partners share the responsibility for the programs with the state (Juul & Jorgensen 2011). This model attracted the attention of Australia’s incoming Hawke Labor Government in 1983 and ‘provided the stimulus to the national training reform agenda’ (Keating et al. 2002, p. 46).

Despite being the jewel in the crown for vocational training, the dual system is showing increasing signs of stress and is lacking in its ability to adapt to changes in the labour market. This is also occurring against a backdrop of a dwindling supply of training places (Powell, Coutrot, Graf, Bernhard & Kieffer 2009; Powell, Coutrot, Graf, Bernhard, Kieffer & Solga 2009) and ‘a declining willingness of enterprises to train young people in the VET system’ (Schmidt 2010, p. 382).

The profile of the dual-system participants is also changing (Berger & Walden 2002). There is a growing number of trainees who have completed their upper secondary school examinations and also far more trainees with intermediate school qualifications than ever before. This means that school leavers who have only completed lower secondary school are increasingly more vulnerable to labour market conditions as they face stiff competition from more academically capable competitors for increasingly limited places (Reupold & Tippelt 2011; Solga 2008).

Students in Germany are also able to undertake school-based vocational training (with no work-based component), although this tends to be an option for those who cannot obtain an apprenticeship (Deissinger 2006). While VET offered entirely in school does offer students the opportunity to obtain different levels of qualifications, including progression to Higher Education, there are serious ‘acceptance problems’ of vocational qualifications obtained in schools in contrast to those obtained in the Dual System of Apprenticeship. Deissinger (2008, p. 21) argues that this is due to the ‘lack of practical training and company-specific socialisation effects’.

An increasingly important and burgeoning vocational training sector is the pre-vocational or ‘transition system’ which acts as a bridge for school leavers who do not manage to successfully transit into the VET system directly through the normal route. The increasing share of this training market, now catering for nearly as many young people as the dual system (Hoeckel & Schwartz 2010), seems to have grown at the expense of the dual system. According to Powell, Coutrot, Graf, Bernhard and Kieffer (2009) and Powell, Coutrot, Graf, Bernhard, Kieffer and Solga (2009), a major drawback of this transition system is that while these programs assist students in terms of their vocational preparation and work aptitudes, they do not lead to a formal qualification. Moreover, the system tends to attract the weakest learners who hope to improve their chances in securing a place in the dual system. Powell, Coutrot, Graf, Bernhard, Kieffer and Solga (2009) note that these programs also take place outside the regular training system, are predominantly school-based and without the work experience component within organisations which employers tend to expect. In addition, the transition system ‘suffers from undue fragmentation and an absence of transparency’ (Hoeckel & Schwartz 2010, p. 5) and few participants actually make a successful transition to mainstream VET.

A large body of research (for example Shavit and Müller 2000) suggests that the age at which tracking occurs appears to have a significant impact on career options for young students who are often diverted away from higher education and the professions. Others (for example, Shavit and Müller 2000; Reupold and Tippelt 2011 and Stromback 2002) also maintain that tracking, in particular early tracking, tends to force students to make early choices who are then often locked into their chosen pathway, causing them to forego other possible opportunities. For example, Germany has a long tradition of apprenticeship and children are segregated into different tracks early in their schooling. The main avenue to university is the academic track. The other tracks lead to vocational qualifications, making access to tertiary education difficult. Stromback (2002, p. 184) claims that although students do not commence an apprenticeship until they are 17 years of age, ‘the choice of this option is predicated on earlier educational choice’. Dronkers (1993) notes that a similar situation of early tracking occurs in the Netherlands where the vocational tracks only provide access to vocationally oriented institutions of higher education.

Studies in several countries (see for example Gamoran & Mare 1989; Shavit & Müller 2000) have also indicated that tracking increases inequality of educational and occupational opportunity and lower class students tend to be placed in lower tracks which then reduces their chances of attending university and securing professional and prestige occupations. Sweet (2009) also suggests that track selection is strongly associated with socio-economic status and achievement of these students and this results in low university aspirations for these students when compared with other OECD nations. In his study on education, social class and social exclusion, Whitty (2010, p. 290) notes that the ‘processes of selection at various levels of the system produce and reproduce distinctive careers for different groups’. He also notes that making certain school choices will bring an increased chance of success compared with others.

In other European countries, tracking is less marked and occurs much later, as is the case in Denmark (Murray & Polesel 2013) with students entering a VET pathway at the age of 16. In addition, the vocational tracks are not terminal. They do not close options for further studies. That said, while the proportion of Danish youth entering

the apprenticeship track is considerable (approximately 25 per cent of this youth cohort), it is much smaller than Germany where more than 50 per cent of students enter this pathway. However, Deissinger (2006) notes that neither Denmark, nor Germany are immune to global economic forces as both are vulnerable to adverse economic conditions which in turn affect the level of support and the number of training places that industry is able to offer.

Operating VET as an alternative track has also been claimed to inhibit educational attainment in several ways. First, Coleman et al. (1966) and Hallinan and Williams (1990) argue that students lose access to their highly motivated and able peers who are in the academic track and whose own chances of success are improved by this experience. As vocational tracks tend to attract academically weaker students, they are deprived of this beneficial effect and exposed to downward pressures on motivation and learning support from peers. Secondly, according to Gamoran (1987) and Oakes (1985), vocational tracks tend to offer a more restricted curriculum and students are therefore less likely to pursue advanced courses. Oakes (1985) also claims that in the less selective tracks, less time tends to be devoted to actual instruction and Metz (1978) argues that this instruction tends to be delivered at a lower level of intellectual complexity. As a result, students in these lower tracks tend to learn less than their counterparts in the upper tracks and are therefore less likely to succeed in university admission tests. Finally, Vanfossen, Jones and Spade (1987) believe that being placed in a lower track sends a message to the students that they are less worthy, and this inhibits their aspirations and expectations of what they can achieve.

Darling-Hammond (1997) also argues that students should have access to the same intellectually challenging work based on what they know, want to learn and are willing to tackle rather than what they are thought to be capable of, given their school histories. Despite the problems that have been identified with tracking students, Lamb (2011) reports that countries like Germany, Austria, Denmark and the Netherlands, which operate vocational education programs as separate qualifications or tracks, tend to have the highest completion rates. But Lamb questions whether this comes at a cost of stronger levels of 'social stratification'. Shavit and Müller (2000,

p. 46) caution, however, that for many of these working-class students, it is these vocational qualifications that will secure them a ‘decent job’.

Other scholars (for example, Oakes 1985) have concerns about the risk of a young person’s employment options being reduced through streaming or tracking into vocational programs. These scholars draw on theories of class reproduction (Bowles & Gintis 1976) and social exclusion (Collins 1979) to argue that tracking is a mechanism for the reproduction of social inequality and that ‘it impedes equality of educational and occupational opportunity’ (Shavit & Müller 2000, p. 30). This concern is also shared by Markussen and Sandberg (2011, p. 399), who argue that if vocational education improves school completion, it is also likely to contribute to ‘stratification and the reproduction of social inequality’.

The Australian context

The educational impact of tracking is no less significant in the Australian context than elsewhere in the OECD. In his description of vocational provision in Australian schools, Polesel (2007) claims that while provision is technically comprehensive, (with the exception of the Australian state of Victoria), with no formal tracking in general and vocational pathways taking place, a form of tracking is nevertheless taking place. Polesel claims that independent (private) schools in areas of high socio-economic status have low enrolments of vocational students while government schools serving the poorest communities have the highest concentrations of vocational students.

Australia has faced many economic difficulties in the late 1980s which have led to several reforms to ensure its economic prosperity. These initiatives have involved schools as well as the vocational and higher education sectors (Barnett & Ryan 2005a). The initial impetus for incorporating vocational programs in school began with the Finn report following a review of young people’s participation in post-compulsory education (AECRC 1991). Barnett and Ryan (2005a, p. 13) report that ‘Notably, the report adopted the view that school or post-school vocational education and training should be regarded as equivalent outcomes’.

To some extent, both dimensions of differentiation (school-based and employment-based) have been incorporated in Australia. This is evidenced by the large numbers of students enrolled in school-based VET programs, a result of many attempts to make secondary schools more relevant to the place of work, the impetus of which is captured in the Mayer (AEC/MVEET 1992), Finn (AECRC 1991) and Carmichael (Employment and Skills Formation Council Australia 1992) reports. The Finn Review had noted the need to integrate general and vocational programs, provide a greater diversity of offerings which placed a stronger emphasis on VET as well as focus on clearly defining employment-related competencies, a task which would soon be taken up by the Mayer Review in 1992. Both landmark documents tended to emphasise generic rather than specialist vocational competencies (Polesel 2008). The Carmichael Report proposed that schools restrict their training activities to entry-level programs (Polesel 2008). And yet, in the previous year, the Finn review also noted the need for ‘a substantial level of vocational specialisation’ in schools, (AECRC 1991, xii), a statement which conflicted with the general thrust towards the provision of generic competencies and broad vocational skills.

Parallel, but mostly separate to the national developments in the senior secondary certificates, the national reform training agenda led to the establishment of a national training system which was based upon a set of national qualifications and national industry developed competency standards (Keating & Noonan 2007).

Following a series of agreements between Australian federal and state and territory governments since 1995, there are two types of school-based vocational programs, VET in Schools programs and school-based apprenticeships and traineeships. VET in Schools programs (VETiS) were introduced to further expand opportunities for senior school students and to prepare young people for the workplace. According to Lamb and Vickers (2006), these programs are recognised as an important component of senior secondary school programs across all States and Territories in Australia. Fullarton (2001) points to a key feature of school-based VET programs in Australia which is that they comply with the National Training Framework and also form part of the student’s senior secondary certificate. This delivers dual recognition since each VET study counts toward an Australian Qualifications Framework qualification as well as towards the completion of a Year 12 certificate (Lamb & Vickers 2006).

Anlezark, Karmel and Ong (2006) claim that by providing the opportunity to combine vocational studies with general curriculum, school-based VET programs aim to provide students with better links to industry and more diverse pathways from school to work and further education. They also note these vocational programs not only enable students to get initial VET qualifications, thus providing opportunities for part-time work while they complete their tertiary studies, but they can also provide bonus marks which students can bring to their tertiary scores. Misko (2006) suggests that another important feature of these VETiS programs is the requirement to undertake formal work placement as part of the program which provides important work-based skills.

The second type of VET provision is school-based apprenticeships and traineeships where young people participate in a wage-based training contract with an employer while continuing with school studies leading to a school completion certificate. Karmel and Mlotkowski (2008) note that school-based apprenticeships and traineeships have recently been given more prominence, partly as a response to skills shortages in a range of areas. Traditional apprenticeships are offered in specific trade and craft areas (for example, engineering, building and construction). Shorter-term contracts (often referred to as traineeships and lasting less than two years) are offered in a variety of occupations that are traditionally not apprenticeship-based, including information technology, retail, childcare, tourism and hospitality (Misko 2006). While still very small compared with the overall number of young apprentices and trainees, Karmel and Mlotkowski (2008) claim that the number of school-based apprentices and trainees is growing. Numbers vary from state to state, with Queensland and Victoria leading the way. However, Smith and Wilson (2002) raise industry concern about the quality of these school-based apprenticeships and the difficulties of ensuring that apprentices have access to adequate time, resources and specialist staff in the workplace.

Within these policy contexts and using Iannelli and Raffe's model of education and employment logic (2007), Australia is considered to be closest to the ideal type of education logic (Wheelahan, Moodie & Buchanan 2012). Australian schools are playing an increasingly important role in the provision of vocational programs, with up to 50 per cent of upper secondary students involved in vocational subjects in their

final years of schooling (MCEETYA 2007). This has meant VET in School students have been able to undertake accredited vocational subjects within a mainstream secondary school certificate, often resulting in school completers achieving both a basic, nationally accredited vocational certificate but also the school leaving certificate, the latter being required to ensure eligibility for entry into university. Malley et al. (1999, cited in Malley et al. 2001a, p. 45) claim that VET programs in schools attract a small number of high achievers who wish to ‘add another string to their bow’ and gain bonus points toward their tertiary entrance score or to impress future employers.

Despite such progress, Polesel (2008, p. 617) argues that VET is still considered to belong to the tertiary (post-school) sector, rather than the school sector, and that vocational programs undertaken in schools are limited to ‘the most basic qualification levels and offered mostly within the context of non-specialist providers (i.e. comprehensive high school)’. Durkheim (1977) also notes that schools which prioritise university preparatory pathways contribute to the maintenance of the view that vocational studies do not belong in modern secondary schooling. Furthermore, significant bodies of research (for example, Ryan (1997); Anlezark, Karmel & Ong (2006) point to the general perception of VET that it is for the academically less able students.

Polesel (2008) notes that the quality of VET programs in Australian schools has also been questioned. Currie and McCollow (2002) note industry concern that for school-based VET students in Australia, while they may have a comparable qualification, they do not have the same level of skills and abilities as those who obtained the same qualification in adult sector VET institutions or in apprenticeships. This raises important issues, especially with regard to the quality of VET delivery in schools. Furthermore, Clarke (2015, p.10) notes that there is little evidence to suggest that VET programs in Australian schools are providing an ‘effective launching pad for school completers to access higher level-qualifications’.

An Australian report on the delivery of VET in schools (PhillipsKPA 2006, cited in Polesel 2008), criticised Australian school-based vocational programs for being out of touch with industry requirements, for being too focussed on graded assessments and

neglecting the attainment of vocational competency and for being compromised through delivery within a more academic school environment. The report also noted concerns that the vocational programs undertaken in schools tended to be supply driven rather than driven by the needs of the industry. Polesel (2008) notes that the way schools deliver vocational units within the upper secondary programs in Australia has a significant impact on the quality of the program. Schools often deliver their own vocational programs, but for them to do so, they need to be accredited as a Registered Training Organisation. This is often an expensive exercise and involves providing evidence of having appropriate facilities and qualified staff. If schools are unable to deliver the vocational components themselves, they will organise delivery through an external training organisation, usually a Technical and Further Education (TAFE) Institute, or alternatively a private training provider. This effectively means that specialised VET provision at the secondary school level is very limited and Polesel (2008 p. 621) is concerned that this ‘further underlines the relatively minor role played by vocational studies in schools.’

Barnett and Ryan (2005b) also note an element of mutual mistrust and cultural differences not only between school educators and industry, but also within school education itself. Currie and McCollow (2002) argue that while there may not be concrete evidence to substantiate these claims, perceptions are important and can adversely impact on the success of VETiS programs.

Furthermore, Polesel (2008) argues that school-based VET qualifications tend to be offered at a basic level, typically at Certificate 1 or II level and that often, students do not undertake enough units to be able to complete the entire qualification. Rather, VET tends to be included within a broader program of general upper secondary studies.

There continues to be ongoing debate, tension and controversy about whether vocational education is most effective when it forms part of a school program or whether it is best placed in the workplace. Each of the two models of differentiation has their own strengths and weaknesses. On the one hand, school-based vocational programs offer many students, who are less academically able, an opportunity to gain occupationally relevant vocational skills thereby reducing the chances of

unemployment. While acknowledging the lower occupational prestige and the precariousness of employment, for many this may be the best option. On the other hand, questions continue to be raised with regard to the quality of school-based vocational programs. It has been claimed (see Shavit and Müller 2000, for example) that school-based training does not provide students with the same level of practical, hands-on experience as do apprenticeships, for example. Others, (for example, Dustman & Schoenberg 2008) express concern that school-based vocational training schemes and vocational colleges are unable to provide workers with the necessary hands-on skills that are required in the labour market.

Different viewpoints have also been expressed with regard to the age at which streaming or tracking should occur. Early tracking forces students to make early career choices. A strong body of research suggests that tracking should occur as late as possible as is the case in the Danish vocational system.

Various countries operate ‘mixed systems’, with more effort being placed in some sectors than others. Some evidence tends to favour employment-based vocational learning over school-based vocational learning, particularly in terms of providing good employment outcomes. Ainley (1996) and Ryan (1997) emphasize the importance of employment-based VET. For example, the German system with its high degree of employer and trade union involvement and strong investment in training (Culpepper & Thelen 2008) highlights the effectiveness of this approach. There is also a substantial body of research, (for example, Anlezark, Karmel & Ong 2006), which has advocated for school-based VET and VET that is more broadly based, rather than occupationally-specific VET.

In Australia, State Boards of Studies have increasingly developed consistent approaches to integrating VET within senior secondary curriculum that would avoid streaming students into vocational pathways and allow articulation into a number of courses. However, there has been one notable exception in the State of Victoria which has taken an innovative approach and has created a stand-alone vocational program – the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning or the VCAL, as it soon came to be called. The VCAL sits alongside the more academic senior school certificate (the VCE) and is the main focus for this thesis.

The focus of this chapter shifts to the effectiveness of vocational learning and applied learning in schools.

Effectiveness of vocational and applied learning in schools

This section considers the evidence concerning the impact of vocational and applied learning on school retention and completion, the ability to engage and motivate young people in their learning, the effectiveness in creating appropriate pathways from school into a range of destinations and the impact these programs have on students from different population sub-groups.

Non-completion of secondary school remains a major policy concern both internationally as well as in Australia. The costs for non-completion have been well documented (Polesel & Rice 2012). Lamb and Markussen (2011) also point to the fact that while the rates of school dropouts and completions may vary across nations, one thing that tends to be constant is the fact that for these students, not completing school and failing to achieve education and training qualifications is associated with a greater likelihood of them being unemployed and generally having lower earnings over their employment career. This is a view that is also shared by Shannon and Bylsma (2005) and Belfield and Levin (2007). Furthermore, Belfield and Levin (2007) argue that students who do not graduate from high school jeopardise their opportunity to become economically independent and this is likely to lead to increased demands on the health system, unemployment benefits and the justice system. They argue (2007, p. 2) that ‘there is a strong case to invest in education’ so that more students are able to complete high school. Some European systems have expanded the range of programs and qualifications offered in the post-compulsory years of schooling in an attempt to improve school completion rates. For instance, the OECD (2000) notes that in the 1980s and 1990s, Finland, Sweden and Norway implemented a number of education reforms concentrating predominantly on expanding vocational options to encourage students to remain in schooling. All these three countries reported an increase in completion rates, suggesting that the diversity offered by vocational programs has helped to engage increasing proportions of young people in those jurisdictions. Strenuous efforts have also been made in some

European and OECD countries to encourage more students to remain in secondary school and gain a qualification rather than exiting school to pursue vocational training in a separate sector or in the workplace.

In a comparative analysis of initial vocational education and training in 25 European countries, Cedefop (2011) notes the value of vocational skills and their contribution to national economies, particularly in the European Union. Acknowledging, however, the perception of vocational training as second-rate and inferior to academic studies, there was clearly a need for reform to raise the profile of VET, making the programs more attractive and thus encouraging more students to participate in them. According to Lasonen and Rauhala (2000), a shared and ambitious strategy for upper secondary education among the Nordic countries has been to provide an educational opportunity for the entire age cohort and to give general and vocational education equal status in order to promote equality among students. However, Veronica Pahl, Director General, Federal Ministry of Education and Research in Germany, shared her concerns at the Vocational Training and Lifelong Learning conference (2002, p. 42), stating that while vocational training had a strong tradition in Germany, the ‘problem of equivalency between general and vocational training’ had not been solved.

Polesel and Rice (2012) note that in Australia, the 1991 Finn Review on post-compulsory education and training had proposed that 95 per cent of 19-year olds should either have completed Year 12 or an initial post-school qualification or else be participating in education and training by 2001. Many initiatives were undertaken in Australia to increase participation in post-compulsory education. Vocational Education in Schools has emerged and grown to the point that nearly 50 per cent of the student cohort now participates in some form of VET studies. Polesel and Rice (2012) also note that there has also been a modest increase in school-based apprenticeships. The Australian state of Victoria has gone one step further and has introduced an alternative certificate which is vocational in nature – the VCAL.

Despite these initiatives, Polesel and Rice (2012) claim that retention rates (a measure of school completion) in Australia have somewhat stagnated over the past two decades and the Finn target has not been achieved. Polesel and Rice (2012) also note that retention rates vary considerably by student group. They report that generally,

non-completion tends to be higher for males and that this gender difference may be connected with the relative decline of full-time employment opportunities for teenage girls when compared to boys. Furthermore, Polesel and Volkoff (2009) argue that vocational programs, while assisting schools in managing diversity, are less effective for female students than their male counterparts, particularly in terms of their further study and labour market transitions. Polesel and Rice (2012) also caution that there are other factors that are outside the control and influence of education systems, but which must be taken into consideration. These include the operation of labour markets and associated economic conditions.

The focus now shifts to the educational impact of vocational training in terms of whether VET students are better motivated and engaged in their learning, and whether their orientation towards learning (including in studies that are general or academic) is enhanced by participation in vocational programs.

Currie and McCollow (2002, p. 50) describe the educational impact of VET programs as seen by some Australian VET teachers in terms of enhanced student engagement, motivation and connectedness with the learning process:

[Teachers] talk about the students as individuals, the changes particular programs bring about in motivation for school in general, or students' increased prospects of finding a job, the improvement in a student's self-esteem and self-awareness, or the sense of achievement many students have never experienced before (Currie & McCollow 2002, p. 50).

According to the OECD (2011, p. 8), VET can engage young people 'who are less academically minded in practical tasks, sustain their motivation for learning, and support their transition to work'. The importance of providing strong incentives for learning and engagement is grounded in learning theory, particularly the importance of creating motivation through good incentives to learn (Bransford et al. 2000), and creating a learning environment that supports meaningful learning (Darling-Hammond 1997). Many students undertake VET because it prepares them and helps them connect with the world of work and in an area of their interest. Polesel et al. (2004, p. 24) claim that VET 'takes the focus off narrow academic performance and

invests resources in the development of work readiness and preparation for life more broadly'. Moreover, McCombs (1996); Pintrich and Schunk (1996); Schunk, Pintrich and Meece (2008) argue that all learners are motivated when they can see the relevance of what they are learning and they can use this learning to do something that has an impact on others, especially within their local community. Thomson and Hillman (2010) also claim that motivation plays a key role in determining student future career outcomes, with students who see the value of study as having an impact on their future success more likely to actually achieve this success.

There are two contrasting schools of thought with regard to the impact of contextualised school-based learning that occurs in these vocational programs and the consequential 'marginalisation' of general knowledge. Bransford et al. (2000, p. 9) claim that for all learners, 'useable knowledge' is a lot more important than 'disconnected facts', and they are more likely to use what they have learnt to solve new problems, and 'to show evidence of transfer' of this new knowledge (Bransford et al. 2000, p. 9).

There is, however, another body of research which challenges the concept of focusing on learning only 'useable' knowledge. Wheelahan (2010, p. 4) describes knowledge as having been 'marginalized in VET qualifications that are competency-based training', for example, the National Vocational Qualifications in England and training packages in Australia, 'because all outcomes are tied to specific workplace roles and tasks'. Wheelahan (2010, p. 1), critiques 'theories of curriculum that argue that learning should be contextual and situated'....it 'denies students access to the knowledge they need to participate in society's debates and controversies'. This is a view also shared by Young (2006, p. 115) who argues that while jobs require knowledge that is context specific, they also require knowledge involving 'theoretical ideas shared by a community of specialists' within the academic disciplines.

Wheelahan (2010, p. 150) also argues that education must assist students to distinguish between 'theoretical and everyday knowledge by helping them to recognize the boundaries between different kinds of knowledge and to be able to work productively with knowledge'. Despite its importance, Wheelahan (2010, p. 3) notes a 'retreat from knowledge in curriculum' but Chappell (2004) argues that the

justification for this retreat is that the knowledge society has transformed the nature of knowledge resulting in an emphasis on contextualised and situated knowledge. According to Wheelahan (2010) learning outcomes have been redefined and are tied to the workplace and the curriculum emphasis is on ensuring that students are work-ready.

Porter (2006) reports that one of the reasons students decide to undertake VET subjects is that students find them interesting, they are good at them and prefer the practical, hands-on approach to learning. Furthermore, Lamb and Vickers (2006) highlight the importance of recognising school-based VET programs as contributing towards a student's senior secondary certificate. This tends to have a greater impact in encouraging students to remain in schooling.

Lamb (2011) considers additional benefits associated with undertaking vocational education. In his study on VET participation in Australian schools in 2001, Lamb (2011) points to evidence that students who undertook vocational studies at school were more likely to complete school because their study helped them form positive views about learning. Cedefop (2011) also report that VET has provided a 'second chance' opportunity for these students to experience success. In this regard, VET is considered to be a safety net for those who have not succeeded in the traditional system and are at risk of social exclusion.

Porter's study of stakeholders' views of school-based VET (2006) reported that VET courses offered self-paced learning in a non-threatening, non-competitive environment. Students were more motivated to learn and they acquired generic as well as specific skills. The students also reported that they found this mode of instruction particularly suited their learning styles.

Polesel et al. (2004, p. 8) also note that VET appears to be seen as playing a critical role 'in managing diversity, in improving school learning and in securing a range of good outcomes for school leavers'. Yet, one of the biggest issues with VET that has consistently been raised—and which has already been raised—is the stigma associated with these programs. Iannelli and Raffe (2007) note that there is ongoing debate about vocational programs being defined more by their lower status and

prestige rather than by their strong orientation to employment. Polesel (2008) argues that vocational education delivered within an 'education logic' framework struggles to establish and maintain status in secondary schools more generally and Murray and Polesel (2013) believe that vocational education continues to suffer from low prestige 'in the status hierarchy of schools and is often regarded as a means of managing diversity and low achievement'. This view is also shared by Bosch and Charest (2008) who claim that VET is often considered by liberal market economies as a place to marginalise and hide weaker students.

Prestige perceptions may also work against students undertaking a program even when its motivational and wider educational benefits are strong. Perceptions of low prestige and the program being considered a soft option may undermine a student's motivation to enrol in a VET course or to put in the required effort to succeed. Barnett and Ryan (2005a, p. 7) suggest that 'the largest issue for students...is the marginalisation of VET programs and the status of VET courses'. However, there appears to be a shift in terms of the cultural attitudes between educators, employers and within schools, towards VET in Schools programs (Barnett & Ryan 2005b). But Porter (2006, p. 30) concedes that more needs to be done because a continuing perception of VET as a 'second tier option' is an obstacle 'to making the most of school VET programs'. This issue of stigma associated with undertaking a vocational program like the VCAL will also be investigated in this study.

Furthermore, Murray and Polesel (2013, p. 235) note that the role of vocational education and training systems in contributing to equity is heavily contested. They point to significant research and evidence which claims that vocational education and training can often operate as 'a mechanism of social selection and working class oppression rather than as a pathway to opportunity and a means of escape from poverty'.

There is also a substantial body of research around the importance of creating an effective learning environment to promote student engagement. An analysis of the literature identifies two main models of an effective learning environment with relevance to a study of the VCAL.

The first of these is presented by Bransford et al. (2000) which describes a good learning environment as having four important and interrelated attributes. The first attribute relates to the importance of providing a 'learner centred' environment where teachers 'pay close attention to the knowledge, skills and attitudes that ... learners bring into the classroom' (Bransford et al. 2000, p. 23). Bransford et al. (2000) also note that a good teacher is not only aware of any preconceptions a student may bring into the classroom, but is able to relate to these students and to adapt teaching to suit student needs.

The second attribute relates to the importance of providing a 'knowledge-centred' classroom by giving attention to what is taught, why it is taught and what competence or mastery looks like rather than presenting 'too many disconnected facts in too short a time' (Bransford et al. 2000, p. 24). Clune (1993) argues that this is a problem faced by many teachers who often find themselves with curriculum that is so overwhelming and the required content coverage so demanding that they feel constrained by the oppressive regime of having to teach to the test. Brown (1994), Gardner (2011) and Shulman (1987) note the importance of students being able to make the connections between what they have learnt and how they can apply them to real life situations. In addition, Keeley (2011) highlights the importance of students being able to transfer ideas they have learnt from one context to another.

The third attribute highlights the importance of formative assessment which permits the teacher to understand the students' preconceptions, determine where the students are in their development and design instruction accordingly. The benefits and impact of formative assessment, or assessment for learning as it is often called (Harlen 2005; Chappuis & Chappuis 2007/2008; Volante & Beckett 2011; Wei 2011), have been well established and have attracted much interest internationally (OECD 2005). Large scale reviews on the impact of formative assessment (see Black & Wiliam 1998; Crooks 1988; Kluger & DeNisi 1996; Natriello 1987) have supported the claim that the use of formative assessment strategies, for example, questioning techniques, feedback without grades and self-assessment significantly increases the speed of student learning (Wiliam 2007).

One of the claims made for student learning is that the key to student development is ‘providing clear standards and criteria for performance on specific tasks, linked to lots of feedback about work in progress and continual opportunities for students to review their work in response to this feedback’ (Darling-Hammond 1997, p. 106). Programs in the US which were reviewed by Darling-Hammond (1997) reportedly use openly discussed performance criteria in sharp contrast to the tradition of content-based exams where criteria for performance are often kept secret. In addition, allowing adequate time for progression and ‘deep immersion’ is also important (Darling-Hammond 1997, p. 111). This has direct relevance to programs like the VCAL. One of the stated aims of the VCAL program is that students should have the opportunity to demonstrate achievement at their own pace; that assessment instructions should be clear and specific and that students should be given adequate time to master key concepts and complex tasks (VCAA 2012a).

Formative assessment also provides a measure of student achievement as well as a means for teachers to assess their teaching practices (Drouin 2010; Wininger & Norman 2005). Crumrine and Demers (2007) suggest that it is critical to conduct regular formative assessments in order to check for understanding. This way, both students and teachers are in the best position to determine when and how to proceed to the next stage of learning. Teachers must also be flexible in their teaching processes. If the assessment reveals that the student has not understood the concept, then it needs to be retaught in a different way. Chappuis and Chappuis (2007/2008) believe that this ability to adapt instruction will yield immediate benefits to student learning.

According to Dirksen (2011, p. 26), formative assessment also allows students to ‘press the reset button’. It can change students’ failure to master skills or concepts into a second chance to learn. It also promotes the idea that failure is an integral part of the learning process. It would also seem that students undertaking module-based vocational programs tend not to be put under the same amount of pressure of pass/fail situations as their counterparts who are undertaking intense academic programs in a bid to secure a university place. The flexibility of this modular approach to VET appears to suit many students (Polesel et al. 2004). However, Bransford et al. (2000) caution that students must be set challenges that are at the appropriate level of

difficulty and complexity, if they are to remain motivating. Tasks that are too easy become boring and tasks that are too difficult will cause frustration.

The fourth attribute describes how learning is influenced in fundamental ways by the context in which it takes place. The norms that are established in the classroom have a very strong impact on student achievement. Bransford et al. (2000, p. 25), describe how some schools encourage reasonable risk taking; others have a 'don't get caught not knowing something' approach. It is important for teachers to design classroom activities and help students organise their work in such a way that it encourages 'the kind of intellectual camaraderie' in a non-threatening learning environment (Bransford et al. 2000, p. 25).

Darling-Hammond (1997) presents another model which highlights key features of a learning environment that supports meaningful learning. Some of these features overlap with the model presented by Bransford et al. (2000), for example, the need for students to be able to make sense of what they are learning and understand the relevance of why they are learning. There are additional elements which are particularly relevant to a study of the VCAL. According to Darling-Hammond (1997), an important feature of a learning environment which supports meaningful learning relates to an appreciation of student diversity. Darling-Hammond (1997) acknowledges, however, that working with students with mixed abilities presents many challenges. Schools have often attempted to make the task easier by 'homogenizing classrooms through tracking and ability grouping' (Darling-Hammond 1997, p. 127). There is the danger that this will decrease learning opportunities for lower achieving students while it will not necessarily provide better opportunities for higher achievers.

Darling-Hammond (1997) describes another important feature of a good learning environment where there is a collective perspective across the school, a view that is also shared by Hill, Foster and Gendler (1990). Finally, Darling-Hammond (1997) describes the importance of developing good relationships between teachers and students. Students' trust in their teachers encourages them to 'have a go' and risk potential failure because they know they will be supported through the process.

The importance of personalised learning and developing strong relationships with students is crucial. Darling-Hammond (1997, p. 107) maintains that personalisation is not just 'nice' for students; rather, it is critical if serious teaching and learning is to occur. As Darling-Hammond (1997, p. 80) notes, 'you can't do anything with the students until they believe in you, until you have some kind of a feeling for who you are working with and what their abilities and feelings are'. This is best achieved in smaller group settings with fewer teachers involved, a view that is also shared by Wehlage et al. (1989).

Despite the importance of maintaining student motivation and engagement, many researchers (for example, Field, Kuczera & Pont 2007) have claimed that upper secondary education also needs to offer good quality pathways without dead ends and provide effective links to the world of work. The focus now turns to whether vocational and applied learning provides students with effective pathways from school.

In determining the 'success' of vocational programs in assisting students to get a job, Anlezark, Karmel and Ong (2006, p.13), acknowledge that both school completion and post-school outcomes are very much affected by 'the health of the labour market'. Polesel et al. (2004) also suggest that there are other important factors that influence a student's post-school outcomes. These include gender and parental background as well as the type of school the student attends and his or her engagement with that school.

However, McIntosh (2004) notes that students who fail to complete any qualification while at school are more likely to be marginalised in the labour market. And securing a job soon after leaving school is crucial. In a study of five countries, the OECD (1998, p. 106) noted that there is a 'scarring effect' from initial experiences of unemployment. OECD (1998, p.105) and Lamb and Vickers (2006) concluded that regardless of education or gender, securing a job in the first year after completing school was also linked to a higher probability of continuing to be employed in subsequent years. And Lamb and Vickers (2006, p. 33) claimed that participation in VET at school 'increased the odds of being in full-time work in the first year after school', therefore potentially reducing the risk of long-term ill effects.

There are different views with regard to the effectiveness of school-based VET in helping students secure employment, as well as the type of employment and long-term outcomes. Lamb and Vickers (2006 p. 3) claim that ‘there is no strong evidence that vocational education at school improves labour market outcomes’. In their comparative study on labour market outcomes in 11 countries with different institutional arrangements for vocational education, Shavit and Müller (2000, p. 42) reported on this ‘safety net’ effect of a VET qualification. This ‘safety net’ effect protects students from scholastic failure and enhances their chances of finding gainful employment as skilled workers. They identified that in most cases (with the exception of the US and to a lesser extent the UK) holders of secondary school vocational qualifications were more likely to be employed than holders of an academic qualification who were not eligible for admission into university, at least in the early stages of their careers. In addition, vocational secondary education reduced the risk not only of unemployment, but also of employment in the worst jobs. However, the authors also acknowledged the ‘diversion effects’ of VET and noted that, as might be expected, the level of occupational prestige achieved by holders of academic qualifications was much higher than that attained by holders of vocational secondary qualifications.

Yet, Shavit and Müller (2000, p. 32) claim that critics who are concerned about lower-prestige job outcomes of VET note that they are adopting a very ‘middle-class’ perspective which considers vocational education from the point of view of its impact on university education and acquiring ‘prestige’ jobs. They argue that this perspective does not consider the fact that for many students vocational education reduces the probability that they will become unemployed or be employed in the lowest paying jobs. According to Shavit and Müller (2000, p. 46), these are students who require a ‘trajectory that can both minimise risk and yield a qualification that would secure a decent job’. They are not concerned that pursuing a vocational education will divert them away from the more academic professions. This is because they understand that these professions are not realistically within the reach of many young people.

Focussing on the Australian context, Polesel (2008, p. 620) is concerned that most VET courses delivered in Australian schools are not only 'basic at best', but they offer limited generic competencies and are generally neither associated with a 'licence' to 'practice a particular trade nor with work-based training'. In addition, Polesel (2008, p. 628) also highlights a 'weakness of the transition to the labour market'. He is concerned that the nature of work accessed by these school leavers tends to be 'part-time in nature (and almost entirely casual rather than permanent) and that the jobs are concentrated in low-paid and part-time positions, mainly in the retail, hospitality and other service sectors' (Polesel 2008, p. 626).

Lamb and Vickers (2006, p. 4), however, present two opposing arguments with regard to the consequences of part-time work. They argue that part-time work can be a 'millstone' on the one hand, or a 'stepping-stone' on the other hand. The millstone argument presents part-time work as a 'trap' which does not lead to full-time work, but to 'further part-time work'. On the other hand, the 'stepping-stone' argument considers that part-time work is significantly better than no work at all and that part-time work may provide students with the skills that will enable them to gain full-time work.

Despite concerns about employment outcomes for students undertaking vocational programs, VET has been found to have a positive impact on employment outcomes for *early school leavers*. Some researchers argue that good employment outcomes for students in VET who do not complete school may well outweigh the disadvantages of dropping out. For example, Nguyen (2010) suggests that while school-based vocational programs do not necessarily increase Year 12 completion, they assist in post-school employment choices and in the transition to the workforce by exposing students to the world of work. Nguyen concedes that this may be viewed as an 'unsuccessful' outcome for the student if this transition occurs before completion of Year 12, as there is a strong argument for students to complete their senior secondary years of schooling. Yet, in some instances, and depending on the nature of the job and its future prospects, it may in effect be a very successful outcome for some students. This view is also supported by Anlezark, Karmel and Ong (2006) who claim that VET in Schools students who left school after Year 11 often experienced a much smoother transition from school to work than did those school students who did

not participate in any VET. That said, they acknowledge that early leavers ‘have a much tougher ride and the transition process is much longer than for those who stay on to Year 12’ (Anlezark, Karmel & Ong 2006, p. 33).

Other researchers (for example, Porter 2006; Smith & Green 2005) consider that school-based VET programs are very effective in getting students to test their *career options*, especially when students are exposed to a variety of workplace experiences. This becomes especially important because there is often a view that schools do not provide enough career advice. Workplace experience makes up for the deficiency. Moreover, students view VET as offering them a head start and the work placement component provides an opportunity to ‘make heaps of contacts’ for the future (Porter 2006, p.19).

There are conflicting viewpoints with regard to whether school-based vocational programs should be occupation-specific or general, in preparing students for employment.

In particular confusion exists about whether it is most appropriate for senior school students to take part in a broad generic orientation towards work and employment, or whether it is most appropriate for them to undertake a more focused preparation for particular occupational and industry pathways

(Dusseldorp Skills Forum 1997, p. i, in Currie & McCollow (2002, p. 52).

Wheelahan and Moodie (2011, p. 8) report ongoing tensions between training for one workplace and a range of workplaces as well as training for ‘immediate and future relevance’. Shavit and Müller (2000) also note that the advantages associated with VET are most pronounced in countries where VET is ‘specific’ rather than ‘general’. However, Anlezark, Karmel and Ong (2006) present a different view, arguing that VET should focus on pre-vocational preparation and broader generic skills rather than industry competencies. This view is supported by Barnett and Ryan (2005b) and Ryan (1997) who claim that employers are seeking more generalist skills and greater integration between general and vocational education.

Field et al. (2009, p. 29) claim that there needs to be a ‘good balance between generic and specific skills’. They also claim that VET graduates need occupationally specific skills to enable them to transition into the labour market smoothly, without the need for additional training. However, they believe that these graduates also need generic skills which are readily transferable and the ability to adapt to ‘fast-changing workplace requirements’.

The focus turns to whether school-based vocational programs provide good opportunities for further learning. There are mixed views with regard to the effectiveness of school-based programs in providing good opportunities for further education. For example, Anlezark, Karmel and Ong (2006, p.33) argue that vocational studies at school tend to attract students who are ‘less academically inclined’ and who are more likely to continue with VET studies after school. They note that in the Australian context, ‘a reasonable number of boys continue in the same field with their post-school vocational studies’. Yet, they are concerned that ‘the fields of education offered at school do not line up particularly well with those offered outside school’ (which are more likely to reflect labour market demands), and that ‘girls tend to shy away from the VET subjects they studied at school’. They are particularly concerned that at school most VET subjects are offered at ‘a lower level’ than a Certificate III which is the ‘bread and butter of the VET world’.

On the other hand, Nguyen (2010) claims that participation in VET in Schools (VETiS) programs provides students with a pathway into further VET after school. Nguyen, however, concedes that participation in school-based VET is not a pre-requisite for participating in post-school VET study. Nguyen also concedes that in many cases, students undertake VET studies that are not related to the subject area they covered during their VET in Schools program. While this implies that their VET program did not provide a direct pathway after completing school, Nguyen (2010) argues that it nevertheless renewed their interest in pursuing further VET studies after school. Other students, in particular girls, use school VET as a ‘taster’ or for immediate employment outcomes rather than as a pathway for post-school VET. In fact, many students use school-based VET programs to determine what they do not want to do (in terms of their post-school pathway), after they have completed their schooling.

Anlezark, Karmel and Ong (2006, p. 9) also question whether it would be better to 'downplay the industrial strength aspects' of vocational programs and instead concentrate on broad vocational education skills, considering VET study more of a vocational preparation. This presents a conflicting view to that expressed by Shavit and Müller (2000) who believe there are distinct advantages where vocational education is specific rather than general. They also argue that VET needs to be more focussed on employment prospects.

There is general consensus internationally and in Australia that non-completion of secondary school remains an ongoing concern. The costs of non-completion are well documented. Many initiatives have been undertaken to encourage students to remain in education. Various countries have expanded the range of programs offered in an attempt to boost retention rates. In the Australian context, vocational education in schools has grown to the point that nearly half of the student cohort participate in some VET studies. However, the retention rates have somewhat stagnated and they vary considerably among student groups with non-completion rates being higher for males than females.

It appears that VET can play an important role in increasing student motivation and engagement. However, there are two distinct schools of thought with regard to the value of school-based VET in educational terms. On the one hand, it is seen as beneficial in offering contextualised learning that is immediately relevant to the workplace. Yet, the consequential marginalisation of knowledge is seen as potentially depriving these students of the ability to participate in the broader society.

There are mixed views about whether school-based vocational programs provide students with good employment opportunities. While school-based VET programs appear to have a beneficial impact on job outcomes, including for early leavers, there are concerns with perceptions of lower prestige job outcomes of VET as well as weak transitions to the labour market. There is no consensus internationally regarding whether the benefits are due to general or specific skills training. This has implications for how VET is organised within schools. For example, if the impact is due to specific industry training, schools would have to be better equipped and staffed

or at least have very good links with technical colleges in order to provide this training.

There are also mixed views with regard to the effectiveness of school-based vocational programs in providing good opportunities for further study. On the one hand, school-based vocational programs have been criticised for attracting the academically weak students and tracking them and diverting them away from university and the professions. Yet, these programs can provide some students with a pathway into VET studies after school. As Shavit and Müller (2000, p. 46) noted, for many of these students ‘it matters little that vocational education also diverts [them] away from the professions since those are not realistically part of their realm of possibilities’.

Locating the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning

This section seeks to locate the VCAL within the frameworks of analyses considered above and to consider the hitherto limited evidence regarding its outcomes. Using Iannelli and Raffe’s (2007, p. 51) categorisation, the state of Victoria may be said to employ more of an *education* logic in its approach to vocational education and training where this vocational certificate tends to function ‘more straightforwardly as part of the education system’. It might also be noted that education programs are offered within a mainly common comprehensive approach until the end of Year 10, when most students turn 16 years of age. Following this, the final two years allow considerable choice in selection of subjects and programs. This is when the option to select VET subjects occurs.

A major review into post-compulsory education in Victoria in the mid-1980s saw the introduction of a comprehensive senior secondary program, the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) in the early 1990s. The VCE is a general certificate which brought together all existing senior secondary certificates into the one program. It was intended that this certificate would *cater for all* and that there would be a strong component of vocational and applied studies within this general certificate. However, pressure from significant and influential stakeholders who were concerned about

ensuring the academic integrity of the qualification would see the much promised vocational component compromised as a result.

As will be seen in subsequent chapters, numerous approaches to incorporating VET in secondary programs have been taken since the introduction of the VCE, for example, dual recognition programs, VETiS programs and finally the VCAL. Victoria is unique in that it is the only state in Australia that offers a separate senior secondary certificate (the VCAL) in the final two years of secondary schooling, which is vocational in nature and which sits alongside the general certificate (the VCE).

The VCAL claims to offer a vocational alternative to the more academic VCE. It also claims to offer an applied learning approach and provide opportunities for skill development to facilitate future pathways to work and further education (VQA 2002b). Polesel (2008) describes the VCAL as having been designed for students who were seeking vocational skills and were not seeking to pursue university studies. According to Polesel (2008, p. 624), the program ‘allows students to undertake a broader range of vocational subjects than is available to VETiS students, and is substantially vocational in terms of content and pedagogy, but does not qualify them for entry to university’. Gunning (2005) claims that the VCAL was intended to provide students with basic skills for the workplace so that these students would be in a better position to make informed pathway choices.

Chapter 6 describes and analyses the implementation of the VCAL and explores a number of evaluations that were undertaken in the first years of the program. While these evaluations identified initial successes of this program in terms of keeping students engaged in education and training, they also identified critical development needs, particularly in terms of resourcing the program and providing appropriate pathways for these students after completing school.

Much like the Danish model, tracking in Victoria occurs at a later stage of upper secondary education where students are offered two educational options in their upper secondary years of schooling; the general and more academic VCE, or a vocational alternative, the VCAL.

While the VCAL may be described accurately in terms of the frameworks covered in this chapter, there is only limited evidence concerning the impact it has had on young people, in particular relating to pathways, motivation and engagement and also the barriers and enablers to effective implementation of a program like the VCAL.

The research questions

Finally, this section considers the evidence that has been presented in this chapter thus far. The research evidence and literature on vocational and applied learning programs may be summarised as follows.

Firstly, there are mixed views about the educational benefits of these programs. VET has played a pivotal role in providing a second chance for many students who have experienced failure. VET also provides strong educational incentives for students to remain engaged in their learning. It is, however, important that students have access to intellectually challenging work with the appropriate level of difficulty and complexity to maintain motivation and engagement. This places great importance on the quality of instruction.

While advocating for the benefits of VET programs, there is concern that VET can contribute to the reproduction of social inequality and relegate students to an inferior educational stream. This may be exacerbated if students are tracked at an early stage in their school life. Care must therefore be taken to minimise the effects of tracking students and forcing them to make early choices, thus locking them into a specific pathway.

Regardless of the approach that is taken with regard to the provision of vocational training, it is important that vocational tracks are not allowed to operate as a mechanism of social relegation. Countries should therefore have mechanisms in place to provide bridges for students undertaking a vocational track to be able to pursue higher level education if they wish.

This chapter considered various approaches used in the delivery of vocational and applied learning and examined how the VCAL compared with other approaches to

VET delivery. The chapter focussed on two main dimensions of differentiation; whether they are predominantly school-based or employment-based. These dimensions were analysed in the context of two conceptual frameworks. The first was presented by Murray and Polesel (2013) who drew on Hall and Soskice's (2001) varieties of capitalism approach. The second framework related to Iannelli and Raffe's (2007) concept of 'vocational effect' and how it is governed by an 'employment logic' or an 'education logic'. In examining the linkages between education and the labour market, Iannelli and Raffe (2007) considered that in countries with strong linkages, the employment logic dominates and vocational education has strong links with the labour market. In addition, employers have greater confidence in vocational qualifications and as a result are more likely to employ vocational graduates.

This chapter also examined Murray and Polesel's (2013) role of systems (whether neoliberal or neocorporatist) and Iannelli and Raffe's (2007) model of education and employment logic. It found that Australia is considered to be closest to the neoliberal system and the ideal type of education logic (Wheelahan, Moodie & Buchanan 2012). Given that the VCAL is a school-based vocational program and is closest to the ideal type of education logic, it could be argued that the program has weak links with the labour market.

These analyses suggest that a program such as the VCAL in Australia needs to be considered carefully in terms of its impact on a number of dimensions. These impacts form the basis of the four main research questions which this thesis seeks to address.

They are:

- Does the VCAL lead to improved retention?
- Does the VCAL lead to effective post-school pathways?
- Does the VCAL lead to effective learner engagement?
- What are the barriers and enablers to effective implementation of the VCAL?

The next chapter focuses on the research methodology that has been used in this study.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Over the past decades, several debates or ‘paradigm wars’ have been waged in the social and behavioural sciences with regard to the superiority of one or the other of the two major social sciences paradigms or models. The positivist paradigm (empiricist approach) underlies what is often referred to as the quantitative approach, while the constructivist paradigm (phenomenological approach) underlies qualitative methods (see Guba & Lincoln 1994; Howe 1988; Tashakkori & Teddie 1998, Tashakkori & Teddie 2003).

