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TAFE, schools and industry: the benefits and challenges of cross-sectoral partnerships

Dr Gosia Klatt

Preparing school students for adulthood and for the world of employment, is an increasing policy focus in Australia, and internationally. Supporting young people preparing for work, while they are still at school, is a complex task and schools can't do it in isolation. Since the early 1990s, when Vocational Education and Training (VET) programs were introduced into Australian secondary schools, the growth of partnerships between schools, TAFEs, workplaces and community organisations has been unprecedented. The majority of secondary schools form partnerships with a number of organisations, ranging from other education and training providers to community groups, businesses and associations to support attainment, qualifications and pathways to work. Over the last three years, I have undertaken research in Victoria, New South Wales and South Australia to explore how schools manage these partnerships and what are the benefits for students. From my conversations with more than fifty secondary school students and a number of school principals, VET coordinators and VET teachers, my observation is that this is a complex and challenging task. Some schools are more successful than others, but most importantly most of these partnerships should be benefiting students. So, what do the effective partnerships look like? And how challenging are partnerships for schools?

What are the most important partners for schools?

In 2014, there were almost 250,000 VET in Schools students in Australia and a majority of them were supported by a partnership between their school and other organisation (through training delivery and work-placements). The major partners in terms of numbers involved are VET programs providers - TAFEs and private RTOs - as well as local businesses. These partnerships play an important role in providing technical skills, technical expertise and infrastructure enabling students to achieve better educational outcomes. Local businesses are the largest non-educational partner to be involved with schools. The majority of them are involved as work-placement providers for compulsory structured work-placements.

What are the benefits for students?

Building partnerships for VET delivery requires significant commitment, time and effort on behalf of schools, however schools recognise that these partnerships provide a number of benefits to VET students. In response to the growing demand and complexity of these partnerships, schools are learning how to manage and how to increase the number of partners they link up with to deliver a very broad spectrum of qualifications with hundreds of programs available on a 'choice' basis. This strategy provides access to a variety of hands-on skills and increases engagement and retention in the senior years of schooling.

Employability skills are one of the most important benefits students gain through the involvement of partners at schools. Structured work-placements, in particular, influence students' employment outcomes post-school. These young people get a 'head start' in their selected industry, or get a taste for different industries which enable them to make more informed career choices. The secondary school students I spoke with generally have a very positive view of work-placements and work in a very diverse range of industries: music studios, trades, early learning centres, manufacturing, cafes, pharmacies, accounting firms, libraries, farms and building sites. The overwhelming majority of students I talked to loved their work-placements. They valued the opportunity to learn new skills and develop knowledge about workplaces.

For students from regional areas and those with lower social capital, access to workplace learning at school helps ameliorate the effects of disadvantage, especially when workplace mentoring is provided. Furthermore, some students consider a vocational pathway to be superior to the general curriculum pathway because it: encourages them to work out what they want to do after they leave school; enables them to be employed full time when they leave school; and provides them with work experience and qualifications. Students also appreciate the adult learning environment they experience in TAFEs which makes them feel more mature and behave responsibly.

Focusing on employability outcomes of VET students as a way of evaluating the effectiveness of these partnership does not give a full credit to other important benefits resulting from these partnerships. Self-esteem, confidence, informed

career choices, increased engagement and ability to manage different demands of schools and external learning environments play an important role in strengthening the youth transitions from education to work. For students who have traditionally not been successful at school the applied learning and work-placement re-engages them with learning and school.

What are the main challenges for schools?

For partnerships to be effective and beneficial for students many factors need to be considered. It is clear from our research that some schools have found it challenging to form meaningful partnerships and to interact effectively with a diverse range of employers, community groups and government agencies. The growing demand from students for access to a broad range of VET qualifications puts a lot of pressure on schools in terms of coordination and monitoring of external learning. The main concerns raised by the schools I visited relate to the quality of delivery, frequent staff turnover in RTOs and TAFEs and a lack of established and formalised communication channels so the schools can monitor the progress of each student. Schools also struggle with finding the appropriate and relevant work-placements for all the students. On many occasions, students are made individually responsible for finding an industry partner. This is especially acutely felt in rural and regional locations with limited number of industry partners.

Many schools create databases of current employees or even establish formal industry school boards to assist in planning and designing vocational courses and training. To support these processes schools create industry and work-placement coordinator positions which require new skills, including knowledge of local industry, networking and negotiating skills. Schools emphasise that limited human resources and limited financial resources remain the biggest barriers. Even under the most favourable conditions, aspects of the current system's weaknesses undermine the positive impact of these partnerships. These include inconsistent funding arrangements, frequently changing regulatory provisions and a narrow understanding of learning on behalf of policy-makers.

Stability and funding are paramount

Secondary schools have been really successful in trying to overcome various challenges undermining effective partnerships. Nevertheless, system-wide improvements would strengthen the relationships with VET providers and industry partners. Schools need to have some funding stability so they can plan and build long-term partnerships. Funding was described by stakeholders I consulted as the biggest issue, as VET delivery is resource-intensive.

As the demand for larger and stronger VET programs in schools grows, so does the demand for stronger partnerships. Consequently, teachers have been burdened with ever increasing paperwork, so the changing regulatory requirements including assessment and reporting of competences need to be addressed. There needs to be an acknowledgement from policy-makers that the traditional school's structures, processes and tasks have evolved to serve diverse range of students in cooperation with multiple stakeholders. The role of school has changed and therefore the funding, program delivery and education policy-making requires new approach.