Tashakkori and Teddie (1998, p. 4) describe how many attempts have been made in the social and behavioural sciences to ‘make peace between the two major paradigmatic positions’. Pacifists (for example, Howe 1988) claim that qualitative and quantitative methods are compatible and they present this compatibility based on a different paradigm which they refer to as ‘pragmatism’. Pragmatically oriented researchers (for example, Patton 2002) now refer to ‘mixed methods’ which contain elements of both qualitative and quantitative research approaches. According to Tashakkori and Teddie (1998, p. 21), most good researchers tend to use the pragmatist credo of “what works” (see also Cherryholmes 1992; Howe 1988 and Tashakkori & Teddie 2003). Indeed, Patton (2002, p. 12) notes that there is no ‘recipe or formula’ in making appropriate methods decisions.

Many researchers (for example, Howe 1988; Reichardt & Rallis 1994), now use whatever methodological approach works for the particular research study rather than relying on one research method exclusively (Tashakkori & Teddie 1998). Creswell (2007, p. 51) notes that qualitative research takes time; it ‘involves ambitious data analysis, results in lengthy reports, and does not have firm guidelines’. However, Patton (2002) notes that qualitative research enables the researcher to investigate issues in greater depth and detail, as it involves a smaller sample. It also enables the researcher to ‘document the world from the point of view of the people studied...

rather than presenting it from the perspective of the researcher' (Hammersley 1992, p. 45).

Johnson , Onwuegbuzie and Turner (2007, p. 113) view mixed methods research as an attempt to respect the wisdom of qualitative and quantitative research 'while also seeking a workable middle solution for many (research) problems of interest'. Mixed methods research effectively attempts 'to consider multiple viewpoints, perspectives, positions and standpoints (always including the standpoints of qualitative and quantitative research)'. Johnson, Onwuegbuzie and Turner (2007, p. 113) believe that this is a relatively new research paradigm which is 'a synthesis that includes ideas from qualitative and quantitative research'.

The researcher took advantage of 'what works best' in a study of this nature and has ascertained that a mixed method approach would be the most appropriate. It was felt that a mixed methods research design for the overall study would be the most suitable as it would provide the best opportunity to combine the qualitative study undertaken by the researcher, while at the same time taking advantage of statistical information that was available from the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD), the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA) and other archived records at the Public Records Office in Victoria. However, for the fieldwork, a qualitative approach was considered to be the most appropriate. Information gathered from secondary data has therefore been used to complement and support the researcher's qualitative research.

DATA COLLECTION STRATEGIES

A qualitative approach

The qualitative research component of the fieldwork for this study took place in 24 government schools and eight Catholic colleges with representation from metropolitan and country Victoria. It involved a number of interviews with 38 teachers predominantly on an individual basis. It also involved a number of student focus groups at 11 of these government schools and six of these Catholic colleges. It was decided that interviewing students in a focus group setting would be the most

appropriate and would yield the best results, particularly given that students were more likely to feel comfortable in a group environment. Ninety students participated in these focus groups.

It is important to note that the fieldwork sample in this study is small. Limitations in the data collected therefore require caution in their interpretation and also make generalisation difficult. However, the issues raised by the study place them in the context of a decade of implementation. Where appropriate, sources of data have been included, such as the *On Track* survey, produced by DEECD, to enrich the perspective on outcomes for these students.

Recruiting the participants

In this research study on the VCAL, the groups of teachers and students were randomly selected. In order to minimise potential conflict of interest, the researcher took great care to identify herself as a university student rather than an employee of the VCAA, an independent statutory authority in Victoria with responsibility for curriculum and assessment for all school students in Victoria. However, the connection between the researcher's role as a student and that of a professional employee of the VCAA (as a VCAL program manager) could not be completely avoided due to the nature of the researcher's work at the VCAA.

It was important, however, to provide adequate information on the importance of the research being undertaken, and to create a sense of professional trust, in order to minimise the probability of 'intentional misinformation and/or controlled behaviour', in particular by the student focus groups (Tashakkori & Teddie, 1998, p. 97). The researcher took particular care to explain the purpose and importance of the research the teachers and students were participating in and the contribution they would make to this study.

It was also important to ensure that there was adequate representation from the government and catholic school sector as well as a representative sample from metropolitan and regional (country) Victoria. A random and statistically representative sample permits confident generalisation from a sample to a larger

population. Patton (2002, p. 230) notes that 'random sampling also controls for selection bias'.

For this study, a combination of random sampling techniques was used. More specifically, a 'stratified random sample' (Tashakkori & Teddie 2003, p. 278) was obtained by separating the schools into groups or strata. The sample obtained from each stratum was proportional to the Catholic/government and metropolitan/country provision of the VCAL. A random sample from each stratum was then selected. Care was taken to ensure that there was no bias in terms of the sample selected so as not to influence the outcome of the results.

Ethics approval to conduct research in schools in Victoria was sought from the DEECD in Victoria as well as the four dioceses of the Catholic Commission of Victoria. Permission was granted to conduct this research and the researcher was invited to communicate with the schools directly in order to set up mutually convenient interview times.

Initial contact was made through the school principal, via a letter (as dictated by protocols for government and Catholic schools). Letters were sent to the principal of 34 randomly selected government schools and 14 Catholic colleges, taking into account the need to have broad representation across both sectors and also with representation from metropolitan and country Victoria.

Some of the schools that were invited to participate in this study declined to participate, either because of low VCAL participation rates or resource constraints. Taking this into account, 24 government schools and eight Catholic colleges were willing to participate in the interviews.

Once the school principals agreed to have their school participate in the study, their permission was sought to make direct contact with the VCAL coordinator or teacher in order to ascertain whether they were interested and able to be interviewed. A randomly selected sample of VCAL teachers who had agreed to participate in the study, were then invited to select a number of students within their VCAL class, who would be interested in participating in the student focus group interviews.

Subsequent contact with the school principals and VCAL teachers was then made via e-mail and telephone. Written permission from all participants (including parental consent for students who were under 18 years of age), to participate in this research study was sought. Some students who were not initially chosen to participate in the focus groups specifically requested to take part in the study.

In total, 38 VCAL teachers/coordinators were interviewed—29 teachers from government schools and nine teachers from Catholic colleges. With the exception of two schools, teacher interviews were conducted on a one-on-one basis. In one school, six teachers were keen to participate in the interview and in another school, two teachers were keen to take part. However, for most schools only one staff member was interviewed. With the exception of four schools, the researcher conducted face-to-face interviews. Due to time and distance constraints, it was more appropriate to conduct telephone interviews with these remaining four teachers.

The student focus groups were held at 11 of the government schools and six Catholic colleges. In total, 90 students participated in the focus groups—54 students from the government schools and 36 students from the Catholic colleges.

Stewart, Shamdasani and Rook (2007, p. 58) report that generally, most focus groups are composed of six to 12 participants. According to these authors, fewer than six participants would make for a ‘dull discussion’ and more than 12 participants would be difficult to manage. Moreover, there would be a risk that there would not be adequate opportunity for all the participants to actively engage in the conversation. With this in mind, and wherever possible, the researcher endeavoured to work within this number of participants, and the number of students in the focus groups in this study ranged from six to eight students.

Developing the Interview Guide – formulating the questions

Stewart, Shamdasani and Rook (2007, p. 61) note that along with the composition of the student focus group, ‘a key element in the design of successful focus groups is the formulation of questions’ and this would effectively serve as the *agenda* for the focus group session.

For the student focus groups in this study, questions were kept to a minimum as the researcher was conscious of the potential limited attention span of the students. Stewart, Shamdasani and Rook (2007) argue that there are two important principles that need to be observed when formulating questions: firstly, questions that are most general and unstructured should be asked in the early stages of the discussion, while the more specific questions should be asked towards the end of the discussion; and secondly that questions should be ordered in terms of importance. These principles may appear to be in conflict with each other and they often are. However, it is generally possible to have a discussion which starts with general questions, moves to more specific questions and then moves back to another general question. This has been the case with the student focus group interviews that were undertaken as part of this study. The researcher was also aware that some of the questions that were formulated were closely related and were likely to influence the responses to the other questions. However, it was felt that this was likely to *reinforce* rather than hinder the discussion.

Student Focus Groups

Khan and Manderson (1992, p. 57) describe a focus group interview as a qualitative method ‘with the primary aim of describing and understanding perceptions, interpretations, and beliefs of a select population to gain understanding of a particular issue from the perspective of the group’s participants’. Moreover, Stewart and Shamdasani (1990, p. 140) believe that they provide a ‘rich and detailed set of data about perceptions, thoughts, feelings, and impressions of group members in the members’ own words’.

There are, however, many criticisms around the use of focus groups, many of which are dismissed as ‘myths’. Morgan and Krueger (1993) identify several of these myths that surround the use of focus groups. One of these myths claims that focus groups can be done cheaply and quickly and that the group interview itself may last only one or two hours. However, it takes considerable time to create an effective set of questions, locate the appropriate participants and make sense of the data they provide.

The myth that focus groups can be done cheaply and quickly has led to many inappropriate uses of focus groups, based more on expedience than on the appropriateness of the method for the purpose at hand. In reality, focus groups require planning, effort and resources, just like every other research method. The researcher was very conscious of this, in particular during the conduct of the group sessions. In preparing the interview guides and the research questions for the student focus groups and the teacher interviews, considerable amount of time was spent in *framing* the questions appropriately to ensure maximum effectiveness. The researcher was also aware that the focus group sessions needed to have a ‘focus and a clearly identifiable agenda’ rather than a ‘freewheeling conversation’ amongst a group of students as had been observed by Stewart, Shamdasani and Rook (2007, p. 45). It was therefore critical that adequate preparation was made to maximise the use of the time available.

Morgan and Krueger (1993) describe another myth that focus groups must consist of *strangers*. They note that limiting ourselves to groups composed of *strangers* would make it very difficult to conduct focus groups effectively. This is a problem often encountered by social scientists and evaluators who often have to contend with problems of ‘prior acquaintance’ (Morgan & Krueger 1993, pg. 6). They propose a way to minimise the problems with group composition by taking extra care in the preparation, selecting and ordering of the questions in the interview guide.

Another myth is that people will not talk about sensitive topics in focus groups. According to Morgan and Krueger (1993), in reality, quite the opposite can occur as groups gain momentum which leads them to reveal details they may not have necessarily disclosed. According to Liamputtong and Ezzy (2005) hearing about fellow students share their experiences stimulates them into sharing their own point of

view and might also remind them of experiences they may not have remembered. This was certainly the case with some of the student focus groups that were interviewed as part of the study on the VCAL. Group interaction helped 'break the ice' and encouraged participants who might otherwise have made little contribution to the conversation, to take an active part in the discussion.

The researcher assured students and teachers that they would be de-identified and their anonymity was assured. As a researcher, it was important to both encourage participants to *open up*, while discouraging any disclosures that went beyond the intentions of the study. It was also important to provide a framework within which the participants were able to present their points of view accurately and thoroughly.

Morgan and Krueger (1993, p. 7) claim that critics have often argued that focus groups tend to produce conformity. These authors believe that a good moderator strives to create 'an open and permissive atmosphere' in which each participant is comfortable enough to share their own point of view. Morgan and Krueger (1993) also argue that when participants are made aware that the researchers are keen to learn as much as possible about their experiences and feelings, then conformity is generally not a problem. While this was the case with the VCAL student focus groups, the researcher, acting as a moderator, faced the challenge of ensuring that the students were kept focussed on the topic under discussion and that no single individual would dominate the discussion.

Morgan and Krueger (1993, p. 9) claim that critics of focus groups often argue that these groups must be validated by other research methods and that this method of research merely prepares the way for 'real research'. Morgan and Krueger (1993, p. 9), however, maintain that when the research topic involves the determination of the success or failure of a particular program in a particular setting, then focus groups may well be the 'most efficient and effective tool for uncovering the reasons behind this outcome'. They also believe that when the goals are to 'generate theories or explanations', then focus groups and other qualitative methods are the most appropriate and effective tools.

Other researchers have championed the use of focus groups. Kamberelis and Dimitriadis (2011, p. 560) describe how focus groups ‘decenter the role of the researcher’, and ‘facilitate the democratization of the research process, allowing participants more ownership over it’. Liamputtong and Ezzy (2005) identify several advantages relating to the use of these focus groups. Amongst them, the authors claim that they reduce the chance of misunderstanding because participants have immediate opportunity to query anything during the discussion, thus providing immediate clarification. Focus groups are also invaluable when the researcher is seeking to gather information from some marginalised or minority groups who may have difficulty expressing their own views through other forms of research methods, for example, a questionnaire. In effect, according to Kitzinger (1995), this method helps empower participants because they have the opportunity to become an active part of the research process. Most importantly, Liamputtong and Ezzy (2005, p. 97) believe that focus groups are generally *fun* for the participants. The notion of *fun* ‘assists the flow of lively discussion as well as building a sense of trust’ among the participants.

The researcher acknowledges, however, that conducting focus groups presents some limitations. Firstly, information gathered during the focus group interviews can only represent the perspective of the participants. Yet, as will be demonstrated in this study, impressions gained raise important questions with regard to whether these views are representative of a wider population. While student focus groups were deemed to be the most appropriate method for collecting information from these students in this study, it is acknowledged that focus group interviews cannot provide the same *depth* of information as can be obtained from an in-depth, one-on-one interview, as was the case with the majority of the teacher interviews. The researcher also acknowledges the potential danger of *group talk* identified by Liamputtong and Ezzy (2005), as well as the dangers of the discussions reflecting the researcher’s interests and every attempt was made to minimise this.

Despite the fact that student focus groups were the most effective method of collecting information for this study, the researcher also acknowledges that, wherever possible, research efforts should be directed through a combination of methods. For

this reason, the researcher has taken the opportunity to combine this research method with other qualitative and quantitative methods.

Interviews

Interviews are more frequently used as a method of data collection in qualitative research than in quantitative research. While textbooks tend to classify interviews into qualitative and quantitative research, Tashakkor and Teddie (1998 p 101) believe that there is actually a continuum which ranges from ‘unstructured and open-ended to highly structured and closed-ended’. The traditional qualitative interview tends to be located on one side of this continuum, and is usually ‘nondirective and very general’, while the traditional quantitative interview is located on the other side and tends to be more ‘structured and closed-ended’. However, despite this dichotomy of classification, many interviews combine the open and closed-ended formats. Tashakkor and Teddie (1998, p. 102) refer to a very common type of combination which is the ‘funnel interview’, during which the researcher starts by using very broad and general questions and then directs the questions to a ‘few focused issues’. This type of interview is ‘applicable to the mixed research approach’.

Tashakkori and Teddie (1998, p. 102) also note that in traditional qualitative research, unstructured interviews are used either in an individual setting or in a group setting and the responses are usually recorded, transcribed and then subjected to ‘content analysis’. And while the traditional qualitative approach favours an unstructured interview, a standardized open-ended interview (Tashakkori & Teddie 2003) was used for this study, based on open-ended but highly structured questions because it was felt that it would make it easier for the participants and would also capture the information most effectively.

In this study, all interviews, including the telephone interviews and focus groups, were digitally recorded. Each interview and focus group lasted approximately 45-60 minutes. The researcher endeavoured to create an informal and relaxed atmosphere with the participants. In addition, in transforming the data collected from the interviews, every effort was made to ensure that the participant’s voice was heard.

For this reason, direct quotes from the participants were used extensively in the analysis of the fieldwork.

Interview Guides

An interview guide was prepared which listed the questions that were to be explored during the interview. The aim of this interview guide was to ensure consistency among the participants interviewed. It also helped ensure that the interviewer would make best use of the limited time that was available in the interview. In addition, the guide kept the interaction with the participants *focused* while allowing them to present their own experiences and perspectives on the VCAL (Patton 2002). It also provided the opportunity to *probe* the participants for more information when further clarification was needed. This was a distinct advantage over questionnaires where interviewer probing is not possible. However, it was very important for the interviewer (the researcher) to remain nonjudgmental to the responses provided by the participants in order to reduce the ‘potentially biasing effects of the interviewer’ (Tashakkori & Teddie 2003, p. 305).

The interview is a very powerful method of data collection. This is because it provides the opportunity to interact closely with the participants and also the opportunity to provide clarification if a question is unclear to the participant, or seek further clarification if a response to the question is unclear. However, the researcher has been very conscious of what Tashakkori and Teddie (1998, p. 102) refer to as the risk of ‘interviewer effects’ on the responses of the persons being interviewed. For this reason, and to minimise these effects, the researcher was careful to identify herself as a research student, rather than as an employee working on the VCAL program. Despite all efforts, it has been impossible to eliminate these effects entirely, particularly during interviews with the VCAL teachers, as the researcher has worked with some of these teachers in a professional capacity. However, every effort was made to ensure that none of the information gathered was affected by the expectations of the interviewer.

According to Tashakkori and Teddie (1998, p.110), an important source of data that is often ignored is the researcher's personal knowledge about the research being undertaken. Although this knowledge is not measured, it provides an 'auxiliary source of data that can enrich your collected data'. This has certainly been the case in this study as the researcher has many anecdotal observations and professional experiences which have in many instances confirmed and affirmed the research findings. However, care has been taken to maintain impartiality and to not let these observations influence the outcomes of this research.

Data collection was undertaken in the participants' natural setting with a strong sense of sensitivity to the people under study. The fieldwork took the researcher 'into the time and place of the observation' (Patton 2002, p. 47). The interviews also allowed the researcher to enter into the participants' perspectives (Patton 2002). Data was subsequently analysed to establish patterns or themes that would inform the study. Throughout the process of collecting the data and analysing them, the researcher was able to shape a narrative – *a story* that would unfold over a few years (Creswell 2007).

A *theme* approach

A *theme* approach was taken to analyse and present data collected from the fieldwork. These themes are portrayed in chapters 7-9 where the researcher has endeavoured to *tell a story* of the impact that the VCAL has had on these students and the broader school community and the challenges it has faced (and continues to face) in order to deliver on its promise to provide better opportunities for students who need it most.

SECONDARY DATA

The researcher also had the opportunity to analyse a variety of secondary data which had been collected over several years and for different purposes. This included *official* and *unofficial documents*, (including both qualitative and quantitative data) such as government archived files, newspapers, educational journals, annual reports, minutes of meetings and records of speeches. More recent statistical information which charted the growth of the VCAL over the first nine years of implementation, as

well as statistics relating to the further education, training and employment destinations and outcomes of the VCAL students also informed this study. Materials produced by the media, for example, newspaper articles and letters to the editor, in particular during a time of major curriculum reform in Victoria, provided a useful insight into public and political sentiment at the time. This data was used to support, corroborate and *test* the research on the effectiveness of the VCAL program.

At a more local level, materials generated at central (departmental) level, such as archived program documentation and publicity material relating to the Technical Year 12 (T12) certificate were analysed. This secondary material was very useful in providing *context* to the research study. However, given the limited information available on the T12 certificate, the researcher has taken the opportunity to document the T12 story and further contribute to the body of knowledge.

The researcher was mindful, however, of potential pitfalls of using secondary data, including the risk that it could be incomplete ‘because of selective reporting or recording’ (Tashakkori & Teddie 2003, p. 317) and that the ‘interpretative validity’ might possibly be low.

RESEARCH DILEMMAS

Issues of Validity in the Data Collection

The researcher considered potential issues of concern highlighted by Tashakkori and Teddie (2003). These issues related to the collection of data, in particular ensuring the accuracy (‘descriptive validity’) of the researcher’s account; that it accurately portrayed the participant’s intention (‘interpretive validity’) and that the theoretical interpretation of the researcher fitted the data being collected (‘theoretical validity’) (Tashakkori & Teddie 2003, p. 300).

Confidentiality

The researcher was also mindful of the need to preserve confidentiality of all the participants. For this reason, pseudonyms were used in this thesis for the participants in order to protect their identity.

Generalisability

The researcher acknowledges that the sample size is small. This therefore requires caution in interpretation of the data and also makes generalisation difficult. However, some of the issues identified in this study echo similar issues raised in previous studies of the VCAL and, as indicated in subsequent chapters, place them in the context of a decade of implementation. The inclusion of secondary data from other sources has helped enrich and support the researcher's perspective.

Ethical and Methodological concerns

The researcher also considered that her role as a student and her professional role as VCAL program manager at the VCAA had the potential to raise a number of ethical concerns. This was identified as a potential concern with the teacher interviews. Despite the fact that the teacher participants were randomly selected, there was a strong likelihood that the researcher would have had a *pre-existing* relationship with some of these participants. It was also important that these teachers did not say what they felt the researcher wanted to hear. However, this did not emerge as an issue during the data collection and recruitment of participants.

This chapter has described the research methodology for this study. A qualitative approach was taken as a data collection strategy. A group of teachers and students were randomly selected with appropriate representation from the Victorian government and the Catholic school sector as well as a representative sample from metropolitan and regional Victoria. With some minor exceptions, teachers were interviewed on an individual basis, and students were interviewed in focus groups.

A variety of secondary data was also used in this study. This included *official* and *unofficial* documents, (including both qualitative and quantitative data) such as government archived files, reports on destinations of Victorian school completers, newspapers, educational journals, annual reports, minutes of meetings and records of speeches. Material produced by the media, for example, newspaper articles during a time of major curriculum reform in Victoria, provided a useful insight into public and political sentiment during this period.

The researcher now steps back in time. The next chapter will look at the history of curriculum change, with a particular focus on vocational education and training in secondary schools in Victoria.

CHAPTER 4

THE HISTORY OF VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

This chapter examines the history of vocational education and training in secondary schools in the Australian state of Victoria, dating back to the early 1900s. The chapter also explores the Technical Year 12 certificate (T12) which made a very important contribution to technical education in the 1980s and which, like the VCAL, was designed for students not intending to go to university. Finally, the chapter introduces the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE), which was the culmination of a major curriculum reform in the mid-1980s and which would see the demise of many other certificates, including the T12.

A review into technical schools, chaired by Theodore Fink in the early 1900s, found that pupils leaving primary schools were ‘ill-equipped to commence courses in the State subsidised technical schools’ (Badcock 1973, p. 437), which consisted of a variety of institutions offering courses in mining, applied science and art, mainly to adult clients. The Review recommended the establishment of continuation schools to bridge this existing gap between primary and technical education, a view that was also shared by Frank Tate, the first Director of Education. This saw the establishment of these ‘in-between’ schools, the first of which opened in 1905 in an old state school building in Spring Street, Melbourne. The stated purpose of these schools was to give ‘general preparatory training in mechanical work’ (Holt 1950, p. 14) and to prepare the sons of the working-classes for a ‘special trade or occupation’ (Badcock 1973, p. 439). They were never intended to compete with private secondary schools. Rather, they would largely cater for ‘the children of the working classes who would ultimately have to support themselves by manual work’ rather than being destined for a profession (Badcock 1973, p. 437).

Despite these original intentions, the first of these schools was neither designed as a feeder for technical schools (as had been envisaged by the Fink Commission), nor as an agricultural school (which had been favoured by Tate). Instead, it provided post-

primary education for future state school teachers and, for a small minority of its pupils, provided a pathway into the University of Melbourne.

Moreover, the curriculum of this school was not ‘narrowly vocational’. It is therefore debatable whether this type of school was ever really intended to restrict its ‘mandate to the training of workers’ (Polesel 2007 p. 158), particularly given that the Premier of Victoria himself had declared in 1905 that one of the tasks of the Melbourne Continuation School was to help the poor students attending this school to gain access to the University of Melbourne.

This confirmed earlier suspicions of the private schools that the state secondary school system was encroaching on their territory rather than merely attempting to ‘broaden the scope and reach of the secondary curriculum’ (Polesel 2007 p. 158). Their fears were further confirmed with the state’s recommendation in 1908 that there would be a rapid expansion of state secondary schooling in this manner. The Education Act of 1910 provided the mechanism for this expansion.

There were several motives behind the state’s entry into secondary school provision. Of primary importance was the need to create a bridge to facilitate entry from primary schooling into a more advanced form of training. At the same time, the nature of the curriculum which included ‘general culture’ as well as ‘technical training’ in these new schools revealed a much broader focus than had originally been stated. In fact, the vocational aims of the schools seemed to diminish in importance over time with students ‘eschewing the industrial and agricultural courses’ that these schools offered, preferring to take up university-preparatory programs (Polesel 2007 p. 158). Moreover, the Director-General, Frank Tate noted that resource issues and a lack of technically qualified staff meant that the teaching in these schools focused increasingly on “the ordinary type of secondary education suitable for such employments as those of doctors, lawyers, teachers and public servants” (Tate 1910, cited in Docherty 1973, p. 654).

It would therefore seem that these continuation schools had failed to provide the kind of vocational and technical training which had been intended. This would soon lead to the creation of the first junior technical schools for boys in 1912, and for girls

shortly afterwards - the first Domestic Arts School for girls opened in 1915 and the first Junior Technical School for Girls opened in 1916 (Sweetman, Long & Smyth 1922).

A divided system of technical and high school provision had effectively been created and this would be challenged on a number of occasions. Martin Hansen, who had succeeded Tate as Director 'was not inclined to tolerate the existence of the dual system of post-primary education'. He believed that the arrangement was wasteful and wanted to have composite schools which offered a 'core of constant subjects' in the first two years (Docherty 1973, p. 669). He also noted the pedagogical advantages of strong applied learning approaches across the curriculum and not just in vocationally oriented subjects. Hansen would make repeated requests to establish multi-purpose schools, requests that were steadfastly refused by the Minister, the Hon. John Lemmon. In 1931, the Committee of Inquiry into education, tasked with making economies during a time of depression, unsuccessfully attempted to amalgamate the two systems of provision. Ramsay's efforts to reform secondary education in 1960 would prove to be equally unsuccessful. The Ramsay Committee had been commissioned to investigate, amongst other things a 'vexing educational problem [which] concerned fitting pupils into the right courses' (Badcock 1973, p. 540). While the Committee argued for a comprehensive high school system, it acknowledged that such a change would be too difficult to implement and that the existing arrangements should remain.

For a quarter of a century following the Second World War, secondary technical education continued in the technical schools of the Education Department. These schools were predominantly for boys, but there were also a few single-sex girls' technical schools, and a few schools that catered for both boys and girls. This situation would change in the late 1960s, which saw co-educational technical schools being built and the gender barriers being broken down.

These co-educational technical schools were vocational schools and they placed great emphasis on vocational subjects and preparing students for work, either as an apprentice or as a skilled worker. They recognised that not all students wished to

pursue or could pursue tertiary studies and they therefore provided programs to meet the needs, interests and abilities of these students.

Until the early 1970s, when growth slowed almost to a standstill, technical schools continued to be opened. These technical schools were given the responsibility of developing their own curriculum to meet their particular local needs. As school completion rates grew and the demand for senior secondary education increased, they began to provide new facilities and preparatory courses for students in Years 11 and 12. These programs were called Tertiary Orientation Programmes (TOP) and were developed towards the end of the decade. Entry to many colleges of advanced education (CAE) courses, particularly those below degree level, was available for students graduating from TOP and the examinations or assessments were school-based, though accredited by the CAEs. With the creation of TOP, the opportunity arose for students to pursue tertiary education through two channels: through the mainstream high school certificate, the Higher School Certificate (HSC) which involved traditional externally-set examinations and through TOP, which involved continuous assessment without external examinations. The 'techs' also developed a new vocational leaving certificate, called the Technical Year 12 Certificate or T12. This certificate is of particular interest as it bears a striking resemblance to the modern day VCAL which is the main focus of this thesis.

Submissions to a review into secondary technical education in 1983 indicated continued and strong support for the view that education provided in these schools offered 'valuable models of alternative approaches to learning for young people' (Education Department of Victoria 1983, p. 6).

Secondary Technical Education at the time had very specific aims. These included helping students achieve their full potential and extending their education beyond primary schooling as well as developing their literacy and numeracy skills. It was also intended to provide a broad range of educational experiences, particularly in the areas of social and natural sciences, the arts, practical and technical activities and physical education. Furthermore, secondary technical education was intended to assist students to make informed choices of future educational or occupational

specialisation as well as qualify students for entry to a very wide range of professional, commercial, agricultural or highly skilled technician and trade courses. (Education Department of Victoria 1985-86).

Most importantly, these courses claimed to provide a comprehensive education as well as clearly defined avenues to almost every skilled vocation and some of the professions. Programs offered included business studies, engineering studies, creative arts, sports studies as well as trade based studies, including industrial studies and building trades, metal trades, automotive and building studies and electrical/electronic studies (Education Department of Victoria 1985-1986). Schools had the freedom to develop courses taking into account the special needs and abilities of their students. This freedom allowed diversification of approach to curriculum development within schools.

In describing the distinctive nature of curriculum in secondary technical schools, the Ministerial Working Party Report into Secondary Technical Education (Education Department of Victoria 1983, p. 21) claimed that what generally (but not exclusively) distinguished the Technical School System was that within this system, technical education was a 'total school concept' embraced by the whole school, where these subjects were integral to the total learning experience of the student. The Report also noted the inadequacy of 'tacking on' practical studies as an appendage to the high school program in an attempt to improve the relevance and effectiveness of the school's program.

Submissions to the Ministerial Review into Secondary Technical Education in Victoria in 1983 indicated 'strong support for the view that the education offered in many of the state's technical schools [provided] valuable models of alternative approaches to learning for young people...As such, technical education [was] making an important contribution to the many pronged approaches needed in moving education towards more equal outcomes' (Education Department of Victoria 1983, p. 6). Victoria therefore appeared to be well served by having separate vocational provision through the technical school system and this would continue until well into the 1980s. The Ministerial Working Party Report into Secondary Technical Education (Education Department of Victoria 1983, p. 1) argued that while various

concepts of comprehensive post-primary education had been promoted by ‘senior departmental administrators’ as the way forward, it was considered that technical schools continued to have an important role to play.

By the late 1970s, alternative programs to the HSC had been developed in high and technical schools. Schools began to negotiate with tertiary institutions for students who had passed a Technical Year 12 program to be exempted from HSC and to be able to enrol in a degree course (Musgrave 1988). The opening of another route to university would later be seen as confusing to both universities and parents (Ministerial Review of Postcompulsory Schooling 1984).

The High School sector and the academic curriculum

Throughout most of the twentieth-century, provision for vocational studies was made through a separate technical school system. This left the high school curriculum under the influence of academic authorities. Teese and Polesel (2003, p. 37) argue that universities ‘clung to the academic strands of the Higher School Certificate’ and continued to resist demands for change, while continuing to exclude school-based curriculum that was being developed at the local level.

This pattern persisted after the Second World War. Teese (2000) describes the curriculum of the 1970s as a hierarchical structure with subjects that were highly theoretical and abstract, drawing the most able students, while the few more practical and concrete subjects attracted academically-weaker students. During this period, curriculum had tended to be focussed towards university studies, even though many students did not in fact enter university (Teese 2000).

The 1970s brought significant changes in the social and economic environment and these would be the catalyst for major curriculum reforms. The first oil shock in 1973-1974 created economic uncertainty which was felt particularly among a cohort of students who suddenly faced not only academic uncertainty, but also intense economic uncertainty (Teese 2000). In Victoria, the collapse of youth employment in the mid-1970s created major curriculum challenges (Teese & Polesel 2003). There was little incentive for students to stay on in school if the school programs provided

no economic benefit. But as unemployment rose, schools were increasingly being blamed. Musgrave (1988, p. 146) describes a 'moral panic' about basic literacy and numeracy that the media whipped up, using carefully selected academics to 'legitimate their position'. A more vocationally-oriented education appeared to be the answer for employers and parents (Musgrave 1988), hence the continued emphasis on technical schools. At the same time, Musgrave (1988) noted that there appeared to be an ongoing need for the more traditional type of examination to satisfy the demand for university studies, as teachers were no longer trusted.

To counter unemployment, the use of school needed to increase. However, Teese and Polesel (2003) argued that unless changes were made to the curriculum in the final two years of schooling, working-class students and those with no university aspirations would have little inducement to stay on at school. Space therefore needed to be created within the curriculum to give all students the opportunity to actively participate in their education. This would usher in major revisions to the HSC to cater for these changing circumstances.

A revised HSC

A newly created curriculum body, the Victorian Institute of Secondary Education (VISE) proposed radical changes to the HSC. After 1980, HSC subjects would be grouped in two categories. Group 1 subjects were familiar to the universities, but they would now have up to 50 per cent of assessment school-based. Group 2 subjects were to be school-assessed and did not give access to university. The approach was to allow students either to undertake a program which mixed Group 1 and Group 2 subjects, or to leave students free to choose only Group 1 (or Group 2) subjects. In the meantime, students still had the opportunity to continue their studies through the T12 certificate and Tertiary Orientation Programs through the technical school system.

The curriculum under the Group 2 structure was diversified into other new areas, for example various business studies courses; and a range of performing and creative arts or alternative courses in the traditional areas, for example, English and Mathematics (VISE 1981). These would be developed by schools or groups of schools and

accredited in a form which would be suitable for any school to deliver. School-based assessment meant that Group 2 subjects could have a strong practical and vocational focus within the wider HSC structure. New vocational subjects were progressively introduced into the curriculum and ran 'parallel' to the mainstream curriculum. They included Advanced Typing, Secretarial Practice, Data Processing, and many more. VISE insisted on equally stringent accreditation processes to these Group 2 courses in an attempt to ensure that the same educational standards were applied to both Group 1 and Group 2 courses and that parity of esteem would be assured. Despite these measures, the vocational (Group 2) studies would struggle for this parity of esteem. This would have major implications for vocational studies as a distinct element in the senior secondary curriculum.

A significant and critical factor in this curriculum reform was that preparation for work had now become a formal and specific aim of the upper secondary curriculum, a principle which clashed severely with the liberal principles of a general education as being 'concerned exclusively with the training of the mind' (Teese & Polesel 2003, p. 33). This conflict was managed in the short term by allowing schools to offer choice and mixing of elements.

These reforms broadened curriculum provision and created space within the curriculum for students who were not intending to go to university. Curriculum had become segmented into two very distinct zones, one zone for university preparation and the second zone for young people who did not intend to go to university. The segmentation of the curriculum into these two zones was significant, particularly for the young people who chose to enter the second zone. However, it should be stressed that many students took a mainstream HSC Group 1 program and added to it one or two Group 2 subjects (rather than students dividing simply into Group 1 and Group 2 cohorts).

Despite the promise of parity of esteem, there was serious doubt that Group 2 subjects would ever be accepted by the universities, and hence gain the same status as Group 1 subjects. Their future would therefore depend on the strength of the links between these terminal tracks and employment or other forms of further education and training

at the end of schooling which could include an apprenticeship or basic vocational programs (Teese & Polesel 2003).

The introduction of 'vocational and general subjects into the lower end of the curriculum' (Teese & Polesel 2003, p. 40) in the 1980s further increased opportunities for low achievers and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to stay on at school and prepare for work or further training. This was important for the weaker students. Ironically, however, these changes to the upper secondary curriculum were of limited benefit, even to those for whom they were intended, because these had been based on a view of a labour market for teenagers which was out-of-date (Teese & Polesel 2003). Yet, there was still an assumption that there would be sufficient jobs available when these graduates were ready to enter the labour market.

At the same time, additional culturally-based subjects were introduced into the curriculum. These included Drama, Classical Ballet, Government and Law. The high school curriculum was also expanded in another direction by the introduction of health and behavioural subjects.

The mid-1970s was a period of high youth unemployment. The labour market could no longer cope with the large number of students who had traditionally left school after they had completed Years 9, 10 or 11. History has taught us that uncertainty and rising unemployment tend to narrow rather than broaden perspectives on the role of the school and to increase the prestige of academic-preparatory studies (Teese & Polesel 2003). The thinking therefore needed to change. And for those students aiming for unskilled or semi-skilled jobs and who had made specific subject choices in this regard, other options had to be considered because these job opportunities were no longer available, or at best would have been significantly reduced. Students therefore had no choice but to either revert back to university type subjects that would qualify them for higher occupational positions, or revert to lower skilled manual trades. This would have a significant impact on working-class girls who would start from a lower base of participation, and would therefore have considerable growth to make up (Teese & Polesel 2003).

As a result, students increasingly started to consider the senior secondary curriculum as a bridge to further study rather than a bridge to jobs, even though they did not necessarily want to pursue the first option. This is borne out most clearly by the increasing participation of girls in subjects like Biology and Chemistry. Teese and Polesel (2003) noted that neither the range of jobs available to young people on completion of school, nor their aspirations (and those of their families) supported the view of segmenting the curriculum into vocational and university preparatory tracks. Teese and Polesel (2003, p. 36) further argued that in any case, 'such a division already existed in the opposition between high schools and technical schools'. These new vocational subjects therefore did not solve the problems they were intended to solve, even if they did provide temporary and partial relief to students and teachers from academic stress.

The 'two-pronged' approach of creating parallel streams and broadening practice within the mainstream curriculum continued until the mid-1980s, creating significant tension between the 'university track' and the 'terminal track', with multiple and competing credentials as well as the drive to give schools more autonomy in designing curriculum and taking control of parts of student assessment.

This was also occurring against a backdrop of separate provision under the technical school system. Things would soon change and Victoria would experience another sustained and bitterly fought out period of educational reform which would see the development of a comprehensive certificate (the VCE) and the subsequent demise of the divided system of provision. This would also mark the end of the technical schools and the T12 certificate. Despite its significance and popularity at the time, little appears to have been written about this technical certificate. The following section makes an attempt to fill some of the gaps and provide a short historical context to this technical certificate. It will describe why this certificate was so important at the time and is so relevant to what would eventuate several decades later.

THE T12 CERTIFICATE

To understand the significance of the T12, it is important to analyse the educational landscape before the creation of this certificate.

The turbulent times of the 1970s had seen the introduction of new courses and certificates to prepare young people for further study and work. In the late 1970s, technical school courses finished at Year 11—the second last year of secondary schooling—unless students attended one of the few schools that offered a Tertiary Orientation Program (TOP). Alternatively they could enrol in a middle-level certificate (or lower level certificate) at a TAFE institute (adult sector VET provider). The school completion rate of 32 per cent in Victoria in 1979 (Cameron 1980), suggests that an additional and different kind of program was required at the upper secondary level to encourage students to remain at school in order to complete twelve years of schooling.

Technical schools had by this time outgrown their ‘vocational’ label and had moved far beyond being chiefly concerned ‘with the mere training of artisans and of personnel destined for employment in industry and commerce’—the traditional representation which was already under challenge in the early 1970s (Docherty 1973, p. 746). Their old roles in pre-apprenticeship training (pre-vocational) and providing a pathway to higher level training were no longer sufficient. A more general education was required to equip young people for ‘today’s world’.

By the late 1970s and early 1980s, students in technical schools were under increasing pressure to complete Year 12. As noted in an internal department file note on the Technical Education study structure (Education Department of Victoria 1984e, p. 1), completing a Year 12 course was a ‘recognised necessity’ for schools. A Year 12 course would enable them to complete a general education with a vocational emphasis and was considered to be necessary to achieve successful outcomes. In this regard, the intent of the Technical Year 12 was to allow students who were not academically inclined, to ‘remain at school and complete a twelfth year of study’ (Education Department of Victoria 1984e, p. 1). Furthermore, it was claimed that the program provided ‘valuable educational experiences and [raised] the students’ self-esteem to

the extent that they [were] able to progress into the vocational field of their choice or further study’.

In June 1979, the Technical Schools Committee had recommended that an alternative Year 12 course be offered to senior secondary students, for whom the existing HSC or TOP was not a sufficiently attractive option to remain in school. The T12 program was intended to provide students with the opportunity to apply the personal and practical skills they had developed through their general education. These students were able to further develop these skills and abilities in a major focus area of their interest without having external constraints in curriculum offerings that were generally imposed on courses having ‘approved tertiary’ requirements.

The T12 program soon became the largest alternative Year 12 program in Victoria, and it gained the support of school committees and the broader community in general. No other model appeared to exist that provided the opportunity for full-time study that was acceptable to these students who would otherwise have been at risk of unemployment. Such was the popularity of the T12 program that in his Professional Development Report, Juniel (1983, p. 8) noted that the program grew ‘at a mathematical progression of doubling each year, from 3 schools in 1981 to cover 60 [proposed] schools in 1984’. In addition, Juniel (1983, p. 8) reported that the number of courses would grow ‘from 3 to over 100 in 1984, and the number of teachers involved from 28 to over 1000’.

THE T12 MODEL

The Technical Year 12 certificate (T12) fulfilled a need for ‘relevant, practical and vocationally oriented courses of study based upon the interests and the needs of students rather than oriented towards the requirements of tertiary entry’ (Matthews 1986, p.4, cited in Beecroft 1987, p. 2). The T12 program offered a different approach to other Year 12 programs. It was a program that was practical in orientation and was geared to develop and extend the interests of students. It was intended as a final year, a ‘rounding off of secondary technical education’ (Education Department of Victoria 1983, p. 15).

Internal department policy documents on the Technical Year 12 Study Structure (Education Department of Victoria 1984d, p. 2) note that the aims of the T12 structure were to offer students a challenging program involving ‘practically oriented activities’ and allowing them to be actively involved in ‘making decisions about their own curriculum choices’. The T12 program focused on the students’ personal growth and the development of knowledge and skills so that they could better adjust when they left school. Another internal policy document on the philosophy of the T12 model noted that the program was not about preparing students for tertiary studies, yet it did not preclude them from doing so (Education Department of Victoria 1984e).

The Technical Year 12 conveyed a clear image to the community, as a document on the certificate structure sought to highlight (Education Department of Victoria 1983, p. 2).

CONCERN	- That we care about what happens to our students.
FUN	- T12 can be interesting, exciting and rewarding, a fun place to be.
FLEXIBILITY	- T12 can respond to the interest and motivation of students.
QUALITY	- T12 is recognised as having a consistently high standard.
REWARDS	- T12 allows personal fulfilment while completing an accredited year 12 which is widely recognised and accepted.

The fundamental aim of the T12 model was to respond to student needs and interests through a negotiated curriculum. A distinctive feature of this technical Year 12 program was that it was not an extension or a further year of sequential study in a select number of subjects. Rather, the Year 12 program offered an alternative Year 12 for an essentially different population to those undertaking Group 1/2 subjects of the HSC. A strong view had emerged that ‘cognitive, aesthetic and social development was best reinforced where the students were offered success in practical and creative activities, and could extend their reflective and design capacities in dealing with applied problems’ (Education Department of Victoria 1984d, p. 2).

In their research on human learning, Bransford et al. (2000) note that learners are more actively engaged in their learning when they can see the usefulness of what they are learning. The T12 program appeared to provide an opportunity for the participants to remain actively engaged in their learning because the content was determined through a process of negotiation with them and it was directly related to their needs, interests, aspirations and capacities. Units were also flexible enough to cater for changing learning experiences in order to continually meet student needs.

The ability to develop curriculum at the school level and to make local decisions was intended to enable students to negotiate their own learning programs in a way that was meaningful to them. The Technical Year 12 Study Structure Report (Education Department of Victoria 1984d) claimed that students were therefore developing real life skills, skills they may not necessarily have been exposed to in a traditional curriculum environment. The T12 program appeared to have a significant advantage over programs which had external constraints, particularly those which led to tertiary studies at higher education level. Furthermore, the report claimed that student negotiation had an additional benefit in that it enabled students to develop a maturity with regard to decision-making processes, opportunities which they may not otherwise have had if they were involved in centrally managed programs.

The thinking behind the development of the T12 certificate which offered flexible curriculum was quite innovative and is an important feature of more recent educational reforms that have occurred in OECD countries, in particular Finland. Sahlberg (2012) notes that many of Finland's claims of success are based on the country's ability to develop flexible curriculum at the local level.

Technical Year 12 certificates and other school-based certificates had a high degree of credibility in the local area surrounding the school, particularly if the school had close links with the community and the course had a significant work experience component (State Board of Education 1985). In addition, Beecroft (1987, p. 2) reported that the T12 program was an 'important innovation in terms of the Victorian Government's stated commitment towards the participation of young people at the Year 12 level to 70% by 1995'.

The T12 attracted a very different student cohort compared with students undertaking the more academic program. They were students who wished to continue to do a Year 12, but did not have the motivation or aptitude for a tertiary oriented course. An internal document on the T12 program noted that students were carefully selected and presented with realistic advice on what the school and course would be able to offer, including their role in negotiating content. It also noted that the flexibility of the T12 structure enabled course content and student needs and aspirations to be revisited every year to ensure that students continued to be adequately catered for (Education Department of Victoria 1984d).

Program Features

The basic premise of a Technical Year 12 program was that students were at the centre of the development process. Their needs, expectations and abilities governed the program structure. It was an integrated program, involving theory and practice. Furthermore, the program was based on a student-negotiated model with teacher-guided curriculum. In addition, assessment was based on student achievement in relation to negotiated goals. Assessment was also undertaken entirely at the school level (Education Department of Victoria 1984d).

The concept of negotiation was a very important part of the T12. A co-operative model of curriculum decision-making was intended to maximise student interests, involvement and motivation. This concept empowered students to take control of their own learning.

For most of us negotiation is trying to sell, to persuade or to succeed in getting through. To teachers, it probably means trying to make a deal with the Principal or trying to gain an agreement from students. In this case the teacher is the negotiator.

In T12 it is the student who is the negotiator.

In T12 the teacher's role is to listen to the student, to try to understand the student's proposition and to agree to facilitate the student's needs. The student negotiates with the teacher. Successful negotiation is usually easy to achieve if the teacher has no preconceived ideas and seeks only to understand and accept the student's ideas.

The key to successfully negotiating curriculum is to be a good listener and facilitator (Education Department of Victoria 1984b, p. 2).

Many of the T12 program characteristics were not new, but rather captured the course innovation that already existed in the technical school system. An internal report on the Technical Year 12 study structure (Education Department of Victoria 1984d) described the program as offering distinct features. The report noted that the T12 offered an integrated whole course approach covering both theory and practice. This was fundamentally different to Group 1 and Group 2 courses defined by the individual subjects selected, a model favoured by academic programs. There were no academic entry pre-requisites for entry into the program. Courses were developed at the local school level as distinct from Group 1 and 2 courses which were centrally designed. Assessment was goal-based for each student. This was a critical component of the course and it enabled schools to better cater for local needs. To talk of developing and setting statewide standards was to completely misunderstand the nature and intent of this program.

The report also noted that credentialling was controlled. The T12 program was in a very real sense owned by the schools which participated in it. A T12 committee (with a majority of practising T12 teachers) ensured the integrity of the program was maintained. All courses were reviewed and discussed. In addition, all schools were fully informed of each other's courses and were expected to participate and support the development of these programs in their regional committees.

Furthermore, schools' links with the community enabled students to become involved with the community and the community with education. The benefits were mutual. Private individuals and businesses financed special projects while others assisted with work experience opportunities. As a result, students developed social maturity which

assisted them in their transition from school. Work experience opportunities often provided employers with their future workers.

The model could support further expansion and application. In fact, while the T12 basic studies component was originally focused on the trade areas, the program soon experienced growth in Business Studies, Home Economics and Textiles and the Arts. But the basic principle remained - it continued to be a negotiated course incorporating theoretical and practical work, with a strong technical component. In addition, this Year 12 course would provide practical, real-life studies in order to motivate students to continue with their general education.

Curriculum Content

A Technical Year 12 program consisted of the following three unit groups:

Base Units: Base Units provided the main focus of the course and while the emphasis remained the same, content was able to be tailored towards the particular needs of the students for the duration of the course. These units effectively provided the intrinsic motivation for the students to undertake the program. The base area provided what the program would cover and mutual responsibilities of teachers and students.

Base Related Units: These units were designed to complement the Base Units, giving them more relevance and meaning. They extended student knowledge and skills within the program. In this group, staff and students negotiated over the selection of these units.

Optional Units: These included additional units to further extend the students' knowledge and skills. They were not necessarily linked or related to the base units. Students here had the opportunity to choose specific studies to broaden their interests.

An internal report on the Technical Year 12 Study Structure (Education Department of Victoria 1984d) described the T12 courses as having been designed to promote the integration of all course units and to achieve maximum variety, interest and relevance for the students. This concept of integrated curriculum would again appear two decades later and would become a fundamental component of the VCAL program.

Upon successful completion of the T12 program, students were issued with an Education Department Technical Year 12 Certificate that listed all units completed, including unit summaries. Students were also provided with a descriptive assessment of their performance which was referenced to the goals they had set out to achieve in the unit. Technical courses were well accepted by the community and they offered clear access to almost every profession or skills vocation (Education Handbook, Technical 1985-86).

Developing a Technical Year 12 Program

The T12 study structure was developed from the ‘bottom up’ with prospective students as the prime focus of the subject content (Education Department of Victoria 1984e).

Schools interested in running a T12 program needed to apply to the Year 12 Committee for authorisation to deliver a Technical Year 12 program. Before undertaking this formal process, schools were required to identify possible courses of interest to these students. Students were counselled to ensure that an appropriate course was selected in order to meet their future vocational needs.

Having identified possible courses, schools ascertained available resources that were appropriate and indeed essential in order to fulfill delivery requirements of proposed courses. This was undertaken with the knowledge that additional funding for facilities and resources for these Technical Year 12 programs would need to be acquired through industry donations, community involvement or using existing resources from nearby schools and colleges.

Course offerings were largely determined by staff expertise. A survey of staff was undertaken to establish areas of subject expertise and skills. Once this was established, results of the survey were matched with student requirements and possible staffing and courses were then identified and established. Having established teaching resources and student interests, possible courses were identified and made known to students in order to ascertain interest to proceed to the next step. Discussions were also held with principals in surrounding regions as well as the regional office to determine interest from other schools within the region.

Having consulted with students and parents about proposed T12 courses, an advertising and public relations campaign was undertaken in conjunction with other schools within the region who were intending to offer Technical Year 12. Information meetings for interested students, parents and community members were held at this stage. From the information gatherings, an estimate of numbers of interested applications was made. At this stage, interviews with proposed applicants took place and possible identification of course content was generated from these interviews. Once courses and numbers of interested applications were established, the school was then in a position to formally apply to the Technical Education Office, to deliver a Technical Year 12 program.

An implementation team, with extensive knowledge of T12 policy and experienced in its operation, was tasked with informing schools of the nature of T12 and to assist them in interpreting policy statements and guidelines and translating these into successful educational programs. Their main responsibilities were to inform regional staff, school staff, parents and school councils of the nature of T12, assist these groups to interpret T12 policy and to successfully implement programs in the schools. They were also responsible for maintaining communications with curriculum program coordinators, informing them of issues identified while facilitating T12.

Typical profile of students entering T12

There was a greater proportion of males undertaking T12 in the traditional trade areas of building, engineering and technical studies, while more females were involved in the developing business studies, social science, textiles and food and catering areas. Fairly even proportions of male and female enrolments were evident in the arts/media/design/photography, graphics and personal/outdoor education areas (Beecroft 1987).

In July 1984, a survey of 1,389 students in 47 T12 schools was undertaken to determine the effectiveness of the T12 program (Education Department of Victoria 1984c). By this time, the program had been operating for two years from implementation (or three years from the trial in 1981). A broad mix of students were surveyed, including adult/re-entry students, continuing students from the same school offering T12, technical school students who had exited their school to participate at another school offering T12, high school students entering a T12 program in technical schools and non-government school students entering T12 technical schools.

Results from the survey indicated that the T12 program attracted students who were unsuccessful in gaining a place at a TAFE college and students who were unable to gain employment and were therefore entering a school program to improve their chances of getting employment. Some students were also entering a T12 program from a high or non-government school because they felt that the existing offerings did not meet their needs and/or would be difficult to cope with.

The 1984 survey results (Education Department of Victoria 1984c) also indicated that had T12 not been available to these students:

- 11 per cent would have remained at school to undertake VISE courses
- 1 per cent would have been willing to repeat Year 11 at their school
- 22 per cent would have tried to enrol in a TAFE program
- 65 per cent would have sought employment or unemployment benefits in preference to returning to school

- of the potential TAFE applicants, had a T12 program not been available to them, they would have sought employment or unemployment benefits.

In addition,

- 34 per cent expressed a wish to continue with further studies the following year
- 64 per cent hoped to gain employment, and
- 1 per cent were unsure about what they wanted to do after their T12 program

(Education Department of Victoria 1984c)

As will be seen in subsequent chapters, similar responses would be received during interviews with the VCAL students as part of the *On Track* project, a survey undertaken by the DEECD which monitors the transition of school leavers. It would seem that the T12 program was catering for the same types of students who would enrol in the VCAL several decades later.

The survey data showed large proportions of students who would have sought employment opportunities or enrolment at TAFE had T12 not been available to them. Given that employment opportunities for Year 11 leavers were not optimal at the time, students were at a significantly increased risk of long-term unemployment.

But the primary success of the program in reaching at-risk groups was largely attributed to the fact that students wanted to complete twelve years of study without necessarily wanting to pursue further studies past this point. In his submission to the Secretary of the Department of Education and Youth Affairs in Canberra, Allen (1984) noted that the Blackburn Report had indicated that only 16 per cent of the Year 7 student cohort would pursue tertiary education. It seems that the T12 may have provided a program which met some of the learning and pathways needs of the broader cohort of students remaining at school until the upper secondary level. Consequently, completion rates among students undertaking T12 courses was very high – 98 per cent.

Concerns and criticisms of the Program

Despite its apparent success, the T12 program faced considerable challenges and had many opponents. In an internal report on the T12 program, Juniel (1984a) noted that some staff who were not familiar with this educational model and who were asked to support and facilitate delivery of it, attempted to change it back to what they were used to and thus adopted the more traditional educational concepts of delivery. This is despite the fact that the success of the program was based on the changes that made this program so distinctive and so attractive to cohorts of educationally disadvantaged or at-risk students. Constant attempts were made to impose external curriculum controls and standards which were against the principles of student/teacher negotiated curriculum. Juniel (1984a) also noted that many critics of the T12 program believed that it should either prepare students for university entrance or else be downgraded to a non-tertiary oriented program with an emphasis on employment. Supporters of the program, however, believed that to impose university entrance requirements on these students would deter them from enrolling. Juniel argued that there should be no reason why a student who achieved the necessary pre-requisite requirements of university entrance should be excluded from enrolling in a university if they wished to do so at a later stage.

The biggest concerns with the program tended to be raised by people who were unfamiliar and as yet uncomfortable with this program. The problems did not lie with the teachers' actual knowledge of the subject area, but rather in the methodology of achieving the T12 philosophies, including any changes in the organisational structure to support it. Internal working documents on the T12 program (Education Department of Victoria, 1984e) note a sense of the program being inferior because it was not intended for students aiming for a tertiary entrance program. It was difficult to understand the argument that students undertaking programs which did not have external standards imposed on them actually tended to attain a higher level of achievement because of the program's flexible approach to education. There was also concern regarding the fact that the T12 program did not contain normative assessment. It is the very fact that the program did not have competitive assessment, but objective, descriptive assessment that made the T12 program such an attractive option for a large number of students.

Some teachers were challenged by the need to respond to student needs and interests through negotiated curriculum as well as the need to develop an integrated approach to curriculum delivery. In an internal report on the implementation of the T12 program, Juniel (1984b, p. 2) reported on the need to provide additional resources to train staff 'to successfully implement programs into the schools'. Another internal report (Education Department of Victoria 1984a, p. 1) noted the need to employ a T12 implementation team to service this rapidly expanding program and help teachers 'internalize the intended meaning of the T12 philosophy'.

In many respects, the T12 was a pioneering program which exhibited many innovative features which continue to be relevant today. The importance of allowing adequate time for teachers to work on curriculum planning has also been identified by Sahlberg (2012) as an important feature of educational reform in Finland.

To manage T12 well, teachers needed to set aside pre-conceived ideas and approach the delivery of the program with an open mind rather than attempt to impose curriculum controls and external standards which were contrary to the spirit of the T12 certificate and the concept of student/teacher negotiated curriculum (Education Department of Victoria, 1984d). A key finding of Bransford et al. (2000) is the importance of teachers drawing out and working with the pre-existing knowledge and skills that students bring with them into the learning environment. This emerging science of learning highlights the importance of re-thinking what is taught, how it is taught and how learning is assessed. Learning is optimised when teachers take into account the knowledge, skills and beliefs students bring into the learning environment (Bransford et al. 2000).

Politics and the demise of the T12

The T12 program was developed at a time when Victoria was approaching a monumental change in its political environment. The conservative Liberal government which had been in power since 1955 was nearing its political demise and it was expected that a new political incumbent would introduce significant curriculum reform. The conservative Liberal government was finally ousted in a landslide

election in 1982. Premier John Cain Jnr, was sworn in as the Labor Premier of Victoria.

In late 1983, the Labor government instigated a major review of the senior secondary curriculum (the Blackburn Review) and this would lead to one of the most significant curriculum reforms ever undertaken in Victoria. The review called for a rationalisation of Year 12 certificates and the broadening of subjects so that all students had the opportunity to experience elements of what contemporary alternative courses such as the T12 were offering (Maslen 1990). The intent was to capture all the positive aspects of the existing range of certificates within a single certificate, the VCE.

The Blackburn Review and the VCE revolution

On 30 June 1983, the Minister of Education, The Honourable Robert Fordham, invited Jean Blackburn to chair a review of post-compulsory schooling. This review, which subsequently became known as the Blackburn Review, would result in a major overhaul of curriculum. The Blackburn Review's attempt to develop an integrated and coherent framework would have major implications for the place of VET and academic alternatives like the Schools' Year 12 and Tertiary Entrance Certificate (STC), the T12 and Group 2 subjects of the High School Certificate (HSC).

The Blackburn agenda was to raise achievement standards and to broaden the educational experiences of young people as they entered their final years of schooling. In their review, the Blackburn Committee attempted to capture the educational advantages of the many innovations which had been introduced since the mid-1970s and to develop educational programs to which all students would have access. However, the Committee was faced with significant challenges; first, a narrow academic curriculum which was focused predominantly on university selection, and secondly, a set of non-academic alternatives which lacked status and were considered to be less intellectually demanding as well as being socially selective.

The Blackburn Review set out to cover all aspects of educational participation at the post-compulsory stage of schooling, including Years 11 and 12 of schooling and

educational provision within the Technical and Further Education (TAFE) sector. This included Vocational Orientation Programs (VOP) for students who had completed Year 10 at school and Tertiary Orientation Programs which provided an alternative pathway into universities and colleges of advanced education. The Review also covered the first year of Certificate Courses in TAFE – a full-time year preceding employment. Students commenced the program after completing Year 11 at school. In addition, it covered transition courses of six months' duration for young people who had been employed for at least four months (Ministerial Review of Postcompulsory Schooling 1984).

In 1984, the Blackburn Committee published a very extensive Discussion Paper which analyzed existing patterns of curriculum provision and proposed 'a radical reshaping of the current educational provision' (Ministerial Review of Postcompulsory Schooling 1984, p. 35). In particular, the Committee noted that 'the division between high and technical schools in Victoria [had] continued long after its demolition in other states in favour of comprehensive secondary schooling' (Ministerial Review of Postcompulsory Schooling 1984, p. 35). The Committee also noted that technical schools no longer provided an exclusive pathway into apprenticeships for boys and into post-secondary technical education in general. Moreover the continued existence of divided provision contributed to 'the persistence of a narrowly academic orientation in schools which [abstracted] learning from the business of life and from its applications in productive fields' (Ministerial Review of Postcompulsory Schooling 1984, p. 35). The Committee also argued that the early separation of the secondary school students into academic and practical courses needed to be challenged because it was inconsistent with 'open options for all', democracy and the 'changed nature of workforce skills' (Ministerial Review of Postcompulsory Schooling 1984, p. 35). TAFE was acknowledged as an important educational provider for the 15-19 year student cohort beyond the field of apprenticeships.

The Blackburn Review generated significant debate and interest from a large number of stakeholders keen to improve the educational opportunities for young people.

Proliferation of Credentials

The Blackburn Review analyzed existing patterns of curriculum provision and noted that the upper secondary years had become fragmented with too many competing courses and certificates which were causing confusion and uncertainty. During this time, young people in the post-compulsory phase of schooling could pursue a number of educational pathways either through the school system or through TAFE. After completing Year 11, students could remain at school and undertake a number of programs. These included the Higher School Certificate (HSC) which was accredited by the Victorian Institute of Secondary Education (VISE). Within this certificate, students could take Group 1 studies (externally assessed and the results standardised); or the Group 2 studies (assessed by the school and moderated by VISE). Alternatively, students could undertake a mixture of Group 1 and 2 studies or even school-assessed courses like STC which were then moderated by VISE.

Students could also undertake Technical Year 12 courses which were assessed by the schools and accredited by the Education Department. They could also undertake school-based and school-assessed courses conducted by schools, some of which branched into VET certificate-level courses and were conducted either in the school or college. Furthermore, students could participate in Tertiary Orientation Programs (TOP) which were offered in only a small number of technical schools. TOP was accredited by an associated college of advanced education or university, assessed by the school and then moderated by the accrediting authority in conjunction with the school.

Alternatively, students could transfer to TAFE Colleges and enrol in either VET certificate courses which were accredited by the TAFE Accreditation Board and assessed either by the TAFE colleges or externally, or TOP courses which were accredited by an associated college of advanced education or university, assessed by the TAFE college and then moderated by the accrediting authority in conjunction with the college (Ministerial Review of Postcompulsory Schooling 1984).

In addition, after completing Year 10, students could either remain at school to complete Year 11 or alternatively transfer to TAFE to undertake a Vocational

Orientation Program (VOP). Both were internally assessed by teachers and no external moderation was involved. One final option for young unemployed people was to seek an apprenticeship or undertake short courses at TAFE, for example, the Commonwealth-funded Employment Programs for Unemployed Youth (EPUY) which were targeted to those who experienced difficulties in the labour market, especially young women, migrants, Aborigines, disabled and rurally isolated youth.

By the early 1980s, three-quarters of the students in Year 12 were taking externally assessed Group 1 subjects within the HSC, while one-quarter took alternative Year 12 courses. These alternative Year 12 courses continued to attract a growing proportion of Year 12 students. This was occurring at a time when the limited number of university places had caused students to seek alternative pathways (Kirner 1989).

The Blackburn Report (Ministerial Review of Postcompulsory Schooling 1985) noted that there was continuing controversy over whether TAFE VET courses could be considered to be equivalent to Year 11 and 12 studies that were undertaken at school, and whether VET certificate courses and TOP undertaken at TAFE would be deemed to be equivalent to Year 12 courses undertaken at school. The same issue concerned VOP and whether this program would be considered to be equivalent to Year 11 in a school. There was no doubt that these parallel courses at school and TAFE fulfilled a vital role in the provision of post-compulsory schooling. Yet the number of certificates and their differing modes of assessment were creating confusion amongst a number of stakeholders and creating difficulties in the selection of students into higher education.

A number of concerns were raised and needed to be addressed. While acknowledging that there was a proliferation of alternative courses which were creating confusion and uncertainty, the Blackburn Review considered that selection for university continued to dominate the curriculum landscape. As a result, there was a progressive narrowing of the purposes of secondary schooling across Years 10, 11 and 12. By default, the prime focus of Year 12 had become that of tertiary selection and students increasingly needed to compete for a limited number of places at university.

The focus on competition for limited tertiary places was inappropriate from a social and educational perspective, particularly at a time where universal education appeared to be the way forward. Furthermore, earlier attempts to broaden the curriculum of upper secondary schooling by extending subject choice at HSC level did not address the need for more inclusive pedagogies. The major curriculum choice that really existed was that of two distinct pathways through the school or alternatively the TAFE system. This was very limiting for the students and effectively divided the age group 'according to occupational preparation' (Ministerial Review of Postcompulsory Schooling 1984, p. 23).

A major challenge faced by the Committee was the fact that young people who chose to undertake parallel Year 11 and 12 courses in a TAFE environment, did so for a very specific reason. In the Discussion Paper (Ministerial Review of Postcompulsory Schooling 1984), the Blackburn Review noted that evidence collected indicated that students did so because they were disenchanted by the school learning environment and wanted to take more responsibility for their own learning in a more adult-like environment. Some students had in fact been unsuccessful at Year 12 in school and wanted to follow a TAFE pathway into tertiary education. This would raise important implications for the review.

There were additional problems with post-compulsory curriculum provision which were uniquely Victorian (Ministerial Review of Postcompulsory Schooling 1984). The existence of more than one path from secondary education into higher education caused concerns with regard to how to compare those who followed these different paths. TOP and HSC Group 2 studies did not involve external examinations which constituted a significant proportion of the assessment of Group 1 subjects. They were also assessed on the basis of different curricular content.

In addition, the tradition of school-based curricular development and assessment was older and stronger in Victoria than in other states. It stood in direct contrast to other forms of moderation that were external to the school except that in which teachers of comparable subjects moderated assessment across the schools involved, as in the case of the STC. While this form of moderation had distinct educational advantages, it was expensive in resource terms.

Although outside the remit of the review, the Blackburn Review Committee noted that an important consideration was that this post-compulsory stage of schooling could not be considered in isolation from what happened in the years preceding this stage. It was therefore important to reflect on the significance of these years of schooling because unless students had positive experiences during this phase, their desire to continue with schooling past this compulsory stage would have been somewhat diminished.

More generally, the Committee noted that students needed to be given every opportunity to remain in education because many would not be able to find a place in the workforce. Unemployment was likely to remain a serious social problem and a destructive experience for those affected and, for some, a long-term tragedy. In addition, formal training in educational institutions and business enterprises was increasingly replacing informal on-the-job training. Even an apprenticeship, that combination of learning and earning which had traditionally been so important for males, had been adversely affected by these changes. Those who were seeking full-time entry into the workforce at the earliest age were those coming from lower income families and those who were most disaffected with the school system. The jobs they entered were, however, precarious, increasingly casual and dead-end and the future did not augur well for these young ones.

The Blackburn Review Committee argued that if learning was to become the socially preferred activity of 15-19 year olds, financial support needed to be provided to encourage rather than discourage participation in it. This was not the case at the time because ironically, unemployment benefits were greater and more readily available than means-tested allowances which were paid to students.

Provision following the compulsory schooling stage was clearly divided between school and TAFE and the Blackburn Review questioned the relevance of that division as it was believed that early occupation-specific training was not desirable and any provision that clearly divided the age-group along academic and non-academic lines should be avoided. Equally importantly, general education at this stage of schooling

was more likely to enlarge students' horizons and provide better opportunities and broader satisfaction for these students.

Moreover, the academic curriculum at the time did not necessarily meet the needs of even the 'academic' students at that particular stage of development, particularly in terms of them becoming more 'knowledgeable, skilful and caring citizens' (Ministerial Review of Postcompulsory Schooling 1984, p. 25). The Blackburn Review Committee acknowledged that earlier attempts to create alternatives to supplement the existing curriculum had failed and these alternatives had been relegated to second-class status and were considered a form of streaming. Students who wanted to stay on at school, therefore, had no choice but to follow the academic curriculum and compete for tertiary entry, which they were often ill-suited to do, either because they had no interest or because they were not capable.

The Blackburn Review Committee also considered that the divided system of high and technical schools was seen as a major concern working against the wider goals of schooling. This had effectively created 'twin forms of exclusion – social and intellectual' which needed to be addressed... and not by solely making general education more 'socially inclusive' (Ministerial Review of Postcompulsory Schooling 1984, p. 25). This was in itself very important, but it was noted that there were also significant economic and educational benefits which could not be delivered by the school or the TAFE system on their own.

Outcomes and Recommendations

The Blackburn Review Committee made a total of 45 recommendations some of which were accepted 'as is' by the government and others were modified following additional reviews and consultation. Most significantly the Blackburn Review recommended:

That the concept of comprehensive post-primary education be extended through the integration of the activities and programs of neighbouring high and technical schools under a single council from 1 January 1987; that all existing high technical or technical high schools become post-primary

schools from that date; and that by January 1988 all schools become comprehensive rather than being designated, equipped or staffed as technical or high schools.

(Ministerial Review of Postcompulsory Schooling 1985, p. 66)

The intent was to create a carefully structured universal certificate which would provide breadth and depth of curriculum choice and cater for students with academic and vocational aspirations equally well. This would, however, signal the end of the technical school system.

In a statement on future directions in post-compulsory schooling, in 1986, Ian Cathie, the Minister for Education, on behalf of the government, accepted twelve principal recommendations of the Blackburn Report and referred seven recommendations relating to curriculum and assessment to the Curriculum and Assessment Working Party for further advice (Cathie 1986).

Amongst other things, the Blackburn Report (Ministerial Review of Postcompulsory Schooling 1985) recommended the creation of the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Board (VCAB), an independent statutory authority representing all sectors of education and the wider community. Unlike its predecessor, VCAB took over responsibility for curriculum from the Education Department. Prior to this stage, VISE, while having a strong statutory brief covering secondary curriculum, had really only exercised its efforts on the accreditation and assessment of Year 12 courses (not including T12).

The Birth of the VCE a promise of breadth and depth

This period saw a significant shift in curriculum provision with the creation of one certificate, the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE). This was to incorporate all existing Year 12 courses into a single framework. The new approach was intended to bring together general education and vocational training which would lead to the award of a single certificate to mark the end of schooling. This had a profound effect not only on the entire education community, including students and teachers, but also on the broader community. As Maslen (1990, p. 53) noted, the introduction of the

VCE had come at a ‘very historic juncture in the history of Victorian education’. School completion had more than doubled in the previous ten years and at the same time a growing number of school leavers – 20,000 in 1990 – accepted a place in higher education. More than 80 per cent of school leavers would have their sights on a university degree. The VCE was clearly a response to this increase in school completion rates and the nature of university education was also changing in response to this increase. More and more, a university degree was no longer ‘the preserve of the lucky or especially talented few’ (Maslen 1990, p. 53). And students who were academically weaker would have a greater choice of curricular offerings.

It was believed that the VCE would capture ‘the best’ of the existing courses, in the one certificate. Most specifically, and of particular interest to this thesis, is the fact that the intent had been that ‘broadly vocational specialisms’ (Ministerial Review of Postcompulsory Schooling 1984, p. 34) should be included and ‘pursued as avenues of general education as well as ways of developing competencies relevant to the broad area of specialism’. The Blackburn Review Committee had noted that ‘all upper secondary studies should open up pathways for further education and training’ and ‘should involve combinations of practical and theoretical study’ where students would also acquire work-related skills. (Ministerial Review of Postcompulsory Schooling 1984, p. 27).

Subjects designed to broaden the new VCE curriculum beyond the narrow framework of the old Group 1 subjects included Materials and Technology, Technological Design and Development, Systems and Technology and Information Technology. Teese and Polesel (2003, p. 40) noted that when upper secondary curriculum was consolidated into a single certificate – the VCE, it was intended that subjects would continue to provide pedagogical freedom in the form of ‘flexible options and school-based assessment’, balanced by external examinations. However, with a change in government in 1992, the first year of full implementation of the VCE, Teese and Polesel (2003, p. 40) reported that conservative forces that had built up in the 1980s were ‘quick to restore much of the old examination regime’, leaving limited opportunities for applied learning and work placement opportunities for students.

Moreover, reactions to the new certificate further encouraged moves away from applied learning approaches. A lot had been promised in the commitment to the provision of academic and vocational education within the one senior secondary certificate which would overcome the obstacles of narrow academic curriculum offerings and vocational alternatives which had been relegated to second-class status. However, the implementation of this certificate would prove to be problematic, with strong reactions from a number of influential stakeholders. Universities, in particular, were skeptical of the VCE's potential to provide students with sufficient academic rigour to meet their entrance requirements. Penington (Maslen 1990, p. 58) noted that the VCE carried 'uncertainties about curriculum content and assessment procedures'. However, Maslen (1990, p. 59) reported that Logan acknowledged the need for the VCE to 'serve a range of markets – not just the universities'. The Blackburn Review Committee and subsequently the Victorian Government worked hard to address university concerns about the integrity and robustness of this new certificate, while promising that students with vocational aspirations would be adequately catered for within the same certificate. Maslen (1990, p. 98) also noted that the VCE's success was 'politically sensitive'. According to Maslen, Alan Brown, then Liberal leader, attacked the certificate as 'educating for mediocrity and condemned it for being a "less demanding, less academic sort of course" that would penalise the bright students'.

Clearing these obstacles would consume all the Committee's efforts and would see the reform effort focusing on the political high-end of the curriculum in order to guarantee the support of the universities. This would have the effect of tilting the certificate towards academic provision and away from vocational provision. And while the Committee had a relatively free hand to integrate VET within this comprehensive certificate, in an attempt to protect the academic integrity of the VCE, the promise of VET would be severely compromised.

This educational reform was the largest that had ever been undertaken in Victorian educational history and considerable time, effort and expertise were used in the development of the VCE. It had been a well-thought out and well-informed process and the intentions were noble. Four ministers would be involved in the

implementation of the VCE: Fordham, 1982-85; Cathie, 1985-87; Hogg, 1988 and Kirner, 1988-90.

However, there were many casualties of the Blackburn Review. The development of the VCE meant the end of the T12 and other alternative certificates. This limited the vocational and technical course offerings available to students. Despite the efforts to offer vocational and technical studies within the VCE, the demise of the T12 certificate saw the loss of many educational ideas and experiences that had been important features of this certificate. External constraints imposed on the VCE would not allow it to follow the same integrated model/whole course approach, but rather the subject cluster models which were favoured by academic programs. Under the new regime, there would be no room for a negotiated, flexible curriculum with the student as an important part of the curriculum design. Moreover, the vocational offerings within the VCE would play a very minor part in the new certificate. It would not be until the mid-1990s that more vocationally oriented subjects began to be re-introduced into the curriculum.

Full implementation of the VCE did not occur until 1992 by which time Victoria saw another change in government which brought different political viewpoints. Credentialling of senior secondary schooling under the one certificate would remain during the political term of the new conservative Liberal government. This period brought more curriculum reform along with an increased role of VET within a revised VCE.

This chapter has examined the history of vocational learning in secondary schools in Victoria over the many decades which shaped the senior secondary curriculum offerings available today. The chapter examined the divided system of technical and high school provision which would be challenged on a number of occasions but would persevere until the creation of the VCE. It found that secondary technical education had very distinct aims. Most importantly, these technical courses claimed to provide a comprehensive education as well as clearly defined progression to skilled vocation and some of the professions. However, this divided system created significant tension between the university track and what was considered to be the terminal track.

The creation of the VCE is of particular significance for a number of reasons. First, it marked the end of the technical schools and the end of a very popular Technical School Certificate, the T12. This is important because the T12 had very distinct characteristics, including a vocational program which effectively engaged students and motivated them to continue with their learning beyond their compulsory years of schooling. This gave them more maturity and enabled them to further develop their skills. Many of these characteristics and elements would reappear two decades later in the VCAL program. Vocational education and applied learning approaches would also suffer under the VCE, in particular during the first years of implementation of this certificate.

The next chapter explores reactions to this new certificate from some of these influential stakeholders and the subsequent ‘birth’ of vocational subjects within the new VCE.

CHAPTER 5

REACTIONS TO THE VCE AND THE BIRTH OF VET IN SCHOOLS

As has been noted, the VCE had a perilous journey into the Victorian curriculum landscape. This chapter explores the perceptions of this new certificate of a number of important stakeholders with significant influence over curriculum development. This is followed by an examination of further curriculum reform which would see an increased role for vocational studies in the new VCE.

The VCE heralded a common credential which, according to Peter Hill, chairman of the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Board (VCAB) at the time, would break down the ‘artificial distinctions and differential status that are a feature of present practice’ (Hill 1989, p. 20). Hill had argued that the existing educational offerings prior to the VCE had reflected a ‘divided and divisive view of curriculum’ and perpetuated the view that ‘technical and vocationally oriented learning is for less-able working class children’. It was intended that the new VCE would help break down these ‘traditional divisive patterns of provision, access and success’.

Perceptions and reactions to the VCE

The VCE reform was the subject of many lively discussions in staffrooms of schools and tertiary institutions as well as newspaper articles and public debate. A number of influential stakeholders had distinct, but varying views about the VCE and these differing viewpoints were aired publicly. Sieler (1990, p. 24) argued that the new VCE study designs were ‘too prescriptive’. Others, for example, Francis (1990, p.15) and Hallpike and Sworder (1990, pp. 47-55) attacked the VCE as a certificate the curriculum of which had been ‘[watered] down’. Donnelly (1989, p.12) argued that the VCE heralded a ‘weakening of academic standards’. An editorial in *The Australian* (25 October 1989, p. 10) reported that the new VCE would ‘further erode what remaining substance and rigour there [was] in Victorian school education’ and that it would set Victorian schools ‘on a path leading nowhere and condemn

government school students to a mediocre and politicised education'. Woods (1990) claimed that it was doomed to failure and that we needed to aim for intellectual rigour. Barnard (1989, p. 13) referred to the new VCE structure as 'limp and imprecise' and that the VCE designers appeared 'happy to submerge hard scholarship in a sea of contrived equal outcome'. Jones (1989) claimed that the VCE would create class divisions and Teese (1997) argued that despite the promise of the VCE to be an all-encompassing certificate giving students equal opportunities of success, regardless of subject choice, a hierarchical structure had developed within the certificate. According to Moran (1990, p. 20) others argued that there was a 'narrow educational hierarchy, rather than a considered intellectual comprehensiveness, embodied in the secondary curriculum'.

According to Barnard (1989, p. 13), the VCE was 'full of breadth, but [had] little depth'. Barnard also noted that tertiary institutions and prospective employers were concerned that examination results 'lacked definition'. Barnard further observed that the equality of opportunity, which the new VCE was intended to provide, would be eroded because employers and higher education institutions would be looking for schools where they could be confident of their academic rigour. This would affect students of lower average achievement who enrolled in the studies with a more vocational emphasis, for example, arts/technology. These were students who were more likely to enter the labour market after completion of the VCE. For this cohort of students, Teese (1997, p. 37) maintained that their VCE program therefore needed to be more closely aligned with 'defined training and employment outcomes, [and] with recognized bridges into the training system, including appropriate work placements which involved supervised and accredited learning'.

The new VCE was intended to make subjects like English 'more relevant to the needs and interests of students'. Yet its detractors claimed it had 'reduced the curriculum to entertainment in an effort to reduce youth unemployment by keeping students at school and to produce a more co-operative and less competitive society' (*Sunday Herald* 15 October 1989, p. 53).

The political debate

While the VCE story was unfolding, passionate views were also being aired in a very public and political domain. In an article in *The Age*, (1989, p. 24), McRae noted that the success of the VCE was 'politically sensitive'. Ken Baker, education director, Institute of Public Affairs, argued (1990) that having one certificate to cater for the increased numbers staying on at school was difficult because student abilities and aspirations had become increasingly diverse. Despite the controversy surrounding this certificate, the government of the day pressed forward, banking on the flexible design of the VCE to meet all needs, without compromising any one group of students.

Hoping to advance on the political front, Don Hayward, the Opposition spokesman for education, (1990) labelled the VCE as a certificate which lacked credibility, undervalued individual achievement and depreciated competitive excellence. Furthermore, there were claims that the VCE would further erode what remaining substance and rigour there was in the Victorian school education system. According to *The Australian* (25 October 1989, p. 10), it would seem that the government was determined that curriculum should be 'more relevant and immediately exciting for students – not challenging, mind you, nor necessarily useful in any way in their adult future, just immediately exciting'.

However, Hedley Beare, professor of education and head of the school of education at the University of Melbourne, was concerned that the VCE was being sullied by politics. Beare (1990) likened the political parties using a certification system to score political points - however well-intentioned this was - to a rush on the banks or a recession. Public confidence in the new certificate was therefore being eroded. Beare maintained that no government could afford to let its certificate and assessment schemes fail because its own credibility depended on their success. Moreover, Beare argued that for a certification system to be socially useful, it was important that the public had full confidence in it.

A school perspective

There were mixed reactions to the VCE from a school perspective. On the one hand, Barnard (1989, p. 13) questioned how many teachers truly endorsed ‘the levelling of spongy curriculum “reforms”’. Donnelly, then a teacher from Camberwell Grammar School, (1989, p. 12) maintained that under the new VCE, courses would no longer offer ‘a truly common experience across schools’ and that as a result, ‘the quality and rigour of a student’s education [would] depend increasingly on the school attended’. Santamaria (1989, p. 15) believed that there was a view that this new certificate did not sufficiently distinguish between students, and that it would ‘not tell us whether the student [had] passed, let alone obtained distinction – it [would] tell us merely that he or she [had] completed their studies’, and would provide no information about the student’s actual subject knowledge. Hallpike and Swarder (1990, pp. 47-55) were also concerned and believed that it was ‘yet to be seen whether Universities and Colleges [would] be more inclined than ever to select students on the basis of the schools they have attended’. Donnelly further argued that the VCE had therefore ‘become a vehicle for social engineering’ and that the new system ‘unfairly [advantaged] students from a particular social and economic background’.

On the other hand, teachers of VCE studies at Marian College (Stafford, Arthur et al. 1989, p. 20), a school serving a low socio-economic status community, thought differently. They were ‘extremely confident that clear, and hopefully fairer, procedures for tertiary selection [would] be in place when they [were] required by students at the end of 1992’. Furthermore, these teachers maintained that those who questioned the integrity and rigour of the new certificate needed to visit schools that were implementing these studies to check out ‘the quality of material and the depth of learning that [was] actually being achieved in these schools’.

Schools that were offering alternatives to the existing HSC, for example, the Schools’ Year 12 and Tertiary Entrance Certificate (STC), were also critical of the new VCE, claiming that this centrally-enforced curriculum would discourage the very students it was supposed to attract. In an article in *The Age* (1990, p. 24) Sieler, then a teacher at the Croydon Community School, highlighted the risk that students, used to a student-centred approach to learning under the STC curriculum structure, would be

‘disenchanted’ with what the new VCE had to offer in their final years of schooling and that they would leave early. To some, the new VCE was about social change rather than educational change (Hallpike 1990) and they felt that the talented student had been neglected (Warner 1990).

According to Strong (1989, p. 8), Robert Rofe, principal of Brighton Grammar was also critical of the VCE. Mr Rofe attacked this new certificate as ‘the result of a lengthy struggle by educational liberals to break the influence of the universities on secondary education’. He argued that it was too complicated for teachers to be fully abreast of developments. Moreover he described the ‘abolition of the public exam system [as] academic vandalism by zealots’.

Supporters of the new VCE were equally vocal. Geoffrey Head, principal of Emerald Secondary College, in a letter to *The Age* (Maslen 1990, p. xvi) argued: ‘when will it be made clear that the present system (the HSC) disadvantages the majority of Year 12 students and discriminates in favour of one socio-economic and ethnic group?...When will critics realize that rigour in education is not dependent on duress or success measurable by only one form of assessment – the three-hour exam?’ Head claimed that the support for the new VCE was so high that Emerald Secondary College, with full support of the school community, even chose to implement this new VCE two years ahead of schedule.

Others claimed that under this new certificate, students from different socio-economic and ethnic groups were no longer disadvantaged. In response to an article by education reporter Luke Slaterry (1990a), Margaret Hibbins, (*The Age*, n.d.), a teacher from Hastings, argued that the new VCE was a win for students from non-privileged backgrounds and that it helped eliminate some of the unfair advantages of students from privileged backgrounds. This would see an increase in the percentage of students from state government schools entering universities and colleges of advanced education. Yet Slaterry (1990a) maintained that there was a sense that given that this new certificate involved a significant amount of research projects and group work, students who had access to large libraries and work contacts through their families were likely to be privileged, causing inequity among the student population.

Bock (1990) reported that many students spoke highly of the VCE because they believed that the workload was more evenly spread and that it offered them greater choice and more opportunity to do their own research. In an article in *The Age* (1990 p. 3), Deborah Anderson, a Year 11 student at Kurunjang Secondary College in Melton, noted that 'the VCE [was] much easier than the old HSC because students [could] no longer get away with bludging Year 11 away and then panicking when Year 12 comes'. And students at Marian College, Sunshine, believed that the VCE was fairer on those who worked hard (Bock 1990). Yet student Justine Martin (1990) felt greatly disadvantaged because she believed that the new VCE structure would not provide her with the opportunity to excel under the new certificate.

Attitudes towards the VCE appeared to be heavily dependent on existing teacher and school traditions and methods. Michael Barnard (1990, p. 13) claimed that the VCE was 'cumbersome and woolly' and placed aggressive demands on time and resources, making teacher and student overload inevitable. Moreover, he believed that the level of assistance in Common Assessment Tasks could have a significant bearing on a student's success and could result in some schools being more advantaged than others.

The attitudes of schools and teachers towards the new certificate also depended on where they came from (Maslen 1990). Maslen further noted that the teachers most uncomfortable with the new VCE were those who were accustomed to the chalk and talk approach, an emphasis on the abstract and the academic and those who were firmly convinced of the value of the written exam as a true measure of academic achievement.

The new VCE would have at least as much effect on how teachers teach as on how students learn. According to a school principal, 'The great thing about the VCE is that it is bringing teachers out of their fox holes and forcing them to renew their teaching practice' (McRae 1990, p. 7).

At a system level, there appeared to be consensus that the VCE was rigorous and had been carefully managed. Tom Doyle, Director, Catholic Education Office and Peter

Hill, Chief General Manager, Office of School Administration (1989, p. 12), claimed that they were comfortable 'that important matters of course content, assessment and entrance to tertiary education [had] been considered thoroughly and developed by VCAB and other contributors'. But Kevin Donnelly (1989) from Camberwell Grammar had very different views and claimed that the comments made by Fr Doyle and Mr Hill were simply not true. Donnelly believed that the new courses which were sufficiently flexible to allow schools and providers to shape courses to suit the needs and aspirations of their students would cause variation among schools.

The industry perspective

The Age (8 November 1989, p. 13) reported significant concerns amongst some employers as to whether the new VCE would provide them with sufficient information about job seekers who presented the certificate as evidence of their educational attainment.

Maslen (1990, p. 66) presented a different viewpoint and reported that employers thought that this was not the case. 'To me, the VCE has come like a breath of fresh air', stated Robert Fallshaw, a manufacturer and representative of the Victorian Council of State School Organisations. Maslen (1990) noted Fallshaw's awareness of industry concerns that organisations were no longer getting a mark by which they could rate prospective employees. But he also argued that this was indeed VCE's strength because industry should not be depending on a mark given by an examiner who did not know the business of the organisation. To Fallshaw, a mark was not a good indicator of what an individual could contribute to a prospective employer.

Maslen (1990) also noted Fallshaw's concern over the way the VCE was being implemented, particularly the fact that half the teaching workforce were significantly uncomfortable with the changes the new VCE would bring about. Perhaps it was time, argued Maslen (1990, p. 67), to bring about cultural changes 'to make teaching a more challenging and changing profession'.

Representatives from employer groups (Victorian Employers Federation) had been involved in various VCE Review Committees and were generally supportive of the

new VCE curriculum. However, Maslen (1990) noted that they were not so comfortable with the assessment regime and felt that it would be more appropriate to have Common Assessment Tasks that were externally set and marked. There was a strong feeling that employers were not looking for schools to provide vocational training because they felt that that was their job, in collaboration with tertiary institutions and TAFE colleges.

A university perspective

Reactions from the university sector were mixed. In seeking their views on the VCE and its relationship to universities, Maslen (1990) noted that while some of the Vice-Chancellors voiced strong criticism of this new certificate, others thought that the VCE initiative was indeed an ambitious one and should be given the opportunity to succeed. Professor Malcolm Skilbeck, Vice-Chancellor of Deakin University (Maslen 1990, p. 60), 'strongly supported the VCE since its inception' but acknowledged that student selection would present many challenges. Some academics (for example, Professor Penington, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Melbourne), argued that the new VCE was 'light on' in terms of intellectual rigour. Despite these criticisms, Maslen (1990, p. 103) noted that the 'strongest impartial endorsement of the VCE' was provided by Dr Barry McGaw and the other four members of a committee set up in 1988 to review the assessment in the VCE. This Committee concluded that the VCE was a 'comprehensive attempt to span the needs of the range of students now in years 11 and 12'.

Under the previous regime, the HSC system of Group 1 and 2 subjects had effectively segregated students with university aspirations into the HSC Group 1 subjects, separating them from those wanting more vocational qualifications who took the HSC Group 2, or such courses as TOP and STC. Most students who displayed very academic abilities were channelled into Group 1 subjects and universities relied heavily on these subjects for tertiary selection, making the selection processes relatively straightforward.

But the intent of the VCE, according to the Blackburn Review, was to embrace equally well the aspirations of students wanting to pursue academic studies and those

who wanted a more vocational pathway (even if not separately labelled as ‘vocational’). And under the new VCE regime, both were supposed to be equally regarded and there would be no channelling of students into different tracks. This caused considerable anxiety among universities who relied heavily on ‘selection by score’.

Professor David Penington of the University of Melbourne was a vehement critic of the VCE. Penington (1989, p. 14) maintained that in the development of this certificate, Victoria had lost the opportunity for students to achieve their fullest potential in Years 11 and 12 and to prepare those going on to higher education. Penington argued that the new teaching framework under the VCE would not give students ‘the vehicle they [needed] to achieve their highest potential’. Furthermore, he argued that in the preoccupation of educators with ‘equity’, it had become ‘the excuse for “levelling down” rather than seeking to open tracks for achievement’. According to Penington, if equal outcomes meant ‘equality of achievement, it [could] only mean decreasing recognition of high achievement to cover up low achievement by others’.

In response to the catch-cry ‘parity of esteem’ between all VCE subjects, Penington (1989, p. 15) had no concerns if this meant that all students should get praise for ‘achievement in subjects appropriate to their talents’. However, he had serious reservations if this meant that all subjects were treated as equally hard ‘and relevant as indicators of the level of education achieved and suitability for selection into higher education’. Penington also believed that the VCE had failed to stress the importance of competition in its quest for ‘parity of esteem’. He argued that competition was an important part of life and hence of education and if we believed that there should be no competition in education, then we were not preparing children adequately for life.

The quality of some of the subjects and the proposed Common Assessment Tasks under the Blackburn regime were also attacked. Penington (1989, p. 15) dismissed claims that all studies offered in the new VCE would satisfy general entrance requirements as complete nonsense. He argued that subjects like Dance, Theatre, Drama, Graphic Communication and Human Development could not possibly have the same relevance to higher education as English, Literature, History, Physics and Chemistry. In effect university pre-requisites for admission to many faculties rejected

a major portion of the VCE curriculum, for example, 'media, contemporary society and dance' (Maslen 1990, p. 49). The only concession that universities made in this regard was that these subjects could be included as a fifth or sixth study and receive a ten per cent increment. These stringent requirements effectively devalued a large number of studies that were deemed to be unacceptable for tertiary entrance. Subjects with a vocational aspect would not fare well as a result.

Despite the rhetoric that universities would consider all 44 studies to be equal, they effectively determined a student's study pattern by setting specific pre-requisites for entry into specific courses. The University of Melbourne, in particular, imposed severe restrictions on the VCE studies that would be accepted for entry into specific academic programs. These restrictions would undoubtedly shape school offerings, thereby defeating a key aim of the Blackburn reforms.

Maslen (1990) also noted that a number of aspects of the VCE continued to worry schools, parents (especially those intent on a tertiary education for their children) and universities. But the feature of the VCE which seemed to cause most concern was the scoring system under which broad letter grades were given, rather than the standardised percentages under the old HSC. While this might have been sufficient for employment purposes, it was not sufficient for university entrance purposes. Universities were particularly concerned about this. Penington (1989, p. 15) argued that there was 'little incentive for students to achieve excellence if a person gaining 98 per cent in maths [got] no greater credit than a person gaining 81 per cent'. So strong was the sentiment against the credibility of the VCE that Barnard (1989, p. 14) reported that Penington did not rule out the possibility of the university setting its own entrance exams which would have significantly undermined public confidence in this new VCE. It would also inevitably offer significant advantages to students who attended independent and selective state schools who were better able to be prepared for these special examinations. Penington (1989) also believed that the students who would lose most were those from government schools, particularly in the poorer western suburbs and in the rural areas who might not have access to rigorous preparation.

Professor Logan, Chairman of the Victorian Vice-Chancellors Committee, representing the state's five universities conceded that there was a gap in achievement standards amongst students who had completed the VCE, especially those close to the cut-off for tertiary entry (Slattery 1990b). But Logan believed that universities had an important role to play and that they had a responsibility to meet any shortcomings at the point of entry into the university by running summer programs to raise the academic standards of these students seeking tertiary entry. He conceded that the VCE was not designed specifically for tertiary entrance and needed to serve a range of purposes. Moreover, not all school leavers wished or were able to go to university and the fact that VCE offered flexibility for all was indeed one of its strengths.

Not all academics shared strong negative sentiments about the VCE. Moran (1990, p. 20) noted that while critics of the VCE viewed it as leading to a 'catastrophic decline in standards', Robert Manne, an academic based at Monash University, claimed that low standards were not actually the problem, but rather that 'the VCE [embodied] standards that [were] far too high' and that the 'VCE courses were programs ambitious enough for aspiring post-graduates at Harvard'.

Ironically, while the intention of the VCE had been to weaken the universities' stronghold over the Year 12 curriculum, it effectively extended university control into a student's Year 11 program. It could be argued that the VCE was compromised as a result of the extreme pressures of conservative voices keen to appease the academics who were a very powerful lobby group. A compromise which might be interpreted as appeasement of these conservative voices was the decision to adopt a finer grading scale. Whether this went as far as most universities wanted is questionable. It is in this context of extreme political pressure that the provision of subjects with a strong vocational emphasis was also unlikely to engage the attention of stakeholders, at least during the first years of implementation.

Tension over the new certificate arose not only from universities and their more conservative vice-chancellors fearful of standards falling. The secondary teachers union, while supporting the broad direction of change, was ambivalent or even hostile to a certificate which had a strongly vocational element.

The Victorian Secondary Teachers Association (VSTA) was a powerful lobby group and believed ‘that students in Victorian schools should be provided with a broad general education from P to 12 which encouraged life-long learning. This included ‘the full range of recognised purposes of education – personal, social, cultural, political and vocational’ (VSTA 1992, p. 1).

The VSTA also acknowledged that as students moved through the school curriculum, the balance between the different purposes of education would change so that in the post-compulsory years where there would be greater course specialisation, the vocational element would become increasingly more important. While the VSTA recognised the importance of students gaining vocational skills, it was, however, strongly opposed to any school program which would have an exclusively vocational purpose or which had such a narrow vocational purpose that it would severely restrict post-school options and create long-term disadvantages (VSTA 1992). Moreover, it was important that the integrity and quality of the VCE curriculum should not be undermined by changes to its programs which focussed on narrowly defined employment-related skills. In addition, the VSTA was opposed to any ‘rigid division of the school curriculum into employment related and non-employment related areas’ (VSTA 1992, p. 2).

The roll-out of the VCE was a long drawn-out and often a very painful process. Few other reforms in education had generated so much debate or indeed received such extensive coverage by the media. As Michael Smith, Editor of *The Age* noted in Maslen (1990, p. xi-xii), ‘For the first time, a program of studies is being offered that will try to provide both a number of common studies and a remarkable range of options in a form intended to equip our young people, as they have never been before, for employment or further study’.

Catering for diversity

Implementation of this new certificate was also occurring during a period of higher levels of school completion, a time when the composition of the traditional school population was changing significantly. As Michael Smith, Editor of *The Age* noted in his foreword (Maslen 1990), two out of three Victorian students of varying abilities

and from very different socio-economic backgrounds were staying on at school. And the senior secondary curriculum needed to cater for all these students.

Every effort was being made to emphasise that the VCE would indeed cater for all student needs and abilities. And yes, the VCE was intended to provide students with a broader curriculum. But given the tensions surrounding the academic credentials of the new certificate, educators and policy-makers did not give vocational or applied learning a prominent role in the new certificate. There were few subjects with a vocational focus.

At best, therefore, VET could only occupy a minor place in the VCE in the form of ex-HSC Group 2 subjects (for example, Small Business Management) or some IT and technology subjects (for example, Materials & Design Studies) some of which had predecessors in Group 2 subjects, (for example, Materials). Moreover, these studies would be subject to the same academic design and teaching philosophy as the traditional academic subjects (as against competency-based assessment). In other words, the potential pedagogical distinctiveness of ‘vocational’ subjects was not able to come through. Any pedagogical advantages, for example, increased student engagement, were therefore at risk of being lost.

The VCE had promised a good blend of studies that would appeal to many different interests, but which would be recognised by universities and not be exposed to ‘second class status’. For the first time, a program of studies was supposed to be offered which would attempt to provide both a number of common studies as well as a range of options intended to equip young people for employment or further study.

While some studies looked familiar, for example, English, Physics, History and Geography, others were new, for example, Studio Arts and International Studies. Subjects like Information Technology had been modernised and were ‘fresh from the 21st Century’ (Maslen 1990, p. 1). Yet Maslen (1990) believed that there were some subjects, for example, Technological Design and Development, which appeared to virtually guarantee the certificate with minimum effort.

The switch to the VCE began in a formal sense in 1987, when all existing Year 12 certificates were re-badged as 'VCE' (Maslen, 1990). This was done to give parents, institutions and students in particular ample time to familiarise themselves with this new program of studies. Full implementation of the VCE did not occur until 1992.

As the story of the VCE unfolds, two distinct themes emerged. First, the strong push to maintain academic reputation or integrity inclined the new curriculum to revert to the academic hierarchy of the HSC. Because of the nature of the stakeholders and the developing political climate, this likelihood of reversion was intensified. This pressure to maintain a strong academic curriculum or at least one that was clearly liberal came from both universities and teachers even though teachers were supportive of some elements of vocational preparation. At the same time, other stories were unfolding at a broader state level and also within a national landscape, in particular, the Finn Review which was undertaken in 1990. This put pressure on the certificate in the opposite direction. Academic narrowness was being challenged at a higher level and had to be modified to serve the national agenda as well as an increasingly broader state direction which demanded a convergence of the academic and vocational focus.

The VCE had a huge mandate to fulfil. On the one hand, it was intended to be a general purpose certificate to cater for those students who wanted to enter the workforce straight after school. At the same time, it was meant to provide an accurate picture of the scholastic potential of those wishing to pursue university studies. Whether these two distinct aims were able to be fulfilled within a single all-purpose certificate would become quickly apparent in the four years following the implementation of the VCE.

The need for vocational options

In this context of a senior certificate focussed primarily on entry to university, a situation not dissimilar to the other Australian states, a committee was established by the Australian Education Council in 1990 to report on the future of post-compulsory education and training. The committee was chaired by Brian Finn, then Managing Director of IBM, a choice that could be interpreted as seeking to widen the voice of

business in educational policy. The main thrust of the review was that individual and industry needs were 'leading towards a convergence of general and vocational education' and that schools needed to become 'more concerned with issues of employability and ensuring adequate provision of broad vocational education' (AECRC 1991, p. ix).

According to Graham, (1992a, p. 4), Finn envisaged that by 2001 there would be a huge increase in the numbers of young people participating in education across Australia. The needs of these students could only be met by a curriculum which was more clearly oriented to the world of work. Students therefore needed access to vocationally oriented programs which would provide direct links from schools to TAFE and employment rather than higher education.

The Finn Report outlined a program of reform which was intended to make schooling and the curriculum in general more relevant to industry needs. In its deliberations, the Finn Committee sought advice from the Dusseldorp Skills Forum which reported that:

In countries such as France, Japan, Italy, Finland and Sweden, schools accept as a matter of course that they have a role in providing students with skills that are required by the labour market, as well as roles in preparing them for higher education and for active citizenship...in virtually all countries that have not been influenced by the Anglo-Saxon tradition and by its apprenticeship model, students who enrol in programs that are termed vocational combine in their total curriculum elements of what we would refer to as vocational training and elements of what we would refer to as general education: languages, the humanities, mathematics and science...

It is widely accepted elsewhere in the world that the continued development of intellectual and social competencies in the post-compulsory years needs to be enmeshed with the development of competencies that are explicitly required by the labour market. (Dusseldorp Skills Forum, submission to the Review, p. 2, in AECRC 1991, p. 5).

The Finn Report (AECRC 1991, p. 6) noted that the educational system for young adults was not working. The existing separate approach to vocational and general

education had in fact ‘hindered the development and implementation of more creative and relevant educational responses to the rapid changes in the nature of work and the skill requirements of individuals as workers and active participants in modern society’.

At the same time, there was also pressure on the more traditional vocational programs such as apprenticeships because it was felt that they were focused too narrowly on specific technical skills and consequently did not provide the flexible, adaptable skills and attributes necessary in the modern workplace. These were strong statements which had earlier been expressed in the Blackburn Review. In addition, subjects which had traditionally been purely vocationally oriented, for example, Information Technology, were increasingly becoming a general educational requirement, hence the degree of overlap between general and vocational education was expected to increase.

Adapting to the world of work could be achieved, the Finn Report (AECRC 1991) argued, by expanding the vocational programs offered by schools, and by extending school/TAFE cooperation. These sentiments would also be echoed at a state level through the Deveson review, another major investigation of educational pathways, completed in 1992.

The Finn Review emphasised the importance of making post-compulsory education and training arrangements more consistent across the country, both between and within sectors. This would facilitate recognition of qualifications, credit transfer and articulation and make the system more efficient. Moreover, it was important to develop more effective linkages between the school and TAFE/training sectors to facilitate curriculum development. Without these structured links, curriculum could develop in only one institutional direction, that is, university.

Issues were raised about vocational specialisation before Year 12 being inappropriate as it closed off other options and would result in streaming. It was acknowledged that the type of curriculum offered within the training sector (at either state or national level) might not be appropriate within the school sector and might need modification

to suit the school environment, while still being consistent with the spirit of the training framework.

The Finn Review also focused on a set of key competencies which employers considered to be vital for success in the world of work. These included communication skills, problem-solving and reasoning skills as well as basic numeracy skills (Lewis 1992). Lewis (1992, n.p.) argued that it was not intended that these key competencies would ‘supplant the existing Liberal-academic curriculum’, but rather that they would ‘deepen the process of putting basic education even more firmly within a vocational context’. A new committee, headed by Eric Mayer, would soon develop the concept of competencies outlined earlier in the Finn Review, into a ‘feasible national framework able to be incorporated into TAFE syllabi and the curriculum of schools’ (Graham 1992b, p. 4).

An important recommendation of the Finn Review was that there should be two-way recognition so that students were able to be granted credit in TAFE for appropriate subjects that they had completed as part of their senior secondary certificate. Students returning to senior secondary studies should also gain credit if they had undertaken an appropriate TAFE course. This recommendation contributed to the later introduction of the Dual Recognition program within the senior secondary curriculum in 1993.

In 1992, the same year that the VCE was being fully implemented in Victoria, a Ministerial Taskforce on Pathways in Education and Training (chaired by Ivan Deveson and hereafter referred to as the Deveson Review), was commissioned in Victoria, to ‘accelerate the development of links between the education sectors and between education and industry’ (Department of School Education 1992, p. iv). Jean Blackburn was a member of this Taskforce.

In essence, the Deveson Review was a Victorian response to what was happening on the national front. The Taskforce was asked to provide advice on the implications for Victoria of the issues which had been raised in the Finn and Mayer reviews into post-compulsory education and training. Carmichael’s report on the new Australian Vocational Certificate Training System was produced in the same year, and had

reported similar findings. Incidentally, Laurie Carmichael had also been on the Deveson Committee (Graham 1992a).

Amongst other things, the Deveson Review was to report on:

Ways of supporting vocational pathways in the VCE and strengthening the links between schools and industry

The provision of work education in schools in the light of the current and emerging patterns of choice in the VCE and the present provision for work education in Years 7-10, and

Ways to strengthen the links between the VCE, training, higher education and further education, including arrangements for credit transfer and course articulation. (Department of School Education 1992, p. iv)

The Deveson Review acknowledged the need for students to have a solid understanding of the world of work, and that vocational training needed to be introduced in the early stages of education. It also noted that ‘while the strengthening of vocational training in schools [was] a key recommendation of this report, it [was] not intended to dilute the academic emphasis of education’ (Department of School Education 1992, p. v). Much like the Blackburn Review, the Deveson Review argued that there was room in the VCE for a sound vocational component without compromising the academic focus.

The Deveson Review also noted that there would be few full-time jobs for young people who did not successfully complete school. This was contrary to the early 1980s where only a minority of young people needed to successfully complete school in order to secure access to appropriate post-school destinations. The Deveson Review considered that apprenticeships, which were at the time the largest single source of full-time employment for young people, had become ‘the preserve of Year 11 and Year 12 graduates’ and that there had been ‘a growing tendency for employers to favour the more highly schooled group’ (Department of School Education 1992, p. 27). This reinforced the need to better align curriculum with the world of work.

However, the requirement to acquire work specific skills had to be carefully balanced against the equally important need to gain a broad curriculum knowledge. Strengthening the links between work and school was therefore crucial. The Deveson Taskforce believed that the VCE was able to accommodate the flexibility required (Kirby 1992). The Deveson Review proposed some major recommendations within the VCE framework, including ‘strengthening the vocational orientation of the VCE, and developing a system-wide student program approach in the VCE’ (Department of School Education 1992, p. 47).

It is also worth noting at this point that the educational landscape, within which the Blackburn review had been carried out in the mid-1980s, had changed significantly by the time Blackburn’s recommendations were implemented in 1992. The sharp recession of 1990-1991 had produced a spike in completion rates (around five per cent). Mass secondary education and increased school completion rates brought with them a different educational perspective which in turn led to major challenges to the VCE relating to program access, program quality and program outcomes, most significantly program access. Students had varying academic abilities and not every student who remained in schooling wanted or could pursue university studies, at least immediately after school. Schools therefore needed to provide a broad enough range of VCE programs to cater for these diverse needs. In addition, all programs needed to provide quality outcomes which would challenge and continue to extend these young people. It was therefore important for these programs to have a practical as well as theoretical focus in order to ensure that there was an appropriate balance in the curriculum. Finally, with regard to delivery of quality program outcomes, it was important for these programs to articulate with a variety of post-school options in education, training and the workplace, particularly given the increasing tendency to stay on at school (Department of School Education 1992).

The Deveson Review (Department of School Education 1992, p. 29) argued that strengthening the vocational dimension of the VCE was not going to be achieved by creating a ‘segregated stream as occurred in the past to accommodate the vocationally-minded student’. The Review (Department of School Education 1992, p. 29) argued for a ‘whole program approach’ which meant that a broad industry or career focus could be used as the basis for making VCE choices. Furthermore, the

Review argued that program access within the VCE needed to cover the five main curriculum areas of Arts, Business, Humanities, Sciences and Technology. However, in order to strengthen the vocational dimension of the VCE, student programs needed to be developed around an industry frame of reference to include Human Services, Building and Construction, Primary Industry, General Manufacturing, Business Services and Engineering (Department of School Education 1992).

Moreover, students completing Year 12 were ‘more likely to combine work with part-time training in a TAFE college or with a private provider if their VCE studies [linked] with a training course’. The vocational dimension could therefore be strengthened ‘both through incorporating vocational skills in their programs as well as articulating VCE programs with courses in the training system’ (Department of School Education 1992, p. 28).

The Deveson Review recommended the development of VCE programs which incorporated ‘a structured mix of study and exposure to work’ and which offered ‘credit for part-time employment where learning in the workplace relates to work requirements and assessment in the VCE’ (Department of School Education 1992, p. 44). This view was also highlighted in the Finn (AECRC 1991) and Carmichael (Employment and Skills Formation Council Australia 1992) reports.

While the VCE had the capacity to provide a ‘vocational orientation’, its shape had been heavily influenced by the stakeholders, like universities and some schools, who were preoccupied with issues of assessment. The challenge therefore was to strengthen the vocational dimension of the VCE, while maintaining its credibility in terms of assessment. This was seen as possible if new subjects could be developed which incorporated work-related competencies, rather than having individual subject choices with no conceptual or industry link, (a piecemeal approach which the existing VCE structure encouraged), but which also met the assessment requirements of other VCE subjects. Moreover, this program approach would ensure that there was a balance in the learning objectives and that ‘vocational’ would not replace or exclude ‘intellectual’, ‘academic’ or ‘general’. In addition, this program approach would enable schools to develop a broad industry focus in their study program, without locking students into particular fields or tertiary destinations.

There were lessons to be learnt to ensure that the weaknesses of the old HSC would not be carried over into the new subjects in the VCE. Care needed to be exercised to ensure that a stronger vocational dimension would not be equated with studies which appeared to have the most ‘overt vocational label’. This would effectively relegate them to the non-academic students who would be seen to be undertaking second-class subjects. The Deveson Review argued that in strengthening the vocational dimension of the VCE, there needed to be a sound program structure so that students not only had access to the required vocational skills, but that they also had access to the ‘breadth of education, the intellectual challenge, and the depth of studies’ which the VCE was intended to deliver (Department of School Education 1992, p. 31).

Strengthening the vocational capacity within the VCE: Implications for Schools

The Deveson Review considered that failure to strengthen the vocational capacity of the VCE was ‘due to the failure of school and training systems to establish adequate resourcing arrangements’ (Department of School Education 1992, p. 42). A large proportion of teachers teaching at the post-compulsory level were more likely to have academic experience than industry-related experience. Relationships between schools and TAFEs, which could provide teachers with industry-related expertise, therefore became more and more important. A framework ‘including resourcing and industrial arrangements’, needed to be developed to enable schools and school systems to make good use of the capacity of TAFE colleges, private training organisations and industry in the delivery of VCE student programs (Department of School Education 1992, p. 43).

The Finn and Deveson Reviews presented a clear message - that a stronger vocational dimension to the VCE was required without compromising the integrity of the certificate. The challenge for policy makers and schools was to accommodate a wider range of programs as well as new approaches to teaching, learning and assessment. Furthermore, vocational education needed to be incorporated within the curriculum framework and adapted to the post-compulsory school environment.

The VET debate was increasing in momentum at a state and national level. Each state developed different initiatives in this regard. In Victoria, it would be nine years (1994) following the Blackburn Report, before VET would again begin to play a major part in post-compulsory curriculum provision through the development of Dual Recognition Programs. The growth of VET through the coming together of two distinct cultures is now explored.

A marriage made in heaven or a marriage of convenience? – The coming together of two cultures

To summarise the more recent history, it can be seen that the VCE had promised to capture the best of previous curriculum initiatives and provide a general education, but also incorporate vocational education and training, but this was not to be fulfilled during the initial implementation of the VCE, as the Deveson Report (Department of School Education 1992) made clear. A common approach was made to the design of the VCE studies (for example, in the unit structure and assessment). This had effectively constrained the way that vocationally oriented studies were constructed (for example, in Materials and Technology).

The Blackburn Review had proposed the abolition of the distinction between high and technical schools to reflect government policy in comprehensive schooling. During the late 1980s, the various options (including T12) were classified under the general heading of VCE (with the new certificate not being fully implemented till 1992). VET had been present within the total range of offerings, for example, in the HSC Group 2 studies, like Small Business Management. During this time, universities played a significant role in maintaining the academic orientation of the VCE.

All this was happening against a backdrop of rising youth unemployment and an increase in school completion rates - from 41 per cent in 1984 to 77 per cent in 1993 (Harmsworth n.d.). Students developed an increasing interest in university education with demand continuing to rise and higher numbers of students not receiving university places. It was not possible, nor was it appropriate for every senior secondary student to pursue academic studies.

In Victoria, the Deveson Review in 1992 had recommended ‘a strengthening of the vocational focus of the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) to assist young people to develop the skills needed for employment in an increasingly sophisticated workplace’ (Department of School Education 1992, p. v).

The VCE-VET union would be a tumultuous one, fraught with tensions between proponents of a very academic curriculum and those who favoured a more inclusive curriculum. Earlier attempts had been made to provide a better balance between general and vocational studies at senior secondary level, through the introduction of statewide credit transfer arrangements between specific VCE and TAFE modules in 1989. While supporters of the academic curriculum acknowledged the need to expand access and to broaden curriculum offerings, given the advent of mass secondary education, they pushed for a need to maintain integrity of the existing curriculum.

But treating all subjects the same was not going to work. Parent groups were quite vocal in this regard. As Babette Francis, coordinator of Endeavour Forum, a conservative parents’ lobby group wrote in *The Age* (1990, p.15), ‘There are 44 subjects or “VCE studies” all to be regarded as “equal”. Many of these are Mickey Mouse – or to put it politely – “Walt Disney” subjects’. Francis maintained that good schools would continue to concentrate on the more academic subjects such as maths, science, history and languages, while students in government schools and in many Catholic colleges were likely to be deprived of a rigorous education if they were offered subjects, such as Outdoor Education, which were not recognised by universities. Moreover, Francis claimed that Melbourne University had rejected more than half the VCE subjects for tertiary entrance requirements, and others were offering bonuses to students who were doing the more academic subjects. Introducing more vocationally oriented subjects in this environment was not going to help the case of the VCE.

Policy makers needed to get past the harsh critics, some of whom were very influential. They would not compromise on what they considered to be a threat to the integrity of the VCE.

A relationship had slowly begun to develop between VET and the VCE. But if this union was ever going to succeed, it needed to become more formalised. There were two distinct cultures serving different needs, with one providing a very academic focus for those who were university bound and the other offering a more inclusive curriculum with vocational options. In this unlikely marriage of these two cultures, various conditions would be placed on this union, primarily to ensure that the integrity of the VCE would not be compromised, while at the same time providing broader opportunities for students through the introduction of VET in Schools.

Each partner brought specific benefits to the relationship. In Table 1 below, the researcher highlights the contribution that each partner brought to the union. It also shows the distinctiveness between each partner around key areas of interest.

Table 1: The VCE-VET union – partnership contributions

Issue/Area of Interest	VCE	VET
Institutional client	University	Industry
Selective or non-selective	Selective, based on ranking	Comprehensive - not about ranking
Academic Discrimination	Yes	No
Hierarchical structure	Yes	No
Workplace learning opportunities	Limited	Broad
Pathways	Mainly Higher Education Limited for employment	Further Education and Training, employment

Source: Debrincat 2012 (unpublished)

VET brought many benefits to the relationship. But maintaining the integrity of the VCE was of paramount importance and could not be compromised.

The focus now turns to specific periods which reflect three major turning points in this tumultuous relationship which brought about the provision of VET in the secondary school system. These are:

1994 – the Dual Recognition Program

1996 – VET in Schools

1997 – the Kwong Lee Dow Review

The Dual Recognition Program – a link between the VCE and the Vocational Training System

In June 1993, a significant milestone was reached. A joint ministerial statement on Dual Recognition (Hayward & Storey 1993) announced a major strategy for broadening the range of vocational educational opportunities for students in their post-compulsory years of schooling. As Harmsworth observed, ‘Coincidentally, this in effect implemented Recommendation 12 of the Blackburn Report’ which had until then not been implemented (Harmsworth n.d., n.p.)

That groupings of occupations which could provide a basis for practically oriented vocational studies having relevance for a number of occupations and for the development of applied studies within the area of mathematics and science/technology be investigated by the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Board

The intention was to achieve some of the original breadth objectives of the VCE, which had not been realised. The objectives of the Dual Recognition policy were to enable students to achieve maximum recognition for their studies by formalising a pathway into TAFE. This would allow approved TAFE subjects to be recognised so that students would be able to complete both a state-wide accredited TAFE award and the VCE within a coherent study program. It was also intended to enable students to maintain access to tertiary entrance by meeting the minimum university entrance requirements (Hayward & Storey 1993).

This decision represented a significant step towards achieving the Victorian Government's commitment to broaden students' options within the VCE with a particular emphasis on increasing opportunities for students to undertake general as well as vocational education.

In their ministerial statement, Ministers Hayward (Minister for Education) and Storey (Minister for Tertiary Education and Training) announced that the 'VCE must be able to deliver appropriate studies for all students who are staying on at school to Year 12. It should also facilitate better links between schools and TAFE colleges to provide students with wider choices in their VCE'. Dual Recognition was also a major step towards implementing the Government's policy to enable TAFE colleges to deliver the VCE (Hayward & Storey 1993, p. 1).

Dual Recognition subjects operated within the framework of the VCE and students were therefore not at risk of narrowing their post-school options. At the end of their Year 12, participating students would have a VCE qualification as well as a training qualification which contributed towards their VCE and thus to their tertiary entrance qualification. Schools would either teach the relevant VET units themselves or they would enrol students in local TAFE institutes. In addition, the dual recognition policy provided valuable opportunities for students to undertake work placement in industry which would further enhance their readiness for employment and further training (Board of Studies 1996).

In 1994, the first year of operation, three certificates were offered: Basic Electronics, Office and Secretarial Studies, and Hospitality. In the following year, certificates in Automotive and Engineering also became available. By 1996, certificates in 11 industry areas were approved for study under the Dual Recognition framework. These included Office Administration, Hospitality, Information Technology, Automotive, Electronics, Retail, Engineering, Agriculture, Clerical, Food and Horticulture (Teese 1997).

Spring (1996, p. 5) claimed that the Dual Recognition program owed 'much of its growing credibility with educators and industry to its program design' and this enhanced 'both the general and vocational preparation of students for post-school

careers, by building on the strengths of both curriculum frameworks'. Moreover, the approval process for Dual Recognition programs involved 'consultation with the relevant Industry Training Board' and increasingly industry was working 'directly with local schools to design local program options'. This confirmed the importance of close 'collaboration between the education and business sectors over employment, education and training activities'. This had earlier been referred to in the Finn Report (Aspin 1991) and was the first national development in training reforms to influence school education (Keating 1996). Similar sentiments had been echoed at a state level through the Deveson Review.

In an address to the Victorian Association of Directors of TAFE Institutes at a dinner on 5 September 1996, Geoff Spring, then Secretary of the Department of Education, described how some schools and TAFE institutes had also trialled dual accreditation where they offered a VET certificate as well as the VCE. Spring acknowledged that there were numerous problems, one of which concerned the fact that students who undertook a full VCE as well as a TAFE certificate had a significantly increased workload. In addition, the VET certificate did not count towards their Year 12 outcome or their Tertiary Entrance Rank (TER). Spring (1996, p. 3) noted that 'despite these problems, schools persisted in their efforts to cater for the vocational needs of their students, and students persisted in enrolling'.

The VCE-VET union appeared to be a harmonious one. Schools responded enthusiastically to the potential of Dual Recognition programs with programs established across all sectors of the secondary education system, covering metropolitan and rural areas. Polesel, O'Brien and Teese (1995) reported that these programs were seen as offering a genuine alternative for students who were looking for a broader, more vocationally oriented range of studies than those available in the traditional VCE.

Staff also commented on the increasing exposure Dual Recognition programs gave to TAFE institutes, a post-schooling choice that had often not been previously considered by students. Future study at TAFE therefore became a distinct possibility. Polesel, O'Brien and Teese (1995, p.10) noted that students were also enjoying the freedom and increased individual autonomy and responsibility that were 'part of the

experience of studying some of the units of the Dual Recognition Program at a TAFE college’.

Despite its popularity, implementing such an ambitious program across two intersecting, but largely autonomous education divisions (the schools sector and the TAFE sector) had its fair share of problems. Staff felt that some students were adversely affected by having to attend a TAFE institute to complete some Dual Recognition units that the school was unable to provide. Polesel, O’Brien and Teese (1995) also noted that students often had to miss some VCE units because of TAFE commitments and others found it difficult to cope with an adult learning environment.

Cracks were starting to appear in this partnership. Growing enrolments in Dual Recognition programs were causing major resource tensions between schools and TAFE despite the fact that schools were themselves able to deliver the most popular courses, namely Office and Secretarial Studies, Hospitality and Information Technology. According to Teese (1997), because Dual Recognition programs were effectively bringing VET courses into the Year 11 and 12 program, schools tended to rely on the State Training Board for financial support. The State Training Board argued, however, that Dual Recognition programs were in effect part of the VCE and therefore funding issues were the schools’ responsibility. In addition, differences in assessment procedures, administrative processes and funding structures between the two sectors caused some difficulties.

There were implications for all players involved - schools, TAFE institutes and industry. For instance, some of the issues schools had to grapple with concerned workplace learning and included the need for teachers to familiarise themselves with workplace assessment methods so that they could provide appropriate advice to students as well as liaise with workplace supervisors. Students also needed to understand employer expectations in the workplace, for instance in relation to factors like behaviour, attendance, personal presentation, etc (Board of Studies 1996).

The Dual Recognition Program did much to enhance the VCE-VET relationship. But despite its increasing popularity, this program was short-lived and the VCE-VET union would soon go through another transformation.

1996 – Vocational Education and Training in Schools

The relationship between VCE and VET reached a new level late in 1996. The Dual Recognition framework was replaced by a new system of accreditation called the Vocational Education and Training in Schools (VETiS) program. The aim of allowing students to combine general as well as vocational studies and to undertake learning within the workplace would remain under this arrangement (Polesel & Teese 1997).

VETiS in Victoria was being implemented against the backdrop of the National Training Reform Agenda which had introduced a number of fundamental changes to vocational education and training. In a media release dated September 30, 1996, Dr Kemp, the federal Minister for Schools, Vocational Education and Training announced a new principals-government alliance to assist school leavers secure employment. A key government strategy included the provision of industry-recognised subjects in secondary schools. Dr Kemp announced that schools would no longer be isolated from the business world and that students who did not wish to pursue full-time tertiary study would develop the skills, experience and confidence to move into employment or quality training. The president of the Australian Secondary Principals' Association, Duncan Stalker, applauded the government for recognising that vocational education had 'a crucial role in the secondary curriculum'. Moreover, Mr Stalker stated that there was a need to ensure that the vocational courses were as 'attractive to students as all other courses in the secondary curriculum' and that the courses reflected 'the economic and social needs of the nation' (Kemp 1996, p. 1).

The reform of the VET system at a national level, however, raised a number of issues that had the potential to involve students, teachers and school administrators. These included the role schools played as a provider of VET in an open training market, the level of VET that a secondary school could provide, the compatibility between competency based training and assessment and the conventional school-based approaches to curriculum and assessment, the role of structured workplace learning within school curriculum, the relationship between schools and other providers of VET, teacher qualifications and funding.

At a state level, the VETiS program was being applauded. A joint Ministerial statement by the Minister for Education, Phil Gude and the Minister for Tertiary Education and Training, Phil Honeywood, (Gude & Honeywood 1996, p. 2) highlighted how the VET in Schools initiative built on the ‘highly successful Dual Recognition Program introduced by the Victorian Government in 1993’. The Victorian Ministers echoed similar sentiments to their Commonwealth counterparts. According to Minister Honeywood, ‘The government sees the importance of Vocational Education and Training in schools, giving students more opportunities as they prepare for work or further study after school’ (Honeywood & Gude 1996, p. 1).

In recognising the benefits to young people of integrating vocational preparation into the senior secondary curriculum, the Victorian Government announced that they would provide funding which would see a ‘doubling of enrolments of VCE students undertaking specified VET studies over the next four years’ (Gude & Honeywood 1996, p. 2).

The Victorian Government believed that strengthening links between schools and industry was important because students needed to have appropriate skills to cope with the challenges of the twenty-first century. Furthermore, VETiS would give students the opportunity to combine general and vocational studies, undertake learning in the workplace and also gain a nationally recognised VET qualification or credit towards one as part of their VCE. This would also see the introduction of new workplace legislation to enable students to gain productive experiences with employers in the workplace. A newly accredited VCE program - Industry and Enterprise Studies also provided opportunities for students to undertake structured work placements.

In confirming the Department’s commitment to broaden curriculum options for senior secondary school students, the Victorian Ministers also acknowledged a number of related issues that would be addressed by this new VET in Schools policy. These included:

- the need expressed by industry and commerce for an entry level workforce which possesses broad vocational skills as well as a high standard of general education, and is able to undertake further study as skill requirements change
- the current youth labour market in which young people without recognised vocational competencies [were] at increased risk of unemployment.

(Department of Education 1996, p. 2).

The VETiS program involved a considerable number of changes in how accredited vocational studies within the VCE would ‘relate to the training system and its accreditation, quality assurance, planning and funding processes’. These changes would present a number of challenges (Teese 1997, p. 15). Under some of these changes, and with effect from 1997 (Teese 1997), students undertaking a VET in Schools program would no longer receive a VET certificate (or credit towards one). Rather, students would gain a nationally recognised VET in Schools qualification (or credit towards one) which was accredited by the Board of Studies. The certificate would include the industry study area and the level obtained within the Australian Qualifications Framework. This qualification was ‘intended to be equivalent to a VET qualification in terms of status and as a credit towards entering further studies in VET’ (Polesel & Teese 1997, p. 5).

However, this could potentially inhibit students from being accepted into a TAFE course with appropriate credit, even though the certificate had been issued by the Board of Studies and was intended to have the same recognition as that issued by a VET provider.

Secondly, under this arrangement, the Office of Training and Further Education (OTFE) would no longer be responsible for quality assurance with regard to schools that were registered training providers. And it was questionable whether audits and quality assurance processes undertaken by schools would carry the same weight as those undertaken by other VET providers.

Thirdly, the school sector became responsible for delivery and funding arrangements of these VET subjects. This could potentially reduce VET offerings to those study areas that did not require buying in expertise or sending students to TAFE institutes

under a negotiated commercial arrangement. Teese (1997, p. 15) noted that this could potentially limit student options and ‘bias future VET in schools to areas of the labour market easily “overstocked” and undermine the key distinguishing feature of VET programs – their route to employment’.

VET programs were expensive and generally involved cost items that were not incurred in general VCE programs. These costs covered liaison with industry, coordination of work placements, the purchase or hire of specialised equipment and registration as a VET provider. In addition, some programs were more resource intensive than others. Moreover, additional professional development and/or the employment of specialist teachers was required to deliver these programs.

Despite these challenges, significant progress continued to be made, and the VETiS program attracted large numbers of students (Teese 1997). However, the VCE-VET partnership remained somewhat strained. Although it was filling a much needed gap in the senior secondary school curriculum, VET continued to suffer inferior status. Students who undertook vocational subjects were seen as not being able to cope with the more academic subjects and as opting for an easier option. In addition, VET modules were still deemed by the Board of Studies to be only equivalent to VCE at units 1 and 2 level (there are 4 units in a VCE study). This meant that they could not be used to contribute to the four 3/4 unit sequences which were required as part of the structure of the VCE. At this stage, VET modules could also only be assessed in competency terms and they could therefore not be included in the four subjects used to calculate the Tertiary Entrance Rank. Universities did, however, consent to allow a 10 per cent increment of a student’s aggregate score in recognition of these VET units. This, too, would change with the introduction of scored assessment for a number of VET units (Polesel 2001).

Another major attempt was soon made to strengthen the VCE-VET union. This would occur through a review of the VCE. On 10 February 1997, the Minister for Education, the Hon. Phillip Gude, announced a review of the VCE. In announcing this review, Minister Gude highlighted a need for ‘curriculum and assessment programs in schools to be constantly monitored and reviewed to ensure the best possible education is available to our young people’ (State of Victoria 1997, p.1). A

Review Committee, chaired by Professor Kwong Lee Dow, was established. The committee highlighted as a priority the need to ‘develop more clearly articulated pathways within the certificate; and the requirement that VCE studies should be rigorous and challenging for all students’ (State of Victoria 1997, p. 1).

The 1997 Review of the VCE made much needed improvements to the status of VET within the VCE to gain greater parity with the more academic subjects within the VCE program. While the Review confirmed that the interests of post-compulsory students continued to be best served through one single certificate, it recognised that VET needed to fulfil a more integral role within the VCE. Significant growth had occurred in the VET sector since full implementation of the VCE, but more needed to be done to enhance, through appropriate VETiS programs, student pathways to employment. The Review also acknowledged that VET needed to be more fully integrated into existing VCE arrangements.

This new approach ensured that VET would play a pivotal role in improving the range of pathways that were available. It also ensured that the VCE was able to ‘respond to specific initiatives and developments, including new apprenticeships, traineeships and youth allowance arrangements’ (State of Victoria 1997, p. 2).

Following the Review, graded assessment of some VCE VET units became available for students who wished to gain a scored assessment of the achievements in those approved VCE VET programs. VET studies could now count for the equivalent of up to eight units for satisfactory completion of the VCE. In addition, and subject to approval of the Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre (an office that administers the application and offer process for tertiary courses in Victoria), the direct scoring of VET programs into the Tertiary Entrance Rank would enable one approved VCE VET program with a scored component to be counted within the best four unit 3/4 sequences and 10 per cent of an approved VCE VET program with a scored assessment component could be counted as a fifth or sixth sequence, as long as this met the VCE satisfactory completion requirements (State of Victoria 1997).

The role of VET was significantly strengthened as a result of this review. In making its recommendations, the Review, however, emphasised the need to ensure that the

VCE continued to be ‘relevant and challenging for the whole of the student cohort’ catering for those who required ‘a strengthening of foundation knowledge and skills’ and those who needed ‘the challenge of performing at the highest possible standard’ (State of Victoria 1997, p. 2).

The VCE-VET partnership had been a difficult one. However, changes over these three important phases brought the partners closer together. A major outcome of these changes was to provide a more secure framework for student participation in VET. Students choosing VET as part of their senior secondary school program were no longer penalised by being excluded from pursuing a university pathway. This created a platform for increasing participation in VET programs in Victoria.

These major turning points saw significant improvements in the provision of VET resulting in a much higher take-up of vocational subjects than had previously been the case (Teese & Polesel 2003). Despite these gains, evidence was emerging that many students still felt that the range of options offered within the VCE did not meet their needs. By 1999, retention remained at a level below 80 per cent and, as some researchers would argue, (for example, Teese 2000; Teese & Polesel 2003), senior secondary curriculum, despite the inclusion of vocational subjects, remained predominantly oriented towards university entry.

In this chapter, the researcher explored varying perspectives on the new VCE from a number of influential stakeholders. Findings point to mixed reactions from political parties, schools, industry and universities. Views within these stakeholders were polarized, ranging from vehement criticism to strong support for this new certificate.

The chapter also examined the increasing role of vocational education in schools in order to cater for an increase in school completion rates. This required the need to offer a broader range of VCE programs to meet the diverse needs and abilities of a substantial cohort of students. It found that this presented many challenges to policy makers to accommodate a wide range of programs within the VCE while at the same time needing to appease vehement critics who considered the introduction of vocational subjects as a significant threat to the integrity and rigour of the VCE.

The chapter also found that the introduction of vocational education and training in schools attracted large numbers of students. Although this filled a much needed gap, VET continued to suffer inferior status. Despite an increasing role of vocational subjects within the VCE, the certificate continued to be oriented predominantly towards university entry. It was therefore unable to cater for all the diverse students who were staying on at school to complete their senior secondary years.

Before long, another review of senior secondary curriculum provision in Victoria would usher in significant curriculum reform. The next chapter examines the creation of a vocational certificate in Victoria, the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning, or the VCAL, as it would soon come to be called.

CHAPTER 6

THE BIRTH OF VCAL

In 2000, only three years after a major review of the VCE, chaired by Kwong Lee Dow, had been undertaken to determine whether the academic needs of post-compulsory students continued to be met through the VCE, yet another review (the Kirby Review) was commissioned to investigate the participation and outcomes of post-compulsory students in Victoria. Earlier, Dow had reaffirmed the position that post-compulsory education and training in Victoria would continue to be best served by this single certificate. And yet a different story would soon emerge, and more change would follow. This chapter examines the creation of the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL), a vocational certificate in the Australian state of Victoria.

It may be useful at this stage to provide some context for the need for change. First, after leading Victoria for seven years, the Liberal conservative government, under the leadership of Premier Jeff Kennett, lost the election and in October 1999, the leader of the Labor party, Steve Bracks, took over the political reins as Victoria's 44th Premier of Victoria. This new government would soon instigate another major reform of post-compulsory education in Victoria. Interestingly, it had also been a Labor government in 1983 that had ushered in major reform of secondary education in Victoria which brought in the VCE.

Shortly after gaining political power in Victoria in 1999, the Bracks government had announced some goals and targets for Victoria, with regard to increasing participation and achievement in education and training:

By 2005 – Victoria would be at or above national average benchmark levels for reading, writing and numeracy as they apply to primary students.

By 2010 – 90 per cent of young people in Victoria would complete Year 12 or its equivalent.

By 2005 – the percentage of young people aged 15-19 in rural and regional Victoria engaged in education and training would increase by six per cent.

(Department of Education, Employment and Training 2000b)

These were very ambitious targets. Even though Victoria led other Australian states in terms of school completion to Year 12, the proportion of young people reaching this level at the time was well below the government's target of 90 per cent, as is reported further below.

The preceding chapter showed how VET in Schools provided the opportunity to combine general and vocational studies. It had also provided the impetus for the introduction of more practical studies in the VCE, for example, Food and Technology, and Industry and Enterprise. Yet VET could only be undertaken as part of the VCE program and students who could not cope with the discriminating demands of the other curriculum components within the VCE were at risk of academic failure. It would therefore appear that under-achievement within the VCE was not going to be solved by VET alone (Teese & Polesel 2003).

Moreover, enrolment rates in VET were uneven, depending on student background and the locality in which they were undertaking their secondary education. In a regional analysis of destinations for the 2000 Year 12 cohort, Polesel and Teese (2002) reported that participation in VETiS programs tended to be stronger in non-metropolitan regions than in the city. In the metropolitan areas generally, participation in VETiS programs tended to rise as the socio-economic status of the labour force fell. According to Polesel and Teese (2002, p. 11), 'the relationship between the socio-economic profile and VET in Schools activity is one which highlights the social and cultural aspects of curriculum use'. The report further stated that 'it could be argued that where the narrowly academic curriculum of the past has tended to exclude or marginalise students from a low socio-economic status background, VET in Schools has provided curriculum breadth and alternative vocational options'. These were positive outcomes to support students, particularly those who were more at risk of academic failure, to stay on at school.

With a new Labor government in power, the year 2000 saw the commissioning of a major review, chaired by Peter Kirby, 'to review participation and outcomes of young

people in post-compulsory education and training in Victoria' (Department of Education, Employment and Training 2000a, p. 3).

The Kirby Review examined at great length the outcomes of young people within Victoria during their post-compulsory years. The findings of the Review 'verified the argument in the Ministerial Statement that educational outcomes for young people in Victoria [were] less than optimal' (Department of Education, Employment and Training 2000a, p. 3).

Some observations can be made about the economic conditions of the 1990s and their influence on school participation. The recession of the 1990s saw the number of full-time jobs declining with a corresponding increase in part-time jobs. The decline of full-time employment tended to influence a rise in school completion rates. However, continuing levels of high unemployment did not appear to eliminate early leaving. This was partly due to the fact that poor job prospects did not weaken the desire to work and also due to the fact that the quality and effectiveness of schooling as experienced by these young people would be a significant factor.

In their review, the Panel noted that an alarmingly large number of young people (approximately 11,000) were leaving school without a formal and recognised qualification, leaving themselves very vulnerable in their future educational and employment options. Most (approximately 90 per cent of the cohort) had attempted the first year of their VCE, but many withdrew along the way. In fact, many were leaving at the end of Year 10 (approximately 10.5 per cent) or even earlier. These young people were entering a significantly reduced labour market with no qualifications (ABS 1999, cited in Department of Education, Employment and Training 2000a).

While certain elements of the post-compulsory education system were clearly unsatisfactory, (for example, modifications to the VCE certificate since implementation had tended to strengthen its powers of discrimination, and access to programs and services were uneven), alternative or better solutions were not readily forthcoming. Given that the overriding purpose of the Review was to engage young people in education and training that was of high standard, this required 'courses and

qualifications that [were] coherent, comprehensive and flexible' (Department of Education, Employment and Training 2000a, p. 4). Most importantly, there also needed to be strong involvement from the wider community, including business and industry to ensure successful pathways for these young people. The Kirby Review took a strong stance that 'collaboration and integration between providers and the integration of sectoral agencies should be welcomed' (Department of Education, Employment and Training 2000a, p. 8).

Although outside the scope of this study, but nevertheless worthy of attention is the fact that the Review Panel noted that when the VCE was established as a single certificate, the implications of a general level of preparedness of students in the junior secondary school were perhaps not fully appreciated. And because there was only the one certificate that was available, this common certificate implied that there were strong links between the junior and senior secondary studies and that all students would be able to cope with the transition from junior to senior secondary studies. The Review Panel argued that students needed to be better prepared for this transition.

The geography of early leaving and educational attainment

The Review Panel reported that low socio-economic areas recorded the highest levels of early leaving, from as high as 30 per cent for girls to more than 40 per cent for boys. In country Victoria, early leaving was also at these high levels. It was clear that the levels of participation and outcomes in post-compulsory education and training were poor, especially for certain groups of students from particular geographical regions.

Within Melbourne, the regions where early leaving was generally high were the regions where student achievement was weak. For instance, in the outer-western, north-western and south-eastern suburbs of Melbourne, students were more likely to receive low grades in VCE English than their counterparts living in suburbs of middle to high socio-economic status. In the north-west and south-east of Melbourne, students dropped out of school more frequently (Department of Education, Employment and Training 2000a).

In contrast to regions where both low achievement and early leaving were found, there were regions in country Victoria where early leaving was not associated with low achievement. This was the case in much of country Victoria and some areas on the outer-urban fringe of Melbourne, which have large rural pockets, in particular, the outer-eastern suburbs and the Mornington Peninsula. While early leaving was high in all country areas, there were only two regions where there were also high levels of students failing their VCE (Gippsland, and for boys, the Loddon Campaspe-Mallee).

Students who experienced difficulties with the existing arrangements were generally unprepared for the VCE. They therefore needed different learning contexts and sometimes different provider contexts. This meant that greater flexibility needed to be built into the VCE as well as greater flexibility in program provision. And mainstream VCE programs certainly lacked the ‘structural links to employment’ which have traditionally been built into VET in Schools programs (Department of Education, Employment and Training 2000a, p. 68).

The Review Panel argued that modifications to the VCE since its implementation had in fact strengthened its powers of discrimination. For instance, changes in the mathematics curriculum had allowed high achievers more scope to excel and placed the less able under considerable pressure. The Kwong Lee Dow Review in 1997 had introduced less-demanding subjects, but gave high achievers more opportunities to distinguish themselves. However, the most important innovation had come in 1994 with the introduction of accredited vocational programs within the VCE. These produced very good transition outcomes particularly for average or low achievers. It is important to note that at the time of this Review, VET still only accounted for 10 per cent of the final year VCE students.

While VET in Schools had resulted in good outcomes for students, a number of submissions to the Kirby Review had indicated that it was not always the answer for a large number of students with low levels of academic achievement. This was because it was very demanding, particularly for students who had to cope with often different learning environments and with needing to make up for missed classes due to attendance at TAFEs and work placements. VET also needed to be seen to add value rather than simply provide a compensatory role for school education (Department of

Education, Employment and Training 2000a). This could not happen if its role was restricted to offering a second chance to these students.

TAFE had multiple important roles to play in post-school education and training. These roles included the provision of complementary specialist vocational studies for the generalist school courses as well as the provision of entry-level, industry-based training ranging from basic training to advanced-level education and training for work. TAFEs also provided compensatory courses, including basic and general education and vocational studies for early school leavers and those who had experienced poor educational outcomes. Furthermore, TAFEs provided the VCE to adult learners and employment-based training at middle and advanced levels in the technical, business and human services fields. Finally, these TAFEs provided pathways to higher education through foundation studies, dual awards, and advanced technical programs (Department of Education, Employment and Training 2000a).

The Review Panel examined current experiences of young people with regard to education and training and considered them in the context of their anticipated needs over the coming years. In order to do this, it was important to examine current ‘patterns of access and participation in education and training’ (Department of Education, Employment and Training 2000a, p. 26) as well as expected outcomes. These outcomes would include formal qualifications, knowledge and skills gained and successful transition to further education and training or employment.

There was concern that close institutional ties between schools and universities reinforced perceptions that the VCE was primarily about going to university. Parents, teachers and students alike shared this view and this tended to aggravate the situation for low achievers for whom anything other than university entrance was considered a failure. TAFE was considered a poor second choice.

The Review Panel argued that the focus of importance should be on the student, rather than the institution. In the past there had been attempts to examine education through ‘its segments and institutions, rather than through the needs of the community’. It was therefore time to examine the needs of the young individuals rather than the ‘individual elements of the system’, whether a school or TAFE (Department of

Education, Employment and Training 2000a, p. 26). The Kirby Review was, however, not directed solely towards students who were likely to experience the poorest educational outcomes and who therefore were at greatest risk of incomplete education and training or poor employment outcomes. Rather, it was concerned with ‘overall education and training access and outcomes for young people in the State’ (Department of Education, Employment and Training 2000a, p. 29).

The report considered that in order to benefit the young individual, there needed to be closer integration and also better collaboration between schools, TAFEs and other providers as well as government and non-government agencies. Of particular interest is the statement by the Review Panel that post-compulsory education and training needed to be inclusive of all ‘the traditional sectors of community education and extended to include any other agencies involved in education and training’ (Department of Education, Employment and Training 2000a, p. 27). This community building approach would be something that would be encouraged within the VCAL program.

This is important given that government policy post-Blackburn had removed TAFE as an option for continuing full-time school-age students. There was no argument against the fact that the most appropriate educational environment for school-age students was the school. However, it was acknowledged that there were instances where it was possible that TAFE and the Adult and Community Education sector (ACE) would be a more appropriate environment. The Review Panel was also aware that a number of secondary schools were delivering programs other than the VCE at the upper secondary level. In addition, TAFE and ACE providers wanted the option of delivering the VCE to the school-aged cohort. Existing rules therefore needed to be relaxed to allow schools to deliver alternative programs which would be accredited by the soon to be established Victorian Qualifications Authority (VQA). In addition, non-school providers needed to be allowed to provide the VCE to the school-aged cohort in association with neighbouring schools.

The Kirby Review came up with a large number of recommendations which were well received by the Labor government. In response to the Kirby report, the Premier of Victoria, The Hon. Steve Bracks MP, announced a set of new goals for post-

compulsory education and training in Victoria. The first goal was to increase the percentage of young people who complete Year 12 or the equivalent. The second goal was to increase the number of adults undertaking education and training and so increase the overall level of educational attainment and literacy levels in Victoria. The third goal was to increase the level of participation and achievement in education and training in rural and regional Victoria and among groups where it [was] presently low. The fourth and final goal was to make near-universal participation in post-school education and training the norm in our society (Department of Education, Employment and Training 2000b).

In the Kirby Review, the view was taken that there had to be changes in institutional arrangements if in-depth reform of the curriculum was going to be achieved. Of major significance in the Kirby Report was the recommendation to establish a single qualifications authority, independent of the three existing boards—the Victorian Board of Studies, the State Training Board and the Adult and Further Education Board. Existing boards would cede their accreditation, certification and registration responsibilities to this new qualifications authority.

The Victorian Qualifications Authority

On Monday, 23 October 2000, the Premier of Victoria announced the establishment of the Victorian Qualifications Authority (VQA) which would be responsible for the accreditation and recognition of all post-compulsory education, with the exception of higher education, in Victoria. Its key purpose was to ensure that the course and qualifications needs of the Victorian community were met and that qualifications were of the highest standard (Bracks 2000).

Creating the VQA as a separate organisation with powers to recommend to the Victorian Government alternative certificates was significant. According to Keating (2011), this was a move that was resisted by the Victorian Board of Studies. Authority over curriculum was thus split in a clear attempt to limit the power and influence of the restructured cross-sectoral Curriculum and Assessment Authority (as an institutional stakeholder). This broke with the view that a curriculum authority was independent of stakeholder influence (that is, independent of universities or various

school sectors), even though they were represented on the Board and various committees.

The VQA was charged with examining possible modifications to the VCE to allow greater flexibility in program delivery and learning contexts to better meet the needs of all post-compulsory students. This came despite the fact that a number of modifications had already occurred over several years and most recently through the Kwong Lee Dow Review. Given the certificate's strong links with university entrance, any changes to the VCE structure would have required extensive consultation with key stakeholders and this would have taken too long to implement. Victoria needed a quicker response (Gunning 2005).

The Kirby Review proposed that the VQA 'examine and recognize or accredit, where judged appropriate, courses and qualifications that [were] broadly equivalent to the VCE, and monitor the outcomes of these programs and the relationship between these qualifications and the VCE' (Department of Education, Employment and Training 2000a, p. 15).

In the case of exploring alternatives to the VCE, it was to allow 'variation in the pace, structure and learning context of studies', so that students who found the VCE difficult and who preferred applied learning styles would be more adequately catered for. It was also imperative that these alternatives should not be 'watered-down versions of the VCE', but rather programs that had 'alternative delivery and learning structures to the VCE' (Department of Education, Employment and Training 2000a, p. 86).

The 1992 model of upper secondary education would soon be broken. It would seem that the VCE model (with VET being accommodated within the single certificate structure) was no longer considered adequate and appropriate. This break is significant because it implies that the single-certificate model was not ideal and was failing in key areas and for key groups. This was particularly the case in the areas of low achievement (and their social patterns) and low participation of some groups (as measured by school dropouts). It opened up the pathway for an alternative certificate

to be established. This certificate would be the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL).

The VQA gets to work

The newly established VQA was ‘charged with taking stock of all post-compulsory education and training (except higher education) accrediting and certifying eligible qualifications in order to raise standards and increase the flexibility of education’ (VQA 2002a, p. 1).

The key purposes of the newly created authority were ‘to ensure that the course and qualifications needs of the Victorian community [were] met and that qualifications [were] of the highest standard’ (VQA 2002a, p. 4). The VQA would contribute to ‘the new model for pathways for students and the achievement of the Government’s aims for a more student-centred, cross-sectional, collaborative approach to post-compulsory education and training’ (Department of Education, Employment and Training 2000b, n.p). The VQA would also be responsible for the accreditation and recognition of all post-compulsory education and training, with the exception of higher education, in Victoria. In addition, the VQA would ‘incorporate the accreditation, certification and quality assurance functions of the Victorian Board of Studies, the State Training Board and the Adult, Community and Further Education Board’ (VQA 2002a, p. 3).

A single qualifications authority would make it easier ‘for Victorians to navigate their way’ (Praetz 2002, p. 193) around education and training systems. This was a first for Australia. While single authorities with responsibility for qualifications are common in other countries, for example, in New Zealand, South Africa and Scotland, this would be the first time that such a body was to be established in an Australian state (Department of Education, Employment and Training 2001).

The VQA’s first task was to review existing options available to young people and to see whether changes could be made to encourage students to stay in education and training beyond their compulsory school years in order to complete a senior secondary certificate.

Dennis Gunning was appointed as the first Director of the newly formed VQA. In an article on opening up vocational pathways for school students, Gunning (2005, p. 21) noted that the existing VCE was 'unlikely to be attractive to such a wide range of students because of its perceived academic focus'. Gunning acknowledged that the introduction of VET in Schools within the VCE structure had clearly been a step in the right direction. But the 'one size fits all' structure of the VCE was not working in Victoria as well as it had been hoped. Alternative provision needed to be introduced to cater for the students who were struggling under the existing arrangements.

The VQA considered a number of options. One option was to redesign the VCE to allow students who were not academically strong to complete a senior secondary certificate. However,

...re-opening debates around the VCE and undertaking another review would have delayed and diverted reforms directed towards the participation of young people who were presently leaving school either without any qualification or without a pathway into work or learning (Praetz 2002, p. 198).

This would be a difficult, lengthy and laborious task given the VCE's strong links with university entrance. Victoria needed a more targeted and expeditious way.

As part of its investigation, the VQA undertook a number of visits to schools and observed that a large number of schools were 'unobtrusively offering to students a range of qualifications other than the VCE' (Praetz 2002, p. 196). These programs had many common features; they included a strong vocational component and provided strong links with local employers and community organisations. In addition, a large proportion of learning was being undertaken outside the school gate. These alternative programs appeared to fill a much needed gap in the provision of education for these young people. However, they lacked formal recognition and therefore proved to be a disincentive because they did not lead to a formal, state-wide certificate that recognised the students' achievements.

In the spring of 2001, the VQA proposed to the Minister for Education and Training, the Hon. Lynne Kosky, MP, that a new certificate be created. This certificate would

sit alongside the VCE and offer a vocational pathway for students who would benefit from a curriculum that was based on applied learning principles (VQA 2002d). This certificate would be designed around the successful initiatives that were already in place and provide a new approach to learning with a focus on applied learning. The certificate would be called the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning, or the VCAL. The VCAL would also broaden the system's capacity to provide a state-wide credential through which participating students would receive formal recognition for their achievements and complete a senior secondary education.

The VCAL was intended to encourage a learning approach 'aimed at meeting the diverse needs of young people'. It was designed 'to have relevance to personal strengths, interests and experiences, and to build resilience, confidence, self-worth and employability skills'. Moreover, the VCAL was intended to provide 'opportunities for experiential learning and skill development and [encouraged] student decision-making regarding future pathways to work and further education' (VQA 2002b, Part B, p. 4).

This was a major policy shift in the education landscape in Victoria. Elevating this program to accreditation status was a significant step which would be unique to Victoria. No other state in Australia offered two very distinct senior secondary certificates.

This innovative approach to learning would provide many opportunities for students, but would also present numerous challenges for educators and policy makers as well as parents and employers. The VQA had a critical role to fulfil in ensuring that this new certificate would be a meaningful and credible alternative to the VCE and not merely a 'remedial alternative' (Henry et al. 2003b, p. 3), or safety net for students at risk of dropping out of school.

In developing the VCAL, the VQA proposed that this new certificate would specifically focus on the learning and development needs of those young people in need of alternative pathways and that it would be framed around four compulsory curriculum strands that covered Literacy and Numeracy, Work Related Skills, Industry Specific Skills and Personal Development Skills.

The VCAL was not intended to produce students with full workplace competencies (Gunning 2005). The aim was to equip students with basic skills that would be necessary for the workplace. It would also provide a range of workplace experiences so that these students would be in a better position to make informed pathway choices. For VCAL students, this involved a pathway to further learning, for example, a pathway to a higher-level VCAL or a TAFE course, or alternatively a pathway to employment or an apprenticeship or traineeship.

The VCAL was designed with the needs of students in the post-compulsory cohorts (Years 11 and 12) in mind. Most importantly, the new certificate was intended to show students who had not coped with the traditional academic curriculum that they could be successful by following a more practical approach to learning – and that this success would encourage them to look for and achieve even more success (Gunning 2005).

The VCAL structure

It is appropriate at this point to offer a more detailed picture of the nature of the VCAL as a qualification within the broader framework of upper secondary education in Victoria. Information about the VCAL structure has been obtained from the VCE and VCAL Administrative Handbook published by the VCAA and the VCAL Curriculum Planning Guides, also published by the VCAA.

The VCAL is a senior secondary certificate of education that is recognised within the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF). It is a framework qualification that is not content driven. Unlike the VCE, there is no study design, but rather a portfolio of learning that includes literacy and numeracy skills and the opportunity to build personal skills and practical work-related experience. The VCAL is intended to provide the skills, knowledge and attributes to enable students to make informed choices regarding appropriate pathways to work and further education. The VCAL is intended to prepare students for employment and to become active participants in the broader community (VCAA 2012b).

The VCAL is offered at three levels:

- | | |
|---------------|---|
| Foundation: | At this level, there is a strong emphasis on literacy and numeracy skills as well as preparatory learning. |
| Intermediate: | At this level, knowledge and employability skills development lead to independent learning, confidence and a high level of transferable skills. |
| Senior: | At this level, knowledge and employability skills development lead to a high level of interpersonal skills, independent action and the achievement of tasks that require decision-making and leadership (VCAA 2008a). |

There are no formal entry requirements for the VCAL program. A student is enrolled at a VCAL level that is most appropriate for his or her strengths and abilities. Each VCAL award level contains four compulsory curriculum strands:

Literacy and Numeracy Skills Strand

The Literacy component of this strand enables ‘the development of skills, knowledge and attitudes in literacy that allow progression in the main social contexts of family, employment, further learning and citizenship’ (VCAA 2008a, p. 9). The Numeracy component provides ‘the ability to use mathematical skills in order to carry out purposes and functions within society related to designing, measuring, constructing, using graphical information, money, time and travel, and the underpinning skills and knowledge for further study in mathematics or related fields’ (VCAA 2008b, p. 10).

Industry Specific Skills Strand

This strand enables ‘the development of skills, knowledge and attributes related to one or more vocational contexts in preparation for progression to further learning or employment’ (VCAA 2013a, p. 13). VET curriculum is the mandatory curriculum component in this strand (with the exception that at Foundation level, limited VCE studies can be used).

Work Related Skills Strand

The aim of this strand is to ‘develop employability skills, knowledge and attributes valued within community and work environments as a preparation for employment. The development of employability skills within this strand provides learners with a capacity to consider and choose from a range of pathways’ (VCAA 2013a, p. 15).

Personal Development Skills Strand

This curriculum strand enables the development of self-confidence and self-esteem as well as the building of social, civic and civil responsible, for example, through volunteering and working for the benefit of others. Moreover, ‘the development of knowledge, skills and attributes in this strand underpins the development of skills in the three other VCAL curriculum strands’ (VCAA 2012a p. 11).

A typical full-time VCAL learning program is based on a timetabled class time and independent learning totalling 1,000 hours. A student is normally able to complete a VCAL level in one year. Some students may, however, choose to complete units over longer periods of time than the nominal hours.

Course Requirements

To be awarded the VCAL, students must successfully complete a learning program that contains a minimum of 10 credits (units). The program must include curriculum components to the value of at least one credit, each of which can be justified against the purpose statement for each of the four VCAL curriculum strands. The program must also include a minimum of two VCAL units, one credit for numeracy and curriculum components to the value of six credits at the level of the VCAL award (or above) of which one must be for literacy and one credit must be for a VCAL Personal Development Skills unit. Furthermore, at the Intermediate and Senior level of the VCAL, the learning program must include VET curriculum components to the value of a minimum of one credit (90 hours) in the Industry Specific Skills Strand.

Table 2 outlines curriculum options that, on satisfactory completion, meet minimum requirements for meeting the VCAL strand requirements:

Table 2: Curriculum options for meeting the VCAL strand requirements

Strand/Level	Foundation	Intermediate	Senior
Literacy and Numeracy Skills Units	• VCAL Literacy Skills Reading and Writing Units • VCE Units: – EAL – English – English Language – Foundation English – Literature • Selected FE reading and writing modules • VCAL Numeracy Skills units • VCE units: – any Mathematics units – Chemistry – Environmental Science – Physics – Selected FE numeracy and mathematics modules	• VCAL Literacy Skills Reading and Writing Intermediate/Senior Units • VCE Units: – EAL – English – English Language – Foundation English – Literature • Selected FE Certificates II/III Literacy/reading and writing modules • VCAL Numeracy Skills units • VCE units: – any Mathematics units – Chemistry – Environmental Science – Physics – Selected FE numeracy and mathematics modules	• VCAL Literacy Skills Reading and Writing Senior Unit • VCE Units 3 and 4: – EAL – English – English Language – Literature • Selected FE Certificate III Literacy/reading and writing modules • VCAL Numeracy Skills Intermediate/Senior units • VCE units: – any Mathematics units – Chemistry – Environmental Science – Physics – Selected FE Certificate II/III numeracy and mathematics modules
Industry Specific Skills	• VET certificates • VCE units – Accounting – Biology – Chemistry – Industry and Enterprise – Physics – Technology Studies – The Arts	• VET certificates	• VET certificates II or above
Work Related Skills	• VCAL Work Related Skills units • VET certificates • VCE units: – any Technology studies – Industry and Enterprise – Outdoor and Environmental Studies • Selected FE certificates/modules	• VCAL Work Related Skills units • VET certificates • VCE units: – any Technology studies – Industry and Enterprise – Outdoor and Environmental Studies • Selected FE Certificates/modules II/III	• VCAL Work Related Skills Intermediate/Senior units • VET certificates II or above • VCE units: – Any Technology studies – Industry and Enterprise – Outdoor and Environmental Studies • Selected FE Certificates/modules III
Personal Development Skills	• VCAL Personal Development Skills unit	• VCAL Personal Development Skills Intermediate/Senior unit	• VCAL Personal Development Skills Senior unit

Source: VCAA (2012b)

Curriculum Principles

The VCAL program is underpinned by a number of curriculum principles (VCAA 2012a). These include student-centred approaches and decision-making regarding program design and delivery as well as opportunities for experiential learning and skills development through activities that are structured and sequential in their learning outcomes. Other principles include program design that has high relevance to personal strengths and experiences, and program delivery which builds resilience, confidence and self-worth and is responsive to diverse needs. The program structure also allows students to enter and exit learning programs at each level to pursue a range of pathway options. Finally, the program provides learning environments intended to strengthen connections with the community.

Providers delivering the VCAL program are encouraged to actively involve students in negotiating and planning their individual learning program. Teachers are also encouraged to determine the delivery modes most suited to the needs of their students. Delivery of the VCAL can take place in school classrooms, post-compulsory education providers (for example, TAFE institutes), online and in community or workplace settings. Wherever possible, teachers are encouraged to extend the learning experiences beyond the classroom through excursions and field trips and to integrate learning activities across the VCAL program. The VCAL programs are often designed to include a thematic or project-based approach.

The flexibility of the VCAL enables the program to contain a combination of VCAL units, VCE units, VET units and selected Further Education units. A common Further Education Certificate that is undertaken by VCAL students is the Certificate In General Education for Adults. The course aims to provide initial skill development in reading, writing and numeracy. Students are also intended to develop skills in other areas to meet their personal needs and to actively participate in the community, or other workplace and further education and training (Training Support Network 2013).

Locally developed curriculum, structured workplace learning programs and community and youth programs provide the context for the achievement of VCAL units (VCAA 2011a). Many organisations have developed programs that have been aligned to the VCAL.

Strategies for VCAL delivery

Providers of the VCAL program are encouraged to negotiate curriculum content with students that is based on their interests, strengths and abilities and different learning styles while building confidence, resilience and promoting active citizenship and social responsibility. They are also encouraged to develop a project-based learning approach which encourages integration across all curriculum stands and engages the broader community. Recognition of formal and informal learning is strongly supported and achievement of learning outcomes, regardless of where, when and how they are achieved, is actively supported. Bohlinger (2012) notes that this learning outcome orientation is a concept which has gained increasing attention over the past decade.

Assessment in the VCAL

In developing assessment for the VCAL program, schools and other providers are encouraged to use a wide range of tasks and activities to ensure reliability, consistency and validity. Assessment must not unduly disadvantage any student and should provide enough flexibility to cater for individual needs. Wherever possible, assessment in the VCAL should focus on projects and activities which *integrate* across the curriculum. Integrating projects and activities across curriculum strands reflects the integration of skills required in social and work activities. It is intended that students are better able to make connections between what occurs in the classroom and in the workplace.

A range of assessment methods and tasks are used to determine achievement of the learning outcomes for the VCAL units. These include teacher observation and/or checklists, self-assessment inventories, physical demonstration of understanding of written or oral text, evidence accumulated through project or program participation,

awards from recognised programs, oral and written reports, debates and role-plays, folios of tasks or investigations, reflective work journals and student logbooks. The use of information and communications technology (ICT), including Internet usage, blogs, wikis, podcasts, eportfolios, multimedia presentations and vodcasts is encouraged (VCAA 2012a).

VET and Further Education (FE) units of competency are assessed in accordance with the VET Training Packages or accredited FE curriculum documents according to guidelines issued by the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF). VCE units undertaken as part of the VCAL program are assessed in accordance with the requirements of the VCE curriculum.

In November 2001, a limited number of schools and TAFE institutes in nine locations across Victoria were invited to participate in a VCAL trial to examine whether these aims might be met by a program like the VCAL. The nine sites were aligned with the Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLENs). These networks had been created as a result of one of the recommendations of the Kirby Review and had been charged with developing ‘collaborative approaches towards planning and improved delivery of post-compulsory education and training programs and services’ (Department of Education, Employment and Training 2000a, p. 19).

In December 2001, twenty schools and two TAFE institutes within these nine locations were approved as VCAL providers for this trial. The VCAL trial commenced in 2002 with a total of 559 students enrolled in these twenty-two sites across Victoria. The trial sites comprised fifteen government secondary schools, five Catholic colleges and two TAFE institutes. Eleven sites were in metropolitan Melbourne (including the two TAFE institutes). The remaining eleven sites were located in country Victoria. These twenty-two trial sites are listed in Table 3.

Table 3: VCAL Pilot – Trial Sites

Langwarrin Secondary College	Western Port Secondary College
Padua College, Mornington	Maryborough Regional College
Castlemaine Secondary College	Shepparton High School
Notre Dame College, Shepparton	Sebastopol Secondary College
Damascus College, Ballarat	Northland Secondary College
The Island – Collingwood college	Samaritan Catholic College, Preston
Kurnai College, Morwell	Lowanna College, Moe
Traralgon Secondary College	Lavalla Catholic college, Traralgon
Corio Bay Senior College	Doveton Secondary College
Eumemmerring Secondary College	Box Hill Senior Secondary College
Northern Melbourne Institute of TAFE	Box Hill Institute of TAFE

Source: VQA (2002c)

All these sites were chosen for their prior experience in developing and presenting programs to meet particular needs of students. With regard to gender, participation was predominantly male, with 72 per cent of VCAL students being boys and 28 per cent girls. The age of these students ranged from 15 years to 33 years with the median age being 16 years (16 year olds comprised 44 per cent of the total student group and 17 year olds comprised 32 per cent of the student group).

The VCAL was offered at three levels which catered for different levels of student abilities: Foundation, Intermediate and Senior level. The breakdown of enrolments across the certificate levels was 52 per cent of the student cohort enrolled at Foundation level, 44 per cent at Intermediate level and the remaining four per cent at Senior level. Of the total student cohort of 559, five per cent were reported by providers as having a disability and approximately seven per cent of the student cohort had an English as a second language (ESL) background (Henry et al. 2002).

It was anticipated that while management of these groups of students participating in the VCAL trial would be predominantly by secondary schools, the VCAL program would be developed by secondary schools in partnership with TAFE institutes, further

education providers, local employers and community organisations as well as the LLENs.

In 2002, the Research Institute for Professional Vocational Education and Training (RIPVET), a consortium of Deakin University and the Gordon Institute of TAFE, was commissioned to undertake an evaluation of the VCAL Trial. The general aims of the evaluation were:

- i. to assess the delivery and impact of the VCAL trial on participating students and on the trial site providers;
- ii. to identify, document and evaluate the range of VCAL learning programs offered across the trial sites. This [would] include the identification of successful strategies of delivery; best practice models or approaches; innovative funding and resource arrangements; and strategic partnerships; and
- iii. to identify and recommend on those policy and operational issues critical to the successful Statewide implementation of the VCAL in 2003.

(Henry et al. 2002, p. 1)

Findings of the RIPVET Review

This review was completed early in 2003. It provided evidence of considerable positive feedback and found that the VCAL was strongly supported in the trial sites. The report also found that the VCAL program was well designed to improve pathways for young people from school to work, further education and/or training and was appropriate for rolling out state-wide. However, it also identified a number of problems with the implementation of the program.

Broadly speaking, feedback from the trial schools was very positive. Peter Biddington, Director of Learning, Hawthorn Secondary College (in Cook 2003, p. 6) noted: *‘We have an eclectic population, and VCAL gives us the opportunity to create flexible pathways and different outcomes for students... VCAL allows schools to be imaginative and constructive in how they deal with students’*. Mrs Hodgkins, VCAL coordinator at Notre Dame College, was equally delighted with the result of the trial. When a group of students at Notre Dame College in Shepparton asked their VCAL

coordinator whether they could have the VCAL name emblazoned on the Year 12 jumper, Mrs Hodgkins knew that the VCAL program had been a success because the students were proud to say that they were undertaking the VCAL (Cook 2003).

Ms Toohey, VCAL coordinator at Box Hill Senior Secondary College, was also enthusiastic. *'VCAL is all about capturing the enthusiasm of students in their areas of interest and developing a learning program around those interests'*, said Ms Toohey (in Guy 2002, p. 3). *'Results have been very promising'*, she continued. *'We've seen young people, hell-bent upon leaving school, or at a loose end after failing to gain a higher education placement, blossoming under the new program'*.

Positive reports were also being received from regional areas. Carmel Hempenstall, the VCAL coordinator at Damascus College in Ballarat, stated *'VCAL is probably the most exciting curriculum development I've seen during my 29 years of teaching... [it] is without doubt an important option for students who have a range of pathways that are currently not being catered for within the VCE'* (Guy 2002, p. 3).

Some schools described the introduction and implementation of the VCAL as a 'seamless integration', with minimal disruption to its existing programs (Henry et al. 2003a, p. 3). Anna Vlass, Assistant Principal of Box Hill Senior Secondary College, described how the School Council decided to build on what was already a strength of the school – a model based on the Technical Schools Year 11 and 12 program, with a strong vocational or hands on focus (Henry et al. 2003a).

Others commented on how the VCAL provided the opportunity for a large number of students, who would otherwise have left school early, to remain at school. This gave them the chance to build their confidence and gain the necessary skills and workplace experience (Henry et al. 2003b). Students saw the VCAL as a 'hands-on course'. This message would soon become the VCAL's slogan.

Most importantly, the VCAL program was built upon the very initiatives that were already in place at a number of schools based on flexible and applied learning approaches. In fact, the evaluators of the trial firmly believed that the 'development of VCAL as an accredited statewide senior school certificate and the trial itself could

not have occurred without the enthusiasm, commitment, knowledge and experience of these pioneering schools' (Henry et al. 2003b, p. 2).

Partnerships with industry and the broader community were essential in ensuring the success of the program. Gunning (2005, p. 23) noted that schools had 'risen to the challenge of building strong partnerships with employers and community organizations' and were adopting more flexible timetables and rules. Parents also offered 'unequivocal support for the VCAL initiative' (Henry et al. 2002, p. 18). One parent thanked her son's school for being 'brave enough to pilot the program as it [had] made such a difference to her son' (Henry et al. 2003a, p. 70). Other parents, who had given up on their children, as far as schooling was concerned, were overjoyed that the same children were now 'achieving success and opening up new doors for the future'. In addition, 'employers were delighted with their experience of young people in their workplace and were prepared to offer apprenticeships or jobs to those young people' (Gunning 2005, p. 23).

Reactions from industry were equally encouraging. The Victorian Employers Chamber of Commerce and Industry CEO, Neil Coulson (in Cook 2003, p. 6), stated that employer feedback was positive, particularly where the duration of apprenticeships was able to be reduced because students had completed the VCAL. *'There are significant skill shortages in Victoria, and VCAL is one way of introducing strong industry links which will tailor learning programs to meet both student and employer need'*, said Mr Coulson. *'Students not only gain training in industry-specific skills, but also through structured work placement. This builds in real work exposure and can lead to employment through apprenticeships and traineeships'*.

The year 2002 was a big year for these trial schools. They had a lot to contend with and were therefore reliant on their familiarity and experience of past curriculum offerings in the VCE and the VCE VET programs. During this time, amongst the wide range of VCAL learning programs being offered across the 22 sites, a large number of units (115 units) were on offer and consisted of VCE and VCE VET units, with only another 26 VET/Further Education (FE) units outside this (Henry et al. 2003b). The reader is reminded that a VCE study (for example, VCE Chemistry and VCE Geography) consists of four units (units 1-4). Students may choose to undertake

all four units, or they may choose to undertake only units 1 and 2. VCE VET units are vocational units that offer students the opportunity to receive credit into the VCE.

During the trial, a substantial portion of the VCAL program was therefore limited to the more academic subjects. This would strongly suggest that there were many opportunities yet to be explored. An interim evaluation report (Henry et al. 2002, p. 3) of the VCAL trial had recommended that:

VCAL continue to be developed, expanded and secured within the Victorian system of education and training for young people seeking an accredited course of study other than those currently available through the structure of the VCE

This recommendation was taken up by the Victorian Minister of Education and Training, with the state-wide implementation of the program in 2003. The Victorian Government also injected significant funds to support the development of the VCAL program in schools as well as the development of partnerships with local employers and community organisations to support the delivery of the VCAL.

Despite these successes, the VCAL evaluation identified a number of ‘critical development needs’. These ‘needs’ related to weaknesses in how the academic curriculum worked. While these weaknesses reinforced the need to offer an alternative, they nevertheless suggested a barrier to the further expansion of the VCAL and would have to be addressed if a state-wide roll-out of the VCAL was going to be successful. The evaluation also identified the need to develop curriculum that resisted the domination of the existing generalised/abstract knowledge-based curriculum that currently existed in mainstream secondary education. Instead, curriculum needed to focus on applied and vocational learning which would provide a sustainable, valid pathway for students. It also identified the need to move away from teacher-centred, expository, classroom-based pedagogies that were still very much the norm within secondary schooling. Rather, new teaching approaches needed to be developed that would focus on adult learning principles. Furthermore, it was important to provide a more inclusive and flexible environment for these young students. These schools needed to work collaboratively with other schools and other community service organisations, employers, TAFEs and Adult and Community Education Centres in order to maximise opportunities for young people who were

undertaking applied learning and vocational courses. The evaluation also stressed the need to reverse negative stakeholder perceptions about vocationally-oriented applied learning as against vocationally-oriented academic learning and general education (Henry et al. 2003b).

The VCAL was a significant departure from the ‘dominant forms of teaching and learning since the 1950s’ (Henry et al. 2003b, p. 3). And it would not be easy to accommodate this type of teaching and learning within the existing institutional cultures of the secondary schools. If this were to succeed, significant changes would need to occur. According to Professor Henry (2003, p. 6) *‘Secondary schools have typically developed so that they deliver programs from within their boundaries’*. He noted that with the VCAL, schools would need to work in different ways and that *‘there is strong pressure on them to enter into arrangements within the local area – youth agencies, employment agencies, local business, TAFEs etc’*.

Professor Henry also acknowledged that while the VCAL opened up tremendous opportunities for schools to develop new partnerships, there also needed to be a ‘cultural shift’ from within schools. *‘VCAL could well become more academic and defined through classrooms rather than a full range of activities unless schools make institutional and cultural changes’*. Henry et al. (2003b) noted that while the VCAL had the potential to become a powerful influence for change, it would also present an enormous challenge for VCAL providers. For the program to succeed, providers would need to be prepared to change themselves if they were to exploit the full potential of the program.

Over the next few years, this curriculum innovation would undergo several other early evaluations, some of which were conducted ‘in-house’ and others involved the commissioning of external contractors. The focus now turns briefly to three of these evaluations, the first of which occurred in 2004. This evaluation was undertaken by Ryan, Brooks and Hooley (2004) and covered the first two years of the statewide implementation of the VCAL program in Victoria. The evaluation concluded that the VCAL had been highly successful in keeping young people in education and training and that the students were motivated and engaged in their learning. The evaluation also noted that the VCAL program provided plenty of opportunities for active

involvement and hard work and that it helped students get a clearer sense of their future. Finally, parents of these students were happy with the effects the VCAL had on their child's attitude towards school and work.

The evaluation concluded that overall, the VCAL program was working well, but it identified some areas for improvement, in particular, how the program was resourced and supported. For example, schools needed to consider the VCAL as a legitimate option rather than a 'second rate' option and that the program therefore needed to be better resourced in order to maximise its possibilities. The evaluation also identified a need for cultural changes to be made around the VCAL program and for changes to be made to teaching practices. The evaluation also concluded that teachers needed more professional development as they were unprepared for the applied learning aspects of the VCAL.

The second evaluation, undertaken by Keating and Noonan (2007), produced similar results. It concluded that the VCAL was serving a valuable role in the delivery of education and training and that it had been successful in providing robust pathways outcomes into apprenticeships, work and VET. Keating and Noonan (2007) recommended that the VCAL students needed stronger pathways into sub-tertiary programs at Certificate IV and Diploma levels and that attention should be given to the training of teachers for careers advice and mentoring.

Other research included a study undertaken by Polesel and Volkoff (2009, p. 1) which examined the participation and performance of young women in the VCAL. The study concluded that 'young women experience demonstrably poorer transitions than their male peers from the VCAL program, facing a greater risk of unemployment and part-time work'. In addition, those who found work were 'more likely to be situated in poorly paid and largely part-time and casualised occupations such as sales assistants and food handlers'. This is an issue that will be explored further in the next chapter.

These evaluations of the VCAL program suggest that while the program experienced considerable success in the first years of implementation, there were areas that were problematic and which needed to be addressed.

Before considering the students' and teachers' own perspectives on the effectiveness of the VCAL program, the focus turns to the growth of the VCAL.

There has been continued growth in student enrolments in the VCAL since it was first introduced. Figure 1 below depicts this growth over a nine-year period, to 2010.

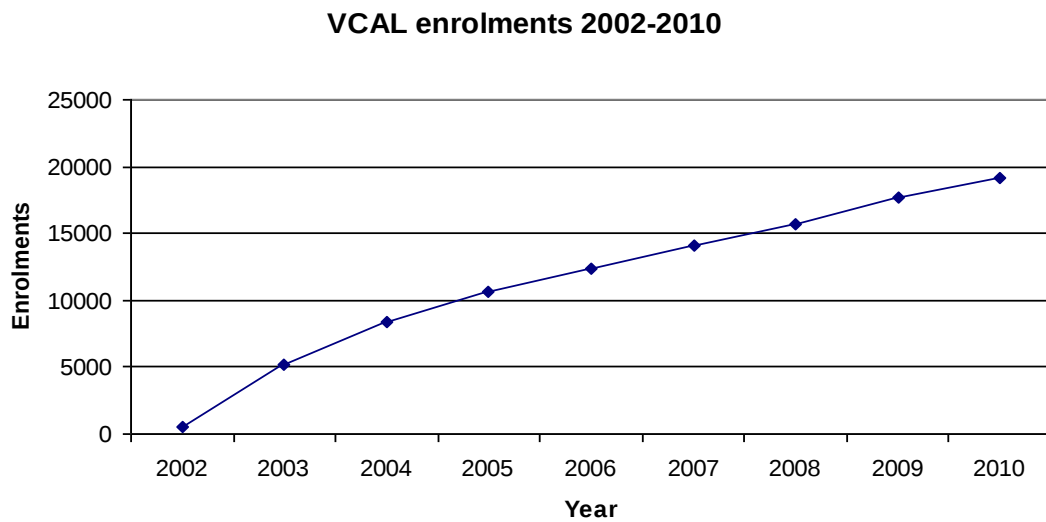


Figure 1: VCAL enrolments 2002-2010
Source: VCAA 2011b

Gender differences in the take up of VCAL

Figure 2 presents the gender distribution of the VCAL enrolments. This graph shows a considerably larger proportion of males than females undertaking the VCAL.

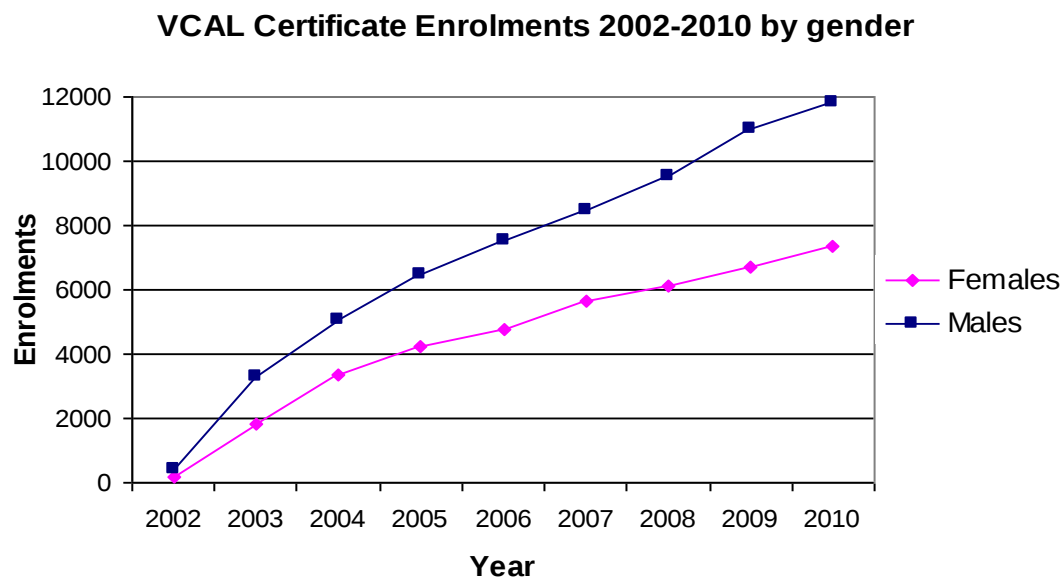


Figure 2: VCAL Enrolments by gender 2002-2010

Source: VCAA 2011b

It had been noted earlier that, in general, boys have traditionally dropped out of school in greater proportions than girls. On the surface then, these figures show that the VCAL may be playing an important role in catering for the needs of male students who may have been in danger of dropping out of school. And yet, as will soon be established, retention overall has not increased since the introduction of the VCAL.

VCAL enrolments for country and metropolitan Victoria

Figure 3 below charts the average enrolments for metropolitan and country regions in Victoria. Without adjusting for the size of the cohorts reaching the final years of school, this chart gives the impression that the take-up of the VCAL has been much greater in metropolitan areas than in country Victoria.

VCAL Enrolments - Country v Metro 2002-2010

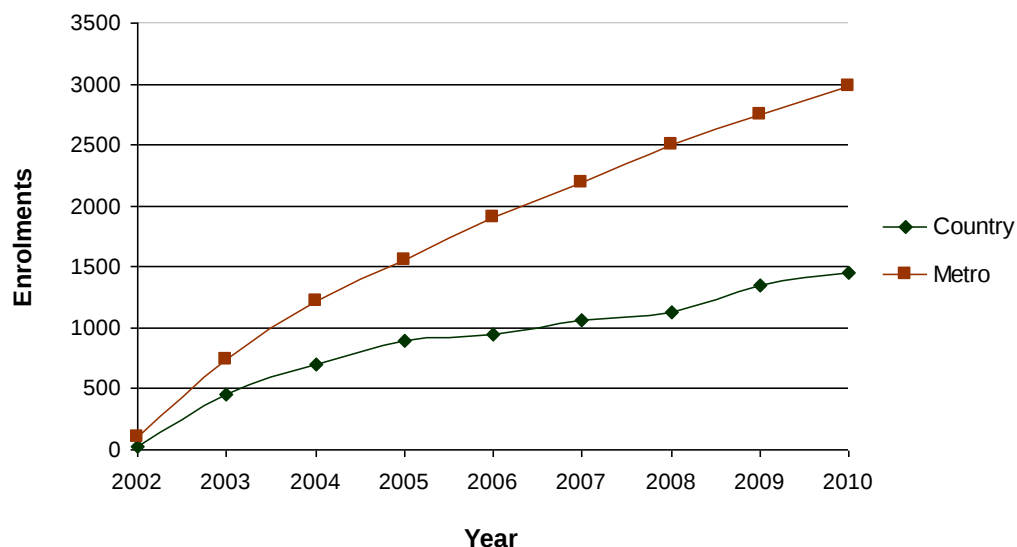


Figure 3: VCAL Enrolments (average country v metro) 2002-2010

Source: VCAA 2011b

However, when VCAL enrolments are presented as a proportion of the total Year 11 and Year 12 cohort, by region, a different picture emerges. Table 4 and Figure 4 present VCAL enrolments (Years 11 and 12) as a proportion of total Year 11 and 12 enrolments. As can be seen, the proportion of VCAL enrolments as a percentage of total students in Years 11 and 12 enrolments is higher in every region in country Victoria (with perhaps the exception of the Grampians region) than it is in metropolitan Melbourne. These figures suggest that the VCAL may have a role in boosting retention, particularly in country Victoria.

Table 4: VCAL enrolments as a proportion of the Total Year 11 and 12 enrolments

Source: VCAA 2011b

REGION	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
Barwon South West	0.17	4.1	7.33	9.7	11	12.9	14.1	16.3	18.5
Gippsland	1.1	8	12.2	14.9	14.6	15.7	16.6	18.7	22.9
Grampians	0.4	5.3	7.8	10.4	12.3	12	11.4	12.7	13.3
Hume	0.5	7.2	10.7	13.3	13.4	14.1	14.9	16.8	18.7
Loddon Mallee	0.4	6.4	11.5	13.2	12.6	12.5	14.7	16.4	18.5
Northern Metro	0.7	5	8	10.1	12.1	13.3	14.1	15.1	15.4
Southern Metro	0.4	2.8	5.1	7	8.7	9.7	10.1	11.4	12.5
Western Metro	0	2.9	5.7	6.5	7.2	9	11.1	12.3	12.9
Eastern Metro	0.4	2.8	3.7	4.9	5.5	5.6	5.9	6.4	7.1

Average

= Country

= Metro

REGION	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
Country	0.51	6.20	9.91	12.30	12.78	13.44	14.34	16.18	18.38
Metro	0.38	3.38	5.63	7.13	8.38	9.40	10.30	11.30	11.98

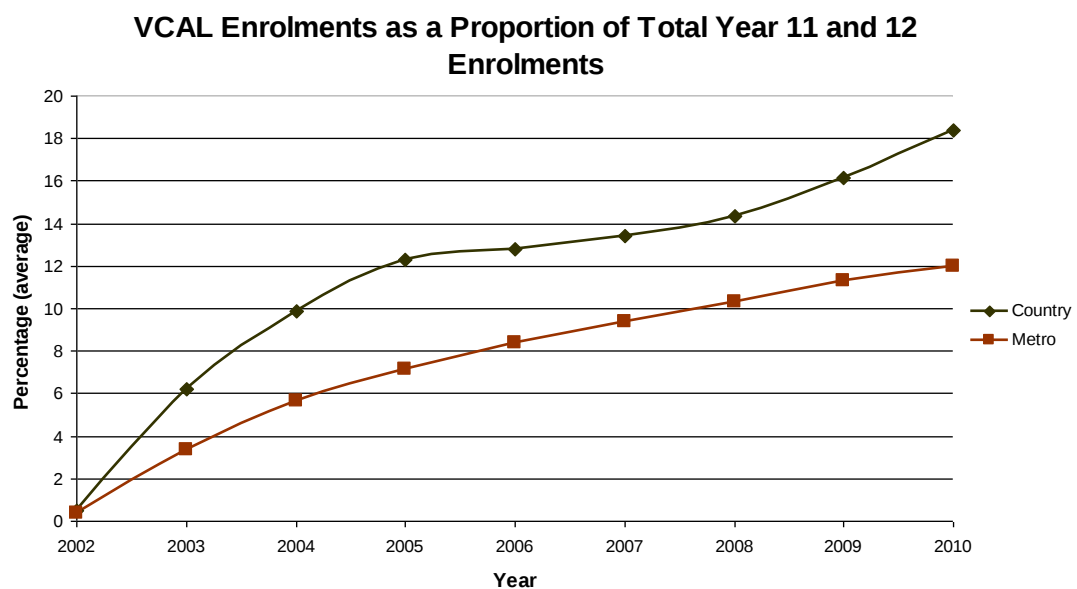


Figure 4: VCAL enrolments as a proportion of total Year 11 and 12 enrolments (average country v metro)

Source VCAA: 2011b

This graph (Figure 4) also suggests that VCAL is of greater proportional significance in country Victoria than in metropolitan Melbourne and that more upper secondary activity is taken up in rural and country Victoria by VCAL.

Some tentative conclusions can therefore be made. First, there has been a steady increase in the proportion of males and females undertaking VCAL, as a percentage of the overall Year 11 and 12 student cohort. In addition, there are significantly higher proportions of males than females undertaking VCAL. Secondly, for country Victoria, not only has there been a consistent growth in the proportion of males and females undertaking VCAL as a percentage of the overall Year 11 and 12 male and female cohort, but the percentage growth as a proportion of the total Years 11 and 12 male and female enrolments is considerably higher than that of metropolitan Melbourne. Nevertheless, the rate of growth of VCAL in terms of actual numbers has been much stronger in Melbourne. Finally, and given that student retention has been relatively steady during the period under review and that there has been a continued increase in enrolments in the VCAL, there may have been a shift from the more academic VCE into the VCAL.

The VCAL program has experienced substantial growth. It would be prudent at this point to investigate the reasons behind the growth in the VCAL a little further. The intent of providing an alternative certificate to the VCE was never merely to keep students at school ‘for its own sake’. It would be counter-productive to have reluctant learners staying on at school and not achieving anything. Rather, the VCAL was seen as having a much more important role to fulfil. The program not only needed to attract more students, particularly those who may have been early leavers; it also needed to encourage students to use the program as an opportunity to make good use of their time at school, and not be merely passive participants in education and training.

VCAL and student retention

As can be seen in Figure 5 below, the retention figures over a 10-year period (2000-2010) have remained static and are well short of the Victorian Government’s goals and targets.

There are, however, significant differences in retention rates between metropolitan and non-metropolitan regions.

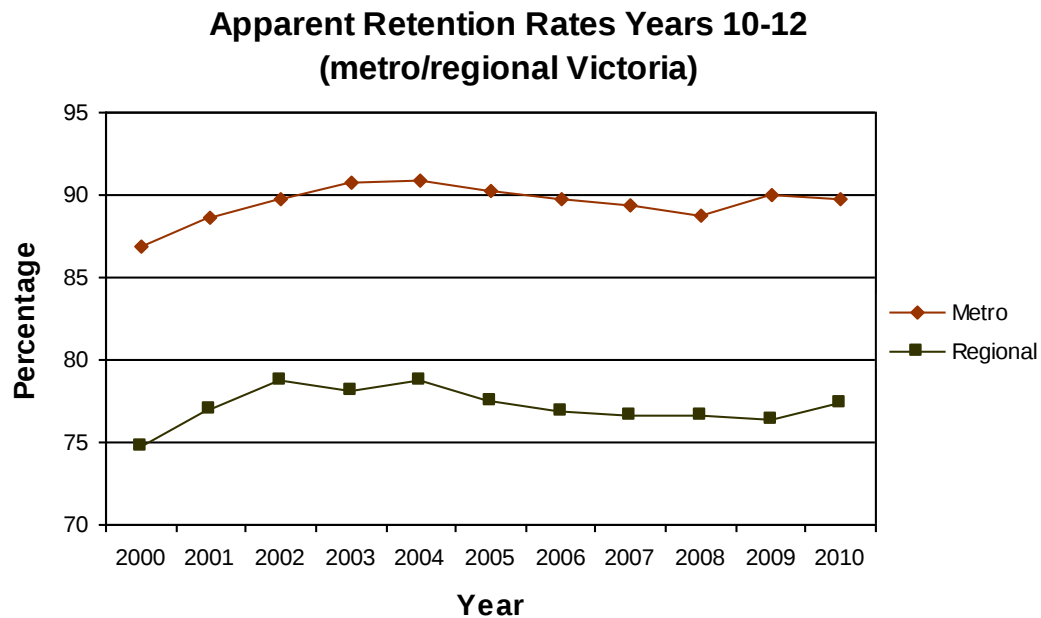


Figure 5: Apparent Retention Year 10-12 in metropolitan and regional (country) Victoria
Source: Department of Education and Early Childhood Development 2012a

This chart shows a persistent gap in student retention between metropolitan and country Victoria.

It would also be useful at this point to consider retention for girls and boys.

Gender Differences

Figure 6 below supports the view that girls are more likely to stay on at school than boys.

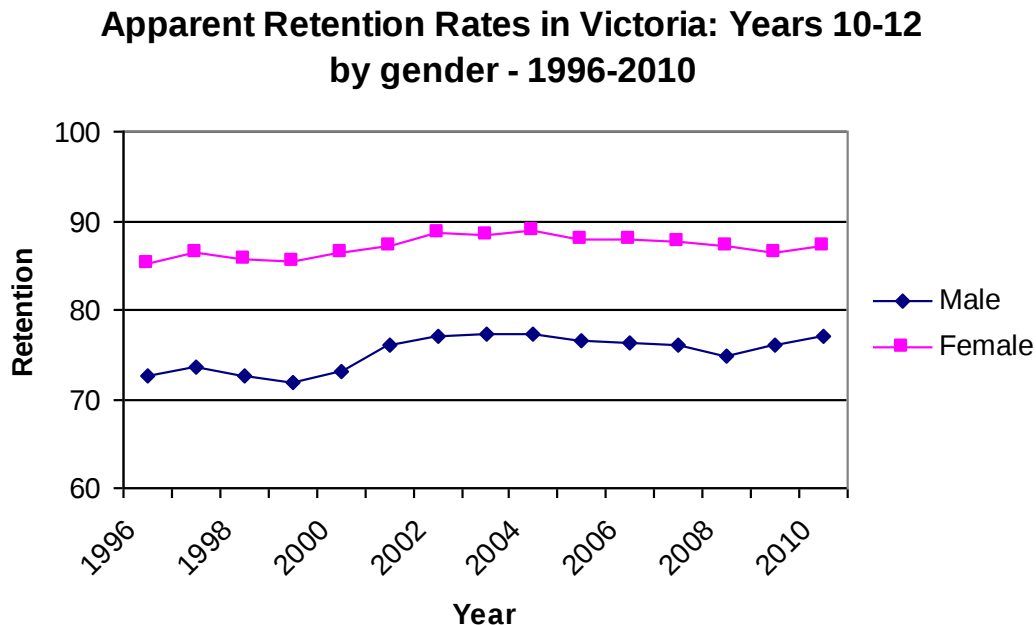


Figure 6: Apparent Retention Rates in Victoria by gender – Years 10-12

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics 17 March 2011

This supports earlier findings in the Kirby Review in 2000 which had noted that boys were on average twice as likely as girls to leave school early.

The Kirby Review had also made a number of findings which were gender specific and which had an impact on retention rates. In particular, girls were affected by a much sharper ‘contraction of the full-time labour market for young women since the mid-1970s’ (Department of Education, Employment and Training 2000a, p. 49). In addition, girls tended to be more successful scholastically than boys. The Review also noted that young people who left school early were at a higher risk of unemployment. However, the degree of risk hinged not only on when they left school, but also whether they were male or female. Unemployment tended to be lowest among boys who finished Year 11, while girls were at greater risk of unemployment. In addition, over half of all students who attempted Year 11 tended to continue in some form of education and training when they left school. The likelihood, however, of continuing in education and training was also strongly related

to gender and regardless of whether students completed Year 11 or not, boys were more likely to be in training than girls.

The Kirby Review had also noted that over two-thirds of boys who reached the end of Year 11 would go on to further study or training compared to only 53 per cent of girls. These gender differences were due to a large extent to the fact that boys had ‘much greater access to structured combinations of work and training’ (Department of Education, Employment and Training 2000a, p. 58). Finally, the Review reported that staying on at school for boys (more so than for girls) meant foregoing lost opportunities for work, income and independence. And if boys were able to find work, it was likely to include a combination of work and training (apprenticeships or traineeship). Boys would therefore become economically independent much more quickly than girls.

However, the Kirby Report (Department of Education, Employment and Training 2000a, p. 50) noted that the decision to leave school early is not simply ‘a reflection of job opportunities’ It is often related to the quality of schooling as experienced by the young student. And leaving school early, albeit for a full-time or worse still a part-time job, did not come without any potential economic penalties. Much depended on whether the individual would continue in training when they commenced work or whether a sufficient basis for lifelong learning had been built during the secondary years of schooling.

The retention figures also raise some important issues which need to be carefully considered. First, the Victorian economy during this period was buoyant. It could therefore be argued that there was direct competition between school retention and a strong labour market. Attraction to the labour market, in particular full-time employment, was likely to provide a significant barrier to student retention. And these favourable economic conditions were also likely to keep a tight lid on retention. Therefore, for retention figures to have actually increased, albeit at a small rate, is a substantial achievement.

Secondly, during a buoyant period of economic growth, opportunities for apprenticeships, particularly for boys are generally optimal. After the catastrophic downturn in the early 1990s, which brought the apprenticeship levels to the 1967 levels, and a subsequent downturn towards the late 1990s, apprenticeship levels reached a new high in the early 2000s, followed by a slow downturn after 2004 (National Centre for Vocational Education Research 2007). Given that retention rates remained relatively steady during a period of significant apprenticeship opportunities, particularly for boys, this indicates that retention rates were actually a lot more positive than would first appear. Boys appear to have continued to be drawn to staying on at school, despite the strength of the economy.

The third consideration is attributed to the ‘substitution effect’. Since the introduction of the VCAL, there appears to have been a change in the course composition of a student’s senior secondary program. This is because the introduction of the VCAL meant that a senior secondary student now had a larger program/subject selection choice and this could potentially alter the degree of VCE activity among this student cohort. Students who would normally have struggled under the VCE’s structure now had the opportunity to remain engaged in education and training and undertake a program more suited to their aspirations, needs and abilities, while getting formal recognition for their training.

While this change in course composition has made a significant impact on a student’s course choice, it seems to have *replaced* activity rather than created new activity. That said, however, it remains true that retention did not fall at a time when job opportunities were on the increase. However, it is very difficult to attribute stable retention figures to the VCAL.

Given the large numbers of students enrolled in the VCAL program, it is reasonable to infer that the introduction of the VCAL has had a significant effect, not necessarily on the level of retention, but on the composition of retention (the nature of the courses that students were taking). The researcher would argue, however, that an apparent lack of growth in retention may be viewed as masking the impact of the VCAL insofar as the program offsets losses of enrolments to apprenticeships and other full-time employment during a period of strong economic growth. The VCAL has had a

substitution effect (replacing activity in some courses by activity in other courses), but arguably also retained in school young people who would once have left and whose retention during good economic times helped offset losses due to the attrition of other young people. In terms then of the first research question, it was found that the VCAL played a role, though a limited one, in keeping students at school.

This chapter has examined the creation of the VCAL as a vocational alternative to the comprehensive VCE. It found that the VCAL was introduced as a response to a major curriculum review that had identified that the existing curriculum offerings within the VCE were not catering adequately for a substantial number of students in Victoria. This is despite the strengthening of vocational offerings within the VCE in the late 1990s.

The chapter also outlined the structure of the VCAL and the curriculum principles upon which the program is based. Furthermore, the chapter considered a number of earlier evaluations of the VCAL that were undertaken during the initial years of implementation. While initial responses were generally positive, the evaluations also identified some weaknesses.

The growth of the VCAL in the context of overall student completion rates in Victoria was also examined. Findings point to continued growth in student enrolments in the VCAL since it was first introduced. Furthermore, the VCAL may have played an important role in boosting student completion rates especially in country Victoria.

The next chapter examines the outcomes for VCAL students and investigates whether the VCAL program provides effective pathways for these students into further education, training or employment. Student outcomes are examined through the *On Track* Destination Survey, which was commissioned by the Education Department of Victoria in 2002. The focus in this thesis is mainly on ‘The Class of 2010’ because this is the year the fieldwork was undertaken and the sample of VCAL students interviewed formed part of this student cohort. The main area of interest, therefore, is the 2011 *On Track* survey which reported on ‘The class of 2010’.

CHAPTER 7

DOES THE VCAL PROVIDE EFFECTIVE POST-SCHOOL PATHWAYS?

It can be argued that a measure of success of the VCAL program is the extent to which it provides these students with effective pathways into further education, training and employment. In this chapter, the researcher argues that a successful transition for these students after completing the VCAL can be determined in terms of whether these students have been able to undertake higher level education and training after completing the VCAL or whether they have been able to secure good employment opportunities, either through full-time employment or an apprenticeship.

This chapter examines the post-school destination data that is collected by the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development *On Track* surveys. The researcher analyses this data and compares the destinations of VCAL students with other similar students who are not enrolled in the VCAL program. In this analysis, the relative outcomes of male and female students undertaking the VCAL are also examined. The main area of interest in this study is the student cohort of 2010, the year in which the researcher undertook the fieldwork. However, the data for this year is not inconsistent with the outcomes reported in the data collected for the years since the implementation of the VCAL program in 2002.

Overview of Year 12 completers' destinations

The *On Track* project (hereafter referred to as *On Track*) is the result of a major policy initiative undertaken by the Labor Government in 2002 to provide improved reporting and accountability arrangements in recognition of the need for ongoing and targeted improvements in student learning outcomes and school performance. *On Track* was initiated by the Labor Government in response to the Ministerial Review of Post-Compulsory Education and Training Pathways in Victoria – the Kirby Review in 2000. A subsequent Ministerial Statement, *Improved Educational Outcomes: A Better Reporting and Accountability System for Schools* (Department of Education

and Training 2002) had included an undertaking to the Victorian public to provide annual information on the education, training and employment destinations of students completing Year 12 or its educational equivalent, on a school-by-school basis.

On Track is a comprehensive survey of school leavers in Victoria that is managed by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD). The survey achieves a higher participation rate than other similar voluntary surveys of school leavers. This provides confidence that the reported results are a good representation of the target population (DEECD 2010). This project was designed to ensure that all Year 10 to 12 government and non-government school students were on a pathway to further education, training or employment after leaving school (DEECD 2012b). The project has been viewed as a “first” in Australia. According to the Ministerial Statement (Department of Education and Training 2002, p. 7):

A post-Year 12 transition profile will provide the Victorian public with a broad picture about what happens to students when they complete Year 12, and will assist schools in planning better educational programs and targeting resources to match student aspirations with their educational pathways.

The information has been published annually since June 2003. *On Track* surveys Year 12 completers (defined as having completed a senior secondary qualification, that is the VCE, the International Baccalaureate (IB) or the VCAL at Intermediate or Senior level) and early leavers (defined as having enrolled in a senior secondary unit but left school before completing Year 10, 11 or 12). The survey is completed six months after students leave school. It investigates student destinations and factors which have influenced their decisions. Information gathered supports the development of policy and programs to improve youth transitions in Victoria.

On Track builds on another important initiative implemented by the Labor Government in 2002, following the Kirby Review. The Managed Individual Pathways program (MIPs) assists 15-19 year old students with their individual career plans and provides support to achieve these plans. *On Track* ensures that Year 10-12

students are contacted after leaving school and that they are provided with further support if they are not in education or full-time employment.

In April-May 2011, 35,002 Year 12 completers were surveyed by DEECD. The sample of Year 12 completers includes 'those who completed such qualifications in schools (98.2 per cent) or in TAFE institutions or adult and community education providers (1.8 per cent)' (DEECD 2011, p. 2). This sample represents 66.1 per cent of all Year 12 or equivalent completers, or 76.1 per cent of the students who agreed to take part in the survey. This is a robust sample. The survey involved a short telephone interview with school leavers who had earlier agreed to participate. The aim was to provide an insight into post-school destinations pathways for these students. The vast majority of the students surveyed completed the VCE qualification (93 per cent), followed by the VCAL (6.1 per cent) and the IB (0.9 per cent).

The study (DEECD 2011) found that more than three-quarters of the overall group of Year 12 completers (76.6 per cent) continued in some form of education and training following completion of Year 12 or its equivalent in 2010. Overall, the most common activity after Year 12 was study towards a bachelor degree (49.5 per cent) followed by entry into certificate-level study (18.6 per cent). Apprenticeships and traineeships accounted for another 8.5 per cent of Year 12 completers. Almost one-quarter (23.5 per cent) of completers were not in education or training. Most were working either full-time (7.4 per cent), or part-time (11.1 per cent). According to the report, only 4.1 per cent were in the labour market but unemployed and looking for work. A further 0.8 per cent were not in the labour force, education or training (NILFET) (DEECD 2011).

When comparing the destinations of Year 12 completers by gender, females made up a larger proportion of the sample of Year 12 or equivalent completers (54.2 per cent) than males (45.8 per cent). This is predominantly a reflection of the higher completion rate of Year 12 females than males. There are also some gender differences in the destinations of these students, as indicated in Table 5 below.

Table 5 : Destinations of Year 12 or equivalent completers, by gender, student cohort of 2010

Destination	Females		Males		Persons	
	No	%	No	%	No	%
Bachelor Degree	9925	52.6	7392	45.8	17317	49.5
Certificate IV and above	2612	13.9	2371	14.7	4983	14.2
Certificate I, II and III	953	5.1	596	3.7	1549	4.4
Apprenticeship	253	1.3	1574	9.8	1827	5.2
Traineeship	746	4.0	390	2.4	1136	3.2
Employed full-time	1234	6.5	1345	8.3	2579	7.4
Employed part-time	2287	12.1	1599	9.9	3886	11.1
Looking for work	691	3.7	744	4.6	1435	4.1
NILFET	158	0.8	132	0.8	290	0.8
Total	18859	100.0	16143	100.0	35002	100.0

Source: DEECD 2011

In particular, women entered bachelor degree programs more frequently than men. Men were more likely than women to undertake VET programs at Certificate IV level and above while women were more likely to undertake VET programs at Certificate I-III than men. Furthermore, more young men than women undertook an apprenticeship and more young women than men undertook a traineeship. In addition, young men were more likely than young women to be employed full-time while young women were more likely than young men to be employed part-time. Finally, young men were more frequently looking for work compared to young women. This data suggests that while the university and lower level VET destinations are stronger for women, employment destinations for women overall (in particular part-time employment) are more precarious than the employment destinations for men.

VCAL Destinations

The survey data also allow the destinations of different kinds of Year 12 completers to be compared. As the focus of this study is on the VCAL, this section compares the destinations of the VCAL students with the destinations of the VCE completers. As indicated, other strands are available in Victorian schools. These include students in

the International Baccalaureate and students enrolled in the combined VCE and VCAL program. These groups are not considered in this analysis due to low numbers.

VCE students can include VET in Schools subjects as part of their VCE. Table 6 breaks down the VCE completers into two sections; students who do not include VET within their VCE program (VCE non-VET column) and students who include VET as part of their VCE (VCE VET column). Students who completed the VCAL certificate at Intermediate or Senior level are listed in the 'VCAL only' column. These students include VET as part of their program. They may also choose to undertake some VCE units as part of their VCAL program, but they receive the VCAL only as their certificate upon completion.

Table 6 Destinations of Year 12 or equivalent completers, for VCE non-VET, VCE VET and VCAL completers – student cohort of 2010

Destination	VCE non-VET		VCE VET		VCAL only	
	No	%	No	%	No	%
Females						
Bachelor Degree	7830	60.6	1913	40.0	10	1.3
Cert IV+	1499	11.6	914	19.1	157	20.1
Cert I-III	489	3.8	297	6.2	145	18.5
Apprenticeship	76	0.6	96	2.0	63	8.0
Traineeship	403	3.1	241	5.0	86	11.0
Employed F/T	742	5.7	399	8.3	64	8.2
Employed P/T	1398	10.8	688	14.4	148	18.9
Looking for work	392	3.0	190	4.0	91	11.6
NILFET	92	0.7	43	0.9	19	2.4
Total	12921	100.0	4781	100.0	783	100.0
Males						
Bachelor Degree	5839	57.3	1413	33.9	18	1.3
Cert IV+	1428	14.0	781	18.7	119	8.8
Cert I-III	291	2.9	163	3.9	126	9.3
Apprenticeship	397	3.9	517	12.4	542	39.9
Traineeship	179	1.8	139	3.3	60	4.4
Employed F/T	697	6.8	439	10.5	164	12.1
Employed P/T	912	8.9	485	11.6	162	11.9
Looking for work	360	3.5	210	5.0	152	11.2
NILFET	95	0.9	21	0.5	14	1.0
Total	10198	100.0	4168	100.0	1357	100.0
Persons						
Bachelor Degree	13669	59.1	3326	37.2	28	1.3
Cert IV+	2927	12.7	1695	18.9	276	12.9
Cert I-III	780	3.4	460	5.1	271	12.7
Apprenticeship	473	2.0	613	6.8	605	28.3
Traineeship	582	2.5	380	4.2	146	6.8
Employed F/T	1439	6.2	838	9.4	228	10.7
Employed P/T	2310	10.0	1173	13.1	310	14.5
Looking for work	752	3.3	400	4.5	243	11.4
NILFET	187	0.8	64	0.7	33	1.5
Total	23119	100.0	8949	100.0	2140	100.0

Source: DEECD 2011 (some percentages may not add to 100 per cent because of rounding)

The percentage of VCAL completers who were subsequently enrolled in a Bachelor degree as their destination (1.3 per cent) in 2011 was extremely low when compared with the percentage for VCE non-VET completers (59.1 per cent), and VCE VET completers (37.2 per cent) (DEECD 2011). This is not unexpected, given that the primary intent of the VCAL is to provide pathways into apprenticeships, traineeship and employment.

The percentage of VCAL completers who were subsequently enrolled in a VET certificate at Certificate IV+ level (12.9 per cent) is similar to that for VCE non-VET completers (12.7 per cent) but lower than that for VCE-VET completers (18.9 per cent). However, VCAL completers enrolled in a VET program at Certificate I-III at a much higher rate (12.7 per cent) than the VCE non-VET completers (3.4 per cent) and the VCE VET completers (5.1 per cent).

The percentage of VCAL completers who chose an apprenticeship or traineeship destination (28.3 per cent and 6.8 per cent respectively) is substantially higher than the percentage for VCE non-VET completers (2 per cent and 2.5 per cent respectively) and that for VCE VET completers (6.8 per cent and 4.2 per cent respectively).

VCAL completers were subsequently employed full-time at a higher rate (10.7 per cent) than VCE non-VET completers (6.2 per cent) and VCE VET completers (9.4 per cent). Furthermore, proportionally more VCAL completers (14.5 per cent) were employed part-time than VCE non-VET completers (10 per cent) and VCE VET completers (13.1 per cent).

The proportion of VCAL completers looking for work (11.4 per cent) is substantially higher than the proportion for VCE non-VET completers (3.3 per cent) and VCE VET completers (4.5 per cent). Moreover, the proportions of completers who are not in the labour force or education and training are higher for VCAL completers (1.5 per cent) than for VCE non-VET completers (0.8 per cent) and VCE VET completers (0.7 per cent).

When comparing the VCAL destinations by gender, for the student cohort of 2010, the following is observed. First, the same proportion of male and female VCAL completers subsequently enrolled in a bachelor degree program (1.3 per cent). The proportion of female VCAL completers who subsequently enrolled in a Certificate IV+ VET program was substantially higher than that for VCAL male completers (20.1 per cent compared to 8.8 per cent). Similarly there was a much larger proportion of female VCAL completers entering VET programs at Certificate I-III than male VCAL completers (18.5 per cent compared to 9.3 per cent).

In addition, the proportion of male VCAL completers who undertook an apprenticeship after the VCAL was much higher than that for female VCAL completers (39.9 per cent compared to 8.0 per cent). However, female VCAL completers undertook a traineeship at a higher rate than males (11.0 per cent compared to 4.4 per cent).

The proportion of males who were employed full-time (12.1 per cent) in 2011 is higher than that for females (8.2 per cent). However, there were a substantially higher proportion of girls (18.9 per cent) than boys (11.9 per cent) who were employed on a part-time basis after VCAL. The proportions of girls and boys looking for work were fairly similar (11.6 per cent for girls and 11.2 per cent for boys). However, higher proportions of girls (2.4 per cent) than boys (1 per cent) were not in the labour force or further education and training.

These figures show higher proportions of VCAL students entering the labour market without further education or training, especially into some of the more precarious destinations of part-time work and unemployment. These figures also suggest that girls are more vulnerable to precarious employment than boys after completing the VCAL. It would be useful to determine whether these patterns are repeated in subsequent years. The next section looks at the destinations of VCAL completers over a seven-year period to 2013.

Table 7: Destinations for VCAL completers by year 2006-2013 (%)

Year	Bach Degr e	Cert IV+	Cert 1- 111	Apprenticeship	Traineeship	Employed	Looking for work	NILFET	TOTAL %
2006	1.0	9.3	12.2	30.4	7.3	28.3	11.5	n/a	100
2007	0.7	9.5	10.0	28.1	6.3	30.8	14.6	n/a	100
2008	0.0	8.2	11.5	32.8	6.6	26.2	14.8	n/a	100
2009	0.6	12.3	11.0	27.9	5.6	28.2	12.6	1.8	100
2010	0.5	12.0	12.3	30.2	4.9	25.3	13.1	1.5	100
2011	1.3	12.9	12.7	28.3	6.8	10.7 (F/T) 14.5 (P/T)*	11.4	1.5	100
2012	0.5	16.2	10.5	25.3	7.1	27.0	11.8	1.6	100
2013	0.8	12.7	11.3	27.0	3.8	10.4 (F/T) 18.5 (P/T)*	14.1	1.4	100

Source: DEECD 2013 * data for full and part-time employment is only available for these years

Table 7 shows that over time, the most popular destination for VCAL completers was an apprenticeship. This is closely followed by employment. A substantial proportion of VCAL students were also undertaking VET programs after completing their VCAL.

However, there appears to be a substantial proportion of VCAL completers for whom their destinations after VCAL are somewhat precarious, in particular for students in part-time work or looking for work. For example, in 2011, 14.5 per cent of VCAL completers were employed part-time, while 11.4 per cent were looking for work. The situation was worse in 2013 for these students with 18.5 per cent of VCAL completers employed part-time and 14.1 per cent looking for work. However, the long term data suggest broadly similar patterns to those reported for the 2010 student cohort and suggest that there has been little change over time.

The destinations for VCAL completers for the period 2006-2013 are now broken down by gender in order to determine whether there are any gender specific issues relating to the destinations for these students after completing the VCAL.

Table 8: Employment destinations for VCAL completers by gender: 2006-2013 (%)

Year	Employed		Looking for work		NILFET	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
2006	25.2	33.4	11.4	11.6	-	-
2007	27.0	37.2	13.1	17.4	-	-
2008	24.4	30.0	12.2	20.0	-	-
2009	26.3	31.5	10.5	15.9	0.9	3.2
2010	22.2	30.9	12.5	14.2	1.5	1.7
2011	12.1 (F/T) 11.9 (P/T)	8.2 (F/T) 18.9 (P/T)	11.2	11.6	1.0	2.4
2012	26.5	27.8	11.9	11.6	1.2	2.2
2013	11.6 (F/T) 15.0 (P/T)	8.4 (F/T) 24.2 (P/T)	14.3	13.8	1.0	2.0

Source: DEECD 2013

As can be seen from Table 8, (in particular for the period 2006-2010) more females than males were making direct entry into the labour market. However when the data is disaggregated into full-time and part-time employment for 2011 and 2013, there was a higher proportion of males than females in full-time employment (12.1 per cent compared to 8.2 per cent for 2011 and 11.6 per cent compared to 8.4 per cent in 2013). Furthermore, a much larger proportion of female VCAL completers were employed part-time than their male counterparts (18.9 per cent compared to 11.9 per cent in 2011). The situation is somewhat worse, in particular for the female cohort reported in 2013 with 24.2 per cent females in part-time employment compared to 15 per cent for males in part-time employment. In addition, there were similar proportions of VCAL males and females looking for work, with the exception of years 2007-2010. There were fairly similar proportions of males and females who were not in the labour force, education or training. This data suggests that female VCAL completers are at greater risk of precarious employment after VCAL than their male counterparts, in particular, for part-time employment. The long-term dangers of precarious employment and associated insecure, low-paid work have been identified by many researchers (see for example, Wilson 2013).

It is not the intent to make direct comparisons of the destinations of VCAL and VCE completers in this study. The two certificates fulfil very different functions. Comparison is useful and important, but it needs to be restricted to the ‘comparable’.

In order to achieve a more useful comparison, the data here is analysed in order to compare senior secondary students from similar academic profiles.

Victoria uses a General Achievement Test or GAT to measure student achievement at a summary level with a view to ensuring comparability of school-based assessment for the VCE across schools. This test can be used to compare student achievement between students undertaking the VCAL and those in the lowest quartile of VCE achievement.

The GAT is a set of tests of general knowledge and skills in written communication, mathematics, science and technology and humanities, the arts and social sciences (VCAA 2012b). All students undertaking at least one VCE study at units 3/4 level (a VCE study contains four units) as part of their senior secondary certificate are required to sit for this test. This includes VCE and VCAL-enrolled students who are undertaking VCE units as part of their program.

The achievement profile (in GAT terms) of VCAL students is quite low. For example, it is estimated that about three-quarters of VCAL-VCE students achieve in the lowest fifth band of GAT, as shown in the Figure 7 below (based on 2007 data). This is not altogether surprising, given that the VCAL was developed (among other things) to cater for students who are struggling with the academic demands of the VCE. For this reason, a more useful comparison could be made with the destinations of these students with VCE students in the lowest GAT quartile, given that this is the achievement location of most of the VCAL cohort. VCAL students and VCE students in the lowest GAT quartile are quite similar in terms of academic achievement and are most likely to face similar academic challenges and may struggle with tertiary education.

The comparison employed here is between (a) all VCAL students (other than Foundation level) and (b) VCE students who are in the lowest achievement quartile.

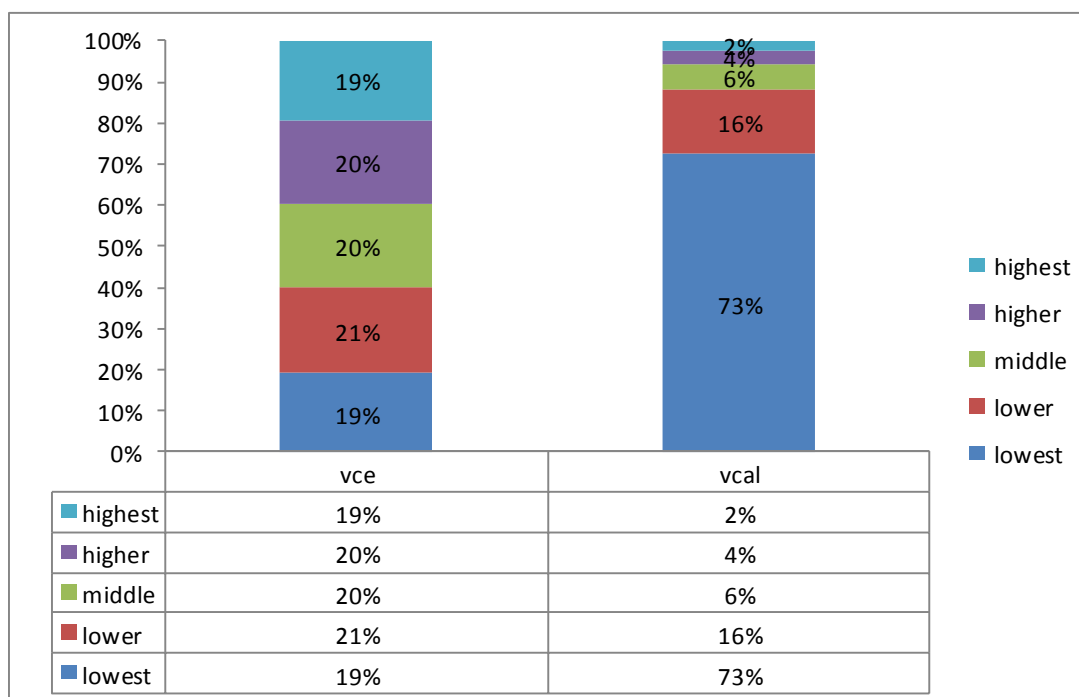


Figure 7: Achievement profile (in GAT terms) of VCAL-VCE students

Source: Unpublished DEECD tables (Teese 2007)

While the GAT results do not count directly towards the VCE results, they are a good indicator of student achievement. Given that a substantial proportion of VCAL students undertake some VCE units as part of their VCAL program, many students undertake the GAT test and this provides useful comparisons of student achievement between these groups of students. Although this does not necessarily explain why the outcomes for VCAL students are poorer than those for VCE students, it provides some understanding of the kinds of students who are enrolling in the VCAL program.

The destinations of VCAL completers are now compared with the destinations of VCE completers who are in the lowest GAT quartile.

Table 9: Destinations of VCAL completers and VCE completers in the VCE lowest GAT quartile – student cohort of 2010

Destination	VCE (lowest GAT quartile)	%	VCAL only	%
Bachelor Degree	1591	24.6	28	1.3
Certificate IV+	1774	27.3	276	12.9
Certificate I-III	566	8.7	271	12.7
Apprenticeship	476	7.3	605	28.3
Traineeship	330	5.1	146	6.8
Employed full-time	508	7.8	228	10.7
Employed part-time	854	13.1	310	14.5
Looking for work	356	5.5	243	11.4
NILFET	45	0.7	33	1.5
Total	6500	100	2140	100

Source: DEECD 2011

As can be seen from Table 9, university destinations for this group of VCE graduates are substantially higher than those for the VCAL graduates. The VCE student cohort in this table is entering higher level vocational training (Certificate IV or Diploma, both technician-level qualifications) at a much higher rate (27.3 per cent) than their VCAL counterparts (12.9 per cent). However, a greater proportion of VCAL completers than VCE completers are entering more basic VET programs after the VCAL. Furthermore, apprenticeship destinations are very strong for the VCAL graduates compared to these VCE graduates. Traineeship destinations for these VCAL graduates are marginally higher than for these VCE graduates. This suggests that the VCAL is successful in providing effective pathways for some students into apprenticeships and traineeships. Transitions into employment, in particular part-time employment are equally problematic for VCE and VCAL graduates. However, unemployment amongst VCAL graduates is twice as high as amongst their VCE counterparts (11.4 per cent compared to 5.5 per cent).

These are not particularly strong outcomes for the VCAL cohort. However, it is important to keep in mind that VCAL students are significantly weaker in academic terms than the general VCE student cohort. The outcomes and destinations for these VCAL completers therefore need to be considered in light of this weaker academic profile. However, this raises some important considerations for the VCAL. It is

important to note that university was never intended to be a destination for VCAL graduates. While the VCE student cohort on this table are more likely to enter higher level VET programs than the VCAL students in this table, the VCAL figures could also suggest that these VCAL students are now able to substitute the VCE with the VCAL and still follow the same training pathway, something that these types of students were previously unable to do. This may be of particular benefit for students who would have been unable to cope with the academic challenges of the VCE.

However, VCAL students are enrolling in higher-level VET programs at a much lower rate than their VCE counterparts (only about half as often). This could suggest that these students are being given weak signals in terms of the potential of pursuing pathways into Technical and Further Education (TAFE). It could also suggest that there are significant ‘gaps’ between the level of VET that the VCAL students are undertaking as part of the VCAL program and the higher-level training undertaken at TAFE. Furthermore, this may raise concern among TAFE institutes that VCAL graduates are inadequately prepared for training at Certificate IV level. TAFE institutes may as a result adopt a more conservative approach and may therefore be disinclined to offer these students training opportunities at this level.

The data also suggests that a substantial proportion of VCAL graduates are enrolling in basic VET courses or looking for work when they might otherwise be undertaking higher level VET programs. This level of VET equates to what these students would have been doing as their VET component within the VCAL program. This raises the question of whether these students have been provided with appropriate level of VET during their VCAL program or whether these students have chosen to pursue vocational training in another field of study and are therefore commencing their training at a lower level. It also puts into question whether the VCAL is being used effectively as a platform to raise achievement and to encourage students to aim higher in their education and training.

The unemployment rate for the VCAL graduates is also considerably higher than for their VCE counterparts. Given that one of the stated aims of the VCAL is to provide effective pathways into employment, the situation for VCAL graduates is particularly problematic. This may also confirm industry concern, identified in the literature

search, that vocational training in schools is not as effective as training in the workplace and that the VCAL students are therefore inadequately prepared for the workplace. Given that the employment prospects for this group of VCAL graduates are somewhat precarious; this may suggest that these students who hold minimal qualifications should be encouraged to undertake higher level VET programs. It may also suggest that there should be a concerted effort to reduce the unemployment figures by boosting apprenticeships and traineeships and in some cases, lower-level training (if this is more appropriate). Furthermore, it may suggest the need to provide stronger links between VCAL programs and higher level training, including Certificate IV and Diploma level programs at TAFE.

Given that the transitions for VCAL students after completing the VCAL are somewhat problematic, it would be useful to determine the extent to which the VCAL program is providing good transitions into further education, training and employment by taking a closer look at the destinations of a sample of the 2010 early leavers and comparing them with the destinations for the VCAL completers for the same year. The intent is to investigate whether completing a VCAL program provides distinct benefits to a group of students who were potentially at a significant risk of leaving school early if the VCAL program was not available. The researcher will also analyse some of the reasons students may exit schooling before completing their senior secondary education. This is to determine whether the VCAL has had an impact on encouraging these students to remain in school. The next section analyses early leavers and their destinations after leaving school.

The *On Track* report (DEECD 2011, p. 29) defines early school leavers as those students in Years 10, 11 and 12 who had registered their details with the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA) by enrolling in an International Baccalaureate (IB) program or a VCE or VCAL unit, and who left school without completing one of the following certificates: IB, VCE, VCAL senior or VCAL intermediate

The *On Track* sample of early leavers is smaller and less robust than the completers' sample. Therefore, less reliance can be placed on the estimates of destinations for this group. However, it is important to use such survey data to examine some possible reasons why young people are leaving school before completing a senior secondary qualification.

A total of 3768 early leavers were contacted and surveyed by DEECD in 2011. This represents a response rate of 34.8 per cent of those who had consented to be contacted (10,824). Findings from the early leaver data therefore need to be treated with caution. However, *On Track* (DEECD 2011) claims that the sample of early leavers is larger than any other data collection currently available and therefore enables a more comprehensive analysis than would otherwise be the case.

Just over one-half of the early leaver sample (51.3 per cent) had attempted or completed Year 11; 19.7 per cent had been in Year 10 or below and the remaining 29 per cent had started but did not complete Year 12. There tended to be more male early school leavers than female early school leavers (DEECD 2011).

The majority of early school leaver respondents (95.5 per cent) were either undertaking education or training or had entered the labour market where they were either working or looking for work. The remaining 4.5 per cent were not in the labour force, education or training (NILFET).

In May 2011, more than one-half (55.3 per cent) of the early school leavers in the survey were in some form of education and training. According to *On Track* (DEECD 2011), this is similar to the percentages of early leavers in the 2008, 2009 and 2010 surveys, but lower than the percentage of Year 12 or equivalent completers

(76.5 per cent). Table 10 below takes a closer look at the main destinations of these early leavers, by gender.

Table 10: Destinations of all early school leavers, by gender – student cohort of 2010

Destination	Females		Males		Persons	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Certificate IV or above	138	9.6	114	4.9	252	6.7
Certificate I-III	271	18.8	238	10.2	509	13.5
Apprenticeship	142	9.9	970	41.6	1112	29.5
Traineeship	118	8.2	91	3.9	209	5.5
In education and training (sub-total)	669	46.5	1413	60.6	2082	55.3
Employed full-time	145	10.1	285	12.2	430	11.4
Employed part-time	248	17.2	228	9.8	476	12.6
Looking for work	268	18.6	343	14.7	611	16.2
NILFET	108	7.5	61	2.6	169	4.5
Not in education or training (sub-total)	769	53.5	917	39.4	1686	44.7
All destinations	1438	100.0	2330	100.0	3768	100.0

Source: DEECD 2011

The percentage of female early school leavers who were enrolled in some form of education and training (46.5 per cent) was substantially smaller than the percentage of male early school leavers (60.6 per cent). This difference is largely because of the significant take-up of apprenticeships by the male cohort (41.6 per cent). On the other hand, participation in the labour force—other than through apprenticeship or traineeship—was greater among female early leavers (45.9 per cent) than among male early leavers (36.7 per cent). However, female early leavers were more likely to be in part-time employment rather than full-time employment. The reverse is true for male early leavers. While part-time work may lead to full-time employment, in general, it does not afford the same level of advantages associated with full-time work, particularly with regard to wages, career opportunities and access to training (DEECD 2011).

The most frequent education and training destination (and the overall most frequent destination) for females was a Certificate I, II or III level program (18.8 per cent).

Another 9.6 per cent of females were enrolled in a course leading to a Certificate IV or above. A further 18.1 per cent of females took up apprenticeships and traineeships. For males, apprenticeships dominated the education and training destinations for early school leavers (41.6 per cent). This was followed by Certificate I-III courses (10.2 per cent) and higher level courses (4.9 per cent), followed by 3.9 per cent for traineeships.

There are several reasons why young people may leave school before completing Year 12 or an equivalent certificate. Helme and Polesel (2004, cited in DEECD 2011, p. 41) classify various influences leading to early school leaving as ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors. ‘Push’ factors operate within the school setting and drive young people away, while ‘pull’ factors attract people away from the school setting into another pathway, for example, an apprenticeship, training or employment.

During the 2011 *On Track* survey, early school leavers were invited to provide reasons why they left school. Table 11 below presents ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors which influenced their decisions to leave school early.

Table 11: Reasons given by early leavers for leaving school, by gender: student cohort of 2010
(Percentages in the 'first reason' columns may not add to 100 per cent due to rounding. Percentages in the 'other reason' columns represent only those who offered additional reasons and sum to less than 100 per cent:

Reason	Females		Males	
	First Reason	Other Reason	First Reason	Other Reason
PUSH FACTORS				
I didn't like school or teachers/I wasn't interested	18.1	6.0	19.4	7.6
School wasn't for me/I wasn't learning	10.0	1.9	10.6	2.1
I wasn't coping well at school/failing subjects	9.7	2.9	5.6	1.6
I was asked to leave/expelled/got in trouble	2.7	0.6	4.7	0.7
Bullying or peer relationship problems	4.2	1.5	1.1	1.3
Other push factors	3.5	1.4	2.6	0.7
PULL FACTORS				
Work or career reasons	15.8	5.4	38.3	8.4
I wanted to study elsewhere (eg TAFE) or do a different course	5.2	1.6	3.7	1.0
I travelled/I went overseas/I moved	4.5	1.6	1.4	0.6
Other pull factors	4.0	1.5	4.1	2.0
OTHER FACTORS				
Family or other personal reasons	9.7	1.4	2.9	0.7
Ill health	8.2	2.0	2.3	0.5
Other	4.2	3.5	3.2	2.8

Source: DEECD 2011

Leaving school for work and career reasons was the most popular 'pull' factor for both males and females. This was nominated by 15.8 per cent of female early leavers and 38.3 per cent of male early leavers as the main reason for leaving school early. The most important 'push' factor was that they did not like school or teachers, or they were not interested in school. This was nominated by 18.1 per cent of female early leavers and 19.4 per cent of male early leavers as the main reason for their early exit. Another important 'push' factor was that school wasn't for them and that they felt they were not learning. This was nominated by 10 per cent of females and 10.6 per cent of males as their main reason. Furthermore 9.7 per cent of females and 5.6 per cent of male early leavers claimed that they were not coping well with school and were failing subjects.

These factors represent a substantial proportion of the overall reasons why young people exit schooling before completing a senior secondary qualification. This data

suggests that a student's learning experience and the school and teaching environment is therefore likely to have a strong impact on whether students choose to stay and complete a senior secondary qualification or exit school without having completed a senior secondary qualification. This therefore raises the question of whether staying on at school and completing the VCAL may give these students better transitions into further education, training and employment, than if they left school without completing a senior secondary qualification. The next section compares the destinations for the sample of the overall early leaver cohort for 2010 with the sample of the 2010 cohort of VCAL completers (DEECD 2011).

Table 12: Destinations of early leavers and VCAL completers – student cohort of 2010.

Destination	Early Leavers (%)	VCAL completers (%)
Bachelor Degree	0	1.3
Certificate I-IV+	20.2	25.6
Apprenticeship	29.5	28.3
Traineeship	5.5	6.8
Employment	24.0	25.1
Looking for work	16.2	11.4
NILFET	4.5	1.5
Total	100	100

Source: DEECD 2011

As can be seen from Table 12, destinations into VET programs for the VCAL completers are higher than those for early leavers. Traineeship destinations are marginally higher for the VCAL completers while apprenticeship destinations are marginally weaker for these VCAL completers. Furthermore, the employment outcomes are also marginally stronger for the VCAL completers and there is a smaller proportion of VCAL completers who are not in the labour force, further education and training. This suggests that for the student cohort of 2010, the students who were able to complete the VCAL were only marginally more likely to effectively transition into further education, training and employment than the early leaver cohort. The data also suggests that from a pathways perspective, completing the VCAL program does not significantly improve transitions into further education, training and employment for these students. However, they are less likely to be unemployed.

This chapter has examined whether the VCAL is successful in providing effective pathways for these VCAL students into further education, training and employment.

In order to determine its effectiveness in this regard, the DEECD's destination data of the VCAL completers for 2010 was compared with the destinations of the overall Year 12 completers for this year. Based on an analysis of this data, it found that apprenticeship destinations, particular for males undertaking the VCAL are strong. However, pathways into employment, in particular part-time employment, are somewhat precarious, especially for girls. When compared with a group of VCE students in the lowest GAT quartile in achievement terms, the VCAL completers are entering more basic VET programs after completing the VCAL. This raises questions as to whether the VCAL is being used effectively to provide these students with effective transitions into higher level VET programs. It also raises concerns about the nature of the careers advice these VCAL students are receiving. In particular, it questions whether the advice given to these students is placing a different emphasis on appropriate destinations for these VCAL graduates. In terms of the second research question then, this study found that post-school pathways for the VCAL students were not strong, but that this partly reflects the very weak academic skills of the cohort.

Moreover, the retention effects of the VCAL must also be considered. Chapter 1 identified a substantial body of research which analyses the costs of dropping out of schools (see for example, Rumberger & Lamb 2003; Shavit & Müller 1998, Rumberger 2011, Markussen 2011 and Markussen & Sandberg 2011). These studies claim that students who drop out of school suffer a number of consequences which affect them for the rest of their lives. According to Rumberger (2011), the consequences of dropping out are not just economic. Dropouts are more likely to engage in crime, have poorer health and are less likely to participate in community activities. Rumberger (2011) and Markussen and Sandberg (2011) also point to evidence of the impact of dropping out affecting not only the dropouts but also the rest of society.

Rumberger (2011) claims that higher levels of engagement in a learning program reduce the likelihood of students dropping out. Given the evidence of the impact and consequences of dropping out and the need to keep students effectively engaged in their education, it is important that these students are offered a program which effectively engages them in their learning. The next chapter examines whether these VCAL students are effectively engaged in their VCAL program.

CHAPTER 8

DOES THE VCAL LEAD TO EFFECTIVE LEARNER ENGAGEMENT?

VCAL has taught me so much about life, how to lead, how to be part of a team, the importance of reliability, good communication, trust and a good work ethic.... VCAL was a chance for me to get my life back on track, skill me up for my future and give me a voice where I am always encouraged to believe in myself, whilst being made aware of community needs...

(Brown 2011)

The short excerpt from Jessica's speech at the VCAL Awards in 2011 describes a VCAL student who has been effectively engaged in a program which has equipped her with life skills as well as employability skills. This chapter explores the impact the VCAL program has had on a number of young people who participated in this study. In particular, it considers the effectiveness of this program in engaging young learners. The focus is on learners who have been identified as facing significant academic challenges and who are often reluctant to engage with their education.

The researcher measured the effectiveness of the VCAL program in engaging these students against a number of factors. These include the ability for these students to be involved in a good quality learning program where they can not only experience success and be motivated to learn, but also where they can make clear connections between what they learn and how they can apply it in real-life contexts. Other factors, against which the effectiveness of this program in engaging these students is measured, include the opportunity to be better prepared for work and to develop strong relationships with teachers and students. These factors are considered primarily through the fieldwork that was conducted in 2010 through a series of interviews with 38 VCAL teachers and co-ordinators and 90 students in a number of focus groups. They are also considered in the context of some of the research identified in Chapter 2, in particular Bransford et al. (2000) and Darling-Hammond (1997) which consider the importance of providing relevant real-life teaching and learning and the importance of building strong relationships in the classroom.

The researcher considered that the size of the sample is too small to establish a typical profile of a VCAL student. Providing a specific profile, particularly in terms of the socio-economic status of these students might compromise the identity of the participants. However, in the absence of the actual profile of the VCAL students, it is useful to reveal something about teacher perspectives of a typical profile of a student entering the VCAL program. In interviews, the VCAL teachers were asked what they believed was a typical profile of a VCAL student. Four teachers volunteered some information on the socio-economic background of these students. Mr Comrie described his school as being located in a low socio-economic area where parent expectations of their children were '*not high*'. Mr Richardson reported that his school faced significant challenges because many of their VCAL students came from broken families and experienced severe financial hardship. Mr Finch also reported that his school was in a '*working-class area*' with parents having a trade background. He further stated that his school wanted to move in a very academic direction which was '*in conflict with the type of student we have here*'. A recent report by the Victorian Auditor-General on student completion rates (Pearson 2012) presents similar findings in this regard and identifies that 'as a proportion, more students with identifiable and measurable risk factors related to completing school - such as low socio-economic status and low academic achievement - undertake VCAL as a senior secondary qualification'.

Responses from the teachers concerning a typical profile of a VCAL student centred on a number of themes. Half of the teachers interviewed (19 teachers) reported that they believed that a typical VCAL student was one who was very focussed on a career pathway, in particular a trade or apprenticeship, rather than an academic pathway. Four teachers added that a typical VCAL student was one who wanted to go to work straight after completing VCAL. Eight teachers believed that a typical VCAL student tended to be academically weak, but four teachers argued that this was not necessarily the case and that these students had enrolled in the VCAL program, not necessarily because they were not intelligent, but rather because they could not see the value of undertaking the VCE when they did not want to pursue an academic pathway. Fourteen teachers described a VCAL student as one who was typically disengaged from schooling and had challenging behaviour – '*the naughty kids*'. Five teachers argued that initially, the VCAL tended to attract more boys than girls. According to

Mr Baker, these were boys with a *'footy club mentality, raging hormones and a diverse range of abilities'*. However, nine teachers argued that the profile of a typical VCAL student was changing. In fact, Mr Edgars believed that there was no longer a typical profile of a VCAL student. According to Mr Edgars:

Some students have a distinct pathway with a strong sense of where they want to be; some will come in with an apprenticeship they are interested in; these students are highly motivated, keen to get out into the workplace. Yet other students are still unsure about their pathway but they know they don't want to go to university.

Ms Matthews also felt that students were now making a conscious choice about their senior secondary options and were choosing to do the VCAL. *'Initially it was us identifying kids with low literacy; now the old stereotypes are fading and people are looking at it as more of a legitimate pathway rather than a place where dumb kids go'*. According to Ms Isaac, many students at her school were returning to complete Year 12 *'because they wanted to and were happy being there'*. Furthermore, Ms Isaac believed that the attitudes and work outputs of her VCAL students had improved and now it was the 'VCE kids' who were causing the hassles, not the 'VCAL kids'.

In order to provide further context to this chapter, the reader is also reminded of important findings of the Kirby Review which were discussed in Chapter 6. The Kirby Review had noted that there were two factors that were most frequently reported by early leavers. These were 'the desire for work and the lack of interest in schoolwork' (Department of Education, Employment and Training 2000a, p. 54). The Review had also argued that a substantial number of students were, for various reasons, unable to cope with the academic demands of the VCE. A different learning program therefore needed to be developed, a program which would re-engage students in education and training, offer them the opportunity to develop work-related skills and also engage them in the community outside the school setting. The development of the VCAL was an attempt at a system level to provide these students with this educational opportunity in order to encourage them to remain at school. For many of these students, the VCAL was an important reason for them remaining in

education. In the Victorian Education Department's *On Track* survey of the class of 2009 VCAL completers—an earlier cohort by one year (during which the fieldwork was undertaken)—these students were asked: *Was your VCAL course an important reason you stayed on at school?* A substantial proportion of VCAL students (87.3 per cent) either strongly agreed or agreed that the VCAL course was an important reason they stayed on at school (DEECD 2010). A similarly high proportion of respondents had provided the same answers in previous years.

Chapter 6 examined the growth of the VCAL program since it was first introduced in 2002 and noted a continued increase in VCAL enrolments. This continued growth in VCAL enrolments could therefore suggest that the VCAL offered a learning program which is keeping these students in education and training. However, the intent of providing an alternative certificate to the VCE was never merely to keep students at school, as it would be counter-productive to have reluctant learners staying on at school and achieving very little. The program not only had to attract more students, particularly those who were at risk of becoming early leavers, but it also needed to get these students to use the program as an opportunity to make good use of their time at school, to improve their career prospects and be actively engaged in their learning, rather than be merely passive participants in education and training. Despite consistent growth in VCAL enrolments, it cannot therefore automatically be assumed that this means that the students who are involved in the program are actually actively engaged in their learning.

In order to test the effectiveness of the VCAL in engaging these young learners, the researcher undertook a series of interviews with 38 VCAL teachers/coordinators at 24 government schools and eight Catholic colleges with representation from metropolitan and country Victoria and a number of student focus group at 11 of these government schools and six Catholic colleges. In total, 90 students participated in these focus groups. In reporting on these interviews, and to protect the identity of the students and teachers, the students have been given fictitious names and the teachers are identified as Mr or Ms, with fictitious surnames.

In this study, conducting interviews directly with the parents of these VCAL students was not possible. However, the parents of these VCAL students play an important

role, not only in their child's decision to enrol in the VCAL program, but also in supporting the education of their child. The importance of parent engagement and involvement in their child's education is supported by a strong body of research (see for example, Bransford et al. (2000) and Darling-Hammond (1997)). It was therefore important to get a perspective on these parents' views on the VCAL program. The researcher used the opportunity to ask the students what they believed their parents thought of the VCAL program and whether they thought their parents believed the program was engaging them in a meaningful way. It is important to note at this point, however, that while the students were happy to share what they thought their parents' views on the VCAL program were, these students did not specifically say whether they shared the same views as those of their parents.

Measuring student engagement

The ability to experience success

The focus turns to the first factor against which student engagement in the VCAL program has been measured – the ability for students to experience success. The importance of experiencing success as a motivator for student engagement is grounded in learning theory. For example, Black (2007) considers educational engagement as an important educational outcome in its own right. She argues that students who are engaged in their learning feel that they belong at school; they take part in school activities, value educational success and believe that education will benefit them.

When asked why they had enrolled in the VCAL program, these students described how they had come to the program with a significant amount of 'baggage' and that some of their past educational experiences had not been positive. Many of these students have also experienced 'failure' in the past. Sixteen students stated that they were struggling with the academic rigour of the VCE and were persuaded by their teachers that the VCAL was a better option for them. Sophie admitted that she was '*failing the VCE*' and she felt she stood a better chance of success with the VCAL. Leo felt that he would not be able to keep up with the '*intensity of the VCE*' and Matilda and Angus also '*struggled*' with the VCE. Eva and Isla shared similar

thoughts. They felt that the VCE would simply be '*too hard*' and they would not be able to cope. Nicholas also claimed that he was persuaded by his teachers who thought the VCAL would be a better option for him in the long run because he would not do well in the VCE. Jack described how he suffered from a medical condition and struggled to attend school particularly because he did not like the school environment. For him, the VCAL seemed an '*easier option*' which would help him achieve his career goals.

Feeling a sense of success appeared to be very important to these students. Given the evidence that the VCAL students are drawn disproportionately from low achievers, (Pearson 2012), it is reasonable to infer that these students have often come into the program having had negative learning experiences and they have experienced a sense of failure and loss of self-worth. It would seem that for many of these VCAL students, the program has provided them with an opportunity to achieve and experience success often for the first time.

This need for a sense of accomplishment and success was also a very strong and emotional topic of conversation with one of the teachers, Ms Waterston, who expressed the view that she had many VCAL students who either through learning difficulties or lack of self-esteem, or even difficult issues at home, had come to the VCAL program feeling so insecure that they did not have enough confidence to speak to anyone. At the interview, Ms Waterston described how by the end of the school year, these same students were presenting with confidence at assemblies, working effectively in teams and they felt a sense of achievement, fulfilment and self-worth. Ms Waterston added that when she reported to parents on the positive progress of their child, these parents were very surprised as this was the first time they had heard anything positive being said about their child. In fact, Ms Waterston described how, on one occasion, one of the 'VCAL mothers' had gone to visit her at school '*to see things for herself*', because she would not believe her daughter who was returning home from school saying that she was '*doing well*'. This was not something the mother was used to, because her daughter had '*never achieved success in all her schooling*'.

For many of the 62 students who reported positively on their parents' views of VCAL in terms of their engagement with learning, the need to have that sense of achievement and fulfilment resurfaced when they spoke about what their parents thought of the VCAL program. *'My mum and dad like it because it means that I don't fail'* said Max. And Amelia's parents *'understood that I was not going to do well with the subjects that I had'*. Scarlett's parents thought that the VCAL was her *'best choice because they knew VCE would be too hard for me...they are happy with what I am doing and happy that I am doing well'*.

There was also a strong sense that parents of these VCAL students appeared to be genuinely grateful that the VCAL program offered their children an alternative course of education and training, knowing that the VCE was not a viable or at any rate the ideal option for them. According to Lucas, his parents were very happy that he *'chose to do VCAL'* and Chloe's parents *'just love the VCAL because they have seen how much I have grown in everything'*.

Providing a good quality learning program

Another factor against which the effectiveness of the VCAL program in engaging these students is measured relates to the provision of a good quality, applied learning program that is relevant, has a sense of purpose and is tailored to student needs. As discussed in Chapter 2, a substantial body of research (see for example, McCombs 1996; Pintrich & Schunk 1996; Schunk, Pintrich & Meece 2008), claims that all learners are engaged and motivated to learn when they can see the relevance of what they are learning and make strong connections between what they are learning and how they can transfer this learning to real life contexts. Bransford et al. (2000, p. 24) also highlight the importance of giving attention to what is taught, why it is taught and what competence looks like, rather than presenting *'too many disconnected facts in too short a time'*. This will have a significant impact on the effort and time a student is willing to devote to learning. Darling-Hammond (1997, p. 115) highlights the importance of *'authentic performance'* in real-world contexts. However, Darling-Hammond (1997, p. 112) cautions that just creating interesting and engaging tasks for students is not enough. To reach desired levels of competence, students need to

engage in ‘continued practice and refinement of performance over a sustained period of time’.

With this in mind, the researcher was particularly keen to determine what kept these students actively engaged in their VCAL program. For 10 students, what engaged them most was that there was a strong sense of purpose behind everything they did. For five students, the ability to practise what they learnt was the most important factor. A further 10 students also reported that they had the opportunity to negotiate the content of their learning with their teacher.

During the focus groups, 31 students also described how they were able to make clearer connections between what they were learning and how they could apply it in the next stage of their career. In particular, it helped them ‘*choose [their] career path*’. According to Alexander, ‘*VCAL is based on what you want to do*’, and Oliver enjoyed being in the program ‘*because it is interactive and we have the opportunity to discover and experience things in VCAL that you would not have time [for] if you were in VCE*’. Aiden and Ivy also claimed that the program ‘*helps you focus on what you want to do*’. Ms Harris shared the same view and said that her VCAL students are ‘*actually enthused about the program where we are tailoring it for them*’.

The ability to tailor an individualised learning program appeared to be very important for these students. This was evident during conversations with some of the VCAL students who said that they would have struggled with the pressure and intensity of the VCE and that the VCAL gave them an alternative choice where they could actively be involved in the development of their own learning program. In fact, according to Samuel, enrolling in the VCAL program was ‘*the best change I’ve ever done so far in my life*’.

When asked what she liked most about the VCAL, Matilda said that she liked the fact that there was no set, rigid curriculum and that students had input into the design of their own learning program. ‘*I like it because it is designed for what we want to do rather than having to do all these things you don’t necessarily need for what you want to do*’, said Ruby. Thomas said similar things: ‘*I like the work based on what you*

want to do rather than the set things; in VCE you study the same stuff as everyone else’.

These students reported that the flexibility of the program also enabled them to negotiate a curriculum program with their teachers; a program that allowed for their interests to be built into the curriculum. This was very important to these students and the ability to develop a program around what was most relevant to them appeared to make it more engaging for them and gave them a greater sense of purpose and direction. They were actively participating in the discussions and decisions about their own learning and this had significant positive implications for their engagement with the program. As Ms Harris said: *‘It is much harder to be disengaged if you are involved in a program which interests you’*. This suggests that students and teachers place a high value on the flexibility of the VCAL curriculum which allows the development of a program that can be based on student needs and interests and is therefore more relevant to the student. It was also clear from the interviews that this notion of active involvement of students in the development of curriculum at the local school level was very important, both for the students as well as the teachers who were interviewed.

An applied, practical approach to learning

Another important factor which appeared to actively engage the students with the VCAL program was the applied, practical approach to learning. One of the stated aims of the VCAL is to deliver a program that is applied and ‘hands-on’. At a system level, policy documents developed by the VCAA describe the principles of applied learning and how the VCAL program has been developed ‘in recognition of the value of an applied learning approach’ (VCAA 2014, p. 2). Furthermore, curriculum planning guides have been developed by the VCAA to guide the delivery of the VCAL curriculum and inform the teacher of the principles of applied learning on which the program is based. The guides encourage these teachers to pay close attention to the individual progress of the student and devise tasks that are appropriate and manageable.

A large proportion of these VCAL students (71 students) claimed that they liked the 'hands-on' approach to learning and the opportunity to apply what they learn in a number of practical contexts, and not necessarily within the school gates. *'I like how it's hands-on; you're not always in the classroom; you're always out doing something different'*, said Harper. Mia enjoyed the *'practical skills that you learn and apply to your area'*. Scarlett reported that her parents knew the VCAL was the best option for her because it *'is more hands on and more suitable for me'*. This style of learning and the ability to be able to practise this new learning in practical, real-life/work situations seemed very appealing and meaningful to these VCAL students. Listening to these students share their experiences about a program that was claimed to offer variety and real-life, practical experiences, suggests that this program has made a significant impact in keeping them engaged in their learning.

Gaining workplace experience

Another measure of effective student engagement relates to the opportunity for these students to gain workplace experience and learning in an adult environment while still being connected to school. The opportunity to experience work first-hand was a popular response with 25 of these VCAL students. These students reported that they appreciated the chance to go out into the workforce and actually getting to know what happens in a real work situation. When asked what she liked most about the VCAL, Ava replied: *'learning, learning skills as well as personal skills, going out into the workforce and actually seeing for yourself'*. This was a view that would later be shared by Mr Wilhelm who stated that these students remained actively engaged in their learning because they were able to do a work placement once a week and include VET in their VCAL learning program.

Zara also noted that the VCAL had provided her with the opportunity to go out into the workplace and experience real-life work situations and this has helped her connect what she had learnt in the classroom with what happened in the workplace. It had also helped her become *'more confident with working'*. This was a view that was also shared by Ms Waterston who claimed that the program has provided her students with the confidence to go out to work.

In order to further ascertain their level of engagement in the program, these young people were asked what they hoped to be doing in five years' time. In all but three cases, all students reported high aspirations to achieve their career objectives. Thirty-nine students saw themselves qualified as an apprentice. Twenty-one students aspired to own their own business and twenty-six students aspired to be in a stable job. Only five students thought that they would still be involved in higher level VET programs. All these students saw the VCAL as a route to their success in achieving their career objectives and they firmly believed they would be successful in achieving their aims.

The opportunity to be able to combine school life with studying in an adult environment and gaining workplace experience on the job was brought up in conversations with several of the students during the focus groups. On the whole, these students appeared to enjoy the variety that the VCAL program offered. Twenty students reported how they liked the way the program was structured where they attended school three days a week, one day at a TAFE undertaking VET programs and the other day out on a work placement. William claimed that he had *'never been academic; and when I heard about VCAL, I thought "beauty", go one day to work, go to TAFE, get a Cert II in automotive and it would be a start to my apprenticeship'*. This arrangement seemed to suit these students and they appreciated the fact that they were not at school all the time. Zara reported that she enjoyed the program because she was not at school every day and going out on work placement helped her become more confident in a working environment. Mason also reported that he liked being able to combine school with work experience. Isaac further stated that being able to combine school with work placement and TAFE gave him many skills and that while the work was not too hard, it was nevertheless challenging. But for three students at Xewkija High School, not being at school five days a week presented a challenge because they felt that they were neglected and that they missed out on some critical 'mainstream' activities. According to Olivia, not being at school for the full week was *'a drainer'* because she felt that she missed out on many of the Year 12 school activities that other students were able to enjoy. Despite these challenges, 20 students claimed that they were happy to 'trade' this against participation in work (and also TAFE). They also conceded that they were not yet ready to completely cut off their ties from the school and the flexibility of the VCAL program enabled them to maintain connection with the school.

Discussions with these students about their parents' views also generated some common themes around watching their children experience success and enjoying going to school, while getting 'real' workplace experience. Lucas reported that his parents liked the VCAL *'because you go to school and you also get to go to work in an area you want to pursue'*. According to Cooper, *'My parents believe that VCAL is the backbone to the working industry with getting trades and all that'.... 'VCAL is good because I get to go out and experience real life working and I am also doing Cert II Business, and there are a lot of goals I can achieve'*. Zara's mum thinks *'it is the best thing I have chosen so far; it has made everything a lot easier in my life and in school'*. Noah also reported that his parents liked the VCAL program because it has provided him with opportunities they never had when they were in education themselves.

Developing good relationships

Another important factor against which student engagement is measured relates to the development of relationships with teachers and fellow students. A small number of students (10 out of 90 students), stated that the social aspect associated with being in a VCAL class was one of the most important things that engaged them in their learning. The word 'relationships' was also mentioned frequently during the focus group sessions with the other students. They claimed that they developed strong friendships not only with fellow students, but also with the teaching staff. They also felt a strong sense of connectedness with fellow students and teachers.

These students also appeared to have placed great trust in their teachers and this helped them to feel confident and be motivated to tackle tasks which challenged and extended them... *'I like the relationships between the students and the teachers'*, said Lucas. And for James *'the relationships you form between teachers and students and between students and students; it's not just like they are your teachers, but they are kind of like your friends; they help you out with all the different things, not just school work'*. Chloe also liked *'how everyone becomes friends; the teachers aren't just teachers; they are like mentors, they come and help you'*. And according to Nathan,

teachers were *'way cooler; much nicer!'* Jasper shared the same views. As far as he was concerned, *'we have real good teachers – they're awesome'*.

Jack was also very passionate about the importance of relationships in his classroom. He loved *'the atmosphere; you go into class and you're not with different people every time, so you get to know the people better and you get this friendly group where you're all mates and you back each other up'*. Jayden also liked the fact that there was *'lots of give and take'* in these relationships. And because the VCAL classes tended to be smaller, learning became more personalised and students formed strong bonds with teachers and fellow students. Chloe also reported that her parents liked *'how everyone supports everyone; they just love it'*. The importance of relationships has often been highlighted in research on effective learning environments. For example, Bransford et al. (2000, p. 25), highlight the importance for teachers to provide an environment which encourages *'the kind of intellectual camaraderie'* in a non-threatening learning environment. Darling-Hammond (1997, p. 134) also notes that *'relationships matter for learning'* and that the trust students place in their teachers *'helps them develop the commitment and motivation needed to tackle challenging learning tasks'*.

The importance of developing good relationships with students and teaching colleagues was also raised by several teachers (12 out of 38 teachers). Ms Arnold described how the VCAL *'does a good job in nurturing students into becoming confident, independent workers'*. Ms Arnold also claimed that students enjoy the relationships that are formed and the sense of connectedness helps with students who are disengaged'. Ms Isaac said that students at her school were very positive about their learning *'because of the relationships they build with the teachers; they see that teachers are there to help'*. This sentiment was also shared by Ms Jacob who felt that the building of personal relationships was very important to her students. But she acknowledged that this did not come easy and that it took about six months of hard work to build a good rapport with her students and develop a good working relationship with them.

Mr Dodson was equally passionate about the impact the VCAL program has had on *'relationships'* and the learning experience for his students. For him, the strength of

the program was *'relationships - relationships across all levels; with their peers, with their project, with the teachers and also with the school'*. Ms Mahoney shared the same views. She believed that a good VCAL program was more about the relationships teachers formed with the students than anything else and that relationships were based on mutual respect. Mr Peterson claimed that he treated his students with respect and he *'received that respect back two-fold'*. Ms Pace also reported that the VCAL has had very positive outcomes for many of her students. *'I look at the kids over the two years and a lot of them have grown and blossomed'*. Ms Arnold claimed that her students often told her that they *'would not have been here if [she] had not supported them along the way'*. Ms Arnold described how she built *'a sense of working together, not a hierarchy between the teacher and the student, but a team based on mutual respect.... And the kids appreciate the effort that goes into this'*. Ms Waterston believed that the VCAL students were really supportive of each other. Ms Archibald and Ms Pisani shared similar views. They reported that their VCAL students became positive about their learning, *'in particular because of the relationships they build with the teachers... they see that they understand them and what they are doing and are there to help them'*.

These findings suggest that how students feel about themselves and others is also fundamental to their ongoing learning and development. That said, this study does not suggest that the importance of fostering good relationships with students and teachers is unique to the VCAL. However, in the context of these VCAL students having had difficulties in the past in engaging with education, the ability to form good relationships with fellow students and their teachers is very important to them. And a positive relationship between the teacher and students will enhance student learning because the student's desire to earn the respect of the teacher and fellow students is a powerful motivator in itself. During the student focus groups, there was a strong sense that because they valued the relationships with their teachers and fellow students highly, they wanted to ensure they did not let anyone in the team down, and this motivated them to deliver on the group's expectations.

Creating a nurturing environment for these students based on support and mutual respect was particularly important for Mr Richardson, because he felt that many of his VCAL students *'walked around with a genuine sense that they are not worthwhile'*.

For Mr Eastwood, *'The VCAL program has provided an environment which has really helped students to become confident, independent workers; they enjoy the connectedness and the relationships that are formed'*. Ms Waterston claimed that the VCAL students at her school were *'very supportive of each other'*. Many of these students seemed to place great trust in their teachers and knew that their teachers would support them through their learning experience. Mr Dodson also believed that relationship building was the cornerstone of the VCAL program at his school, providing students with the security and opportunity to take risks and try different things; *'we encourage them to take risks'*. The teachers who were interviewed described how they worked hard to provide a *'positive'* learning environment which according to Ms Isaac *'helps these students learn skills and develop confidence and self-esteem'*, without fear of failure. Mr Peterson also highlighted the importance of having faith in the students ... *'you don't ever give up on any one of them.... There will be times when they will try just as hard to fail... and you just can't let that happen'*. Ms Fuller shared similar views and stressed the importance of offering their students *'a secure zone'* and *'comfort space'* in the classroom.

Evidence from the student focus groups and teacher interviews also suggests that the students are actively engaged in a learning program that engages and nurtures them. Atkins (2009, p. 143), however, cautions that *'a nurturing approach and the incremental individual achievement of low level academic skills'* will not necessarily provide the right tools for these students to achieve their career aspirations. In fact, Atkins believes that excessive nurturing will result in these students believing that they can achieve anything without necessarily questioning what they need to do to achieve their aims. These students may also become too dependent on their teachers. It is therefore important that these students are presented with a robust learning program that challenges and extends them.

The ability to participate in an educational program where they could engage in a *relaxed* learning environment was also identified as an important measure of student engagement in the program. Three students reported the program as being *'fun'*. Fourteen students claimed that they felt less pressured than their VCE counterparts, and that there was *'time'* for them to complete their tasks, something that they felt their VCE counterparts missed out on. Oliver described how he enjoyed the VCAL

program because *'it is interactive and we have the opportunity to discover and experience things in our course that you would not have the time to if you were in the VCE'*. Jordan also liked *'how relaxed it is.... No pressure to work all the time'* and Mitchell got to experience *'a more relaxed teaching environment'*. These students hastened to add that just because they enjoyed working in a relaxed environment, they were not suggesting that this was more important to them than learning, but rather that it helped them maintain engagement with the program. These students appeared to be particularly sensitive about the fact that they did not want to be seen as 'bludging'. They were also quick to point out that just because they felt less pressured, it did not mean they did not do any work. Sophie and Amelia were very sensitive about others assuming that they *'just bludge off in class and that teachers don't care what you are doing; and you don't do any work...and you get let off'*. Another student, Ella conceded that she found the work really challenging. In particular, she found some theoretical aspects *'hard'* but said that her teachers were very helpful. Issues around a program which may be perceived as being *'too easy'* and not offering adequate challenge appeared to be a concern for these students.

These findings suggest that students, teachers and parents view the VCAL as a program for engaging students in a meaningful learning experience. These young people have reported that they are satisfied with the VCAL program, but what this actually means needs to be carefully considered. Satisfaction with the VCAL program may indicate engagement or indeed relief that they are undertaking a program of study they can cope with. However, it may not necessarily tell the reader much about the actual quality of the program or whether this program supports effective transitions into quality training and employment. Nussbaum (1997) notes Sen's view that people's levels of satisfaction are not necessarily good indicators of their quality of life. Furthermore, Nussbaum (1997, p. 282) states that *'deprived people frequently adjust their sights to the low level they know they can aspire to, and thus actually experience satisfaction in connection with a very reduced living standard'*. These VCAL students may therefore be satisfied because they have low expectations of themselves and of education in general, either due to past educational experiences or family attitudes to education. It is therefore important to determine whether these 'satisfaction measures' provide a good guide for educational policy. Given the issues related to poor transitions for these students which were addressed in

Chapter 7, the researcher was particularly interested to investigate whether the VCAL offered a good quality program which challenged these students.

Offering a robust and rigorous program

Another important factor against which the effectiveness of the program in engaging these students is measured looks at whether the VCAL offers a robust and rigorous learning program which provides the opportunity for students to develop their knowledge and employability skills and challenges and extends them in their learning. Almost 70 per cent of teachers who were interviewed claimed that the curriculum in the VCAL program was robust and they believed the curriculum model was balanced and offered the ‘right mix’ of subjects. However, 11 students presented a different view and stated that the VCAL program did not challenge them enough. In fact, Jasper and Finn reported that the VCAL can sometimes be ‘*boring*’. According to Oliver, ‘*we are doing the same work from the same books, we are repeating, yet getting a higher certificate*’. Grace admitted that she was undertaking the VCAL program for the wrong reason; that she was simply ‘*too lazy*’ to do the VCE and that the VCAL was an easier option for her. For other students like Ruby and Archer, the VCAL program was ‘*too easy*’. Charlotte and Oliver claimed that the teachers themselves were ‘great’ but the way the school delivered the VCAL program was less than ideal.

Mr Goldberg conceded that some of his students complained that teachers made the lessons ‘*boring, repetitive and irrelevant*’ and that they did not feel adequately challenged. He stated, however, that his students ‘*do not do the work that they are given*’. It would seem that these students lacked the motivation and the skills to engage with their learning and organise themselves... ‘*that is the paradox...VCAL is supposed to be an education where the kids are supposed to be self-starters, yet we have weaker kids who are not engaged, kids who are slow self-starters and often especially at senior level where the whole emphasis is supposed to be on them doing everything, they do not have the wherewithal to achieve these things*’.

Conversations with these students and teachers therefore suggest that while providing an opportunity for every student to experience a sense of achievement is important, it

is equally important to ensure that a healthy balance is achieved between setting targets that are too easily achieved and tasks that are not achievable. The importance of providing students with tasks that are challenging enough to maintain engagement but not so difficult to lead to discouragement was highlighted by Bransford et al. (2000). These VCAL students not only need to continue to be challenged and grow in their learning, but also to feel that they are undertaking a learning program that is rigorous and worthwhile and is preparing them to transition effectively into further education, training or employment. While taking student interests and abilities into account is important, these students must not be made to feel that they are engaged in a second-class program which is only suitable for what Mr Edgars referred to as '*dumb arses*'. Tasks therefore need to be set at the proper level of difficulty in order to motivate, extend and challenge them. The need for students to be given challenging work which '*stretches*' them has already been raised. Tasks that are too easy will become boring and tasks that are too difficult will cause frustration and will discourage the students.

When asked what their parents thought of the quality of the VCAL program, 10 students reported that their parents thought that the program was not challenging enough and that they '*should be going to school longer*'. Charlotte was particularly vocal: '*they think it is a joke; they think the way the school has handled it is very shocking; but they think the teachers are great*'.

A small group of teachers (four teachers), also reported that some parents viewed the VCAL program very negatively....'*a program for the yobbo element*', according to Mr Baker, and a program '*for dummies*'. Mr Finch stated that as far as the VCAL was concerned, there were '*still a lot of demons from previous siblings that might have gone through the program... and we did not do a very good job in the past*'. Ms Harris believed that *the VCAL parents* viewed the VCAL as a program for students '*who can't do the VCE*'.

These viewpoints, however, appeared to be localised to four schools in the sample and therefore need to be treated with caution. This may suggest that concerns do not lie with the program itself, but rather with how the program is implemented in some schools. This is an issue that has been identified as a potential barrier to effective

implementation of the VCAL program and which is discussed in more detail in the next chapter. These findings also suggest that it is important that rigour in the VCAL program is not compromised in any way.

In reporting on their parents' views of the quality of the VCAL program, eight students stated that their parents lacked the appropriate knowledge about the VCAL program to fully understand *'how it worked'* and the impact it was having on their children. *'I don't think my dad knows what VCAL is'*, said Xavier; *'they kind of wonder why I don't have homework'*, added Ethan. And Charlie said that his parents thought that his options were limited with the VCAL ... *'they think that if I finish being a mechanic in five years, ... I can't do anything else; I don't think that's the case'*, said Charlie. However, eight teachers argued that the main problem was there was still a considerable lack of knowledge around the VCAL program itself and that schools have not done a very good job at 'selling' the program to parents of children who would benefit most from the program. Another two teachers reported that the background of the parents themselves had a significant influence on how they perceived the VCAL. It seemed that parents who had a trade background were more likely to understand the 'potential' of the VCAL program.

Another important measure of the effectiveness of the VCAL program in engaging these students relates to the extent students are motivated to remain in school to complete their senior secondary education. While the students themselves did not express a personal opinion, 62 students reported that their parents viewed the VCAL very positively in terms of keeping their son/daughter in school. Hudson claimed that his parents liked the program *'because it is the only reason I'm still at school'*. According to Evie, *'They think VCAL is good for me because I wanted to drop out and VCAL is keeping me at school'*. To which Jaxon added: *'Dad likes it because it is the only year that I haven't got a detention'*.

The researcher was also interested to seek the teachers' views on how they believed parents generally viewed the VCAL program in terms of keeping their children at school. Twenty-three teachers reported that they believed parents viewed the program very favourably in this regard. Mr Baker commented that some parents reported that their child actually wanted to get up and come to school and that generally they were

more engaged in their learning. He added that parents thought that the VCAL was their '*saving light*'. According to Ms Vella, parents at her school claimed that '*my child would not be at school if it wasn't for the VCAL*' and Ms Pisani reported that the VCAL was a '*fantastic relief*' because they did not want their child to leave school. Mr Watson agreed that most parents saw the VCAL program as a '*good thing*'; their child had come through an education where they had not received good reports and for a lot of them, they saw it as an alternative pathway because their child would otherwise have dropped out. Ms Waterston further added that her students '*felt very positive about themselves*'. In fact, Ms Waterston has had students '*come back to talk to the kids and say that if it were not for the VCAL, they would have left school* and that before the VCAL '*they were getting nowhere*'. Mr Garrett believed that some parents thought the VCAL was a very good program because they had actually seen in their child things they had never seen before; that they were more active and involved and that by undertaking VET and the Work Related Skills unit they were doing something they really enjoyed. Ms Isaac further reported that parents whose children were enrolled in other schools that do not offer the VCAL program were so confident in the potential of the program to engage their child and keep them in school, that they were willing to transfer their children into her school so that they could enrol in the VCAL program.

However, Ms Oswald pointed out that it was important that the VCAL would not be viewed as purely a re-engagement program because the program had a lot more to offer. Ms Oswald expressed a strong view that the VCAL is '*not a behaviour modification tool, nor is it merely a student motivation or engagement tool*'. To her, it was much more than that; the VCAL was a different pathway which suited students with particular learning styles.

Evidence from the focus groups and teacher interviews point to a program which has been successful in engaging these students and keeping them in school. For Mr Garrett, the biggest indicator of success for his students is the attendance record at his school which '*is almost perfect.... To me that speaks volumes*'. This is a view that is shared by Rumberger (2011, p. 169) who claims that one of the most direct and visible indicators of engagement is attendance'. For Mr Richardson, however, the real strength of the program lies in the fact that '*kids come out of it as young men and*

women with a litany of experiences'. According to Mr Richardson these previous '*raw recruits*' realise how far they come in their learning... '*and this generates its own momentum*'.

Ms Mahoney also reported that the VCAL had produced remarkable results for some of her students. She described how she had two students in her class whom she could not even '*get to sit down*', let alone be engaged in their learning, and '*Joshua ended up being Apprentice of the Year*'. Mr Dodson was equally glowing about how the VCAL had been instrumental in turning the students at his school around. He had seen '*a re-igniting of education*' with some of his students coming into the VCAL program. '*We find a lot of students who have behavioural issues come into VCAL and are re-engaged into education. You can see the light come back on and we ask why this has not happened earlier*'. For Mr Smith, the biggest achievement for his students was that they became more self-directed and actively engaged... '*we teach them life skills; skills that employers want*'. Mr Smith further stated that one of the major strengths of the VCAL is that '*VCAL kids do not get told what to do; they have to think for themselves*'.

This chapter has measured the effectiveness of the VCAL program in engaging these students against a number of important factors. These include the ability for these students to experience success in a program that is robust, provides them with important work and life skills and motivates them to continue with their learning. These factors were analysed primarily through the fieldwork that was conducted in 2010 through a series of interviews with 38 VCAL teachers and co-ordinators and 90 students in a number of focus groups.

Findings suggest that these VCAL students have been effectively engaged in their learning. Despite the challenges that were reported in the previous chapter, concerning the effectiveness of student transitions from school, this chapter has identified that the VCAL has successfully kept these students at school and that there are significant economic and social benefits in keeping students in school to complete their senior secondary education. This has strong positive implications particularly in terms of providing these students with the opportunity to further develop their maturity and their personal skills.

The data also suggests that issues that have been identified appear to relate more to the way the VCAL program is implemented in some schools rather than the content or the appropriateness of the VCAL program itself. Negative perceptions of the program also appear to be strongly linked to a perceived lack of knowledge of the potential of the program and the overall culture of the program as a poor cousin to the more academic VCE. These issues have the potential to significantly affect the delivery of the program. The next chapter identifies barriers and enablers which have a direct impact on the implementation of the VCAL program.

CHAPTER 9

WHAT ARE THE BARRIERS AND ENABLERS TO EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE VCAL?

The previous chapter examined whether the VCAL program was effective in engaging these VCAL students. Student engagement was measured against a number of factors. Evidence from the focus groups and teacher interviews suggests that many of these VCAL students have on the whole enjoyed their learning experience and have been actively engaged in their learning. Despite the fact that the pathways for these students were considered to be less than optimal, there were other benefits to be gained from remaining in school to complete their senior secondary years.

This chapter addresses a number of barriers and enablers which were identified during the student and teacher interviews and which may have a significant impact on the effective implementation of the VCAL program. These include parity of esteem and the status of the VCAL program, timetabling, applied learning pedagogy, leadership and school culture and funding. The researcher considers these barriers and enablers from a system as well as a school perspective. This chapter utilises interview data collected from interviews with 38 teachers from 24 government schools and eight Catholic colleges and data from a number of student focus groups at 11 of these government schools and six of these Catholic colleges.

There is extensive literature that supports the view that it is important that students are encouraged to remain in school. For example, Rumberger (2011) notes the educational, social and economic consequences of dropping out. The importance of encouraging students to remain in school was also identified by Birdwell, Grist and Margo (2011, p. xx). In their report on the failures of the school system in the United Kingdom to cater adequately for 50 per cent of school students, they noted that when students walk out of the school gates for the last time, it is important that they are equipped with the necessary skills to move into their next stage of development. As Shaks Gosh, CEO Private Equity Foundation states in his foreword to this report

(Birdwell, Grist & Margo 2011, p. 13), it is therefore important for these students to ‘stay the path to reach their full potential’.

In addition, the Victorian Auditor-General’s Report on School Completion Rates (Pearson 2012, p. ix) also identified that as a proportion, ‘more students with identifiable and measurable risk factors related to completing school – such as low socio-economic status and low academic achievement – undertake the VCAL as a senior secondary qualification’. It is therefore important that the VCAL delivers on its promise to provide these students with a genuine and realistic alternative pathway into further education, training or employment after completing school. But it is equally important that students are offered a program that engages them and motivates them to remain in school in order to maximise their potential.

Chapter 7 identified a program which provided strong apprenticeship pathways, in particular for boys. However, pathways into employment, in particular part-time employment are somewhat precarious, especially for girls. Chapter 7 also noted the importance of encouraging students to remain in education and the social and economic consequences of dropping out of school. Chapter 8 identified a VCAL program that not only engages and motivates these students to remain in education, but also appears to be robust and works well for these students. Almost 70 per cent of the teachers who were interviewed reported that the VCAL curriculum was rigorous and worked well for this cohort of students. This therefore raises the question of whether the concerns around the VCAL are localised and therefore relate more to the way the program is implemented in some of these schools.

One of the most significant barriers to the effective implementation of the VCAL relates to parity of esteem. Issues of parity of esteem are, however, not unique to the VCAL. The reader is reminded that vocational education in Victoria (and indeed internationally) has faced many challenges in terms of parity of esteem and in providing innovative programs that provide challenge and motivation for students who need it most. Polesel and Clarke (2011, p. 525) note that ‘the culture, ethos and traditions of secondary schooling explicitly exclude vocational learning from the mission of secondary schools’. Chapter 4 examined the challenges that were faced in the early 1980s, through the introduction of more vocationally oriented subjects in the

Group 2 structure of the revised HSC. These vocational studies struggled for parity of esteem. There were also serious doubts as to whether these Group 2 subjects would ever be accepted by universities as having the same status as Group 1 subjects. This issue would reappear with the introduction of the VCE in the early 1990s where vocational studies within the certificate were compromised in an attempt to appease many influential stakeholders who were concerned about maintaining the integrity of the VCE. The status of VET in general would also have an impact on how the VCAL was perceived given that VET forms a significant part of the VCAL program.

Status of the VCAL program

The focus turns firstly to how the VCAL is perceived and how this might impact on the status of the VCAL program. At a system level, there is an attempt to ‘market’ the VCAL as an *alternative* senior secondary program, catering for students who have different needs and aspirations to those wishing to pursue a university pathway. There is no suggestion in the promotional literature that the VCAL is a program that is *equal* to the VCE, but rather that it is a *different* program which caters for students with different needs and aspirations to those undertaking the VCE. The VCAL is promoted as a program that ‘gives you practical work-related experience, as well as literacy and numeracy skills and the opportunity to build personal skills that are important for life and work’ (VCAA 2013b, p. 2). The VCAL is also promoted as an option for students who are ‘interested in going on to training at a Technical and Further Education (TAFE) institute, starting an apprenticeship, or getting a job after completing school’ (VCAA 2010, p. 2). Every attempt appears to be made to ensure that the VCAL is seen as a viable alternative to the more academic VCE. And yet, during the interview, Ms Nicholl and Mr Peterson claimed that for some students and teachers, the VCE continues to be the ‘*be all and end all*’ and that ‘*you only do the VCAL if you are not good enough to do the VCE*’.

At a school level, the teachers who were interviewed reported that the VCAL is generally promoted as a legitimate pathway into apprenticeships and traineeships, further education and training, and employment. Seventeen of the 38 teachers interviewed described how their schools ran information evenings and career expos where, according to Ms Pace, ‘*VCAL is promoted as a pathway sitting alongside the*

VCE'. Ms Pace added that this was generally followed by an application process and interviews with the students and their parents to determine whether the VCAL was the most appropriate pathway for these students. In their promotion of the VCAL, Ms Nicholl claimed that her school was very careful not to '*tarnish*' the program as a program for the '*naughty or disengaged kids, or for the kids that they [the teachers] think should be in the program*'. Ms Arnold's school also worked hard to improve how the VCAL was viewed. At Mr Peterson's school, both the VCE and the VCAL were given '*equal billing*' and previous VCAL students of the school were often invited to come and speak to prospective students about their own VCAL experience. Mr Richardson also engaged previous VCAL students because they were '*fantastic young adults who end up promoting the program on our behalf*'. Six teachers conceded, however, that there were some students at their school who were '*targeted*', particularly if they were considered to be '*weak*'. Mr Dimech admitted that while most of his students were '*definite*' about wanting to follow a trade pathway and they willingly chose the VCAL pathway, there were '*always a few who are directionless and have to be coerced into the VCAL program*'. Mr Comrie and Ms Stevenson conceded that some students were '*pressured*' into the VCAL program if the teachers considered that they were '*weak [and] couldn't do the VCE*'. Mr Goldberg also conceded that at his school, the VCAL was promoted as a program '*for weaker students*' and if the students had '*the abilities and skills*', the school preferred them to do the VCE, even if they wanted to pursue an apprenticeship. This was because '*VCAL is quite limiting...tends to pretty much close doors... We try and pitch the VCAL to the weaker students given that we believe that the more academic students could be moving into VCE and still be able to do their VET*'. It would seem that the way the VCAL is perceived and 'promoted' at these schools has the potential to exacerbate the problems associated with the status of the VCAL program.

Data collected from these interviews also suggests that the issues around parity of esteem faced by the VCAL program appear to be more acute in some schools than others. Many of these schools put considerable effort into promoting the VCAL as a legitimate alternative to the VCE; however, these teachers conceded that this was not always an easy task. There was also a strong sense among these students, that they were undertaking a program which was considered to be *inferior* to the VCE. The status issue appears to be at its most acute level when these students feel stigmatised

and perceive themselves to be involved in an inferior program. A consistent message from the students across the two school sectors was that they were very sensitive about the fact that because they were VCAL students, they were virtually treated as second-class citizens.

When asked what he liked least about the VCAL, Mason did not hesitate: *'The reputation that goes with it and people thinking that because you're in VCAL, you're stupid...There is this whole idea that VCAL is just for tradies [tradespeople] and people are not intelligent and this is just not the case'*, said Jack. Fifteen of the 90 VCAL students who participated in the focus groups were particularly sensitive about the fact that they were considered by fellow students and teachers to be stupid. *'The school should treat us all equal'*, said Olivia, *'rather than being told that we are dumb'*. Jasmine was particularly concerned that *'this is completely different to what the VCE students get; they [the VCE students] are classed as smarter'*.

Ivy was also concerned that the VCAL students were made to feel 'stupid' or 'dumb'. *'I enjoy VCAL, but don't like it when some kids call VCAL kids dumb; I don't think VCAL kids are dumb, they are just more out in the workforce trying to do stuff for their future; just because we don't do VCE doesn't mean that we're dumb'*, said Ivy. Ryder also believed that the VCAL was seen as 'second best to the VCE'. Mitchell did not like the *'lack of acceptance you get from the VCE kids; you're a big joke for doing it; VCAL is just a joke to all the people who do VCE; none of them understand it has work too'*. Nathan agreed: *'no one really thinks we're smart. You get picked on by VCE students; like you're in VCAL, so you must be dumb!'* *'The VCE students have given VCAL a bad name since the start; VCAL students get bagged a lot for being in VCAL'*, said William. Sophie shared her disappointment that *'people just assume that you just bludge off in class and that teachers don't care about what you're doing and you don't do any work'*. Jake was even more vocal and felt that teachers *'treat VCAL students as if we are diseased or have a mental condition'*.

These findings suggest that reputation and feeling *equal* to the VCE students mattered a great deal to these VCAL students and that this has a significant impact on the well-being of these young people. Equally importantly, these students claimed that they needed others to be aware that what they were undertaking in the VCAL program was

worthwhile. Jack wanted to see an improvement in the way the VCAL was seen by others because *'VCE students think of VCAL where you just do crap and you just don't do any work... People think that VCAL is just for people who are not very smart or could not do VCE'*. William agreed with him: *'It does cop a little crap from the VCE students and people that just think it is a bludge for people who aren't good at school'*. Patrick shared similar concerns. He wanted to see more public awareness of the program so as *'not to get put down as much; because everyone thinks VCAL is for no-hopers, because it's clearly not'*. However, Mitchell believed that the problems did not actually lie with the VCAL program itself: *'I don't think VCAL needs to be changed; but people's opinions towards it should'*. *'And we're not stupid'*, added Xavier.

The concern that the VCAL students were being seen as 'the dummies' had already been flagged as an issue in the initial evaluation of the VCAL trial in 2002. Henry et al. (2002, p. 3) had identified the potential risk that a vocational program like the VCAL would be negatively perceived. They noted that a significant challenge for secondary schools was to maintain the VCAL learning program as a high quality option for a wide range of young people without it becoming a 'remedial alternative'. After a decade of implementation, this concern still seems to be very prominent in the minds of these students. This sense of feeling like a 'second-rate student' may have significant implications for the well-being of the students and the impact it will have on maintaining their engagement with education. In the interview, Mr Richardson acknowledged that this was often the case with some of his students and he felt sad that *'kids walk around with a genuine sense that they are not worthwhile'*.

The topic of reputation and stigma around the VCAL program was also raised by many of the teachers who were interviewed for this study. Some of these teachers were quite vocal about how the VCAL was perceived at their school. *'A recycle bin for kids who don't want to do the VCE'* was Mr Saliba's view of his school perceptions of VCAL. Mr Walker was equally negative. *'VCAL is still viewed by students and staff as a course for dummies and non-academic kids and trouble-makers'*. Ms Mahoney and Ms Fuller also claimed that at their school, there was this notion that just because they were *'VCAL students'*, they were therefore *'slack'*.

Mr Garrett shared the same concerns. *'Unfortunately some see VCAL as a program for dropkicks and dropouts; people who do not want to be at school, people with behavioural problems'*. Mr Richardson was equally negative. He believed that the VCAL program was *'a tipping ground for kids with behavioural management issues whom the VCE teachers did not want in their class'*. Mr Baker thought that his school was very much an 'academic' school and the VCAL program suffered as a result. In Mr Comrie's school, teachers were saying that 'smart' kids should be doing the VCE and not the VCAL; it did not seem to matter that these students were not focussed on a university pathway. Ms Pisani shared similar concerns and believed that at her school the VCAL program was *'labelled and dumbed down... for kids who can't perform'*. She further stated that this had caused division amongst students and teachers in senior school. Ms Mahoney stated, however, that the students themselves were often their own 'worst enemy' because these students did not consider that undertaking practical tasks constituted 'real learning'. Ms Mahoney believed that this was because of the culture of the school saying *'you have to be writing an essay to be learning; they [the students] themselves say that they do nothing in VCAL, yet when they look at what they have done over the year, they have done amazing things'*.

While acknowledging the status issue at her school, Ms Stevenson maintained that a lot of the negativity around the VCAL stemmed from the fact that there was *'a lot of confusion, misinformation and ignorance continuing in terms of VCAL'*. Staff at her school needed to be constantly reminded of how the VCAL program worked and students also needed to be reminded all the time that it was not the easy or slack option; not a course for 'dumb kids', but an alternative learning program. Judging by some of the student comments, it would seem that a lot of the negative aspects of how the students viewed the VCAL came from students who were not actually involved in the VCAL program, not the VCAL students themselves. Mr Goldberg also reported that there was a lack of understanding about the VCAL program at his school and that it did not have a good reputation... *'A lot is borne out of ignorance; we are isolated here and a lot of the staff have not been near here; they don't bother coming here and yet they have a lot to say about the program'*. He hastened to add that the boys *'don't do themselves any favour either. It is a problem of having low achieving students who often lack motivation, grouped together and often the outcomes are not going to be great; and some of their behaviours are seen in a negative fashion'*. And yet these

boys were actively involved in many school projects including the renovations of the school fountain *'which reflect positively on the program and the students'*. Three teachers reported that parents in general did not know enough about the VCAL program to make an informed judgement.

When asked about what she believed students thought of the VCAL program at her school, Ms Harris admitted that *'there is a double-edged sword here'*. Students, who were actually involved in the VCAL program, really wanted to do it because they knew that this was the best pathway for them; they had the opportunity to undertake VET and work placement and they developed hands-on skills. While the VCAL program was successful at her school, Ms Harris conceded that the school continued to fight a community perception that the VCAL is for the *'duddy kids'*. While there have been ongoing efforts to improve the status of the VCAL at this school, negative perceptions continued to persist. Ms Harris believes that the VCAL students still perceive themselves as *'not as good as the VCE kids'* because many of them had grown up in a culture and within an education framework *'where tests and exams determine how good they are and where they fit in a particular pecking order'*. Ms Harris also acknowledged that it was going to take these students a considerable amount of time to grasp that not needing to sit for exams was actually *'a freedom rather than a punishment'*.

Overcoming negative perceptions of the program was very important for Ms Harris. She believed that her school has an important role to play in this regard. According to Ms Harris, even little structural things can make a big difference to the way the VCAL is perceived in the school community. For instance, at her school, the VCE students had in the past been allocated to classes A, B and C, while the VCAL students were allocated the *'naughty letters'*, like classes X and Y. All senior students at this school have now been integrated into teams and *'you can't tell which Year 12 class is VCE or VCAL.... it helps teachers understand that they are kids first and then the program comes second'*. The VCE centre has even been renamed Study Centre. *'We talk about a senior campus, rather than VCE or VCAL'*. Ms Harris believed that it is important not to label students as being VCE or VCAL students, but acknowledged that this was an ongoing battle and teachers needed to be constantly reminded that *'the reason we are here is to assist students'*. According to Ms Harris,

all teachers want to make a difference, but *'we need to make sure that we are making a difference for every student'*. Ms Nicholl claimed that at her school, the teachers and school leaders worked hard to improve the image of the VCAL. For example, the school ensures that there is a VCAL student in the student leadership team *'because this makes students feel good about being in VCAL'*.

Despite persistent negative views in some schools, an equal number of teachers who were interviewed claimed that the VCAL program was viewed very positively at their school. In fact, these teachers spoke of the VCAL in glowing terms and according to Mr Rafter, it really depended on *'who you talked to'*. In some schools, it was viewed *'as a way of protecting the VCE'*. Mr Peterson agreed:

Our school has really embraced VCAL; it sees the benefits not just for those who choose to do VCAL, but also the VCE class; it thins out the VCE class, so those in VCE genuinely want to be there and those in VCAL genuinely want to be there and they both have opportunities to follow their pathway to get the destiny they want. If VCAL was well managed, it could cater for an enormous range of talents.

Ms Pace agreed: *'we are very lucky here; the school has supported VCAL from the start ... the school supports the educational dreams of all students'*.

Data collected from these interviews also suggests that the culture around the VCAL program is changing and previous negative perceptions were decreasing. According to Mr Finch, *'If you asked me three years ago when I first got here, I would have said that students see VCAL as a joke of a program where all dumb kids go; that is the vibe that I got when I first got here'*. Mr Finch agreed that the culture around the VCAL at his school was changing:

We have students wanting to get into VCAL... the culture has changed to being a really good alternative for students and I don't think the students can say that the program is anything but authentic and provides really good outcomes... I think a lot of students who do the VCAL are more than capable of doing VCE ... they are really positive about their learning.

Ms Jacob shared similar views: *'a few years ago, VCAL was looked at as the 25 kids you were pleased not to have in your class'*. Ms Jacob believed that at her school, the VCAL was now given the same weighting and rigour as the VCE; *'in fact it is sometimes harder than the VCE where they are spoon fed... and the school has embraced the VCAL program'*. Mr Richardson reported that at his school, *'VCAL is now being seen as not just the dumb cousin to the VCE but a very legitimate pathway in its own right'*. According to Mr Richardson, some of the most 'successful' students at his school had initially become disengaged in Year 7 and 8. Once they joined the VCAL program and were actively involved in the workplace and on-the-job training, *'their positive attributes come to the surface and we have some fantastic young adults who end up promoting this program on our behalf'*. It would seem that the VCAL was no longer seen as a program for 'veggies', but one that provided many opportunities. According to Ms Archibald:

We don't have that anymore; we have students who are of a higher academic standard entering VCAL because they understand and appreciate that the VCAL fits within their overall pathway. They are strong, solid achievers who know where they want to go; they are actually the smart kids because they know where they are heading after school.

Mr Saliba also reported that perceptions of the VCAL program have improved significantly at his school. There was now a strong focus on School-based Apprenticeships and students saw this as a vehicle for staying on at school. But Mr Dodson was quick to point out that *'the benefits of VCAL are far greater than getting an apprenticeship'*. Ms Archibald reported that her students were becoming more positive about their learning and that the stigma around the VCAL was slowly starting to fade. *'They don't feel stigmatised because they are in VCAL'*, said Ms Archibald. But she admitted that this had been a long process and continued to remain a challenge because in the past, during subject selections, you were encouraged to do VCE *'because that meant you have a brain'*. Even the VCAL students who initially were not enthused about their learning in the VCAL program, tended to become very positive learners by the end of their VCAL program. According to Ms Lincoln, *'their attitude towards their learning changes from the start of Year 11 to the time they*

reach the end of Year 12'. Mr Peterson agreed that his students now viewed the VCAL very positively; 'they don't in any way view it as a second-rate option, or what you do if you're not good enough to do VCE; they see it as a 'pathway for me' and most of them understand that by doing VCAL they come out with many more qualifications'. At this school, regular internal surveys of the VCE and the VCAL are conducted. Questions relating to connectedness to peers and staff and student opinions about themselves rate very positively for both senior secondary certificates, not just the VCE.

Mr Walker believed that the negative mentality at his school was changing and that the school leadership were seeing the program as *'more of a priority than it used to be'*. Ms Archibald also stated that teachers at her school were starting to see that the VCAL has a legitimate place in the school and were more *'open to it'*. But she acknowledged that it has not been easy. According to Ms Archibald, changing the perception of the VCAL has not come without significant effort on the part of the teachers and school leadership. Ms Arnold's school has worked *'really hard in the past three years to improve things; it used to be seen as a dumping ground and somewhere you would not want to teach. You would often end up with students who don't work well within other classroom environments; now the students are highly valued in our community'*. Ms Archibald said that she can look back and say *'I can't believe I started with 22 students and so much resistance and look at us now. Now there is a lot of support for the program'*. This suggests that teachers have expended a lot of energy in improving the perceptions and acceptance of the VCAL program at their school. The data also suggests that initial perceptions of the program (which were initially identified as significant barriers) were changing, and were now enabling a more effective delivery of the VCAL at many of these schools.

Despite these changing perceptions at a local school level, there are mixed views about how the VCAL program is perceived by the broader community. For example, teachers like Ms Harris believed that the broader community around her school was generally very positive about the VCAL and the opportunities it offered students who were undertaking this program. Her school had developed strong networks with employers who provided assistance with work placement. Ms Harris believed that these networks understood the validity of the program and the mutual benefits....

'they get to try before they buy... we are actually supplying them with their future workers'. Ms Harris also believed that her school had experienced considerable success with the senior students who had become the best school's spokespersons. According to Ms Harris, *'if you have someone saying the VCAL program at our school is great – my son is now an electrician – that is more than we can achieve at any parent information night'.* And this positive sentiment about the VCAL students was clearly evident in their work placement. Another teacher, Mr Garrett claimed: *'I have yet to find a person at work to have a negative comment about these students; students often end up getting full-time work after their placement'.*

However, Mr Goldberg presented a different picture at his school. He believed that his school community did not know much about the VCAL program.. *'they think in terms of the vocational streams when they themselves were in school... and few employers have a clue about VCAL'.* Other teachers felt that more work needed to be done to establish better links with the broader community, in particular, employers and TAFE. Mr Saliba and Ms Pisani felt that better communication and access needed to be established with TAFE. Ms Robertson also believed that there needed to be more community involvement in the VCAL program as the community had the potential to make a significant contribution to the program.

Parental perceptions of the program also appeared to have an impact on whether they presented a barrier or enabled the effective implementation of the program. The previous chapter described how many students and teachers believed that parents viewed the program as a 'godsend' for their child and that as a result, they were actually engaged in their education. However, there were some teachers who felt that parents had negative perceptions of the VCAL and considered it to be a program that was 'inferior' to the VCE. This had a significant impact on how effectively the VCAL was implemented in the school. According to Ms Mahoney, some parents thought that *'VCAL drops the academic standard of school'.* Ms Nicholl said that the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) had been so ingrained in the mind of these parents that it was hard to change that perception, even though the students and their parents admitted that they (the students) were struggling with the VCE. There were some parents who still saw it *'as a program for dummies or a waste of time'.* However, Mr Baker insisted that if parents took the time to look at the program, and

really understood what it could do for their child, they would change their views. But sometimes the VCAL students appeared to reinforce that perception by their behaviour: *'because if kids muck around on a placement, the whole VCAL program gets tarnished'*. Discussions with these teachers also confirmed the students' view that a significant barrier in the acceptance of the VCAL as a legitimate program existed due to continued *confusion* with regard to the potential of the VCAL program.

What emerged from conversations with these teachers was that promoting the VCAL to the parent community was not an easy task. Mr Richardson's school found it very difficult to communicate to parents about the VCAL program. He believed that at information evenings he was speaking *'to the converted'* because these parents were willing and had the capacity to engage in their child's education. According to Mr Richardson, his school decided the previous year to *'get into the lounge rooms'* of these families in order to communicate with the parents in a way that they were more comfortable with. The school developed a DVD where *'VCAL students did the talking'* in two minute grabs. Mr Richardson firmly believed that promotion of the VCAL program had to come through the student voice because this helped eliminate any barriers that may exist between the parents and the school hierarchy.

Ms Harris believed that schools needed to take responsibility for the fact that *'VET and VCAL have not been promoted in a way that has been accessible for parents'*. As a result, parents were only looking at the VCAL because their child was unable to cope with the VCE. Furthermore, four teachers who were interviewed believed that location and demographics also appeared to have an impact on how parents viewed the VCAL. Mr Saliba's school is located in a farming area where farmers appreciate the *'value of VCAL and its work ethic'*. He believed that trade-oriented parents are generally very supportive of the VCAL: *'The biggest problem is trying to convince professional parents who have a child who is an applied learner...or a parent with a strong academic background'*. According to Mr Saliba, the challenge was to help these parents become comfortable with the VCAL as a worthwhile program; to accept that it is a different program, but not necessarily a program that is inferior to the VCE. He added that parents needed to be continually reassured that it was *'OK'* for their child *'not to do VCE'*. But according to Ms Pace, choosing to do the VCAL was still a *'big thing'* because *'better students do the VCE'*.

These teachers argued that while it was important to inform parents and students about options, it was equally important to ensure that students were seeking to enrol in the VCAL program for good reasons and that they understood the nature of the program and had appropriate expectations. These schools went through a rigorous selection process. Ms Jacob also described the formal process of selection for enrolment in the VCAL. Students wrote a letter of application, including a resume and the student was then interviewed by members of the teaching/counselling team at the school. Ms Waterston said they had strict conditions attached to the application process and students were asked to *'sign their level of commitment'* to the program. According to Ms Pace: *'We tell them that VCAL is not an easy option and they have to work hard'*, a view that was also shared by Ms Lincoln.

A sense of exclusion

Another issue that was flagged by eight students in four schools as having the potential to inhibit successful implementation of the VCAL related to students and teachers feeling excluded from the rest of the school community. This sense of 'exclusion' mattered a great deal to many of these VCAL students and reinforced their feelings of being relegated to an inferior position within the school community. *'Everyone forgets about VCAL, they always tell VCE students special dates and we get left behind'*, said Patrick: *'It's all about VCE on information nights'*, added Samuel. Olivia agreed: *'We get excluded a lot from the VCEs; we only come three days a week which is a drainer... the days we are not on site, we miss all the Year 12 activities that are happening in school'*. Emily shared similar concerns: *'VCE excludes us in a lot of things they do, for example, they'll do an out-of-uniform day but we won't get told until the last minute; because the notices go up in the VCE room and not VCAL'...* *'or we won't even get told'*, added James. Patrick also felt very strongly that the VCAL students should *'not get left in the dark'*. *'We had a camp this year and it was all based on VCE; it was all like about them; nothing really for us'*, added Alexander.

Ms Pisani recalled a situation where a group of her VCAL students were excluded from a careers excursion because the coordinator believed that it was not relevant to

them because *'they were VCAL students'*. According to this coordinator, these students were *'VCAL kids - they don't need those skills'*. Ms Nicholl admitted that staff at her school have made some serious errors of judgement and these have not *'helped VCAL's case'*. According to Ms Nicholl, *'When we first started VCAL, we had 25 kids who hung together; we made some big blunders; we put them all in lockers together because they were the VCAL group; we even used separate forms for them'*. She was thankful that things had improved at her school and the VCAL students were now more integrated with other senior secondary students.

What emerges from these conversations is a clear sense that many of these students were feeling 'excluded' and were wanting to belong to the broader school community. These VCAL students felt that they were being disadvantaged by the very fact that they were in an alternative program and were missing out on opportunities offered to mainstream students. They also felt that they were missing out on the same level of careers counselling offered to the VCE students.

The VCAL timetable

The next section focuses on the way the VCAL is timetabled in different school settings and the impact this may have on the effective implementation of the program. Data collected from the interviews with regard to the VCAL timetable has presented two different viewpoints. In the previous chapter, the researcher identified that the majority of the students who were interviewed considered that the way the VCAL program was timetabled (generally three days in school, one day at a TAFE and the remaining day undertaking work placement) was a significant *enabler* and helped them to engage with their learning. These students liked the opportunity to combine schooling with learning in a more adult learning environment at TAFE as well as undertaking workplace activities. During the interviews, teachers were asked whether they thought the VCAL timetable worked well in their school environment. Eleven teachers reported that the way the program was timetabled presented no significant issues at their school. However, some of these teachers reported that they have had to be creative to make the timetable work. When asked whether her school faced timetabling constraints, Ms Harris was adamant that: *'The timetable is a really great thing to hide behind philosophically'*. Ms Harris was insistent that *'you can make the*

timetable do anything: we don't allow the timetable to rule the school'. She acknowledged that while there were 'difficulties to be overcome, the biggest constraint is freeing people's minds to make it work'. She also acknowledged that her school has had to make some modifications to the timetable, and given that the number of VCAL students was increasing, further changes would need to be made as the VCAL classes required flexible learning areas and access to technology. But in the end, Ms Harris stated that 'it is just about putting kids in classes, in blocks and in grids'.

At Mr Goldberg's school, the timetable also appeared to work well. He reported that the only difficulty was having 'the boys' grouped together for three full days which brought potential conflicts amongst the group. Two other teachers reported that the VCAL timetable has 'always been an issue' at their school, but that they found ways of 'getting around' these constraints. Four teachers, however, specifically raised the issue around the VCAL timetable continuing to inhibit the effective implementation of the VCAL program at their school and that the '*VCAL needs*' were always '*pushed back*'. This suggests that how the VCAL timetable is managed at a school has the potential to be a significant enabler or barrier to the effective delivery of the program.

Applied learning in the VCAL

The focus now turns to applied learning pedagogy in the VCAL program and whether this is perceived as an enabler or a barrier to the effective implementation of the VCAL program. At a system level, the VCAL learning program claims to have been developed, based on an applied learning, 'hands-on' pedagogical approach. The researcher was interested to 'test' whether this applied learning approach to the delivery of the VCAL learning program was actually happening in the VCAL classroom, or whether it was still 'an ideological philosophy' which has not been put into practice. When asked whether applied learning was truly happening at their schools and whether this model created distinctive challenges for them, there were mixed responses from the teachers who were interviewed. Sixteen teachers believed that teachers at their school were delivering the VCAL curriculum in an applied learning, practical way. Five teachers, however, believed that applied learning continued to be merely a 'philosophy' at their school and seven teachers had mixed

views as to how effectively applied learning was being used in the delivery of the VCAL program at their school. Ms Archibald felt that while VCAL at her school was based on an applied-learning approach, teachers were initially very challenged because they were used to *'teaching the VCE'*. Ms Isaac shared the same view and conceded that at her school, teachers were still *'very traditional and focussed on having a discrete curriculum area'*. According to Ms Isaac, the teachers at her school had not yet *'made that leap'*.

Mr Garrett also noted that many of the teachers at his school experienced considerable difficulty in dealing with the flexibility that is required of the VCAL program. Ms Lincoln believed that the biggest hurdle was to get teachers *'to understand the concept of negotiated curriculum'* and Ms Vella believed that it was *'tough to put it into practice'*. According to Mr Dodson, the biggest challenge VCAL teachers faced was *'allowing students to drive the curriculum'*. Mr Comrie agreed that some teachers felt challenged *'without the text book'* and that not every teacher could cope with the VCAL *'because you have to be more flexible and tailor curriculum to student needs ... and what works well one year may not work well the next'*. He also conceded that students made it more difficult because they were often *'not motivated'*. Mr Goldberg agreed. He said that the main problem with applied learning is that *'it works best with the most motivated and gifted kids who have the skills to do the types of projects you want them to do there are inherent difficulties in trying to get the VCAL kids to be able to do it because as a rule they are not self-starters'*. Ms Stevenson, however, stated that teachers at her school had *'accepted the challenge and understand and appreciate the learning styles of the student they are teaching.... They teach in a completely different way to how they might teach in other subjects'*. Ms Stevenson believed that the best VCAL teachers are the *'go getters, innovative, ideas people... they are the ones who will think outside the box and are willing to change what is happening in the classroom... if they come up with an activity and the kids are not responding, they are more easily able to adapt and try something different'*. Ms Stevenson also stated that the VCAL teacher needed to be able to *'micro manage things and be really organised but also very spontaneous'*.

Ms Harris recalled the time the VCAL program was first introduced at her school. At the time, the general view at the school was that applied learning meant watering

down the curriculum. Teachers were teaching the VCAL as if it were a *‘Jenny Craig version of the VCE; they were taking the calories out of the VCE and doing the same thing’*. According to Ms Harris, some teachers adapted really well to the VCAL program, in particular the teachers in the Health and Physical Education disciplines. Other teachers, in particular the Mathematics and English teachers faced many challenges. While she noted a distinct improvement over the last few years, Ms Harris conceded that not every teacher at her school liked this style of teaching... *‘some, like me find this really liberating... we can get stuck into something we really like’*. Others found it difficult to adapt to this style of pedagogy. Ms Harris accepted that it was not easy and that *‘some teachers did not come on board with VCAL... and it was punishing the kids as well as the teachers by continuing to put them in front of a VCAL class’*. Ms Vella experienced similar problems at her school and conceded that the VCAL was a *‘tough gig’*. Mr Goldberg acknowledged that the VCAL program required *‘the best teachers with the highest motivation’*, a view that was also shared by Mr Davies who claimed that the VCAL teachers needed to work with others who *‘share the same passion’* for the VCAL.

It would seem that teachers who appeared to cope best with the challenging demands of this new style of pedagogy were those who came from a TAFE or industry background. Mr Smith believed that the most effective VCAL teachers

‘are not those who have done university studies, but those who are more passionate about a particular hobby and bring it into the curriculum, or someone like Mr Rafter and myself who have a work background; who have actually been in industry because you know it and can talk in that language a lot more, and understand it; we are applied teachers because we learn that way ourselves; that makes a big difference’.

Mr Dimech also reported that he was experienced in *‘building things’* and he appeared to find his trade background very useful. He coached his students in building several things around his school, including flower beds, a hot house, benches, and a barbecue area *‘and the kids really enjoyed this’*. Mr Jones worked *‘in the building trade’* during school holidays and believed that this gave him *‘the life skills to pass on to the students’*. Mr Jones also believed that his sporting background

gave him *‘a bit of an insight into how to relate to these difficult students’*. Ms Waterston taught in TAFE for 15 years before joining the VCAL program and she believed that her TAFE background prepared her *‘really well for VCAL’*, a view that was also shared by Mr Garrett who taught at TAFE for 21 years before joining the VCAL program. Mr Saliba is also *‘an old Tech teacher’* and he was *‘used to these kids’*. Before commencing his teaching career, Mr Dodson was a fitter and turner and he ran his own landscaping business. He believed that his *‘life experience lent itself well into VCAL and the applied learning model’*.

Given the challenges that these VCAL teachers appeared to face, the researcher also explored whether these teachers believed that they were adequately prepared to teach in a program like the VCAL. A total of 25 teachers reported that they felt inadequately prepared. Ms Nicholl noted that the VCAL was *‘not around’* when she did her teacher training while Mr Petersen and Mr Goldberg claimed that they learnt their skills *‘on the job’*. Ms Lincoln and Ms Pace also said that a teacher’s preparedness to teach in a program like the VCAL depended on the type of teacher training course and the teaching method they trained in. Ms Pisani believed that few graduates had actually heard of the VCAL program. Only one teacher (Ms Waterston) said that she felt adequately prepared through her teacher training. When these teachers were asked whether they were given the opportunity to undertake professional learning to support this *‘new pedagogy’*, 28 teachers reported that they were offered the opportunity to undertake professional development. Of these, seven teachers reported that they only had access to in-house professional development. Ms Stevenson claimed, however, that while there was opportunity at her school to undertake professional learning, these professional development activities in the VCAL and applied learning practices tended to compete with other activities at the school... *‘I can’t send the new staff to the [VCAL] induction day because it falls on the same day as the swimming carnival at the school’*.

Mr Rafter shared similar views and acknowledged that if the VCAL professional development *‘clashed’* with other activities, the VCAL would *‘always miss out’* and that *‘if a teacher has to choose between a science meeting and a VCAL meeting, they will always go to the science one’*. Travel also presented many challenges for

teachers at Ms Oswald's school and as a result these teachers often missed out on professional development activities.

The researcher was also interested to determine whether these teachers had chosen to teach in the program or whether they had been *'tapped on the shoulder'*. Sixteen teachers reported that they had not elected to teach in the program but had been pressured to do so. Ms Jacob claimed that at her school, teachers were 'asked' to teach in the program. Mr Dodson also acknowledged that he did not initially choose *'the VCAL path'*, but he is very glad that he did. However, Mr Goldberg believed that the VCAL is often considered a *'dumping ground'* for teachers who have struggled with the VCE. According to Mr Goldberg, students at his school believed they became the victims of the teachers' reluctance to teach in the program. Ms Harris shared the same views and added that these teachers were dumped with the *'naughty kids in a naughty class with no curriculum'*. Mr Comrie also acknowledged that many teachers at his school did not want to be in the program and consequently had a bad rapport with the students. Mr Rafter further claimed that some teachers chose to teach in the VCAL program *'for the wrong reason'* because they think that it is *'the easy alternative'*. Ms Matthews was also adamant that many teachers at her school had an *'elitist attitude'* towards teaching and they were reluctant to teach in the VCAL program which they considered as *'education for idiots'*. According to Ms Matthews, many teachers at her school were not prepared to *'degrade themselves'* by teaching in this program. Mr Goldberg shared similar concerns about teacher attitudes towards the program. He conceded that at his school, the VCAL program tended to attract staff that *'can't fit in anywhere else'* and this did not help to create a positive image of the program. As a VCAL teacher, Mr Goldberg felt isolated from the rest of the teaching staff: *'a lot of the staff has not been near here; they don't bother coming here, yet they have a lot to say about the program'*. Ms Jacob, however, stated that despite initial negative perceptions of teaching in the program, once these teachers became involved in the program, *'they grew to enjoy it'*.

Furthermore, staff turnover can have a significant impact on the effective delivery of a program like the VCAL. The researcher asked these teachers whether they believed staff turnover was a concern at their school. Twenty teachers reported that staff turnover was not a concern at their school. Mr Johnson stated that once the teachers

started teaching in the VCAL program at his school, *'they wanted to stay'*. Eight teachers, however, reported that at their school, VCAL teachers suffered burnout because they felt they were involved in a very demanding and resource intensive program. Mr Dimech tended to agree and further claimed that it was *'hard for teachers to teach VCAL on an ongoing basis'*.

What emerges is a clear sense that teacher attitudes towards the program and their willingness to teach in the program can be a significant barrier to effective delivery of the program at the school. Staffing the program, therefore, has the potential to have a significant impact on the success of the program. The next section looks at the challenges of staffing the program and the school culture around the VCAL.

Ms Harris reported that at her school there has been a strong cultural shift in the way teachers were selected to teach in the VCAL program. In the past, when teachers received their teaching allotments, they received their VCE allotment first, based on their area of expertise *'and they then got topped up with VCAL'*. According to Ms Harris: *'this was modelling that the VCE was more important than VCAL'*. This school has now changed this arrangement... *'We want them in the VCAL classes first and they then get topped up with VCE'*. At this school, there are three positions of responsibility for the VCAL curriculum because *'our big concern was that VCE was prescribed down to the last lesson while the VCAL content was 'nebulous and up in the air'*. This presented a number of challenges because students were not being provided with the appropriate rigour if teachers were too preoccupied about teaching in a flexible organic way. Ms Harris claimed that at her school, there is a strong belief that for a good program to work, there is a need to provide flexible learning spaces. Ms Harris noted that many schools have traditionally not been built to accommodate this type of learning environment. *'Typically, VCAL students are body kinaesthetic learners and we need space for kids to be manipulating this as part of their learning'*.

Ms Harris, who occupies a leadership position at her school, firmly believed that teachers in leadership positions needed to be actively involved in the delivery of the VCAL. According to Ms Harris, it was really important for school leaders to teach in a VCAL class. *'If I choose to teach VCAL – that sets an example... I am not going to*

delegate it simply because I can... We put strong teachers in the VCAL program'. Ms Robertson shared similar views and was pleased that more leading teachers at her school were teaching in the VCAL program. She admitted, however, that it was '*hard work*' to establish good relationships with other teachers. At Ms Harris's school, there was a strong philosophy that for a VCAL program to work well, there needed to be a whole school approach and commitment to the VCAL and applied learning pedagogy. The leadership group was effectively the VCAL's 'sponsor' and ultimately responsible for the program's success. This group was very committed to the program and placed equal importance on the VCAL and the VCE.

How the VCAL program is viewed by the leadership team at a school appeared to have a significant impact on whether certain areas are considered as enablers or significant barriers to effective delivery of a vocational program like the VCAL. Mr Smith acknowledged that his school faces significant challenges in implementing the VCAL program. However, his school has taken the view '*that VCAL is important, therefore we support it*'.

Funding the VCAL program

The next section looks at issues around funding the VCAL program. At a system level, funding is the most significant resource constraint which has the potential to significantly inhibit the effective delivery of the VCAL program. The VCAL is a resource intensive program which caters for the most vulnerable cohort of students at risk from disengaging from education. As noted in the Victorian Auditor-General's Report on school completion rates (Pearson 2012, p. 35) the VCAL is 'especially important for students at risk of disengaging, including those with low academic achievement and those from low socio-economic status (SES) background'. The report also noted (Pearson 2012, p. 35) that the importance of the VCAL in retaining students in education 'can be strongly inferred from the contents of DEECD surveys of school leavers'. For example, in 2010, the survey reported that 87 per cent of the VCAL students stated that the VCAL was an important factor in their decision to stay at school (Pearson 2012).

While acknowledging the importance of the VCAL program in engaging young students in education, the report acknowledged that the schools surveys ‘all stated that VCAL is more expensive to provide than the VCE’ (Pearson 2012, p. 34). The report also noted (Pearson 2012, p. 35) that it costs more for schools to provide vocational education than more traditionally classroom-based education and that DEECD provides additional funding to schools ‘to cover the extra costs of delivering particular courses’.

In Victoria, there have been significant funding changes to the VCAL and VET in Schools programs over the last decade. These funding changes have the potential to ‘reduce VCAL as a viable option for schools and students to attain a secondary school certificate’ (Pearson 2012, p. ix). Since the introduction of the VCAL in 2002, DEECD has provided co-ordination funding to schools that deliver the VCAL. This funding was, however, withdrawn in 2012. The report further noted the difficulty of assessing ‘the impact on funding changes on schools’ ability to meet the growing demand for VCAL, and, in turn, on the impact that this would have on future completion rates’ (Pearson 2012, p. vii). In particular, the report noted its concerns relating to the ‘impact of any reduction in the availability or breadth of VCAL course offerings’ which would most likely ‘impact on students from non-metropolitan or disadvantaged backgrounds’ (Pearson 2012, p. 33). It is not the intention to focus on the issues of VET funding in Victoria, which are very complex, but rather to highlight the fact that VET funding issues also have a direct impact on the delivery of the VCAL program because VET is a compulsory component of the VCAL program at Intermediate and Senior level. It is also important to note that the interviews with VCAL teachers as well as the student focus groups were undertaken before the withdrawal of this funding.

Concerns about the impact of limited funding resources and their impact on the delivery of the VCAL program were one of the most nominated challenges faced by 11 of the VCAL teachers who were interviewed as part of this study. Three teachers also voiced their concerns about the prohibitive costs specifically associated with VET delivery. They felt that this was preventing students from undertaking these programs. Another four teachers voiced similar funding concerns and stated that the problem was further compounded by the fact that the ‘VCAL money’ was being

absorbed in the school's general revenue. While acknowledging these cost constraints, 10 teachers indicated that despite these challenges, they believed that the VCAL program had a critical role to play in the education of these young students and they therefore needed to be creative and think 'outside the square'. In particular, Mr Finch stated that teachers had to '*find ways around it... look at different ways to make money go as far as possible*'. Mr Finch also highlighted the importance of approaching industry to '*support the VCAL program*' and four teachers described how they accessed other funding bodies to support the delivery of their VCAL program.

The challenges of distance and remoteness from other facilities were other factors that were nominated by seven teachers as a significant cost constraint and therefore a barrier to effective implementation of the VCAL program at their school. For three teachers, in particular, travel costs for their students to participate in VET programs and other program related activities were prohibitive and a significant issue for their schools.

This chapter has identified a number of barriers and enablers which have the potential to either support or inhibit effective implementation of the VCAL program. These include issues around parity of esteem and perceptions of the VCAL program, concerns around how the VCAL program is timetabled at the school, whether teachers are adequately prepared to teach in this different style of pedagogy and whether the attitudes of school leaders support the effective delivery of the program. These barriers and enablers were considered from a system perspective as well as a school perspective. The researcher found that issues of parity of esteem are ongoing and they are not unique to the VCAL program. However, negative perceptions of the VCAL program appear to have improved. The researcher's findings also suggest that schools that have school leaders who actively participate in the program appear to deliver a very successful VCAL program. These schools are creative in the way the program is time-tabled and funded to ensure maximum effectiveness and that teachers are supported with ongoing professional development. The chapter also found that other schools continue to be challenged by barriers relating to an inflexible timetable which inhibits effective implementation of the program, lack of funding support and a lack of leadership and teacher commitment and 'buy-in'. Furthermore, what has been identified as a barrier in some schools has been identified as an enabler in other

schools. For example, the way the program is time-tabled in some schools has hindered effective delivery of the program, and yet other schools have been creative in how the program is timetabled to ensure optimal impact.

It is therefore important to capitalise on enablers which promote successful delivery of the program and to address barriers so as to minimise negative impacts on these vulnerable students. This needs active involvement by a number of stakeholders (at a system and local school level), including the VCAL providers and teachers, system authorities, teacher training institutions and employers, all of whom have a critical role to play. Education alone will not solve labour market problems. However, it is important that students are provided with an educational program that provides them with important work and life skills to effectively transition after the VCAL. Furthermore, industry has a critical role to play by actively engaging in the education of these young people and providing them with mentoring and training opportunities in the workplace.

The next chapter brings this study to a close. This concluding chapter provides an opportunity to revisit the research questions in light of the researcher's findings. In this chapter, the researcher also considers a number of principles which might be formulated with respect to the quality of vocational program like the VCAL, for school-age students.

CHAPTER 10

CONCLUSION

This chapter brings the study to a close. It is divided into three sections. The first section considers the VCAL program in light of the international literature on vocational education and applied learning, with a focus on differences in the approaches used to deliver vocational and applied learning to school-aged students internationally as well as in Australia. The literature review focussed on two main dimensions of differentiation in vocational programs - whether they are school-based or employment-based (apprenticeship) and the age at which differentiation into university-preparatory and vocational programs occurs. It also considered the effectiveness of these programs internationally and in Australia, particularly in terms of their impact on retention and school completion, their ability to keep students engaged in their learning and the evidence for their effectiveness in creating effective pathways from schools into a range of destinations including further education, training and employment, and finally the impact they have on students from different population sub-groups. This study has found that the VCAL has ‘delivered’ in some of these areas but continues to face ongoing challenges in other areas.

In the second section of this chapter, the researcher focuses on the specific research questions which have been formulated as a result of this review of the literature on vocational education and applied learning. In the final section, the researcher considers the principles that might underpin an effective VCAL learning program and how these might be operationalised at two levels – the school setting and the systemic setting.

In considering the various approaches that can be adopted in order to deliver vocational and applied learning programs to school-aged students, the researcher analysed the two main dimensions of differentiation using two conceptual frameworks. First, Murray and Polesel (2013) draw on Hall and Soskice’s (2001) varieties of capitalism approach which suggests that an organisation’s approach to training is heavily influenced by the national institutional structures within which they operate. In their study, Murray and Polesel (2013), building on the work of Hall and

Soskice (2001), examined the roles of the welfare state in Denmark and Australia and their relationship to the education and training systems in each country. They note that in a liberal market economy, as in Australia and Britain for example, there is little relationship between industry partners, state structures and the education system. In a coordinated market economy, however, such as Germany and Denmark, one is more likely to find a commitment to a strong apprenticeship system, with strong links between industry partners, state structures and the education system. The literature review also highlighted how the dual (apprenticeship) systems of Germany and Denmark have long been praised for their success in creating effective transitions for school leavers, their high levels of industry investment and their ability to provide access to skilled and well-paid jobs.

The second framework focussed on Iannelli and Raffe's (2007, p. 49) study of the 'vocational effect' and the linkages between education and the labour market. In their study, Iannelli and Raffe (2007, p. 50) constructed two ideal types: the 'employment logic' systems and the 'education logic' systems. Iannelli and Raffe (2007) argued that in education systems with strong linkages with the labour market, the employment logic dominates, while in education systems with weak links to the labour market, the education logic dominates. Countries like Germany and Denmark operate closest to Iannelli and Raffe's (2007) employment logic with strong links to the labour market, while countries like Australia and France operate closest to the education logic as these countries rely heavily on a school-based approach to VET. With the exception of the state of Victoria, each state of Australia (through the Board of Studies) has developed consistent approaches to integrating VET within senior secondary curriculum that avoids streaming students into a vocational pathway and which allows students to articulate into a number of programs. Victoria has taken a different approach. While VET continues to be offered within the VCE, Victoria has created a stand-alone vocational program, the VCAL, which sits alongside the university-oriented VCE.

The literature also notes that the age at which tracking occurs has a significant impact on the career options of students who are diverted away from higher education into a vocational option. For example, students in Germany (in most Lander) are segregated into different tracks early in their schooling on the basis of assessment tasks

conducted at the age of ten. This forces them to make early career choices and students are locked into their chosen pathway, causing them to forego other possible career options (Sweet 2009). However, student tracking occurs much later in Denmark and vocational tracks for Danish students tend not to close other options for further study.

Applying these frameworks to the Victorian education system, it can be seen that the approach adopted in the allocation of students to the VCAL or to the university-oriented VCE most closely resembles the education logic paradigm of Iannelli and Raffe (2007), with students in the VCAL program not typically undertaking an apprenticeship but rather in full-time study at school. It can also be seen that students who undertake the VCAL program are tracked in their final two years of schooling, typically around the age of 16. This means that VCAL students are not subject to some of the disadvantages associated with early tracking, such as diminished aspirations (Sweet 2009).

Despite the distinct benefits of an employment-based approach to vocational education and applied learning, the research has highlighted ongoing debate and tension about whether vocational education is most effective when it forms part of a school program or whether it is best placed in the workplace. The international research has highlighted strengths and weaknesses associated with the two models of differentiation. For example, school-based vocational programs offer students, who are less academically able, the opportunity to gain important work-based skills, in particular through formal work placement arrangements (Misko 2006). This has the potential to reduce their chances of unemployment. However, it has also been claimed (see Shavit and Müller 2000) that school-based training does not offer students the same level of practical, workplace experience and skills as do apprenticeships.

The researcher considered the literature relating to the impact of vocational education and training programs on student retention and school completion, on the engagement and motivation of young people in their learning and on the creation of effective pathways into a range of destinations. The impact of these programs on students from different population sub-groups was also considered. The importance of providing strong incentives for learning and engagement is well documented in the research into

learning theory. Many studies (see for example, Darling-Hammond 1997 and Bransford et al. 2000) have found that students are more motivated to engage with their education when they can see the relevance of what they are learning in the context of their workplace opportunities. For many students, VET has provided a second chance opportunity to experience success. In this regard, VET has been considered as a safety net for students who have not succeeded in the traditional curriculum and who are at risk of social exclusion.

These issues led the researcher to formulate the four research questions as they relate to the effectiveness of the VCAL program:

- Does the VCAL lead to improved retention?
- Does the VCAL lead to effective post-school pathways?
- Does the VCAL lead to effective learner engagement?
- What are the barriers and enablers to effective implementation of the VCAL?

The focus shifts to the first research question.

Does the VCAL lead to improved retention?

This section examines the evidence for the impact of the VCAL program on student retention rates in Victoria. It is based on analysis conducted in Chapter 6 of school completion rates in the state of Victoria over a 10-year period (2000-2010), broken out by student sub-groups. The researcher noted that these completion rates have remained static over that period and are well short of the Victorian Government's goals and targets. The researcher also noted that in general boys have traditionally dropped out of school in greater proportion than girls. However, the findings point to a considerably larger proportion of males than females undertaking the VCAL over the period 2002-2010. These figures therefore suggest that the VCAL may be playing an important role in catering for the needs of the male students who may have been at risk of dropping out of school. The findings also suggest that VCAL may have an important role in boosting retention, particularly in country Victoria where VCAL enrolments as a percentage of the total year 11 and 12 enrolments is higher in every

country region in Victoria (with the exception of the Grampians region) than metropolitan Melbourne.

In analysing the impact of the VCAL on school retention and completion, the researcher considered the data against a number of factors. Firstly, during this time, Victoria experienced a period of economic growth after the catastrophic downturn in the early 1990s which had been followed by a subsequent downturn towards the later 1990s. Apprenticeship levels reached a new high in the early 2000s. Attraction to the labour market was therefore likely to provide a significant barrier to student retention. Given that retention rates remained relatively stable during a period of improved employment and apprenticeship opportunities, particularly for boys, this suggests that retention rates were therefore more positive than would first appear. Boys in particular continued to be drawn to staying on at school despite the strength of the economy.

The researcher also considered the ‘substitution effect’. Since the introduction of the VCAL, there appears to have been a change in the course composition of a student’s senior secondary program. This is because students have a broader program/subject selection choice which could potentially alter the degree of VCE activity among this student cohort. However, this seems to have *replaced* student activity rather than created new enrolments. Students who would normally have struggled to cope with the structure of the VCE, now had the opportunity to undertake a vocational program (the VCAL) which was more suited to their aspirations, needs and abilities and which provided them with formal recognition of their learning. While school completion did not fall at a time when job opportunities were increasing, it is, however, difficult to attribute stable retention figures to the VCAL program.

Given the large numbers of students enrolled in the VCAL program, it is likely that the introduction of the VCAL has had a significant effect, not necessarily on the level of school completion, but on the nature of courses that students were undertaking. The researcher argues that an apparent lack of growth in school completion may be viewed as masking the impact of the VCAL insofar as the program may have been offsetting potential losses of enrolments to apprenticeship and full-time employment during a buoyant economic period. The researcher would also argue that the VCAL

has had a substitution effect and has also retained in school young people who would have left. In this regard, the researcher considers VCAL to have played a role, though a limited one, in keeping students at school.

Does the VCAL lead to effective post-school pathways?

In this section, the researcher argues that a successful transition for VCAL students after completing the VCAL can be determined in two ways: whether these students have been able to undertake higher level education and training after VCAL or whether they have been able to secure employment opportunities, either through full-time employment or an apprenticeship.

The post-school destination data collected by the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) were examined. The researcher analysed these data and compared the destinations of VCAL students with similar students who were not enrolled in the VCAL program. The main area of interest in this study is the student cohort of 2010, the year the researcher undertook the fieldwork. However, the data are similar to the outcomes reported in the data collected for the years since the implementation of the VCAL program in 2002.

As the focus of this study is on the VCAL program, the researcher compared the destinations of the VCAL graduates with the destinations of VCE completers (including VCE graduates who undertook VET as part of their VCE program and those who did not include VET in their VCE program).

The percentage of VCAL completers who were subsequently enrolled in a Bachelor degree was extremely low. This is not unexpected given that the primary intent of the VCAL program is to provide pathways into apprenticeship, traineeship and employment. However, this study has raised concerns that a substantial number of VCAL students continue to enrol in basic level VET (Certificate I – III) after they have completed their senior secondary qualification. This may suggest that the VCAL program has not provided much career progression for these students and that the program has therefore not provided an effective post-school pathway for these students. The researcher also highlighted the fact that VCAL students were enrolling

in higher-level VET programs at a much lower rate than the VCE students (only about half as often). This could suggest that these VCAL students may be given weak signals in terms of the potential of pursuing pathways into Technical and Further Education (TAFE) institutes. It could also suggest that there are significant gaps between the level of VET training undertaken in the VCAL program and the higher-level training undertaken at TAFE. This may indicate a concern among TAFE institutes that VCAL graduates are inadequately prepared for training at a higher level (Certificate IV) and these institutes would therefore be disinclined to offer these students training opportunities at this level.

On the positive side, the study highlighted that destinations for VCAL graduates into apprenticeships and traineeships were strong when compared to the destinations for the VCE student cohort. However, the data also show higher proportions of VCAL students entering the labour market without further education or training, especially into some of the more precarious destinations of part-time employment or unemployment.

The evidence in this study points to the fact that the pathways outcomes for these students are less than optimal. Despite this strong career focus from these students, it is questionable whether these VCAL students are basing their career plans on appropriate advice, given the precarious employment outcomes of some of these students, in particular for girls. It may also explain why a much larger proportion of VCAL students than VCE students are still looking for work six months after completing their VCAL. The researcher is concerned that the unemployment figures for these VCAL graduates continue to be higher than that of their VCE counterparts, even after taking into account similar achievement levels (that is, comparing VCE students in the lowest achievement quartile with students undertaking a VCAL program). This is problematic, particularly given that an important aim of the VCAL program is to facilitate pathways into employment.

That said, education alone cannot necessarily solve labour market problems and employment outcomes also depend on the state of the labour market and not just the level of a school leaver's qualifications. This, therefore, raises the question of whether students who hold minimal qualifications after completing the VCAL should

be encouraged to look for work, or whether they should be encouraged to undertake further training to improve their employment prospects, particularly during a period of economic downturn. It also highlights the importance of giving targeted careers advice to students to ensure that they are provided with realistic pathway options.

In terms of this research question, therefore, this study has found that the post-school pathways for VCAL graduates were not strong, but this partly reflects the weak academic skills of this student cohort. However, the retention effects must also be considered. A substantial body of research (see for example, Rumberger & Lamb 2003; Shavit & Müller 1998, Rumberger 2011, Markussen 2011 and Markussen & Sandberg 2011) analyses the costs of dropping out of schools. These studies claim that students who drop out of school suffer a number of consequences which will affect them for the rest of their lives. Rumberger (2011) and Markussen and Sandberg (2011) also point to evidence of the impact of dropping out affecting not only the students who drop out but also the rest of society. Given the evidence of the impact and the consequences of dropping out and the need to keep students effectively motivated and engaged in their learning, it is important that students are offered a program which effectively engages them in their learning. The next research question examined whether the VCAL program has effectively engaged these VCAL students.

Does the VCAL lead to effective learner engagement?

The review of the literature (see for example Porter 2006; Lamb 2011) noted that vocational programs in schools can have a positive impact on student motivation and engagement. However, there are two distinct views with regard to the benefits of contextualised school-based learning that occurs in vocational programs and the consequential ‘marginalisation’ of general knowledge. For example, Bransford et al. (2000, p. 9) claim that for all learners, ‘useable knowledge’ is more important than ‘disconnected facts’ and students are more readily able to transfer this knowledge to other contexts. However other researchers (see Wheelahan 2010 for example), claim that knowledge has been marginalised in some VET qualifications and that this consequential marginalisation of knowledge may be potentially depriving these students of the skills and attributes to participate in the broader society.

In this study, the researcher has provided evidence that the VCAL has helped students in the targeted schools to remain engaged in the program and has motivated them to continue with their education. The effectiveness of the VCAL program in engaging these students was measured against a number of factors. These include the ability for these students to experience success in a school program that provides them with important work and life skills and motivates them to continue with their learning. The fieldwork has also found that the program has provided these students with the opportunity to develop strong bonds with their peers and their teachers. The VCAL program has provided these students with the opportunity to experience vocational training in an adult sector environment (at a Technical and Further Education institute) and connect with the world of work through work placement opportunities while still maintaining links with their school. Furthermore, a substantial proportion of the students (71 out of 90 students) found the program interesting and they liked the hands-on approach to learning and the fact that everything they learnt had a distinct purpose that was directly linked to their career plans. They also reported that they were able to directly influence and negotiate the content of their VCAL program, a factor that motivated them to continue with their education.

For many of these students, the VCAL program has played an important role in providing a 'second chance' at success, a safety net for those who have not been successful in the more traditional subjects offered to them. The data collected from the student focus groups highlighted that how these students felt about themselves and the program was pivotal to their ongoing learning and development. Furthermore, having the ability to engage with a personalised learning program changed the attitude of many of these students towards learning.

There was still a strong sense among some of these students and teachers that the VCAL is a second-rate qualification and that students only undertook the VCAL program if they could not cope with the VCE. Yet, a minority of students also considered that the program was not challenging enough. Perceptions matter a great deal and while negative perceptions of the program have diminished significantly, it was felt that there was still considerable room for improvement. Despite these negative perceptions and labour market outcomes that are less than optimal for some

of these students, the data from the students suggests that the program has kept these students engaged in their education to complete their senior secondary years of schooling. This has helped them develop their maturity and further develop their employability skills.

What are the barriers and enablers to effective implementation of the VCAL?

These findings suggest that the VCAL is making some contribution towards engaging reluctant learners and fostering student retention. They also suggest that the transitions of VCAL graduates into the labour market and into post-school education and training may be problematic, especially for some student sub-groups, such as females.

Data collected from the interviews with the VCAL teachers and coordinators in this study, in particular, suggest that the VCAL is playing an important role in catering for some of the system's weakest and most disengaged learners. However, there are also ongoing issues of parity of esteem and the general status of the VCAL program, particularly in some school settings. The study has also identified that feeling *equal* to their VCE counterparts is very important to these VCAL students. Furthermore, reputation mattered a great deal to these students and they wanted to *belong* to the broader school community. These issues of parity of esteem will have an impact on the effectiveness of the VCAL program.

In summary, then, there are difficulties in design and implementation. The issue of design arises at the system level, where the weaknesses associated with a program based on an education logic model, particularly its limited engagement with the labour market and employers, cannot be ignored. The issue of implementation arises at the school level, where evidence from the study suggests that there are issues with the way the VCAL is being implemented, particularly in some schools rather than others.

Dealing with the school level first, this study suggests that culture and attitudes towards the VCAL at a school level have a direct impact on how effectively the program is implemented in these schools, since schools which prioritise university-

preparatory pathways contribute to the maintenance of a view that vocational studies do not belong in modern secondary schooling (Durkheim 1977). The evidence also suggests that the VCAL works best in a school setting where there is a 'whole school approach' to program delivery with active involvement from the leadership team. The findings also identified concerns relating to the need for a different pedagogical approach which often challenged many of the teachers who were involved in this program. Furthermore, several aspects that have been identified as barriers in some school settings have actually worked as enablers in other settings. For example, timetabling the program has been identified as a barrier in some schools but an enabler in others.

With respect to the system (or design) level, the researcher argues that introducing aspects of an employment based approach to the VCAL in the form of apprenticeships, traineeships and other forms of work-based training would strengthen industry engagement and would be likely to raise the profile and esteem of the VCAL program, as well as to provide clearer employment pathways for these students. In addition, the researcher notes the fact that the VCAL is a resource intensive program. This issue of resourcing in fact presents significant challenges from both a system and a school perspective. Evidence from this study also suggests that while funding the program presents more challenges to some schools, other schools have found innovative ways to address these financial issues and better resource the program.

The next section considers some of the principles which might underpin a more effective VCAL program at both the system and school levels.

Principles for a more effective VCAL program

Evidence from the researcher's findings suggests that for the most part, the VCAL has effectively engaged the students who participated in the study. The VCAL program has motivated them to remain at school. Student enrolments in the VCAL program continue to grow. However, the outcomes for students after completing the VCAL are somewhat mixed. If the intentions of the program to engage students and provide them with effective pathways into further education, training and employment are to be achieved, educational reform is needed from several angles. This requires a shift

in strategic thinking and a commitment to this program from a number of stakeholders.

The researcher argues that the university-preparatory VCE continues to dominate the educational landscape in Victoria and a pathway to university is still considered to be the most important objective in many schools. Acknowledging the labour market realities and that education alone cannot fix labour market problems, the researcher argues for a new educational philosophy which places equal importance on both senior certificates. This needs to be articulated at a system (design) level as well as at the local school level. This is somewhat ambitious but it may work towards eliminating some of the stigma associated with tracking students into a vocational pathway.

Evidence from the researcher's findings indicates that VCAL programs for school-age students are strongest when a number of factors are taken into account. These will have implications for policy and practice, at various levels, including at a system and policy level, on the way schools deliver the program and the way employers and the broader school community engage with schools and VCAL students.

Dealing with the system level first, there is a strong body of research (see Iannelli and Raffe 2007) which argues that in systems with an employment logic approach, vocational upper-secondary education has strong links with the labour market. In these systems, employers are confident about vocational qualifications and therefore more inclined to employ vocational graduates. As noted by Juul and Jorgensen (2011), there are limits to state intervention in vocational education and training when this is not done in collaboration with these 'social partners'. In this study, the researcher found that highly successful VCAL programs have occurred where schools have developed strong partnerships with industry and employers have actively engaged with the school community. The researcher therefore argues that introducing aspects of an employment based approach to the VCAL program through apprenticeships, traineeships and other forms of on-the-job training will provide employers with the opportunity to play a more important and strategic role in the delivery of the VCAL program. This will not only strengthen the profile and esteem of the VCAL program but will also provide more seamless employment pathways for

these students. This will, however, require intervention at a system level which will involve a redesign of the VCAL program by introducing mandatory apprenticeships and traineeships as part of the VCAL program. Schools also have an important role to play in this regard by actively engaging with industry and providing a more coordinated approach to program delivery. This could involve industry forums and extending invitations to employers to actively participate in school events and activities.

The researcher's findings have also demonstrated that the VCAL is a resource intensive program which requires considerable financial support. Allocation of appropriate financial resources to the program is complex and requires intervention at a system and local school level. Despite the funding cuts in 2012 initiated at a state level, this research has identified that best-practice VCAL schools have been creative in the way they have allocated funds for the VCAL program to ensure that they deliver a robust and rigorous program for these students.

At a school level, evidence from the researcher's fieldwork suggests that the most successful VCAL schools have adopted a whole-school strategic approach to VCAL delivery with a positive school culture towards the VCAL program. Strong sponsorship and support occurs at the top of the school hierarchy. These schools consider that the school community will look to senior leaders for messages about the importance of the VCAL and the schools' commitment to the program. They believe that 'owning' the success of the program would facilitate the necessary organisational support, gain commitment from key stakeholders and ensure appropriate resources are available. They also believe that active and visible commitment to the VCAL program will reinforce the importance placed on the VCAL program and may also go some way to addressing issues of parity of esteem. Furthermore, integrating VCAL students with their VCE counterparts in shared activities and roles within the school will help address the issue of VCAL students needing to belong to the broader school community.

The most successful VCAL schools in this study put the strongest and most experienced teachers into the VCAL program. This sends a clear message to the school community that the VCAL is an important part of its senior secondary

curriculum and that the school is committed to the program. The most successful VCAL programs have occurred in schools where school leaders have an active role in the delivery of the VCAL program by having a regular teaching allotment in the program. These schools also ensure that the VCAL is not seen as a dumping ground for underperforming teachers who have struggled to teach in the VCE program.

This study has also demonstrated that the most successful VCAL programs have occurred in schools where teachers have been provided with adequate support and professional development opportunities. These schools recognise the importance of giving teachers more time within the school day for networking with their colleagues within and outside their immediate school environment. Teachers at these schools have the opportunity to share ideas and examples of best practice to support their program planning and delivery.

Evidence from this study points to a substantial proportion of teachers (25 out of 38 teachers) who felt inadequately prepared to teach in a program like the VCAL. Establishing better connections between system authorities, training institutions and schools will assist new VCAL teachers in preparing them for the applied learning approach to VCAL delivery. The researcher also argues that universities that train teachers are a critical strategic partner and have an important role to fulfil in educating VCAL teachers in this style of pedagogy.

The importance of establishing good connections between the VCAL providers and adult sector vocational providers around higher-level training has also been highlighted in this study. These providers need to be assured of the quality of the delivery of the VCAL program so that they can be confident about offering education and training pathway opportunities for these VCAL students. Ongoing dialogue could occur through the establishment of a forum to provide opportunities for joint school/training provider planning and development which will be mutually beneficial.

This study has also found strong evidence which points to the importance of engaging the support of parents and the broader community. Establishing stronger partnerships with these stakeholders could be further enhanced by, for example, showcasing examples of VCAL excellence through information nights and inviting parents and

community organisations to actively work with the VCAL students on community based projects. The Local Learning and Employment Networks (established as a result of the Kirby Review in 2000, in order to develop collaborative approaches towards planning and delivery of post-compulsory education and training programs), continue to fulfil a very important role in brokering connections between schools, employers and the broader community. These relationships should be encouraged and strengthened.

One of the major strengths of the VCAL program is the flexibility of curriculum development at the local level, to meet particular student needs. This supports findings of the earlier evaluations of the VCAL which had chosen school sites for their experience in developing flexible programs to meet student needs. However, this flexibility brings with it many challenges, particularly with regard to consistency of delivery and assessment. The most successful VCAL schools in this study have developed an integrated approach to the delivery of the VCAL with collaboration between teachers, school leaders and industry to ensure continued ‘currency’ of the VCAL curriculum.

Finally, this study has highlighted the importance of providing appropriate careers counselling for these VCAL students. The researcher acknowledges that schools alone cannot solve labour market problems. However, this research has highlighted the need for these students to be provided with more targeted careers advice and be better prepared for the possibility of worsening economic conditions. This may require a new approach to careers counselling to ensure that these students are given current and realistic careers advice. It may also require further research into the appropriateness of VET programs that these students are undertaking within their VCAL program. Furthermore, it may require more professional development for careers counsellors to assist them to counsel these students about realistic career options and appropriate pathways after completing the VCAL.

This study has highlighted many success stories. For many of these students, the VCAL has provided a ‘second chance’. However, other students continue to face ongoing challenges after completing their VCAL and the post-school pathways for these students are somewhat precarious. If the VCAL is to provide better

opportunities for those students for whom the VCE is not suitable, then every effort needs to be made to improve the quality and integrity of the program. It is equally important that the VCAL program provides a sound platform for these students to effectively make the transition into their next stage of career development and not merely be a 'holding bay' for these students. Many players have a critical role to fill in this regard.

For many of these students, the VCAL program is the only reason they have remained in education. Despite the evidence that transitions for these students into further education, training and employment could be improved; the VCAL program has been successful in engaging these students and keeping them in school. There are substantial economic and social benefits to be gained in this regard. The VCAL program has also been successful in providing these students with the opportunity to gain a higher degree of maturity and self-confidence in an environment where they have continued to further develop their knowledge and employability skills.

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APPENDIX 1

STUDENT FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

An evaluation of post-compulsory curriculum provision in Victoria, with a particular focus on the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL)

Student Focus Group questions

Why did you choose to do VCAL?

Response

What do you like most about the VCAL?

Response

What do you like least about the VCAL?

Response

What do you plan to do once you finish your VCAL?

Response

How confident are you about achieving these plans?

Response

What do your parents think of VCAL?

Response

How could VCAL be improved?

Response

What do you see yourself doing in 5 years' time?

Response

APPENDIX 2

TEACHER INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

An evaluation of post-compulsory curriculum provision in Victoria, with a particular focus on the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL)

Proposed Interview Questions

Could you talk about the place of VCAL in your school (for example, is it targeted to particular groups of students, has it grown in recent years?)

Response

Could you describe how students see the VCAL?

Response

How do parents see the VCAL?

Response

In your view, has VCAL had a positive impact on student engagement?

Response

Are you satisfied with the pattern of student destinations after leaving school? Do you see any particular issues in VCAL student destinations?

Response

Does your school run multiple VCAL classes?

Response

In your experience, does the philosophy of Applied Learning create distinctive challenges for a teacher and if so, what are they?

Response

Would you say that teachers are adequately prepared for VCAL in their initial teacher training?

Response

Would you say that you have the opportunity to participate in regular professional development activities?

Response

Are there particular cost or resource issues associated with the delivery of VCAL in your school?

Response

How could VCAL be improved?

Response